

Examples of Grades of Perfection in Poetic Style

Examples from Classical and Mediaeval Writers

Would you please tell me where in Homer the “descent of Apollo” occurs?¹

It is in the first fifty or a hundred lines of the first book of the Iliad.²

I don't suppose Chapman or Pope have rendered it adequately.

Of course not — nobody could translate that — they have surely made a mess of it.

Homer's passage translated into English would sound perfectly ordinary. He gets the best part of his effect from his rhythm. Translated it would run merely like this, “And he descended from the peaks of Olympus, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders arrows and doubly pent-in quiver, and there arose the clang of his silver bow as he moved, and he came made like unto the night.” His words too are quite simple but the vowelation and the rhythm make the clang of the silver bow go smashing through the world into universes beyond while the last words give a most august and formidable impression of godhead.

Would you consider this line of Dante's as miraculously inevitable as Virgil's “O passi graviora”?

e venni dal martiro a questa pace

That is rather the adequate inevitable.

¹ See page 186 — Ed.

² The passage begins with line 44 of the first book of the Iliad: bē de kat' Oulumpoio karēnōn chōomenos kēr. — Ed.

And, is it possible to achieve a prose-inevitability — with rhythm and everything as perfectly wonderful as in poetry? Take, for instance (I quote from memory):

O mors quam amara est memoria tua homini pacem
habenti in substantiis suis.

or

Fulcite me floribus stipate me malis quia amore languo

or

Et his malis omnibus mors furibunda succedit.

I don't think any of these has at all the same note as poetry gets — it is fine writing, but not the inevitable. 18 September 1934

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What exactly is Dante's style? Is it the forceful adequate (of course at an "inevitable" pitch)? Or is it a mixture of the adequate and the effective? A line like —

e venni dal martiro a questa pace —

is evidently adequate; but has this the same style —

sí come quando Marsia traesti
della vagina delle membra sue?

The "forceful adequate" might apply to much of his writing, but much else is pure inevitable; elsewhere it is the inspired style as in the last lines quoted. I would not call the other line merely adequate; it is much more than that. Dante's simplicity comes from a penetrating directness of poetic vision, it is not the simplicity of an adequate style. 3 November 1936

Examples from Amal Kiran and Sri Aurobindo

I should like to know whether, when you call a poem very good, very fine, very beautiful, very powerful, or magnificent, you mean that it is inevitable — at least in its total impression, whatever slight declivities there may be in one or two places.

Not necessarily.

And does the difference of epithet in the above descriptions indicate levels of excellence or merely kinds of excellence on the same level?

Rather kinds than levels.

Also, if you say that a poem or part of it is very effective, do you always have in mind that which you have termed “effectivity” in the grade of perfections, as distinct from “adequateness”, “illumination of language”, “inspiredness” and “inevitability”?

No, I am not usually thinking of that classification.

For example, what do you think of these lines?

. . . For I have viewed,
Astir within my clay’s engulfing sleep,
An alien astonishment of light!
Let me be merged with its unsoundable deep
And mirror in futile farness the full height
Of a heaven barred for ever to my distress,
Rather than hoard life’s happy littleness!

This is indeed an example of the effective style at its best, that is to say rising to some touch of illumination, especially in the second, fourth and sixth lines. 16 September 1934

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Do you find the lines of this sonnet any good?

Seeing You walk our little ways, they wonder
That I who scorn the common loves of life
Should kneel to You in absolute surrender,
Deeming Your visible perfection wife
Unto my spirit’s immortality.
They think I have changed one weakness for another,
Because they mark not the new birth of me —

This body which by You, the Mystic Mother,
Has now become a child of my vast soul!
Loving Your feet's earth-visitation, I
Find each heart-throb miraculously flower
Out of the unplumbable God-mystery
Behind dark clay, and hour by dreamful hour,
Upbear that fragrance like an aureole.

Exceedingly good. Here you have got to inevitability. I forgot to say that all the styles "adequate", "effective" etc. can be raised to inevitability in their own line.³ The octet here is adequateness raised to inevitability except the fourth and fifth lines in which the effective undergoes the same transformation. In the sestet on the other hand it is the illumined style that becomes inevitable.

17 September 1934

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What kind of style are these lines?

Is the keen voice of tuneful ecstasy
To be denied its winged omnipotence,
Its ancient kinship to immensity
And the swift suns?

This seems to me the effective style at a high pitch.

Or these?

But plunged o'er difficult gorge and prone ravine
And rivers thundering between dim walls,
Driven by immense desire, until he came
To dreadful silence of the peaks and trod
Regions as vast and lonely as his love.

This is also high-pitch effective except the last line which is in the inspired style — perhaps!

23 September 1934

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³ *This sentence was incorporated in the composite letter printed on pages 185–86, which was revised in that form by Sri Aurobindo. — Ed.*

What about these lines?

