

DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON VIEWS OUR POETS

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TO apply the measuring rod of the academies to the intangible and ever-expanding spirit of life as manifested in poetry, or to use the criteria of an age that is dead to appraise the art of a period that is characterized by youth and vitality, may seem a task scarce worth the effort necessary for its accomplishment. However, there are certain fixed canons applicable to art which are inherent both in its form and in its content. These static principles may with profit be reaffirmed, and may be given their due prominence in a critical study of modern poetry.

The criteria which we have said to be inherent in the very nature of form constituted the bases of that classical criticism of which Samuel Johnson, in his own day and age, was the most noted exponent. He who lives in an isolated parish has little need to know the rules of a complex and cosmopolitan society. Nevertheless, having a smaller world to conquer, he may be much more definite in his conclusions, precise in his appraisals, and correct within his limitations than the man who is bewildered by the flux of ideas too numerous for his comprehension and too varied for summary classification. For these reasons we should not be surprised to find that the redoubtable author of *The Lives of the Poets* spoke with the voice of authority and walked with certain step in paths where "angels fear to tread." Was he not the supreme dictator in the literary *milieu* over which he presided? Was he not the self-appointed spokesman of his times? Undoubtedly, by his genius and by dint of stupendous labours, he had risen to the position of a great critic in an age which revered the stately and musical Latinity of the schools. Therefore, from his marvellous fund of knowledge, we may deduce those principles which dominated the foremost writers of Greece and Rome as surely as they directed literary expression in the eighteenth century. We may also admit that poetry was born before prosody, and freely acknowledge the limits of the generation in which Johnson lived, and yet be forced to believe that his genius had discovered many of the fundamental truths underlying all great art. We may find, indeed, that, in dealing with the form side of poetry, he was familiar with

laws which have been deemed salutary by the writers and critics in every age.

Even a cursory examination of his criticism reveals his belief that a poet should possess the power to give pleasure. We are, therefore, prepared to find Dr. Johnson exacting in his demand for "known measures" and "uniform structure in the stanzas." Let us more fully consider the justice of his contention in favour of the familiar metre and the orderly stanzaic form.

The unfamiliar must always tend to astonish rather than to please. If we leave aside the fact that unexpected delight may at times be welcomed, there remains the general truth that we are irritated by the line of poetry which violates our preconceived idea of harmony. Nor does the memory easily retain the echo of a music that is barbaric to our senses. While it is comparatively easy for a western mind to recollect the strains of a composition modelled upon our own science, it is exceedingly difficult for the same mind to reconstruct a piece of Chinese music or to appreciate its beauty. This leads us to the consideration of a theory which need not be elaborated; viz., that there is not a universal language of art. Each race, in its separate cultural development, builds conventions to suit its own temperament and its own thought processes. Language, for this very reason, has had separate growths, so that our words do not convey their meanings to people who have not learned our system of symbols. In the same way that words are a growth, poetic forms are a development of our culture. Those patterns which are familiar to us convey, with the least possible effort, our ideas and emotions to others whom we wish to affect. May we not, then, say justly that "known measures" form part of the greatest pleasure to be derived from poetry?

Dr. Johnson's plea for "uniform structure of the stanzas" may also profitably engage our attention. When a poet begins with a stanza which conforms to convention, he issues a challenge and a promise. "Here I have a poetic idea," he may be conceived as saying, "which I intend to present, accepting the limitations of a prescribed form. Being master of my instrument, I shall accomplish this feat without undue strain and without exhibition of the exact means by which it is done." Failure to attain to the uniformity which he has led us to expect can merely force us to conclude that he does not know his business, and is not a master of the vehicle which he has dared to use. Not pleasure but annoyance and disgust must be the portion of the reader who is subjected to the harshness and irregularity of stanzas which held the promise of a smooth, uninterrupted flow of emotion embodied in a corresponding medium.

