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The Value to the Preacher of the Great Poets

The Rev. Robert Christie, D. D., LL. D.

No attentive reader of good literature can have failed to note the frequent appeal which is made to the great poets. Even the "myriad-minded" Plato draws often upon Homer, whilst an inspired Apostle points to "what certain of their own poets have said". And what writer of the English speaking people fails to call Shakespeare to his support if that genius has spoken on the subject in hand? Speakers also are prone to light up or clinch an argument with a quotation in verse. And if such quotation be apt, it has a weight of authority far beyond any similar sentiment in prose. From this it would appear that these "sons of song" speak as men having peculiar authority. This indeed seems to be everywhere conceded. But did you ever stop and ask yourself what it is in their productions that gives them this weight of influence? Why, for example, does a stanza from Tennyson count for more than a paragraph from Gladstone on the same subject? It cannot result from superior scholarship, since the attainments of the statesman were beyond those of the poet. At first blush the effect might be ascribed to the form in which the poet

conveys his thought. No doubt rhythmic cadences impart their charm; but, divested of these, the power remains. The fact that the thought is from the brain of a Dante or a Shakespeare gives the mintage its value.

The question therefore returns: what enabled these men to pass beyond others in their pursuit of truth and to convince their fellows that they have been successful in their quest? That which gave them advantage over others was a *gift* not an attainment, a possession that culture and circumstances might modify and develop but could not create. Such bestowment separated them from their fellows almost as far as would have an added faculty or an extra sense.

This possession is known as Imagination, a faculty that has not always been credited with yielding the most reliable products. Indeed, Imagination is thought of by many as a creator of fiction and fantastic views. But we shall see, I trust, when applied to the gift of the poet that it is a truth-seeing faculty, reaching aspects of reality and perceiving far-reaching analogies that can come to us in no other way. It has been called,

“The vision and faculty divine”.

Ruskin says of it that it is “a greater power than any other human faculty”. Its possessor does not see things differently from other men, but he sees further; he does not feel differently from others, but he feels more delicately and deeply. It ought not to be deemed strange that no satisfactory analysis of this faculty has ever been given. You sometimes find a youth without mental training capable of the most amazing mathematical calculations. In recent years two continents have been entertained by an ignorant colored boy reproducing on the piano, after one hearing, the most difficult compositions, whilst unable to read a single note of music. Ask either prodigy how it is done and you receive for answer a shake of the head. Ask the philosopher to explain and you know in advance that he will reply by conjecture.

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We find no generally accepted definition of Imagination as applied to the poet. I find myself in agreement with those who regard it as the faculty whose chief function is to fill out into complete forms that which we find in life in the shape of imperfect and mutilated examples.

For illustration, give a naturalist a bone of an extinct species and he will not only make a drawing of the whole animal, but will tell you the element in which it lived, the food on which it subsisted, together with the climatic conditions by which it was surrounded. Give a poet a man with a dominating passion, such as ambition or avarice, occupying a certain position, and he will fill out to a completeness at a glance the resultant character. In Dante's *Inferno* you see the single deed, or disposition, good or bad, completing itself at once in a corresponding character and destiny. Branca d'Oria, a citizen of Genoa, is guilty of the double crime of treachery and murder. The poet represents his soul as at once hurried down to the lowest hell whilst a devil from the pit comes instead to inhabit his body. Could anything more truly have set forth what had taken place in the experience of that criminal? It is true "he eats, drinks, sleeps and puts on clothes as do the other citizens of Genoa", but what of that once peaceful heart and whence that torturing fiend that puts a venomous sting in everything that once gave delight? From whence could such a spirit come but from the pit of woe? The stages chosen by the poet to set forth the retributions that are wrapped up in a single evil deed are the present and the future. By such perspective he can set forth the stages through which the soul passes in its downward course. But to his own eye the evil deed completes itself, in character, at a single glance. Like every one who has looked into the moral nature of man, Dante saw that,

"The soul is its own place,
And of itself makes a hell of heaven
And a heaven of hell":

or, as Dr. Strong tells us, "he shows you that a whole

heaven or a whole hell may be wrapped up in the compass of a single soul". "Hence", says one, "Dante's *Inferno* is no foreign structure arbitrarily erected. It rather symbolizes conditions of existence projected from the soul, and formed, like the shell around the nautilus, out of natural secretions from its own inward life. The soul's retributions grow out of the moral nature of man and hold an indestructible place in the order of the moral universe.

