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978-1-108-05467-6 - From Shakespeare to Pope: An Inquiry into the Causes and
Phenomena of the Rise of Classical Poetry in England

Edmund Gosse

Excerpt

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POETRY AT THE DEATH OF
SHAKESPEARE.

G.

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THE time seems to have arrived at last, when we may contemplate without passion that precise, mundane, and rhetorical order of poetry which is mainly identified in our minds with the names and practice of Dryden, of Pope, and of Johnson. The school of writers who cultivated this order—and those who emphasise their faults admit that they did institute a school—have commonly been described as the classical, because their early leaders claimed to emulate and restore the grace and precision of the poets of antiquity, to write in English as Horace and Ovid were then supposed to have written in Latin,—that is to say, with a polished and eclectic elegance¹. The prestige of these

¹ *Horace* will our superfluous Branches prune,
Give us new rules, and set our Harp in tune,
Direct us how to back the winged Horse,
Favour his flight and moderate his force.

Waller to *Roscommon*, 1684.

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[More information](#)

classical versemen was first attacked, in the middle of the eighteenth century, by Gray and Chatterton; and their influence received blow upon blow until the close of the century, when the efflorescence of the naturalistic poets, first from within, as in Crabbe, and then much more decisively from without, as in Wordsworth and Coleridge, destroyed it altogether.

To the first and second generation after this revolution in taste, the classical species of poetry seemed no poetry at all. Dryden and Pope, who had been enthroned so long in secure promise of immortality, felt their shrines shaken as by an earthquake. It became the fashion to say that these men were no poets at all, and Keats, in a curious passage of his youth, made himself the daring spokesman of this heresy.

“Yes, a schism

Nurtured by foppery and barbarism
 Made great Apollo blush for this his land.
 Men were thought wise who could not understand
 His glories; with a puling infant's force
 They sway'd about upon a rocking-horse,
 And thought it Pegasus. Ah, dismal-soul'd!
 The winds of heaven blew, the ocean roll'd
 Its gathering waves—ye felt it not. The blue
 Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew
 Of summer night collected still to make
 The morning precious: Beauty was awake!

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[More information](#)*Death of Shakespeare.*

5

Why were ye not awake? But ye were dead
 To things ye knew not of,—were closely wed
 To musty laws lined out with wretched rule
 And compass vile; so that ye taught a school
 Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit,
 Till, like the certain wands of Jacob's wit,
 Their verses tallied. Easy was the task:
 A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask
 Of Poesy. Ill-fated, impious race!
 That blasphemed the bright Lyrist to his face,
 And did not know it,—no, they went about,
 Holding a poor, decrepit standard out,
 Mark'd with most flimsy mottoes, and in large
 The name of one Boileau¹!"

In these lines Keats has so admirably summed up the convictions of the first half of the present century with regard to the classical poetry, that I need make little comment upon them, further than to point out that with the tact of a great writer he has contrived to condemn the practice he is attacking, no less by the form in which he clothes his ideas, than by the ideas themselves. The passage I have just quoted does not merely satirize the poetry which is presently coming under our consideration, but it is written in extreme formal opposition to it:—

¹ From *Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 181—206, published in the *Poems* of 1817.

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[More information](#)

“The blue
Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew
Of summer night collected still to make
The morning precious:”

That sentence is a cluster of what the French call *enjambments*, stridings-over; although we have so much of the thing in our literature, we have no word for it in English. It has been proposed to pronounce the French word as though it were English, *enjambments*, but this is hideous. My friend, Mr Austin Dobson, has proposed to me the term *overflow*¹ for these verses in which the sense is not concluded at the end of one line or of one couplet, but straggles on, at its own free will, until it naturally closes; and I propose to adopt it throughout this inquiry, as equivalent to the *vers enjambé* of the French. In its simplest definition, then, the formular difference between the two classes or orders of English poetry is, that the romantic class is of a loose and elastic kind, full of these successive overflows, while the classical is closely confined to the use of distich, that is to say, of regular couplets, within the bounds of each of which the sense is rigidly confined.

¹ Milton describes the same peculiarity in *The Verse* (*Paradise Lost*, fifth title-page) as “the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another.”

