

# NEW BEARINGS IN ENGLISH POETRY

A STUDY OF  
THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

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1938

CHATTO & WINDUS  
LONDON

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

**Leavis, Frank Raymond, 1895-**  
**New bearings in English poetry.**

Reprint of the 1932 ed. published by Chatto & Windus, London.

**CONTENTS:** Poetry and the modern world.—The situation at the end of the war.—T. S. Eliot.  
[etc.]

1. English poetry—20th century—History and criticism. 2. Eliot, Thomas Stearns, 1888-1965—Criticism and interpretation. 3. Pound, Ezra Loomis, 1885-1972—Criticism and interpretation. 4. Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 1844-1889—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.  
[PR610.L4 1978] 821'.9'1209 75-30032  
ISBN 0-404-14035-1

Reprinted from an original in the collections of the University of Chicago Library.

Reprinted from the edition of 1938, (1932) London.  
First AMS edition published in 1978.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

**AMS PRESS, INC.**  
**NEW YORK, N.Y.**

*Nightingales, Anangke, a sunset or the meanest flower  
Were formerly the potentialities of poetry,  
But now what have they to do with one another  
With Dionysus or with me?*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Microscopic anatomy of ephemerides,  
Power-house stacks, girder-ribs, provide a crude base ;  
But man is what he eats, and they are not bred  
Flesh of our flesh, being unrelated  
Experientially, fused in no emotive furnace.*

RONALD BOTTRALL.

*What we cannot understand, it is very common, and indeed a very natural thing, for us to undervalue ; and it may be suspected that some of the merriest witticisms which have been uttered against Mr Wordsworth, have had their origin in the pettishness and dissatisfaction of minds, unaccustomed and unwilling to make, either to others or to themselves, any confession of incapacity.*

J. G. LOCKHART.

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## Prefatory Note

THIS book, as the title indicates, does not offer itself as a survey of the verse—even the good verse—produced in our time. It starts from certain general considerations about poetry and, in particular, the relation of poetry to the modern world. How little I suppose these considerations to be original the book will make plain: it is largely an acknowledgment, vicarious as well as personal, of indebtedness to a certain critic and poet. Indeed they have been commonplaces for some years. They may be found habitually referred to and employed as such in *The Calendar*, that uniquely intelligent review which, from 1925 to 1927, was, it is hardly excessive to say, the critical consciousness of the younger adult generations. And yet it was not because they were commonplaces that *The Calendar*, for all its brilliance, was condemned to die of neglect.

If I am embarrassed at all, it is at seeing the simple—perhaps even naïve—way in which I have put them. I have deliberately put them in the simplest terms, believing that so they are most irresistible: for if they are commonplaces they

have not, I have ample grounds for contending, been as common in effective acceptance as they should have been.

In any case, my main concern is with the concrete : to discuss critically what seems to me most significant in contemporary poetry, 'significance' being defined by the generalities that I venture upon. I have endeavoured to confine myself as strictly as possible to literary criticism, and to remember that poetry is made of words. Many interesting and apparently relevant questions concerning the present and future of poetry that have presented themselves, and that the reader may expect to find dealt with, I have therefore dismissed, hoping by this asceticism to ensure a cleaner impact.

The reader, missing also certain poets whom he expected to find, may complain that my criterion of significance is too rigorous. To this I can only reply that I meant it to be rigorous : nevertheless, I do not think that I have left out much work that is important by any serious standards. There may, of course, especially in America, be important poets of whom I am ignorant : I hope that American readers will be placated by observing that two out of my three main subjects are Americans by birth.

There are certain serious and intelligent verse-writers whom (though I respect them) I have not

dealt with because they seem to me not poets. I preferred to pass them by rather than introduce them only for critical dismissal. The necessary criticism upon them, it seems to me, makes itself if my valuations of Mr Eliot, Mr Pound and Hopkins are accepted. I notice that in any case the necessities of compression have led sometimes (especially in the second chapter) to effects that might be found ironical.





