

CHAPTER IX

SOME SYMBOLIC POETRY

AS the term approaches its close I shall attempt only a short lecture. Poems of the kind which I am going to talk about are not extremely numerous; all such English poetry can be fairly represented by a small number of strong examples.

I have been told about a certain ethical code or artistic code in Japanese poetry, according to which the finished expression of a thought, the complete utterance of a feeling, is considered much inferior to the suggestion alone of the same thought or feeling, but of course I do not know to what extent this rule may be applied. Judged by Western canons of good taste such a rule would be admired, if applied only to particular classes of poetry,—especially to some of the briefer lyrical poems. But it could not be applied at all to many kinds of Western poetry. Certain kinds of poetry demand the very opposite treatment—vividness, exactness, clearness, of the most limpid sort, both in language and in thought. Others again considerably gain by being left in a kind of nebulous condition—so that the thoughts expressed appear only very faintly, as objects looming through some beautiful coloured mist.

We have in English a small store of beautiful suggestive poems, symbolic poems, mystic poems—it does not matter to which class they especially belong for the purpose of this lecture. I want only to talk of poems which leave the mind thrilling with a thought or fancy that has only been half spoken—only suggested. A poem can do this in a great many ways. It may do it by telling a story of which you have to guess the meaning. It may do it by combining together images so incongruous in themselves, that you stare

in surprise at the juxtaposition; and that while you are staring, there comes to you in a sudden flash, the sense of the meaning which the images are intended to represent only as the Chinese ideograph is intended to express a sound. It would take very long, indeed, to enumerate the various qualities or methods which make a poem suggestive;—the suggestiveness can best be explained by example.

Here is an example of a suggestive poem by Rossetti. The method is one of those above mentioned. A little story is told, completely told; but you know when you finish reading it that this story is only the symbol and suggestion of another story of a very different kind. The poem is called “The Honeysuckle.”

I plucked a honeysuckle where
 The hedge on high is quick with thorn,
 And climbing for the prize, was torn,
 And fouled my feet in quag-water;
 And by the thorns and by the wind
 The blossom that I took was thinn'd,
 And yet I found it sweet and fair.

Thence to a richer growth I came,
 Where, nursed in mellow intercourse,
 The honeysuckles sprang by scores,
 Not harried like my single stem,
 All virgin lamps of scent and dew.
 So from my hand that first I threw,
 Yet plucked not any more of them.

What is the story? A man, walking along a country road, sees a honeysuckle flower in a high hedge; and he wants to get that flower. It is all alone. But it is hard to get; for there is a bit of swamp between the hedge and the road; and even after having crossed the muddy place, there are thorns in the way. But in spite of the thorns and the mud, the man gets the flower, and walks away with it. Presently he comes to a place, a real garden, where there is a magnificent hedge full of honeysuckle flowers, much more beautiful than the one which he first thought pretty,

and which he had torn his clothes and dirtied his feet in order to pluck. So he threw away that first flower, but he did not pick up any more of them. But is such a story as that worth writing a poem about? It would not be if the poem only meant what it says. But it means infinitely more. Now listen to the real story:—A young man struggling hard to make his way in the world, and very poor, but full of ambition, sees in the days of his poverty a pretty country girl whom he tries to seduce. I suppose that we should call it a mere case of selfish sex-hunger. The girl is hard to get, poor as she is; he has very difficult work to accomplish his purpose, and he is obliged to associate with many improper people and to do many improper things when he does get her. But in spite of the wrong and the poverty and the miserable association, he finds her in herself very lovable and pretty.

Suddenly after long struggling, success comes to this young man—great success. His future is secure. He enters at will into great society, and there he finds about him magnificent girls—delicate, rich, accomplished, noble, all eager to marry him—because he is recognized as a strong and successful man with a great future before him. It is now time for him to rid himself of his former mistress;—he drops her. Does he marry any of the splendid girls that now offer themselves to him? No. Why? I do not know;—the poet has not told us. It might be for two reasons. One reason would be that he has become selfish and hard and eager for pleasure only—disinclined to devote himself to the happiness of any one woman. But it might be—and this is better to think—because he already feels remorse for the wrong that he has done, and secretly wishes, when too late, that he could win back the love that he threw away: And there is a third possibility. Remember that a thing becomes more desirable to imagination in the same proportion that it is difficult to obtain. Perhaps that was the principal reason why he wanted that country girl. And as soon as we are able to obtain at will anything desirable in

itself, we cease to desire it—become indifferent. But this third suggestion is so inhuman that I do not like to entertain it. I prefer the second suggestion—that of regret.

That is one symbolic poem. I shall now offer another of a totally different kind,—in the form of a dialogue. It is a dialogue between two lovers, or perhaps between man and wife. They are jesting affectionately with each other; and both wished for magical power. “What would you do,” asks the woman, “if you had the power to change me into an animal?” “I should change you into a fox,” the man answers—“a beautiful shy fox. But what would you do with me, if you had the power?” “I should change you into a toad,” she answers. That is the story. But that is not the real meaning of the poem which is entitled “White Witchcraft.”

