

About Writing Poetry

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The autobiographic frankness of the following pages has led the author to withhold his name—one, however, familiar to readers of this magazine, who on more than one occasion have seen it signed to verse and prose of peculiar distinction.]



I CANNOT remember when I began writing, any more than I can remember learning to read. By writing I mean, of course, composition; the baser mechanism of chirography I was taught when I was about five, and I distinctly recall discovering with surprise that the alphabet was nothing other than a list of the familiar letters from which words were made. So by then I must have been reading for some time. Of course all children make up rhymes and jingles of their own, and turn naturally to rhythm as alike an instinctive pleasure and an aid to memory. The only circumstance unusual in my case was that, by reading so early to myself I had more models. I was not (thank Heaven!) a virtuous and bookish child; but to read was as natural as mischief, and nearly as much fun. I would read anything that was a book, especially if there were pictures in it; and more especially if I had been told that it was too old for me to understand, for then I became curious. I did not read Ibsen in infancy, like the Boston child of comic fame; but I read Shakespeare and *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and Miss Parloa's *New Cook-Book* with entire impartiality, and Dickens and Scott and Burns and Longfellow along with Oliver Optic and Mayne Reid. I remember particularly a queer yellow volume called *The Geography of the Heavens*, which was not a geography at all, but contained, besides some stupid stuff about the stars, an account of an entirely new set of gods and goddesses and heroes with unpronounceable names, more reasonable than the fairies, and somewhat more humanly companionable than the patriarchs and angels of the Bible stories. These people I found also in a small, fat Pope's *Iliad* without a cover; and when

I tired of reading this I would build a sty for it under the table, and play that it was a pig. On these occasions a big Doré Milton was generally a cow. And there was an *Ancient Mariner*, illustrated also by Doré, which gave me very evil dreams. Of course I impersonated everything I read about, from grizzly bears to gorgons, and from Ivanhoe to Achilles. And equally, of course, I made up for myself, long before I learned or cared to write them down, stories and verses of my own in imitation of my reading. I dictated by the hour to my patient mother, who solemnly read me the result; and I knew when a line or sentence sounded wrong before ever I heard of grammar or versification.

For so much reminiscence I have some excuse, beyond the pleasure of anonymous egoism, for it serves very simply to explain the spirit of my reading ever since, and the instinctive trend of my own writing. From the first, all books were only books to me—a literary commune with no other aristocracy than that of interest. I could have no fear of a classic, being familiar with many before I had heard of such a thing; and I enjoyed endless rubbish, in ignorance of any critic against whom to defend my enjoyment. I had never the chance to be a prig about the one or a Philistine about the other. Milton I read contemporaneously with the Elsie Books, and recognized much the same theology in both, and the same tone of moral melodrama. Milton was better when comprehensible, because he made a gorgeous noise. Mrs. Finley, although equally familiar with the Deity, never called Him Jehovah thundering out of Sion; her hell also was less pictorial, and her heaven a place only for dead people. With these and the Bible stories my mythological gleanings formed a kindred category. I was, of course, informed that those were true stories and these

fairly tales; but the difference, if any, seemed rather in favor of the last. It was all equally real. If I had never seen Venus or Andromeda, no more had I seen Jezebel; and gnomes or dryads, Oberon or Azrael, an elephant or a centaur or a Cheshire cat, would have been alike recognized at once if I had found them in the garden. So, likewise, "Romeo and Juliet" and "As You Like It" and *The Talisman* were books of adventure like *The Bush Boys* and the innumerable works of G. A. Henty—perhaps more musical and less adventurous. And I felt alike for Ariadne and Evangeline and Ophelia, without in the least understanding the complexion of their sorrows. All this, which pedagogy would have expected to spoil my palate, gave me instead whatever critical taste I may possess, for it forced upon me from the first some standard of individual judgment as the only standard possible. I could prefer books only for their power to interest, and form no other prejudices than my own; and that to-day I read George Meredith and George Ade with equal though diverse pleasure; that poetry still seems natural as prose, tradition merely a history that is not dead, and romance more often true than realism, I must owe frankly to the catholicism of apples and gingerbread and the big leather-covered chair. I was so fortunate as to learn first what I liked, and afterward that it was literature. And I have since learned that all great art is nothing but what, in the long run, continues to please many people.

