

Commencement Thesis

The Attitude Of The Poet and Scientist
Toward Nature.

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As for untruths in poetry, poets are apt to go beyond the true facts in the case, and as a result things are stated which are not in accordance with scientific laws.

In taking up the different ways in which a few of the best poets have treated Nature, we may have some idea of the elements in Nature poetry. Chaucer, who has been called "The Morning Star of English Song", is said to have loved Nature equally as well as any poet but with that simple child-like love. Shakespeare, through all his dramas, forcibly impresses the reader with not only the characters of the persons but with it gives you (and often times by just a line or two) a perfect picture of the surrounding scenery. In this he differs from our modern poets for in describing his characters he strikes off the surroundings most natural to fit the case, while the modern poet is prone to premeditate on all the scenery and then bring in the character later. For this reason Shakespeare excelled as a poet.

Wordsworth is one of our very best Nature poets. While but a mere boy he had that love of Nature which grew up with him and made him the great interpreter of Nature. While roaming over the hills with other boys he had such beautiful thoughts which found expression later in his poems. We find that after his return from France, his mind had become so filled with

been crammed with all the 'ologies that are now taught? Suppose he had been a geologist. As he stood there on the mountain top viewing the peaks, the thoughts would come to him of how the stratified rocks were evidences of a long since vanished sea; of how the subterranean forces causing upheavals had displaced certain portions of the earth's crust; and of how the deep gulleys and valleys had been caused by great glaciers and the erosion of some swift-running river etc. With all these things pushing in where would his imaginative thoughts be?

But to me this looks a little unreasonable in this day and age for men find no pleasure in ignorance, they are constantly inquiring and seeking after knowledge, and as their knowledge increases their imaginative thoughts will; and more, they are more liable to be correct thoughts for they are based on facts.

Let us next look to the poet. Here we find beauty first - (then truth) the underlying principle. "Whenever the soul comes into living contact with fact and truth, whenever it realizes these with more than common vividness, there arises a thrill of joy, a glow of emotion; and the expression of that thrill, that glow, is Poetry." The poet can get things out of Nature that the scientist can not. The scientist may get a lesson for the brain - but the poet gets a lesson for the heart.

The true scientist and the true poet look at Nature in different lights. First, let us take the scientist. He is constantly seeking for the truth, in fact this is the underlying principle of all science. In some cases he is hindered from the real appreciation that Nature has in store for everyone if they will only listen to her teaching. Instead of drinking in her unbounded joys and living in that poetical field of pure enjoyment he is too often surrounded by an atmosphere of reasoning and doubt which is unmingled with any thought of love or beauty. The shepherd boy whom Wordsworth describes as watching the rising sun from the Highland Mts. is a fair example of the effect Nature has on a mind unfilled with scientific law.

"The clouds were touched
 And in their silent faces did he read
 Unutterable love. Sound needed none
 Nor any voice of joy; his spirit drank
 The spectacle: perception, soul and form
 All melted into him; they swallowed
 His animal being; - in them did he live
 And by them did he live; they were his life."

Some use this argument: Do you suppose he would have had the same feeling if his head had

the problems of men and of nations that it crowded out for a time his clear insight into Nature - "but as his faith in man and his love of Nature had suffered shipwreck together, it was by the same influence they were restored." The one thing that aroused him was the influence of human affection and that came through his sister Dorothy. She made a home for him and became his hourly companion. She saw in him the elements of a true poet and begged him to follow this calling and used her influence in every way she could by taking him to lonely and beautiful places and teaching him, unconsciously on her part, to have that sympathy and tenderness for human things that he before had uncared for. So he became once more, as he expresses it -

"A sensitive being, a creative soul."

Now we have seen the attitude of first the scientist toward Nature and next the poet. To be a true interpreter of Nature I have come to the conclusion that we must have a combination of the two. Science involves experiment, analysis, reasoning inductively and deductively and "poetry cannot rightly intermeddle." It is possible to imagine things before and after we have entered into science but it is impossible "to combine imaginative contemplation and scientific investigation at the same time, in one mental act." Says one writer "It is only after analysis and

reasoning have done their work and secured their results is the man of science free to look abroad on Nature with a poetic eye. So we see how poetry really rests on science and after receiving this benefit, poetry by her own peculiar powers, can partially repay this debt by weaving in these laws in such a way as to make them familiar to men's minds whereas they might otherwise never have been made known to them. In many cases, the laborer, after eight or ten hours labor per day, coming home at night will prefer the poetry to some "dry" scientific work if he is to make his choice. Men often use it to sooth their passions and if a few scientific laws are involved (but hidden) his knowledge is increased. Thus we see how poetry may advance science. This then is a point in favor of the question "Will science put out poetry?" We may reasonably judge not so long as men's natures are what they are. So a combination of the two is what we need to make the world intelligent but not so intelligent as to cause the love of beauty in Nature to be crowded out.

Objections will be found to this view perhaps, about scientific laws entering into poetry and to feel assured of being understood - this does not mean every or any law, nor the carrying out of them in detail but simply the general laws. In the following

is found a splendid description, in verse, of a boulder, a rock which has considerable geological history:

"As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence,
Boulder is all who do the same copy
By what means it hath hither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense.
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself."

It would certainly be out of place to put into poetry, minor scientific points, like a great long formula in chemistry or a mathematical problem. The view that poetry should not be ruined by the introduction of scientific principles is absurd. If the imagination alone is left to play in the mind of an uneducated person or poet and he proceeds with incorrect scientific statements he will be criticised severely by the scientists. They will detect any error on first reading. As to write good poetry and to avoid untruths in it one must first become acquainted with the general scientific laws. Furthermore, as to the attitude of a true poet toward Nature, he must retain that "freshness of eye and child-likeness of heart" which enables him to ever look on Nature with that same wonder and appreciation

that he first had. With some, this has been crowded out and as one writer has expressed it ^{to} the dull mechanic mind this marvelous earth is but a black ball of mud painted here and there with some streaks of green and gold. Is the drily scientific mind which fancies itself educated, it is merely a huge piece of mechanism like some great mill or factory worked by forces which he probably tabulates and calls "Laws of Nature." But the true poet still enjoys Nature and it is his mission to express it in such a way as to make others feel it.

The attitude of the poet and scientist toward Nature is widely different in some respects while in a few they may rightly overlap.