HOW A YOUNG MAN OUGHT TO HEAR POEMS.

1. It may be allowed to be a question fit for the determination of those concerning whom Cato said, Their palates are more sensitive than their hearts, whether that saying of Philoxenus the poet be true or no, The most savory flesh is that which is no flesh, and fish that is no fish. Yet this to me, Marcus Sedatus, is out of question, that those precepts of philosophy which seem not to be delivered with a designed gravity, such as becomes philosophers, take most with persons that are very young, and meet with a more ready acceptance and compliance from them. Whence it is that they do not only read through Esop's fables and the fictions of poets and the Abaris of Heraclides and Ariston's Lyco; but they also read such doctrines as relate to the souls of men, if something fabulous be mixed with them, with an excess of pleasure that borders on enthusiasm. Wherefore we are not only to govern their appetites in the delights of eating and drinking, but also (and much more) to inure them to a like temperance in reading and hearing, that, while they make use of pleasure as a sauce, they may pursue that which is wholesome and profitable in those things which they read. For neither can a city be secure if but one gate be left open to receive the enemy, though all the rest be shut; nor a young man safe, though he be sufficiently fortified against the assaults of all other pleasures, whilst he is without any guard against those of the ear. Yea, the nearer the commerce is betwixt

the delights of that sense and those of the mind and reason, by so much the more, when he lies open on that side, is he apt to be debauched and corrupted thereby. Seeing therefore we cannot (and perhaps would not if we could) debar young men of the size of my Soclarus and thy Cleander altogether from the reading of poets, yet let us keep the stricter guard upon them, as those who need a guide to direct them in their reading more than in their walks. Upon which consideration, I find myself disposed to send thee at present in writing that discourse concerning Poetry which I had lately an occasion to deliver by word of mouth; that, when thou hast read it over thyself, thou mayst also make such use of it, if thou judgest it may be serviceable to that purpose, as those which are engaged to drink hard do of amethysts (or preservatives against drunkenness), — that is, that thou mayst communicate it to Cleander, to prepossess him therewith; seeing he is naturally endowed with a brisk, piercing, and daring wit, and therefore more prone to be inveigled by that sort of study.

They say of the fish called polypus that

> His head in one respect is very good,
> But in another very naughty food;

because, though it be very luscious to eat, yet it is thought to disturb the fancy with frightful and confused dreams. And the like observation may be made concerning poetry, that it affords sweet and withal wholesome nourishment to the minds of young men, but yet it contains likewise no less matter of disturbance and emotion to them that want a right conduct in the study thereof. For of it also, as well as of Egypt, may it be said that (to those who will use it)

> Its over-fertile and luxuriant field
> Medicines and poisons intermixt doth yield;

for therein

> Love with soft passions and rich language drest
> Oft steals the heart out of th' ingenuous breast.*

* Odyss. IV. 230; II. XIV. 216.

And indeed such only are endangered thereby, for the charms of that art ordinarily affect not those that are downright sots and naturally incapable of learning. Wherefore, when Simonides was asked why of all men he could not deceive the Thessalians, his answer was, Because they are not so well bred as to be capable of being cajoled by me. And Gorgias used to call tragical poems cheats, wherein he that did cheat was juster than he that did not cheat, and he that was cheated was wiser than he that was not cheated.

It deserves therefore our consideration, whether we shall put young men into Epicurus's boat, — wherein, having their ears stopped with wax, as those of the men of Ithaca were, they shall be obliged to sail by and not so much as touch at poetry, — or rather keep a guard on them, so as to oblige their judgments by principles of right reason to use it aright, and preserve them from being seduced to their hurt by that which affords them so much delight. For neither did Lycurgus, the valiant son of Dryas (as Homer* calls him) act like a man of sound reason in the course which he took to reform his people that were much inclined to drunkenness, by travelling up and down to destroy all the vines in the country; whereas he should have ordered that every vine should have a well of water near it, that (as Plato saith) the drunken deity might be reduced to temperance by a sober one. For water mixed with wine takes away the hurtful spirits, while it leaves the useful ones in it. Neither should we cut down or destroy the Muses' vine, poetry; but where we perceive it luxuriates and grows wild through an ungoverned appetite of applause, there ought we to prune away or keep under the fabulous and theatrical branches thereof; and where we find any of the Graces linked to any of the Muses, — that is, where the lusciousness and tempting charms of lan-

* Il. VI. 130.

guage are not altogether barren and unprofitable, — there let us bring in philosophy to incorporate with it.

For as, where the mandrake grows near the vine and so communicates something of its force thereto, the wine that is made of its grapes makes the sleep of those that drink it more refreshing; so doth the tempering poetry with the principles of philosophy and allaying their roughness with its fictions render the study of them more easy and the relish of them more grateful to young learners. Wherefore those that would give their minds to philosophical studies are not obliged to avoid poetry altogether, but rather to prepare themselves for philosophy by poems, accustoming themselves to search for and embrace that which may profit in that which pleaseth them, and rejecting and discarding that wherein they find nothing of this nature. For this discrimination is the first step to learning; and when this is attained, then, according to what Sophocles saith, —

> To have begun well what we do intend
> Gives hope and prospect of as good an end.

