

# ENGLISH LYRIC IN THE AGE OF REASON

BY OSWALD DOUGHTY

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A hundred years ere he to manhood came,  
Song from celestial heights had wandered down,  
Put off her robe of sunlight, dew and flame,  
And donned a modish dress to charm the Town.

Thenceforth she but festooned the porch of things ;  
Apt at life's lore, incurious what life meant.  
Dextrous of hand, she struck her lute's few strings ;  
Ignobly perfect, barrenly content.

Unflushed with ardour and unblanched with awe,  
Her lips in profitless derision curled,  
She saw with dull emotion—if she saw—  
The vision of the glory of the world.

WM. WATSON .  
*Wordsworth's Grave.*

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## FOREWORD

IN the following pages I have attempted to trace the course of English Lyric in the Age of Reason. The days when "influences" and "tendencies" were supreme in literary criticism are now gone, and it is well. A much-needed protest has been raised against this—

'chatter about 'schools,' 'influences,' 'revivals,' 'revolts,' 'tendencies,' 'reactions.'"<sup>1</sup>

But dislike of one extravagance should not lead us into another and opposite one. Personality, temperament, the individual must always be the most important factor in any writer's work. Nevertheless, that personality is inevitably moulded by the writer's mental and material environment. The works of his predecessors may affect him, but above all, save in exceptional circumstances, he will be affected by the "spirit" of his own age. The "spirit of the age" is a very elusive ghost, often indeed a much misunderstood one; but that there is, over and above the individual, a general influence which almost invariably leaves its impress upon the works of contemporary writers is proved by the fact that we can at sight distinguish an Elizabethan lyric from a modern one. Nor is the chief difference due to a changed language. The fundamental change is intellectual, a difference of attitude, of thought. Change of thought is in general reflected in literature, and produces a roughly parallel "evolution" in poetry and prose.

In reading the poetry of the eighteenth century, I cannot avoid the conclusion that the worship of a

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in Literature*, by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, M.A. Cambridge, 1920, p. 85.

narrow conception of Reason in the Augustan Age led to a wide-spread attempt at stoicism, to the suppression of emotion. This in turn led to a lack of high lyric utterance. Again and again the poets sing the ideal of Indifference. They could not help feeling emotion as men in all ages have felt it. But they could and did refuse to express it in passionate verse.

John Pomfret, in a poem entitled *Reason*, expressed in the first year of the century the conception which was so greatly to influence the literature of the day :

The passions still predominant will rule,  
Ungovern'd, rude, not bred in Reason's school ;  
Our understanding they with darkness fill,  
Cause strong corruptions, and pervert the will ;  
On these the soul, as on some flowing tide,  
Must sit, and on the raging billows ride,  
Hurried away ; for how can be withstood  
The impetuous torrent of the boiling blood ?  
Begone, false hopes, for all our learning's vain ;  
Can we be free, where these the rule maintain ?  
These are the tools of knowledge which we use ;  
The spirits, heated, will strange things produce ;  
Tell me, whoe'er the passions could control,  
Or from the body disengage the soul ;  
Till this is done, our best pursuits are vain  
To conquer truth, and unmix'd knowledge gain.

Gradually came a realisation of the fact that this Augustan ideal of Indifference was unattainable in actual life, and therefore unworthy of expression in art. They saw at last that " The Peace of the Augustans " was that peace which springs from the heart's solitude, a peace of desolation. Then came a period of disillusion followed by a search for new ideals in life and art. Gradually, by way of Ballad Revival, Mediævalism, Nature,—despite one attempt at reaction,—Romance returned to the vacant throne.

Such, it seems to the present writer, was the course of eighteenth-century lyric. That the actors in the scene were fully conscious of the true nature of the impulses which swayed them, I do not for a moment imagine.

Individuality and environment, these in action and reaction give us the poetry of the age. But lest I be misunderstood in the following pages, I would here affirm that the most important reason for the dearth of lyric in the eighteenth century is to be found in the lack of lyric power in the poets themselves. As Gray wrote :

But not to one in this benighted age,  
Is that diviner inspiration giv'n,  
That burns in Shakespeare's or in Milton's page,  
The pomp and prodigality of Heav'n.

It is with pleasure that I here express my obligations to all who have assisted me with criticism or advice. In particular I am indebted to Professor Thomas Seccombe, who has most generously, on all occasions, given me the benefit of his intimate knowledge of the eighteenth century, and so frequently infused a genial warmth into labours grown tedious and cold, and to Dr. A. J. Carlyle for many helpful suggestions.

To express my thanks to Professor W. P. Ker and Professor R. W. Chambers, who kindly read and criticised the completed MS., is a pleasant duty.

Nor must I fail to record my appreciation of the assistance given me by my friend, E. J. O'Brien, Esq., of Forest Hill, Oxford, at whose suggestion I first determined to seek a wider audience than that afforded by a small and patient circle of friends.

