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THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK  
1785–1866

That the great eighteenth-century tradition of satire survived, and flourished, in the Romantic period is attested by Thomas Love Peacock's prose, as well as by Byron's verse. Peacock left school at thirteen but, by assiduous reading, made himself an accomplished classical scholar and a master of French and Italian literature. He was not an author by vocation, but his executive position in the huge corporation, the East India House, allowed him the time to pursue an avocation as writer of essays, translations, prose fiction, and poems. He had a wide literary acquaintance, although Shelley was the only one with whom he was intimate; he was appointed the executor of Shelley's will. Peacock's oldest daughter, Mary Ellen, contracted a desperately unhappy marriage with the novelist and poet George Meredith, which became the subject of Meredith's sonnet sequence, *Modern Love*. Peacock himself lived to the age of eighty-one; his death came as the result of a physical collapse following a house fire, during which, despite his morbid terror of fires, he refused to leave his beloved library, shouting "By the immortal gods, I will not move!"

Peacock's finest literary achievements are his inimitable satiric novels—*Headlong Hall* (1816), *Melincourt* (1817), *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), and *Crotchet Castle* (1831)—in which his procedure is to collect a group of argumentative eccentrics in a country house and set them to talking. His protagonists represent extreme or bigoted or visionary points of view on all sides of the important topics of the time. *Nightmare Abbey* contains ludicrous representations of major poetic contemporaries, including Coleridge, Byron, and Peacock's friend Shelley—who admired the caricature and took no offense. The novels also contain parodies of poets and fashionable poetic forms. *The War Song of Dinas Vawr* explodes the vogue of pseudohistorical border ballads, and their glorification of war, in forty devastating lines.

Peacock published his essay *The Four Ages of Poetry* in a short-lived periodical, Charles Ollier's *Literary Miscellany*, in 1820. It is famed for having evoked Shelley's great *Defence of Poetry* by way of response but is in its own right a brilliant satiric commentary on what Peacock regarded as the excessive pretensions and doctrines of Wordsworth and other Romantic poets. To support his adverse judgments of his contemporaries in the concluding part of the essay, Peacock develops a history of poetry modeled on the view, common in Greek

and Roman writers, that the history of humanity manifests a constant decline from the original age of gold through the silver and bronze ages to the present iron age. Peacock changes this order to the sequence in poetry of the iron, golden, silver, and bronze ages, and represents this cycle as having evolved twice, once in classical times and again in the span from the Middle Ages to his own period—that era in which, as the consequence of intellectual progress, the poet remains, he says, “a semi-barbarian in a civilized community.”

Peacock is inveterately ironic, and it is impossible to establish the exact boundaries between the serious and the playful in his counterclaims to the high value placed on emotion and the supreme function attributed to the imagination by many poets of his day. It will, however, help guard against too literal a reading of this witty essay if we remember that Peacock had been a versifier since his early youth, had published several books of serious poems, and had even tried his hand at the archaic form of epic. It is also noteworthy that the “chemists . . . metaphysicians . . . and political scientists” whom, in his concluding sentence, he lauds as the highest products of contemporary civilization, as well as the doctrine of intellectual progress on which he bases the argument of *The Four Ages*, are targets of his satiric attacks in other writings. As he wrote in 1837 in the preface to a collection of his novels, the recurrent subjects of his ridicule include “perfectibilians, deteriorationists, statu-quo-ites . . . transcendentalists, political economists, theorists in all sciences . . . lovers of the picturesque, and lovers of good dinners”—classes of men that “will march for ever, *pari passu* with the march of mechanics, which some facetiously call the march of intellect.”

### The Four Ages of Poetry

Qui inter haec nutriuntur non magis sapere possunt, quam bene olere qui in  
culina habitant.<sup>1</sup>

Petronius

Poetry, like the world, may be said to have four ages, but in a different order: the first age of poetry being the age of iron; the second, of gold; the third, of silver; and the fourth, of brass.

The first, or iron age of poetry, is that in which rude bards celebrate in rough numbers the exploits of ruder chiefs, in days when every man is a warrior, and

1. Those who are nourished among these things are no more able to taste than those who live in a kitchen are able to smell (*Satyricon* 2).

when the great practical maxim of every form of society, “to keep what we have and to catch what we can,” is not yet disguised under names of justice and forms of law, but is the naked motto of the naked sword, which is the only judge and jury in every question of *meum* and *tuum*.<sup>2</sup> In these days, the only three trades flourishing (besides that of priest which flourishes always) are those of king, thief, and beggar: the beggar being for the most part a king deject, and the thief a king expectant. The first question asked of a stranger is, whether he is a beggar or a thief:<sup>3</sup> the stranger, in reply, usually assumes the first, and awaits a convenient opportunity to prove his claim to the second appellation.

