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MODERN ENGLISH POETRY
1882-1932

CRITICISM
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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MODERN
ENGLISH POETRY
1882-1932

R. L. MEGROZ

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TO
SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

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MODERN ENGLISH POETRY

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1

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON POETRY AND CRITICISM

" Though one man must originate a movement it takes many men to make one, and when our glance backward deepens into a scrutiny we see not so much the movement as the men"—WALTER DE LA MARE.

THE question whether poets must be treated as individuals or may be regarded as social phenomena is largely answered by the necessities of logical construction in a survey of any period so rich, changeable and recent as the subject of this book. To treat all the poets on their merits as unique individuals would involve the writing of a critical record either of excessive length or too much like a catalogue. In another fifty years our opinions will have been sifted, and then it will be no more difficult to name the surviving poets of 1882 to 1932 than it is now to do the same for the preceding half-century, which is roughly the Victorian era in poetry. The first warning of the magnitude of the subject when treated not as a period but as a series of poets writing between certain dates came with the perusal of an old prospectus of lectures by Mr. Horace Shipp (himself a poet) on contemporary poetry. The lectures were delivered in

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the City of London Vacation Courses for Teachers. The prospectus consisted mainly of grouped lists of poets, who seemed to be as the sands of the seashore in number.

In a popular series of booklets published from 1925 onwards, there appeared in 1927 one entitled *Poems from Books, 1927*.¹ The editor, Thomas Moulton, says in a Preface that the contents were extracted from books of verse published in Great Britain between the autumn of 1926 and the late summer of 1927. The selection does not represent all the books of verse published in that period, and probably overlooks a few good ones, but "attention is drawn to thirty-two of the more important". A perusal of the list of these books by thirty-two poets suggests that twenty would by no means be an over-estimate of the number of books that really had some importance to a literary historian of the period. Twenty new books in about ten months. There are 600 months from 1882 to 1932. At the same rate that would mean 1,200 books of verse of sufficient importance to be not only distinguished from the great majority published in the period in Great Britain but probably by poets worthy of a monograph on their work. For want of statistics, we will assume that the poets of the past fifty years have averaged as high as six volumes of verse each. That means at least 200 distinct and distinctive poets.

Bewildering experiences in the Reading Room of the British Museum have left the writer satisfied that these figures are not excessive, and that for at least several years before the war of 1914-1918 new books of verse with some claim to the title of poetry were being published as fast as in 1926-1927, when the post-war rush of verse by soldiers had ended. Criticism, if honest, loses its self-assurance in the face of such quantities of material to work

¹ Augustan Books of English Poetry. A transcription of the list of books from which these poems were taken appears in the Appendix.

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upon. The best that can be done to report upon it without abandoning the critical initiative of a synthesis must be a compromise with the ideal presentation of literary values.

It has seemed advisable to take readers into my confidence at the outset, if only to explain the compromise that I have made. It would have been easy to add one more to the books that profess to give an account of modern English poetry but which actually run a theory to death and look at the period through glasses tinted with some contemporary preoccupation. You can turn your survey then into an attack on or an equally superfluous defence of a tendency such as "romanticism" or "classicism", which you are careful to re-define to fit the argument, and (what impresses university undergraduates most of all) discover that there are only two or three poets (for preference the most obscure poets you can find) worthy of your notice. (This is especially useful if you have not read enough.)¹

The only feasible method that is directly opposed to the individual treatment of each poet is to label groups of poets. Assuming that one batch is to be labelled "Romantic", a term is sought to describe another batch which appears to differ notably from the first. The label may be "Parnassian", "Realist", or "Classical". There is something to be said for such a method when the labels are not used thoughtlessly. It cannot be denied that there are schools and tendencies in all the arts, just as in politics and the sciences there are parties and prevailing ideas. The danger of making critical surveys follow the lines of groups is that the individuals composing the groups may be forgotten or seen in a distorted perspective. Poets are necessarily individuals

¹ The knowledgeable reader of certain recent books of alleged criticism of poetry will recognize also a lamentable practice by supercilious young men of stealing from works by broader-minded critics, without acknowledgment, of course.

in their essential character as creators. They may be helped or hampered by the prevailing mental environment, but they cannot be exactly identified with any social phenomenon in so far as they are poets. The degree in which a Tennyson or an Eliot faithfully reflects prevailing contemporary preoccupations or moods is a fairly reliable indication of the extent to which he is something other than poet. A writer may be influential as theologian, moralist, philosopher or politician, but only by using Arnold's dictum in the fallacious sense (which he did not himself quite separate from the true one) can such criticism of life be regarded as contributing or detracting from a poet's stature as a poet.

