Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

75

ISSN 1052-4851

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 75

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

THOMSON
GALE

Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn. • Waterville, Maine • London

Poetry Criticism, Vol. 75

Project Editor
Michelle Lee

Editorial
Kathy D. Darrow, Jeffrey W. Hunter, Jelena O. Krstović, Thomas J. Schoenberg, Noah Schusterbauer, Lawrence J. Trudeau, Russel Whitaker

Data Capture
Frances Monroe, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services
Laurie Andriot

Rights and Acquisitions
Edna Hedblad, Shalice Shah-Caldwell, Kim Smilay, and Andrew Specht

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Lezlie Light, Mike Logusz, Dan Newell, Christine O'Bryan

Composition and Electronic Capture
Tracey L. Matthews

Manufacturing
Rhonda Dover

Associate Product Manager
Marc Cormier

For more information, contact
Thomson Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
Or you can visit our internet site at http://www.gale.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 91-118494

ISBN-13 978-0-7876-8709-0
ISBN-10 0-7876-8709-X
ISSN 1052-4851

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Thomson Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Thomson Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Thomson Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

Organization of the Book

Each *PC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *PC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *PC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *PC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order all individual poems, book-length poems, and collection titles contained in the *PC* series. Titles of poetry collections and separately published poems are printed in italics, while titles of individual poems are printed in roman type with quotation marks. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing *Poetry Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 79-88. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series
Thomson Gale
27500 Drake Road

Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
1-800-347-4253 (GALE)
Fax: 248-699-8054

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *PC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *PC*, VOLUME 75, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

American Poetry, v. 6, fall, 1988 for "Objectivist Romantic: Ezra Pound and the Poetic Constellations of Robert Duncan" by Christopher Beach. Copyright © 1988 by Lee Bartlett and Peter White. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***ANQ,*** v. 12, fall, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802.—***boundary 2,*** v. 8, winter, 1980. Copyright © 1980 by *boundary 2*. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher.—***Chicago Review,*** v. 45, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by *Chicago Review.* Reproduced by permission.—***Christianity and Literature,*** v. 53, spring, 2004. Copyright © 1982-2004 by the H. W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—***Contemporary Literature,*** v. 30, spring, 1989; v. 33, summer, 1992; v. 35, fall, 1994. Copyright © 1989, 1992, 1994 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All reproduced by permission.—***Critical Quarterly,*** v. 28, winter, 1986. Copyright © 1986 by Basil Blackwell, Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Blackwell Publishers.—***Cross Currents,*** v. 46, spring, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by Cross Currents, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—***Dalhousie Review,*** v. 56, spring, 1976 for "Poetry of Commitment: John Betjeman's Later Writing" by Geoffrey M. Harvey. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—***Gettysburg Review,*** v. 12, autumn, 1999 for "Poetry and Lies" by Dorothy Barresi. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review,*** v. 4, fall, 1997. Copyright © 1997 by Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—***Hudson Review,*** v. lvii, spring, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by the Hudson Review, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—***Ironwood*** 22, v. 11, fall, 1983. Content Copyright © 1983 by Ironwood Press. Reproduced by permission.—***Kentucky Review,*** v. 12, autumn, 1993 for "The Native American Presence in Mary Oliver's Poetry" by Robin Riley Fast. Copyright © 1993 by the University of Kentucky Libraries. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Language and Style,*** v. 19, summer, 1986 for "Potencies of Words: A Grammetrical Reading of Robert Duncan's 'The Propositions, 2'" by Enikö Bollobás. Copyright © 1987 by E. L. Epstein. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***New Criterion,*** v. 23, March, 2005 for "Betjeman: A 'Whim of Iron'" by Brooke Allen. Copyright © 2005 by Foundation for Cultural Review. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***North Dakota Quarterly,*** v. 55, fall, 1987. Copyright © 1987 by the University of North Dakota. Reproduced by permission.—***Parnassus: Poetry in Review,*** v. 21, 1996 for "Exquisite Environments" by Gyorgyi Voros. Copyright © 1996 by Poetry in Review Foundation, NY. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—***Poetry,*** v. 176, for "Prosody for the People" by Robert B. Shaw. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Review of English Studies,*** v. 42, November, 1991 for "Betjeman's Riddel Posts: An Echo of Ninian Comper" by Edward Wilson. Copyright © 1991 by Oxford University Press. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—***Sagetrieb,*** v. 4, fall & winter, 1985 for "Robert Duncan: Talent and the Individual Tradition" by Michael André Bernstein. / v. 9, spring & fall, 1990 for "Robert Duncan and the Mercurial Self" by Timothy Materer. International copyright © 1985, 1991 by the National Poetry Foundation. Both reproduced by permission of the respective authors.—***Southern Review,*** v. 41, winter, 2005 for "Pushing and Pulling" by Jay Rogoff. Copyright © 1982-2005 by the H. W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Thoreau Society Bulletin,*** summer, 1998. Reproduced by permission. www.thoreausociety.org—***Twentieth Century Literature,*** v. 39, fall, 1993. Copyright © 1993 by Hofstra University Press. Reproduced by permission.—***Women's Studies,*** v. 21, 1992. Copyright © 1992 Gordon and Breach, Science Publishers SA. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, http://www.taylorandfrancis.com.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *PC*, VOLUME 75, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Birkenhead, Lord. From "Introduction to the First Edition," in ***John Betjeman: Collected Poems.*** Edited by Earl of Birkenhead. John Murray, 1955. Copyright © by John Betjeman 1955, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1968, 1970, 1979, 1981, 1982, 2001.

Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Barbara M. Bibel
Librarian
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Dr. Toby Burrows
Principal Librarian
The Scholars' Centre
University of Western Australia Library
Nedlands, Western Australia

Celia C. Daniel
Associate Reference Librarian
Howard University Libraries
Washington, D.C.

David M. Durant
Reference Librarian
Joyner Library
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Nancy T. Guidry
Librarian
Bakersfield Community College
Bakersfield, California

Heather Martin
Arts & Humanities Librarian
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library
Birmingham, Alabama

Susan Mikula
Librarian
Indiana Free Library
Indiana, Pennsylvania

Thomas Nixon
Humanities Reference Librarian
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis Library
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mark Schumacher
Jackson Library
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, North Carolina

Gwen Scott-Miller
Assistant Director
Sno-Isle Regional Library System
Marysville, Washington

Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

John Betjeman 1906-1984 1
English poet, essayist, historian, editor, and writer of children's stories

Robert Duncan 1919-1988 110
American poet, essayist, and playwright

Mary Oliver 1935- 280
American poet and essayist

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 349

PC Cumulative Nationality Index 457

PC-75 Title Index 461

John Betjeman
1906-1984

English poet, essayist, historian, editor, and writer of children's stories.

INTRODUCTION

Poet Laureate of England until his death in 1984, Betjeman was an enormously popular poet whose topographical verse was well-known and revered throughout Britain, although it was not always warmly received by critics.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Betjeman, an only child, was born on August 28, 1906, into a prosperous London family headed by his father Ernest, an inventor and manufacturer of Dutch ancestry. Three years later the family moved to Highgate, spending their summers at their cottage in Cornwall. In 1911 Betjeman began his formal schooling at Byron House, and four years later enrolled at Highgate Junior School. In 1917, at the age of eleven, he began attending the Dragon School, Oxford, where a faculty member introduced him to the study of architecture, which became a lifelong interest for him. In September of 1920, Betjeman transferred to Marlborough College, a public school in Wiltshire, and in 1925 entered Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was tutored by C. S. Lewis and befriended by W. H. Auden and Evelyn Waugh. He edited a literary magazine and routinely neglected his studies, and in 1928 he left without taking a degree. Betjeman taught briefly at Heddon Court School in Hertfordshire and then took a position as assistant editor of *Architectural Review.* While there, he met Penelope Hester Chetwode, whose father was a Field Marshall and the Commander-in-Chief in India. Although her family strongly disapproved of Betjeman's middle-class origins, the couple married in 1933 and took up residence on a farm in Uffington, in Berkshire. The Betjemans had two children but their marriage was troubled almost from the beginning. Betjeman took little interest in his offspring and always maintained a separate residence in the city, leaving Penelope to care for the children in the country. Betjeman continued to occupy his time with journalism and the editorship of the Shell Oil Company's travel guides to the English counties, producing one for Cornwall in 1934 and one for Devon two years later. He was also publishing his poetry during this period in various journals and in very small limited editions.

During World War II, Betjeman served in the Ministry of Information, and from 1941 until 1943 as the Press Attaché in Dublin, as well as in a variety of other administrative positions in which he proved very successful. Betjeman was knighted in 1969 and was named England's Poet Laureate in 1972 by Queen Elizabeth II; he retained that position until 1984. Betjeman died on May 19, 1984, at his vacation home in Cornwall after many years of ill health caused by Parkinson's disease and a number of strokes. He is buried in Cornwall at St. Enodoc Church.