The natural desire of every man to engross to himself as much power and property as he can acquire by any of the means which might make right, is accompanied by the no less natural desire of making known to as many people as possible the extent to which he has been a winner in this universal game. The successful warrior becomes a chief; the successful chief becomes a king: his next want is an organ to disseminate the fame of his achievements and the extent of his possessions; and this organ he finds in a bard, who is always ready to celebrate the strength of his arm, being first duly inspired by that of his liquor. This is the origin of poetry, which, like all other trades, takes its rise in the demand for the commodity, and flourishes in proportion to the extent of the market.

Poetry is thus in its origin panegyric. The first rude songs of all nations appear to be a sort of brief historical notices, in a strain of tumid hyperbole, of the exploits and possessions of a few pre-eminent individuals. They tell us how many battles such an one has fought, how many helmets he has cleft, how many breastplates he has pierced, how many widows he has made, how much land he has appropriated, how many houses he has demolished for other people, what a large one he has built for himself, how much gold he has stowed away in it, and how liberally and plentifully he pays, feeds, and intoxicates the divine and immortal bards, the sons of Jupiter, but for whose everlasting songs the names of heroes would perish.

This is the first stage of poetry before the invention of written letters. The numerical modulation is at once useful as a help to memory, and pleasant to the ears of uncultured men, who are easily caught by sound: and from the

2. “Mine” and “thine” (Latin).

3. “See the *Odyssey*, passim: and Thucydides, I.5” [Peacock’s note]. In the *Odyssey* 3.70, for example, Telemachus and his group of travelers, on arriving at Pylos, are asked whether they are men of commerce or else pirates. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.5, Thucydides comments that in early times both the Hellenes and the Barbarians practiced piracy, which was then regarded as an honorable vocation.

exceeding flexibility of the yet unformed language, the poet does no violence to his ideas in subjecting them to the fetters of number. The savage indeed lisps in numbers,<sup>4</sup> and all rude and uncivilized people express themselves in the manner which we call poetical.

The scenery by which he is surrounded, and the superstitions which are the creed of his age, form the poet's mind. Rocks, mountains, seas, unsubdued forests, unnavigable rivers, surround him with forms of power and mystery, which ignorance and fear have peopled with spirits, under multifarious names of gods, goddesses, nymphs, genii, and daemons. Of all these personages marvellous tales are in existence: the nymphs are not indifferent to handsome young men, and the gentlemen genii are much troubled and very troublesome with a propensity to be rude to pretty maidens: the bard therefore finds no difficulty in tracing the genealogy of his chief to any of the deities in his neighbourhood with whom the said chief may be most desirous of claiming relationship.

In this pursuit, as in all others, some of course will attain a very marked pre-eminence; and these will be held in high honour, like Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, and will be consequently influenced with boundless vanity, like Thamyris in the *Iliad*.<sup>5</sup> Poets are as yet the only historians and chroniclers of their time, and the sole depositories of all the knowledge of their age; and though this knowledge is rather a crude congeries of traditional phantasies than a collection of useful truths, yet, such as it is, they have it to themselves. They are observing and thinking, while others are robbing and fighting: and though their object be nothing more than to secure a share of the spoil, yet they accomplish this end by intellectual, not by physical, power: their success excites emulation to the attainment of intellectual eminence: thus they sharpen their own wits and awaken those of others, at the same time that they gratify vanity and amuse curiosity. A skillful display of the little knowledge they have gains them credit for the possession of much more which they have not. Their familiarity with the secret history of gods and genii obtains for them, without much difficulty, the reputation of inspiration; thus they are not only historians but theologians, moralists, and legislators: delivering their oracles *ex cathedra*,<sup>6</sup> and

4. Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, line 128: "I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came." ("Numbers" is the old term for meter.)

5. In the *Odyssey* 8.470ff., the blind bard Demodocus makes Odysseus weep by his song about the fall of Troy. The *Iliad* 2.594ff. narrates that the poet Thamyris boasted he could outsing the Muses; they punished him by maiming him and taking away his gift of song.

