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SIX CENTURIES of GREAT POETRY

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LAUREL

SIX CENTURIES OF GREAT POETRY

Edited by

ROBERT PENN WARREN

and

ALBERT ERSKINE

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SIX CENTURIES OF GREAT POETRY

The wide selection of poems collected here by Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine is the finest in British lyrics written between the mid-1300s and the early 1900s. The selections are taken from the lyric tradition: generally short, reflective poems expressing the thoughts of a single speaker but conveying a wide range of styles and themes, from the romantic poets' passionate view of nature to twentieth-century poets' search for meaning in troubled times. A comprehensive selection of enduring work by over one hundred acknowledged masters, this extraordinary collection is the definitive anthology of great poetry.

ROBERT PENN WARREN taught English at Yale University and is the winner of the Pulitzer prize for fiction and one for poetry, and of the National Book Award for poetry. He is the author, with Cleanth Brooks, of *Understanding Fiction*, and of the novels *All the King's Men*, *World Enough and Time*, *Band of Angels*, and *Flood*, as well as many other works of fiction, poetry, and literary criticism. He died in 1989.

ALBERT ERSKINE was a vice president and executive editor at Random House in New York. He was also on the staff of *The Southern Review* and was associated with the Louisiana State University Press.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is intended for the general reader of poetry—the person who, though he may or may not be a specialist in literature, enjoys poetry as part of his natural enjoyment of life.

There are many kinds of anthologies. There is, for instance, the historical anthology often used in schools, which gives good representative examples, period by period, of the sort of poetry written in the past. The primary obligation of the maker of such an anthology is to keep the record straight, to give samples of the work of all periods, even work with which he, or his age, may be unsympathetic, and to mark the fluctuations of taste. Again, there are anthologies illustrating some critical principle —for instance George Moore's anthology of "pure" poetry. There are anthologies of special forms—of ballads, of odes, of sonnets, and so on. Or anthologies of topics—poems of love, poems of friendship, poems of patriotism, poems of childhood, even anthologies for dog lovers and devoted gardeners. And there is the personal anthology in which the maker indulges his tastes, his whims, his accidental preferences and prejudices, his eccentricities, with a shameless, and sometimes delightful, contempt of public opinion.

Our anthology is not quite like any of these. No form or topic dominates this book. We could simply ignore such concerns, but we could not quite so readily ignore—and did not wish to ignore—some of the problems of historical representation. Our book is, in fact, historical; it begins with Chaucer and comes down into our century, and we hope that it does give a picture of the long sweep of English poetry. Our emphasis is, however, more on the "poetry" than on the "sweep." In other words, we intended to select the best English poems of a certain scale and put them in their historical sequence.

The "best," we say. But the best on whose authority? On nobody's authority, not even the authority of Time, that most reverend critic, but on our own responsibility. This may sound as though we have made a personal anthology, after all, and in

one sense that is true. We have read or reread the body of poetry that falls within our province and have tried to scrutinize honestly our own reactions to it. We have found, of course, some need to revise old opinions. Some poems have lost their morning glister, others shine more brightly than ever before. Some that we, and many anthologists, have previously ignored appear on our pages to solicit now the franchise of general approval—for instance, certain poems by Skelton, Clare, and Barnes.

This anthology, then, is personal in that we take the risk of our taste and judgment. But whose else can we take? And as we take that risk we can only hope that our own experience of life and poetry is not too gross or too whimsical, and that we are not too ignorant or too doctrinaire.

But in another sense this book is not personal. It is the fruit of a collaboration, a long and careful collaboration full of wrangles and debates as well as happy enthusiasms. No collaboration can make the purely personal anthology. What may give the personal anthology its charm—the sentimental attachment, the accidental association, the crankiness of taste, the flavor of an individual life—these things are subdued in a collaboration. Eccentricities and accidents belonging to one collaborator tend to be canceled by those of the other. We must confess that occasionally we have not been above bargaining with each other, and perhaps now and then have compounded rather than canceled eccentricity and accident, but ordinarily a veto has been carried, and the poem in question laid away for somebody's truly personal anthology.

This book represents not only the limitations of our taste and judgment, but other limitations as well. For one thing, we have a limited number of pages. English poetry has a long and rich history, and simply on grounds of space, many fine poems have been laid regretfully aside. For the same reason, long poems have been passed by. This is a collection of short pieces, chiefly lyrical—taking *lyric* in its broadest significance. It is true that we do have here Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, with its 625 lines, but without it Coleridge could scarcely be said to be represented at all, and the poem itself has its affiliations with characteristically short rather than long poems, the ballad and not the epic, the personal cry and not the extended argument.