## I

### Poetry and the Modern World

POETRY matters little to the modern world. That is, very little of contemporary intelligence concerns itself with poetry. It is true that a very great deal of verse has come from the press in the last twenty years, and the uninterested might take this as proving the existence both of a great deal of interest in poetry and of a great deal of talent. Indeed, anthologists do. They make, modestly, the most extravagant claims on behalf of the age. 'It is of no use asking a poetical renaissance to conform to type,' writes Mr J. C. Squire in his *Prefatory Note to Selections from Modern Poets*. 'There are marked differences in the features of all those English poetical movements which have chiefly contributed to the body of our "immortal" poetry. . . . Should our literary age be remembered by posterity solely as an age during which fifty men had written lyrics of some durability for their truth and beauty, it would not be remembered with contempt. It is in that conviction that I have compiled this anthology.' Mr Harold Monro, introducing *Twentieth Century Poetry*, is more modest and more extravagant:

'Is it a great big period, or a minutely small? Reply who can! Somebody with whom I was talking said: "They are all of them only poetical persons—*not* poets. Who will be reading them a century hence?" To which I answered: "There are so many of them that, a century hence, they may appear a kind of Composite Poet; there may be 500 excellent poems proceeding from 100 poets mostly not so very great, but well worth remembering a century hence."'

Such claims are symptoms of the very weakness that they deny: they could have been made only in an age in which there were no serious standards current, no live tradition of poetry, and no public capable of informed and serious interest. No one *could* be seriously interested in the great bulk of the verse that is culled and offered to us as the fine flower of modern poetry. For the most part it is not so much bad as dead—it was never alive. The words that lie there arranged on the page have no roots: the writer himself can never have been more than superficially interested in them. Even such genuine poetry as the anthologies of modern verse do contain is apt, by its kind and quality, to suggest that the present age does not favour the growth of poets. A study of the latter end of *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* leads to the conclusion that something has been wrong for forty or fifty years at the least.

For it seems unlikely that the number of potential poets born varies as much from age to age as literary history might lead one to suppose. What varies is the use made of talent. And the use each age makes of its crop of talent is determined largely by the preconceptions of 'the poetical' that are current, and the corresponding habits, conventions and techniques. There are, of course, other very important conditions, social, economic, philosophical and so on; but my province is that of literary criticism, and I am confining myself as far as possible to those conditions which it rests with the poet and the critic to modify—those which are their immediate concern.

Every age, then, has its preconceptions and assumptions regarding poetry: these are the essentially poetical subjects, these the poetical materials, these the poetical modes. The most influential are apt to be those of which we are least aware. The preconceptions coming down to us from the last century were established in the period of the great Romantics, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats. To attempt to define them is to risk misrepresenting them, for it is largely in their being vague and undefined that their power has lain. Their earliest formulation is to be found, perhaps, in the *Dedication* (dated 1756) of Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*. What Warton, con-

sciously challenging the prevailing ideas, puts explicitly, afterwards came to be implicitly assumed.

We do not, it should seem, sufficiently attend to the difference there is between a MAN OF WIT, a MAN OF SENSE, and a TRUE POET. Donne and Swift were undoubtedly men of wit, and men of sense : but what traces have they left of PURE POETRY ?

The question would seem to determine the spirit of the affirmation : any doubt that may remain, both affirmation and question in the following combine to settle :

The sublime and the pathetic are the two chief nerves of all genuine poesy. What is there transcendently sublime or pathetic in Pope ?

Warton goes on to classify the English Poets :

In the first class I would place our only three sublime and pathetic poets ; SPENSER, SHAKESPEARE, MILTON.

The collocation is decisive : it defines with sufficient precision the nineteenth-century idea of the poetical. Donne, we may note, Warton places in the third class. The reign of the idea is challenged when Donne comes to be associated with Shakespeare in contrast to Spenser and Milton. How universal and unquestioned it had become in the Victorian Age Matthew Arnold may be cited to prove. His evidence is the more

significant in that it was unwitting, for he regarded himself as a critic of the ideas about poetry current in his day.

Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification, Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose.<sup>1</sup>

The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and all their school, is briefly this : their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul.<sup>2</sup>

—Arnold, that is, shares with his age a prejudice against recognizing as poetry anything that is not, in the obvious sense of Milton's formula, ' simple, sensuous, and passionate.' Poetry, it was assumed, must be the direct expression of simple emotions, and these of a limited class : the tender, the exalted, the poignant, and, in general, the sympathetic. (It is still quite common to come to the University from school doubting whether satire can be poetry.) Wit, play of intellect, stress of cerebral muscle had no place : they could only hinder the reader's being ' moved '—the correct poetical response.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Essays in Criticism*. Second Series : *The Study of Poetry*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Thomas Gray.

