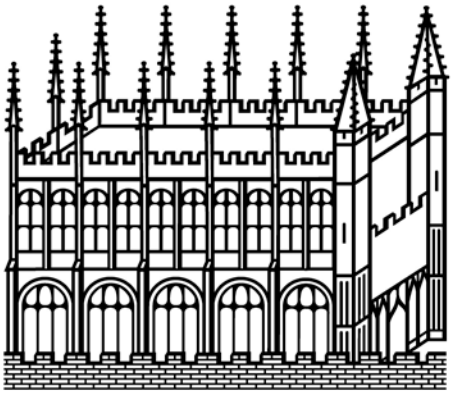

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The Poet's Eye

VERNON LEE, LITT.D.

THE HOGARTH PRESS

THE POET'S EYE

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BY

VERNON LEE, LITT.D.

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THE POET'S EYE

NOTES ON SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VERSE AND PROSE

I

I HAVE never, in all my life, been able to write a single line of verse; though I have written volumes, too many, of prose. While, as regards reading, instead of my ever-ready appetite for prose I discover in myself a slight initial unwillingness when it comes to verse. This personal idiosyncrasy, and doubtless inborn defect, of my constitution, is as well confessed at the outset of the present essay. Because, besides fitly introducing my views about verse and prose, it brings into relief the paradoxical fact of my always having, and always having had, a sense of inferiority, as towards poetry, and those who write it. I am acutely aware of belonging to a lower caste; and that my walk in life is, however honourable, humble and decidedly humdrum. This is not, I hasten to explain, because I have been dazzled by poets in private life: their person and conversation have always struck me as much of a muchness with those of ordinary mortals, among whom I should not be disinclined to count them.

Yet, while so doing, something would stop me. However close their resemblance to human beings, there remains an unaccountable difference, something like an *aura* of immortality, about them. Nay, though experience may have shorn those who write verses of some of their individual prestige in my eyes, I have merely transferred the lyre and laurel-crown, the divine stature and radiance, from themselves to their art. Poetry may doubtless be more boring than prose, but it bores me as I might be bored in a sanctuary. It is godlike, immortal.

Godlike, methinks, because it *is* immortal. And *immortal* (such is the contention of the present essay), because one *remembers* it ; because it survives in the memory, dwells, thrones there, in state. Whereas prose just comes and goes ; does its honest (or dishonest) work of altering something in our mind, and, having done that, fades away. So that, however great and enduring its effects, prose is, itself, no better than mortal.

The different status of verse and prose is so much taken for granted that, far from inquiring into its origin, our learned critics rarely so much as point out the bare existence of such a difference. It is therefore left to an ignoramus in poetical lore, namely myself, to ask how you, or any of us, would feel on reading in *The Times* an important emendation in the text, first folio and all subsequent editions, of a famous passage in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, making it read as follows :

"The prose-writer's eye, rolling in a fine frenzy, glances from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven, in such a manner that when he sees in his mind's eye forms which he has never seen elsewhere, his pen can turn them into bona-fide shapes, giving to airy nothingness a place and name."

What drivel! we exclaim; what sacrilegious caricature! Really, people ought not to be allowed, etc., etc. Of course not! Still it is not so much the contents of this monstrous piece of nonsense which makes it sound nonsensical; since, when you come to think of it, quite a lot of prose-writers have displayed just such imaginative power, making us accept the existence in time and space of persons and things existing nowhere outside their head. It is therefore the way in which the thing is said which makes it shocking; particularly the attribution to the prose-writer of a *Rolling Eye*, let alone a condition of *Frenzy*, *fine* or not *fine*. Such remarks should evidently be applied only to poets. Which is exactly what I have been driving at; only a poet can have an Eye, at least a Rolling Eye, or at least an Eye Rolling in Fine Frenzy, for it is possible to roll one's eyes, if not one at a time, without being in a frenzy, or without the frenzy being a fine one.