If you and I could change to beasts what beast would either be?
 Shall you and I play Jove for once? Turn fox, then, I decree!
 Shy wild sweet stealer of the grapes! Now do your worst on me!
 And thus you think to spite your friend—turned loathesome?
 What, a toad?
 So, all men shrink and shun me? Dear man, pursue your road!
 Leave but my crevice in the stone a reptile's fit abode!
 Now say your worst, Camidia! He's loathesome I allow:
 There may or may not lurk a pearl beneath his puckered brow
 But see his eyes that follow mine—love lasts there, anyhow.

The first part of the poem is simply playful:—The Lover proposes to turn his sweetheart into a fox, partly because the fruit-fox to which he refers, is a very shy and pretty creature, fond of warm bright places and fond of grapes, which in the poem, may be taken to mean the good things of life. Very possibly the idea of the fox was suggested by a verse, the fifteenth of the second chapter in the “Song of Solomon.” Calling her “Camidia” gives us a clue to the meaning of the last part of the poem. Camidia was a beautiful woman loved by the Roman poet Horace; and her

real name was Gratidia. But when she got tired of Horace, and left him, he revenged himself by writing a wicked poem about her, describing her as a witch under the false name of Camidia. And the name Camidia, on account of that poem, has passed into literature as a symbolic name for a witch. Well, the woman in the poem simply means to say, "Even though I were to treat him like a witch, he would never treat me as Horace did Camidia. Even if I should turn him by magic into an ugly toad, he would love me just as much as before." In other words, real affection—not the sensual kind—takes no account of form: it is a love of soul and soul. The reference to the jewel may need explanation;—there used to be a superstition, and there still is a proverb to the effect that the ugly toad carries a precious jewel in its head. By the jewel in the poem is meant the intellectual worth of the poet.

Let me now quote to you a very beautiful poem, of the symbolic class written by a poet of whom you may not yet have heard—for he is still a very young man, and has only begun to make his reputation. His name is William Butler Yeats; and he has printed only two small volumes of poems, mostly mystical; but these are of such rare excellence, that in France, where literary merit is much more quickly recognized than in England, one of his books has been crowned by the Academy. He is an Irishman; and a great many of his poems have been inspired by ancient Celtic literature. This is one of them:—

AEDH TELLS OF THE ROSE IN HIS
HEART

ALL things uncomely and broken, all things
worn out and old,
The cry of a child by the roadway, the creak
of a lumbering cart,

The heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing
the wintry mould,

Are wronging your image that blossoms a
rose in the deeps of my heart.

The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong
too great to be told ;
I hunger to build them anew and sit on a
green knoll apart,

With the earth and the sky and the water,
remade, like a casket of gold
For my dreams of your image that blossoms
a rose in the deeps of my heart.

I doubt that you can understand this at once, in spite of the beautiful music and the very simple English. There is a deep thought in it,—a thought that is very seldom uttered in poetry. There is a curious fact connected with the psychology of love. Love may be an illusion: there is always some illusion about it. But, illusion or no illusion, it is a sudden vision of beauty. When this illusion comes to a young man, the effect is strange in one way—the way this poet has described. So beautiful does the beloved appear, that other things in the world seem out of harmony with her presence. Why should there be any ugliness, any unhappiness, any dreariness, in the world that contains so beautiful a creature? Having made this explanation I shall paraphrase freely:—

“Everything that I see which is ugly or broken,—everything that is worn out,—everything that I hear, that is not pleasant to hear—such as the crying of the child, the creaking of a cart lumbering over the rough roadway or the clumsy steps of the tired ploughman, as he walks through the mud, splashing it as he goes;—all these things seem to me in discord with my vision of you. The memory of you blossoms like a beautiful rose in the depth of my heart; and I wonder why there should be anything ugly or unhappy in the world.

“O how very unfortunate—how unutterably unfortunate—it is that there should be anything unpleasant or badly

formed. For your sake I wish that I had the power of a god to make the world all over again; I should make it very beautiful;—and then I should sit down on a little green hill to think about you; and the new earth and the new sky and the new water, all around me, would serve as a precious casket to contain that beautiful memory of you which is like a rose in the depth of my heart.”

If you read that over again, some other time, I am sure that you will find it very beautiful. What is more, it is very natural; it has the double beauty of true poetry. Now let me give you a little symbolic poem from Rossetti called “The Woodspurge.” Nobody knows the meaning of this poem immediately at the first reading, unless he has considerable experience in suggestive poetry. But if you think about it for a moment, it will become quite clear.

The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,
Shaken out dead from tree and hill:
I had walked on at the wind's will,—
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was,—
My lips, drawn in, said not Alas!
My hair was over in the grass,
My naked ears heard the day pass.

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

The meaning of this poem is simply that in the time of great pain we see things or notice things never seen before. If any of you remember distinctly the moment of receiving some very painful news—for example, the death of a parent

—you will also remember very distinctly something else that you saw or heard at the same moment: a crying of birds, the direction of sunlight entering a room, the sharp appearance of some little spot or crack in the plaster of a wall. This is what the poet intends us to understand. Something terrible has happened to him. He first walks about alone,—then, at last, weary, he sits down in the grass and thinks. All about him there is silence and green only. He is not looking at things; his mind is entirely occupied with his pain. But, involuntarily, his eyes happen to be directed upon a little flower growing at his feet. It is a woodspurge. And for the first time he notices that the flower is peculiar: it has three sets of petals, one inside of another—a triple calyx. That is all; but the intensity of grief could not be more vividly expressed than by such an incident.

