

ARTICLE IV.

EPIC AND LYRIC POETRY.

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A GENEROUS license, in the mode of living, is allowed by Milton to the lyric poet, but water and a wooden bowl are all he can afford the epic poet — singer of the gods and their descent unto men. No doubt, lyric poetry is, in essence, the expression of individual passion, and, as such, cannot quench love as supreme passion. Only in Alexandrian and later Greek literature did love enter as a main interest or motive into the epic. But in poetry itself, the dividing line between epic and lyric is often dimly drawn, and an epical lyric, as well as a lyrical epic, can be warrantably used of certain compositions. Not even the quaint stateliness of Spenser's epic poetry can hide the lyric spirit that pervades much of it. But, indeed, the epic sums in itself all poetry — not merely epic, but dramatic, idyllic, and elegiac elements as well. For the epic is the most comprehensive of all kinds of poetry. It is inclusive of the romance, as Tasso very clearly perceived. In the "Odyssey" of Homer, we find the epic become the most romantic of all poetry. For it has all experience for its province. With calmness and self-possession the epic poet represents his past events as action in progress, so differing from the dramatic poet, who imports immediacy and vehemence into his representation of events as real and present. The dramatic poet cannot afford to carry the equanimity of the epic poet.

And yet, to do lyrical poetry justice, it must be said that

lyric verse ranges from the deepest to the highest in a way that gives it a width of feeling and expression scarcely open to the epic. Besides which, the epic can hardly, in its historic and descriptive character, be so realistic as the lyric, dealing with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn, the love of love, of the world within. And, though the epic subsumes under itself the lyrical impulse or element, in the way we have noted, yet the lyrical in poetry at times has the epical for its subject. But it takes from the epical just so much as it wants while keeping true to itself as lyrical poetry, with the emotions peculiar thereto. The psychic form, indeed, of the vital unit in all poetic creation is just poetic mood, which has no simpler embodiment than the lyrical. Whereas the epic must have, for its subject, one great complex action, the single rapturous thrill, out of which no long poem could be made, is the inspiration of the lyric. For the lyric is poetry in its simplest, purest, most subjective, and personal — but yet ideal — form. The lyric is therefore the most perfect vehicle for the expression of spiritual life, from the way in which it precipitates the essence of the ideal. The pure lyric, in its native simplicity, is a thing so beautiful and rare that the world is always willing to stand in hushed delight before it.

As examples of its acutely personal note may be taken Heine's "Wenn ich in deine Augen seh'," Burns' "Ae fond kiss and then we sever," Tennyson's "Tears, idle tears. I know not what they mean," Wordsworth's "I wander'd lonely as a cloud," and Shelley's "Stanzas written in dejection, near Naples." Single, whole, unmingled, must be the leading mood or rapture of lyric poetry. To this ruling sentiment, thought, or emotion, everything else must be subordinate and accessory. Hence we have the uniquely felicitous in Horace, the successfully human in Béranger, the incomparable in

Burns — than whom none among modern poets has more nearly attained the pure lyric — and the inimitable in Heine, in their power to clothe the dominating sentiment or emotion. For the lyric is primarily a cry of the heart — which could never be content with any mere *ens rationis* — an impulsive and exuberant outburst of emotion. This inevitableness of the lyric is its supreme quality. Its crystalline purity, and its ideality of abstraction, enable it fitly to reflect what is most final in our nature. In pursuance of this end it must preserve the simplicity natural to itself, as lyric, and suffer no flamboyancy or excessive ornament. Think of the horror of introducing such elements into a matchless lyric like Tennyson's—

“Break, break, break,
On thy cold gray stones, O sea.”

