Commencement Three

The Attitude Of the Poet and Scientist

Toward Nature

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As for untruths in poetry, few are apt to go beyond the true facts in the case, and as a rule things are related 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 element 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, though all his dramas, forcibly impressed the reader with not only the characters of the personae, but with it gave upon (and often times by just a line or two) a perfect picture of the surrounding scenery. On this he differs from our modern poets for in describing the 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. To this end 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 as filled with
been crammed with all the dogmas that are now taught. Suppose he had been a geologist. As he stood there on the mountain top viewing the rugged, the thoughts would come to him of how the stratified rocks were evidence of a long line of vanished ages, of how the subterranean forces causing upheavals had displaced certain portions of the earth's crust, and of how the deep gullies and valleys had been caused by great glaciers and the course of some swift-running river etc. With all these things racking 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 when seeking after knowledge, and as their knowledge increases, their imaginations thoughts grow, and more, they are more liable to be correct thoughts for they are based on fact.

Let me next look to the poet. Here we find beauty first (then truth) the underlying principle. When 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 scienist cannot. 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 me 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 joy and living in that poetical field of pure enjoyment he is too often surrounded by an atmosphere of reasoning and doubt which is unmixed with any thought of love or beauty. The shepherd boy whom Longfellow describes as watching the rising sun from the Highland Mts. is a first example of the effect Nature has on a mind unfilled with scientific laws.

The clouds were touchèd
And on their silent faces did he read
Unutterable love. Sound needed none
No voice of joy. His spirit drank
The spectacle. Pondering, soul and form
All melted into him, they swallowed
His animal being. In them did he live
And by then, 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 problem of men and of nations that it crowded out
for a time its clear weight into Nature—"but as his
faith in man and his love of Nature had suffered ship-
wreck together, it was by the same influence they were
restored." The one thing that comforted him was the in-
fluence of human affection and that came through his
poet Drury. She made a home for him and became
his hourly companion. She gave in him the elements of
a true poet and urged him to follow this calling and
used her influence in every way she could by taking
him to lovely and beautiful places and teaching him,
unconsciously on her part, to have that sympathy and
tenderness for human things that he before had unlearned
for. So he became once more, as he expressed 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 con-
clusion that we must have a combination of the
two. Science involves experiment, analysis, reasoning
inductively and deductively and "sorting sound freight
out of the tangle." It is possible to imagine things before
and after we have entered into Science, but it is im-
possible to combine imaginative contemplation and
scientific investigation at the same time, in one mental
act."

Says she writes: "It is only after analyses and
reasoning have done their work and secured their results.

Is the man of science free to look abroad on nature with a poet's eye? If we see how poetry really rests on science and after receiving the benefit, poetry by its own peculiar powers, can partially repay the 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 worth their leisure and if a few scientific laws are involved (but hidden) the 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 cancel the love of beauty in nature to be crowded on.

Objections will be joined to this view perhaps, about scientific laws entering into poetry and to find 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. On 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
Couch'd on the hulb top of an eminence,
Wonder to all who do the same repey
By what means it hath thither come, and whence;
Is that it seems a thing endued with sense
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand repose, there to sun itself."

it would certainly be out of place to put
into poetry, minor scientific facts, 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 on the mind
of an uneducated person or poet and he proceeds
with incorrect scientific statements, he will be
criticized severely by the scientists. They will detect
any error on first reading. It is with good poetry
and to avoid untruths in all one must first become
acquainted with the general scientific laws. Further-
more, as to the attitude of a true poet toward
Nature, he must retain that freshness of eye and child-
liness 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 at one writer has expressed it the dull mechanic mind. The marvelous earth is but a black ball of mud painted here and there with some stroke of green and gold. Is the daily scientific mind which fancy he has 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 even that toward Nature is widely different in some respects, while in a few they may strongly overlap.