

# CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETS

ELIZA RITCHIE

IT is often difficult to gauge correctly the intellectual movements—whether in the social, political, aesthetic or literary sphere—of one's own day. Time tests all things, and what to the contemporary onlooker seems an epoch-marking change may later prove to have been merely a temporary stirring of the surface; while the wave that passed almost unnoticed may have grown into a strong current destined to sweep far and wide. In the case of art or letters especially we often misinterpret the appearance of new influence, which may indeed indicate only some trivial impulse, or—on the other hand—herald the emergence of a genuinely fresh and creative spirit. It is certainly unsafe to dogmatize, either in praise or in depreciation of new movements of this kind; although it will often be of interest and sometimes of value to watch the stream of tendency, noting as far as possible its strength and direction.

Some such reflections are called up as one considers the revival of poetic expression in England since the opening of the present century, and especially during the last fifteen years. Yet it has seemed to the present writer that an attempt, however tentative and slight, to describe and analyze this revival might not be without its use. In the present paper, attention will be confined to lyrical verse, although not a little narrative and dramatic poetry of undoubted value is to be found among the work of contemporary English writers. We shall not take account of American or Irish verse of this epoch, though both—and especially the latter—might well deserve attention. The characteristic spirit, however, in each case is quite different from that of present-day English poetry. But we must include in our survey the too-soon hushed song of those young poets of England who perished in that devastating storm of war which has cost the world so much in spiritual as well as in material things,—since they too belonged to this generation of singers.

Let us consider, then, some of the qualities of this lyrical poetry. We may begin with a negative characterization; it is not to any

great extent *imitative*, in this respect differing very noticeably from that written in the immediately preceding era. The mid-nineteenth century was a time of marked personalities in literature. Tennyson, Rossetti, Browning, Swinburne, Arnold, Meredith,—each brought to the service of poetry a personality and a genius of a strongly individual type. But their immediate successors for the most part echoed their strains. Tennyson, not a profound thinker, but within his limits a consummate master of his craft, dominated Victorian poetry, and a host of respectable verse-writers learned from him. As he himself said, “Most can raise the flowers now, for all have got the seed”; but some of these flowers were faint in perfume and feeble in growth. Of those not of his following, some attempted with more or less skill the psychological analysis which had fascinated Browning; others gave us Swinburne’s sensuousness and what they could command of Swinburne’s melody. Then Kipling struck a more vigorous note, which however soon became mannered; while a whole band of versifiers deluged us with Kipling-and-water. Exceptions there of course were, such as Francis Thompson and Mrs. Meynell, but the last years of the nineteenth century produced little lyrical verse that could carry on the noble British tradition of this form of art expression. Writers of the newer generation have at least more independence. Rupert Brooke’s noble war-sonnets are thoroughly his own; they resemble those of Wordsworth, written more than a hundred years earlier, only in the dignity of their language and the intensity of their patriotism: the sense of personal anguish, of the tragedy of suffering and the loss of young lives through war, is wholly modern. Still more dissimilar to any previous war-verse are the poems produced by the men who experienced the hardships and the horrors of the actual fighting. Such fearless realism as we find in Nichol’s “The Assault” and Sassoon’s “The Rearguard” gives direct expression, so vivid as to be unforgettable, to the human reaction to the physical agonies and the spiritual demoralizations of the awful conflict,—nothing like this has been written before. Less passionate, but equally fresh and direct, is the note struck in the few poems we have by Charles Hamilton Sorley, who was killed at the front at the age of twenty: there is moral as well as literary strength in his sonnet “To Germany”:

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,  
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.  
But gropers both, through fields of thought confined,  
We stumble and we do not understand.

You only saw your future bigly planned,  
 And we the tapering paths of our own mind;  
 And in each other's dearest ways we stand,  
 And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

When it is peace, then we may view again  
 With new-won eyes each other's truer form,  
 And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm  
 We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,  
 When it is peace. But until peace, the storm,  
 The darkness and the thunder and the rain.

And in poetry not relating to the war we find a readiness to treat of unhackneyed themes, or at least to write of the old ones in a new and individual way. Such freshness of outlook we find in the verse of James Elroy Flecker, whose early death from tuberculosis seems a repetition of Keats's tragedy a century ago. Flecker's work is full of exuberant vitality, vivid and glowing colour, and the true spirit of romance:

I know the countries where the white moons burn,  
 And heavy star on star,  
 Dips on the pale and crystal desert hills.

