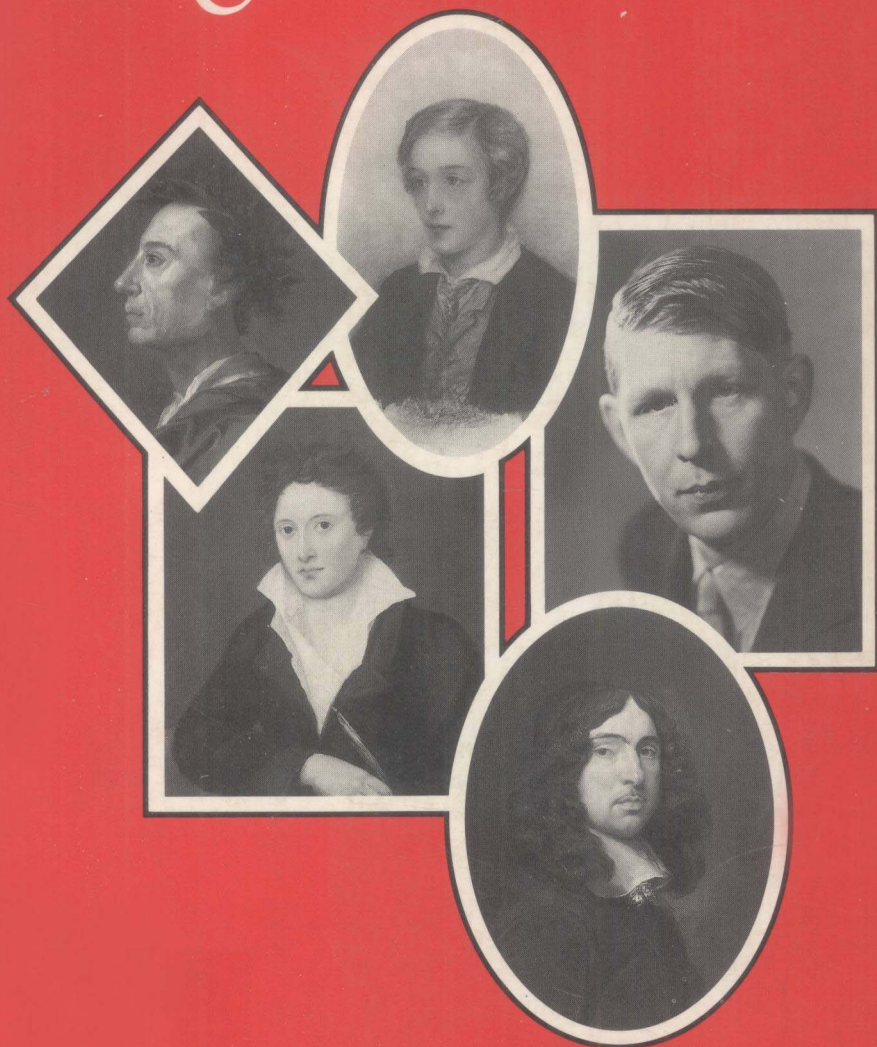


BRITISH POETRY

SINCE THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY



JOHN GARRETT

BRITISH POETRY SINCE THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

A Students' Guide

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MACMILLAN

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Leila.

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Introduction

It is the aim of this book to open up some of the gates that may appear to be unassailable or unscalable to the student whose familiarity with the literature of the British Isles is at present rudimentary. Ease of access is what is required and this is what will, it is hoped, be facilitated by the pages that follow. Some students have grown accustomed to thinking of William Shakespeare as an ogre or of Alexander Pope as a dry old bachelor, both of them writing in an English as archaic as it is incomprehensible. If this book can conquer prejudices like these and reveal that the works of such authors are as alive and informative today as ever they were, it will have achieved its goal.

In the following chapters selected poems will be presented for study, in chronological order, so that the book as a whole may provide the basis for an intensive course in British poetry for sixth-formers and first-year college and university students. Occasionally works by American poets are quoted, in illustration of points not conditioned by geography; but in the main the poetry dealt with here comes from native-born or naturalised British writers. The book sets out initially to demonstrate some of the methods by which poetry works – the means by which it gains its effects and accomplishes its end of absolute communication. From this the book moves on to a survey of the last four hundred years, a period during which poetry has been written in a relatively stable and ‘modern’ English language. The whole object is to alert readers to what has been going on in British poetry over the last four centuries: to introduce them to some illustrious people and to prepare them to meet others for whom room could not be found in these pages.

