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ARTICLE VIII.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HOMERIC POETRY.

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If we look at the amount of interest which the Homeric poems keep alive in the highest literary culture of this age, we might easily be led to think that they had but just issued from the press, and not from the lips of a rhapsodist who sang nearly three thousand years ago. Indeed, they are so inwrought in our forms of expression and modes of thought that if they were all taken from us our literature would be like a garden from which most of the choice flowers had been plucked, and little left save the withered stems on which they grew.

How shall we account for this prevailing and self-perpetuating influence? It cannot arise from any transient literary excitement, which, like a contagion, sometimes spreads over a country, and then leaves no trace of itself save in the blighted and sickly condition which it has engendered. Nor can it result from the peculiar taste of any nation, or of many peoples having a kindred lineage, since the appreciation of these productions is co-extensive with civilization. Nor is it produced by the spirit of the age, except in so far as this is a part of universal humanity; for these poems are emphatically the hymns of the ages, since all generations subsequent to their first appearance have taken up their refrain. Their popularity, then, must be sought for in the roots of human nature, in the sympathy which they have with all that belongs to cultivated man; for thus only can we account for the hold they have retained upon the race.

There are four distinct periods or ages of Greek poetry, which shall be designated by their representative authors.

First, its youth, of which Homer is the all-comprehending exponent.

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Second, its manhood, wherein Sophocles is the leader.

Third, its green old age, whose representative is Menander.

Fourth, its garrulous senility, led by Apollonius Rhodius.

It is not by accident that the different periods of Grecian song are named after the ages of man; for nations in their intellectual development are the counterpart of human life. That nations in their progressive civilization do resemble the different periods of life is apparent to many who have never seen the profound speculations of Vico on this subject (in his Scienza Nuova); and this correspondence cannot fail to strike any one who bestows upon it even a cursory reflection.

Of the several periods enumerated, the most interesting by all odds is the Homeric, just as childhood and youth are the most delightful parts of life. Our early days always come before us fraught with truthfulness, simplicity, and freshness. We are always young in imagination when we recur to the sweet days of youth. So Homer, as the exponent of this age of Greek culture, strikes a chord in the heart of every man capable of appreciating him, because he there perceives his own nature drawn by a master's hand. And as early youth is the most precious of all our times of life to revisit in memory, so this poet continues to be the most welcome of all who employed the master-language of earth to portray human thought.

The leading excellence in Homer is, undoubtedly, his sympathy with external nature. By this is meant his tendency to the objective, to the delineation of all that is external in the world and internal in man, as seen by direct vision in contrast to reflection. This sympathy is shown by his distinctness of outline, as well as accuracy of detail, in portraying scenery. In the descriptions of nature, the nearer language comes to painting the more pleasure such word-pictures must give to the reader or hearer; for the infinite variety and freshness which the external world affords is a source of perennial delight. Such pictures never grow old. They never become hackneyed by repetition; because each recurrence of a pleasure is a new creation. Hence the tints of

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the rainbow, the unfolding beauties of the flower-bud, or the brightness of rosy-fingered morn are as fresh and pleasing as when the eye of man opened upon them for the first time. If these, then, can be reproduced in language they will charm as long as the world lasts; and in exact proportion to the ability of the author to recreate them will be his popularity. But he must reproduce them in such a way that the pictures stand out as realities, not as description; so plainly that we see not the man who speaks, or hear his words, but behold the originals in all the glory and beauty of their living reality.

Description of this kind preserves its youth and freshness so long as there is susceptibility to kindred impressions; and this will still be the case "while the races of man succeed each other like the leaves of spring." Nor is this susceptibility confined to those who are young in years merely, but is experienced equally by all those who retain freshness and vividness of feeling, who gracefully round off life by blending the vigor of youthful imagination with the wisdom of age. Such men, like Plato, Bacon, and Gladstone, set off the jewels of knowledge and experience with the casings of brilliant fancy; and the bees which settled upon their lips in the cradle continue to return to them ever freighted with sweets.

