

There is a kind of inspiration to be caught from the sound of such music, which may well account for the charm which the odes and songs of Milton, of Dryden, of Burns and Shelley have for all readers. And we might be disposed to think that lyric poetry ought to confine itself to such subjects, were it not that Wordsworth and Coleridge and Gray have shown us how possible it is that very different subjects may become proper material for lyric poetry, in the hands of a master.

We should have thought that the old Platonic doctrine of a pre-existent life and of the relation of knowledge to reminiscence was better fitted for a philosophic treatise than for a lyric poem, yet in Wordsworth's noble ode on Intimations of Immortality, a poem in which it has been said with some truth that the poetic power of this century reached its high water mark, you may see this subject so suffused with beauty and with strong emotion that you feel yourself transported above the region of speculative philosophy into the serene atmosphere inhabited only by the seer, the prophet, the inspired poet. So it would by most critics seem almost an axiom that ethics, the whole theory of human duty and obligation and obedience to law, are fitting topics for treatises on morals and not for odes and poems. Yet hear a stanza from Wordsworth's Ode to Duty:

"Stern law-giver, yet thou dost wear
The God-head's most benignant grace,
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face.
Flowers laugh before thee in their beds,
And fragrances thy footing tread;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong,
And the most ancient Heavens, through thee are fresh and strong."

Who does not recognize here the power there is in poetic genius to irradiate the province of the moralist and the preacher, and to give a new charm to the truths they have to teach?

In like manner we should none of us at first sight suppose that polemical controversy or natural theology was a fitting subject for poetic treatment, yet Dryden, as you know, put the whole of the argument for and against the Church of Rome and the Reformation into verse, which at the time when it was published attracted more attention than any other form of argument would have drawn to it, and which for ingenuity and strength and command of language is still read and admired. There is a place in literature for didactic poetry, for although the enforcement of truth is not the poet's first business yet it is quite within his province so to touch his subject with tender feeling, with graceful fancies, as to present truth in a new light. Pope, as you know, undertook to expound in the Essay on Man that purely natural theology which Bolingbroke and the deistic philosophers of that day had made famous.

It cannot be said that Pope added much strength to the philosophic argument, but his poem is read though. Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury and Warburton are well nigh neglected, and the reason will be plain to you when I read even four lines of that famous composition:

"All nature is but art unknown to thee,
All chance, direction which thou canst not see,
All discord, harmony not understood,
All partial evil, universal good."

From the point of view of philosophy these may be mere platitudes, but the felicitous choice and collection of words and the musical rhythm give an additional charm to whatever

of truth there is in the philosophy of Bolingbroke, and a place for that philosophy in the history of literature, such as mere speculative discussion would never have secured for it.

But one of the highest forms which poetic inspiration has assumed has been the production of *epic* poems. Addison following generally in the lines once traced by Aristotle has laid down the conditions that ought to be fulfilled by a great epic. They are:

1. That it concerns itself with action (that is to say not primarily with sentiment or reflection).
2. That it should be one action—that is to say the attention of readers should not be distracted by many incidents, but the story should have unity and coherence as a whole.
3. That the action should be a great action, that is that the theme should not relate to ephemeral incidents, but to those of permanent interest, and have in it something of the heroic and the sublime.

And in the whole history of literature, ancient and modern, there are but four or five poems which have fulfilled these conditions. Each of the great phases of the world's intellectual history has found its representation in an immortal epic. Homer's two great poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, represent the earliest legends of the heroic age, and give to you with amazing force and vividness the manners, the beliefs, the conceptions of life which characterized the Greeks of the pre-historic age. Virgil's *Aeneid* was written in the Augustan age, the period of the highest prosperity and luxury of Rome, and while in its subject it dealt with the ancestry of Romulus and those traditions of which Rome was proudest in regard to the origin of their city and its policy, in its style it reproduces the tastes and the modes of thought of the age in which it was written.

Dante's great poem, the "*Divina Comedia*," takes for its subject one of the grandest of all conceptions. The description of the unseen world in its three aspects—Paradise, the Inferno and the Purgatorio. I suppose it is because pictures of possible bliss and enjoyment are monotonous, while pictures of suffering and distress give ample scope and variety to an active fancy, that the Inferno is read more than the Paradiso, and is generally regarded as the highest effort of the poet's genius. But at any rate the poem stands first as the permanent embodiment of the belief of Catholic Christendom as it appeared to a cultivated Florentine in the thirteenth century.

Finally, there are Milton's two great epics, "*Paradise Lost*" and "*Paradise Regained*," which have for their theme a subject of the highest interest to humanity, which represent the convictions and the ideas dominant in Puritan England more than two centuries ago, and which for sustained sublimity, noble feeling, ripe knowledge, and imaginative power, deserve at least to rank with the great epics of former ages. Indeed there is no exaggeration in Dryden's famous epigram on Milton, as compared with Homer and Virgil.

Three poets in three distant ages born,
Greece, Italy and England did adorn,
The first in loftiness of thought surpassed,
The next in majesty, in both the last,
The force of nature could no further go,
To make a third she joined the other two.

Does it seem to you that the large thoughts and far reaching speculations of the epic poetry are out of harmony with the pressing duties and cares of an active professional life? I hope not. Dr. Johnson once wisely said, "Whatever makes the past, the distant or the future predominate in our minds over the present, exalts us in the ranks of thinking beings." I think he might have added, "makes us understand the present better." The way to know our own place in the