6. Authoritatively; literally, "from the seat (of authority)" (Latin).

being indeed often themselves (as Orpheus and Amphion) regarded as portions and emanations of divinity: building cities with a song, and leading brutes with a symphony;<sup>7</sup> which are only metaphors for the faculty of leading multitudes by the nose.

The golden age of poetry finds its materials in the age of iron. This age begins when poetry begins to be retrospective; when something like a more extended system of civil polity is established; when personal strength and courage avail less to the aggrandizing of their possessor and to the making and marring of kings and kingdoms, and are checked by organized bodies, social institutions, and hereditary successions. Men also live more in the light of truth and within the interchange of observation; and thus perceive that the agency of gods and genii is not so frequent among themselves as, to judge from the songs and legends of the past time, it was among their ancestors. From these two circumstances, really diminished personal power, and apparently diminished familiarity with gods and genii, they very easily and naturally deduce two conclusions: first, That men are degenerated, and second, That they are less in favour with the gods. The people of the petty states and colonies, which have now acquired stability and form, which owed their origin and first prosperity to the talents and courage of a single chief, magnify their founder through the mists of distance and tradition, and perceive him achieving wonders with a god or goddess always at his elbow. They find his name and his exploits thus magnified and accompanied in their traditional songs, which are their only memorials. All that is said of him is in this character. There is nothing to contradict it. The man and his exploits and his tutelary deities are mixed and blended in one invariable association. The marvellous too is very much like a snowball: it grows as it rolls downward, till the little nucleus of truth which began its descent from the summit is hidden in the accumulation of superinduced hyperbole.

When tradition, thus adorned and exaggerated, has surrounded the founders of families and states with so much adventitious power and magnificence, there is no praise which a living poet can, without fear of being kicked for clumsy flattery, address to a living chief, that will not still leave the impression that the latter is not so great a man as his ancestors. The man must in this case be praised through his ancestors. Their greatness must be established, and he must be shown to be their worthy descendant. All the people of a state are interested

7. In Greek myth Orpheus charmed even wild beasts with his skill on the lyre; Amphion, by playing his lyre, formed stones into the wall of Thebes.

in the founder of their state. All states that have harmonized into a common form of society, are interested in their respective founders. All men are interested in their ancestors. All men love to look back into the days that are past. In these circumstances traditional national poetry is reconstructed and brought like chaos into order and form. The interest is more universal: understanding is enlarged: passion still has scope and play: character is still various and strong: nature is still unsubdued and existing in all her beauty and magnificence, and men are not yet excluded from her observation by the magnitude of cities or the daily confinement of civic life: poetry is more an art: it requires greater skill in numbers, greater command of language, more extensive and various knowledge, and greater comprehensiveness of mind. It still exists without rivals in any other department of literature; and even the arts, painting and sculpture certainly, and music probably, are comparatively rude and imperfect. The whole field of intellect is its own. It has no rivals in history, nor in philosophy, nor in science. It is cultivated by the greatest intellects of the age, and listened to by all the rest. This is the age of Homer, the golden age of poetry. Poetry has now attained its perfection: it has attained the point which it cannot pass: genius therefore seeks new forms for the treatment of the same subjects: hence the lyric poetry of Pindar and Alcaeus, and the tragic poetry of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The favour of kings, the honour of the Olympic crown, the applause of present multitudes, all that can feed vanity and stimulate rivalry, await the successful cultivator of this art, till its forms become exhausted, and new rivals arise around it in new fields of literature, which gradually acquire more influence as, with the progress of reason and civilization, facts become more interesting than fiction: indeed the maturity of poetry may be considered the infancy of history. The transition from Homer to Herodotus is scarcely more remarkable than that from Herodotus to Thucydides: in the gradual dereliction of fabulous incident and ornamented language, Herodotus is as much a poet in relation to Thucydides as Homer is in relation to Herodotus. The history of Herodotus is half a poem: it was written while the whole field of literature yet belonged to the Muses, and the nine books of which it was composed were therefore of right, as well as of courtesy, superinscribed with their nine names.<sup>8</sup>

Speculations, too, and disputes, on the nature of man and of mind; on moral duties and on good and evil; on the animate and inanimate components of the

8. Herodotus in the 5th century B.C.E. named each of the nine books of his history of the Greeks after one of the Muses; in Greek mythology each Muse presided over a branch of literature, an art, or a science. His younger contemporary Thucydides wrote a factual account of the Peloponnesian War that is regarded as a model of historical method.

visible world; begin to share attention with the eggs of Leda and the horns of Io,<sup>9</sup> and to draw off from poetry a portion of its once undivided audience.

