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PROSAIC SPIRIT OF THE AGE

There are some phrases that convey only a vague and indefinite meaning, that make an impression upon the mind so faint as to be scarcely resolvable into shape or character. Being associated, however, with the feeling of beauty or enjoyment, they are ever on our lips, and pass current in conversation at a conventional value. Of these phrases is the 'poetry of life'—words that never fail to excite an agreeable though dreamy emotion, which it is impossible to refer to any positive ideas. They are generally used, however, to indicate something gone by. The poetry of life, we say, with sentimental regret, has passed away with the old forms of society; the world is disenchanted of its talismans; we have awakened from the dreams that once lent a charm to existence, and we now see nothing around us but the cold hard crust of external nature.

This must be true if we think it is so; for we cannot be

mistaken, when we feel that the element of the poetical is wanting in our constitutions. But we err both in our mode of accounting for the fact, and in believing the loss we deplore to be irretrievable. The fault committed by reasoners on this subject is, to confound one thing with another—to account for the age being unpoetical—as it unquestionably is—by a supposed decay in the materials of poetry. We may as well be told that the phenomena of the rising and setting sun—of clouds and moonlight—of storm and calm—of the changing seasons—of the infinitely varying face of nature, are now trite and worn-out. They are as fresh and new as ever, and will be so at the last day of the world, presenting, at every recurring view, something to surprise as well as delight. To each successive generation of men, the phenomena both of the outer and inner world are absolutely new; and the child of the present day is as much a stranger upon the earth as the first-born of Eve. But the impression received by each individual from the things that surround him is widely different—as different as the faces in a crowd, which all present the common type of humanity without a single feature being alike. This fact we unconsciously assert in our everyday criticism; for when any similarity is detected in a description, whether of things internal or external, we at once stigmatise the later version as a plagiarism, and as such set it down as a confession of weakness.

But although the manifestations of nature, being infinite, cannot be worn out, the capacity to enjoy them, being human, may decay. It may, in fact, in some natures, be entirely wanting,

and in some generations at least partially so. Seamen, for instance, who live, move, and have their being in a world of poetry and romance, are the least poetical of men; even in their songs they affect the prosaic and matter of fact, and discard everything appertaining to the fanciful.¹ Here is a direct instance of the materials of poetry being present, and its spirit wanting. So common, however, is it to confound the poetical with the faculty of enjoying it, that we find a hygienic power ascribed as an absolute property to the beauty of that very element, from which they who view it, both in its sweetest and grandest aspects, derive no elevation of feeling whatever. Hufeland, who reckons among the great panaceas of life the joy arising from the contemplation of the beauties of nature, in estimating the advantage of sea-bathing as the chief natural tonic, attributes it in great part to the action of the prospect of the sea upon the nervous system. 'I am fully convinced,' says he, 'that the physical effects of sea-bathing must be greatly increased by the impression on the mind, and that a hypochondriac or nervous person may be half-cured by residing on the sea-coast, and enjoying a view of the grand scenes of nature which will there present themselves—such as, the rising and setting of the sun over the blue expanse of the waters, and the awful majesty of the waves during a storm.' Now, if all patients were alike impressionable, this would be sound doctrine; but, as it is, few see the sun rise at all, many retire before the dews of evening begin to condense, and almost all shut

¹ See *Journal*, No. 425. Article, 'Dibdin's Sailor-Songs.'

themselves carefully up during a storm.