In pursuit of this ideal of order and consonance in poetical form, we find the doughty Johnson making a memorable attack upon a school of writers of whom Cowley was the example chosen. "In these poets it is apparent that whatever is improper or vicious is produced by a voluntary deviation from nature in pursuit of something new and strange. . . . They were wholly employed upon something unexpected and surprising." It would afford us much pleasure to digress at this point in order to apply this straightforward and forcible criticism of the metaphysical versifiers to several well-known movements in contemporary poetry. But there remains much of value in the Doctor's discussion of form which must be given place before proceeding to the application of his doctrine.

Among other striking examples of wit and wisdom which illumine the pages of the *Lives*, we are especially arrested by the common sense with which our critic defends the use of rhyme. Appropriately enough, this defence constitutes part of the biography of Milton, who had declaimed against "the jingling sound of like endings." If Johnson lived in the twentieth century, when the science of psychology is the servant of aesthetics, he would be able to add thunder to the Latin phrases which give point to his opinions. Yet, despite his limited knowledge, genius came to his aid when he said that "Perhaps, of poetry as a mental operation, metre or music is no necessary adjunct." That image-making or creative faculty which we vaguely assign to the realm of imagination or intuition, in accordance with our various philosophies, seeks patterns and delights in them as an aid to memory. Indeed, memorableness is one of the inherent qualities of all great poetry, and in rhyme we have a device which quickens the image-making faculty and stimulates it to reproduce and add to patterns already known. Johnson would commend us for saying that only those poets who are unconcerned about the immortality of their work can afford to dispense with rhyme.

Of other poetical devices less apparent than rhyme we find in our author's work a due appreciation. Of imitative or representative harmony he has this to say when speaking of the verse of Pope: "Beauties of this kind are commonly fancied; and, when real, are technical and nugatory, not to be rejected, and not to be solicited." He shakes a warning finger, also, at those young poets who abuse alliteration, and firmly contends that figurative language must be such as "to expand and illumine" the idea presented in a poem. "An epithet," he tells us, "when drawn from nature enobles art; an epithet or metaphor when drawn from art degrades nature." His mind, precise and orderly, will admit im-

proprieties which offend good literary taste no more readily than it will admit violations of his moral code. Moreover, the bric-a-brac of poetic form which is ornamental but without possible application to life's deeper ends can only offend his serious nature. Beauty—the ideal perfection—he will worship if it be in any measure revealed in verse, but he is persuaded that “compositions merely pretty have the fate of other pretty things, and are quitted in time for something useful.” This quotation does not necessarily imply an utilitarian view of poetry. It is Dr. Johnson's way of differentiating between what is ephemeral and what is permanent in literature, or between what is merely pretty and what is beautiful.

But more important than these allusions to the subsidiary qualities of poetic expression is the matter of diction. In regard to this much-misunderstood element of poetry, we find the author of the *Lives* speaking in masterful tones and in a manner becoming to the dignity of great literature. In the following memorable passage, he enunciates his theory: “Language is the dress of thought; and as the noblest mien or most graceful action would be degraded and obscured by a garb appropriated to the gross employments of rustics or mechanics, so the most heroic sentiments will lose their efficacy, and the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths and contaminated by inelegant applications.” In these lines is contained a philosophy of art. Nor will it suffice to dismiss this dogmatic statement with a gesture. It is not, as the superficial may conclude it to be, intellectual snobbery. It is fact of a nature unwelcome in this democratic age, which would include poetry in the levelling-down process that it is applying to politics, religion and society. We have already noted that art does not speak a universal language. There are certain well-defined artistic conventions, spoken and written, which have been developed in widely divergent civilizations and cultures. Moreover, there are two languages in use in this country and in every country. There is the language of ordinary life. There is the language of literature. The man who has to tell the price of pork and wheat, the amount of coal burned under a boiler, needs only the first. The man who has to convey to us the emotions of a Rosalind or a Macbeth, who has to picture the loves of an Endymion or a Guinevere, requires a language adapted to more delicate tasks. To make the intangible things of the spirit tangible is the highest office of language and the highest act of the creative imagination of man.