MAJOR WORKS

Betjeman's first book of poetry, *Mount Zion; or, In Touch with the Infinite* was published in 1931. The volume contains poems on themes that preoccupied Betjeman throughout his writing career—topography and architecture, fear of death, and nostalgia for a way of life that was quickly disappearing in England. He satirized British society and Victorian notions of propriety in his next collection, *Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgeois Verse* (1937), considered by some critics more mature and technically accomplished than *Mount Zion.*

Old Lights for New Chancels appeared in 1940 and contains Betjeman's most famous poem, "A Subaltern's Love-Song," as well as a number of more somber pieces such as "On a Portrait of a Deaf Man," an elegy for the poet's father. The volume marked the beginning of the focus on illness and death that would characterize Betjeman's later work. In 1945 *New Bats in Old Belfries* was published; Betjeman's attraction to the sea, particularly along the coast of Cornwall, is apparent in this offering, which also contains several poems based on his childhood memories. In 1954 Betjeman produced the very well-received volume *A Few Late Chrysanthemums,* and in 1958, *Collected Poems.* His best-known and best-loved individual pieces are contained in that volume, including many of his comic and satiric poems. In 1960 Betjeman published an autobiography in verse entitled *Summoned by Bells,* followed by his last important volumes, *High and Low* (1966), and *A Nip in the Air* (1974). In addition to poetry, Betjeman published

a number of essays on the history of English architecture, showcasing his particular interest in churches built in the nineteenth century.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Betjeman was known during his lifetime as an enormously popular poet whose verse was familiar to most Englishmen. His work was generally less popular with critics, although his fellow poets—particularly W. H. Auden and Philip Larkin—were among his most fervent admirers. Auden provided the introduction to *Slick But Not Streamlined* (1947) and took issue with any "idiotic critic" who might consider Betjeman's poems "trivial." The Earl of Birkenhead concurred, insisting that "the apparently effortless manner in which John Betjeman writes should deceive no one as to the intense care that goes into his craftsmanship, and its great metrical skill." Geoffrey M. Harvey, too, contends that Betjeman's very popularity is the reason he is disparaged by critics who consider his poetry "lightweight, even frivolous, and relegate him to the rank of a minor comic poet." According to Harvey, Betjeman's work is not only serious, but even subversive, since the poet criticized English society in an increasingly strident, angry fashion in his later work.

Betjeman's topographical poetry has been praised by several scholars, among them John Sparrow, who maintains that Betjeman was not only fascinated by various locales, but also had the ability "to seize upon the effective features of each scene and endow them with an appropriate form and rhythm, with their own peculiar tune." Peter Thomas suggests that tourists trying to discover what the British Isles are really like would do well to use Betjeman's *Collected Poems* as a guidebook "to the whole, over-populated United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland), alternately celebrated or castigated for its people in their strengths and in their follies; for its towns and villages and landscapes in their mixture of decadence and grace." Betjeman's recreations of recognizable English locales are generally tinged with nostalgia, however. Derek Stanford finds that the public reacts to the world captured by Betjeman in his poetry "with a start of regret since it is a world which is disappearing from us; a world slipping into the past in which the memories of our childhood or our parents' hey-days lie buried." Ralph J. Mills, Jr. also points out that readers find in Betjeman a poet "whose world, though often at the point of disappearing in actuality or only now available through images drawn from memory, they can recognize as the one in which they live or have lived." John Press notes that between 1954 and 1966 Betjeman wrote poems that "record the poet's deepening awareness of change and decay, mortality and the passing of the old order," and Frank Delaney notes that "John Betjeman's London echoes with an unanticipated loneliness."

Betjeman has been both praised and vilified for failing to embrace twentieth-century poetic innovations. Dennis Brown notes that "in a century that has restlessly destabilized the formal poetic line . . . , Betjeman's work has consistently held to traditional boundaries, as if these constituted the essence of poetic Englishness." Press considers it "a mark of his originality and authenticity as a poet that he has always remained indifferent to changes in poetic fashion and to dominant critical shibboleths." Bevis Hillier acknowledges that Betjeman "could be seen as flagrantly, flauntingly, anti-modernist," but asserts that the poet "has been able to distil and bottle the essence of every decade he has lived through." Patrick Taylor-Martin also notes that the poet was "apparently unaffected by all that the term 'modernism' implied," but contends that he "was not just an escapist, a traditionalist whose appeal was, at best, anachronistic"; according to Taylor-Martin, Betjeman had "married a modern sensibility to a traditional technique and produced something genuinely original."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Mount Zion; or, In Touch with the Infinite 1931
Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgeois Verse 1937
Old Lights for New Chancels: Verses Topographical and Amatory 1940
New Bats in Old Belfries 1945
Slick But Not Streamlined: Poems and Short Pieces (selected and introduced by W. H. Auden) 1947
Selected Poems (compiled and introduced by John Sparrow) 1948
First and Last Loves 1952
A Few Late Chrysanthemums 1954
Poems in the Porch 1954
Collected Poems 1958
Summoned by Bells 1960
High and Low 1966
A Nip in the Air 1974
Church Poems 1981
Uncollected Poems 1982
The Illustrated Poems of John Betjeman 1995