The descriptions of the Homeric rhapsodies are characterized by this excellence. They picture nature just as she is. The poet is neither seen nor heard. The scene is painted before the eye; and we look on what appears as a reality, not a description. Nor is the case altered when the feelings and pursuits of man as a part of nature are the theme. Here the actors play in character and speak their own pieces. We see them as the plain countryman saw Garrick and Mrs. Pritchard in Macbeth. The tall woman is so completely self-possessed, even when urging the commission of a most bloody deed, that there scarcely seems anything terrible in the murder of the king. But the "little man" is so frightened that we see the rising ghost, and tremble with him. Homer's heroes are created so true to nature that we

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see neither picture nor screen to hide the picture, but men and women, heroes and gods, living and moving before us. In order to accomplish this result, the poet does not appear to let his images pass through his own mind, and be deflected by the medium; but they take his place, speak and act for him, while he is as much a spectator as they. It has been asserted by Humboldt that the Greeks did not excel in drawing pictures from nature. He says: "Imagination animated vegetable forms with life; but the types of poetry to which the peculiar direction of mental activity amongst the ancient Greeks limited them gave only a partial development to the descriptions of natural scenery."[1] But however deeply read in scientific research, yet this wonderful man showed by this assertion a meagre acquaintance with, or else imperfect appreciation of, Homeric poetry. For if there is any excellence pre-eminent in Homer, it is just this. After much reflection in endeavoring to account for Humboldt's criticism, this is believed to be the cause: Modern descriptions of nature are invariably due for their excellence in great part to the skilful combinations of the writers, rather than to the faithful transcript of the originals. While the pictures retain sufficient outlines of the objective in nature to enable them to be recognized as genuine resemblances, still, they have so much of the subjective that they become the unquestioned property of their painter. They have passed through his mind, have become naturalized during their transit, and so resemble the medium through which they are seen. They are no longer originals, seen through a transparent atmosphere, but colored — beautifully, it may be — by the windows of scientific combination through which we view them. In other words, they are meant to be pictures of nature such as Petrarch, Herder, or Southey saw them. Homer, however, spirits us away, and in a moment we see Olympus with its snow-clad summit and its wooded ravines. We stand with him on Ida, and hear the roar of the young lions which haunt this "nurse of wild beasts." But when

[1] Cosmos, ii. 377, Bohn's edition.

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Petrarch takes us to Vaucluse we admire the fountain, and pluck a flower or two; but we all the time hear the chattering of the guide who conducts us, and see him waiting to receive his fee for showing it to us. And when we are invited to see the falls of Lodore, and have admired its "splashing and dashing, its rumbling and tumbling," we espy in the mist which the torrent of alliterative words raises the image of Southey; and louder than the cataract's roar is heard the voice: "I am the Poet Laureate." The feeling that an author is trying with all his might to describe something takes away much of our enjoyment in the contemplation of his picture. For we see therein not the reproduction of the scene, but a wearied and struggling author, who either excites our wonder at his acrobatic feats, or else arouses our sympathy for one who makes such painful efforts to please us. To him whose taste is gratified chiefly by skilful arrangement, wherein the intellectual vigor is prominent in combining with external nature to create a mixed picture, doubtless Homer and the other early Greek poets would seem greatly wanting. For among these nothing of artistic coloring appears in the lines wherewith the scene is reproduced. Modern word-pictures are nearly always the result of a purpose which cannot be concealed. The poet, when he comes to a beautiful scene, stops (and we must stop with him), until he takes out his sketch-book, sharpens his pencil, and draws his picture. We look over his shoulder, and are pleased because we see the beauty of the drawing, but still more so through admiration for the skill of the artist. But when he passes on we are conscious that we have to get up with him and go farther. Homer, however, when he comes to a beautiful prospect in nature takes us up gently, and noiselessly places us for a moment on some elevation where the whole scene is taken in at a glance; so that before we are aware of having stopped we see all the beauty he saw, all that was to be seen; and we follow not him, — for this poet is never seen, — but his heroes as they go in quest of new adventures.