And now I have got you to admit that much, namely, that poets are to this extent different from such of us as write only prose, we may go on to inquire how this comes

about. So, returning to the proposed emendation, we find that it not only states what is obviously untrue, namely, that a prose-writer can have an eye rolling in a fine frenzy. It does much worse; for, by translating blank verse into prose, it turns a memorable poetic description into tautology and drivel. Since as, in prose, *forms* and *shapes* are, in such context, convertible terms, to say that the poet's pen turns *forms* of imagined things into *shapes*, is to say—well, a more or less "airy nothing." The adjective *visible* or *bona fide*, intercalated in the prose version does indeed get rid of the tautology and puts some meaning into the remark. But that meaning is commonplace, not worth mentioning; above all it is *not Shakespeare's meaning*. For of course we all know Shakespeare never meant that the poet's pen, with or without the assistance of his rolling eye, could turn *forms into shapes*, nor even turn imaginary forms into bona-fide shapes. Shakespeare meant, of course, that the poet can make us accept as real what exists only in his own head. . . . *Did* Shakespeare mean that? It sounds a bit dull; and as already remarked it might be said with equal truth about the prose-writer, to whom neither Shakespeare nor anyone else would have attributed a rolling eye and a state of frenzy. It seems less easy than one expected to make *quite* sure of what Shakespeare did mean to say. But only think of how he said it: the miraculous pat felicity of that "local habitation and a name" which

everyone quotes daily; the enchanting grace of that "airy nothing"; the dignified passion of that "in a fine frenzy rolling"; the great lyric swing of the whole passage. All that could never have been said about a prose-writer; only about a poet.

Moreover, only *by* a poet, never *by* a prose-writer. And that is what I was driving at in making that sacrilegious translation from verse into prose: my contention that there is in all this business a magical power at work transcending that which Shakespeare attributes to the eye, the fine frenzy, and whatever they stand for, of the poet. I mean the power of *verse as verse* to transform the obvious into the memorable, to call forth and justify far-fetched (occasionally doubtful) metaphors and high-flown descriptions. The power of *verse as verse* to turn him who employs it from a prose-writer into a poet.

Come, come! here interrupts orthodox criticism, that is really pushing paradox just a little too far! Nothing is an older-established truth, older than Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, and modern critical science, than that the employment of verse has *never* made a poet. There has to be, in the first place, and before we can so much as begin talking of poetry, ever so much else, ever so much more important—in short, everything *besides* verse which is necessary to make a poet. Of course. Far be it from me to deny it. All I humbly maintain is that when you

have all the *everything else* which is needed to make a poet, you do not get him unless you add that fact of his writing in verse. Indeed, I more than suspect that the mere writing in verse is what sets that poet's eye *rolling* and puts him into a *fine frenzy*; or, since I must express myself in prose, gives the rein to his imagination, calls forth new and audacious expressions, sets the brain into more complex activity, puts the blood into rather more of a tumult, and brings to the aid of that poet-man's individual powers the virtues inherent in artistic forms fashioned by scores of previous poets and—(which is as important)—accepted, cherished by generations of listeners and readers. It is the use of verse which makes the poet feel (even if the feeling be delusion) that he *is* a poet, and which secures an audience accustomed to grant poetic license. Moreover, the use of verse means, on the part of the reader, readiness for a special kind of enjoyment involving a maximum of sympathy and good-will, a minimum of the critical activity with its perpetual stop: what does that mean?

II

Never having written any poetry myself, I can speak of the poet's fine frenzies only from hearsay and inference. But having read, indeed still reading, poetry with occasional enjoyment, I *can* speak from my own experience about the especial condition, quite different from that set up by the prose-writer, which the employment of verse produces and insists upon in the reader. To begin with, and reverting to Shakespeare's verses about the Poet's Eye and my prose translation of the same, I think we found that the statement in question when made in prose challenged, and even succumbed to, criticism; whereas, made in verse, it imposed unquestioning acceptance. Why? Because, among other reasons, rhythm, and in lesser degree every other kind of verbal symmetry, makes us expect repetition of a given effect and thereby prepare ourselves for ourselves for making a given response; expectation and preparation, if repeated, eliciting a degree of imitative activity on our part, we set to marching at that particular pace, and metaphorically, if not literally, dancing that particular step. Become thus docile, surrendering all choice, we forget all alternatives, and our lost initiative is compensated by an increase of ease and certainty such that we feel ourselves, while merely obeying, ten times stronger, freer, and more