I think that there are only two expressions in the poem needing explanation. The first is the use of the word “flapped” in relation to the wind. The wind is described as a something shaken suddenly, with a pulling motion,—as one might take a *furoshiki* by a corner and shake it to get rid of the dust. The comparison well gives the idea of the irregular motion of the wind upon a gusty day. But it is used with the adjective “dead.” We commonly say in English, “the wind is *dead*” to imply that there is no breeze,—that it has stopped blowing. The poetic simile is a little strange, though forcible. You must understand it as something like this:—“The wind had been shaken out, until it could not be moved further.”

The other expression is “had the run of”—in the third stanza. Here the word “run” means range or superficial extent. “To have the run of a place” signifies to have freedom to move or act within the circumference of that place. In other words the poet says: “In the position that I sat, I could see only about ten different plants and my eyes might have fixed themselves upon any one of the ten within that space.”

Now let me give another very pretty, but simple poem

by Yeats. It represents the attitude of a poet to the woman that he loves.

AEDH WISHES FOR THE CLOTHS
OF HEAVEN

HAD I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

What does this mean? It means simply that he has made the girl a present of some little poems which he composed himself: those are his dreams. It was the custom—indeed, it is still the custom—to spread beautiful carpets of cloth along the way upon which an empress or a queen is going to walk. Sometimes the way is strewn with flowers instead. To the poet, the girl that he loves is his queen. He tells her that if he had the power he would put the beautiful sky under her feet, with its three colours,—the azure of the day, the rich black-blue of the night, and the hundred colours of twilight blended into one splendid tone. But he cannot give her the sky: he can only give her his verses; and these he offers to her as much as a carpet might be offered to a queen to tread upon. But he begs her not to judge them too harshly—not to despise them: tread softly because you tread on my dreams. And the dreams are a part of himself—his emotion, his sentiment.

I now turn to another poet, a very great poet, the greatest female poet of the nineteenth century: Miss Rossetti. She wrote many symbolic poems, and all of them are good. But I shall offer you only two examples, because we must go back again to Browning and other poets later on. See how beautiful this is, entitled "Three Seasons."

"A cup for hope!" she said,
In springtime ere the bloom was old:

The crimson wine was poor and cold
By her mouth's richer red.

"A cup for love!" how low,
How soft the words; and all the while
Her blush was rippling with a smile
Like summer after snow.

"A cup for memory!"
Cold cup that one must drain alone:
While autumn winds are up and moan
Across the barren sea.

Hope, memory, love:
Hope for fair morn, and love for day,
And memory for the evening gray
And solitary dove.

I suppose that you know the foreign custom of drinking to something or somebody—a custom dating back to older civilizations than the present. You drink a cup of wine to the health of somebody, to the success of some undertaking, or to the honour or joy of something or some one. And I think that you also know that morning, noon, and evening, as well as Spring, Summer, and Autumn, are used by poets for symbols of childhood, manhood, and old age. In this beautiful poem, the double comparison appears; we have morning coupled with Spring and first youth; noon coupled with Summer and with manhood; evening joined with Autumn and with old age. But if we include the last stanza we get a grouping something like this:—

morning	noon	evening
Spring	Summer	Autumn
childhood	manhood	old age
hope	love	memory
joy	beauty	sorrow

Now this is a really wonderful poem in the perfect complexity of its seemingly simple structure. But what does it mean? Who is the beautiful creature who offers the cup? She is the Spirit of Life,—Nature, if you like better. Youth

is the time of hope; and in that morning of life all things seem full of beauty, and Nature bids us rejoice. Then comes the time of love,—which is the noon and fullness of life,—the Summer of human existence. Again Nature gives us happiness, offers her golden cup. At last comes the evening of life,—the period of age and experience of pain. Then the world seems to us not all blue and gold, as before, but sad and gray like the sea; and our happiness is rather in the past than in the present. Then the Spirit of Life bids us seek bliss in memory. But it is a bitter bliss, because it is mixed with the pains of loss.

Some of Miss Rossetti's poems are deceptively simple like the mystic poems of Blake. Here is an example. It is called "Up-Hill."

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

Yea, beds for all who come.

I think you know at once what this means. The road is the Road of Life; and the journey is hard, and becomes harder and harder all the way until the very end. And the Inn is the Grave—the resting house at whose door no man will be kept waiting. Read it over again, this poem, and over again: every time that you read it will seem more

terrible. I think there is nothing particular to explain except, perhaps, the single line of the last stanza, "Of labour you shall find the sum." It is vague—but sufficient. It means simply you will obtain the result of your work in this world. But of course the reader will be tempted to ask himself the blank question, "Is there a result?"

No man wrote so many surprising poems of this kind as Browning; and I must give you several more examples from him by reason of his great importance in Victorian literature. But between them, I shall quote other poets to you. Let us now, however, take a selection from Browning. It is called "Love in a Life."

I

Room after room,
I hunt the house through
We inhabit together.
Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—
Next time, herself!—not the trouble behind her
Left in the curtain, the couch's perfume!
As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew;
Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of her feather.

II

Yet the day wears,
And door succeeds door;
I try the fresh fortune--
Range the wide house from the wing to the centre.
Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter.
Spend my whole day in the quest,—who cares?
But 't is twilight, you see,—with such suites to explore,
Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!