What characteristics, if any, are peculiar to British poetry? Which features are more accentuated than in the poetry of other nations? Britain’s poetic wealth has been accumulating through the centuries

gradually but inexorably, like the growth towards magnificence of a coral reef. When the Old English wordsmiths – the makers of *Beowulf*, ‘The Seafarer’ and ‘The Wanderer’ – were hewing their ringing, alliterative lines from the unwieldy granite of the Anglo-Saxon language, they were not only producing the first primitive examples in their culture of the power of poetry to survive time, but giving voice to themes and motifs that have continued to inform the matter and spirit of British poetry ever since. These were the pioneers of poetry in the British Isles, and perhaps they foresaw for their endeavours a no less perishable end than that encountered by the haunted individuals, ever aware of death’s imminence and ubiquity, of their verses. As yet there was no certainty of permanence for what they had made, for there was no existing body of literature to which their works could be attached. All might vanish, like the companions of the disconsolate ‘Wanderer’,

In the night of the past, as if they had never been.

(‘The Wanderer’, 88)

Even when Geoffrey Chaucer, several centuries later and in a language closer to the English of our own times, was embedding his poetry in parchment – a surer guarantee of survival than the earlier practice of oral recitation and transmission from memory – there is no sign that he regarded himself as part of a burgeoning poetic tradition. In fact, despite his confident use of vernacular English to convey an entire emotional range,¹ he was more indebted to Continental influences than to the patrimony of his native island. Besides, like his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, he could not have seen himself as contributing to a ‘national’ heritage, which was nonetheless unobtrusively consolidating. There was as yet no binding factor, either in history or geography, linking one British poet to another. Chaucer’s English contemporary William Langland was writing in a western dialect far removed from the London dialect of Chaucer’s verse. Langland’s English was as foreign to Chaucer as that of the Old English poets. Yet Chaucer’s poetry shares some of the same preoccupations of his Anglo-Saxon forbears and establishes a closer kinship with them than he was aware of.

Just as Chaucer saw himself as a courtier, more sophisticated poet than his rustic precursors, later generations were to consider him crude, in both the form and the content of his verses. The 17th-

century writer John Dryden, while admiring the vitality of Chaucer's work, considered it 'rude' from a technical point of view and set about refining and rewriting it in accordance with the canons of 'polished' poetry then current. Chaucer seemed to have existed in isolation, separated in space and time from other members of the confraternity and rejected by Renaissance and later poets as an inconsiderable part of the national heritage. Only with the Romantic reappraisal begun by William Blake – who recognised 'God's plenty' amid the shrewd characterisations of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims – and with the subsequent phonological discovery of the metrical laws governing Chaucer's lines was Chaucer admitted to be an essential thread in the poetic tapestry of Britain. His more immediate successors would not have adjudged him thus; and the English sonneteers – the first poets to write in an English which approximates to that of our own day – acknowledged horizontal connections with their Continental brethren rather than vertical ties to a British genealogy, much as Chaucer himself had done two centuries earlier.

Yet despite these recurrent eschewals of a continuing 'British' tradition by the poets themselves, despite the rejection by one era of an earlier era and the pledge of a new start, the same ideas and obsessions keep emerging from poets of different epochs, demonstrating that there are, after all, common bonds that help to define British poetry. What are these? They may be summed up in two substantives: the seasons and the sea.

All British poetry is imbued with an awareness that nature is in a continual flux, moving from winter through spring to high summer, followed by a decline into autumn and beyond until winter comes along and wraps up everything in a cocoon of snow and ice. The poet of 'The Wanderer' comments on the 'blowing snow and the blast of winter' that 'enfold the earth . . . raging wrath upon men', in harsh sympathy with his melancholic mood; while Chaucer, in lighter vein at the start of his pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales*, finds himself in the midst of a season appropriate to his gaiety and optimism,

Whan that Aprille with hise shoures sote	(showers/sweet)
The droghte of March hath perced to the	(drought/pierced/
rote.	root)
	('General Prologue', 1–2)

Four centuries later John Keats caught the lethargy of autumn after the year's labours have been brought to a fruitful conclusion, the harvest safely gathered in:

Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers.