In writing, as in reading, it was much the same. From childhood immemorial verse had been simply a form of speech more moving and more memorable than prose. In stories there was no guide from word to word; but in poetry, if a syllable went wrong it spoiled the rhyme or rhythm; and I had pages of it by heart without having tried to memorize. Also the mere stamp and swing of it were exciting, like the march of soldiers to a tune. As for the sense of anything therein artificial or remote, all children learned rhymes before they could read, and invented them before they could write; and their elders no more than played at the same game. What was the difference between the nightmare

"Life-in-Death" and the "Dong with the Luminous Nose"? When I first read of both I was as much afraid of one as of the other. And I could have howled aloud (only that I was not a girl) over the lamentable parting of Ralph Rackstraw and Josephine. It had the same miserable sorry feeling as the lament of Helen over Hector, which I had read a month or two before. So by the age of ten or twelve I had a fair, though irregular, familiarity with most English poets between Spenser and Keats, and had versified pages of nonsense of my own. There would have been more of it if I had not been preoccupied with baseball and stamp collecting and a few first love-affairs. But it never occurred to me until years afterward that any of these occupations might be less ordinary than the rest.

What had, however, occurred to me long since was my technical inferiority to my models. That my ideas were any less worthy of expression than Shakespeare's I could not then perceive; but I was quite aware that I did not express them so well. I could not rhyme like Gilbert or Byron; my hexameters were not even so good as Longfellow's; my iambs lacked the trample and blare of Macaulay; and my attempts at blank verse had such a hopeless habit of stopping for breath at the end of every line that I soon gave up that form in despair. There was also an early lyric about spanking which went to the music of "Bonnie Dundee"; and, despite the impassioned intimacy of this theme, I recognized with regret that my lines would not sing themselves to the melody like those of the original. It was with style, moreover, as with prosody; child as I was I felt that, compared with what I read, my own writing sounded childish; it was play-poetry, somehow, not grown-up and real. At last I discovered in an old rhetoric a chapter on versification which was, happily for me, traditional and sound and sane. A passage in Pope suggested that the sound of a line might emphasize and adorn its meaning. And with this for a starting-point, I set to work, neither more nor less seriously than at football or plane geometry, to puzzle out the science of this game. The little I could find upon the subject I

read; more time I spent upon experiment, and in crude analysis of masterpieces, if haply I might surprise some secret of their golden harmonies. It was a matter no one could tell me much about, and of course too subtle for a school-boy. Tennyson was a great help, and Swinburne and Kipling and Morris and Rossetti. While yet I could no more than smatter at their meaning, I went through pages of Homer and Horace and Vergil for the pure glory of their sound. Then presently, as my small Greek and Latin grew, there came new light from the comparison of languages; and the study of shorthand lent an else unimagined suggestion of phonetics. About my sophomore year I discovered roughly Stevenson's theory of the verbal pattern; and then I found his essay and learned, between vanity and humiliation at once, that my discovery was true and that it was none of mine. I was always doing that, or piling some callow card-house of hypothesis which the next fact blew flatlong. But I kept at it in rather desultory fashion, from sheer curiosity and love of an art which then I had no thought to make professionally mine. And I have been at it ever since.