If you ask me what this means, I am not very sure of being able to answer quite correctly—though I shall try. You can take several meanings out of poetry. It is the most obscure that I have yet ventured to quote; but it is also one of the most powerful and ghostly. The direct meaning is quite plain of course. Here is a man alone, in some house, vast as a palace, trying to overtake a figure that haunts that house. The haunting shadow is the shadow of a beau-

tiful woman. He has been always in the house;—he has seen her a thousand times;—he has seen her reflected as she passed by the looking-glass;—he has seen her touch dead flowers or artificial flowers and make them alive by her phantom touch. And there is a faint perfume wherever she has been—in the curtains by the window at which he has seen her stand; in the coverings of the bed in which she seems to have been reposing. But he never can get near enough to her to speak to her, to touch her. As he opens one door, she always passes out through another. And the house is very large—so that it is extremely difficult to discover where she is hiding. He opens closet after closet, examines alcove after alcove, explores nook after nook. She is everywhere and yet nowhere. And it is getting dark. Has he been wasting his whole day in trying to find her? He does not know; he does not care: what troubles him chiefly is that he has only examined a part of the house, and it is getting dark. After that he cannot hope to find her.

But who is she? And what is the house? The house is the House of Life; the woman is the Ideal. Every man carries about with him in his heart the image or ideal of supreme beauty and goodness. But no man can ever find this human perfection that he dreams of. The world is not perfect enough for that;—man's own nature is not perfect enough to enable him to find it even if it existed for his sake. We find plenty of goodness in the world, and love, and many charming things; but we imagine, and cannot help imagining something better than what we know. If we could not imagine it, if we did not imagine it, no great religion and no great system of ethics could exist. We become gradually better and kinder through being able to imagine what is superior to ourselves. And death comes before we have finished our search.

One more little poem by the same author; it is called "Pisgah-Sights." Pisgah is the mountain from whose top Moses was allowed to see the whole of the Promised Land

before his death, though not allowed to enter it. The reference is to the chapter in "Deuteronomy," in which his death is mentioned.

I

Over the ball of it,
 Peering and prying,
 How I see all of it,
 Life there, outlying!
 Roughness and smoothness,
 Shine and defilement,
 Grace and uncouthness:
 One reconcilment.

II

Orbed as appointed,
 Sister with brother
 Joins, ne'er disjointed
 One from the other.
 All's lend-and-borrow;
 Good, see, wants evil,
 Joy demands sorrow,
 Angel weds devil!

III

"Which things must — *why* be?"
 Vain our endeavour!
 So shall things aye be
 As they were ever.
 "Such things should *so* be!"
 Sage our desistence!
 Rough-smooth let glove be,
 Mixed — man's existence!

IV

Man — wise and foolish,
 Lover and scorner,
 Docile and mulish —
 Keep each his corner!
 Honey yet gall of it!
 There's the life lying,
 And I see all of it,
 Only, I'm dying!

“Over the edge of life, as over the surface of a great ball, or as one looking from a mountain over the round of the world, so do I see life at this moment. I see the roughness and the smoothness, the clearness and the foulness, the beauty and the ugliness;—and all these appear to be strangely joined together. I see no discord.

“All are united as by some eternal destiny. Everything seems like a universal lending and borrowing. Goodness does not satisfy alone; therefore the necessity of evil. Happiness cannot be satisfied alone; therefore do angels of women marry devils of men.

“Why should such things be? It is useless to ask why. They will always be so, and have always been so. You think that they should be otherwise. Oh! You had better not trouble your mind about what should be: you are not wise enough to know what should be. Take the world as it is, with all its joys and pains, and understand that it is necessary that human life should be made up both of good and evil.

“There are wise men, foolish men; lovable people, detestable people; weak characters and gentle; dull characters and obstinate like mules. All of these have their own work to do. They help to make the world;—try to be content with them as they are, and to judge them as generously as you can. Great is the sweetness of life; sharp also is the bitterness of it. I can see the whole meaning of life now;—but—what is the use?—I can only see it because I am dying.”

There is more in this poem to think about than the apparent meaning, which is only the expression of the mystery of existence. The poet means especially to suggest that we cannot judge of life impartially, nor even see clearly, while we are actually engaged in the struggle of it. Necessarily we are obliged to think about our own interests; and naturally each one of us is inclined to love what helps those interests and to hate what opposes them. And these interests are inter-opposed in a double, triple, quadruple,—centuple

way. For not only are human desires, by reason of their intrinsic nature, opposed to each other; but the interests of races, countries, classes, periods, and individuals, are all inter-opposed. Whatever we do, we must love or hate. But, in the hour when life falls away from us, then, and only then, can we become quite just and reasonable in our judgment of it.

Returning to the subject of last term, perhaps, some of you will feel inclined to observe, "Can poetry of this kind have any other than an aesthetic or metaphysical value?" I answer, "Most certainly it can; it may have a great poetical value at times; it may have a national value." The fact is that great truths are popularly taught better by symbolism or parable than by precise and detailed statements. I am going to give you a powerful example of the use of the symbolic poetry in politics. The poem is entitled "Barbarossa;" and the author is Roden Noel, an English nobleman who has made himself a brilliant reputation both as poet and critic. But the poem needs explanation.