This point of view, which is always implicit in the following pages, leads me to voice a complaint against some modern criticism that is much more learned and influential than my own. It will save much space if I pick my little quarrel on behalf of literature with that skilful and sensitive poet but extremely Philistine critic, T. S. Eliot, who has dazzled so many university undergraduates into awed submission. In a volume of essays published by the Royal Society of Literature, entitled *The Eighteen Eighties*, edited by Walter de la Mare, there is a contribution entitled "The Place of Pater", by T. S. Eliot. In my ignorance of what the "intelligent" (O blessed word!) of to-day are thinking, I had supposed that the belittlement of Monna Lisa Pater was a youthful occupation which had served its turn, and that we could now see Pater and his like in a reasonable perspective. But Mr. Eliot's essay is devoted in the first half to finding that Arnold is empty and no good to us, and in the second half to a more emphatic verdict still about Pater. In fact, to use a bit of slang, Arnold is "a wash-out" and Pater even more so. Nothing whatever to so much as suggest that Pater was a literary critic who will always have some importance, although only the mental

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disease of ultra-modernity could prevent a reader appreciating the sensibility, intelligence and creative vitality which went into the *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean*, and *Appreciations*, all of which were published before the "Nineties" that we have heard so many irrelevant generalizations about. The most unexpected of Eliot's accusations is that Pater was concerned about "the true moral significance of art and poetry". The preoccupations with moral and religious significances of works of literary art has unpoised nearly all Eliot's mature later criticism. The basis indeed of his condemnation of Pater is that Pater endeavoured to find religious value in the aesthetic creed, using, as W. B. Yeats very effectively did for his poetry and prose, the illumination of the experience of beauty as a valid test of reality and an ideal by which to live and work. Possibly Arnold, Pater and Yeats were more fallible in their philosophic outlook than a modern Anglo-Catholic. Or possibly not. This is strictly irrelevant to an aesthetic criticism, and a literary criticism which is not primarily aesthetic is concerned with a scale of values other than those of art and therefore answers to the description of Philistine as fully as the ordinary sentimental acceptance or rejection of poetry according to the sentiments or subject of the poet. When modern criticism is thus Philistine it is still reacting against the creed of "Art for Art's sake", and this really developed into a consciously-held principle with the French decadence of which, for convenience, the mid-nineteenth-century Baudelaire may be considered the source, though Baudelaire was drawing upon a decadence (chiefly through Poe) that was more widespread at the turn of the previous century. Behind the reaction, which is Victorian vulgarity in a new dress, is an evident confusion of ideas. The justifiable assertion that works of art cannot be judged by moral or philosophical standards.

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and that the poet's job was not to preach but to prove that we are wiser than we know, was reinterpreted as a manifesto against conventional morality and indeed any kind of orthodoxy such as the spiritual authority of the Christian Church. The seeds of this fallacy were sown at the time of the French Revolution, though we may take Baudelaire as a literary source of the phase which required such a slogan. Baudelaire's admirers lost sight of his sincerity, and forgot the discipline by which his morbid temperamental revolt was successfully translated into art. The lesser but more fluent genius of Theophile Gautier helped to attach the creed to the cause of romanticism, doing little more than echo Hugo's early demand that criticism should be content to ask merely whether the poem is good or bad as a poem. Before Gautier died in 1872 the increasing triviality, sentimentality and disintegration of technique in French poetry had engendered the so-called Parnassian counter-movement headed by Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894), who voiced, in opposition to the romantic mood of personal sorrow, the ideal of impersonality. De Lisle's poetry was the best of the Parnassian movement, but in spite of his pursuit of epic and elegiac themes it was scarcely less personal in the poetic sense than Baudelaire's.