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Death of Shakespeare.*

7

It will now be well to show the distinction between these two orders by examples. The passage just quoted from Keats will serve us very well as a specimen of the romantic order. While the wayward music of it is still in our ears, I will contrast it with a few lines from Dryden:—

“All human things are subject to decay,
And, when Fate summons, monarchs must obey.
This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young
Was called to empire, and had governed long,
In prose and verse was owned, without dispute,
Through all the realms of Nonsense, absolute.
This aged prince, now flourishing in peace
And blest with issue of a large increase,
Worn out with business, did at length debate
To settle the succession of the state;
And, pondering which of all his sons was fit
To reign and wage immortal war with wit,
Cried, ‘’Tis resolved, for Nature pleads that he
Should only rule who most resembles me¹.’”

The temper in which these two writers, Dryden and Keats, are here displayed, is almost identical. I have selected the second piece, because, like the first, it breathes indignation against the mediocrity of poetasters. Our ears none the less instruct us in a moment that here we have two brilliant artists whose methods, whose ambitions, whose

¹ *Mac-Flecknoe* (1682), ll. 1—14.

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whole conception of style, are at the poles of contrast. Briefly, then, it may be said that each of the manners thus exemplified has been twice in the ascendant in English poetry. The classical, or precise, when poetry first began to be written in modern English; the romantic, when poetry revived under the Tudor monarchs; the classical again from the English Commonwealth to the French Revolution; the romantic again ever since.

The subject of our present investigation is confined to the phenomena and history of the second of these changes, that which succeeded the career of Shakespeare, and led to a new fashion which culminated in the art of Pope. That this change occurred is obvious to everybody, but the causes that led to it are so obscure, and even the history of it has hitherto been so little studied, that the inquiry we are about to pursue may be said to be practically a novel one. In undertaking it we are confronted by the difficulty which a traveller encounters in attempting minutely to survey a passage of country, part of which is flat and part is hilly. From a distance nothing seems easier than to distinguish between plain and acclivity, but when we are on the spot we find ourselves baffled, for these melt into one. It is because we have again retired to a distance from the scene of our survey that the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Death of Shakespeare.

9

time seems to me to have arrived for a just consideration of the classical school. We can now contemplate in a calm perspective what was too near for the generation of Keats to observe without the injustice of foreshortening.

I have hitherto spoken only of the formal character of the change which took place in English poetry towards the middle of the seventeenth century, and not of its ethical or essential character; because poetry is an art, and must be regarded primarily from an artistic and not from a philosophical point of view. To fail to acknowledge this to be a postulate, is to fall into an error such as a critic of music would make, although a less serious one, if he gave attention to the emotional sentiments awakened in the hearer by a performance, in priority to the science of the harmonical and melodious sounds of which that performance was the executive production. I must therefore dwell a moment longer on the formal character of the change, and beg my readers to consider the marvel of a nation that was free to use in any combination all the endless varieties of iambic and trochaic movement (for the dactylic and anapaestic¹

¹ I purposely take no note here of the experiments in tumbling rimeless measure made by certain Elizabethans. These were purely

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movement was, curiously enough, entirely unknown to the Elizabethans) trammelling themselves by a series of pedantic and artificial rules, the function of which was to reduce to a minimum the effects possible to poetic art.

But this change of form was accompanied by an equally extraordinary change of subject and of treatment. Here, again, where all had been liberty, where no bounds of space or time, no regulations of any kind, had curbed the erratic inclinations of the poets, they suddenly and wilfully shut themselves up between walls of rule, and abandoned the wild woods for stately and mechanical circuits around the box-walks of a labyrinth. For the direct appeal to Nature, and the naming of specific objects, they substituted generalities and second-hand allusions. They no longer mentioned the gilly-flower and the daffodil, but permitted themselves a general reference to Flora's vernal wreath. It was vulgar to say that the moon was rising, the gentlemanly expression was, "Cynthia is lifting her silver horn." Women became "nymphs" in this new phraseology, fruits became "the treasures of

exotic, and, even in the hands of Campion himself, neither natural nor successful. I would at the same time guard myself from being supposed to think, though for convenience sake I speak of iambs and dactyls, that we possess real metrical quantity in English.