The poetry of life, we need hardly say, is not associated exclusively with the things of external nature:

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,

are likewise a portion of the materials which it informs as with a soul. For poetry does not create, but modify. It is neither passion nor power; neither beauty nor love; but to one of these it gives exaltation, to another majesty; to one enchantment, to another divinity. It is not the light of 'the sun when it shines, nor of the moon walking in brightness,' but the glory of the one, and the grace and loveliness of the other. It is not instruction, but that which lends to instruction a loftier character, ascending from the finite to the infinite. It is not morality, but that which deepens the moral impression, and sends the thrill of spiritual beauty throughout the whole being. But its appeals, says an eloquent writer, are mainly 'to those affections that are apt to become indolent and dormant amidst the commerce of the world;' and it aims at the 'revival of those purer and more enthusiastic feelings which are associated with the earlier and least selfish period of our existence. Immersed in business, which, if it sharpen the edge of intellect, leaves the heart barren; toiling after material wealth or power, and struggling with fortune for existence; seeing selfishness reflected all around us from the hard and glittering

surface of society as from a cold and polished mirror; it would go hard with man in adversity, perhaps still more in prosperity, if some resource were not provided for him, which, under the form of an amusement and recreation, administered a secret but powerful balsam in the one case, and an antidote in the other.' Poetry elevates some of our emotions, disinters others from the rubbish of the world, heightens what is mean, transforms what is unsightly,

Clothing the palpable and the familiar
With golden exhalations of the dawn.

It is a spiritual wine which revives the weary denizen of the vale of tears, and softens, warms, and stimulates, without the reaction of material cordials. 'It gives him wings,' says another writer, 'and lifts him out of the dirt; and leads him into green valleys; and carries him up to high places, and shews him at his feet the earth and all its glories.'

The poetry of life, therefore, although one of those expressions that baffle definition, points to something of vast importance to the happiness of men and the progress of the race. It is no idle dream, no mere amusement of the fancy. Whenever we feel a generous thrill on hearing of a great action—that is poetry. Whenever we are conscious of a larger and loftier sympathy than is implied in the exercise of some common duty of humanity—that is poetry. Whenever we look upon the hard

realities of life through a medium that softens and relieves them—that medium is poetry. Without poetry, there is no loftiness in friendship, no devotedness in love. The feelings even of the young mother watching her sleeping child till her eyes are dim with happiness, are one half poetry. Hark! there is music on the evening air, always a delightful incident in the most delightful scene; and here there are ruins, and woods, and waters, all the adjuncts of a picture. This is beauty; but if we breathe over that beauty the spirit of poetry, see what a new creation it becomes, and what a permanent emotion it excites!

The splendour falls on castle walls,
And snowy summits, old in story;
The long light shakes across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.
Blow, bugle blow, set the wild echoes flying;
Blow bugle, answer echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O hark! O hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, further going;
O sweet and far, from cliff and scar,
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying;
Blow bugle, answer echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O love, they die in yon rich sky!
They faint on field, and hill, and river;
Our echoes roll from soul to soul,

And grow for ever and for ever.

Blow, bugle blow, set the wild echoes flying;

And answer, echoes answer, dying, dying, dying.²

This is a sample of the spiritual wine we have talked of—something to elevate and intoxicate. But the picture it presents does not pass away in the reaction of the morning. It haunts us in all after-life, rising up before us in the pauses of the world, to heal and refresh our wearied spirits.

As in this poem the pleasure is caused by its appeals to the imagination heightening the feeling the scene naturally excites; by the spiritual and material world being linked together as regards the music; and by the connection established between the echoes and the sky, field, hill, and river, where they die—just so it is with the poetry of moral feeling. The spectacle we have instanced of the young mother watching her sleeping infant, is in itself beautiful; but it becomes poetical when we imagine the feeling of beauty united in her mind with the instinct of love, and detect in her glance, moist with emotion, the blending of hopes, memories, pride, and tearful joy. Poetry, therefore, is not moral feeling, but something that heightens and adorns it. It is not even a direct moral agent, for it deepens the lesson only through the medium of the feelings and imagination. Thus moral poetry, when reduced to writing, is merely morality conveyed in the form of poetry; and in like manner, religious poetry, is religion so

² Tennyson.

conveyed. The thing conveyed, however, must harmonise with the medium, for poetry will not consent to give an enduring form to what is false or pernicious. It has often been remarked, with a kind of superstitious wonder, that poems of an immoral character never live long; but the reason is, that it is the characteristic of immorality to tie down man in the chains of the senses, and this shews that it has nothing in common with the spiritual nature of poetry. For the same reason, a poem based upon atheism, although it might attract attention for a time, would meet with no permanent response in the human breast; religion being Truth, and poetry her peculiar ministrant.