Far-visaged wanderer, dost Thou rejoice
Straining towards the empty-hearted gloom
To kiss the cold lips of eternity?

Not with sage calm but thrilled vast hands I claim
The unfathomed dark which round my spirit lies —
And touch immortal rapturous loveliness!

All effective-illuminated.

O star of creation pure and free,
Halo-moon of ecstasy unknown,
Storm-breath of the soul-change yet to be,
Ocean self enraptured and alone!

Can't say.

Withdrawn in a lost attitude of prayer.

Illuminated passing into the inspired.

24 September 1934

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I feel my poem *The Triumph of Dante* has now been sufficiently quintessenced. If it satisfies you, will you make whatever analysis is possible of its inspirational qualities?

These arms, stretched through ten hollow years, have
brought her

Back to my heart! A light, a hush immense
Falls suddenly upon my voice of tears,
Out of a sky whose each blue moment bears
The sun-touch of a rapt omnipotence.
Ineffable the secrecies supreme
Pass and elude my gaze — an exquisite
Failure to hold some nectarous Infinite!
The uncertainties of time grow shadowless
And never but with startling loveliness,
A white shiver of breeze on moonlit water,
Flies the chill thought of death across my dream.

For, how shall earth be dark when human eyes
Mirror the love whose smile is paradise? —
A smile that misers not its golden store
But gives itself and yearns to give yet more,
As though God's light were inexhaustible
Not for His joy but this one heart to fill!

There are three different tones or pitches of inspiration in the poem, each in its own manner reaching inevitability. The first seven lines up to “gaze” bear as a whole the stamp of a high elevation of thought and vision — height and illumination lifted up still farther by the Intuition to its own inspired level; one passage (lines 3, 4) seems to me almost to touch in its tone of expression an overmind seeing. But here “A light, a hush . . . a voice of tears” anticipates the second movement by an element of subtle inner intensity in it. This inner intensity — where a deep secret intimacy of feeling and seeing replaces the height and large luminosity — characterises the rest of the first part. This passage has a seizing originality and authenticity in it — it is here that one gets a pure inevitability. In the last lines the intuition descends towards the mental plane with a less revelatory power in it but more precise in its illumination. That is the difference between sheer vision and thought. But the poem is exceedingly fine as a whole; the close also is of the first order. 16 November 1936

Examples from Harindranath Chattopadhyaya

Your satisfaction with today's poems is certainly justified, for they are very fine — they are among the best. The conciseness and clarity — which, by the way, were always there in lyric and sonnet — have grown very rapidly and there is nothing here of their opposites. To quote particular lines is difficult, but I may instance

a tremulous drop of rain
Silverly slipped over the voiceless hill

as an example of some kind of inevitability, — for there are many kinds, — or again in another kind

His marvellous experiment of wings
Crowned with a rich assurance of the height;

or, in yet another

Unmemory yourself of sign and mark
Which draw you still towards the greying earth.

The mark of this inevitability or perfect perfection is the saying of a thing that has to be said with such a felicity of phrase and rhythm that it seems as if it could not be better or otherwise said in the highest poetic way, it sounds final and irrevocable. All in a poem cannot be like that; one has to be satisfied with a more ordinary perfection — some critics even hold that this should be so as a matter of deliberate technique so as to bring the greater moments of the poetry into relief — all ought not to be Himalayan peaks clustering one upon the other, there must be valleys, plains, plateaus from which they rise. But in any case these moments lift poetical expression to its highest possibilities. There are other lines that could be quoted, but these will suffice.

Examples from Nirodbaran

About yesterday's poem . . . I don't see what beauty is there to make you mark certain lines twice — e.g. "Into a heaven of light", which is a very simple, ordinary sort of line.

There is probably a defect in your solar plexus which makes it refuse to thrill unless it receives a strong punch from poetry — an ornamental, romantic or pathetic punch. But there is also a poetry which expresses things with an absolute truth but without effort, simply and easily, without a word in excess or any laying on of colour, only just the necessary. That kind of achievement is considered as among the greatest things poetry can do.

A phrase, word or line may be quite simple and ordinary and yet taken with another phrase, line or word become the perfect thing.

A line like "Life that is deep and wonder-vast" has what I have called the inevitable quality; with a perfect simplicity and

straightforwardness it expresses something in a definitive and perfect way that cannot be bettered; so does “lost in a breath of sound” with less simplicity but with the same inevitability. I don’t mean that highly coloured poetry cannot be absolutely inevitable, it can, e.g. Shakespeare’s “In cradle of the rude imperious surge” and many others. But most often highly coloured poetry attracts too much attention to the colour and its brilliancy so that the thing in itself is less felt than the magnificence of its dress. All kinds are legitimate in poetry. I only wanted to point out that poetry can be great or perfect even if it uses simple or ordinary expressions, e.g. Dante simply says “In His will is our peace” and in writing that in Italian produces one of the greatest lines in all poetic literature.

1 April 1938