This question of the relative degree of the poet's detachment from the mood and argument of his poem, a question which is often identified with terms like 'subjective' and 'objective' and again associated with 'romantic' and 'classical', is in retrospect seen to be largely irrelevant. After assuming (as we may) that fine poetry must come from a fine mind in a condition of ecstasy, the most that can be done to classify it is to recognize its predominating moods and the kind of temperament it may specially appeal to. The value or relative "greatness" of a poem does not depend upon its philosophy, on noble sentiments, or an austere ethic; it is not measured by

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its rational argument. Perhaps one could say it is measured by the spiritual energy embodied in its concrete form, having now in mind the apprehensions of reality which in ecstasy are recognized as beauty but which shrink at the touch of practical thought. Philosophy, when it is not poetry, is practical like science and morality. Philosophy, science and morality are essentially empirical; poetry (and any other art, of course) and religion necessarily transcend and anticipate demonstrable experience and therefore cannot be fully expressed or understood rationally.

Poetry might be defined as the art of conveying through words more than the words have ever expressed before. Every poem is in this sense a discovery of a beauty latent in us which awaited incarnation, but it is first of all the poet's discovery of his own perceptions and feelings : the richer the poem the more is demanded of the reader who would share the discovery. Clearly, then, poetry is more personal than the conclusions of the rational faculty or the communal feelings that are slowly crystallized into moral principles.

A poem is a more private affair than a logical argument. To this extent it resembles a dream. Compared with our waking activities a dream is a less superficial and more personal expression of ourselves. Its motivity is in that vast region of the mind below the level of consciousness. In waking life we can communicate an opinion and utter a syllogism which will be fully comprehended by a listener, but nobody could share our dream. To tell a dream to another person is at the best a far from perfect communication of the experience. But however crudely the dream is related, if some of the imagery and events are remembered vividly enough they will evoke in the listener a sympathetic understanding that comes of recognition, because fundamentally the dream world of one individual resembles that of another. Much

inferior poetry communicates ideas and sentiments to sympathetic readers in this way : the communication is trivial, though the motives may be deep. A good poem shares the private dream as completely as words can be made to express it. It of course does more than report a dream, for the controlling intellect is requisitioned, not only to use the medium of expression, but to forge links between the inner and the outer world, compelling the visible forms of things to symbolize perceptions that could not be communicated by any merely logical statement.

When we insist that poetry is essentially irrational and unmoral we are not asserting that it must be nonsense and is immoral. It may be both without ceasing to be good poetry. Some of the worst attempts at poetry are written in quite good English, are highly moral, and full of wise reflections. Compare the *Proverbial Philosophy* of Martin Farquhar Tupper, Esq., D.G.L., F.R.S. (of Christ Church, Oxford), with the *Poems and Ballads* of that temperamental young man who failed to get his B.A. at Oxford.

Go, call thou snake-eyed malice mercy, call envy honest praise,
 Count selfish craft for wisdom, and coward treachery for prudence,
 Do homage to blaspheming unbelief as to bold and free philosophy,
 And estimate the recklessness of licence as the right attribute of
 liberty,—

But with the world, thou friend and scholar, stain not this pure
 name :

Nor suffer the majesty of Love to be likened to the meanness of
 desire :

For love is no more such, than seraphs' hymns are discord,
 And such is no more Love, than Etna's breath is summer.

This is from Tupper's admirable essay "Of Love" (it is a mistake to feel nothing but contempt for verse which is not poetry), but though Tupper waxes eloquent about the "mighty spiritual force", the spiritual triviality of

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his sermon is perceived at once in contrast with the strictly immoral " Hymn to Proserpine " :

I have lived long enough, having seen one thing, that love hath
an end;

Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend.
Thou art more than the day or the morrow, the seasons that laugh
or that weep ;

For these give joy and sorrow ; but thou, Proserpina, sleep.
Sweet is the treading of wine, and sweet the feet of the dove ;
But a goodlier gift is thine than foam of the grapes or love,
Yea, is not even Apollo, with hair and harpstring of gold,
A bitter God to follow, a beautiful God to behold ?

I am sick of singing : the bays burn deep and chafe : I am fain
To rest a little from praise and grievous pleasure and pain,
For the Gods we know not of, who give us our daily breath,
We know they are cruel as love or life, and lovely as death.

