

[Text: Edgar Allan Poe, "Marginalia - Part V," *Graham's Magazine*, March 1846.]

MARGINALIA.

BY EDGAR A. POE.

The effect derivable from well-managed rhyme is very imperfectly understood. Conventionally "rhyme" implies merely close similarity of sound at the ends of verse, and it is really curious to observe how long mankind have been content with their limitation of the idea. What, in rhyme, first and principally pleases, may be referred to the human sense or appreciation of *equality*--the common element, as might be easily shown, of all the gratification we derive from music in its most extended sense--very especially in its modifications of metre and rhythm. We see, for example, a crystal, and are immediately interested by the equality between the sides and angles of one of its faces--but on bringing to view a second face, in all respects similar to the first, our pleasure seems to be *squared*--on bringing to view a third, it appears to be *cubed*, and so on: I have no doubt, indeed, that the delight experienced, if measurable, would be found to have exact mathematical relations, such, or nearly such, as I suggest--that is to say, as far as a certain point, beyond which there would be a decrease, in similar relations. Now here, as the ultimate result of analysis, we reach the sense of mere *equality*, or rather the human delight in this sense; and it was an instinct, rather than a clear comprehension of this delight as a principle, which, in the first instance, led the poet to attempt an increase of the effect arising from the mere similarity (that is to say equality) between two sounds--led him, I say, to attempt increasing this effect by making a secondary equalization, in placing the rhymes at equal distances--that is, at the ends of lines of equal length. In this manner, rhyme and the termination of the line grew connected in men's thoughts-- grew into a conventionalism--the principle being lost sight of altogether. And it was simply because Pindaric verses had, before this epoch, existed--*i.e.* verses of unequal length--that rhymes were subsequently found at unequal distances. It was for this reason solely, I say--for none more profound--rhyme had come to be regarded as of right appertaining to the *end* of verse--and here we complain that the matter has finally rested.

But it is clear that there was much more to be considered. So far, the sense of *equality* alone, entered the effect; or, if this equality was slightly varied, it was varied only through an accident--the accident of the existence of Pindaric metres. It will be seen that the rhymes were *always anticipated*. The eye, catching the end of a verse, whether long or short, expected, for the ear, a rhyme. The great element of unexpectedness was not dreamed of--that is to say, of novelty--of originality. "But," says Lord Bacon, (how justly!) "there is no

exquisite beauty without some *strangeness* in the proportions." Take away this element of strangeness--of unexpectedness--of novelty--of originality--call it what we will-- and all that is *ethereal* in loveliness is lost at once. We lose-- we miss the *unknown*--the vague--the uncomprehended, because offered before we have time to examine and comprehend. We lose, in short, all that assimilates the beauty of earth with what we dream of the beauty of Heaven.

Perfection of rhyme is attainable only in the combination of the two elements, Equality and Unexpectedness. But as evil cannot exist without good, so unexpectedness must arise from expectedness. We do not contend for mere *arbitrariness* of rhyme. In the first place, we must have equi-distant or regularly recurring rhymes, to form the basis, expectedness, out of which arises the element, unexpectedness, by the introduction of rhymes, not arbitrarily, but with an eye to the greatest amount of unexpectedness. We should not introduce them, for example, at such points that the entire line is a multiple of the syllables preceding the points. When, for instance, I write--

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain,

I produce more, to be sure, but not remarkably more than the ordinary effect of rhymes regularly recurring at the ends of lines; for the number of syllables in the whole verse is merely a multiple of the number of syllables preceding the rhyme introduced at the middle, and there is still left, therefore, a certain degree of expectedness. What there is of the element, unexpectedness, is addressed, in fact, to the eye only--for the ear divides the verse into two ordinary lines, thus:

And the silken, sad, uncertain Rustling of each purple curtain.

I obtain, however, the whole effect of unexpectedness, when I write--

Thrilled me, *filled* me with fantastic terrors never felt before.

N. B. It is very commonly supposed that rhyme, as it now ordinarily exists, is of modern invention--but see the "Clouds" of Aristophanes. Hebrew verse, however, did *not* include it--the terminations of the lines, where most distinct, never showing any thing of the kind.

Talking of inscriptions--how admirable was the one circulated at Paris, for the equestrian statue of Louis XV, done by Pigal and Bouchardon--"Statua *Statutae*."

In the way of original, striking, and well-sustained metaphor, we can call to mind few finer things than this--to be found in James Puckle's "Gray Cap for a Green Head:" "In speaking of the dead so fold up your discourse that their virtues may be outwardly shown, while their vices are wrapped up in silence."