It is no wonder, therefore, if I cannot entirely sympathize with that now fashionable school which demands a poetry professedly American and up-to-date, which proclaims emancipation from conventional form, and asserts that men work better for not knowing how—Imagist, Modernist, Futurist, *et id genus omne*. With all their sincerity, there seems a certain affectation and advertisement about these popular rebels—as of a huge and swaggering majority with its back against the wall, a heroic Juggernaut claiming the martyr's crown. For some of us their freedom is too hard a bondage, and their anarchy too narrow and inflexible a dogma. On what compulsion must we deny ourselves whatever beauty is not wholly new? Or because this is here and now, shall not all distance and all yesterday make music in us also? Imagine a Shakespeare restricted to Elizabethan subjects, a Vergil imprisoned within Augustan realism, a Keats compelled to be contemporary! Doubtless we are the people, and wisdom was born with us.

Being modern Americans, we cannot if we will produce any other than modern American art; and perhaps we might do as well to put away self-consciousness and, instead of trying to make something national, try simply to make anything good. We live in the Great Age, as others have done; but that is hardly a reason why we should make it smaller by imprisoning our souls therein, as others did not do. And the question of form I for one answer by merely declining to be disinherited. Free verse itself, as Miss Lowell is so fond of pointing out, has been written off and on for centuries. Why make a boast, then, of writing nothing else? Convention is but our name for that which very many have approved; and we should call him a foolish carpenter who would do his work without hammer, saw, or chisel because these tools were tainted with the touch of time.

Of course analogy is not argument. But I am here less concerned to argue as a critic than to make plain one poet's prejudice about these things. I can no more revolt against a classic than against an old friend. The distinction between sound and sense, though useful to measure what latitude we may allow ourselves, appears to me as imaginary as the Equator; we may conceive the two apart, like soul and body; but in fact life is their combination. And as regards thought expressed in words, a thing said otherwise is to me simply another thing. Nowadays, when I am called sometimes a technician with more care for style than for substance, the old childhood feeling still persists—that, though the substance of what I write be worthy of perfect writing, my expression remains forever weak and tawdry, and painfully below the beauty of what I read. I suppose I know more about blank verse than any man alive, and perhaps as much about the shaping of words for music; at any rate, it is no very wild boast to say so; yet any day a rich line of Noyes or a blazing phrase of Masfield, or one of Kipling's ultimately expressive sentences—yes, or some slap-bang rattle of a rag-time song—will remind me afresh of artistries far out of reach, and make me feel a beginner or a charlatan. Truly, I do care more for

style than substance; and why not? The thoughts are what I have to say—beyond my creation or control, save that I can in some sort choose among them; but the saying, the embodiment in rhythms and words—that is my own affair, to care for and to work over; the “crafte so long to learne” that I have not learned yet, nor ever shall. At least I know enough for this—to find some fault always in the best line that I can make. Though I think like Sophocles or dream like Swinburne, what shall it profit when certainly I cannot write like them? So, for aught I know, may any other person less articulate than I. And I like to think that I may harmlessly be vain of my ideas—which are not mine, but given to me from God knows where—so long as I keep a decent modesty of my small power to create verses in their image.

This brings to mind a question I am often asked—I mean about the actual psychology of composition. Somebody may be interested if I set down the answer here; and it is really an easy matter to describe. Have you never developed pictures in the dark-room, and watched the image form upon the blank film? You know how first the high lights appear, a touch here and a mass there and an outline yonder, separately and nothing like a picture; then gradually the space between fills into a design wherein the first intense bits have their places; and then the shadows and fine details come last of all. And you know how sometimes one picture never will come wholly clear, or another flashes forth too quickly, only to fade away again; and the result in either case is the same—a flat, dull, foggy thing with all its values wrong. So that your whole work is to bring each image to its best and fix it there, not spoiling force in refinement nor detail for the sake of intensity. Well, it is exactly like that. I have beforehand the idea, the vision of what the thing is meant to be—a plan of rhythm and thought and the tone or feeling of it all. So I sit down and make a dark-room of myself, shutting out every other light except the red glow of imagination. Then first come the high lights, a phrase in one place, a line or a sentence in another, and again some

