

Poetry

by J.C. Philpot

Poetry requires a special gift that is natural and cannot be learned, and a true poet must possess many gifts, including original powers of thought, imagination, and feelings.

Scripture: Psalm 139:14

Topics: "Religious Poetry", "Spiritual Influence"

Description

J.C. Philpot delves into the essence of poetry, highlighting the natural gift required for true poetry and the inability to manufacture it through practice alone. He emphasizes the rarity and unique combination of mental faculties needed to be a genuine poet, drawing parallels with music and drawing talents. Philpot also discusses the misuse of poetry for sinful purposes and the profound impact of poetry, like Lord Byron's, on shaping minds towards darkness. He contrasts secular poetry with religious poetry, pointing out the power of spiritual and experimental compositions to touch the soul in a unique way.

Transcript

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There is in poetry--we mean true poetry, something inexpressibly charming to those with whose natural tastes it is in accordance. To understand, admire, and love it, and much more to write it, is a natural gift of comparatively rare occurrence, and which, even when found, exists in very different degrees in different individuals. This natural gift, whether confined to simply understanding and enjoying it, or expanded into a power of poetical composition, may be cultivated and improved by study and practice, and may be refined to a high degree by industry and exercise, but can never be communicated by them where it does not originally exist. In this it much resembles music and drawing. If there be no natural ear for music, no practice can enable a person to sing correctly; and if there be no natural taste for drawing, all instruction will fail to make the pupil an artist.

So it is with poetry. No man can ever be a poet, in the real sense of the word, who does not originally and naturally possess the rare gift of a thoroughly poetical mind; and we much doubt if any one has even a dim perception of the exquisite beauty of poetry, or any acquaintance with the peculiar feelings that it kindles, unless his mental faculties are of a similar cast. As a proof; two men shall read the same lines. To the one, they shall make the blood leap in his veins, flush his cheek, fire his eye, and melt his heart into tears. The

other shall think them very good and very pretty, but see and feel no more in them than in a page of Robinson Crusoe. So two companions in travel shall see at the same moment, for the first time, the majestic range of the Alps spread before them in all their matchless grandeur. The one is speechless with rapture and admiration; the other thinks them very pretty, but, being tired and hungry, thinks much more about his dinner. Which of these two is the poet, which the man of prose? As, then, some people are naturally incapable of understanding and admiring a beautiful landscape, so others are naturally incapable of understanding and admiring a beautiful poem.

But if to understand and enjoy poetry requires a special gift, how much more is a larger endowment of the same peculiar faculty needed to pour forth strains which shall at once proclaim their writer a true and genuine poet, and not a mere versifier. In fact, it is not so much one gift as an assemblage of many gifts, and these rarely united, that is required to constitute a true poet. He must possess great and original powers of thought, an active and thoroughly poetical imagination, feelings highly sensitive and acute, affections deep and strong; and these must be combined with a musical ear exquisitely attuned to sound, a rich and varied vocabulary of language, and a thorough acquaintance with the laws of metre and rhythm. His mind, by original constitution and long continued study, must resemble a musical instrument of exquisite manufacture, which is susceptible of every tone and responsive to every touch; and he must be a skillful performer upon it, thoroughly acquainted with all its powers, and able to evoke at will every note through its entire gamut. He must himself feel, deeply feel, every thought that arises in his mind, and almost every thought to which he gives utterance must be the vivid expression of this feeling.

To move and stir the sluggish minds of others, he must have his own mind moved and stirred to its lowest depths; and he must, as it were, first bathe his words in the inmost recesses of his own heart, and then bring them forth all dripping with the feelings by which he himself is agitated. He should be able to clothe his ideas and feelings in the choicest and most musical language; and the whole, both in design and composition, should be under the control of a chaste and refined taste, so that nothing gross or vulgar, low, far-fetched, or obscure, should mar the delicacy and beauty of his thoughts and expressions. Though what he writes will often be the fruit of the greatest labor, it should from its ease, appear thrown off spontaneously and without the slightest effort; and, however highly polished by continual corrections, his verse should show no trace of the file.