2. Let us therefore in the first place possess those whom we initiate in the study of poetry with this notion (as one which they ought always to have at hand), that

> 'Tis frequently the poet's guise
> To intermingle truth with lies; —

which they do sometimes with and sometimes against their wills. They do it with their wills, because they find strict truth too rigid to comply with that sweetness and gracefulness of expression, which most are taken with, so readily as fiction doth. For real truth, though it disgust never so much, must be told as it is, without alteration; but that which is feigned in a discourse can easily yield and shift its garb from the distasteful to that which is more pleasing. And indeed, neither the measures nor the tropes nor the grandeur of words nor the aptness of metaphors

nor the harmony of the composition gives such a degree of elegance and gracefulness to a poem as a well-ordered and artificial fiction doth. But as in pictures the colors are more delightful to the eye than the lines, because those give them a nearer resemblance to the persons they were made for, and render them the more apt to deceive the beholder; so in poems we are more apt to be smitten and fall in love with a probable fiction than with the greatest accuracy that can be observed in measures and phrases, where there is nothing fabulous or fictitious joined with it. Wherefore Socrates, being induced by some dreams to attempt something in poetry, and finding himself unapt, by reason that he had all his lifetime been the champion of severe truth, to hammer out of his own invention a likely fiction, made choice of Esop's fables to turn into verse; as judging nothing to be true poetry that had in it nothing of falsehood. For though we have known some sacrifices performed without pipes and dances, yet we own no poetry which is utterly destitute of fable and fiction. Whence the verses of Empedocles and Parmenides, the Theriaca of Nicander, and the sentences of Theognis, are rather to be accounted speeches than poems, which, that they might not walk contemptibly on foot, have borrowed from poetry the chariot of verse, to convey them the more creditably through the world. Whensoever therefore any thing is spoken in poems by any noted and eminently famous man, concerning Gods or Daemons or virtue, that is absurd or harsh, he that takes such sayings for truths is thereby misled in his apprehension and corrupted with an erroneous opinion. But he that constantly keeps in his mind and maintains as his principle that the witchcraft of poetry consists in fiction, he that can at all turns accost it in this language, —

> Riddle of art! like which no sphinx beguiles;
> Whose face on one side frowns while th' other smiles!
> Why cheat'st thou, with pretence to make us wise,
> And bid'st sage precepts in a fool's disguise? —

such a one, I say, will take no harm by it, nor admit from it any absurd thing into his belief. But when he meets in poetry with expressions of Neptune's rending the earth to pieces and discovering the infernal regions,* he will be able to check his fears of the reality of any such accident; and he will rebuke himself for his anger against Apollo for the chief commander of the Greeks, —

> Whom at a banquet, whiles he sings his praise
> And speaks him fair, yet treacherously he slays.†

Yea, he will repress his tears for Achilles and Agamemnon, while they are represented as mourning after their death, and stretching forth their limber and feeble hands to express their desire to live again. And if at any time the charms of poetry transport him into any disquieting passions, he will quickly say to himself, as Homer very elegantly (considering the propension of women to listen after fables) says in his Necyia, or relation of the state of the dead, —

> But from the dark dominions speed thy way,
> And climb the steep ascent to upper day;
> To thy chaste bride the wondrous story tell,
> The woes, the horrors, and the laws of hell.‡

Such things as I have touched upon are those which the poets willingly feign. But more there are which they do not feign, but believing them themselves as their own proper judgments, they put fictitious colors upon them to ingratiate them to us. As when Homer says of Jupiter, —

> Jove lifts the golden balances, that show
> The fates of mortal men, and things below.
> Here each contending hero's lot he tries,
> And weighs with equal hand their destinies.
> Low sinks the scale surcharged with Hector's fate;
> Heavy with death it sinks, and hell receives the weight.§

To this fable Aeschylus hath accommodated a whole trag-

* See. Il. XX. 57.

† From Aeschylus. The whole passage is quoted in Plato's Republic, end of Book II. (G.)

‡ Odyss. XI. 228.

§ Il. XXII. 210.

edy which he calls Psychostasia, wherein he introduceth Thetis and Aurora standing by Jupiter's balances, and deprecating each of them the death of her son engaged in a duel. Now there is no man but sees that this fable is a creature of the poet's fancy, designed to delight or scare the reader. But this other passage, —

> Great Jove is made the treasurer of wars ;*

and this other also, —

> When a God means a noble house to raze,
> He frames one rather than he'll want a cause :†

these passages, I say, express the judgment and belief of poets who thereby discover and suggest to us the ignorant or mistaken apprehensions they had of the Deities. Moreover, almost every one knows nowadays, that the portentous fancies and contrivances of stories concerning the state of the dead are accommodated to popular apprehensions, — that the spectres and phantasms of burning rivers and horrid regions and terrible tortures expressed by frightful names are all mixed with fable and fiction, as poison with food; and that neither Homer nor Pindar nor Sophocles ever believed themselves when they wrote at this rate : —

> There endless floods of shady darkness stream
> From the vast caves, where mother Night doth teem ;

and,

> There ghosts o'er the vast ocean's waves did glide,
> By the Leucadian promontory's side ;‡

and,

> There from th' unfathomed gulf th' infernal lake
> Through narrow straits recurring tides doth make.

And yet, as many of them as deplore death as a lamentable thing, or the want of burial after death as a calamitous condition, are wont to break out into expressions of this nature : —

> O pass not by, my friend ; nor leave me here
> Without a grave, and on that grave a tear ; §

* Il. IV. 84.
† From the Niobe of Aeschylus, Frag. 151.
‡ Odyss. XXIV. 11.
§ Odyss. XI. 72.

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