Of course we have to understand what is said in poetry, and no one more than Dr. Johnson has insisted upon intelligibility as

a necessary adjunct in a work of art. But, in addition to knowing what is said, we must also be aware of what is suggested. For it is by the power of suggestion that poetry is made possible. Suggestion may often depend upon allusions to the mythology of our race, to history, to tradition, to earlier literature. Whatever the specific allusion made by a writer, it calls for special education before its significance can be understood. By means of the magic of associated ideas, true poetry goes down to the roots from which our being had its origin. It places us upon the highways of eternity. This it can do only by means of a diction which is uncontaminated by material things and which, by analogy, lifts us into a realm where ideals of truth and beauty breathe an air more rarefied than that of the market-place. It follows, then, that we are deeply indebted to the great English scholar and critic whose reverence for literature embodied itself in a noble "dress of thought" when defending the language of great poetry.

Having briefly dealt with the principles of form which were advocated by our critic, we may for a time concentrate upon those determining his concept in regard to the proper content of poetry. Our enquiry may reveal, in this instance, much that was peculiar to the spirit of the eighteenth century, but it may also bring to light a wholesome attitude towards art which has been somewhat obscured by our more complex and turbulent days. We may first note that, in keeping with his healthy and well-balanced nature, Dr. Johnson insisted upon sincerity as a basic quality in poetry. How often, in dealing with the English poets, he inveighs against artificiality, sentimentality, and sensibility as opposed to passion! "But the basis of all excellence is truth," he cries, in the introduction to the *Life of Cowley*. Evidently persuaded that only contact with life can awaken the fire of genius which carries conviction and assures permanence to literature, he has much to say about versifiers who strive "to become amorous by study," and heaps his contempt upon those who woo an imaginary Phyllis "in flowers as fading as her beauty, and sometimes in gems as lasting as her virtues." We are led to suspect that his bitter dislike for pastoral poetry was caused not so much by his lack of interest in nature as by an aversion to the "swains," "milk-maids," "shepherds," "pipes", and "crooks" which crowded the scenery in so many of these effusions. Shall we gainsay his dictum that a capacity for genuine and exalted passion precludes all the insincerities of sophistication and the cheap cynicism which derides the spiritual significance of human love?

It may be more surprising to find that scholasticism had not dimmed his perception of the value and place of inspiration in the

making of poetry. Unable to analyze his own thought processes because of the limitations of his knowledge of psychology and philosophy, Johnson, nevertheless, was a genius and was, moreover, intelligent enough to appreciate the fact that he possessed the divine fire. So we find him, in seeming opposition to his insistence upon intellect and dexterity in versification, praising "the beauty peculiar to itself" that "must be numbered among those felicities which cannot be produced at will by wit or labour, but must arise unexpectedly in some hour propitious for poetry." This sounds very much like the pronouncement of another and a greater English poet, "No man by taking thought can make a poem." Croce or Bergson had not arrived to tell the savants of the eighteenth century about intuition, but evidently the faculty was existent in that century and its light, in the case of Samuel Johnson, was sufficient to enable him to recognize its presence in himself and in others.

There seems also, in the sayings of the dictator, to be an approach to the idea that a work of art must be an entity—an organic whole. We are hardly justified in believing that he fully appreciated the fact that every true poem is thus brought to birth, but dimly we can feel him working towards this conception. He pleads, in his *Life of Dryden*, for consideration of a great work, not line by line, but as something complete. Again, in dealing with one of the minor poets, Blackmore, we are interested to read his opinion that "of a large work the general character must always remain." He tells us that "correction seldom corrects more than the suppression of faults." From this we may infer that he considered the body of a poem to be something dependent upon a period of gestation within the consciousness of its author. Existing as an entity before it is made manifest upon paper, it cannot be radically changed in form without destroying that unity which is inherent in its very nature.