Other Major Works

Ghastly Good Taste; or, A Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of English Architecture (essay) 1933
An Oxford University Chest (essay) 1938
Vintage London (essay) 1942

A Pictorial History of English Architecture (history) 1972
Archie and the Strict Baptists (juvenilia) 1977
John Betjeman: Coming Home; an Anthology of His Prose 1920-1977 (prose) 1997

CRITICISM

W. H. Auden (essay date 1947)

SOURCE: Auden, W. H. Introduction to *Slick But Not Streamlined: Poems & Short Pieces by John Betjeman,* selected by W. H. Auden, pp. 9-16. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1947.

[*In the following introduction, Auden offers a lighthearted appraisal of Betjeman's topographical poetry, but cautions critics and readers to avoid dismissing it as trivial.*]

It is difficult to write seriously about a man one has sung hymns with or judiciously about a poet whose work makes one violently jealous. Normally when I read good poetry, for example Mr. Eliot's line

> The place of solitude where three dreams cross

my reaction is one of delighted admiration; a standard of excellence has been set in one way which I must try to live up to in mine: but when I read such lines of Mr. Betjeman as

> And that mauve hat three cherries decorate
> Next week shall topple from its trembling perch
> While wet fields reek like some long empty church

I am, frankly, rather annoyed because they are not by me. My feeling is similar to that one has when; on arriving at some long-favorite picnic spot in the woods, one finds that another trespasser has discovered it too.

Indeed, like a character in a tale by Hoffman, I can never make up my mind whether Mr. Betjeman was born after the flesh or whether he was magically begotten by myself in a punt on the Cherwell one summer evening in 1926. I have no memory of company on the outward journey on that occasion; I only know that *two* of us returned. Since that day Mr. Betjeman has indubitably existed, looking, to the outward eye, like anyone else, as an editor of the *Architectural Review,* an editor of the Shell-Mex guidebooks to the English counties, a husband, a father, a churchwarden, a secretary to a local of the Agricultural Laborers' Union, etc., but I *wonder.* Even if there was a real Betjeman once, I am afraid that he has been evicted and his place taken by the obstinate spirit of my favorite aunt Daisy. She was said to be what is called "mentally retarded" and was looked after in a convent (from which she occasionally ran away), and used to come to us for the Christmas holidays, when her brilliant skill at Happy Families belied her reputation for not being "quite all there." She had one obsession; being totally deaf in one ear, she would implore us to promise that, when she died, we would not bury her too deep, for then she might never hear the last trumpet. Sure enough, at her funeral, when the coffin was being lowered into the grave, it stuck halfway down and refused to budge. It is my secret conviction that she fooled us all about being buried and that it is her dear chilblained mittened hand which now prompts Mr. Betjeman's pen. How else could he have entered so intimately into my childhood? How else could he be so at home with the provincial gaslit towns, the seaside lodgings, the bicycles, the harmonium, above all, the atmosphere of ritualistic controversy? By the time I could walk, I had learned to look down with distaste on "Prots"—they were said never to kneel properly but only to squat—to detest the modernism of our bishop, and mildly deplore the spikyness of Aunt Mill, who attended a church where they had the Silent Canon and Benediction. How else could he know—apart from church organists and myself nobody else does—what hymns are sung to Melcomb, Eudoxia, Redhead 76, Nicaea, Irby, Stockport, University College, etc., or which composer enunciated that curious and original doctrine:—"As it was, it was in the beginning"———?

Because of all this, it is quite impossible for me to bore the reader with a serious critical introduction to Mr. Betjeman's work. I shall not spoil the field for potential Ph.D.s by discussing the influence on the poet's development of Ebenezer Elliott or C. S. Lewis, or by counting the number of his references to the bicycle. Besides, Mr. Betjeman has said for himself all that needs to be said in the extract which follows this introduction. A few general remarks about topophilia may, however, be in order here since, so far as I know, it rarely attacks professional poets in this country.