Very different is the work of J. C. Squires, who in his poem "The Rugger Match" gives us a thoroughly modern subject treated with unrelenting realism and genuine power. Highly individual are the lyrics of Walter de la Mare, whose imaginative and singularly beautiful poem "The Listeners" is already almost a classic. He writes for children with a delicious naïveté and whimsicality, and his more serious verses have a rare and singularly penetrating charm. Always he is original and personal:

"Who knocks?" "I, who was beautiful  
 Beyond all dreams to restore,  
 I from the roots of the dark thorn am hither,  
 And knock at the door."

"Who speaks?" "I—once was my speech  
 Sweet as the bird's on the air,  
 When echo lurks by the waters to heed;  
 'Tis I speak thee fair."

"Dark is the hour!" "Aye, and cold,"  
 "Lone is my house." "Ah, but mine?"  
 "Sight, touch, lips, eyes gleamed in vain."  
 "Long dead these to thine."

Silence. Still faint on the porch  
 Broke the flames of the stars.  
 In gloom groped a hope-wearied hand  
 Over keys, bolts, and bars.

A face peered. All the grey night  
 In chaos of vacancy shone;  
 Nought but vast sorrow was there—  
 The sweet cheat gone.

But if our English poets of to-day seek to express themselves without copying their predecessors, they have not on the other hand declared war on all the goodly heritage of the past, seeking new devices of technique as though novelty in rhythm and irregularity in metre were virtues in themselves,—like some American writers of verse. Symbolists, imagists, and votaries of free verse there are, but for the most part their departures from traditional methods have not led them into wild flights of eccentricity. Mrs. Meynell, who formed such an interesting link between the Victorian and the Georgian poets, in her lines called "The Laws of Verse" has expressed a conviction which the best of the latter seem to share:—

Dear Laws come to my breast!  
 Take all my frame, and make your close arms meet  
 Around me; and so ruled, so warmed, so pressed,  
 I breathe, aware; I feel my wild heart beat.

Dear Laws, be wings to me!  
 The feather merely floats. Oh, be it heard  
 Through weight of life—the skylark's gravity—  
 That I am not a feather but a bird.

Differing from each other as the poets we are considering naturally do in many respects, there is one trait which is nearly always to be found in their work,—a very keen susceptibility to beauty. Such was not always the case with those of the previous generation, some of whom seem to have thought that the sordid treatment of sordid themes was essential to a vigorous realism. Even Rupert Brooke was guilty of a sonnet on the sea-sickness of a channel passage, itself a nauseating production. Every poet should have been taught by the spirit of his art that to be a revealer and interpreter of "That Light whose smile kindles the Universe, That Beauty in which all things work and move", is his express mission. An enthusiasm for beauty is therefore as essential to the creative poet as an enthusiasm for truth is for the philosopher

or the student of science;—however realistic his outlook or his methods, he must in the actual fact which forms his subject-matter find and present something of the artistic ideal. Such sensitiveness to beauty we find in the lyrics of John Drinkwater, well known as a dramatist. His lyrical work is less outstanding in originality of thought than that of some of his contemporaries, but the best of it has a singular delicacy of expression and refinement of feeling. More interesting, perhaps, in some respects are the poems of W. H. Davies,—a remarkable man who was “discovered” nearly twenty years ago by George Bernard Shaw. His lyrics remind the reader, now of Blake, now of some of the seventeenth-century poets, yet they are the genuine expression of his own direct attitude toward the world and its beauty,—an attitude at once poetic and child-like. Something, too, of a remarkable freshness and directness is to be found in a recent poem by Thomas Moulton, of which these are the first two verses:

In their glad playing time, like windflowers down the billowy April  
blowing,  
The children come where the grass grows deep.  
Bewitched in the dream of their frolic and laughter, to this green  
glowing  
Sun-field they come, and along the cool  
Green hedgeway, nor knowing  
That here, under the grass and the windflowers, the strong and the  
beautiful  
Lie in their sleep.