The lyric poet, remaining ever himself, freely abandons himself to his own vivid impressions, but the epic poet may not wrap himself up in personal interest in this fashion, but must have his readers ever before him. In the primacy of the song spirit, the lyric differs from the epic, whose motive and inspiration are primitively ethical. The ethnic hero of the epic is, in some sort, an ideal individual, embodying in himself whatever is best in his race. The epic poet has no concern to interpret history, even heroic history, but to fill his poem with dramatic passion and strength of mind. For the epic does not, of necessity, concern itself with great historic events or issues, or demand a magnificent and ideal subject. Only the artificial epic — that of a Virgil, a Tasso, a Milton — makes such demand. What truly differentiates the epic is its comprehensiveness and dramatic variety. But it remains, of course, distinguished from other forms of composition by its solidity, stateliness, nobility, solemnity, and

even frigidity. Hence the phantasmal sway exerted by the epic on so many of the great poetic minds. Chaucer — the saviour, with Boccaccio, of medieval romance — did happily not allow himself to succumb to this tendency, even as did Boccaccio. It is because of the world, in its more mature stages, having outgrown epic conditions, that only two great epic poems have been given to our more modern world, namely, the cosmical epics of Dante and Milton.

The lyric has certainly lost nothing of its significance in our own times. For it now expresses a judgment of the worth and zest of life, no less than a desire for keen and vital spiritual being. Prophetic as Shelley's "West Wind," the lyric is aspiring as his "Skylark." Its goal is an ethereal flight, through ever-deepening empyreans. The lyric impulse rises in fire — in fire which slowly burns in a Wordsworth, more fiercely in a Byron, and becomes a rushing flame in a Shelley. Marked by expectant poise, it ends in breathless suspense, or becomes — as in Victor Hugo, whose name, Swinburne extravagantly said, is above every name in lyric song — a song of the sunrise, a thing of glorious sound and color. But the lyric often, as in the case of Shelley, voices moods or states of feeling in a way which defies analysis, and obscures — and means to obscure — thought that would become clear, and emotion that would be defined. The lyric is then in a world of its own, where thought has no end to seek, and emotion is chased by emotion in swift, piled-up succession. In all this, it partakes of the subtle and universal idealism of the poetic attitude. For the lyric poet is happily just he whom we sometimes see pass splendidly out of the personal into the universal.

No poet has surpassed Moore in the felicity of his sacred lyrics, word and sound being wedded together in the most

perfect fashion. He reminds one of what the Italian poet and novelist D'Annunzio has said, that in lyric poetry the essential element is not the word, but the music—not the word as letter, but the word as sound and rhythm. This lyric success, both as to meter and language, is conspicuously present in the sacred lyrics of D'Annunzio's countryman, Manzoni. The poetic idealism, of which we have spoken, is finely exemplified in the ideal future pictured for Greece, with rare hope and enthusiasm of lyric genius, in Shelley's "Hellas." The epic, which had the honor to have its essential properties described so long ago as Aristotle and his "Poetics," has had its relations to other forms of poetry much better explicated.

It was not Aristotle—to whom Homer was the only poet who knew "the right proportions of epic narrative"—but Plato, who voiced the sentiment that all good poetry, "epic as well as lyric," is the result of inspiration, not of art. There is but one "Iliad," and it is the most perfect epic the world has seen, with nobility, grandeur, high-spiritedness, all its own. But the world recognizes how much it has to be thankful for in Virgil's "Æneid," in the "Divina Commedia" of Dante, the "Nibelungen Lied," Tasso's "Gerusalemme Liberata," Milton's "Paradise Lost," yea, and in many other national products as well—the Spanish "Poema del Cid," and the "Lusiad" of Camoëns, are samples—that were epic in spirit and character. The simple, plain, easy, natural, direct style of a Homer is widely different, in the sentiment and feeling it carries, from that of Virgil in a literary epic like the "Æneid"—a difference greatly due to the ages in which their works were created. And the war of Troy, it has been truly said, "is not the subject of the 'Iliad' in the same way as the siege of Jerusalem is the subject of Tasso's poem." True epic inspiration will always show itself in con-

centrated fire and sonorous dignity befitting its theme. The true epic demands at least religious imagination, for, in its desire to explain its great humanitarian fact or event by heavenlier agency or power, it shows itself to be, of all poetic styles, the most essentially religious. Precisely because it is the proper function of the epic poet to find the providential clue to the maze of events, Virgil in the "*Æneid*" rightly represents *Æneas* as the passive instrument of Divine direction.