Having justified his doctrines in regard to the sincerity, passion, and unity of a poem, we may well pause before presenting his ideas in regard to essential content. To him the artistic purpose was invariably a moral purpose. The aim of the poet was to elevate the understanding, so that the true moral order of the universe might be apprehended. Moreover, the morality of our critic's generation was that of the orthodox Christian Church. While we are unwilling to engage in the eternal argument about the relation of art to morals, we shall unhesitatingly support Dr. Johnson in the wider implications arising from his attitude towards life. An examination of the great and enduring monuments to literature

reveals the poet to be a teacher and a seer. Invariably we find the master artists proclaiming the message of the spirit, and reaffirming the same truths in regard to the immortality of the soul and the reality of the unseen world of ideals which stands in relation to our universe as cause to effect. Only in the work of minor poets do we find the gospel of despair and futility, the chaos of thought which can give only an equivocal answer to those seeking some solution for the problem of living. We will grant that a work of genius is a thing in itself needing justification neither from religion nor from any authority extraneous to itself, but we know that art has a significant relation to life. If, then, it be true that life is merely the product of chemical action and reaction, or of the fortuitous grouping of atoms, art, which is an expression of that life, may be considered to be devoid of spiritual significance. If, on the other hand, life is, in its essence, spirit, then we must look upon its highest manifestation, poetry, as the symbol of a spiritual experience. If the latter view be correct, then Dr. Johnson was nearer to the truth than those moderns who, in their own vulgar phrase, would "debunk" poetry in a vain attempt to make it the servant of the animal brain which perishes with the physical body. Widening his concepts beyond the boundaries of his day and age, and taking it for granted that the dictator would have preserved his sense of direction in the year 1930, we shall make bold to apply his theories to the poetry of our contemporaries.

Having now examined the criticism of our author in regard to poetic form, we may appropriately make our first application of his doctrines to the prevailing modes of expression current in the twentieth century. In viewing the work of the writers of the present day, his predilection for the "known measure" would doubtless cause him some vexation and surprise. The nineteenth century loosened and expanded the metrical structure of English verse to admit of many modifications, but the changes introduced by the master hands of artists such as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and Swinburne were not radical. After the Wordsworthian revolt against convention, the romantic poets returned to the use of the lordly manner and the grandiloquent phrase. Then, with the "mellifluous thunder" of Tennyson, the period closed without effecting revolutionary changes in form. But, with the opening of the present century, there arose a spirit of revolt among living and recent authors which made a great noise below the literary horizon. This movement resulted only in intermittent lightning, which found its mark in the work of "cults" and "schools" that are already passing into history. Applied to the poetry

of Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, or the work of the Sitwells in England, the criteria of Johnson would pronounce such verse to be "lax and lawless versification" which "conceals the deficiencies of the barren and flatters the laziness of the idle." His ire would be aroused by their "voluntary deviation from nature in pursuit of something new and strange." Nothing could persuade him that there is sincerity in poetry which aims at exciting the intellect by subtleties and at courting favour through novelty.

However, he would be pleased to find that the mass of good poetry written to-day is making no tremendous departure from the past. The selections in any representative anthology of modern verse are sufficient proof of the fact that the classical and romantic tradition is dominant in the minds of the best writers. Being more or less incapable of appreciating lyric poetry, Dr. Johnson might refer sarcastically to the poets who indulge in light and airy trifles, but he would find satisfaction in the solid accomplishments of those who still achieve creditable results in the epic and dramatic forms. He would also discover that, with few exceptions, the better poets are adhering to his "uniform structure" in their stanzas. He might be mollified, too, by seeing that the invention of new forms is proceeding upon the lines of the classical usage so dear to his heart.

Turning to the necessity for rhyme in English poetry, we find the Johnsonian dictum triumphantly vindicated by a survey of twentieth century verse. The memorable line is lacking in the mass production of modern poets. This is partially due to the fashion of innovation in rhymes which has permitted deviations from the perfection demanded by classical prosody. If rhyme be used at all, it should be natural and inevitable, and should accomplish its purpose of fixing in the memory the lines which it attempts to adorn. If it once succeeds as an ornament, it may go further and serve as a snare for the imagination. Half-rhymes or imperfect rhymes can never fully serve the purpose which lies behind the ancient device. It is significant that there has crept into the consciousness of some of our worst offenders against this law a suspicion that their work lacks permanence because of this very defect. We may find it illuminating to note that members of the "free verse" schools, H.D. and others, are writing sonnets in order that some portion of their writings may be remembered by their fellow-countrymen.