I think that most of you have read the strange medieval legend of the king who sleeps in a cavern in the mountains, surrounded by his knights and barons, waiting for the time when he will be needed again in this world. There are beside him two ravens,—the birds of Odin, the birds of carnage. Every hundred years he sends one of the ravens out, to see if the time has come. But the raven comes back, and says, "Not yet,"—then the king goes to sleep again. Already his white beard has grown to the table of stone at which he sits. Now this old story has been told of several kings—of Charlemagne among others. I think that you have read a German poem by Heine upon the same legend. The subject of the legend in this English poem is Barbarossa. Barbarossa, or Red Beard, was the name of Frederick the First of Germany, who belongs to the twelfth century. He was a great Emperor, a great warrior, a great statesman and a great tyrant. Probably you know that he made war no less than forty times, and that he led one of the great Crusades,

and was accidentally drowned in Palestine. But the people said that he was not dead; but only sleeping, and that he would some day come back again to make another and mightier German Empire. And it is said that it is at Untersberg in Austria that he sleeps, surrounded by his great barons and counts.

Now you have the story. It is only necessary, by way of further explanation, to remind you that when France was conquered by Germany in 1870, King William of Germany entered into the famous palace of Versailles, while his armies were besieging Paris, and there, in the wonderful Hall of Mirrors built by Louis XIV, he was crowned Emperor of Germany—i.e. King of Kings. After this you will see what a tremendous force this little poem must have had at the time to all who then imagined that European liberty was in danger.

Deep in a mountain's caverned hall,
It is whispered low,
Waits in a weird, sepulchral glow
An arméd phantom, crowned and
Whose hoary beard of centuries,
Grows on the gray stone where it lies;
While jewelled knights with glittering eyes
Glow round
In trance profound.

Anon, at age-long intervals,
The ghostly king
Sends a raven of sable wing
From his stupendous prison-walls,
To learn how near the fated hour
When he may reassume the power,—
Behold! no raven comes again.

Behold! the raven devours the slain!
Vaults asunder
Burst in thunder!
Lo! in the hall of mirrors yonder,
In a palace consecrate to all

Age-long glories of the Gaul,
 A German wears imperial
 Purple: Barbarossa lives!
 The ghost of a dark age revives,
 And the heart of every freeman dies,
 Seeing him rise!

But, as a matter of course, you know that the result of making a new German Empire was of great benefit to Western civilization in every possible way. Intellectual liberty was thereby better secured than it could have been by any other means; and the new Barbarossa was a patron of learning. Nevertheless, there was fear for the moment, at the uprising of this gigantic power; and the feeling was well expressed in this strange poem.

While on the subject of Roden Noel, let me read to you another of his symbolic poems of a very different kind:

D Y I N G

They are waiting on the shore
 For the bark to take them home;
 They will toil and grieve no more;
 The hour for release hath come.

All their long life lies behind,
 Like a dimly blending dream;
 There is nothing left to bind
 To the realms that only seem.

They are waiting for the boat,
 There is nothing left to do;
 What was near them grows remote,
 Happy silence falls like dew;
 Now the shadowy bark is come,
 And the weary may go home.

By still water they would rest,
 In the shadow of the tree;
 After battle sleep is best,
 After noise tranquillity.

The title of the poem is simply old. That sufficiently explains the meaning. The comparison gives us a little picture of tired travellers reaching a ferry. Of course the ferry is that of the River of Death; and the shadowy boat is familiar to all acquainted with Greek mythology. Notice that we very often use the word "shadowy" in the sense of ghostly, just as we use the word "shade" in the meaning of spirit or ghost. The reference to resting under the shadow of a tree, by quiet waters, is biblical: it refers to the scriptural representation of Paradise.

Any emotional truth may be excellently expressed in this kind of verse. Although in one sense all symbolic poetry used to be chiefly devoted to religious subjects—that is why most of the examples that I have given you are quite modern. It is true that even in these times religious poetry of the same sort sometimes appears; but it has little value. It is in our own time that the real worth of this class of poetry has been discerned. I shall give you now a psychological example, expressing the thought of the present age. The poet is a lady named Alice Meynell—she was almost unknown a dozen years ago; she is now very well known indeed.

I come from nothing; but from where
 Come the undying thoughts I bear?
 Down, through long links of death and birth,
 From the past poets of the earth.
 My immortality is there.

I am like the blossom of an hour.
 But long, long vanished sun and shower
 Awoke my breath i' the young world's air.
 I track the past back everywhere
 Through seed and flower and seed and flower.

Or I am like a stream that flows
 Full of the cold springs that arose
 In morning lands, in distant hills;
 And down the plain my channel fills
 With melting of forgotten snows.

Voices I have not heard possessed
 My own fresh songs; my thoughts are blessed
 With relics of the far unknown;
 And mixed with memories not my own
 The sweet streams throng into my breast.

Before this life began to be,
 The happy songs that wake in me
 Woke long ago, and far apart;
 Heavily on this little heart
 Presses this immortality.