cadence or movement of the verse—as casually and as much without construction or control of mine as the scattered markings on the film. I recognize them by their places in the plan, and I try hard to hold them there until I can fill in the connection and bring all into form and harmony; and that is sheer technical labor. These high lights are the important parts in the sense of being climaxes or openings or endings, dominant rhyme-words or essential sentences that must be just so, and upon which the rest depends; important also in that I do not and cannot make them—they *happen*, as if I remembered them; or they refuse to happen, as if I could not remember; but of course in the completed work no more important than the half-tones and organism of the design which I myself must make. And sometimes I have only the lights, and cannot for the life of me fill in the rest; and sometimes the whole image flares and fades, and the lights get lost among the shadows, and the work dulls into a vile, flat mockery of what I meant to do. And—only sometimes—there are lucky days when thought and mood and movement fit themselves into form at once, so that I have hardly more than to write down words as if I were taking dictation in a dream. But that is too good to happen often.

And always there is work—work at the full stretch at once of patience and of effort, even though it be only the effort of attention. Usually there is emotional excitement mixed up with it, and of course the nauseating struggle with parts that will not come right and must be prevented from making all the rest go wrong. But my facility seems to have nothing to do with the result, either in detail or as to the entire poem. I cannot, once I have forgotten, myself distinguish the phrase that seemed to have been spoken to me from that one which I rewrote a score of times; and, although I perhaps tend a trifle to prefer such of my poems as were made readily, yet in this I am probably wrong, for other people are as likely to impute either force or smoothness to those over which I have fussed and tinkered for months, leaving no line unturned. In any case, nothing of mine is practically

ever finished, because I never can be satisfied; and the proofs of some new printing are only another chance to see if I can fit a word more accurately or improve the movement of a line.

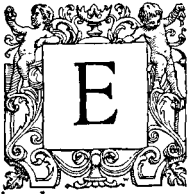
Now all this is, of course, my ordinary work, and about as strange to me as getting shaved: rather less so if anything; for to have songs growing in my head is in itself surely not more mysterious than to have hair growing upon my face; and it has happened ever since I can remember, instead of during certain years. Nor do I believe this experience in any way peculiar to myself or to imaginative art; but that it is the normal psychology of much that we carelessly call thinking, and far more common than we suppose. I think that the better half of everybody's daily brain work is precisely thus intuitive or subconscious; but most people, being not introspective, forget the essential revelation in remembering the conscious labor of arrangement. So that we imagine ourselves to have thought out an idea, whereas in fact the idea has been first revealed to us; and then we have thought *about* it. However this may be, of the source of those fragmentary illuminations which I make into poems I am myself quite unaware. The sensation is altogether external, and I know no sense in which I may accurately claim to be their origin. It may be God or Apollo or Chemistry or the Subconscious Mind—I know as little of one as of another. And I was never of those confident folk who consider themselves to have understood a phenomenon merely by giving it a name—even a scientific name. Life is a tissue of familiar mysteries, and it is only when we talk scientific nonsense or try absurd scientific experiments about these matters that they argue themselves unknown.

At any rate, there are some things about this process which I do know. And, first of all, that all the talk about the artistic temperament and waiting upon inspiration is ultimate bosh and an excuse for inexcusable laziness. If you wait for inspiration, it does not come. It will no more occur unbidden than your photograph will expose or develop itself. It must be sought; and the manner of its