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*April 23rd, 1922.*

O. D.

## I. THE NATURE OF LYRIC

“There is not, it may be fairly asserted, any language in the world possessed of a greater variety of beautiful and elegant pieces of lyric poetry than our own.”—J. RITSON, *Select Collection of English Songs*, 1783.

“I HAVE no great opinion of a definition,” says Burke in his treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful*. To the demand for scientific classification and definition in literature our reply is identical with that of Burke. Nothing indeed could be more obviously futile than all attempts to divide a literature as wide and varied as are human experience and human emotion into a number of separate and distinct watertight compartments, by the erection of certain arbitrary barriers never to be crossed. Such attempts at the formation of a complete and comprehensive system of classification and definition in literature lead inevitably to that final damnation of the critic by which, far from the Delectable Mountains, he wanders in the outer waste of letters, evolving a new class for each example, a new definition for each class, until the logical result, ever near but never to be attained, appears within reach, when each poem shall find itself alone in its own separate class, the wheel after infinite toil coming full circle. Nevertheless the categories, if distinctions be not carried too far, are a convenient means of classification, not without a certain value.

That these categories merge imperceptibly one into the other, and that their value is only to be found within certain limits, was realised and well expressed by Matthew Arnold when he wrote: “We may rely upon it that we shall not improve upon the classification adopted by the Greeks for

kinds of poetry; that their categories of epic, dramatic, lyric, and so forth, have a natural propriety and should be adhered to. It may sometimes seem doubtful to which of two categories a poem belongs; whether this or that poem is to be called, for instance, narrative or lyric, lyric or elegiac. But there is to be found in every good poem a strain, a predominant note, which determines the poem as belonging to one of these kinds rather than the other; and here is the best proof of the value of the classification and of the advantage of adhering to it."<sup>1</sup>

Entirely just as this criticism is, so wide and vague a principle of division as the "strain" or "predominant note" obviously leaves much room for individual differences of opinion as to whether a particular poem is or is not to be included in the lyric category. From this fact arise endless discussions such as whether Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, and Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* are rightly to be termed lyrics. Hence a slight examination of the various meanings attached to the term "lyric" is not out of place.

To the Greeks a lyric meant originally a song intended to be sung to the accompaniment of the lyre. In course of time the term lost a great part of its original meaning; the ideas of singing and of a musical accompaniment died out, and the former association of lyric with song and music was retained only in music of rhyme, rhythm, and verbal melody. But if part of the original significance of the term has become obscured, other portions of its meaning which were at first implicit rather than explicit have attained a greater importance and consequently a clearer and more definite recognition with the passing of time, so that the modern reader demands as a fundamental element of a great lyric that it be an expression of individual emotion, or, in other words, subjective. With the

<sup>1</sup> *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, 1891, pp. 137-8.

tendency of later poets to deeper introspection, this individual element has inevitably assumed greater importance, until lyric has become a favourite form of temperamental expression. Thus it is that in that ideal pattern of lyric laid up no doubt in the heavens, the critic demands a complete balance and harmony of three elements—music of word, rhyme, and rhythm, strong, real, direct emotion, and temperamental expression, an individual channel through which that emotion finds its way and assumes its own special significance.

The critic's conception of lyric will therefore depend in large measure upon the relative value that he attaches to each of these three elements in lyric, and here too is room for much difference of opinion and consequent dispute. Narrative, descriptive, dramatic, or other elements may enter into a poem of a certain lyrical tendency, and raise doubts as to its real character. For such cases no general rules can be laid down, and the verdict will vary with the individual. Nevertheless it must not be forgotten, in looking for the "strain" or "predominant note" in such poems, that an apparently non-lyrical form, such as that of narrative or descriptive verse for example, is not necessarily inconsistent with true lyric utterance, and that dramatic form can be employed without destroying the essential subjectivity of a poem. A lyric, as it is in the ideal a supreme expression of strong emotion, must consequently be short; but the mere length of a poem as such can never become a test of its quality, and the ideal poet might make his ideal lyric as long as Homer's *Iliad* without affecting its lyric quality. Regarded as the supreme expression of strong emotion, lyric reveals itself as the very real but inexplicable essence of poetry, so that the greatest and most truly poetical verse invariably shows a lyric quality, whatever may be the form.

Nor must we, in dealing with English poetry in the eighteenth century, adopt too high a standard of lyric quality. To adhere steadfastly to our



conception of the ideal lyric in dealing with so anti-lyrical an age would be to exclude all but some half-dozen poems from our province. For this reason we shall depart from strictly logical and ideal standards with no other *apologia* than the excellent one of practical expediency, and adapt our conception of lyric to meet that of Landor when he spoke of "all that portion of our metre which, wanting a definite term, is ranged under the capitulary of lyric."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed we may not unreasonably be said to extend this definition in some ways, for we shall include within our survey the shorter, slighter verse of the age, excluding neither such forms as elegiac verse nor epigram; but our conception of lyric will not be entirely Landor's, for ever within our minds will linger, a shadow of a shade, that ideal test and standard, to restrain us from too far a deviation from the straight and narrow lyric road.