These verses are entitled "The Modern Poet;" but they might as well have a dozen other titles. The signification of the poem is that everybody who feels the emotion of beauty or the emotion of truth experiences something that does not belong only to himself, but to all the millions and millions of the dead that help to make them. Each one of us is not merely a single life, but a compound of innumerable lives and if we feel a grand emotion, it is so only because the whole past sometimes revives in us. But we must paraphrase these verses; for the poem is a deep one:—

"I seem to have come out of nothing. But that cannot be true—for how is it that these immortal thoughts come into my mind, these sudden inspirations, these generous emotions? Where do they come from? They come from the millions of my ancestors who have passed away;—they have come to me through an infinite succession of death and birth. It is the whole past that made me; and all that is of worth in me belongs to that past.

"I am like a flower, if you will,—a flower that blossoms for a little time only. But what made it blossom in this particular way?—What gave it these particular colours, this particular fragrance? The courses that evolved it are all of the long past, the incalculable past. Suns that have been, rains that fell in forgotten ages first made it blossom. I am a flower, if you will—but a flower that can trace back its own history through seed and flower and seed and flower across vast periods of time.

“Or I may compare myself to a river flowing in a plain, far away from any mountains, but full of cold water and clear, made by the melting of snow on the tops of mountains much too far away to be seen.

“I make songs; I compose poems. But the music of these songs, the thoughts of these poems are of the past; the feeling and the power have come to me from the dead. And the memories that I sing of are not my own memories only—they represent the experiences of numberless generations that have passed away.

“Long before I was born the thoughts and feelings that make my poems were born—and not in some one other life only, but in many other lives, and each far distant from the rest. Wherefore the past is to me not only life, not only thought, not only feeling and inspiration, but something more: a weight, a responsibility, the pressure of my being of countless ages.”

Although this little poem is very profound, please to remark how simple is the language. There is not a single word needing explanation.

Another subject—also by a woman and quite recent; it is called “An Upper Chamber” :—

I came into the City and none knew me;
 None came forth, none shouted “He is here.”
 Not a hand with laurel would bestrew me,
 All the way by which I drew anear,—
 Night my banner, and my herald Fear.

But I know where one so long had waited
 In the low room at the stairway’s height,
 Trembling lest my foot should be belated,
 Singing, sighing for the long hours’ flight
 Towards the moment of our dear delight.

I came into the City when you hail’d me
 Saviour, and again your chosen Lord:—
 Not one guessing what it was that fail’d me,
 While along the way as they adored
 Thousands, thousands, shouted in accord.

But through all the joy I knew—I only—
 How the hostel of my heart lay bare and cold,
 Silent of its music, and how lonely!
 Never, though you crown me with your gold,
 Shall I find that little chamber as of old!

Frances Bannerman.

The meaning here must be felt. The poem expresses some sad experience in the life of a successful man—most likely a statesman. He begins his career probably as a poor student, living in an attic—that is what is meant by the low room at the height of the stairway. In great Western cities, until within very recent years, a great many poor students used to live in the very top of the house—in the attic, or room immediately under the roof. The ceiling was usually low: therefore the poet calls it the low room, although it is very high up. But now since they have begun to build enormous houses with steel and cement, the top stories are sometimes very costly and magnificent places of residence. In his attic days, however, this poor student had someone to love him—some woman to whom he was sincerely attached. And the conditions were such that the relation had to be kept secret; but it was a happy one, and he could forget all the troubles of life in her company. At last, after many years of painful struggle, he becomes famous; the whole country knows him; his native city honours him with a mighty reception. As he passes through the streets, all the people shout in his honour. But now he is very lonesome; for the woman that he loved is dead, and cannot see nor hear of his fame and success. So, in the midst of the millions, he has no joy; he wishes he were, even for one hour only, the poor student in the attic room, with the person he loved to give him welcome.

Here is a very suggestive poem, only eight lines long, by a young Canadian poet called Bliss Carman. He is now a poet of some reputation,—only a minor poet, but some of his work is very original and striking. This little poem is entitled “A Sea Child”—

The lover of child Marjory
 Had one white hour of life brim full;
 Now the old nurse, the rocking sea,
 Hath him to lull.

The daughter of child Marjory
 Hath in her veins, to beat and run,
 The glad indomitable sea,
 The strong white sun.

Here is the whole story of the life of fisher-folk suggested in eight lines. A little girl, called Marjory, is born in a fishing village, grows up to womanhood and marries. Her husband is recently drowned—that was to be even more expected than feared. Only a small number of the fishermen reach old age: the sea devours most of them. But they are not a sad people on that account: on the contrary, they are too healthy, and simple-hearted to feel the real tragedy of life. This woman's husband died young; but he had been happy and fearless like his fathers. After his death his child is born,—a little girl who takes the same name as her mother, and who inherits the joyous strength and spirit of the dead father, the spirit of daring, the fearlessness of the sea-child. She no more fears the sea than if she were a mermaid; the breath of it is in her blood. She will, like her mother, marry a man whom the sea will probably take away from her, just as her own father was taken. But she is not sad. And the little verses are intended to make us reflect that, after all, the short and happy life of fisher-folk, humble as it is, is really happier than most of what we call the life of high places.

I am going to dictate a poem of the symbolic kind by way of illustrating another capacity of this kind of poetry, —the power that it has of expressing very deep truth, especially psychological truth by means of imagery. The poem is by Rossetti, and is called "The Mirror."

She knew it not:—most perfect pain
 To learn this too she knew not. Strife
 For me, calm hers, as from the first.