Then comes the silver age, or the poetry of civilized life. This poetry is of two kinds, imitative and original. The imitative consists in recasting, and giving an exquisite polish to, the poetry of the age of gold: of this Virgil is the most obvious and striking example. The original is chiefly comic, didactic, or satiric: as in Menander, Aristophanes, Horace, and Juvenal. The poetry of this age is characterized by an exquisite and fastidious selection of words, and a laboured and somewhat monotonous harmony of expression: but its monotony consists in this, that experience having exhausted all the varieties of modulation, the civilized poetry selects the most beautiful, and prefers the repetition of these to ranging through the variety of all. But the best expression being that into which the idea naturally falls, it requires the utmost labour and care so to reconcile the inflexibility of civilized language and the laboured polish of versification with the idea intended to be expressed, that sense may not appear to be sacrificed to sound. Hence numerous efforts and rare success.

This state of poetry is however a step towards its extinction. Feeling and passion are best painted in, and roused by, ornamental and figurative language; but the reason and the understanding are best addressed in the simplest and most unvarnished phrase. Pure reason and dispassionate truth would be perfectly ridiculous in verse, as we may judge by versifying one of Euclid's demonstrations.<sup>1</sup> This will be found true of all dispassionate reasoning whatever, and all reasoning that requires comprehensive views and enlarged combinations. It is only the more tangible points of morality, those which command assent at once, those which have a mirror in every mind, and in which the severity of reason is warmed and rendered palatable by being mixed up with feeling and imagination, that are applicable even to what is called moral poetry: and as the sciences of morals and of mind advance towards perfection, as they become more enlarged and comprehensive in their views, as reason gains the ascendancy in them over imagination and feeling, poetry can no longer accompany them in their progress, but drops into the background, and leaves them to advance alone.

Thus the empire of thought is withdrawn from poetry, as the empire of facts

9. Zeus, assuming the form of a swan, made love to Leda and fathered two sons, Castor and Pollux, and two daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra; in some versions of the myth these children were hatched from eggs. He transformed Io, another of his loves, into a white heifer in order to allay the suspicion of his wife, Hera.

1. A demonstration in the treatise on plane geometry written by the Greek mathematician Euclid at about 300 B.C.E.

had been before. In respect of the latter, the poet of the age of iron celebrates the achievements of his contemporaries; the poet of the age of gold celebrates the heroes of the age of iron; the poet of the age of silver re-casts the poems of the age of gold: we may here see how very slight a ray of historical truth is sufficient to dissipate all the illusions of poetry. We know no more of the men than of the gods of the Iliad; no more of Achilles than we do of Thetis; no more of Hector and Andromache than we do of Vulcan and Venus: these belong altogether to poetry; history has no share in them: but Virgil knew better than to write an epic about Caesar; he left him to Livy;<sup>2</sup> and travelled out of the confines of truth and history into the old regions of poetry and fiction.

Good sense and elegant learning, conveyed in polished and somewhat monotonous verse, are the perfection of the original and imitative poetry of civilized life. Its range is limited, and when exhausted, nothing remains but the *crambe repetita*<sup>3</sup> of common-place, which at length becomes thoroughly wearisome, even to the most indefatigable readers of the newest new nothings.

It is now evident that poetry must either cease to be cultivated, or strike into a new path. The poets of the age of gold have been imitated and repeated till no new imitation will attract notice: the limited range of ethical and didactic poetry is exhausted: the associations of daily life in an advanced state of society are of very dry, methodical, unpoetical matters-of-fact: but there is always a multitude of listless idlers, yawning for amusement, and gaping for novelty: and the poet makes it his glory to be foremost among their purveyors.