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, 8 vols, London, 1876, Vol. IV, p. 56.

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH LYRIC IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Fair Nine, forsaking Poetry,  
How have you left the ancient love  
That bards of old enjoy'd in you !  
The languid strings do scarcely move !  
The sound is forc'd, the notes are few.

WM. BLAKE: *To the Muses.*



## CHAPTER I

### THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

' J'avoue, d'ailleurs, qu'en vous retraçant l'évolution de la poésie lyrique, je me suis efforcé de lier à ce mouvement même le mouvement aussi des principales idées du siècle.'—F. BRUNETIÈRE, *L'Évolution de la Poésie Lyrique en France au Dix-neuvième Siècle*.

Then tell me, is your soul entire ?  
Does Wisdom calmly hold her throne ?  
Then can you question each desire,  
Bid this remain, and that begone :  
No tear half-starting from your eye ;  
No kindling blush, you know not why ;  
No stealing sigh, nor stifled groan.

AKENSIDE : *Odes*, Bk. I, 3.

WHEN we remember that the eighteenth century gave us in the person of " John Bull " a symbol of what we are pleased to regard as our national character, and also in Dr. Johnson a supreme representative, not only of that character but also of the age, we shall scarcely be surprised to find that high and sustained lyric utterance is by no means a salient feature of the period. We shall not expect the poets of such an age to be men of whom we can say :

And in his gusts of song he brings  
Wild odours shaken from strange wings,  
And unfamiliar whisperings  
From far lips blown,  
While all the rapturous heart of things  
Throbs through his own.<sup>1</sup>

For although our literature can show lyrics com-

<sup>1</sup> *Poems of Wm. Watson*. London and New York, 1905. 2 vols.  
(*Shelley's Centenary*, p. 56.)

parable both in number and quality with those of any other nation, we rightly refuse to regard the minds of our lyric poets as at all representative of the national psychology; and although John Bull, as known to the eighteenth century, is by no means representative of present-day England, any modern symbol of national character would appear as incongruous a lyrist as would John Bull himself apostrophising the skylark as he paced his native fields.

From the opening of the century indeed, until well within sight of the close, influences adverse to lyric had full and visible sway. It was an age of reason, of common sense, of prose. Philosophy, science, and even religion worked hand in hand to establish the supremacy of reason in every department of thought and emotion. Man was to be ruled entirely by his mind; in literature, if not in life, the heart, the passions, were forgotten, or remembered only to be suppressed; and although Pope's motto, "Follow Nature," was continually upon the lips of the writers of the time, they systematically retained the low imaginative and emotional level of art bequeathed to them by the age of Dryden. By "Nature" was meant something very different from the "Nature" of the romantics who followed them. To the eighteenth century "Nature" meant many things, but above all it meant the following of reason; a narrow, myopic, purblind reason which would only recognise what was under its nose, and refused to see all aspects of life that could not be stated with the clearness and lucidity of a Euclidean problem. This mental attitude to life was the result of the speculation of Hobbes in the preceding century. Whatever its value in the realm of philosophy, such a position was fatal to the production of elevated and passionate lyric, and amongst the anti-lyrical influences of the age the continuation of this sceptical philosophy by Locke and Hume was not the least important. Its influence was speedily manifested in contemporary poetry. Before the close of the seventeenth



century John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave, had stated the new poetic ideal with an energy that bordered perilously upon enthusiasm when he wrote :

While in dark Ignorance we lay afraid  
Of Fancies, Ghosts, and every empty Shade,  
Great Hobbs appear'd, and by plain Reason's Light  
Put such fantastick Forms to shameful Flight.<sup>1</sup>

And inspired by so exalted a theme as the work of Hobbes, he soars into the poetic empyrean singing :

But here sweet Eloquence does always smile,  
In such a choice, yet unaffected Style,  
As must both Knowledge and Delight impart,  
The Force of Reason, with the Flowers of Art.

Sheffield has at least the merit of having stated in that last line, clearly, concisely, and correctly, the poetic aim of the next age.

This following of a plain, a very plain Reason, was a natural revolt against the poetic ideals of the earlier romantic age. With the decay of the romantic imagination, poetry had fallen a prey to involved, fantastic, and frequently obscure imagery, to far-sought conceits, which not seldom crossed the boundaries of the ludicrous. The inevitable reaction, when it came, was not, as is too often assumed, entirely detrimental to English verse. In the first place it must not be forgotten that, under the leadership of Pope, the rebels took " Truth " as one of their watchwords.

Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find,  
That gives us back the image of our mind,<sup>2</sup>

was to be the subject of their song ; and this, after the false wit of the seventeenth century, was a great gain, in theory if not in practice. That they chose throughout the first part of the century what to

<sup>1</sup> *On Mr. Hobbes and his Writings.*

<sup>2</sup> *Essay on Criticism.*