It is also interesting to observe that the poets of to-day are paying heed to the warning of Dr. Johnson in regard to the abuse of imitative harmony and alliteration. Moderation in ringing the

changes produced by these time-honoured artifices can result only in the attainment of a more pleasing melody. But we may be pardoned if we suspect that our writers often refrain from the use of elaborate and complicated rhythms because of their inability to manage them successfully. Simple cadences are not always the evidence of a disciplined mind and heart. Quite often they betray the poverty of a poet's equipment, or reveal the fact that the seven-stringed harp of Apollo has not been mastered. Richness and fullness of tone betoken the presence of an instrument matured and flawless in its structure; richness and fullness of style are the manifest signs of a personality splendidly endowed with sensibility and creative power.

This same lack of complete mastery of the poetic instrument is shown by those who twist and torture words in the attempt to produce a piece of original imagery. Our dictator would have ample cause for indignation if confronted by the figurative language of many followers of the modern schools. Style, as viewed by Johnson and his contemporaries, was a thing of austere and majestic beauty. Allusions and figures of speech which degraded either nature or art were not admitted within the pale of good poetry. Therefore it is not difficult to imagine the Doctor's reaction to the painful reaching for novelty which is apparent in the following lines from the pen of a living English poet:

The light would show (if it could harden)
Eternities of kitchen garden,
Cockscomb flowers that none will pluck,
And wooden flowers that 'gin to cluck.

Nor would his just ire be much abated by this startling couplet:

Cockscomb hair on the cold wind
Hangs limp, turns the milk's weak mind.

These selections from the work of Miss Edith Sitwell are probably extreme examples of the modern tendency towards obscure and outlandish imagery. Yet, in search for natural and dignified figures of speech as the proper adornment, what is one to think when the work of three much-advertised modern poets reveals the following conceits:

And what with broken wheels and so on, I won't say it
wasn't hard going. . . .
Over roads twisted like sheep's guts.

James had to take his time to chew it over
Before he acted; he's just got round to act.

The dead will rise from unsuspected slime,
God's chosen will be gathered in God's time.

We have here quoted successively from the work of Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, and John Masefield. May we not, with justice, apply to the authors of these violations of good taste the words of Dr. Johnson, "As they sought only for novelty, they did not much enquire whether their allusions were to things high or low, elegant or gross. . . . They wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature. . . . Their wish was only to say what they hoped had never been said before"?

If the word "elegant" in this quotation lead to the opinion that Johnson meant prettiness when he used the term, the reader is labouring under a mistaken belief. No critic ever despised the trivialities of the versifiers more than he did. Nobody would have been more alarmed than he by the spread of the ability to write pretty nothings which is so common in our day and age. Superficial education, the flood of newspapers and periodicals at the present time are both factors contributing to the debasement of popular taste for poetry, and they are also responsible for the fact that any petty rhymster may, without difficulty, see himself in print. At no time in the history of our language have there been so many writers capable of turning out fairly well made verse at short notice. Hundreds of literary clubs and poetry societies put forth an annual crop of cheap books and magazines from soil that is fertilized by sentimentality and watered by the mutual admiration of their members. So prevalent is the habit of writing verse that it is not surprising that discrimination is becoming rare as the genuine flower of poetry itself. Prettiness, our dictator would aver, is all too common. Beauty, which is a spiritual grace, is present only when culture has developed character to the point where it is in touch with the eternal realities.