Although written poetry, however, does not necessarily come into this subject, it may be observed, that the comparative incapacity of the present generation to enjoy the poetical is clearly exhibited in its literature. Never was there so much verse, and so little poetry. Never was the faculty of rhyming so impartially spread over the whole mass of society. The difficulty used to be, to find one possessed of the gift: now it is nearly as difficult to find one who is not. Formerly, to write verses was a distinction: now it is a distinction not to write them—and one of some consequence. But with all this multitude of poets, there is not one who can take his place with the comparatively great names of the past, or vanishing generation. Now and then we have a brilliant thought—even a certain number of verses deserving the name of a poem; but there is no sustained poetical power, nothing to mark an epoch, or glorify a name. When we

commend, it is some passage distinct from the poem, something small, and finished, and complete in itself. The taste of the day runs more upon conceits and extravagances, such as Cowley would have admired, and which he might have envied. The suddenness of the impression, so to speak, made by great poets, their direct communication with the heart, belongs to another time. It is our ambition to come to the same end by feats of ingenuity; and instead of touching the feelings, and setting the imagination of the reader instantaneously aglow, to exercise his skill in unravelling and interpretation. We expect the pleasure of success to reward him for the fatigue.

The same feeling is at work, as we have already pointed out, in decorative art; in which 'a redundancy of useless or ridiculous ornament is called richness, and the inability to appreciate simple and beautiful, or grand and noble forms, receives the name of genius.' The connection is curious, likewise, between this ingenuity of poetry and that of the machinery which gives a distinguishing character to our epoch. It looks as if the complication of images, working towards a certain end, were only another development of the genius that invents those wonderful instruments which the eye cannot follow till they are familiarly entertained—and sometimes not even then. If this idea were kept in view, there would be at least some wit, although no truth, in the common theory which attempts to account for the decline of poetry. Neither advancement in science, however, nor ingenuity in mechanics, is in itself, as the theory alleges,

hostile to the poetical; on the contrary, the materials of poetry multiply with the progress of both. The prosaic character of the age does not flow from these circumstances, but exists in spite of them. It has been said, indeed, that the light of knowledge is unfavourable to poetry, by making the hues and lineaments of the phantoms it calls up grow fainter and fainter, till they are wholly dispelled. But this applies only to one class of images. The ghost of Banquo, for instance, may pale away and vanish utterly before the light of knowledge; but the air-drawn dagger of Macbeth is immortal like the mind itself. Knowledge cannot throw its illumination upon eternity, or dissipate the influences by which men feel they are surrounded. A candle brought into a darkened room discloses the material forms of the things in the midst of which we are standing, and which may have been involved, to our imagination, in a poetical mystery. But the light itself, as an unexplained wonder—its analogies with the flame of life—the modifications it receives from the faint gleam of the sky through the shadowed window—all are poetical materials, and of a higher character. Where one series of materials ends, another begins; and so on in infinite progression, till poetry seems to spurn the earth from beneath her foot—

Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,
And in clear dream and solemn vision
Telling of things which no gross ear can hear;
Till oft converse with heavenly habitants
Begins to cast a beam on the outer shape—

The unpolluted temple of the mind,
And turn it by degrees to the soul's essence,
Till all be made immortal.