Then comes the age of brass, which, by rejecting the polish and the learning of the age of silver, and taking a retrograde stride to the barbarisms and crude traditions of the age of iron, professes to return to nature and revive the age of gold. This is the second childhood of poetry. To the comprehensive energy of the Homeric Muse, which, by giving at once the grand outline of things, presented to the mind a vivid picture in one or two verses, inimitable alike in simplicity and magnificence, is substituted a verbose and minutely-detailed description of thoughts, passions, actions, persons, and things, in that loose rambling style of verse, which any one may write, *stans pede in uno*,<sup>4</sup> at the rate of two hundred lines in an hour. To this age may be referred all the poets who flourished in the decline of the Roman Empire. The best specimen of it, though not the most generally known, is the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus,<sup>5</sup> which

2. Author of a long history of Rome, late in the 1st century B.C.E.

3. Cabbage served up a second time (Latin).

4. While standing on one foot (Latin).

5. The *Dionysiaca* was an epic written by Nonnus, a Greek poet of the 5th century C.E.

contains many passages of exceeding beauty in the midst of masses of amplification and repetition.

The iron age of classical poetry may be called the bardic; the golden, the Homeric; the silver, the Virgilian; and the brass, the Nonnic.

Modern poetry has also its four ages: but "it wears its rue with a difference."<sup>6</sup>

To the age of brass in the ancient world succeeded the dark ages, in which the light of the Gospel began to spread over Europe, and in which, by a mysterious and inscrutable dispensation, the darkness thickened with the progress of the light. The tribes that overran the Roman Empire brought back the days of barbarism, but with this difference, that there were many books in the world, many places in which they were preserved, and occasionally some one by whom they were read, who indeed (if he escaped being burned *pour l'amour de Dieu*)<sup>7</sup> generally lived an object of mysterious fear, with the reputation of magician, alchymist and astrologer. The emerging of the nations of Europe from this superinduced barbarism, and their settling into new forms of polity, was accompanied, as the first ages of Greece had been, with a wild spirit of adventure, which, cooperating with new manners and new superstitions, raised up a fresh crop of chimaeras,<sup>8</sup> not less fruitful, though far less beautiful, than those of Greece. The semi-deification of women by the maxims of the age of chivalry, combining with these new fables, produced the romance of the middle ages. The founders of the new line of heroes took the place of the demigods of Grecian poetry. Charlemagne and his Paladins, Arthur and his knights of the round table, the heroes of the iron age of chivalrous poetry, were seen through the same magnifying mist of distance, and their exploits were celebrated with even more extravagant hyperbole. These legends, combined with the exaggerated love that pervades the songs of the troubadours, the reputation of magic that attached to learned men, the infant wonders of natural philosophy, the crazy fanaticism of the crusades, the power and privileges of the great feudal chiefs, and the holy mysteries of monks and nuns, formed a state of society in which no two laymen could meet without fighting, and in which the three staple ingredients of lover, prize-fighter, and fanatic, that composed the basis of the character of every true man, were mixed up and diversified, in different individuals and classes, with so many distinctive excellencies, and under such an infinite motley variety of costume, as gave the range of a most

6. In *Hamlet* 4.5.183 the mad Ophelia, handing Queen Gertrude a sprig of the plant called rue, says, "You may wear your rue with a difference."

7. For the love of God (French); the allusion is to the burning of heretics by Christians.

8. She-monsters with a lion's head, goat's body, and serpent's tail (pronounced kīmeéras).

extensive and picturesque field to the two great constituents of poetry, love and battle.

From these ingredients of the iron age of modern poetry, dispersed in the rhymes of minstrels and the songs of the troubadours, arose the golden age, in which the scattered materials were harmonized and blended about the time of the revival of learning; but with this peculiar difference, that Greek and Roman literature pervaded all the poetry of the golden age of modern poetry, and hence resulted a heterogeneous compound of all ages and nations in one picture; an infinite licence, which gave to the poet the free range of the whole field of imagination and memory. This was carried very far by Ariosto,<sup>9</sup> but farthest of all by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, who used time and locality merely because they could not do without them, because every action must have its when and where: but they made no scruple of deposing a Roman Emperor by an Italian Count, and sending him off in the disguise of a French pilgrim to be shot with a blunderbuss by an English archer. This makes the old English drama very picturesque, at any rate, in the variety of costume, and very diversified in action and character; though it is a picture of nothing that ever was seen on earth except a Venetian carnival.

The greatest of English poets, Milton, may be said to stand alone between the ages of gold and silver, combining the excellencies of both; for with all the energy, and power, and freshness of the first, he united all the studied and elaborate magnificence of the second.

The silver age succeeded; beginning with Dryden, coming to perfection with Pope, and ending with Goldsmith, Collins, and Gray.

