



Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

from *The Poet* (1844)

The poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and appries us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth. The young man reveres men of genius, because, to speak truly, they are more himself than he is.... He is isolated among his contemporaries by truth and by his art, but with this consolation in his pursuits, that they will draw all men sooner or later.... The poet is the person...without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man....

The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre.... The poet is the Namer or Language maker... The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms.... This insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path or circuits of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others....

We do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre, but of the true poet.... Talent may frolic and juggle; genius realizes and adds.... The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.... We love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene.... The poet...resigns himself to his mood, and that thought which agitated him is expressed...in a manner totally new....

The highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact.... The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men.... The poets are thus liberating gods... They are free, and they make free.... It is nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body overflowed by life, which he worships... Things admit of being used as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and

in every part.... There is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature.... The Universe is the externalization of the soul....

The spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the Creator, comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine. The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body. That is not an inspiration which we owe to narcotics, but some counterfeit excitement and fury. Milton says, that the lyric poet may drink wine and live generously, but the epic poet, he who shall sing of the gods, and their descent unto men, must drink water out of a wooden bowl. For poetry is not 'Devil's wine,' but God's wine.... So the poet's habit of living should be set on a key so low, that the common influences should delight him. His cheerfulness should be the gift of the sunlight; the air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water.... The poet...puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object.... For, as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,--re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, by a deeper insight,--disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider's geometrical web....

When the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away from it its poems or songs,--a fearless, sleepless, deathless progeny, which is not exposed to the accidents of the weary kingdom of time: a fearless, vivacious offspring, clad with wings (such was the virtue of the soul out of which they came), which carry them fast and far, and infix them irrecoverably into the hearts of men. These wings are the beauty of the poet's soul.... The melodies of the poet ascend, and leap, and pierce into the deeps of infinite time.... He is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible... Most of the things he says are conventional, no doubt, but by and by he says something which is original and beautiful....

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe.... We have our difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer too literal and historical.... It does not need that a poem should be long. Every word was once a poem.... The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the speaker and to the hearer.... Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us to their poetic origin....

Thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season.... Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, 'It is in me, and shall out.' Stand there, barked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity.... And this is the reward: that the ideal shall be real to thee...

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