Tupper's eight lines say more to the reason than Swinburne's twelve, and express an idea of greater value in the scale of ethics. If the " Hymn to Proserpine " (which would yield passages of finer poetry and still thinner philosophy than the above opening lines) can be described as immoral, still more so can the poems like " Anactoria ", " Laus Veneris " and " Dolores ", which frankly express that erotic perversity which was constitutional in the poet. Swinburne's greater spiritual power is due to his ability to communicate more fully and from deeper personal sources than Tupper.

The belated but immense appreciation accorded to Swinburne's poetry encouraged lesser artists during the last three decades of the nineteenth century to that distortion of the idea of art for art's sake into a conflict between ' beauty ' and morality. The spate of moral and sentimental slush to which Wordsworth and Tennyson were the most distinguished contributors in poetry, and Millais and Holman Hunt in painting, would in any case have compelled new poets to an active resistance, **but** when Swinburne was seen to be the fiery-tongued

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herald of Baudelaire and Gautier, and became more commonly regarded (with ever-decreasing justification) as one of the "Pre-Raphaelite" singers, Art for Art's Sake really assumed the character of a maxim for all the best work of the latter half of the century. Joseph Conrad, an original genius in a prose fiction closely allied to poetry, and a barely acclimatized foreigner, found himself in the very midst of the last phase of enthusiasm, when the protagonists had deteriorated from the level of Rossetti and Swinburne to that of Wilde and Pater. He looked back upon the confused atmosphere that prevailed when, nearly middle-aged, he was beginning his career as a writer, and he wrote of it in his later Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, recognizing anew the virtue in that ideal of art for art's sake, a cry which in the uneasy solitude of sincerity, he says, "loses the exciting ring of its apparent immorality", but, he adds, it "has ceased to be a cry, and is heard only as a whisper". Certainly it is a better cry for poets than Thomism for Classicism's Sake, or Intuition for Middleton Murry's Sake.

Before Conrad came to London, Ronald Ross in the 'seventies and 'eighties also saw contemporary literature without being immersed in the contemporary literary atmosphere. His work was unheard of for nearly half a century, for while he was writing most of his poetry in India he was doing work in medical science which brought him fame at the turn of the century. Some of his early unpublished essays show that the character of his poetry owed something to a conscious turning away from the almost effete romanticism of the second half of the nineteenth century. Largely owing to Wordsworth and Coleridge, much of the new stream of literature early in the century had been drawn from German romanticism. Like Rossetti, Ross himself showed a youthful sympathy with that taste for the weird and impossible which was most natural to Coleridge and was shared in

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different degrees by the other poets of the " Romantic Revival". It was a refinement of the earlier so-called " Gothic " romance, the spirit of which was congenial to the revival of interest in ballads and archaic romances, of which in England the chief was the fifteenth-century Malory's version of the Arthurian legends.

There is in the interrelations of German, English and French poetry in the last century an interesting object-lesson in how literature overflows national boundaries and takes on altered hues according to its environment. Early in the century French poets were influenced by Scott and Byron as much as English poets were influenced first by German literature, and later by Baudelaire and his successors in France. Rossetti's early translation of Burger's " Lenore ", however, was a better indication of the predominant mood of his poetry than the ballad-like poem, " The Night Ride ", written about 1878, was of Ross's. Original though it is, and forecasting in theme the poet's prose romance, *The Spirit of Storm*, " The Night Ride " undoubtedly throws the mind back to Burger and reminds one also of Schiller. But all unknown to the English literary world, the young Ross's attitude as it became more critical anticipated the quite recent reaction against another stream of effete romanticism, coming from the decadent successors of the Pre-Raphaelites. In an unpublished essay on Wordsworth, written in India about 1880, Ross reveals a growing antagonism to romantic egoism and an attraction, which was no doubt strengthened by his scientific studies, to classical humanism and clear construction. He was casting in his lot with Apollo instead of Dionysos—to use a convenient antithesis of ideas—urging that art should control inspiration rather than the converse. Probably quite unaware of it, he was expressing in English an attitude which Leconte de Lisle and his disciples were trying to express in French poetry.

Which is another reminder of how very mixed are those

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as in a faded tapestry, the brilliance of the raiment has outlasted the flesh-colour,—have a likeness to the creations of this school so remarkable, that Keats may be safely credited with a chief share of parentage.