seeking is the traditional one known of all seers from the beginning, to shut oneself inward from the senses and concentrate upon darkness until the lights appear. Call it reverie if you will, or auto-hypnosis. I call it, as common folk have always called it, meditation. By any name, it is not done without endeavor, although here also habit helps; and it must be done with a clean heart and a clear head if the result shall be worth having. Inspiration of itself is nothing—mere day-dreams of no use unrealized; and between these and their realization lies all that a man may compass of labor and honesty and hoarded skill. That is why technique seems to me the supremely important thing to toil and talk about; not because the execution matters so much itself as the design, but because ideas happen, whereas their embodiment must be made. Art here is in no special category. The scientist groping for material law, the engineer scheming some new structure, the statesman ordering the affairs of men, merchant or banker or soldier, or whom you will—all have their share in the one sacred fire; they must all alike learn and agonize to forge therein any achieved event of earthly use; and I cannot see why the artist need claim exemption from the study and practice of his proper trade. Here is the radical error of the radicals, that they look for some philosopher's stone of art, some Northwest Passage to invention. They pretend, of course, to have preferred their cubes and jargons and cacophonies as more expressive than conventional craftsmanship, and not as evasions of its difficulty. Surely sometimes these gentlemen deceive themselves; and the proof is that they profess to improve upon that which they have not exhausted, to have done more than what they cannot do. Now and then some true prophet speaks honestly in a strange tongue—Browning, Whitman, Rodin. And for the others, by their fruits ye shall know them. Like the rest of us, they have discovered how hard it is to bring a design to bear and to express imagination; so they make figures without form and sounds without meaning, and call upon you and me to admire the representation of their souls.

Huns of the Air

BY WALTER PRICHARD EATON



VERY mouse in the fields and meadows, every rabbit that crouches under the thicket, every grouse and pheasant, even fish and frogs and muskrats in the waters and the squirrels and song-birds of the forest, live under a menace from above, no less terrible to them than the Zeppelins have been to London, and far less effectively combated. They live under the menace of the raptorial birds, or birds of prey—the eagles, hawks, falcons, and owls—certain species of which are still far commoner than the ordinary person supposes, even in the settled sections of our northeastern states. The Terror comes to them out of the air; it drops with the speed of lightning and kills with extraordinary strength and ferocity. Size in itself is little protection, for a goshawk will easily kill a rooster and even carry him off. That menacing shadow over the hen-yard which causes such a commotion on a still summer day hovers in reality over all the land of the little wild folk, by night as well as by day, and tragedy falls like the traditional bolt from the blue in open field and sedgy marsh and silent forest.

One March day I found a strange record on my mountain-side. The body of a small skunk dangled over a bent sapling, about four feet from the ground. Beneath was snow and mud without a track. The skunk showed no mark of shot, nor had there been any hunters in that vicinity. He could hardly have climbed up and straddled a sapling to die a natural death; besides, there were blood marks on his head and throat. In all probability he had been killed by a great horned owl,—one of the few creatures I know which have any fondness for skunks,—and had either been dropped because the owl wasn't hungry or else placed on the limb preparatory to eating, the owl having been scared away

before the meal could begin. At any rate, I could see no other explanation.

It was on the 18th day of March that I first noticed the hawks so prominent in the air. It was also the day that bird-song and spring warmth were first apparent. Walking along a highroad above a pine-filled valley, I heard a loud commotion in the trees, and suddenly a score of crows burst up above the pines, like black fragments of an explosion. In their midst was a bird of about the same size, which speedily made off. Four crows went in pursuit, however. I was too far away to make out with any certainty what variety of hawk this bird was, and in addition the light was in my face. It was probably a Cooper's hawk. But I could see the four crows fly over him, and dart down every few feet to take a peck at his head. Meanwhile the crows which remained behind kept up an incessant racket in the pines. The hawk made no effort to fight back, nor did he even seem greatly annoyed. Without any attempt to dodge or change his line of flight, he gradually accelerated his speed, swung down wind, and disappeared, the four crows being left astern after about a mile. Just what he had done to annoy them I cannot say. He may have been hungry and attacked one. But it doesn't pay to attack a crow. *E pluribus unum* is their motto. I have seen literally hundreds of crows gather in less than two hours to attack a great horned owl which had killed one of their number. As a rule, I doubt if the hawks and owls trouble the crows very much, even though their nests are placed so similarly in the tops of the forest trees.

I had hardly finished watching this little battle over the pines when, on looking upward, I saw a big red-tailed hawk (the large bird commonly and mistakenly called a hen-hawk) sailing far aloft on almost motionless pinions. It is a beautiful flight, this of the red-tailed