Science with us, however, is a business instead of an ambition: ingenuity a trade rather than a taste. We go on from discovery to discovery, from invention to invention, with an insatiate but prosaic spirit, which turns everything to a profitable and practical account—imprisoning the very lightning, that it may carry our messages over land and under sea! We do not stop to look, to listen, to feel, to exalt with a moral elevation the objects of our study, and snatch a spiritual enjoyment from imagination. All with us is material; and all would be even mean, but for the essential grandeur of the things themselves. And here comes the question: Is this material progress incompatible with spiritual progress? Is the poetry of life less abundant because the conveniences of life are more complete and admirable? Is man less a spirit of the universe because he is a god over the elements? We answer, No: the scientific and the prosaic spirit are both independent elements in the genius of the age; or, if there is a necessary connection, it is the converse of what is supposed—the restless mind in which the fervour of poetry has died, plunging into science for the occupation that is necessary to its happiness. Thus one age is merely poetical, another merely scientific; although here, of course, we use, for the sake of distinctness, the broadest terms, unmindful of the modifications

ranging between these extreme points. The age, however, that has least poetry has most science, and *vice versâ*.

But man, unlike the other denizens of the earth, has power over his own destiny. He is able to cultivate the poetical as if it were a plant; and if once convinced of its important bearing upon his enjoyment of the world, he will do so. The imagination may be educated as well as the moral sense, and the result of the advancement of the one as well as the other is an expansion of the mind, and an enlargement of the capacity for happiness. The grand obstacle is precisely what we have now endeavoured to aid in removing—the common mistake as to the nature of the poetical, which it is customary to consider as something remote from, or antagonistic to, the business of life. So far from this, it is essentially connected with the moral feelings. It neutralises the conventionalisms of society, and makes the whole world kin. It enlarges the circle of our sympathies, till they comprehend, not only our own kind, but every living thing, and not only animate beings, but all created nature.

A DUEL IN 1830

I had just arrived at Marseilles with the diligence, in which three young men, apparently merchants or commercial travellers, were the companions of my journey. They came from Paris, and were enthusiastic about the events which had lately happened there, and in which they boasted of having taken part. I was, for my part, quiet and reserved; for I thought it much better, at a time of such political excitement in the south of France, where party passions always rise so high, to do nothing that would attract attention; and my three fellow-travellers no doubt looked on me as a plain, common-place seaman, who had been to the luxurious metropolis for his pleasure or on business. My presence, it seemed, did not incommode them, for they talked on as if I had not been there. Two of them were gay, merry, but rather coarse boon-companions; the third, an elegant youth, blooming and tall, with luxuriant black curling hair, and dark soft eyes. In the hotel where we dined, and where I sat a little distance off, smoking my cigar, the conversation turned on various love-adventures, and the young man, whom they called Alfred, shewed his comrades a packet of delicately perfumed letters, and a superb lock of beautiful fair hair.

He told them, that in the days of July he had been slightly wounded, and that his only fear, while he lay on the ground, was that if he died, some mischance might prevent Clotilde from

weeping over his grave. 'But now all is well,' he continued. 'I am going to fetch a nice little sum from my uncle at Marseilles, who is just at this moment in good-humour, on account of the discomfiture of the Jesuits and the Bourbons. In my character of one of the heroes of July, he will forgive me all my present and past follies: I shall pass an examination at Paris, and then settle down in quiet, and live happily with my Clotilde.' Thus they talked together; and by and by we parted in the court-yard of the coach-office.

Close by was a brilliantly illumined coffee-house. I entered, and seated myself at a little table, in a distant corner of the room. Two persons only were still in the saloon, in an opposite corner, and before them stood two glasses of brandy. One was an elderly, stately, and portly gentleman, with dark-red face, and dressed in a quiet coloured suit; it was easy to perceive that he was a clergyman. But the appearance of the other was very striking. He could not be far from sixty years of age, was tall and thin, and his gray, indeed almost white hair, which, however, rose from his head in luxurious fulness, gave to his pale countenance a peculiar expression that made one feel uncomfortable. The brawny neck was almost bare; a simple, carelessly-knotted black kerchief alone encircled it; thick, silver-gray whiskers met together at his chin; a blue frock-coat, pantaloons of the same colour, silk stockings, shoes with thick soles, and a dazzlingly-white waistcoat and linen, completed his equipment. A thick stick leant in one corner, and his broad-brimmed hat hung against the wall.