Why should we speak of the sleepers to these, the winsome and  
white  
Girls dancing and the mischievous boys, why should our shadow  
Fall on their game?  
They are so heedless of Life and lavish with Time, already they  
outrun  
The flying hours past the edge of their eager sight  
In their little brief flush of brightness, their light.  
They would only look into our old eyes with eyes quickly troubled,  
They would go whence they came  
And forget in the sun.

As illustrating the presentation of beautiful matter in a form worthy of it, we may take Martin Armstrong's “Before Battle”, part of which I quote. The poem begins with a short description of life in the trench which “gapes like a long wound in the sodden clay”, where “the sky is waterlogged and the drenched earth rots”; then it goes on—

Once in another life, in other places,  
 Where a slow river coiled through broad green spaces,  
 And sunlight filled the long grass of the meadows,  
 And moving waters flashed from shine to shadows  
 Of old green feathered willows, bent in ranks  
 Along sun-speckled banks,  
 Lovely remembered things now gone for ever;  
 I saw young men run naked by the river,  
 Thirty young soldiers. Where the field-path goes,  
 Their boots and shirts and khaki lay in rows.

\* \* \* \* \*

With feet among the long warm grass stood one  
 Like ivory in the sun,  
 And in the water, white upon the shade,  
 That hung beneath the shore,  
 His long reflection like a slow flag swayed,  
 And at a trembling of the water frayed  
 Into a hundred shreds, then joined once more.  
 One, where the river (when the willows end)  
 Breaks from its calm to swirl about a bend—  
 Strong swimmer, he wrestled against the race  
 Of the full stream. I saw his laughing face  
 Framed by his upcurved arm. Another, slim,  
 Hands above head, stood braced upon the brim,  
 Then dived—a brother of the curved new moon—  
 And came up streaming soon  
 Ten feet beyond, brown shoulders shining wet  
 And comic face and hair washed sleek as jet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clear shouts and laughter filled the sparkling air:  
 White flakes of shining water everywhere  
 Splashed from their diving. Hosts of little billows  
 Beat on the shores, and the boughs of the hanging willows  
 Glittered with glassy drops. Then, bright as fire,  
 A bugle sounded, and their happy din  
 Stopped, and the boys, with that swift discipline  
 With which keen life answers the heart's desire,  
 Rushed for the bank. And all the bank grew white  
 With bodies swarming up out of the stream.  
 From the water and the trees they came in sight:  
 Across dark leaves I saw their quick limbs gleam.

The whole poem is as vivid and as graceful as a Greek frieze.

In a different strain, and of a dignity and gravity befitting its subject, is the "Ode to Sorrow" by Frederick V. Branford, a poet known to the present writer only by this and one other poem contributed to a recent anthology:—

Immortal Sorrow, that with the Spirit of God  
 Didst journey on the dark original seas;  
 On peaks of ancient night thy foot was shod  
 To walk the scope of all immensities  
 Obscurely embryoned in the waters' womb:  
 Yea, in that hollow No-time, thou didst share  
 Breath with Being;—a solitary tomb  
 Mounds over ruined worlds, and thou art there.

Lo! from the topless pinnacle of mind  
 Bold Nature brags a high unmortal merit,  
 But little ruth in thee shall Nature find  
 Whose sight is ever nailed on changeless spirit.  
 Thou art a law, pale adamantine Queen,  
 Whose mandate runs through all the shires, and saith  
 To dust and deity, cosmic and terrene,  
 'Seek manumission in the Courts of Death'.

Though bloody sweat stand beaded on the brow  
 Of Eons labouring on fire-sown soil,  
 Still on unchallenged Golgotha art thou  
 Serenely towered above the tides of toil.  
 From void to void time flings the enormous forms,  
 Systems of wheeling suns, till space doth swell,  
 But thou art throned beyond the solar storms,  
 Cloudless and calm and inaccessible.