Topophilia differs from the farmer's love of his home soil and the litterateur's fussy regional patriotism in that it is not possessive or limited to any one locality; the practised topophil can operate in a district he has never visited before. On the other hand, it has little in common with nature love. Wild or unhumanised nature holds no charms for the average topophil because it is lacking in history; (the exception which proves the rule is the geological topophil). At the same time, though history manifested by objects is essential, the quantity of the history and the quality of the object are irrelevant; a branch railroad is as valuable as a Roman wall, a neo-Tudor teashop as interesting as a Gothic cathedral.

America is so big, the countryside not actually under cultivation so wild, that the automobile is essential to movement. Topophilia, however, cannot survive at velocities greater than that of a somewhat rusty bicycle. (Hence, Betjeman's obsession with that vehicle.) The American landscape, therefore, must probably be left to the farmers and the nature lovers, and topophilia will flourish chiefly in the cities where it is possible to walk; moreover it is more likely to be found among ward bosses than among literary men.

For example, that well-known poem by the late Stephen Vincent Benét, "I've fallen in love with American names," is not a topophiliac poem. When the poet enjoins the reader

> Bury my heart at Wounded Knee

the latter is not convinced that the poet had ever been there or would have liked it if he had. It remains a pretty name on a historical map, like the names in Milton.

A topophil would probably have written something like

> Bury my heart at the corner of West 4th and 6th Avenue:

But topophiliac poetry does get written here and appears from time to time in local newspapers. As I write, the current issue of the *New Yorker* contains a specimen from the Carlisle (Pa.) *Valley Planter,* celebrating the last trolley from Carlisle to Holly.

> . . . The line was on North Pine Street, just opposite old
> Hotel Argone. Charles Lenhart was the conductor, and
> Norman Leidigh motored it along. Bong! Bong! went the gong
> when Norman tramped on it. Along went the car with few people
> in it, and groaned and creaked as it went
> out the street and, by golly, on reaching Mt. Holly, for
> it would run nevermore, stopped of itself for medicine right in front
> of Doc Snyder's drugstore.

Much as I admire the *New Yorker,* it disturbs me that this poem should appear in small type under the patronising heading Poesy Department. Its technique may not be very distinguished, but the reader who does not recognise that this is poetry (and poetry a great deal better than much which appears in the more favored and well-paid positions in the *New Yorker*) has very poor taste. He will never appreciate one of my favorite stanzas in English poetry:

> Here's success to this foreign station
> Where American ships without horses ride,
> And Portugueses from every nation
> Comes in rotation upon the tide.
> But not forgetting Haulbowline Island
> That was constructed by, Mrs. Deane:
> Herself's the lady that has stored the water
> To supply the vessels upon the main.

Nor will he like Mr. Betjeman.

> The sun was low on the railway line
> And over the bricks and stacks
> And in at the upstairs windows
> Of the Dawley houses' backs,
> When we saw the ghost of Captain Webb,
> Webb in a water skeeting,
> Come dripping along in a bathing dress
> To the Saturday evening meeting.
> Dripping along—
> Dripping along—
> To the Congregational Hall;
> Dripping and still he rose over the sill and faded away in a wall.

This is technically brilliant where the Carlisle poem is inept, but it belongs to the same poetic genre, and I would like to hope that the publication of this volume will inspire American topophils to take poetry seriously and American poets to take topophilia seriously.

It is one of my constant regrets that I am too short-sighted, too much of a Thinking Type, to attempt this sort of poetry, which requires a strongly visual imagination. I have seen what was the most beautiful building in New York, the El station at Sands Street, vanish unsung. Had I only Mr. Betjeman's talent, what a lovely poem I should have written about it. What lovely poems would I be writing now about Schrafft's Blue Plate Special, Stouffer's teashop, the Brighton Beach Line, the General Theological Seminary on Ninth Avenue at Twenty-first Street, the Shakespeare garden in Central Park, the Portuguese Jewish cemetery on West Eleventh Street, Italian opera in Brooklyn, the Garibaldi house on Staten Island, Welfare Island, the Hotel Seville on Twenty-ninth Street, Sam's Umbrella Shop, the Museum of American Indian Art, etc., etc.