Cowper divested verse of its exquisite polish; he thought in metre, but paid more attention to his thoughts than his verse. It would be difficult to draw the boundary of prose and blank verse between his letters and his poetry.

The silver age was the reign of authority; but authority now began to be shaken, not only in poetry but in the whole sphere of its dominion. The contemporaries of Gray and Cowper were deep and elaborate thinkers. The subtle scepticism of Hume, the solemn irony of Gibbon, the daring paradoxes of Rousseau, and the biting ridicule of Voltaire, directed the energies of four extraordinary minds to shake every portion of the reign of authority. Enquiry was roused, the activity of intellect was excited, and poetry came in for its share of the general result. The changes had been rung on lovely maid and sylvan

9. Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), Italian author of the great romantic epic *Orlando Furioso* (“Orlando Insane”).

shade, summer heat and green retreat, waving trees and sighing breeze, gentle swains and amorous pains, by versifiers who took them on trust, as meaning something very soft and tender, without much caring what: but with this general activity of intellect came a necessity for even poets to appear to know something of what they professed to talk of. Thomson and Cowper looked at the trees and hills which so many ingenious gentlemen had rhymed about so long without looking at them at all, and the effect of the operation on poetry was like the discovery of a new world. Painting shared the influence, and the principles of picturesque beauty were explored by adventurous essayists with indefatigable pertinacity.<sup>1</sup> The success which attended these experiments, and the pleasure which resulted from them, had the usual effect of all new enthusiasms, that of turning the heads of a few unfortunate persons, the patriarchs of the age of brass, who, mistaking the prominent novelty for the all-important totality, seem to have ratiocinated much in the following manner: "Poetical genius is the finest of all things, and we feel that we have more of it than any one ever had. The way to bring it to perfection is to cultivate poetical impressions exclusively. Poetical impressions can be received only among natural scenes: for all that is artificial is anti-poetical. Society is artificial, therefore we will live out of society. The mountains are natural, therefore we will live in the mountains. There we shall be shining models of purity and virtue, passing the whole day in the innocent and amiable occupation of going up and down hill, receiving poetical impressions, and communicating them in immortal verse to admiring generations." To some such perversion of intellect we owe that egregious confraternity of rhymesters, known by the name of the lake Poets;<sup>2</sup> who certainly did receive and communicate to the world some of the most extraordinary poetical impressions that ever were heard of, and ripened into models of public virtue, too splendid to need illustration. They wrote verses on a new principle; saw rocks and rivers in a new light; and remaining studiously ignorant of history, society, and human nature, cultivated the phantasy only at the expence of the memory and the reason; and contrived, though they had retreated from the world for the express purpose of seeing nature as she was, to see her only as she was not, converting the land they lived in into a sort of fairy-land, which they peopled with mysticisms and chimaeras. This gave what

1. The reference is to the spate of books in the 1790s by William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard Payne Knight that discussed the definition of the "picturesque," i.e., features of a natural scene similar to those in pictures by landscape painters.

2. A term applied by some contemporary reviewers to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, who lived in and wrote poetry about the Lake District.

is called a new tone to poetry, and conjured up a herd of desperate imitators, who have brought the age of brass prematurely to its dotage.

The descriptive poetry of the present day has been called by its cultivators a return to nature. Nothing is more impertinent than this pretension. Poetry cannot travel out of the regions of its birth, the uncultivated lands of semi-civilized men. Mr. Wordsworth, the great leader of the returners to nature, cannot describe a scene under his own eyes without putting into it the shadow of a Danish boy or the living ghost of Lucy Gray, or some similar phantastical parturition of the moods of his own mind.<sup>3</sup>

In the origin and perfection of poetry, all the associations of life were composed of poetical materials. With us it is decidedly the reverse. We know too that there are no Dryads in Hyde-park nor Naiads in the Regent's-canal. But barbaric manners and supernatural interventions are essential to poetry. Either in the scene, or in the time, or in both, it must be remote from our ordinary perceptions. While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age. Mr. Scott digs up the poachers and cattle-stealers of the ancient border. Lord Byron cruises for thieves and pirates on the shores of the Morea and among the Greek islands. Mr. Southey wades through ponderous volumes of travels and old chronicles, from which he carefully selects all that is false, useless, and absurd, as being essentially poetical; and when he has a commonplace book full of monstrosities, strings them into an epic. Mr. Wordsworth picks up village legends from old women and sextons, and Mr. Coleridge, to the valuable information acquired from similar sources, superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and the mysticisms of German metaphysics, and favours the world with visions in verse, in which the quadruple elements of sexton, old women, Jeremy Taylor, and Emanuel Kant, are harmonized into a delicious poetical compound. Mr. Moore presents us with a Persian, and Mr. Campbell with a Pennsylvanian tale, both formed on the same principle as Mr. Southey's epics, by extracting from a perfunctory and desultory perusal of a collection of voyages and travels, all that useful investigation would not seek for and that common sense would reject.<sup>4</sup>