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Considering poetical description as an artistic effort, Homer, and all the Greek poets up to the time of Sophocles, in this assuredly fail. For in the youthful period which we are considering, a formal description was not even attempted. But when they describe we are conscious of a reality before us which we are so intent on beholding that we never think of a picture or a painter. And even when Homer speaks of the feelings by which his heroes are actuated, we see the motives which influence their actions discovering themselves through the clear medium of a character too frank for concealment. Nay more; where they practise deception toward each other, the tricks of both sides are so transparent that we see the workings of their hearts, as we look upon the mechanism of a clock which has a glass covering, not to conceal it from view, but to preserve it uninjured, that we may see it the better. For motives are seen in their immediate action upon rational beings; and we have no deep speculations, as in the later philosophical poetry of the Greek tragedians (and which, among modern writers, is so conspicuous in Shakespeare), where the complicated tissue of human passions is combined with subtile reasonings which force us to exclaim:

> "Many wondrous things there are,
> And nought more wonderful than man."[1]

The distinction made by the Schoolmen of *primae et secundae intentiones*, is apposite for illustrating the two kinds of description. The exhibition by poetical genius of the actors in life's drama working out their own destiny, makes an impression upon us apparently without the intervention of the author; and this constitutes the *primae intentiones*. But when the poet receives the impression himself, and puts it through the crucible of his own subtile combination, we have, not what men actually do in in real life, but what a profound reflection upon human action deems it proper they should do. In these particulars Homer's age agrees precisely with youth. In our own experience we receive impressions imme-

[1] Soph. Antig., 131, 132.

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diately from nature, and enjoy them to the full, without troubling ourselves to reason upon them. It is sufficient that we derive pleasure from the sight; and while there is a constant succession of agreeable sensations, we are content to be receptive rather than weary ourselves by reproducing them moulded after the fashion of our own minds. Besides, at this period of life, we have neither the experience in turning the mind back upon its own processes, nor facts enough from which to make deductions. For a long time we can be learners only. Our minds are empty vessels which must be filled, or the blank leaf to be written over, before we can communicate to others more than the simple pictures which nature has traced. Thus the mind at this age reproduces the impression without change, and hence describes what it sees by words significant of its ideas, such as onomatopoea, or their immediate derivations, which are a simple transference from sound to another sense. All early languages, and especially such as are built up by one homogeneous people, show a wonderful aptitude for word painting. A single word stands for a complicated idea, because the mind seizes upon that which is prominent in the thing signified. Thus the lion is loud-voiced; the sheep is thick-wooled; the ox is trailing-footed and curved-horned; the sun is the passer-over; Jove is the loud-thunderer; morning is rosy-fingered; the west is *βουλυτόνδε*, the-place-for-loosing-the-oxen-from-the-plow. Like a child, susceptible to every external influence, who gives to each impression a designation by some sound which sums up his feelings without telling us why he felt so, Homer is the mouth-piece through which the senses speak. Such is the simple nature of Greek poetry in this Juventus Mundi; and it will delight us while we retain our youthful nature, and continue young as long as the world is kept alive by fresh blood coursing through its veins.

A second marked characteristic in the Homeric poetry is the undoubting faith exhibited by the author in his own creations. To effect belief in others, we must possess it ourselves

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in that which we communicate; for, however plausible our story may be made by skilful imitation, still, if we do not believe it, this want of faith will betray itself at some unexpected moment; and the whole narration then becomes, like the chain, no more trustworthy than its weakest link. But it will not do for us to examine the poetry of an early age by the sober tests of scientific criticism, any more than to try the day-dreams of youth by the severe assay of subsequent experience. For such a process dissolves the dream in either case, and takes away all the pleasure of the reverie. Yet nothing can please a properly balanced mind but that which is essentially true. Hence the pleasure derived from an acknowledged fiction results from its verisimilitude. We are delighted because the parable is true to nature, in such a case as probably may arise, and therefore has its foundation in reality. Since the pleasure which poetry gives arises from its fidelity to truth, it is necessary for the poet to have unbounded confidence in himself so as to believe implicitly all the creations of his genius. Nor is it surprising that this should be the case in regard to the many marvellous and even grotesque stories which form the chief subject-matter of the Homeric poems. It is not to be supposed that the wandering rhapsodist invented them bodily. They were the common heritage of the nation, assuming gradually a more perfect form as they were divested of what seemed incongruous, until at last they came in perfect harmony with the spirit of the age. And hence where there was anything added by the poet this must be in sympathy with what was already received as true. Or, to go a step farther, if the bard introduces a new story, not an outgrowth of his national faith, he must first construct an atmosphere wherein his characters can live, as well as invest them with an attractive history. All the parts of the story must be consonant with each other, and mutually supporting, or they will fall "like the baseless fabric of a vision." Applying these principles to our subject they elucidate it clearly. There is not the shadow of a doubt manifested in Homer's poems of his belief

