CHAPTER I

NAKED POETRY

BEFORE beginning the regular course of literary lectures this year, I want to make a little discourse about what we may call Naked Poetry,—that is, poetry without any dress, without any ornament, the very essence or body of poetry unveiled by artifice of any kind. I use the word artistically, of course — comparing poetry to an artistic object representing either a figure or a fact in itself, without any accessories.

Now for a few words about poetry in general. All the myriad forms of verse can be classed in three divisions, without respect to subject or method. The highest class is the poetry in which both the words, or form, and the emotion expressed are equally admirable and super-excellent. The second division in importance is that kind of poetry in which the emotion or sentiment is the chief thing, and the form is only a secondary consideration. The third and least important class of poetry is that in which the form is everything, and the emotion or sentiment is always subordinated to it. Now scarcely any modern poem of great length entirely fulfils the highest condition. We have to go back to the old Greek poetry to find such fulfilment. But the second class of poetry includes such wonderful work as the poetry of Shakespeare. The third class of poetry is very fairly represented in English literature by the work of Pope and the dead classic school. To-day — I mean at this moment in England — the tendency is bad: it is again setting in the direction of form rather than of sentiment or thought.

This will be sufficient to explain to you what I shall

mean in future lectures by speaking of perfect poetry, or second class poetry, or inferior poetry, independently of other qualifications. But I must also ask you to accept my definition of the word poetry — though it is somewhat arbitrary. By poetry, true poetry, I mean, above all, that kind of composition in verse which deeply stirs the mind and moves the heart — in another word, the poetry of feeling. This is the true literary signification of poetry; and this is why you will hear some kinds of prose spoken of as great poetry, although it is not in any way like verse; an important difference of the kind above referred to has been recognized, I am told, by Japanese poets.

They have, at all events, declared that a perfect poem should leave something in the mind, — something not said, but suggested, — something that makes a thrill in you after reading the composition. You will therefore be very well able to see the beauty of any foreign verses which can fulfil this condition with very simple words. Of course, when academic language, learned words, words known only to Greek or Latin scholars are used, such poetry is almost out of the question. Popular language, in English at least, is the best medium for emotional poetry of certain kinds. But even without going to dialect, or descending to colloquialisms, great effects can be produced with very plain common English — provided that the poet sincerely feels. Here is a tiny but very famous little verse, which I would call an example of naked poetry—pure poetry without any kind of ornament at all. It has only rhymes of one syllable; but even if it had no rhymes at all it would still be a great poetry. And what is more, I should call it something very much resembling in quality the spirit of Japanese poetry. However, you can judge for yourselves: —

FOUR DUCKS ON A POND

Four ducks on a pond,
A grass-bank beyond,
A blue sky of spring,

White clouds on the wing;
What a little thing
To remember for years—
To remember with tears!

It reads like nothing in particular until you get to the last line; — then the whole picture comes suddenly into your mind with a shock, and you understand. It is an exile's memory of home, one instant of childhood shining out in memory, after all the rest of memory has become dark. So it is very famous, and really wonderful — although there is no art in it at all. It is simple as a song.

Now English poetry contains very few inspirations like that—which, by the way, was the work of an Irishman, William Allingham. The remarkable thing about it is the effect made by so small a thing. But we have a few English poets who touched the art of divine simplicity,—of pure emotion independent of form; and one of these was Kingsley. You know several of his songs which show this emotional power; but I am not sure whether you know "Airly Beacon."

"Airly Beacon" is a little song; but it is the story of the tragedy of life—you never can forget it after once reading it. And you have no idea what you are reading until you come to the last line. I must tell you that the place for "Airly Beacon" is a high place in Scotland, — from the top of which a beautiful view can be obtained, — and it is called Airly Beacon, because in ancient times a signal-fire or beacon-fire used to be lighted upon it. Bearing this in mind you will be better able to judge the effect of the poem. I must also remind you that in England and America young girls are allowed a great deal of liberty in regard to what is called "courting," that is to say, being wooed, or made love to under promise of marriage. The idea is that a girl should have sufficient force of will to be able to take care of herself when alone with a man. If she has not—then she might have to sing the song of Airly Beacon. But perhaps the girl in this case was not so unfortunate;

we may imagine that she became a wife and very early a widow. The song does not say.