3. Wordsworth wrote poems titled *The Danish Boy* and *Lucy Gray*. The final phrase echoes "Moods of My Own Mind," Wordsworth's heading for a section in his *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807).

4. The allusions in this paragraph are to Sir Walter Scott's verse-romances such as *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*; Byron's verse-narratives such as *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*; Southey's various epics, including *Thalaba* and *Roderick: The Last of the Goths*; Wordsworth's *The Excursion* and various other poems; Coleridge's

These disjointed relics of tradition and fragments of second-hand observation, being woven into a tissue of verse, constructed on what Mr. Coleridge calls a new principle<sup>5</sup> (that is, no principle at all), compose a modern-antique compound of frippery and barbarism, in which the puling sentimentality of the present time is grafted on the misrepresented ruggedness of the past into a heterogeneous congeries of unamalgamating manners, sufficient to impose on the common readers of poetry, over whose understandings the poet of this class possesses that commanding advantage, which, in all circumstances and conditions of life, a man who knows something, however little, always possesses over one who knows nothing.

A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labours.<sup>6</sup> The philosophic mental tranquillity which looks round with an equal eye on all external things, collects a store of ideas, discriminates their relative value, assigns to all their proper place, and from the materials of useful knowledge thus collected, appreciated, and arranged, forms new combinations that impress the stamp of their power and utility on the real business of life, is diametrically the reverse of that frame of mind which poetry inspires, or from which poetry can emanate. The highest inspirations of poetry are resolvable into three ingredients: the rant of unregulated passion, the whining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment: and can therefore serve only to ripen a splendid lunatic like Alexander, a puling driveller like Werter,<sup>7</sup> or a morbid dreamer like Wordsworth. It can never make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life an useful or rational man. It cannot claim the slightest share in any one of the comforts and utilities of life of which we have witnessed so many and so rapid advances. But though

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poems of the supernatural, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*; Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*; and Thomas Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming* (Wyoming is the name of a settlement in Pennsylvania).

5. In the preface to *Christabel* Coleridge says that its meter is "founded on a new principle . . . of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables."

6. In the *Odyssey* Homer describes the Cimmerians as a people who lived in a sunless land perpetually shrouded in mist and snow.

7. Werther, the supersensitive protagonist of Goethe's early novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), commits suicide at his failure to win the woman he loves. "Alexander": Alexander the Great, who in the 4th century B.C.E. set out to conquer the known world.

not useful, it may be said it is highly ornamental, and deserves to be cultivated for the pleasure it yields. Even if this be granted, it does not follow that a writer of poetry in the present state of society is not a waster of his own time, and a robber of that of others. Poetry is not one of those arts which, like painting, require repetition and multiplication, in order to be diffused among society. There are more good poems already existing than are sufficient to employ that portion of life which any mere reader and recipient of poetical impressions should devote to them, and these having been produced in poetical times, are far superior in all the characteristics of poetry to the artificial reconstructions of a few morbid ascetics in unpoetical times. To read the promiscuous rubbish of the present time to the exclusion of the select treasures of the past, is to substitute the worse for the better variety of the same mode of enjoyment.

But in whatever degree poetry is cultivated, it must necessarily be to the neglect of some branch of useful study: and it is a lamentable spectacle to see minds, capable of better things, running to seed in the specious indolence of these empty aimless mockeries of intellectual exertion. Poetry was the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society: but for the maturity of mind to make a serious business of the playthings of its childhood, is as absurd as for a full-grown man to rub his gums with coral, and cry to be charmed to sleep by the jingle of silver bells.