I am tempted at this point to try to forestall any idiotic critic who may think—whether with approval or disapproval is all one, for both are equally wrongheaded—that Mr. Betjeman's poems are trivial, that, because he does not write earnestly about religion, love, and death, he is lacking in real faith and sincere emotion, but I realise that the blind cannot be argued into vision. If the reader cannot see for himself that when Mr. Betjeman writes

> Oh! then what a pleasure to see the ground floor
> With tables for two laid as tables for four,
> And bottles of sauce and Kia-Ora and squash
> Awaiting their owners who'd gone up to wash. . . .
> And I think, as these fancy-lit sights I recall,
> It is these we are fighting for, foremost of all.

he means exactly what he says, nothing I could say will make him. I will content myself with asserting dogmati-

cally that, this season, the man of good will will wear his heart up his sleeve, not on it. For better or worse, we who live in this age not only feel but are critically conscious of our emotions—there is no difference in this respect between the highest of highbrows and the most farouche of soda jerkers—and, in consequence, again for better or worse, a naïve rhetoric, one that is not confessedly "theatrical," is now impossible in poetry. The honest manly style is today only suited to Iago.

Let me end as I began, on a personal note. Were it possible to escape from our duties to God and our neighbor into our private islands of schizophrenic bliss, very few of us, I fancy, would take with us any of the great works of world literature. Our libraries would consist, for the most part, of those books which, read in childhood, formed our personal vision of the public world. To these tattered, dog-eared volumes, however, most of us have in the course of our lives added one or two extra treasures. In my case Mr. Betjeman's work belongs—so do the novels of Ronald Firbank and the Li'l Abner cartoons—to this tiny group of later additions to my original nursery library: he is privileged to stand beside *Icelandic Legends, Machinery for Metalliferous Mines, Eric or Little by Little, Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor* (Stanley Smith, M.A., D.Sc. H. M. Stationery Office. 3s6d net), *Struwelpeter, Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (the 1869 edition), *The Edinburgh School of Surgery, Hymns Ancient and Modern* (with tunes), and *Dangers to Health,* a Victorian treatise on plumbing with colored plates which, incidentally, I lent to Mr. Betjeman twelve years ago and he has not yet returned. I see I shall have to pray Aunt Daisy to speak to him most severely about it.

John Sparrow (essay date 1948)

SOURCE: Sparrow, John. "Preface." In *Selected Poems by John Betjeman,* selected by John Sparrow, pp. ix-xxii. London: John Murray, 1948.

[*In the following preface, Sparrow discusses the strong sense of place inherent in Betjeman's poetry.*]

In the Preface to his second collection of verses—***Old Lights for New Chancels***—John Betjeman described the kind of poetry he most enjoys; and it is the kind to which the best of his own poetry belongs. Most of the pieces in that book, and in his later volume—***New Bats in Old Belfries***—are inspired by what he calls his "topographical predilection": they describe a scene, or convey the atmosphere of a place. If there are figures in the foreground, they are subordinate to their setting and somehow expressive of it; and even when the poem tells a story the incidents seem to be designed to make the landscape articulate, to give a voice, as it were, to the atmosphere of the Lincolnshire fens or the lakes of Westmeath or the London suburbs.

Yet, though these poems owe so much to places and their associations, they are not "Nature poems"; though he is moved by what he sees around him, and especially by what he sees around him in the country-side, their author indulges in no reflections upon it, still less upon the feelings it evokes in him. He is content to observe, and—however deeply he may feel—to describe only what he sees and hears. In other words, he is not a Nature poet, like Wordsworth, but a landscape poet, like Crabbe. And, like Crabbe, he is the painter of the particular, the recognizable, landscape; his trees are not merely real trees with their roots in the earth, they are conifers with their roots in the red sand of Camberley, "feathery ash in leathery Lambourne," or forsythia in the Banbury Road. For there is a great variety of landscape in his poems; unlike most pastoral poets, each of whom has his own "especial rural scene"—Crabbe on the Suffolk coast, Cowper on the banks of the Ouse, Barnes among the farms of Dorsetshire—this poet is equally at home in the most diverse surroundings—in the tame Thames valley:

> In mud and elder-scented shade
> A reach away the breach is made
> By dive and shout
> That circles out
> To Henley tower and town;
> And "Boats for Hire" the rafters ring,
> And pink on white the roses cling,
> And red the bright geraniums swing
> In baskets dangling down—

and on the wild Cornish coast:

> But when a storm was at its height,
> And feathery slate was black in rain,
> And tamarisks were hung with light
> And golden sand was brown again,
> Spring tide and blizzard would unite
> And sea came flooding up the lane—

among the Lincolnshire fens:

> Oh cold was the ev'ning and tall was the tower
> And strangely compelling the tenor bell's power!
> As loud on the reed-beds and strong through the dark
> It toll'd from the church in the tenantless park.
>
> The mansion was ruined, the empty demesne
> Was slowly reverting to marshland again—
> Marsh where the village was, grass in the Hall,
> And the church and the Rectory waiting to fall—

and in an Irish churchyard:

> There in pinnacled protection,
> One extinguished family waits

A Church of Ireland resurrection
By the broken, rusty gates.
Sheepswool, straw and droppings cover
Graves of spinster, rake and lover,
Whose fantastic mausoleum
Sings its own sea-blown Te Deum,
In and out the slipping slates.

