

That there has been a steady decline in the quality of the verse produced since the time of Shakespeare, is a statement which few will gainsay. At times, indeed, England would become "a nest of singing birds," but it must be admitted that, however excellent the poetry was, its strength was always one-sided. As a result we have the contrasts existing between the poetry of each. Their verse, although often filled with the divine "a-flatus," is generally the expression of their personal views. The "Essay on Man," Cowper's "Task," and "Childe Harold," may be taken as examples. In short, if one carefully reads the most considerable poets from Shakespeare to Tennyson, he will finish, with his mind in a complex state of doubt, and will not be able to disentangle any fixed opinions from the multitude of varying impressions thus produced.

Now, since every poet living during that period has produced verse, in which particular phases of thought are elaborated almost to the limit of possibility, it follows that as time goes on, the finding of subjects for poetic treatment becomes more and more difficult. Writers must either choose subjects already dealt with, or find neglected phases of emotion. Thus we find Tennyson resurrecting the Arthurian legends, while Swinburne inclines to an excess of sensuousness, as Browning of mysticism.

At this point it is well to inquire as to how the poets of to-day express our ideas and feelings. Fortunately we have certain axioms which may guide us in coming to a decision. It is agreed that in a barbarous age the poetry is marked by great vigor, accompanied by little or no depth of thought. In a semi-enlightened age, the vigor is still present, and also a delicacy of sentiment. Of this fact, the "Iliad" may be taken as an example. Only such an age can produce a true poet, whose mind will be developed symmetrically, and whose poetry will be marked by a perfect balance existing between the vigor of description and the depth of thought. Such an one will err, neither on the side of grossness of color, nor that of lack of ideality.

But in our age, one of manufactures, of inventions, of comparative social equality, and above all of absence of superstition,

it is natural that our writers should reflect our practical bent of mind. And that is exactly what they are doing. Kipling, whose name has been heralded to the four corners of the earth as our only representative Anglo-Saxon poet, is probably the best example of this fact. His "Recessional" may live for a century or so, or perhaps longer. But if we except that one production, has he written a single poem that will endure for a century, and be a source of inspiration to Englishmen yet unborn? Can productions savoring strongly of engine-rooms, machine oil, reckless soldiery and jingles, can such poems weather the storms of time, and stand forth as literary monuments? His works are interesting, his language vigorous, and his general tone is one of sincerity, but their evanescence is almost a certainty.

Besides him, there are in England and Canada, scores of good versifiers, many gifted with poetic instincts of a high order. But they never soar. "The world is too much with them."

Disregarding the host of self-constituted poets of America, we observe that public opinion has settled upon Walt Whitman as most capable of reflecting American thought. And, indeed, if a complete disregard of technique be praiseworthy, he is beyond criticism. He chooses commonplace subjects, from which even Wordsworth would have recoiled, and treats them after a fashion all his own, which is generally tedious, and at times disgusting. If one doubts this latter statement, let him study the treatment accorded to a subject whereon the poet lavished all his resources, namely, a Chicago pork-packing establishment.

As far as we have attempted to explain why modern writers select prosaic subjects. We have given some reasons which lead us to believe that poetry, worthily so called, is almost impossible at present, owing to the complexity of our impressions, and their consequent lack of vividness. Such a conclusion, though not gratifying, is nevertheless not without consolation. If the stream of modern poetry is too scanty to afford us much refreshment, let us not forget that we can draw inspiration from the Grecian, Roman and European literature, the whole forming "an intellectual ocean, whose waves touch every shore of thought."