Airly Beacon, Airly Beacon;
  Oh the pleasant sight to see
Shires and towns from Airly Beacon,
  While my love climbed up to me!

Airly Beacon, Airly Beacon;
  Oh the happy hours we lay
Deep in fern on Airly Beacon,
  Courting through the summer's day!

Airly Beacon, Airly Beacon;
  Oh the weary haunt for me,
All alone on Airly Beacon,
  With his baby on my knee!

The great test as to whether verse contains real poetry, emotional poetry, is this: — can it be translated into the prose of another language and still make an appeal to emotion? If it can, then the true poetry is there. If it cannot, then it is not poetry, but only verse. Now a great deal of famous Western poetry will really bear this test. The little poem that I have just quoted to you will bear it. So will some of the best work of each of our greatest poets. Those of you who studied German know something about the wonderful poems of Heine. You know they are very simple in form and musical. Well, the best foreign translation of them is a translation into French prose. Here, of course, the rhyme is gone, the music is gone, but the real essence of poetry — the power to touch the heart — remains. Do you remember the little poem in which the poet describes the soldier, the sentry on guard at the city-gate? He sees the soldier standing in the light of the evening sun, performing the military exercise all by himself, just to pass the time. He shoulders his gun as if in receiving invisible orders, presents, takes aim. Then the poet suddenly exclaims, "I wish he would shoot me dead!"

The whole power of the little composition is in that exclamation: it tells us all that he means, and all that he feels. To a person unhappy, profoundly unhappy, even the most common sights and sounds of life give him thoughts and wishes in relation to death. Now a little poem like that loses scarcely anything by literary translation: it is what I have called naked poetry;—it does not depend upon the ornaments of expression, or the decoration of rhyme, in order to produce its effect. Perhaps you will say that this essence of poetry may also be found occasionally in prose. That is true;—there is such a thing as poetry in prose, but it is also true that measure and rhyme greatly intensify the charm of emotional expression.

Suppose we now take something more elaborate for an example—this celebrated little poem written many years ago by an Oxford student, and now known everywhere. I call it more elaborate only because the workmanship as to form is much more delicate:

The night has a thousand eyes,
  And the day but one;
Yet the light of the whole world dies
  With the dying sun.

The mind has a thousand eyes,
  And the heart but one;
Yet the light of a whole life dies
  When love is done!

—*Francis Bourdillon.*

An ancient Greek might have written something like that; it has the absolute perfection of some of those immortal little pieces preserved to us in the Greek Anthology — two thousand and even three thousand years old. The comparison of stars to eyes is very old: in every Western literature the stars have been called the eyes of the night; and we still speak of the sun as the Eye of Day — just as the Greeks did. Innumerable as are the stars of the night, they

cannot be seen at all when the sun has well risen. They are not able to make light and joy in the world; and when the sun sets, everything becomes dark and colourless for us. Then the poet says that human love is to human life what the sun is to the world. It is not by reason, but by feeling that we are made happy. The mind cannot make us happy as the heart can. Yet the mind, like the sky, "has a thousand eyes" — that is to say, a thousand different capacities of knowledge and perception. It does not matter. When the person that we love is dead the happiness of life ceases for us; emotionally our world becomes dark, as the physical world becomes when the sun has set.

Certainly the perfect verse and rhyme help the effect; but they are not at all necessary to the beauty of the thing. Translate that into your own language in prose; and you will see that very little is lost; for the first two lines of the first stanza exactly balance the first two lines of the second stanza; and the second two lines of the first stanza exactly balance the second two lines of the second stanza. Therefore even in prose the composition must assume a charming form, no matter in what language it is rendered.