This power that enables a man to complete the whole from a fragment, or see the general in the particular, is not peculiar to the poet. The general, from the knowledge of a single fact in the enemy's situation, divines the whole plan of attack. This because, if the part on which the imagination acts be an essential element of the whole, the result can scarcely be deceptive. Give a mathematician a segment of any of the curves and by an act of personal consciousness he will complete the figure. In this connection it has been claimed that Newton's power was as marvelous as that of Shakespeare.

In his *Autobiography* Goethe says, "While I was visiting at Strausburg I happened to be in a pretty large party at a country house from which there was a magnificent view of the Cathedral and the tower that rises above it. 'It is a pity', said some one, 'that the whole is not finished and that we have only one tower'. I replied, 'To me it seems quite as great a pity that this one tower is not completed, for the four volutes end much too abruptly. Four light spires should have been added to them, as well as a higher one in the middle where the clumsy cross now stands'.

"As I made this declaration, with my usual earnestness, a lively little man addressed me and said, 'who told you that?'. 'I have observed it so carefully and have manifested such attachment to it that at last it determined to confess to me this open mystery.' 'It has not informed you untruly', said the little man. 'I have the best means

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of knowing for I am the superintendent of the public buildings. In our archives we still have the original designs (drawings) which say precisely the same, and which I can show you' ”.

Following out the lines on which the building was constructed, the imagination of the poet saw that it was incomplete and divined what was needed to perfect the whole.

As the kings, heroes, and statesmen of Shakespeare act their parts in their high positions and pass to their reward, every competent judge exclaims, “How natural”. No uninspired man has so perfectly portrayed human character in nearly all its phases. Where did this man, with no advantages beyond the average Englishman, find his originals? Not in daily life or in the pages of history. Had such characters existed in his time, they would not, in his position, come under his eye. He gives you, not the real Macbeth or Cardinal Woolsey. In the Cardinal and Thane of history there is the element of unhallowed ambition; and what the bone is to the naturalist, what the segment of the curve is to the mathematician, that unholy passion is to the poet. Given that element and the high position in which they act their parts, and the imagination creates,

“Forms more real than living men
Nurslings of immortality”.

Hence it is that they reveal more fully, and therefore more truly, than in actual life the possibilities wrapped up in the nature of man.

We have an illustration of our theme in that instance where Elisha wept in the presence of Hazael. “The great man said, Why weepeth my lord? And he answered, Because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel; their strongholds wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword, and dash their children. And Hazael said, But what, is thy servant a dog that he should do this great thing? The

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answer was, The Lord hath showed me that thou wilt be king over Syria.”

And now as to the religious bearing of our subject. It has been said that “that which decides the vitality of any book is precisely that which decides the value of any human soul—not the knowledge it contains, but simply the attitude it takes toward the universe, seen and unseen”. No book takes a more definite attitude in this matter than that which the Christian minister holds in his hand. From lid to lid it teaches that man is vitally related to two realms—the visible and invisible, the material and spiritual, the temporal and eternal. It teaches that there is an inflexible moral order, within which obedience leads to lasting joys and disobedience to suffering and woe; that man, as a dependent sinful being, needs the pardoning mercy and sustaining favor of God. In a word, it teaches that they that fear the Lord have the promise of the life that now is as well as of that which is to come. But the Book claims to be a revelation from One who can read the inmost workings of the soul and foresee the consequences of its actions, good and evil. The Book has been written also with a definite religious purpose, and therefore it has been easy for the unbeliever to weaken its authority by denying the existence of God and the reality of a *moral order* to which obedience issues in happiness, disobedience in misery.