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in all he uttered. There was at that age a faculty for growth and a quick receptivity for all impressions from within and without — an exuberance of fancy combined with eager curiosity. Nor had the critical rigor, which repeated deception begets in the history of centuries, as it does in the experience of the aged, been developed to try what was marvellous. So the story harmonized with their feelings, and contradicted none of their scanty experience; it was gladly welcomed as a contribution to their knowledge.

The similarity between youth and a nation in its earlier life is seen again in the fondness for what is marvellous, the blending of the supernatural with humanity. As childhood delights in stories of wonders, and implicitly believes all the tales of the nursery, even so the nation passing through a similar stage receives, with unquestioning faith, all that does not shock by its incongruity. For truthfulness and freedom from suspicion are equally large in both instances. We smile now at the absurd stories of the Arabian Nights, and forget the time when we walked around the monster egg with veracious Sindbad, or lashed ourselves with our turbans to the great leg of the Roc, and were carried down to the Valley of Diamonds. Yet, as children, we believed all such stories, provided we read them too early to have their statements falsified by knowledge of the world. Just so the nation in its childhood. And, therefore, when we read of gods and men holding familiar intercourse, of rivers and mountains addressed as sentient beings, we see no reason to think that Homer and his auditors questioned the truthfulness of such representations. What if Scamander, though a river, rose up to fight Achilles? What if Achelous coveted Dejanira? For to the child every object is animated, full of thought and feeling. It is addressed as a person, is the conscious author of pain and pleasure, and is visited with punishment because it incurs guilt. The child beats the stone against which it stumbled, and as readily scolds the plaything that will not work right as the human companion who will not take his proper place in the game. All children

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are much alike. Xerxes scourged the Hellespont, and *branded* it with hot irons because it destroyed his bridge. The Hindoo worships his sacred river, because he believes it to be a veritable god. The Greek called himself an *autochthōn*, one sprung from the earth. The American Indian seats himself upon his mother, the earth, when, by a breach of politeness, the pale-faced general provides for him no chair. It is undoubtedly true that all the stories which form so large part of the Iliad and Odyssey were believed by Homer (and we have enough of this temper of childhood to believe in Homer as a veritable man) with genuine faith. Doubtless he had a deep-felt consciousness that he was the interpreter of his people's religion; that he was their prophet, who had a profound insight into all mysteries, human and divine. He had that primary element of all greatness and success, faith in himself; and therefore, in the absence of all revelation except that which is by the reflected light from Sinai, he was the highest embodiment of human wisdom, the organ of communication between gods and men. Nor was this feeling one of arrogance, because it had truth for its basis. He was so completely filled with his subject that he saw distinctly all he revealed. His was a self-confidence which rose above all arrogance, and discerned only its mission; for it looked not at its own personality, but simply at the inspiration wherewith it was filled. No man ever succeeded in imposing his opinions upon his fellows, unless he had unlimited confidence in the matter of his teachings; and the measure of his own belief — provided his mind was clear — was the measure of his influence on others. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he," is the utterance of divine truth; and thus he becomes the standard of all things unto himself, and as many as follow him.

In the childhood of Greece, that most marvellous childhood the world ever saw, Homer told his story. The elements of intellectual life for the whole earth were thick around him, and he quickened them unto growth. The creations of youthful fancy were perfected by his genius, and struck that chord

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of undying popularity which vibrates only to the touch of a master. It may be impossible for us to explain the power of a truly great man, and he may never whisper to us "wherein his great strength lieth." But, in the two characteristics — unquestioning faith in his own creations, by which he sees in himself the highest realization of truth, and his sympathy with nature in all her forms of beauty — we see enough to account for that wonderful sway his songs have held over the cultivated intellects of successive generations; for all, when they return to him with the disposition of children, find a kindred spirit, ready to believe whatever satisfies imaginative curiosity, and delighting in everything which is lovely in nature.

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