'Twas but another bubble burst
 Upon the curdling draught of life,—
 My silent patience mine again.

As who, of forms that crowd unknown
 Within a distant mirror's shade,
 Deems such an one himself, and makes
 Some sign; but when the image shakes
 No whit, he finds his thought betray'd,
 And must seek elsewhere for his own.

This poem is exquisitely beautiful—one of the most perfect things of the kind ever written. But it requires careful explanation and study. I shall speak of the story first.

It very often happens that a man loves a woman quite incapable by nature of loving him, or even of understanding what real love is, in any way, and never could learn. She is selfish; she is bad. Then why should any good man be foolish enough to love a bad woman? Some people will say that he is actuated merely by sexual feeling; but this is not always the case; and it would be both foolish and unjust to imagine that it is always the case. A good man may happen to love a bad woman with the most unselfish affection. Then there must be a reason for this strange infatuation. The reason is simply the mistake of imagining the character of that woman to be like his own. He imagines that she feels and thinks just as he does. But that is an unfortunate mistake. Her soul is only a kind of mirror that reflects his own. Now it takes a long time for him to discover the deception. At last something happens which reveals the woman's character. And now see how beautifully the image of "The Mirror" is used to express that which happens. Let us paraphrase:

"She did not know. I did not know that she could not love me; and it was a terrible pain for me to learn the truth, and that pain she could not know anything about. With me, all was passionate earnestness, sincere affection and sincere suffering; but she always remained cold and still as

a statue. How I felt did not concern her, for she could not know how I felt. The whole experience was only another bubble upon the surface of the current of my life—a current now made thick (curdling) into pain. At last I learned to keep that pain to myself—to be silent and patient.

“My case was like that of a man watching the surface of a great mirror at the end of a room. In that mirror he sees the reflections of many people, moving about; and one of the figures he thinks to be his own reflection. But presently he is astonished to find that when he moves, the figure in the looking glass does not move. He has been deceived. So did I mistake, in the mirror of another human soul, the reflection of another for the reality of myself.”

Psychological poetry finds this form especially adapted to its expression. A famous example, on the subject of Self and the mystery of Self is furnished by Lord Houghton's composition entitled “Strangers Yet.” One of the things that everybody discovers sooner or later in life,—although very young people never think about it,—is that nothing is so difficult to understand as a human personality; that is to say, the mind or character or soul of another human being. I need scarcely remind you that no two human characters can be exactly the same. But in youth we are apt to think the differences much slighter than they really are. As we grow older, we find them wider and deeper. And this is natural, because each one of us grows wider and deeper as time develops and accentuates character. At no time can we know anything of another human being except through the relation of that being to ourselves; and accordingly as we grow more complex, the relation also becomes more complex as a matter of course. But there are times when this knowledge of our imperfect relationship to other people becomes painful and makes us feel terribly alone. And it is such a moment that the following poem must have been composed:—

STRANGERS YET

Strangers yet!
 After years of life together,
 After fair and stormy weather,
 After travel in far lands,
 After touch of wedded hands,—
 Why thus join'd? Why ever met,
 If they must be strangers yet?

Strangers yet!
 After childhood's winning ways,
 After care and blame and praise,
 Counsel ask'd and wisdom given,
 After mutual prayers to Heaven,
 Child and parent scarce regret
 When they part—are strangers yet.

Strangers yet!
 After strife for common ends—
 After title of "old friends,"
 After passions fierce and tender,
 After cheerful self-surrender,
 Hearts may beat and eyes be met,
 And the souls be strangers yet.

Strangers yet!
 Oh! the bitter thought to scan
 All the loneliness of man:—
 Nature, by magnetic laws,
 Circle unto circle draws,
 But they only touch when met,
 Never mingle—strangers yet.

No doubt some part of this poem utters a truth which belongs to the life of Western rather than of Eastern society. You know that children and parents separate early in Western countries—especially in England and America: among the French and the Latin races generally the family relation is not so completely broken up. But, in spite of the fact, the verses tell something of universal truth.

The first stanza refers to the relation of husband and

wife. Surely, if any two human beings could perfectly understand each other, those two would be husband and wife. There is the most intimate of human relationship in adult life;—and nevertheless we sometimes find that a husband and a wife, even after having lived for many years together, do not understand each other at all, cannot be frank and sincere with one another, and even separate at last, as if they had always been perfect strangers.

The second stanza treats of the relation between parents and children. (This is the stanza containing facts which do not, I think, relate much to Eastern society). One would suppose that no relation could be more tender, more intimate, more affectionate, more grateful in a merely emotional sense than the relation of child and parent—and it is so while the child remains the child. But as the child grows up to manhood, or to womanhood, the character changes; and the love is too often forgotten. The girl voluntarily leaves her parents to marry the man of her choice. The youth quits his father and mother without regret for his wife. Thereafter the son or daughter is scarcely more than an occasional visitor at the house of the parents. That is indeed the English way;—but you must remember that English school life, separating the children entirely from the parents, and training them in a particular, hard fashion, prepares the way for the ultimate separation. When the boy or girl comes from school, the parents seem like strangers, or at most like distant friends.

The third stanza treats of friendship. It is not uncommon to see men quarrel and separate after a friendship of twenty and thirty years. It seems very strange that two who have grown up together, worked together, helped each other, should ever become strangers. But here again the natural law of individuality asserts itself; for character changes necessarily more and more as people grow older, and the differences become wider.

