THE ADVANCE OF ENGLISH POETRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY

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O! 't is an easy thing
To write and sing;
But to write true, unfeigned verse
Is very hard!
—HENRY VAUGHAN, 1655

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TO

MY FRIEND FOR FORTY YEARS

FRANK W. HUBBARD

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The titles of the several volumes of poems with dates of publication are given in my text.

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W. L. P.

PREFACE

The material in this volume originally appeared in *The Bookman,* 1917–1918. It is now published with much addition and revision.

The Great War has had a stimulating effect on the production of poetry. Professional poets have been spokesmen for the inarticulate, and a host of hitherto unknown writers have acquired reputation. An immense amount of verse has been written by soldiers in active service. The Allies are fighting for human liberty, and this Idea is an inspiration. It is comforting to know that some who have made the supreme sacrifice will be remembered through their printed poems, and it is a pleasure to aid in giving them public recognition.

Furthermore, the war, undertaken by Germany to dominate the world by crushing the power of Great Britain, has united all English-speaking people as nothing else could have done. In this book, all poetry written in the English language is considered as belonging to English literature.

It should be apparent that I am not a sectarian in art, but am thankful for poetry wherever I find it. I have endeavored to make clear the artistic, intellectual, and spiritual significance of many of

our contemporary English-writing poets. The difficulties of such an undertaking are obvious; but there are two standards of measure. One is the literature of the past, the other is the life of today. I judge every new poet by these two tests. The fashion in poetry is always swinging from Spenser to Donne, and back again; from Tennyson to Thompson, and back again. At this moment the influence of John Donne is wider than at any time since the mid-seventeenth century. Our latest extras in flesh and spirit can hardly surpass his candour or his ecstasy. Meanwhile, amid the winds of doctrine and the gusts of sentiment, the old tunes are heard. With reference to the life and thought of today, many of our poets may be called reflectors and interpreters.

I have given some biographical detail, because it is important and not always easy to find.

W. L. P.

Yale University,
Tuesday, 4 June 1918.

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Although English poetry of the twentieth century seems inferior to the poetry of the Victorian epoch, for in England there is no one equal to Tennyson or Browning, and in America no one equal to Poe, Emerson, or Whitman, still it may fairly be said that we can discern an advance in English poetry not wholly to be measured either by the calendar and the clock, or by sheer beauty of expression. I should not like to say that Joseph Conrad is a greater writer than Walter Scott; and yet in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* there is an intellectual sincerity, a profound psychological analysis, a resolute intention to discover and to reveal the final truth concerning the children of the sea, that one would hardly expect to find in the works of the wonderful Wizard. Shakespeare was surely a

greater poet than Wordsworth; but the man of the Lakes, with the rich inheritance of two centuries, had a capital of thought unpossessed by the great dramatist, which, invested by his own genius, enabled him to draw returns from nature undreamed of by his mighty predecessor. Wordsworth was not great enough to have written *King Lear;* and Shakespeare was not late enough to have written *Tintern Abbey.* Every poet lives in his own time, has a share in its scientific and philosophical advance, and his individuality is coloured by his experience. Even if he take a Greek myth for a subject, he will regard it and treat it in the light of the day when he sits down at his desk, and addresses himself to the task of composition. It is absurd to call the Victorians old-fashioned or out of date; they were as intensely modern as we, only their modernity is naturally not ours.

A great work of art is never old-fashioned; because it expresses in final form some truth about human nature, and human nature never changes—in comparison with its primal elements, the mountains are ephemeral. A drama dealing with the impalpable human soul is more likely to stay true than a treatise on geology. This is the notable advantage that works of art have over works of science, the advantage of being and remaining true. No matter how important the contribution of scientific books, they are alloyed with inevitable error, and after the death of their authors must be constantly revised by lesser men, improved by

smaller minds; whereas the masterpieces of poetry, drama and fiction cannot be revised, because they are always true. The latest edition of a work of science is the most valuable; of literature, the earliest.