Some Frenchman--possibly Montaigne--says: "People talk about thinking, but for my part I never think, except when I sit down to write." It is this never thinking, unless when we sit down to write, which is the cause of so much indifferent composition. But perhaps there is something more involved in the Frenchman's observation than meets the eye. It is certain that the mere act of inditing, tends, in a great degree, to the logicalization of thought. Whenever, on account of its vagueness, I am dissatisfied with a conception of the brain, I resort forthwith to the pen, for the purpose of obtaining, through its aid, the necessary form, consequence and precision.

How very commonly we hear it remarked, that such and such thoughts are beyond the compass of words! I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty in expression is experienced, there is, in the intellect which experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method. For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it:--as I have before observed, the thought is logicalized by the effort at (written) expression.

There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word *fancies* at random, and merely because I must use *some* word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquillity--when the bodily and mental health are in perfection-- and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams. I am aware of these "fancies" only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable *point* of time--yet it is crowded with these "shadows of shadows;" and for absolute *thought* there is demanded time's *endurance*.

These "fancies" have in them a pleasurable ecstasy as far beyond the most pleasurable of the world of wakefulness, or of dreams, as the Heaven of the Northman theology is beyond its Hell. I regard the visions, even as they arise, with an awe which, in some measure, moderates or tranquilizes the ecstasy--I so regard them, through a conviction (which seems a portion of the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to the Human Nature--is a glimpse of the spirit's outer world; and I arrive at this conclusion--if this term is at all applicable to instantaneous intuition--by a perception that the delight experienced has, as its element, but *the absoluteness of novelty*. I say the absoluteness--for in these fancies--let me now term them psychal impressions

there is really nothing even approximate in character to impressions ordinarily received. It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality.

Now, so entire is my faith in the *power of words*, that, at times, I have believed it possible to embody even the evanescence of fancies such as I have attempted to describe. In experiments with this end in view, I have proceeded so far as, first, to control (when the bodily and mental health are good) the existence of the condition--that is to say, I can now (unless when ill) be sure that the condition will supervene, if I so wish it, at the point of time already described--of its supervention, until lately, I could never be certain, even under the most favorable circumstances. I mean to say, merely, that now I can be sure, when all circumstances are favorable, of the supervention of the condition, and feel even the capacity of inducing or compelling it--the favorable circumstances, however, are not the less rare--else had I compelled, already, the Heaven into the Earth.

I have proceeded so far, secondly, as to prevent the lapse from *the point* of which I speak--the point of blending between wakefulness and sleep--as to prevent at will, I say, the lapse from this border-ground into the dominion of sleep. Not that I can *continue* the condition--not that I can render the point more than a point--but that I can startle myself from the point into wakefulness--*and thus transfer the point itself into the realm of Memory*--convey its impressions, or more properly their recollections, to a situation where (although still for a very brief period) I can survey them with the eye of analysis.

For these reasons--that is to say, because I have been enabled to accomplish thus much--I do not altogether despair of embodying in words at least enough of the fancies in question to convey, to certain classes of intellect, a shadowy conception of their character.

In saying this I am not to be understood as supposing that the fancies, or psychal impressions, to which I allude, are confined to my individual self--are not, in a word, common to all mankind--for on this point it is quite impossible that I should form an opinion--but nothing can be more certain than that even a partial record of the impressions would startle the universal intellect of mankind, by the *supremeness of the novelty* of the material employed, and of its consequent suggestions. In a word--should I ever write a paper on this topic, the world will be compelled to acknowledge that, at last, I have done an original thing.

Mr. Hudson, among innumerable blunders, attributes to Sir Thomas Browne, the paradox of Tertullian in his *De Carne Christi*--"*Mortuus est Dei filius, credibile est quia ineptum est; et sepultus resurrexit, certum est quia impossibile est.*"

Bielfeld, the author of "*Les Premiers Traits de L'Erudition Universelle*," defines poetry as "*l'art d'exprimer les pensees par la fiction*." The Germans have two words in full accordance with this definition, absurd as it is--the terms *Dichtkunst*, the art of fiction, and *Dichten*, to feign--which are generally used for poetry and to make verses.

Diana's Temple at Ephesus having been burnt on the night in which Alexander was born, some person observed that "it was no wonder, since, at the period of the conflagration, she was gossiping at Pella." Cicero commends this as a witty conceit--Plutarch condemns it as senseless--and this is the one point in which I agree with the biographer.

Brown in his "Amusements," speaks of having transfused the blood of an ass into the veins of an astrological quack-- and there can be no doubt that one of Hague's progenitors was the man.

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