The last stanza presents a philosophical truth under a geometrical image. The spheres, or two circles, can touch each other only at a point. Take two balls of hard material—

two marbles, for example,—and put them together any way that you please; then they will only touch at a point. You cannot put one of them inside of another. So it is with any two human souls; they can touch each other only at a point of their surfaces: they cannot penetrate into each other. There is the great law of attraction in nature—the law of gravitation. There is also the great law of human attraction—the law of love. But by neither law can they ultimately, whether physical or psychical, be more than brought into temporary contact. The mystery forever remains. In view of this truth, what a lonesome thing is man! He can never know more than the surface of his fellow souls.

This is a fine poem and expresses a deep truth; but, as I told you before, it is a truth that no young man is likely to feel. Only a man who has reached the age of fifty could have written it.

One more example of this kind of poetry in conclusion. It is a very queer poem; and it is somewhat indefinitely suggestive. The symbolism is that of a river flowing into the sea; and we know that the voyage down the river means Life, and that the sea is Infinity out of which we all come and back to which we must all return. Matthew Arnold has a strangely splendid poem upon the same subject; but the treatment is quite different. M. Arnold expresses the mystery of life and a hope beyond it. But this writer expresses the pain and terror of death—that is all. The purpose of this poem is the expression of fear—the ghostly fear of death. The author is called Richard Garnett; and the poem is called “The Ballad of the Boat.”

The stream was smooth as glass, we said: “Arise and let’s away;”
 The Siren sang beside the boat that in the rushes lay;
 And spread the sail, and strong the oar, we gaily took our way.
 When shall the sandy bar be cross’d? When shall we find the bay?
 The broadening flood swells slowly out o’er cattle-dotted plains,
 The stream is strong and turbulent, and dark with heavy rains,
 The laborer looks up to see our shallop speed away.
 When shall the sandy bar be cross’d? When shall we find the bay?

Now are the clouds like fiery shrouds; the sun, superbly large,
Slow as an oak to woodman's stroke sinks flaming at their marge.
The waves are bright with mirror'd light as jacinths on our way.
When shall the sandy bar be cross'd? When shall we find the bay?

The moon is high up in the sky, and now no more we see
The spreading river's either bank, and surging distantly
There booms a sullen thunder as of breakers far away.
Now shall the sandy bar be cross'd, now shall we find the bay!

The seagull shrieks high overhead, and dimly to our sight
The moonlit crests of foaming waves gleam towering through the night
We'll steal upon the mermaid soon, and start her from her lay,
When once the sandy bar is cross'd, and we are in the bay.

What rises white and awful as a shroud-enfolded ghost?
What roar of rampant tumult bursts in clangor on the coast?
Pull back! pull back! The raging flood sweeps every oar away.
O stream, is this thy bar of sand? O boat, is this the bay?

The first stanza, representing the smooth stream, and the ready boat departing, may be taken to signify the first entering upon the struggle of life. The next stanza indicates the struggle, with its description of the violent stream and the dark water. The young man is impatient for success. By his desire to reach the bay, we may suppose, is meant his desire and hope for a time of comfort and peace as a reward of his toil. And everything promises well for him. The third stanza, describing sunset and its splendor, suggests the evening time of life;—and the calm desired has not yet been attained. The fourth stanza, with its description of night, and the enormous widening of the river, and the sound of the waves far away, suggests the approach of death—the time is nearing when all struggle must cease. But the man does not know: he is full of hope and full of impatience to attain his object. And in the fifth stanza, the high waves appear for the first time—shall we call them shadowings of death? In the sixth stanza the bar is crossed—that is to say, death comes suddenly, unexpectedly, and all is terrible. Vain now is hope. There is but a moment of agony and surprise;

and all is over.

A few words deserve notice. "Siren" in the second line of the first stanza is a word we found in reading Tennyson. You know that in Greek mythology the sirens were monsters with the faces of beautiful women, who devoured men. They had such sweet voices that when sailors heard them singing they would jump from their ships and swim to the shore where the sirens were. Then the sailors were killed and eaten. The use of this word in the very second line of the poem is sinister, and gives us the suspicion that something terrible is going to happen. All the descriptions which follow are very fine, but all are disquieting. Notice the adjectives "strong," "turbulent" and "dark" used to describe the stream; and observe the use of the word "shroud" in the first line of the third stanza. In that line we may take the shrouds to signify sails, great white sails in appearance. You know that the word "shroud" also signifies the sheet or wrapping in which a corpse is buried. The imagery of the last stanza is extremely powerful because it is extremely vague—nothing is clearly seen or heard; but everything is terrible and tumultuous. Such a poem haunts the imagination for a long time, after having been read.

Here I may close this lecture on the subject of symbolic and suggestive poetry. I must warn you that there is a great deal of nonsense to-day written under the name of symbolic poetry—metaphysical nonsense, philosophical nonsense, morbid nonsense of all kinds. I have tried to give you examples only of what is really symbolic poetry and suggestive poetry in the best modern sense. And I think that if you have time and inclination to study the subject further for yourselves you will find that in the best examples of this kind of English poetry there is a real inner relation to the spirit of the best Japanese poetry.