There was a certain convulsive twitching of the thin lips of this person, which was very remarkable; and there seemed, when he looked fixedly, to be a smouldering fire in his large, glassy, grayish-blue eyes. He was, it was evident, a seaman like myself—a strong oak that fate had shaped into a mast, over which many a storm had blustered, but which had been too tough to be shivered, and still defied the tempest and the lightning. There lay a gloomy resignation as well as a wild fanaticism in those features. The large bony hand, with its immense fingers, was spread out or clenched, according to the turn which the conversation with the clergyman took. Suddenly he stepped up to me. I was reading a royalist newspaper. He lighted his cigar.

'You are right, sir; you are quite right not to read those infamous Jacobin journals.' I looked up, and gave no answer. He continued: 'A sailor?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And have seen service?'

'Yes.'

'You are still in active service?'

'No.' And then, to my great satisfaction, for my patience was well-nigh exhausted, the examination was brought to a conclusion.

Just then, an evil destiny led my three young fellow-travellers into the room. They soon seated themselves at a table, and drank some glasses of champagne to Clotilde's health. All went on well; but when they began to sing the *Marseillaise* and the *Parisienne*,

the face of the gray man began to twitch, and it was evident a storm was brewing. Calling to the waiter, he said with a loud voice: 'Tell those blackguards yonder not to annoy me with their low songs!'

The young men sprang up in a fury, and asked if it was to them he alluded.

'Whom else should I mean?' said the gray man with a contemptuous sneer.

'But we may drink and sing if we like, and to whom we like,' said the young man. '*Vive la République et vive Clotilde!*'

'One as blackguardly as the other!' cried the gray-beard tauntingly; and a wine-glass, that flew at his head from the hand of the dark-haired youth, was the immediate rejoinder. Slowly wiping his forehead, which bled and dripped with the spilled wine, the old man said quite quietly: 'To-morrow, at the Cap Verd!' and seated himself again with the most perfect composure.

The young man expressed his determination to take the matter on himself; that he alone would settle the quarrel, and promised to appear on the morrow at the appointed time. They then all departed noisily. The old man rose quietly, and turning to me, said: 'Sir, you have been witness to the insult; be witness also to the satisfaction. Here is my address: I shall expect you at five o'clock. Good-night, Monsieur l'Abbé! To-morrow, there will be one Jacobin less, and one lost soul the more. Good-night!' and taking his hat and stick, he departed. His companion the abbé

followed soon after.

I now learned the history of this singular man. He was descended from a good family of Marseilles. Destined for the navy while still young, he was sent on board ship before the Revolution, and while yet of tender years. Later, he was taken prisoner; and after many strange adventures, returned in 1793 to France: was about to marry, but having been mixed up with the disturbances of Toulon, managed to escape by a miracle to England; and learned before long that his father, mother, one brother, a sister of sixteen years of age, and his betrothed, had all been led to the guillotine to the tune of the *Marseillaise*. Thirst for revenge, revenge on the detested Jacobins, was now his sole aim. For a long time he roved about in the Indian seas, sometimes as a privateer, at others as a slave-dealer; and was said to have caused the tricoloured flag much damage, while he acquired a considerable fortune for himself. With the return of the Bourbons, he came back to France, and settled at Marseilles. He lived, however, very retired, and employed his large fortune solely for the poor, for distressed seamen, and for the clergy. Alms and masses were his only objects of expense. It may easily be believed, that he acquired no small degree of popularity among the lower classes and the clergy. But, strangely enough, when not at church, he spent his time with the most celebrated fencing-masters, and had acquired in the use of the pistol and the sword a dexterity that was hardly to be paralleled. In the year 1815, when the royalist reaction broke out in La Vendée, he

roved about for a long time at the head of a band of followers. When at last this opportunity of cooling his rage was taken from him by the return of order, he looked out for some victim who was known to him by his revolutionary principles, and sought to provoke him to combat. The younger, the richer, the happier the chosen victim was, the more desirable did he seem. The landlord told me he himself knew of seven young persons who had fallen before his redoubted sword.

