THE MECHANISM OF POETRY.*

The restless and puissant school of modern sages who are ambitious not only to dispose of all the vexed and momentous questions of their own time but to settle the affairs of the future upon a basis equally distinct and positive, and who, having kindly informed us as to the exact nature of the religion of the future, are willing to undertake for the poetry of the future a similar process of discovery, may find some embarrassment in pursuing their later quest in that strictly scientific method which alone they are willing to employ. "Interrogating science" after the majestic habit of these philosophers, they will receive a not unanimous but a conflicting answer. A distinguished scientist of this country, a President of the American Association, himself a man of ripe literary as well as scientific culture, has declared that the

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*THE SCIENCE OF ENGLISH VERSE. By Sidney Lanier. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

whole tendency of modern civilization is averse to the cultivation of the imagination, and that with the advance of the arts and sciences poetry will continue to decline. This feeling has been shared by many, and has not been confined to scientific men: we believe no less an authority than Macaulay affording aid and comfort to the doctrine that it is only among nations emerging from barbarism that we are to look for the highest development of poetic taste. Thus there would seem to be, among those to whom we turn for prophecies, a class of poetic skeptics who not only fail to furnish premonitions of what the poetry of the future is to be, but plainly deny that the future is to have any poetry except those fragments which it may be able to preserve from a less civilized and more imaginative past. As quoted by Holmes—who takes the pleasant revenge of compelling these poetic nihilists to testify in that form of utterance which they are so soon to abolish —

> "They tell us that the Muse is soon to fly hence,
> Leaving the bowers of song that once were dear;
> Her robes bequeathing to her sister, Science,
> The groves of Pindus for the axe to clear."

But not all who prophesy upon the poetry of the future speak in the doleful key, or predict that science will put out the flame of poesy. In their higher forms, poetic genius and scientific genius seem akin; and from both poets and scientific men have come sentiments of mutual recognition and dependence. Professor Tyndall—himself an instance of a finely poetic and imaginative temperament dominated by strong reasoning and reflective powers—declares that science comes not as the antagonist of poetry, but as its ally; and he speaks hopefully of the coming time "when Poetry shall take her younger sister Science by the hand and lead her forward with the joy of a bacchanal." Says Mr. Stopford Brooke, "To write on the universal ideas of science, through the emotions which they excite, will be part of the work of future poets of nature;" and he adds the forcible remark that if the poetic genius of a Byron and the scientific genius of a Faraday could be combined, the result would be a poem of the kind "for which the world waits." Perhaps the relations of poetry and science have by no one been more clearly perceived than by Wordsworth, who, in one of his Prefaces, says: "If the time should ever come when what is now called Science becomes familiarized to men, then the remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, the mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art as any upon which it can be employed. He will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science; he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of science itself." A more recent writer, Principal Shairp, one of the most discerning poetic critics of our time, declares that "while Science gives to Poetry new regions to work upon, Poetry repays the debt by familiarizing and humanizing what Science has discovered. * * * Every new province of knowledge which Science conquers Poetry may in time enter into and possess." And Mr. Matthew Arnold, a writer of fine poetic and prophetic insight, in a recent essay admirably depicts the higher destinies of poetry and shows that without its aid the influence of science, philosophy, religion even, can never be wholly complete.

It must be a matter of mild surprise even to persons who are not accustomed to view poetry and science as antagonistic in their nature, and of profound astonishment to those who have pronounced not only the irreconcilability of the two but even the impossibility of their coëxistence, to meet an argument at once so novel, naïve, and practical, as that afforded by Mr. Sidney Lanier in his "Science of English Verse"—a work which even in its title assumes not only the essential harmony but for certain purposes the identity of the two domains. The advance of modern science is thus curiously made, not to abrogate poetry, but to aid and interpret it; for the poetry of the future, according to Mr. Lanier, is itself to be a science, and is to be constructed and investigated in strict accordance with scientific methods. Such are the methods employed by Mr. Lanier in the present treatise; and the rigor and consistency with which he has adhered to them throughout, evidence his sincerity and do much to vindicate the soundness of his theories. These theories relate, of course, only to the mechanism of poetry—to those principles of poetic form whose analysis and determination are among the most difficult and subtle tasks in all the domain of literary criticism. Form is by no means an accident of poetry, but one of its most essential elements, and governed by unyielding laws of its own. Goethe declares that "there are great and mysterious agencies included in the various forms of poetry. * *

The rhythm is an unconscious result of the poetic mood. * * All that is poetic in character should be rhythmically treated." And Emerson well observes that "the imagination, when awakened, brings its own language, and this is always musical." The relation between the thought and the form of a poem is not unlike that between the human soul and body:

> "For of the soul the body form doth take;
> For soul is form and doth the body make."

