

A Plea For More Joy In Poetry

(By Annie Charlotte Dalton)

I.

Joy is the sweetest lyric of the world, and yet how very few are her songs which we can sing with all our hearts, for love and religion were once almost the exclusive subjects of Anglo-Saxon poetry; today the love-lyric is comparatively rare, and religion has largely given place to philosophy.

Professor Edward Dowden thinks that we shall now have a new psychological poetry—that the higher emotional life will almost certainly take precedence of the passional life.

Joy is supposed to be the natural concomitant of youth, and as we are one of the youthful nations, which are hampered by few regrets cropping up out of the past, our land is surely the supreme environment for the joyous life.

Having just finished a book containing some of the saddest poetry ever written by myself, I am now, inevitably, inclined to contend that joy should be, above everything, the crown of the poet's work; and that nothing but love and service for others, should induce one to give poetic utterance to melancholy and despair.

One of the oldest rules written for the instruction of poets is a quaint exhortation to cultivate "happiness of mind"—a good rule and very often broken—for there is a striking predisposition to sorrowful themes in the creative imagination, which is a pity, even if we consider only the economy of words.

Joy's utterances are brief. Sorrow revels in many words and in painful repetitions. She is never sated with her own exuberance, but loves and thrives upon the recital of her woes. There is indeed a sublime sorrow, which rises to such tragic heights of agony as to be far beyond ordinary expression. For this, poetry is the only utterance and relief.

Unsatisfied longing is said to lie at the core of all pure imagination. This idea meets with general acceptance, because so few of us recognize the potential powers of joy in creative work, and joy is such an elusive and delicate thing, that even Dante's pictures of the delights of Paradise are not nearly so convincing as his descriptions of Hell.

It is true that the simple act of spiritual creation is an act of joy in itself, but, poetry being, above all things, a communion of souls, the poet should have, at least in the processes of fundamental work, some regard for the needs and enjoyment of others.

Some poets are obsessed with sorrow; others, going to the opposite

extreme, imitate Theognis, who made the Muses and the Graces chant as the burden of their songs:—

"That shall never be our care
Which is neither good nor fair."

Socrates said, "Not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine," and the Stoics held with equal truth, that "Though the impressions of the senses are beyond our control, the uses we make of these impressions, our thoughts about them, our estimate of them and their consequences, all these are within our power."

Locke contends that when we think of a colour or a figure which we have never before thought about, then there ensues some real alteration in the mind. It is this change of mind, this new idea of the relativity of joy and grief, which has become so desirable in modern days. Why should we not be moved as profoundly by joy, as we are by pity and terror?

It is an exhilarating thought that if we set about seeking joyous things in the days when inspiration seems far from us, we shall, indubitably, reap our reward in the increased joyousness of our subsequent work; and as naturally, if, either by choice or necessity, we dwell habitually upon sorrowful themes, great sadness and perhaps bitterness, will be all-pervasive in our poetry, and by so much will it fall from its true greatness.

The triumphs of life are built upon its defeats, but in poetry, as in everything else, there is a time to rejoice as well as to mourn, a statement which seems to be refuted, when we consider the too frequent assumption that great songs must be born of deep suffering. This apotheosis of suffering is usually justified by ample quotations from the poets, and from the Bible—few people observing how often joy is commended and even commanded in the sacred Book; and in what other book shall we find such exultation, such rapture, such pure joy of the heart? Certainly not in any of the poets, not even in Shakespeare. It is some years since I wrote:—

One said to me, "The poets dwell
For aye in heavens blue"—
I answered "Tongue can never tell
The storms they struggle through;
They sing of grief they know too well,
Of joy they never knew."

Low as the phosphorescent glow
Down in the sunless deeps,
High as the mountain's virgin snow,
The poets' pleasure sleeps;
Close as a serpent's sinuous flow
The poets' sorrow creeps.

The sign of suffering's baleful star
To them is surely given,
The veil that shrouds Shekinah's awe,
For them is truly riven;
And welcome is the suffering for
The fleeting glimpse of heaven.

Every word of the poem is still true, but the question I ask myself now, is, do we share with others our "glimpses of heaven" as often as we do our griefs and disappointments? It has been very wisely said that "technique will profit nothing, even passion will profit nothing—unless a poet can give us of his joy—that elemental joy which is his deepest attribute."

Far too much stress is placed on suffering as being the strongest bond which holds us to each other. Why not substitute laughter? Even enmity would have small chance of survival in a crowd given over to laughter. It is vain to flatter ourselves that only the most commonplace minds can be happy in this so-called vale of tears. It is not true. It is dragging down happiness, a divine thing, to the level of the unconsciousness of Pyrrho's pig, which, unconcerned, went on eating heartily whilst the ship was in imminent danger of foundering.

This is not the tranquillity a poet could wish for. There is no comparison between this simple animalism and Wordsworth's "wise passiveness," or the supreme transfiguration which transcends all life for the poet in his highest moments, and fills his heart with pure, profound, and unworldly joys.

To prepare ourselves for this ineffable glory of inspiration, we may go forward, willingly, drawn by sublime visions of the future, or we may be driven, unwillingly, by the pressure of the hard and repulsive facts behind us—we cannot stand still if we are true to our calling—and the greatest one amongst us, will be the one who is neither coaxed nor kicked up the steep road of life, but who, by the "power of his own deep joy" goes triumphantly before his fellows.

It is encouraging to find so few of our own poets given over to neurotic musings. Their joy in Nature is remarkable, so remarkable, indeed, that one feels as if, in the regard of all but our major poets, man is secondary to Nature. This is said tentatively, for I speak more from a general impression, than from carefully gathered facts.