But the question at once arises, "If this is to be a poet, where will you find one? You have set up a standard neither necessary nor attainable." To set up a standard is one thing; to require full compliance with it is another. It is with poetry as with every other product of the human mind or hand. Unless we set up an ideal standard of beauty or excellency, we can have no definite rules of judgment, nor any adequate and trustworthy points of comparison; and without these, we are no judges whatever whether such and such a poem is poetry, or such and such a writer is a poet. And this is just the case with most readers. Having no standard in their own minds, or any poetical taste of their own, they cannot distinguish between mere verse and real poetry. Of course, in this as in every other product of the human mind, there are degrees of excellence, and a man may be a good poet who is not a great one.

In fact, the gifts required for first class poetry are so great, that though the world has in all ages been flooded with verses, there are scarcely a dozen great poets. Excellence in any suit is so rare that for the same reason there never have been many great musical composers, or great painters, or great sculptors, or great orators. But to take a kindred instance; in music, there may be and are people who can sing very sweetly and accurately, who are not first-rate singers, and individuals who can even compose with melody and harmony, do not rise to the highest class of musical composers, so in poetry there may be and are

writers who are sufficiently led to shine and to please who are not poets in the highest sense of the word.

But it is time for us to leave the ground of poetry as poetry, and speak of it as attuned and adapted to the utterance of Christian thought and feeling. The hints we have dropped are meant to show that poetry, whether secular or religious, must emanate from a peculiar assemblage of original mental gifts, and cannot be learned like farming or arithmetic, as well as to beat down that vain and conceited notion that every copy of verses put forth by any or every scribbler is poetry. A man may tag rhymes all his life, and leave behind him volumes of poems and piles of manuscript, of which the first is only fit for the trunk maker, and the last for the butter merchant. A poet is as different from a mere verse maker as a Handel from an organ grinder, a Michael Angelo from a stone mason, or a Raphael from a traveling portrait painter.

But what a proof of man's degradation and desperate wickedness it is, that this noble gift of poetry, the highest exercise, in one sense, of the intellectual faculty, the harmonious combination of the most subtle and exquisite tastes, which should only find their truest utterance in singing the high praises of God, should be prostituted, for the most part to the service of the devil. Sin and Satan have seized the lyre, which, as touched by the fingers of David, sounds the pure songs of Zion--and have dragged it down from heaven to hell. Naturally fitted, as we see in Holy Writ, to be a handmaid in the service of God, she has been made to subserve the vilest passions of the human heart. Lust and bloodshed, under the names of love and glory, have been her chosen themes; and thousands have been stimulated into crime by her magic tones chanted in the worship of these twin deities.

In our own days, for instance, what a dreadful influence for evil has Lord Byron's poetry exercised upon the minds of thousands of the young and imaginative. What gloomy infidelity, what hatred of all restraint, what pride and selfishness, what contempt of everything holy and spiritual, have his powerful verses engendered or nurtured in many a bosom. Youth is the season for those deep impressions which influence a life; and to a mind of poetical cast there is sometimes a force in one stanza of his glowing verse, which, imprinting itself on the memory as in letters of fire, burns and smoulders, until it gushes forth in lava streams of words and actions. We are not speaking here at a venture, but of what we have seen with our own eyes in days long gone by, for we have personally known those who apparently owed their ruin, body and soul, to the influence of his poems.

To the young and ardent of both sexes, to the romantic and imaginative, to the meditative and melancholy, especially when under the influence of that strongest of all human passions, love--how seductive is that poetry, which, in all the magic of verse, reveals and embodies their deepest and most secret feelings; and how almost at will the enchanter can beguile their thoughts and desires into the channel of his own headlong passions. What the Bible is to a child of God their idolized poet is to them. They hang over its pages, learn by heart its lines, are continually repeating to themselves favorite passages, until they drink into the very spirit of the writer, and adopt him as their model and guide.