But it does not follow at all that because a short composition in verse contains a great deal of meaning or happens to be very cleverly constructed, you can call it a real poem. Verses that only surprise by cleverness, by tricks, by good words, have a very little value. They may be pretty; they may give you the kind of pleasure that a small graceful object gives; but if they do not touch the heart as well as the head, I should never call them real poetry. For example, there is a little French verse which has been translated into English more than a thousand times — always differently, and yet never successfully. *The English Journal of Education* of this year asked for translations of it, and more than five hundred were sent in. None of them were satisfactory, though some were very clever. Here is the little verse:

La vie est vaine:
Un peu d'amour,
Un peu de haine,
Et puis—bonjour!

La vie est brève:
Un peu d'espoir,
Un peu de rêve,
Et puis—bonsoir!

Meaning "Life is vain:
A little love,
A little hate,
And then—good-bye!

Life is brief:
A little hope,
A little dreaming,
And then—good-night!"

Of course this requires no explanation. The French word is astonishingly clear, simple as it looks: the same thing cannot be done in the English tongue quite so well. As I have told you, at least a thousand English writers have tried to render it into English verse; so you see that it is very famous. But is it poetry? I should certainly say that it is not. It is not poetry, because it consists only of a few commonplaces stated in a mocking way — in the tone of a clever man trifling with a serious subject. They do not really touch us. And they do not bear the test of translation. Put it into English, what becomes of them? They simply dry up. The English reader might well exclaim, "We have heard all that before, in much better language." But let us take one verse of a Scotch song by Robert Burns which is known the whole world over, and which was written by a man who always wrote out of his heart:

(Original in Scotch dialect)

We two had paddled in the brook
From morning sun till noon,

But seas between us broad have roared
Since auld lang syne!*

When I put that into English, the music is gone, and the beauty of several dialect-words such as "dine" (meaning the dinner hour, therefore the midday), and the melody have disappeared. Still the poetry remains. Two men meet each other in some foreign country, after years of separation; and one reminds the other of childhood days, when both played in the village brook from the sunrise until dinner-time—so much delighted by the water! "Only a little brook," one says; — "but the breadth of oceans, the width of half the world, has been between us since that time." Now, anybody who, as a boy, loved to play or swim in the stream of his native village with other boys, can feel what the poet means: whether he be a Japanese or a Scotchman makes no difference at all. That is poetry.

And now, so much having been said on the subject of the emotional essence of poetry, I want to tell you that in the course of such lectures on poetry as we shall have in the course of the academic year, I shall try always to keep these facts before you, and to select for our readings only those things which contain the sort of poetry that will bear the test of translation. Much of our English poetry will not do this. I think, for example, that it is a great mistake to set before Japanese students such eighteenth century verse as the verse of Pope. As verse it is perhaps the most perfect in the English language; as poetry, it is nothing at all. The essence of poetry is not in his poetry, nor is it to be found in most of the eighteenth century school. That was an age in which it was the fashion to keep all emotion suppressed. But Pope is a useful study for English classes in England, because of what English students can take from it through the mere study of form, of compact and power-

* The original form runs:—

We twa hae paidl'd in the burn,
Frae morning sun till dine;
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin auld lang syne!

ful expression with very few words. Here, the situation is exactly converse. The value of foreign poetry to you cannot be in the direction of form. Foreign form cannot be reproduced in Japanese any more than French can be reproduced in English. The value of foreign poetry to you must be in what makes the soul, the heart, the essence of all true poetry:—feeling and imagination. Foreign feeling and foreign imagination may help to add something to the beauty and the best quality of future Japanese poetry. There, I think, the worth of study may be very great. But when foreign poetry means nothing but correct verse, you might as well waste no time upon it; as there is much great poetry which has good form as well as strong feeling.