('To Autumn')

The consciousness that things are continually changing, that life is becoming alternately stronger and weaker, that some men are ageing while others are simultaneously growing towards their prime, supplies much of British literature with an underlying rhythm. One senses that what is light may become dark (as in Shakespeare's *King Lear*) and, conversely, that what is dark will eventually lighten (as in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*). But the shortness of the British summer means that the emphasis in the nation's literature is often on the brevity of the period during which nature attains to fullness. So there is a latent awareness that darkness and sorrow are dominant in human affairs and that pleasure, youth and vitality must be snatched and enjoyed to the full for the few brief hours that they appear in this world. 'Youth's a stuff will not endure', sings Feste in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and it is a sentiment that runs like a melancholic undercurrent beneath the mainstream of the literature of the British Isles.

The other aspect of Britain that is an essential characteristic of its literature results from a geographical accident that has been both the strength and the weakness of its people: its insularity. From being separated by twenty miles of sea from the European continent, Britain has developed a feeling of 'separateness' from its neighbours. This separateness has manifested itself quite often as a feeling of national pride and superiority over its Continental cousins. In Shakespeare's *Henry V* twenty-nine Englishmen are killed during a battle in which ten thousand Frenchmen die. The playwright's feeling is that this makes the score about even. In William Wycherley's 17th-century play *The Country Wife*, and many other dramas of the Restoration period, the French are blamed for exporting venereal disease to the British Isles. At the end of the 18th century France, Italy, Spain and Germany supply the exotic settings and decadent characters for the English Gothic novels, in which anything indecorous and ungentlemanly can happen – and usually does.

Unspeakable crimes, in the general assumption, could only be fathered abroad, by the detested 'foreigner' – until Charles Dickens came along to reveal that London, too, nursed in its bosom a nest of vipers as loathsome as anything bred on alien soil.

Britons prided themselves on their 'difference' from the rabble across the Channel. This slim stretch of water has become the emblem of Britain's uniqueness. In the Second World War it was set alight to discourage German invaders. The sea is a recurrent, and very emotive, image in British literature. 'The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea', Matthew Arnold onomatopoeically called it, suggesting that mixture of dread and gratitude with which the British have traditionally beheld this barrier severing them from close contact with the rest of the world. John of Gaunt in Shakespeare's *Richard II* encomiastically refers to England as 'this precious stone set in a silver sea', a valuation in which the worth of the country is somehow enhanced by its isolation. The sea – like the seasons – shows many moods. Sometimes it is placid and brings calm or even melancholy to the spirit of the person who contemplates it (in Arnold's 'Dover Beach', for example); at other times it is a furious and vengeful god before whom the puny British native can only cower and grovel (this aspect of the sea is manifest in Coleridge's poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and in Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*). The sea is an element that both buoys man up and bears him down, sometimes bringing him life, sometimes death. But like the varying seasons themselves – which can range overnight from balminess to cataclysm – the sea has impregnated the British character and is constantly lapping in the background of its literature.

This was so from the beginning. *Beowulf* opens with the sea burial of a warrior lord, in 'a ship put out on the unknown deep', where the sea provokes a tremor of fear at the prospect of the last voyage, Death. Chaucer, for all his metropolitan urbanity, returns to the sea time and again, seeing in it an emblem both of the ease of trade by which a man might become rich and of the threat of death that might swallow him whole in an instant:

casuelly the shippes botme rente, (the ship's bottom split)
And ship and man under the water wente
In sighte of othere shippes it byside. (in full view of other ships)
('The Nun's Priest's Tale', 335–37)

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The seasons and the sea are the means through which British literature has consistently expressed its deepest concerns: they are the distinctive imprint of its island character.

1 Approaching Poetry

Poetry is a compressed form of expression and seeks a response which is simultaneously emotional and intellectual. It thus tries to reach its audience by as many means, or through as many channels, as possible. The poet uses many poetic devices (rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, imagery and so on) to convey his general theme, or particular aspects of that theme, as efficiently and emphatically as possible. The patterns a poem makes – its music and its metaphors – all serve the imperatives of its theme.

