

Professor Trochee

ESSAY ON POETRY

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Written for the edification and for the instruction of would-be poets.

When I consider the abundance of young men and the superabundance of young women in the present century, when I survey the necessary and consequent profusion of reciprocal attachments, when I reflect upon the great number of poetical compositions emanating therefrom, when I bring my mind to bear upon the insanity and chaotic formation of these effusions, I am readily convinced that by writing an expository essay of the poetical art I shall be greatly contributing to the emolument of the public.

Having therefore carefully considered the best and most practical way in which to open so relevant a discussion, I have not unwisely concluded that a straightforward statement of the rules of poetry is the manner in which I must present the subject to the reader. I have thought it useless and inappropriate to refer myself too often to the ancient critics on the art, since modern critics are pleasanter to quote and have said all that was to be said on the matter, and a little more — which is their part, where they are original. For putting aside the critics of old I have two excellent reasons of which the second is that, even if I *did* know anything about them, I should not like to trust my scholarship on the reader. I begin then my exposition.

Firstly I think it proper to bring to the attention of would-be poet a fact which is not usually considered and yet is deserving of consideration. I hope I shall escape universal ridicule if I assert that *theoretically* poetry should be susceptible of scansion. I wish it of course to be understood that I agree with Mr. A. B. in maintaining that strict scansion is not at all necessary for the success nor even for the merit of a poetical composition. And I trust I shall not be deemed exceedingly pedantic if I delve into the storehouse of Time to produce as an authority, some of the works of a certain William Shakespeare or Shakspeare that lived some centuries ago and enjoyed some reputation as a dramatist. This person used to take off, or to add on, one syllable or more in

the lines of his numerous productions, and if it be at all allowable in this age of niceness to break the tenets of artistical good sense by imitating some obscure scribbler, I should dare to recommend to the beginner the enjoyment of this kind of poetic licence. Not that I should advise him to *add* any syllables to his lines, but the subtraction of some is often convenient and desirable. I may as well point out that if, by this very contrivance, the young poet, having taken away some syllables from his poem, proceed on this expedient and take all the remaining syllables out of it; although he might not thus attain to any degree of popularity, he nevertheless would exhibit an extraordinary amount of poetical common-sense.

And I may as well here explain that my method for the formation of the rules, which I am here exposing, is of the best. I observe and consider the writings of modern poets, and I advise the reader to do as I have done. Thus, if I advise the would-be poet to care nothing *in practice* for scansion, it is because I have found this to be a rule and a condition in the poems of today. Nothing but the most careful consideration and the most honest clinging to a standard can be of use to a learner in the art. In all cases I may be relied upon to give the best method and the best rules.

I approach the subject of rhyme with a good deal of trepidation, lest by uttering any remarks which may seem too strictly orthodox, I shall harshly violent one of the most binding regulations of modern poesy. I am obliged to agree with Mr. C. D. when he says that rhyme should not be very evident in any poem, even though it may be called rhymed; and the numerous modern poets who exemplify this precept have my entire approbation. Poetry ought to encourage thought and call for examination; what is then greater than the delight of the close critic when, after a minute dissection of a composition, he perceives, first, that it is poetry and not prose, secondly, after long exertion, that it is rhymed and not blank.

Such poetical niceties, however, being visible only to the experienced critic, the ordinary man of poetical tastes is sometimes, when called upon to criticize a poem, placed in an undesirable situation. For instance, about a week ago a young friend of mine called upon me and asked my opinion of a poem which he had written. He handed me a paper. I made a few, and futile attempts at understanding the effusion, but quickly corrected them by inverting the position of the paper, as better sense could thus be obtained. Being fortunately forewarned that the paper before me contained a poem, I began at once, though without caution, to heap eulogies on the excellent blank verse. Colouring with

indignation, my friend pointed out that his composition was rhymed, and, moreover, that it was in what be called the spenserian stanza. Though not a bit convinced by bis impudent invention of a name (as if Spencer had ever written poetry!), I continued to examine the composition before me but, getting no nearer to the sense, I contented myself with praising it, and especially commending the originality of treatment. On handing back the paper to my friend, as he glanced at it to show me something particular, his face suddenly fell and looked puzzled.

«Hang it», said he, I gave you the wrong paper. This is only my tailor's bill!»

Let the poetical critic take as a lesson this most unhappy episode.

On that bane of poetical feeling, blank verse, I shall only touch lightly; but as several friends of mine have repeatedly asked me for the formula or recipe for its production, I hereby communicate the directions to those of my readers who are so far gone. To tell the truth there is not, in the whole range of poetry, anything easier to produce than blank verse.

The first thing to do is to procure yourself ink, paper and a pen; then write down, in the ordinary commonplace language which you speak (technically called prose) what you wish to say, or, if you be clever, what you think. The next step is to lay hands upon a ruler graduated in inches or in centimetres, and mark off, from your prose effusion, bits about four inches or then centimetres long: these are the lines of your blank verse composition. In case the fourinch line does not divide into the prose effort without remainder, either the addition of a few Alases or Ohs or Ahs, or the introduction of an invocation to the Muses will fill in the required space. This is the modern recipe. Of course I do not know directly that such is the method that modern poets employ. On examining their poems, however, I have found that the *internal evidence* is conclusive, pointing everywhere to such a method of composition.

As to the scansion of your blank verse — never mind it; tr first, whatever its kind, the critics will find in it the most outrageous flaws; but if in time you wriggle into poetical greatness, you will find the same gentlemen justify everything you have done, and you will be surprised at the things you symbolised, insinuated, meant.

Before taking leave of this part of my essay, I beg to point out to the reader that in this the age of motorcars and of art for the sake of art, there is no restriction as to the length of a line in poetry. You can write lines of two, three, five, ten, twenty, thirty syllables or more — that is of the least importance; only

that when the lines of a poem contain more than a certain number of syllables, that composition is generally said to be written in prose. This difficulty of finding what is the number of syllables that is the limit between poetry and prose

makes it modernly impossible well to establish which is one which the other. Internal distinction is of course impossible. After some study I have found that that may generally be considered poetry where every line begins with a capital

letter. If the reader can find another distinction I shall be very pleased to hear of it.

s. d.

Pessoa por Conhecer — Textos para um Novo Mapa . Teresa Rita Lopes. Lisboa: Estampa, 1990: 117.

Atribuído inicialmente ao Dr. Pancrácio