As another limitation we have ruled out excerpts from poems. We use only whole poems, or occasionally such parts of longer works as are self-contained units that can stand alone without explanation—for instance, songs from plays or certain units from Tennyson's *In Memoriam.* There are thrilling and beautiful passages from epics, plays, and other long works, but they are not for us now. Excerpts may tease the reader to further acquaintance, or if he already knows the full work, may revive it for him with peculiar poignancy, as a scrap of overheard music may revive the massiveness of a past experience. Or the excerpt, by reason of its very lack of mooring and context, may give the joy of a free flash of poetry—somehow purer, finer, more nearly absolute than ordinarily. But there is another more human, sober, and lasting joy in watching, as it were, the poetry derive from the whole poem, in seeing poetry accept its untranscendental condition of a poem, in seeing it flow, sometimes, from the unpromising lines that would never be quoted in a collection of brilliant excerpts.

The fact that the size of this book prevents the use of long poems, and that we have discarded excerpts, does, however, work certain inequities. Pope suffers, as do Thomson, Johnson, and Crabbe—and that may again tell us something we already knew about the eighteenth century. Shelley and Byron suffer too; for a different reason.

But within our plan, what poets do have here the fullest exhibits? In asking this question we remember that some poets of highest quality have a relatively small body of work, or achieve this quality in only a few poems. Even so the answer to our question may say something about English poetry—and about us, the editors. When our work was done we found that Shakespeare—Shakespeare as lyric poet—dominated the field with 942 lines. Wordsworth is second with 688 lines. Milton, Browning, and Tennyson, as is customary, occupy impressive positions. To some poets we have allotted significantly more space than they usually receive in anthologies of this scope: Skelton, Wyatt, Campion, Donne, Herrick, Marvell, Blake, Clare, and Barnes.

It is easy to choose Chaucer as a starting point. But it is not quite so easy to choose an ending point. In an anthology that covers some centuries there is always a problem when contem-

porary writers are reached. For it is inevitable that our judgments of our own time should be somewhat interested and special. And it is inevitable that there be some temptation to shift scale—a feeling that if we represent our age at all we ought to do it as it appears to us, a rank, rich, undifferentiated hurly-burly without benefit of history. If we don't shift scale, how perfunctory and wrong-headed the contemporary section is likely to seem! We need only look back at a few anthologies to be convinced of this. There is no happy solution for the problem, and there is no solution that is not more or less arbitrary. Our solution is arbitrary: to represent no poet born in this century and no poet who is now alive.

In the beginning we said that we had set out to print the best English poems—with all the risks of our choosing the best. But some shadows fell across that bright intention. One shadow was the need for some proportion in representation. If we had been absolutely rigorous in fulfilling that intention we should have had fewer poets in our 570 pages. Though we have made a point of giving fuller showings of the big poets than has been customary in anthologies of this scale, we have sometimes been forced to omit impressive pieces to make a place at all for smaller but attractive, or even indispensable, poems. Out of the massive reservoir of Donne or Wordsworth or Tennyson some pieces have been passed by to make room for, shall we say, Leigh Hunt. Another shadow was the matter of publishers' permission for work still in copyright. The holders of copyrights restricted us to the number of poems here exhibited by several poets—Yeats and Hardy among them. For us at least, these would demand many more, even in a book of this size.

The texts used have been drawn from the best available sources. As our work of compilation progressed, we were surprised to find how little consistency in such mechanical matters as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, etc., exists—not only among the various editions of an early poet, but sometimes within the pages of a single volume. Varying degrees of modernization have been employed by various editors, and sometimes by the same editor. Had we followed what seemed to us the

most authoritative edition of each poet, our text would have had no consistent approach to these questions at all.

We have tried, therefore, to follow this principle: to use a modern system in all cases where meter and meaning are not violated by so doing. Though the general reader can, with the help of a glossary, take pleasure in Chaucer, his language, and that of the poets for a century or so thereafter, is so different from ours that modernization would alter its poetic quality; we have therefore left the texts as we found them. We have likewise respected dialectal peculiarities in the work of certain later poets—as for example Allan Ramsay, Burns, and William Barnes. When dealing with a poet like Blake, whose text seems to represent an eccentric personal quality and not merely the convention of a period, we have not tampered with it except in certain trivial respects.

After Skelton, with some self-evident exceptions, we are dealing with the language of our own time. Donne's line, "Who saies my teares have overflow'd his ground?" is not in any way changed by this version: "Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?"