Theme

When confronting a poem one seeks to discover as soon as possible what is its 'gist'. The best way to divine this is, first of all, to look at the title of the poem, since this will provide an early clue to the labyrinth. Here, for example, is a poem by the First World War poet Wilfred Owen:

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 Shall shine the holy glimmer of good-byes.
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
 Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The title alone should lead one to expect certain contradictions in the poem itself. An anthem is a religious song, a hymn of praise and glorification, sung at moments of gladness. Yet what is being praised here? It is an anthem 'for doomed youth': a song of praise for young people condemned to die. The contradiction implicit in it suggests that the title does not exactly mean what it appears to mean: it is *ironic*. The word 'anthem' is used ironically, for it is in fact not an anthem but its opposite, a *dirge* (or funeral lament), that is the appropriate mode for such sombre subject-matter. Thus in the title of the poem the tensions and ironies on which the poem itself is based are already indicated.

Owen's poem soon demonstrates this fundamental opposition between the ethereality of a world of spiritual values (the Church) and the reality of a world in which men are slaughtered like beasts (the field of war). If the poem is read through two or three times, its theme can be developed a little further. Then a prose paraphrase might be made of it, as follows:

The conventional ceremonies of the Church are inappropriately applied to men who have been killed senselessly. The world of religion and the world of the modern war-machine are poles apart and can have nothing to do with each other. Religion is unable to cope with or comprehend this inane sacrifice; only in the minds of those who have loved them will the full horror and the ineffable tragedy of these young soldiers' deaths be realised.

It is not a bad idea to attempt such a paraphrase of any poem that one wishes to study. Such a practice will lay bare the theme of the poem; and once the theme is determined, it is a simple matter to examine all the other facets (tone, imagery, diction and so forth) by and through which this theme is communicated. In the example above, this task has been facilitated by the title, which indicates the ironic stance that the poet is adopting towards his subject-matter. Many longer poems

not only indicate their theme by their title but also give a summary in their opening lines of what is to follow. Thus John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is, as its title indicates, concerned with the ejection of man from the Garden of Eden and the first few lines of the poem elaborate this theme in what amounts to an extended subtitle:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.

On the other hand many a shorter poem has been left untitled, and its meaning has to be deduced from the body of the poem itself without the aid of an initial guidepost.

Tone

Having discovered what the subject of a poem is, the reader should consider the question of what the poet's attitude towards his topic is. What tone does his 'speaking voice' convey? Is he angry, placid, bitter, ironic, indifferent or what? The poet is usually personally involved in what he is writing about, which is why he chooses to write in verse, a medium suggestive of emotional utterance. In other words poetry very often involves the poet *subjectively* in his material whereas a prose version of the same material would seem detached, and even scientifically *objective*, by comparison.

To illustrate this point here are two people's expressions of the same experience. In 1802 William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy travelled across London's Westminster Bridge in the early morning. William wrote a poem about what he saw, while Dorothy recorded it in her journal. Here are the two versions:

- a) *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802*
Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This city now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
 Never did sun more beautifully steep
 In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
 Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
 The river glideth at his own sweet will:
 Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
 And all that mighty heart is lying still!

- b) It was a beautiful morning. The City, St. Paul's, with the river and a multitude of little boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke, and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a fierce light, that there was even something like the purity of one of nature's own grand spectacles.

The 'poetic' version suggests involvement on the part of the writer with the scene he is describing. 'Earth has not anything to show more fair' indicates that he is making a judgement on what he sees. His heart goes out to meet the beauty of the scene. The city is described in terms of an elegant woman, wearing the clarity of the morning sunlight 'like a garment'. It is a sight, however, that surpasses even the beauty of women, the poet tells us: anyone who does not respond in a similar manner to the sight before him must be 'dull of soul'. Wordsworth's poem is an anthem in praise of the city of London; his sister's 'prosaic' response seems cold and remote by comparison, her reference to 'one of nature's own grand spectacles' suggesting the detached attitude of a spectator in the gallery of a theatre.

Evidently in Wordsworth's poem the 'theme' is not confined to description, to depicting the outlines of London in the manner of a sketch or a photograph. The poet's enthusiastic response to the sprawl of the city – his hyperbolic 'tone' of praise – is a part of the theme, transforming the grey perimeters of the urban mass into something radiant and sparkling. Often in a poem the tone of the poet is inseparable from the theme of the poem. This is evident in Wilfred Owen's poem. 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' does not merely convey an apocalyptic picture of the carnage of the Great War, but it demonstrates the poet's anger at it, his impatience with and derision