When we pass on to the application of Johnson's pronouncements upon the subject of poetic diction, there are various modern conditions which make it difficult for us to apprehend the full significance of his attitude towards style. We have to a great extent lost the power to interpret human individuality upon the high plane of imaginative experience. This means that we have lost, in our misguided search for reality upon lower planes, the knowledge that the language of poetry is the natural language of man when the intensity of passion or the aspiration towards the ideal has transfigured his common life. The style which is generated by a truly poetic experience must, then, be such that it transcends the ordinary limits of speech. It is for this reason that the highest moments of Shakespearean drama may be considered the highest attainment which the English-speaking race has reached

in the use of language. It is this style—this grand manner—which we find throughout the sounding periods and the stately march of words in the prose of Dr. Johnson. It is this style, at once sincere and appropriate, which he longed to see in the poetry of his countrymen. And, after a survey of modern poetry, we may safely declare that it is the lack of this peculiar and marvellous diction which is most apparent in the work of our contemporaries. Let us give a due measure of praise to those writers who endeavoured to free poetry from the too-lordly measures of Tennyson; let us honour those who aimed to restore sincerity in place of convention; and, after granting to them their meed of appreciation, we may enquire if it be not possible that their zeal has dispossessed poetry of one of its most precious treasures. For, in anthologies of modern verse, we may search almost in vain to discover the inevitable word or the unforgettable phrase. Not until poetic drama is once more given its place as the highest expression of the life of our people, not until poetry has once more become the conservator of language which is uncontaminated by the filth of a material civilization, will it be possible to say that we are making progress as human beings. Style is “the outward sign of an inward grace.” If the style and diction of modern poetry reveals bad taste, squalor, and ugliness, let us lay the blame upon those who are making the world safe for democracy.

We have noted the modern desire for a return to sincerity. Forcibly we are reminded of the dictator’s unqualified statement: “He that professes love ought to feel its power.” Whether it be that Freudian analysis has made common that which was once revered, or that “petting parties” have degraded that which was intended to awaken nobility in human souls, it remains a significant fact that there is a hiatus in our poetry where once there was the impassioned outpouring of lovers whose search for the Divine Beauty was symbolized by their worship of the one woman. Of sophisticated and cynical society verse we have an abundance, of conventional imitations of the love poetry of the past there is no lack, but the fire of dynamic passion is wanting at the present moment. The intellectual gymnastics of the two lovers in “Cavender’s House” by Edwin Arlington Robinson, the disillusionment of the bawdy house in Rudyard Kipling’s “Vampire,” the eminently proper gesture of Robert Bridges’s “Awake, my Heart, to be Loved”, are poor substitutes for the spiritual fervour of Browning’s “Prospice” or the winged and ideal passion of Shelley’s “Epipsychidion.”

It is this lack of passion in modern poetry which leads us to question the nature of the inspiration responsible for the pro-

duction. We remember, in this connection, that Dr. Johnson, when criticizing Addison's verse, averred that the poet "thought justly but faintly." Slightly changing his words, he might say of the moderns that they think justly but feel faintly. The flame of genius may be expected to kindle enthusiasm to the point of ecstasy, and we have every right to be disappointed if a poet cannot, at times, sweep us forward upon the wings of his passion so that we too may share a transport which lifts us out of the rock of ordinary life. It is an intangible essence, this flash from the spirit world through which soul speaks to soul, and yet, if it be not present, we may have the most perfect verse without so much as a line of permanent value. To say that this rare quality is absent from the work of contemporary writers is equivalent to declaring that poetry has ceased to exist. Such a statement would be untrue. There are a few living singers, notably those of the Celtic revival, whose verse is evidently the result of that high vision which blends flesh with spirit and gives to a moment of time the import of eternity. But a general survey of our libraries will reveal the existence of many to whom the making of verse is an exercise in prosody. We feel, too often, that the author has deliberately gone out in search of a theme, and has even more deliberately set about the manufacture of his form. The sound of chisel and hammer is apparent, while he vainly strives to carve the stubborn marble of words to the proportions of an idea which is neither original nor of intrinsic beauty. Indeed it might almost seem as if the democratic spirit of the age—the temper of our times—had opposed the making of great individuals, and that it had, by some subtle process, diffused the genius of a Dante or a Shakespeare to kindle a feeble illumination glimmering in many minds. The pale and reflected light from a multitude of twinkling stars has an enchantment of its own, but only the radiance of a sun can convey the vital energy of life. We have become so accustomed to mediocrity that, when the master is with us, speaking in the ancient manner of great poetry, we fail to recognize his voice. It may be that only the Great Companions of Whitman would not be reverent in the presence of that *mens diviniore* which called forth the admiration and wonder of the great dictator of the eighteenth century.