In this respect we must rate Dante more highly than Milton. for Dante's cosmical epic is more shot through with Christian idea, and is more penetrated by the Christian conception of the universe, than is Milton's great epic. Hence it is scarcely exaggeration for Huber to say that "there is no single poem in the whole range of human compositions which for importance of subject, elevation of thought, earnestness of conviction, or corresponding perfection of execution, can bear comparison with Dante's great epic." So fixed is Dante's eye on the spiritual side of creation, that the temporal and transitory of his age is seen reflected in the light of the universal and eternal: the mirror is for all time. In this sense, Dante's epic ranks higher even than the "*Iliad*"—model for all time as Homer's epic must be—for the true poet of humanity is much more he who deals with man within the whole redemptive sphere and reach, than he whose world is peopled with purely human gods, with crude ideas of heaven and earth, and the ceaseless combats of Hellenic heroes. The whole growth of the Epic—its slow evolution from old and common forms of poetry—is in the direction of the freedom of the imagination. Epic dignity, stateliness, and magnificence are the result of such freedom of the dramatic imagination. Such epic stateliness is found even in English verse so old

as "Beowulf," which is not without its passages of striking Homeric likeness. In our great English epic, Milton has lost epic dignity and perfection by his recourse to episodes connected, no doubt, with the main course of action, but not essential, nor helpful, to it; such are, for example, his narrations about Raphael and Michael. Homer had the skill to avoid such formal episodical passages, winning thus higher artistic perfection for the "Iliad" than can be claimed for the "Æneid," or even for the "Gerusalemme Liberata," since, in both of these, scope is found for some more formal use of the episode. Tasso, however, is much less partial to its use than Virgil.

Milton, less ethereal or spiritual in his Divine descriptions than Dante, yet deals with a theme that lacks in human interest, as lying too much outside the range of human experience. The most engaging of Milton's characters is just Satan himself, who is formed, less after the fashion of biblical representation, than after Greek conception of Prometheus. Such is he of whom our poet says:—

"Yet not for those,
 Nor what the potent Victor in his rage
 Can else inflict, do I repent, or change,—
 Though changed in outward lustre,—that fixed mind,
 And high disdain from sense of injured merit,
 That with the Mightiest raised me to contend,
 And to the fierce contention brought along
 Innumerable force of spirits armed,
 That durst dislike His reign; and, me preferring,
 His utmost power with adverse power opposed
 In dubious battle on the plains of Heaven,
 And shook His throne. What though the field be lost?
 All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
 And study of revenge, immortal hate,
 And courage never to submit or yield,
 And what is else not to be overcome,—
 That glory never shall His wrath, or might,
 Extort from me."

Par. Lost, l. 94-111.

“Farewell, happy fields,
 Where joy for ever dwells! Hail, horrors! hail,
 Infernal world! and thou, profoundest hell,
 Receive thy new possessor! one who brings
 A mind not to be changed by place or time.
 The mind is its own place, and in itself
 Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
 What matter where, if I be still the same,
 And what I should be,—all but less than he
 Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
 We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built
 Here for His envy; will not drive us hence:
 Here we may reign secure; and in my choice
 To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
 Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven.”

Par. Lost, l. 249-263.

“He, above the rest
 In shape and gesture proudly eminent,
 Stood like a tower: his form had not yet lost
 All her original brightness, nor appeared
 Less than archangel ruined, and the excess
 Of glory obscured: as when the sun, new-risen,
 Looks through the horizontal misty air,
 Shorn of his beams; or, from behind the moon,
 In dim eclipse, disastrous twilight sheds
 On half the nations, and with fear of change
 Perplexes monarchs; darkened so, yet shone
 Above them all the archangel.” *Par. Lost*, l. 589-600.