Apart from the natural and inevitable advance in poetry that every year witnesses, we are living in an age characterized both in England and in America by a remarkable advance in poetry as a vital influence. Earth's oldest inhabitants probably cannot remember a time when there were so many poets in activity, when so many books of poems were not only read, but bought and sold, when poets were held in such high esteem, when so much was written and published about poetry, when the mere forms of verse were the theme of such hot debate. There are thousands of minor poets, but poetry has ceased to be a minor subject. Any one mentally alive cannot escape it. Poetry is in the air, and everybody is catching it. Some American magazines are exclusively devoted to the printing of contemporary poems; anthologies are multiplying, not "Keepsakes" and "Books of Gems," but thick volumes representing the bumper crop of the year. Many poets are reciting their poems to big, eager, enthusiastic audiences, and the atmosphere is charged with the melodies of ubiquitous minstrelsy.

The time is ripe for the appearance of a great poet. A vast audience is gazing expectantly at a stage crowded with subordinate actors, waiting

for the Master to appear. The Greek dramatists were sure of their public; so were the Russian novelists; so were the German musicians. The "conditions" for poetry are intensified by reason of the Great War. We have got everything except the Genius. And the paradox is that although the Genius may arise out of right conditions, he may not; he may come like a thief in the night. The contrast between public interest in poetry in 1918 and in 1830, for an illustration, is unescapable. At that time the critics and the magazine writers assured the world that "poetry is dead." Ambitious young authors were gravely advised not to attempt anything in verse—as though youth ever listened to advice! Many critics went so far as to insist that the temper of the age was not "adapted" to poetry, that not only was there no interest in it, but that even if the Man should appear, he would find it impossible to sing in such a time and to such a coldly indifferent audience. And yet at that precise moment, Tennyson launched his "chiefly lyrical" volume, and Browning was speedily to follow.

Man is ever made humble by the facts of life; and even literary critics cannot altogether ignore them. Let us not then make the mistake of being too sure of the immediate future; nor the mistake of overestimating our contemporary poets; nor the mistake of despising the giant Victorians. Let us devoutly thank God that poetry has come into its own; that the modern poet, in

public estimation, is a Hero; that no one has to apologize either for reading or for writing verse. An age that loves poetry with the passion characteristic of the twentieth century is not a flat or materialistic age. We are not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.

In the world of thought and spirit this is essentially a fighting age. The old battle between the body and the soul, between Paganism and Christianity, was never so hot as now, and those who take refuge in neutrality receive contempt. Pan and Jesus Christ have never had so many enthusiastic followers. We Christians believe our Leader rose from the dead, and the followers of Pan say their god never died at all. It is significant that at the beginning of the twentieth century two English poets wrote side by side, each of whom unconsciously waged an irreconcilable conflict with the other, and each of whom speaks from the grave today to a concourse of followers. These two poets did not "flourish" in the twentieth century, because the disciple of the bodily Pan was a cripple, and the disciple of the spiritual Christ was a gutter-snipe; but they both lived, lived abundantly, and wrote real poetry. I refer to William Ernest Henley, who died in 1903, and to Francis Thompson, who died in 1907.

Both Henley and Thompson loved the crowded streets of London, but they saw different visions there. Henley felt in the dust and din of the city the irresistible urge of spring, the invasion of the

smell of distant meadows; the hurly-burly bearing witness to the annual conquest of Pan.

> Here in this radiant and immortal street
> Lavishly and omnipotently as ever
> In the open hills, the undissembling dales,
> The laughing-places of the juvenile earth.
> For lo! the wills of man and woman meet,
> Meet and are moved, each unto each endeared
> As once in Eden's prodigal bowers befel,
> To share his shameless, elemental mirth
> In one great act of faith, while deep and strong,
> Incomparably nerved and cheered,
> The enormous heart of London joys to beat
> To the measures of his rough, majestic song:
> The lewd, perennial, overmastering spell
> That keeps the rolling universe ensphered
> And life and all for which life lives to long
> Wanton and wondrous and for ever well.

The *London Voluntaries* of Henley, from which the above is a fair example, may have suggested something to Vachel Lindsay both in their irregular singing quality and in the direction, borrowed from notation, which accompanies each one, *Andante con moto, Scherzando, Largo e mesto, Allegro maestoso.* Henley's Pagan resistance to Puritan morality and convention, constantly exhibited positively in his verse, and negatively in his defiant Introduction to the Works of Burns and in the famous paper on R. L. S., is the main characteristic of his mind and temperament. He was by nature a rebel—a rebel against the Anglican God and against English social conventions. He loved all fighting rebels, and one of his most