Plainly, what inspired the writer of those stanzas was a sense of place. Just as some people are fascinated by human beings, by their diversity and their peculiarities, so he has been fascinated by the peculiarities of various places, enjoying each simply for being what it is. Plainly, too, besides this unusual sensibility, he possesses the still rarer gift of being able to seize upon the effective features of each scene and endow them with an appropriate form and rhythm, with their own peculiar tune.

This topographical predilection, as he calls it, draws him not only to the country-side, where earlier pastoral poets have sought to indulge it, but to the town and, above all, to the suburbs. For the landscape that most appeals to him is the inhabited landscape: he cannot see a place without seeing also the life that is lived in it, without becoming conscious of its human associations. Like a portrait painter, interested not so much in the beauty as in the contours of a face and in the personality that moulds it, he can find matter for poetry in the least promising surroundings, provided they have an individual character and the breath of life. So, the threat of invasion wakes in him fears for the Margate of his childhood:

From third floor and fourth floor the children looked down
Upon ribbons of light in the salt-scented town;
And drowning the trams roared the sound of the sea
As it washed in the shingle the scraps of their tea.

* * *

Beside the Queen's Highcliffe now rank grows the vetch,
Now dark is the terrace, a storm-battered stretch;
And I think, as the fairy-lit sights I recall,
It is these we are fighting for, foremost of all—

and similar echoes reach him in the purlieus of Parliament Hill Fields:

Oh the after-tram-ride quiet, when we heard, a mile beyond,
Silver music from the bandstand, barking dogs by Highgate Pond;
Up the hill where stucco houses in Virginia creeper drown—
And my childish wave of pity, seeing children carrying down
Sheaves of drooping dandelions to the courts of Kentish Town.

"I see no harm," he writes, "in trying to describe overbuilt Surrey in verse. . . . I love suburbs and gas-lights and Pont Street and Gothic Revival churches and mineral railways, provincial towns and garden cities." Seen through his eyes—and he himself sees them through the eyes of the people who built, and the people who inhabit, them—even Croydon and North Oxford are endowed with an unsuspected charm.

To see such beauties, and to reveal them to others as Mr. Betjeman has done, is to contribute something new to poetry. But this ready sensibility, this versatility of taste, may easily become a snare to its possessor. The habit of judging things simply as specimens of their kind serves, no doubt, to extend the range of one's appreciation and to refine its edge; like a sense of "period," it opens the eyes to beauties and oddities of which others may be unaware; but, like all exploitations of taste, by tending towards concentration upon the foreground, it may obscure a wider vision. Absorbed in their appreciation of Pont Street, its victims may lose sight of the beauty of St. Paul's, and even persuade themselves, with a certain sense of triumph, that they derive a deeper pleasure from any Sandemanian Meeting-house than from Salisbury Cathedral.

In his earliest verses, collected in ***Mount Zion*** and ***Continual Dew,*** Mr. Betjeman was in danger of yielding to the seduction of the "original" and the "amusing"; he seemed content to lose himself in his new-found wonder-land of Victorian and post-Victorian architecture:

The Gothic is bursting over the way
With Evangelical Song,
For the pinnacled Wesley Memorial Church
Is over a hundred strong,
And what is a new Jerusalem
Gas-lit and yellow wall'd
To a semi-circular pitchpine sea
With electric light install'd?

His sense of period, and of certain periods in particular; his eye for detail; his relish for architectural and ecclesiastical eccentricities; his evident delight in this newly discovered field of poetry and his evident facility in exploiting it—all these threatened to inhibit any effort to extend his range of subject or of feeling. And here his admirers were his enemies: for his early verses gained him an audience of devotees who seemed to ask only that he should continue to amuse them by further variations on the theme of his own invention:

Oh worship the Lord in the beauty of ugliness! It looked, indeed, as if Mr. Betjeman was fated to end his days as the Laureate of the suburbs and the Gothic Revival—a position which he had, certainly, created and made his own, but one which was far from doing justice to his powers.