For all that has been already said of the freedom, naturalness, and spontaneity of the lyric, it must not be thought that the lyrical impulse knows no law, or that the emotion involved therein knows no development of logical and orderly character. The primacy of the poetic impulse does not keep the poet's emotion from being harnessed to intellectual clearness and logical order, even though emotion remain always lord and master. There is no finer example of this than Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," of which we give the beginning:—

“O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

"Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou
Who charlotest to their dark wintry bed

"The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

"Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

"Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and Preserver: hear, Oh, hear!"

Again, in Shelley's "Skylark," where the lyricism is so perfect, there is advance from note of joy to notes of wistful questioning, of anxious aspiration, of sadness born of self-knowledge and the disillusionments of life, advance also to the vision of the ideal in its distant but undimmed luster and peerless worth. Hence, for example, the outburst at close of the poem:—

"Teach us, sprite or bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine:
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

"Chorus Hymenaeal,
Or triumphal chaunt,
Matched with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt,
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

"What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

"With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be:
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest; but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

“Waking or asleep,
 Thou of death must deem
 Things more true and deep
 Than we mortals dream,
 Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?”

“We look before and after,
 And pine for what is not:
 Our sincerest laughter
 With some pain is fraught;
 Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

“Yet if we could scorn
 Hate, and pride, and fear;
 If we were things born
 Not to shed a tear,
 I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

“Better than all measures
 Of delightful sound,
 Better than all treasures
 That in books are found
 Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

“Teach me half the gladness
 That my brain must know,
 Such harmonious madness
 From my lips would flow,
 The world should listen then, as I am listening now.”

The lyrical contempt of method, which we thus see to be more apparent than real, is in contrast with the epic, which, though not without its own unity of sentiment, allows no diffused impersonal sentiment to interfere with the dramatic strength and variety of its characters. The simplicity of the lyric—the prevalence of the single mood—is possible in epic poetry also—witness the “*Chanson de Roland*”—but it is more rare and difficult in the epic, and is apt to mean there simply loss of dramatic subtlety or force or charm. When the epic does succeed in maintaining simplicity and avoiding appearance of method, we see its success attained by summoning to its aid large infusions of lyrical tone and

sentiment, and by use of deeper methodological considerations than at first sight appears. Simplicity in the epic, indeed, instead of being the merit we have seen it to be in the lyric, tends to sink the epic to the level of the ballad, with its less ambitious, less self-conscious, less aristocratic character. Not only does the lyric exist less by method than the epic, but, in its inception, the lyric exists less for its moral force than for its music. Not so the epic, which, though music is not unimportant to it, comes into being for the sake of moral point and motive. But even the lyric is not without underlying idea — truth colored by mood and personality. The personality, of which the lyric is the efflorescence, is an ideal self — a thing of ideal values. Says, therefore, Rabbi Ben Ezra:—

“What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me,”

and again:—

“All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped,”

But in the great reflective developments of the epic, there is present a quality of abstract conception, which embodies fuller mood and conveys a larger message, like that we have seen in Milton's Satan shadowing forth the arch-impotence of the energetic working of evil in the human heart. It is precisely the lack of such larger conception that marks the defect of such an epical composition as Boileau's “*Lutrin*,” whose satire of the upper middle classes of France lacks the large satiric character of poets like our own Dryden or the French Regnier. So much must be said, despite Boileau's own claim for his verse that it always said something — “*mon vers, bien ou mal, dit toujours quelque chose.*” At the other end of the scale is the sacred epic of the German Klopstock, in

which the straining after greatness of conception and treatment, together with other artistic faults, produced unhappy results. If we must still weep and lament that the masters of epic are no more with us, we can at least rejoice that our age has produced lyrical genius so astonishing as that of Swinburne — the Byron, and more than the Byron, of his generation.