Would that religious poetry exercised the same influence upon the children of God that secular poetry has exercised in all ages upon the children of this world. To a certain extent, and in a different way, we thankfully acknowledge that it does. The blessing, for instance, that Hart's hymns have been made to the church of God is incalculable. We name him, because, besides his rich and deep experience, and spiritual unction and power, he evidently possessed a large share of poetical gift. That there is something in the very form and language of poetry is indisputable; for else how is it that a verse, or line of a hymn, if it describe the experience of the soul, produces an effect which the same thought would not produce were it

expressed in simple prose? The circumstance cannot be well explained, but the fact remains that there is something in the poetry itself, through which, as an instrument, the Blessed Spirit touches and melts the heart.

But independent of their qualities as poetry, spiritual and experimental compositions in verse have a power peculiar to themselves. Tried indeed by the standard that we have set up, few of our most admired hymns can be called poetry--at least, not if Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron are poets. But they possess what these poets had not--a secret power over the soul, a power contrasted with which, weighed in a spiritual balance, all their gifts are as valueless as time compared with eternity. When we have read the most beautiful compositions of earthly poetry, what impression do they usually leave behind? One so abhorrent to the spirit of Christ, that, in a spiritual frame, a Christian cannot read or even look at them.

We are conscious to ourselves of two distinct feelings and tastes--one that would revel in poetry such as we have attempted to describe--the other that would turn away from its carnality and worldliness with abhorrence; one that would despise the baldness of many a hymn dear to the church of God, the other that would feel and love the experience which it unfolds. For this reason, we feel it exceedingly difficult to appreciate poetry strictly religious. Having read in former days so much of first class poetry, as well as being naturally fond of it, we are too much inclined still to read religious verses as literary compositions, and to weigh them in the same balance as Homer or Shakespeare; and though our spiritual mind calls out against it, and would look at them with gracious eyes, yet we own there is a continual tendency to demand in them some of those qualifications which give to secular poetry not merely its charm but its very being. We offer this explanation and apology if we should seem to have dwelt too long, or insisted too much, upon poetry as distinct from religion.

Indeed, as poetry deals so much with mere natural feelings, and draws its deepest and most intoxicating draughts, not from the well of Bethlehem or the pool of Siloam, but from the turbid springs of human passion, a spiritual poet is almost cut off from the main fountain of poetic thought and expression. A carnal poet may wander at will, unchecked by conscience or godly fear, amid every field of human thought and passion, and pluck flowers for his poetic wreath from the very brink of hell. But a Christian poet can dwell only on those themes which the Holy Spirit has sanctified, and every thought and expression must be under the powerful restraints of a conscience made tender in God's fear.

Debarred from the use of "strange fire," the writers before us have rather sought to fill their censers with coals from the brazen altar. Their aim is nobler and higher than any carnal poet ever dreamed of; and if they have clothed their thoughts and feelings in verse, it is not to bind their brows with wreaths of poetic laurel, but to express their own experience of sorrow and joy for the comfort and encouragement of the people of God. As gracious men, and as personal friends, both of them have a claim upon our affectionate sympathy and interest; and if we cannot rank them in the highest class as poets, we are glad to esteem and value both them and their productions as imbued with the spirit of the gospel.

As poetical contributions, Mr. Sears' compositions certainly claim the higher place, and are generally written with much ease of versification, and force and warmth of expression. Though his main object was doubtless to give utterance to his own feelings and desires, yet he has evidently paid much attention to the structure of his verse and the correctness of his rhymes. In some of his verses there is an easy, animated flow, and a command of poetic imagery and expression which evince a natural gift in that direction. But it has higher qualifications. There is a prayerful spirit, mingled with confession, breathing through them, which makes them very suitable to the tender in heart and contrite in spirit; and though doctrinal truth is

not prominently put forward, yet, to use John Newton's figure, it sweetens the whole.

The people of God instinctively feel and recognize what is spoken or written under divine influences and as to them that alone is true eloquence which speaks from heart to heart, so that to them is alone true poetry which is imbued with unction and savor, and reaches their feelings and consciences.

The Christian poet leads to Gethsemane and Calvary, not to the regions of sin, death, and despair. Who would choose a Byron's fame to have a Byron's end? Happier far are our friends who have devoted their poetic powers to the service of the sanctuary, and, instead of seeking the applause of dying worms, have made their end and aim the glory of God.

Songs in the Wilderness. By the late William Brown, Minister of the Gospel--(July, 1868.)