As the face and even the figure of a man are the index of his mind or soul, so that we see in his outer person the symbol and expression of his inner life, so the thought and form of a perfect poem blend and connect together by some subtle process whose law is as imperative as it is mysterious. This it is which is the poet's secret—which he can never impart to another. Every great poet is such by the use of this power; by it alone he is able to give utterance and reality to the fine fancies of his brain.

But it is not to investigate the mystic processes by which the conception of the poet creates its appropriate outer form, but to determine the laws by which that form produces a poetic effect upon the mind of the reader—to ascertain why certain combinations of words and syllables are pleasing and why others are displeasing—that Mr. Lanier has chosen for his interesting and difficult task. In prosecuting it, he has pushed his investigations farther and followed them more closely than any writer upon the subject who has preceded him. Passing beyond the ground covered by the fragmentary treatises—valuable for occasional brilliancy of observation, but insufficient and unsatisfactory as connected theories—of Poe and Coleridge and Mitford and Sylvester, Mr. Lanier boldly advances to the practical application of speculations which, though perhaps not originating them, he has done much to elaborate, and to some striking generalizations which he has been the first to formulate. The key-note of his theories may be given in the simple statement that phenomena of verse are wholly phenomena of sound. Independently of the pleasure afforded by the sentiment of a poem, with which Mr. Lanier's treatise has nothing to do, the pleasure which it gives as verse is thus clearly referable to the effect upon the ear produced by its rhythm and melody, and by its rhyme and other minor elements which Mr. Lanier groups under the head of "tone-color." To hear verse correctly read aloud, or, what is the same thing, if read silently by the eye, to imagine how it will sound when correctly read aloud, must therefore be the only means of determining its poetic value. It would follow that without the sense of hearing poetry as well as sound could not exist; and hence men always deaf must be absolutely devoid of poetic sensibility—a point which we are unable to find touched upon in the present treatise.

Mr. Lanier makes a practical application of his theory to the study of verse, by declaring that this study must "begin with the study of sounds;" and he believes that if we "can ascertain all the possible relations between sounds, we will have secured physical principles for the classification of all verse-effects from which there can be no appeal." Fortunately, this investigation "can be carried on with the confidence attaching to the methods of physical science." Declaring that "there is absolutely no difference between the sound-relations used in music and those used in verse," he applies the methods of written music to poetry, seeking by a system of musical notes and bars to give quantitative precision to all the sound-elements entering into any conceivable form of verse. We have not space to follow all the elucidations of his theory, which include a minute consideration of the principles of sound, of music, of rhyme, of quantity, of tune, and many other technical and abstruse details—including the grandly philosophic speculation of the presence of the rhythmic principle in universal nature, which Mr. Herbert Spencer has so finely and amply elaborated. The relations of music and poetry are admirably treated, and their intimate association suggests the interesting prediction, concerning both the poetry and the religion of the future, that "under our new dispensation the preacher must soon be a poet, as were the preachers before him under the old. * * Music already occupies one end of the church: the same inward need will call poetry to the other." Whether all the conclusions of his author are correct, and all his positions shall prove unassailable, is not now a question of moment. It is sufficient to note that for his broader and more important generalizations he has apparently established a substantial basis, and to welcome his successful application of the scientific method to a new and novel field of inquiry. By this method, aided by his

own industry and scholarship, Mr. Lanier has produced what is beyond question the most striking and thorough exposition yet published of the technics of English poetry. The technical part of poetry, as we have seen, is by no means unessential; but it must not be taken for the whole. Its relations to poetic art are well shown by Mr. Lanier in the concluding statement, which gives correct perspective to the book, that the matters therein treated "are only in the nature of hints leading to the widest possible views of poetic form, and by no means laws. For the artist in verse there is no law: the perception and love of beauty constitute the whole outfit; and what is herein set forth is to be taken merely as enlarging that perception and exalting that love."

FRANCIS F. BROWNE.