purposeful. This psychological fact is at the bottom of all art, as well as of quite other matters. With regard to poetry, this particular docile activity on our part extends our acquiescence to everything happening to be connected with the symmetry, the rhythm which has set it up. Metre induces us to accept not only itself in its recurrence, but also whatever meaning that metre happens to vehicle. This, however, is only half of this queer business: *Expecting* implies, of course, remembering; and the fulfilled expectation drives home the remembrance. Remembrance, moreover, induces twofold acceptance; hence, *cæteris paribus*, a twofold sense of the importance, the inevitableness of the statement which the recurrent metre has made us willing to accept. There is a cogency in all verse, according to the degree we feel it to be verse; and, of course, most of all in rhymed verse. Thus—

> "Early to bed and early to rise
> Makes men healthy, wealthy, and wise"

is fraught with deep significance. We accept and would fain apply such immemorial wisdom. But turn it into prose: "Going to bed and getting up early ensures health, riches, and wisdom to men," and, behold, I at once question the truth of such an assertion. Where is its former profundity, its imperative? Gone, alas, with the metre and the rhyme, gone with our verse-inspired acquiescence.

But verse does more than render the dictum of a poet —even of that nameless ancient poet I have just quoted —unassailable and memorable. Verse lifts the matter of discourse, because it lifts the hearer and reader, out of the tentative perfunctoriness of every day, where our thoughts, save for practical results, are merely transitive and mainly unimportant ; in themselves empty like those connecting words, the *ands* and *buts*, *therefores* and *notwithstandings* which weave the items of prose into close logical relation and values. The world of verse is one of intrinsic values, and its relations are directly to our feelings. And our feelings get enclosed by the symmetrical recurrence of stress and sound in a charmed circle wherein nothing need connect with anything else and all becomes important in its own right. Meanwhile, once enclosed in the magic maze of *verse as verse*, our spirit moves in that verse's motions, in modes as much more definite and continuous as dancing compared with walking. Thus does the mere patterned movement of verse insufflate us with energy transcending our own ; it sweeps us up to regions otherwise inaccessible to our jogtrot thoughts and affections, into regions where whatever we long for is realised and where whatever takes place is right.

What wonder, therefore, if mere men and women like ourselves, the least legitimate descendant of Shakespeare, the dowdiest great-grandniece of Sappho, appear to our

eyes, when they issue from such regions, crowned, hooded with superhuman effulgence like that of Moses descending from the mountain.

Neither should we make too sure that this is but delusion on our part, and that they are the mere commonplace fellow-creature afterwards revealed in daily life. Poetry is *not* daily life, even when fit only for the waste-paper basket. I am ready to put my hand (wielding, alas, but a prose-pen !) in the fire if *verse as verse* does not act first and foremost on him who writes it, carrying him, as it carries us, into those exalted, unquestionable regions. In prosiest prose, and speaking as a psychologist, I think it probable that the creature thinking in verse thinks in a manner at once less trammelled and more sustained than we do ; thinks thoughts different from ours, plunging into depths, soaring to giddy heights ; and very often babbles sublimities which he would be at a loss to explain. (And which we, in our turn, are sometimes as much at a loss !) He—I mean the poet—certainly permits himself to do things forbidden to other folk, of which rolling his eye is the most unusual but not, when you come to think of it, the most indelicate. . . . Nay, do we not expect the poet to pour out for our entertainment his privatest emotions such as the prose-writer barely ventures to embody in imaginary personages ? Is it not the literary critic's welcome task to nose out in every line an allusion to light-o'-loves and faithless friends ? And does

not Browning's refusal in "House and Shop" strike us as positive incivility ?