But here comes Shakespeare of whom it may be said:

“He saw thro’ life and death, thro’ good and ill,
He saw thro’ his own soul:
The marvel of the everlasting will,
Before him lay an open scroll”;

and when he came to tell what he saw, what is his report? Be it remembered that he writes with no religious object in view. His aim is to entertain the theatre goers of London. And yet he shows that happiness and misery are determined precisely as in the Bible. His attitude towards the universe, seen and unseen, is identical with that of prophets and apostles. His characters find their

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peace and joy, their inspiration and support in the truths and spiritual realm revealed in the religion of Jesus. And when they violate the laws of their moral nature, monitions and retributions identical with those threatened in the Bible overtake the evil doer. "I doubt", says one, "whether there is an essential doctrine or precept of the Gospels which is not directly or indirectly recognized and enforced by Shakespeare". From whence could be drawn a stronger argument in support of the divine origin of the Scriptures? As is confessed by all, no other human being has read so clearly the workings of the human soul and the operations of the moral order under which we live; and, when for the entertainment of his fellows he comes to tell what he found there, there is essential identity with the words of Holy Writ. In this, it seems to me, the preacher has a buttress to his faith all the stronger because wholly undesigned. "In that master dramatist", says one, "you cannot find a trace of that present day theory born of a morbid physiology by which character, personality, the soul, responsibility are explained away and all moral energy disappears before such solvents as outward circumstances, antecedent conditions, heredity, and accumulated instincts". "And all genuine poetry comes as a refutation of that philosophy which denies us any access to truth except through the senses, which refuses to believe anything which scalpel, crucible, or microscope cannot verify; which reduces human nature to a heap of finely granulated iridescent dust and empties man of a soul and the universe of a God."

Another function of the poet is to present, through the imagination, effects that could be known only by experience. Sympathy has been defined as 'two souls tugging at one burden'. Now there are two ways of coming into sympathy with a soul in its joys and sorrows. The one is to do or suffer the same things that have caused the gladness or the pain. The other is to be able to think yourself down into the same states of mind and

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heart with the one rejoicing or suffering. It is the peculiar prerogative of the poet to do the latter. Where will you find feelings of a soul guilty of murder so perfectly given as in Macbeth? And nowhere can you find the sufferings that come from the ingratitude of children portrayed so perfectly as in King Lear. And how true to life the sweet comforts and supporting power of innocence in the face of persecution, calumny, and death as seen in Cordelia? What gave the poet fitness for such description? He had never imbrued his hands in the blood of the innocent, he had never been called to endure the ingratitude of a Goneril or a Regan, nor had he been misunderstood like their gentle sister. How then could he portray so faultlessly the workings of the human heart tortured by guilt, stung by ingratitude, or upheld by innocence while looked upon and treated as guilty? Imagination enabled him to think himself down into hearts passing through such experiences and to so realize them in his own being as to give fitness to their adequate expression. Were it not so, none could describe the effect of guilt except the wrong-door, none the miseries of the fallen but such as have yielded up their innocence. That righteousness always exalts and that the wages of sin is death we find written in the Bible; Shakespeare found them indelibly written in the nature of man.

And beyond the power of portrayal the poet enables us to see things as he sees them and in a measure to feel about them as he does. Has that of which he sings moved his pity? His song brings your soul into a like atmosphere of tenderness. Has a noble deed moved him to rapture? His song, wing-like, lifts you to the realm to which he soars. Is he dealing with human wrong? He makes you an ally in its condemnation. Hiawatha humanized our Indian policy, whilst Uncle Tom, a creature of the imagination, hastened the death of slavery. Let the wrongs of the oppressed be voiced by a true poet, and the yoke is in the way of being broken. Emerson

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expresses the uplifting effect of poetry when he says, "The degraded classes are the classes whose poetry has not yet been sung". "One of the chief ends", says one, "which the poet sets for himself is to awaken men to the nobility that lies hid, often obscured in human souls, to call forth sympathy for neglected truths, for noble but oppressed persons, for downtrodden causes, and to make men *feel* that through all outward beauty and all pure inward affection God himself is addressing them. In this endeavor poetry makes common cause with all high things, with right reason and true philosophy, with all man's moral intuitions and his religious aspirations. It combines its influence with all those benign tendencies which are working in the world for the amelioration of man and the manifestation of the Kingdom of God. It is adding from age to age its own currents to those great

"Tides that are flowing
Right onward to the eternal shore'".

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