It was long the practice to print the past participles of verbs, when the *–ed* had no independent syllabic value, thus: *drown'd,* which is pronounced, of course, the same way as *drowned*—one syllable. By the same practice, when poets needed to make an extra foot with such a verb form, the participle was given in full: *drowned,* pronounced *drownèd.* We have consistently printed the full form and have marked the accent when it seemed to be the poet's intention.

And to anyone who feels that by changing "Who saies my teares . . ." we have destroyed something called "the flavor of the original," we can only say we don't believe the "flavor" was a part of the original but something added to it by a modern response to the funny spelling. Presumably, "Who *f*aies . . ." would be even more flavorful.

R. P. W.
A. E.

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER/1340?–1400

Merciles Beautè

I. CAPTIVITY

Your yën two wol slee me sodenly,
I may the beautè of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit through-out my herte kene.

And but your word wol helen hastily
My hertes wounde, whyl that hit is grene,
Your yën two wol slee me sodenly,
I may the beautè of hem not sustene.

Upon my trouthe I sey yow feithfully,
That ye ben of my lyf and deeth the quene;
For with my deeth the trouthe shal be sene.
Your yën two wol slee me sodenly,
I may the beautè of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit through-out my herte kene.

II. REJECTION

So hath your beautè fro your herte chaced
Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne;
For Daunger halt your mercy in his cheyne.

Giltles my deeth thus han ye me purchaced;
I sey yow sooth, me nedeth not to feyne;
So hath your beautè fro your herte chaced
Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne.

Allas! that nature hath in yow compassed
So greet beautè; that no man may atteyne
To mercy, though he sterve for the peyne.
So hath your beautè fro your herte chaced
Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne;
For Daunger halt your mercy in his cheyne.

III. ESCAPE

Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene.

He may answere, and seye this or that;
I do no fors, I speke right as I mene.
Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene.

Love hath my name y-strike out of his sclat,
And he is strike out of my bokes clene
For ever-mo; ther is non other mene.
Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene.

Truth

BALADE DE BON CONSEYL

Flee fro the prees,[1] and dwelle with sothfastnesse,
Suffyce unto thy good, though hit be smal;
For hord hath hate, and climbing tikelnesse,[2]
Prees hath envye, and wele blent overal;
Savour no more than thee bihove shal;

[1] press, crowd [2] uncertainty

Werk wel thy-self, that other folk canst rede;
And trouthe shal delivere, hit is no drede.

Tempest[1] thee noght al croked to redresse,
In trust of hir that turneth as a bal:
Gret reste stant in litel besinesse;
And eek be war to sporne ageyn an al;
Stryve noght, as doth the crokke with the wal.
Daunte thy-self, that dauntest otheres dede;
And trouthe shal delivere, hit is no drede.

That thee is sent, receyve in buxumnesse,[2]
The wrastling for this worlde axeth a fal.
Her nis nor hoom, her nis but wildernesse;
Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stall
Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;
Hold the hye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede:
And trouthe shal delivere, hit is no drede.

ENVOY

Therfore, thou vache,[3] leve thyn old wrecchednesse
Unto the worlde; leve now to be thral;
Crye him mercy, that of his hy goodneese
Made thee of noght, and in especial
Draw unto him, and pray in general
For thee, and eek for other, hevenlich mede;
And trouthe shal delivere, hit is no drede.

The Compleint of Chaucer to His Empty Purse

To you, my purse, and to non other wight
Compleyne I, for ye be my lady dere!
I am so sory, now that ye be light;
For certes, but ye make hevy chere,

[1] disturb [2] submission [3] cow

Me were as leef be leyd up-on my bere;
For whiche un-to your mercy thus I crye:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now voucheth sauf this day, or hit be night,
That I of you the blisful soun may here,
Or see your colour lyk the sonne bright,
That of yelownesse hadde never pere.
Ye be my lyf, ye be myn hertes stere,[1]
Quene of comfort and of good companye:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now purs, that be to me my lyves light,
And saveour, as doun in this worlde here,
Out of this toune help me through your might,
Sin that ye wole nat been my tresorere;
For I am shave as ny as any frere.
But yit I pray un-to your curtesye:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

LENVOY DE CHAUCER

O conquerour of Brutes Albioun!
Which that by lyne and free electioun
Ben verray king, this song to you I sende;
And ye, that mowen al our harm amende,
Have minde up-on my supplicacioun!

Balade

Hyd, Absolon, thy gilte tresses clere;
Ester, ley thou thy meknesse al adown;
Hyd, Jonathas, al thy frendly manere;
Penalopee and Marcia Catoun,
Make of youre wifhod no comparisoun;

[1] guide