How continually it happens that good men and approved ministers of God's word pass away and leave no memorial behind them beyond that affectionate remembrance which still remains in the hearts of those by whom they were personally known, or to whom their ministry was owned and blessed. It is pleasing, then, when we can possess some memorial of them of a more fixed and permanent character than those reminiscences which grow weaker and weaker every day.

We are glad, therefore, to welcome this little memorial of so worthy and excellent a man, and of so acceptable a minister to those who knew and loved the truth as our dear and esteemed friend, the late Mr. Brown. In this little book we have a twofold memorial of him, each in its way singularly expressive; for we have in it not only a photograph of his face and person, strikingly like him, as the frontispiece, but we have a photograph also, as clear and as striking, of his mind. Thus there meets us, at the opening of this nicely gotten-up book, the representation of his outward man, strongly recalling to our remembrance his manly, intelligent, and yet subdued features, and in his poems as clear and vivid representation of the features of his inward man.

Besides the clear and sweet line of experience which runs in a very marked manner through these "Songs in the Wilderness," there is more of a poetic vein in them than we often find in the compositions of good men, who would almost seem to think that such minor considerations as poetical language and correct rhymes need scarcely to be attended to in comparison with clear statements of doctrinal truth, and a bringing forward of living, sound, and gracious experience. Were, indeed, the choice to lie between poetry and experience, between what Mr. Hart calls "tinkling sound" and "rich savory meat," we could not for a moment hesitate which to prefer. But why should we not have both, or at least why should real poetry be thought by some out of place in the setting forth of God's truth? In ancient days, when the Holy Spirit inspired godly men to sound forth God's praise, he did not disdain to clothe divine thoughts in a poetic dress. Indeed, so striking is the poetry of the Old Testament that worldly critics to whom the theme is distasteful have been compelled in every age to acknowledge the beauty of the form. No, even in later days, when such inspiration has ceased as moved the men of God whose compositions are recorded in the inspired word, we yet often find gracious thoughts and feelings, to use Milton's expression, "wedded to immortal verse."

It is worthy also of observation, that almost all our most approved hymn-writers, and almost all whose compositions have found a permanent place in the books and hearts of those who know and love the truth, possessed considerable poetical gifts. There is a charm in true poetry quite independent of mere poetical language, though, of course, that has considerable effect. This sublimity of thought, aptness of comparison, beauty of figure, vividness of illustration, are all distinct from the mere poetical form of rhyme

or metre, and of a much higher character, for they remain when these are lost. We have a striking illustration of this in the Scriptures, those parts of them we mean which are strictly poetical. None of them have the forms of our modern poetry, such as rhyme, and metre, but how full they are of all the highest and truest characteristics of true poetry. Take, for instance, the song of Moses at the Red Sea. What poetic fire animates it! with what strength and vividness of expression, what striking contrasts, and what surprising force and beauty are the thoughts and ideas expressed! Observe the following verse--"And with the blast of your nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as a heap, and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea." (Exod. 15:8.) We seem to see the waters gathering together at the blast of God's nostrils; we seem to behold the floods standing upright as a heap, and the depths congealing themselves in the heart of the sea. But the enemy appears in sight; we see the chariots and the horsemen, and we hear their language, anticipating a speedy and thorough triumph--"The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them." (Exod. 15:9.) "I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil." What a determination! "My lust shall be satisfied upon them." I will take full vengeance, and bathe my sword in their blood. We seem to see them pressing on and drawing their swords, as they rushed through the heaped up floods and the congealed depths.

Now observe the contrast--"You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters!" (Exod. 15:10.) How we seem to hear the roaring of the wind and see the sea loosening itself on each side! See how it covers them; see how they sink as lead in the mighty waters. Then hear the loud burst of holy triumph--"Who is like unto you, O Lord, among the gods? who is like you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" Is not this true poetry, the best and highest form of it? Will our readers kindly excuse this digression into which we have been drawn by our desire to show that the highest Scripture truth may be clothed with the greatest poetic beauty, and that the soul of poetry may exist where we have not the body?

It is in vain, of course, to compare human compositions with the inspired word of God; but let none think that true poetry is out of place in a hymn book.

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