Leaving the poet thus to pin upon his sleeve that ornate paper valentine he calls a heart, let me revert to that remark of mine (since it sums up my thesis) *that in poetry all that is is right.* Right even, as anyone translating verse so often finds, when which of two senses of a word is not made clear by the context (Browning's splendid "flat on the nether springs"). Right when grammar and common sense come tumbling over each other like Goethe's "Es Stürzt der Fels und über ihn die Flut." Right even when a comparison is an absurdity, like Baudelaire's "La nuit s'épaississait ainsi qu'une cloison." Right when we could not swear what the poet is driving at, as Dante with his "Amor che a nullo amato amar perdona." Right when Shelley apostrophises his lark "Bird thou never wert." . . . All of which is right, unquestionable, unassailable, unalterable, perfect and plusquam-perfect when it is in verse. But a thing to run one's blackest pencil through, to be endlessly corrected or everlastingly effaced, if in prose.

III

And now having started this most prosaic inquiry with Shakespeare's high-flown eulogy on those who really are poets, duly frenzied and rolling-eyed, let me end with Wordsworth's more reasonable remarks about those other persons who might have been poets but aren't. I quote from the second book of the *Excursion*, v. 76:

> "Oh, many are the poets that are sown
> By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts,
> The vision and the faculty divine;
> Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse
> Which, in the docile season of their youth,
> It was denied them to acquire, through lack
> Of culture and the inspiring aid of books,
> Or haply by a temper too severe,
> Or a nice backwardness afraid of shame,
> Nor having e'er, as life advanced, been led
> By circumstance to take unto the height
> The measure of themselves, these favoured Beings,
> All but a scattered few, live out their time
> Husbanding that which they possess within,
> And go to the grave, unthought of. . . ."

I have chosen this passage because, first of all, it confirms my contention that a poet *is* a poet only if he writes in verse, since Wordsworth ascribes the *melancholy* miscarriage of these "men endowed with highest gifts" to

their " wanting the accomplishment of verse." Lacking that *accomplishment* (as it is called by this contemporary of Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Young Ladies), lacking *that*, there is nothing for it but to " go to the grave unthought of." I have, however, a second, subtler, and more intrinsic reason for choosing that quotation—to wit, that these prosaic expressions, " highest gifts," " inspiring aid of books," " led by circumstance," and these prosy platitudes become tolerable and even impressive because, well! because Wordsworth did *not* " lack the accomplishment of verse." Being poetry, they roll along, wave upon wave, solemn, majestic, no matter what poor drift and drivel they leave behind for disappointed treasure-seekers. More particularly, there is in this quotation one verse which, turned into prose by the transposition of a single word—" the vision and the divine faculty "—becomes flat and foolish enough, calling forth the immediate criticism that as the poet's *vision* is an essential part of his " faculty," the one cannot be added to the other. As prose that is bad prose; but as verse that line can be adequately described only by quoting itself; for does it not irradiate the whole passage just with " the vision and the faculty divine " ?

IV

Let no one imagine, as everyone will, that this is the voice of envy—to wit, that of the prose-writer embittered by lack of rolling eyes and fine frenzies. Or if it be envy, then only such as Keats felt towards his nightingale: "Envy of thy happy lot, but being too happy in thy happiness." Indeed, since we are discussing the difference between prose and verse, the above may be the only, though symbolical, meaning plain prose can extract from that verse which (according to my view) Keats, inasmuch as a poet, had a right to make as obscure as ever he pleased.

Whereby I mean that, while just a little envious thereof, I am delighted that poetry should enjoy certain happinesses denied to prose, because I enjoy the spectacle of them as Keats enjoyed the song, which he could not emulate, of that nightingale. Since it is a high happiness for all of us, even for prose-writers, to be occasionally delivered, if only by proxy, from the trammels, traps, and pitfalls of logic among which our thoughts pick their timid way; and charioted by the divine winged steeds of rhythm and rhyme, to career freely in poetry's interstellar spaces, yonside of sense and nonsense.

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