The next morning at five o'clock, I was at the house of this singular character. He lived on the ground-floor, in a small simple room, where, excepting a large crucifix, and a picture covered with black crape, with the date, 1794, under it, the only ornaments were some nautical instruments, a trombone, and a human skull. The picture was the portrait of his guillotined bride; it remained always veiled, excepting only when he had slaked his revenge with blood; then he uncovered it for eight days, and indulged himself in the sight. The skull was that of his mother. His bed consisted of the usual hammock slung from the ceiling. When I entered, he was at his devotions, and a little negro brought me meanwhile a cup of chocolate and a cigar. When he had risen from his knees, he saluted me in a friendly manner, as if we were merely going for a morning walk together; afterwards he opened a closet, took out of it a case with a pair of English pistols, and a couple of excellent swords, which I put under my arm; and thus provided, we proceeded along the quay towards the port. The boatmen seemed all to know him. 'Peter, your boat!' He seated

himself in the stern.

'You will have the goodness to row,' he said; 'I will take the tiller, so that my hand may not become unsteady.'

I took off my coat, rowed away briskly, and as the wind was favourable, we hoisted a sail, and soon reached Cap Verd. We could remark from afar our three young men, who were sitting at breakfast in a garden not far from the shore. This was the garden of a *restaurateur*, and was the favourite resort of the inhabitants of Marseilles. Here you find excellent fish; and also, in high perfection, the famous *bollenbresse*, a national dish in Provence, as celebrated as the *olla podrida* of Spain. How many a love-meeting has occurred in this place! But this time it was not Love that brought the parties together, but Hate, his stepbrother; and in Provence the one is as ardent, quick, and impatient as the other.

My business was soon accomplished. It consisted in asking the young men what weapons they chose, and with which of them the duel was to be fought. The dark-haired youth—his name was M—L— insisted that he alone should settle the business, and his friends were obliged to give their word not to interfere.

'You are too stout,' he said to the one, pointing to his portly figure; 'and you'—to the other—'are going to be married; besides, I am a first-rate hand with the sword. However, I will not take advantage of my youth and strength, but will choose the pistol, unless the gentleman yonder prefers the sword.'

A movement of convulsive joy animated the face of my old captain: 'The sword is the weapon of the French gentleman,' he

said; 'I shall be happy to die with it in my hand.'

'Be it so. But your age?'

'Never mind; make haste, and *en garde*.'

It was a strange sight: the handsome young man on one side, overbearing confidence in his look, with his youthful form, full of grace and suppleness; and opposite him that long figure, half naked—for his blue shirt was furled up from his sinewy arm, and his broad, scarred breast was entirely bare. In the old man, every sinew was like iron wire: his whole weight resting on his left hip, the long arm—on which, in sailor fashion, a red cross, three lilies, and other marks, were tattooed—held out before him, and the cunning, murderous gaze rivetted on his adversary.

"'Twill be but a mere scratch,' said one of the three friends to me. I made no reply, but was convinced beforehand that my captain, who was an old practitioner, would treat the matter more seriously. Young L—, whose perfumed coat was lying near, appeared to me to be already given over to corruption. He began the attack, advancing quickly. This confirmed me in my opinion; for although he might be a practised fencer in the schools, this was proof that he could not frequently have been engaged in serious combat, or he would not have rushed forwards so incautiously against an adversary whom he did not as yet know. His opponent profited by his ardour, and retired step by step, and at first only with an occasional ward and half thrust. Young L—, getting hotter and hotter, grew flurried; while every ward of his adversary proclaimed, by its force and exactness, the

master of the art of fence. At length the young man made a lunge; the captain parried it with a powerful movement, and, before L— could recover his position, made a thrust in return, his whole body falling forward as he did so, exactly like a picture at the Académie des Armes—'the hand elevated, the leg stretched out'—and his sword went through his antagonist, for nearly half its length, just under the shoulder. The captain made an almost imperceptible turn with his hand, and in an instant was again *en garde*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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