One or two of the more popular of those early pieces are collected as an Appendix to this book. There is no need to dwell on the qualities which made them popular, any more than on their defects: the felicities and the false notes both lie obviously on the surface. The lines on the arrest of Oscar Wilde are an attempt to create an atmosphere of "period" by wheeling the old stage properties—the astrakhan coat, the hock and seltzer, *The Yellow Book*—all too conscientiously into place; while as for **"Death in Leamington,"** that is Mr. Betjeman's *Innisfree,* doomed to haunt its author, in too persistent popularity, all his days. Compare these poems with the fragments of his Cornish Idyll or his lyrics on Bristol and on the Beaulieu River, and the distance he has travelled since he wrote them will immediately be plain.

The second part of ***Old Lights for New Chancels*** consists of poems which their author calls "amatory." Perhaps this name will serve for them as well as any other; to call them love-poems would be as misleading as to call his topographical verses nature-poetry, and misleading in the same direction. Between these two kinds of poems there is a curious analogy: fascinated by certain features of the human landscape, he describes Miss Joan Hunter Dunn as though she were a part of Surrey—lingering upon its surface, surrendering to its associations, and making his picture of it live by his unerring choice of detail. He does not analyse his feeling for his tennis-partner any more than he analyses his feeling for the Coulsdon woodlands: we have to gauge its depth simply from the warmth of his description. How deep, how "serious," that emotion may be it is difficult to say, and perhaps foolish to ask. But at least it is clear that, when his eyes are turned towards the landscape of sex, Mr. Betjeman's vision does not range beyond the features that can be seen from the foothills of childhood and adolescence; not for him the scent and the sympathy, the soulful or the sophisticated allurements, of mature femininity; he revives the passions of the school holidays, of the birthday party and the tennis tournament—emotions that were devastating out of all proportion to their depth, simply because they were too strong and full for the channels along which they were forced to flow:

> First love, first light, first life. A heartbeat noise!
> His heart or little feet? A snap of twigs
> Dry, dead and brown the under-branches part
> And Bonzo scrambles by their secret way.
> First love so deep, John Lambourn cannot speak,
> So deep, he feels a tightening in his throat,
> So tender, he could brush away the sand
> Dried up in patches on her freckled legs,
> Could hold her gently till the stars went down,
> And if she cut herself would staunch the wound,
> Yes, even with his First Eleven scarf,
> And hold it there for hours.

If he were a novelist, Mr. Betjeman would be the novelist of childhood: he remembers so well what it was like to be a child, and how the world looked through the sharp eyes of one who was still seeing things for the first time:

> Oh when the early morning at the seaside
> Took us with hurrying steps from Horsey Mere
> To see the whistling bent-grass on the leeside
> And then the tumbled breaker-line appear,
> On high, the clouds with mighty adumbration
> Sailed over us to seaward fast and clear
> And jelly-fish in quivering isolation
> Lay silted in the dry sand of the breeze
> And we, along the table-land of beach blown
> Went gooseflesh from our shoulders to our knees
> And ran to catch the football, each to each thrown,
> In the soft and swirling music of the seas.

The sea, and the days of his childhood—these are the sources from which spring almost all the most deeply felt (and they are also the most deeply moving) of his poems, and when those sources are united, as they are in his poems about Cornwall, the force of his creative emotion is at its strongest.

Other impulses move him to write, among them, a bent for satire, or something very like it. **"In a Bath Teashop"** might be a sketch by Thomas Hardy, and **"The Planster's Vision"** reveals his loathing of the socialized world into which he has had the misfortune to be born:

> Cut down that timber! Bells too many and strong
> Pouring their music through the branches bare
> From moon-white church-towers down the windy
> air
>
> Have pealed the centuries out with Evensong.
> Remove those cottages, a huddled throng!
> Too many babies have been born in there,
> Too many coffins, bumping down the stair,
> Carried the old their garden paths along . . .

But satire is not his *forte*: the sestet of the sonnet just quoted, and such early poems as **"Slough"** and **"In Westminster Abbey"** hardly rise above the level of the political lampoons in a weekly magazine. He possesses all the gifts that make a satirist except the gift of indignation. He has an eye for the external peculiarities of his fellow-creatures, and insight into the qualities that go with them. Put him in the hall of the Regent Palace Hotel or on the seafront at Blackpool or in the bar of a Bloomsbury public-house, and he will tell you all about the tastes and habits of those around him—the businessmen with portly stomachs and the intellectuals with pasty faces, the young men who sell motorcars and the girls they go about with: no facet of their ugliness or vulgarity escapes him. But so completely is he fascinated by what he sees, so absorbed by curiosity about his fellow-beings, that he quite forgets his natural