As to that small portion of our contemporary poetry, which is neither descriptive, nor narrative, nor dramatic, and which, for want of a better name, may be called ethical, the most distinguished portion of it, consisting merely of querulous, egotistical rhapsodies, to express the writer's high dissatisfaction with the world and every thing in it, serves only to confirm what has been said of the semi-barbarous character of poets, who from singing dithyrambs and "To Triumphe,"<sup>8</sup> while society was savage, grow rabid, and out of their element, as it becomes polished and enlightened.

Now when we consider that it is not the thinking and studious, and scientific and philosophical part of the community, not to those whose minds are bent on the pursuit and promotion of permanently useful ends and aims, that poets must address their minstrelsy, but to that much larger portion of the reading public, whose minds are not awakened to the desire of valuable knowledge, and who are indifferent to any thing beyond being charmed, moved, excited,

8. The cry of Roman soldiers during their triumphal procession in Rome following a military victory. "Dithyrambs": Frenzied hymns, sung and danced by a chorus in ancient Greece in honor of Dionysus, god of wine and natural fertility.

affected, and exalted: charmed by harmony, moved by sentiment, excited by passion, affected by pathos, and exalted by sublimity: harmony, which is language on the rack of Procrustes;<sup>9</sup> sentiment, which is canting egotism in the mask of refined feeling; passion, which is the commotion of a weak and selfish mind; pathos, which is the whining of an unmanly spirit; and sublimity, which is the inflation of an empty head: when we consider that the great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit; that in proportion as they become so, the subordinacy of the ornamental to the useful will be more and more seen and acknowledged; and that therefore the progress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowledge, will continue more and more to withdraw attention from frivolous and uncondusive, to solid and conducive studies: that therefore the poetical audience will not only continually diminish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in the comparison of intellectual acquirement: when we consider that the poet must still please his audience, and must therefore continue to sink to their level, while the rest of the community is rising above it: we may easily conceive that the day is not distant, when the degraded state of every species of poetry will be as generally recognized as that of dramatic poetry has long been: and this not from any decrease either of intellectual power, or intellectual acquisition, but because intellectual power and intellectual acquisition have turned themselves into other and better channels, and have abandoned the cultivation and the fate of poetry to the degenerate fry of modern rhymesters, and their olympic judges, the magazine critics, who continue to debate and promulgate oracles about poetry, as if it were still what it was in the Homeric age, the all-in-all of intellectual progression, and as if there were no such things in existence as mathematicians, astronomers, chemists, moralists, metaphysicians, historians, politicians, and political economists, who have built into the upper air of intelligence a pyramid, from the summit of which they see the modern Parnassus<sup>1</sup> far beneath them, and, knowing how small a place it occupies in the comprehensiveness of their prospect, smile at the little ambition and the circumscribed perceptions with which the drivellers and mountebanks upon it are contending for the poetical palm and the critical chair.

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9. In Greek legend a brigand who fitted his victims to the length of a bed either by cutting them short or stretching them out.

1. A mountain in Greece sacred to Apollo, god of poetry, and to the Muses.

## The War Song of Dinas Vawr

The mountain sheep are sweeter,  
 But the valley sheep are fatter;  
 We therefore deemed it meeter  
 To carry off the latter.  
 We made an expedition; 5  
 We met a host, and quelled it;  
 We forced a strong position,  
 And killed the men who held it.

On Dyfed's richest valley,  
 Where herds of kine were browsing, 10  
 We made a mighty sally,  
 To furnish our carousing.  
 Fierce warriors rushed to meet us;  
 We met them, and o'erthrew them:  
 They struggled hard to beat us; 15  
 But we conquered them, and slew them.

As we drove our prize at leisure,  
 The king marched forth to catch us:  
 His rage surpassed all measure,  
 But his people could not match us. 20  
 He fled to his hall pillars;  
 And, ere our force we led off,  
 Some sacked his house and cellars,  
 While others cut his head off.

We there, in strife bewild'ring, 25  
 Spilt blood enough to swim in:  
 We orphaned many children,  
 And widowed many women.  
 The eagles and the ravens  
 We glutted with our foemen; 30  
 The heroes and the cravens,  
 The spearmen and the bowmen.

THE WAR SONG OF DINAS VAWR

17

We brought away from battle,  
And much their land bemoaned them,  
Two thousand head of cattle,  
And the head of him who owned them:  
Ednyfed, king of Dyfed,  
His head was borne before us;  
His wine and beasts supplied our feasts,  
And his overthrow, our chorus.

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