In conclusion, we shall gladly reaffirm the opinion of Dr. Johnson that poetry must have a message for the spirit of man. We shall take no cognizance of the fact that the morals of his generation were narrow conceptions unsuited to a century which has broadened the faith of our fathers. For it would be manifestly unfair to our critic to suppose that his genius had not separated

the essentials of religion from its outward forms. Let us remember that he was at all times hampered by a temperament which clung stubbornly to the symbols which were to him the sole embodiment of spiritual truth. That he cherished the spirit more than the letter of the law, we may be assured by reading his *Life of Savage*, and by the numerous occasions upon which he set aside his conventions to deal in a charitable spirit with the frailties of his fellow-men. We may also be assured that he instinctively felt poetry to be a messenger of the spirit by his impatience with those writers who sought to weave pretty word-patterns devoid of aught that could elevate the mind or soul. Here we may pause to recall the difference between prettiness and beauty which entered into a former part of our discussion. A pretty verse has no spiritual significance; a beautiful poem, upon a theme having no connection whatever with morals, has intrinsically a spiritual value. Beauty, in itself, can produce a harmony which is more powerful than a sermon to lead a sensitive mind towards a finer conception of life and its meaning.

Should we not, in pursuing this argument, call to mind the saying, "Poetry is a kind of knowledge"? Accepting this truth, we shall understand more clearly that the offices of teacher and poet are, in some mysterious way, eternally one and the same. If, then, the poet is in possession of a faculty which enables him to arrive at a direct knowledge of the truth by processes denied to the ordinary man, may we not expect that he will bring to us some of his light so that our paths may be easier to follow? Have we not a right to demand that he shall help us to solve the riddle of life, and that he shall give us some sign to hearten us in our brief span between the eternities?

It is demands such as these which we must bear in mind when studying modern poetry from the point of view which we have assumed to be right. Poverty of content is only too apparent when these just requirements are considered in relation to the work of contemporary writers. This is the more surprising when we think of the achievements of the twentieth century. In these days when the forces of nature are harnessed to the service of man, when the physicists have penetrated beyond the veil of matter into the unseen world of vibratory energy, when philosophers talk glibly of the subconscious and of intuition, when world problems of unprecedented magnitude engage the thoughts of statesmen, when hearts have been wrung by the horrors of the greatest war in history, is it not amazing that our poets seem concerned to burble only about purling brooks, twittering song-birds, and the

joys of the simple life? Futility, pessimism, cynicism, a careful avoidance of the real issues—these we can find without much effort in the poetry of our times. The ironic and immanent Will of Hardy, the “dusty answer” of Meredith, the fatuous piety of Oxenham, the imperialistic God of Kipling, the hard scepticism of the younger generation of poets are with us, but in these blind alleys of the soul there is not comfort for any man. Here and there brighter lights are shining, but they are dimmed by the mists rising from the swamps of uncertainty and disillusionment. The versifiers, who deal in moral platitudes, still ply their trade. Edgar A. Guest is still popular. But of teachers who have a vital message there is a need which would give pain to the kind heart of the dictator.

Looking over the entire field of modern poetry, however, he would not despair. In every great transitional period of world history there is a renaissance of song. When Elizabethan England was thrilling with the exuberance of youth and the vision of a new world, the hedgerows were vocal and a thousand poetasters rejoiced in madrigals and roundelays. These lesser voices were a presage of the dawn. Shakespeare, of whom they were the heralds, remains as the symbol of those golden days of literature. At the present moment we are entering a greater age than that which engaged the energies of imperial England or the superb powers of Greece and Rome. If the past may foreshadow the future, this twentieth century will produce poets to restore the ancient tradition to its rightful place of supremacy.