If we inquire into the subjects which engage the attention of present-day lyrical poets, we find that one of the "stock" subjects of verse in the past seems to have gone out of fashion. Love-poetry occupies a very small place in the work of contemporary writers. Whatever the reason is for this,—whether there is a dread of mere sentimentality, or a consciousness that the field has been so thoroughly harvested that but scanty gleanings can be gathered, or whether the modern lady-love is indifferent to rhymed tributes to her charms,—certain it is that the contemporary verse-writer does not compose sonnets to his mistress's eye-brow. Only rarely, and usually only indirectly, is woman's beauty the object of his song. A tiny graceful poem extolling love is by a woman, Muriel Stuart. It is called "The Old Saint":—

You have stopped short of love, your May is over,  
 Your lips are shrivelled berries on the tree.  
 Earth gave you her sweet chance of being lover,—  
 Earth that held Eden as well as Calvary.

You may get whatever guerdon heaven carries,  
 But not the password to keen kissing lips,  
 You will never know what Helen said to Paris,  
 You have lost Egypt, though you saved your ships.

It is perhaps old Mother Nature who now most often inspires the English poet. Especially does he feel the charm, and delight to sing the praises, of the English country-side. Since the close of the war his patriotism finds expression chiefly in this way. We do not hear imperialistic aspirations or laudations of British glory, but fond descriptions of whatever part of England is dearest to the lyricist's heart; and the pen-picture is often as definitely localized as the paintings of Constable or Crome. Thus Mr. Drinkwater sings of the Cotswold hills, and Mr. Hilaire Belloc of the weald of Sussex; while Mr. Alfred Noyes bids us "Go down to Kew in lilac-time" when—

The cherry-trees are seas of bloom and soft perfume, and soft perfume,  
 The cherry-trees are seas of bloom (and oh, so near to London!)  
 And there they say when dawn is high, and all the world a blaze of sky  
 The cuckoo, though he's very shy, will sing a song for London.

A love of animals has always been a characteristic of Englishmen, and it is of some interest to observe how often at the present day verse of a high quality is written about them. Ralph Hodgson in his fine poem "The Bull" makes a truly tragic figure of the one-time lord of the herd, now deserted and dying. Dogs have never wanted for a Laureate, but now the Epicurean of our fireside finds due recognition in the lines of Mr. Harold Munro, "Milk for the Cat":

When the tea is brought at five o'clock  
 And all the neat curtains are drawn with care,  
 The little black cat with bright green eyes  
 Is suddenly purring there.

\* \* \* \* \*

The children eat and wriggle and laugh;  
 The two old ladies stroke their silk:  
 But the cat is grown small and thin with desire,  
 Transformed to a creeping lust for milk:

The white saucer like some full moon descends  
 At last from the clouds of the table above;  
 She sighs and dreams and thrills and glows,  
 Transfigured with love.

She nestles over the shining rim,  
 Buries her chin in the creamy sea,  
 Her tail hangs loose; each drowsy paw  
 Is doubled under each bending knee.

D. H. Lawrence has a graceful lyric on a snake; while another writer does not disdain to make a poem on a snail:

Veined and lustrous, ringed with pearl and azure,  
 With amber flecked, and orange and black,  
 Marvellous is the house of his abiding,  
 The curved frail mansion on his glistening back.

The last stanzas of Chesterton's poem "The Donkey" are deeply impressive:—

The tattered Outlaw of the earth,  
 Of ancient crooked will;  
 Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,  
 I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;  
 One far fierce hour and sweet;  
 There was a shout about my ears,  
 And palms before my feet.

The examples which have been given of present-day lyric verse but very imperfectly represent the poetical output of English writers during the last dozen years. Lascelles Abercrombie, John Freeman, Rose Macauley, Aldous Huxley and Maurice Baring may be named as among those who have done notable work in this form. But perhaps enough has been presented in this paper to justify the conclusion that what we have before us indicates a genuine renaissance of English poetry. It is possible that some of these men are destined to give the world nobler and grander work than any they have as yet accomplished; it is not easy to forecast the future as to this. But what they have already done is in itself, in many instances, of genuine and permanent value. We find in it beauty, strength and sincerity, and that mastery of technique which the poet must have if he is to give adequate art form to his inner vision. To neglect such verse is foolish, to ignore it is ungrateful. It may well be that neither in England nor elsewhere to-day can be found the man of lofty poetic genius, the peer of Milton or Goethe; but though we do not face any stupendous mountain peak to awe us with its lonely sublimity, there are shapes and hues of beauty to be met with on the curving hillsides and the fertile plains sufficient for our enjoyment and our inspiration.