<sup>3</sup> ' Poetry tells you about things that have happened long ago, and it tells you about them in language that is rich with an antique idiom. . . . The poet must, I think, be regarded as striving after the simplicity of a childish utterance. His goal is to think as a child, to understand

There is something further to be noted of 'the poetical' in the nineteenth century. 'It comes out if one considers these half-a-dozen well-known and representative poems: *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *Mariana*, *The Lady of Shalott*, *The Blessed Damsel*, Morris's *The Nymph's Song to Hylas*, *A Forsaken Garden*, O'Shaughnessy's *Ode*. Nineteenth-century poetry, we realize, was characteristically preoccupied with the creation of a dream-world.<sup>1</sup> Not all of the poetry, or all of the poets: but the preoccupation was characteristic. So that when a poetaster like O'Shaughnessy, with nothing personal to communicate, was moved by the desire to write poetry he produced this:

We are the music-makers,  
And we are the dreamers of dreams,  
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,  
And sitting by desolate streams;  
World-losers and world forsakers,  
On whom the pale moon gleams. . . .

The preoccupation, the habit, then, became a dominant element in the set of ideas, attitudes and sentiments constituting 'the poetical' for the nineteenth century, and may often be seen to be present and potent when it is not avowed or even wittingly entertained. Consider, for instance,

as a child. He must deliver himself—and the poetic task is the same in every age—from the burden of the intellect of his day and the complexity of the forms of speech which it involves.—J. M. Thorburn, *Art and the Unconscious*, p. 70.

<sup>1</sup> Mr Eliot has pointed this out in *Homage to John Dryden*.

Andrew Lang's sonnet, *The Odyssey*. Lang (born in 1844) was a scholar and a man of taste, with a feeling for language and a desire to write poetry—with, in short, all the qualifications of a poet except the essential one, the need to communicate something of his own. His sonnet is one of the most interesting of the many documents of like value that are to be found in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. It illustrates very neatly the kind of thing that cultured people in the latter part of the nineteenth century took poetry to be.

As one that for a weary space has lain  
Lull'd by the song of Circe and her wine  
In gardens near the pale of Proserpine,  
Where that Aææan isle forgets the main,  
And only the low lutes of love complain,  
And only shadows of wan lovers pine—  
As such an one were glad to know the brine  
Salt on his lips, and the large air again—  
So gladly from the songs of modern speech  
Men turn, and see the stars, and feel the free  
Shrill wind beyond the close of heavy flowers,  
And through the music of the languid hours  
They hear like Ocean on a western beach  
The surge and thunder of the *Odyssey*.

This is a very representative document. To begin with, there is about the whole thing an atmosphere such as we have learnt to associate with the 'nineties. It is quite in keeping, then, that Swinburne should be very much in evidence : 'gardens near the pale of Proserpine,' 'the low

lutes of love,' 'the close of heavy flowers,' etc. Morris, too, is there, suggesting a general Pre-Raphaelite collaboration. Then, as we should expect in late Victorian poetastry, we are aware of the pervasive presence of Tennyson. And when Lang wishes to escape from 'the music of the languid hours' into the 'larger air' of 'a western beach' he naturally has recourse to Matthew Arnold. But in spite of the explicit intention to end in the larger air, and the success with which Lang achieves 'the traditional trumpet blast of the close' (as the reviewers say), it is the music of the languid hours that predominates in his sonnet.

We are the music-makers

And we are the dreamers of dreams,

and if we dream of Homer and of waking up, it is still dreaming. And there is in the sonnet yet another presence, that of Keats—the Keats of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* ('And only shadows of wan lovers pine') which counts for so much in 'the poetical' of the nineteenth century.

It is not only in the practice of poetasters that such preconceptions, habits and conventions assert themselves: they exercise a decisive influence over the use of genuine talent. Poetry tends in every age to confine itself by ideas of the essentially poetical which, when the conditions which gave rise to them have changed, bar the poet from his most valuable material, the material



that is most significant to sensitive and adequate minds in his own day; or else sensitive and adequate minds are barred out of poetry. Poetry matters because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age. He is, as it were, at the most conscious point of the race in his time. ('He is the point at which the growth of the mind shows itself,' says Mr I. A. Richards.<sup>1</sup>) 'The potentialities of human experience in any age are realized only by a tiny minority, and the important poet is important because he belongs to this (and has also, of course, the power of communication). Indeed, his capacity for experiencing and his power of communicating are indistinguishable; not merely because we should not know of the one without the other, but because his power of making words express what he feels is indistinguishable from his awareness of what he feels. He is unusually sensitive, unusually aware, more sincere and more himself than the ordinary man can be. He knows what he feels and knows what he is interested in. He is a poet because his interest in his experience is not separable from his interest in words; because, that is, of his habit of seeking by the evocative use of words to sharpen his awareness of his ways of feeling, so making these communicable.' And poetry can communicate the actual quality of

<sup>1</sup> *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 61.