Bridges' plausible phrasing of second-hand opinions (he obviously knew very little about nineteenth-century painting) is none the less misleading for coming from such an authoritative source. All that generalization about the 'school' of painting seems very flimsy in view of the fact that Rossetti's pictures have so little in common with the work of the other recognized Pre-Raphaelite painters. Except for two only of Millais's early and uncharacteristic paintings (the Ophelia and that of a Nunnery garden), Bridges' description of the pictured figures cannot be applied to the work of any other important painter besides Burne-Jones. The dream-like figures in the immature work of Lizzie Siddal, which owe so much to Rossetti's early water-colour paintings, correspond most fully with the critic's retrospective impression of the school. As for Pre-Raphaelite poetry, where is the comparison (to begin with) in morbidity or decorated languor between the figures in "Isabella" and the tragic passions of the persons in Rossetti's narrative and ballad poems—"Sister Helen", "The Bride's Prelude", "A Last Confession", "The Staff and Scrip"? Can it be that the gorgeous texture of such poems still obscures their tremendous energy?

That view of Pre-Raphaelite poetry as a sort of wish-washy emotionalism became hardened into a critical habit after the chief work of the movement was done, and imitators were hastening its decline. The associations with languid lilies and exotic sin, when not traceable to Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, is derived from the completely different later cult of Wilde and Pater. Nevertheless, since the label obviously has a meaning, if only it calls to mind Rossetti and Swinburne, the

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significance of it has to be differentiated both from the intentions which led to its original adoption and to the ultimate degradation of the slogan.

Three young painters, Rossetti, Millais and Holman Hunt, formed themselves into a " Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood " as a gesture of defiance to the prevailing academic principalities and powers. Their not-well-considered choice of a name was largely due to Rossetti's transient admiration for Ford Madox Brown's imitation of the German pseudo-primitive school, represented by the sugary Overbeck. This led to his interest in the genuine Italian primitives, whom he alone could fully appreciate. It was, however, only through the friends seeing some engravings by Lasinio from the Campo Santo frescoes in Pisa that their violent but vague feeling of revolt against the contemporary academic style of painting took shape as an attack on Raphaelism. Crude as were the engravings, the young men detected a sincerity in the original artists which was lacking in the effete style of the academicians. The work of the young painters was soon to show that apart from enthusiasm they had little in common. Moreover, the genius of Rossetti soon drew him into a renaissance in poetry as intense as the renaissance in painting.

In the perspective of a century the decline in painting and poetry appears to be due simply to the persistence of powerful influences expressed as a prevailing taste for schools that had ceased to be vital. Behind such an explanation, as always, there is the real cause, a temporary hiatus in the recognition of new work of genuine originality. The lesser artists are dominated by the contemporary taste, and the crowd of unoriginal practitioners are not so much dominated as inspired by the echoes of what is already concluded. They busy themselves in giving the public what it wants or what the academic critics of the time want. (What the public

wants *in the long run* is not so very different from the enduring new work which only a few recognize at the moment of its appearance.) Here and there a genius of strong originality remains for a while as a voice crying in the wilderness.

Little might have been heard of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in painting (for the Brethren soon broke apart) had not Ruskin stamped it by his championship with some sort of critical meaning, which ultimately he found very difficult to apply to the new work being done. In poetry, however, the forceful personality of Rossetti imparted a directional impulse so strong that it has been described as a second romantic revival. How much truth there is in this we shall see. Note that the impulse owed little to any other member or associate of the original P.R.B. except Christina Rossetti, whose poetry conveys with the least mixture of other elements the refined luxury and clarity of the Pre-Raphaelite ideal. The width of this term when used for criticism is indicated by the fact that an important painter and an important poet—Ford Madox Brown and Tennyson—who both stood apart from the P.R.B.s, did work almost as clearly Pre-Raphaelite as any later painters and poets, although their inspiration in this vein quickly exhausted itself. Some of the earliest work of Coventry Patmore also betrayed the common influence, and though he went beyond the Pre-Raphaelite standards of naturalism with his "Angel in the House", he came back later into sympathy with other Pre-Raphaelite qualities in his Odes. There is no doubt at least that Tennyson's best early poems, in the vein of "The Lady of Shalott" and "The Lotos-Eaters", and Brown's middle-period work, like "The Carpenter's Shop", which caused such a hullabaloo in the Press, not only have a family likeness to poetry and painting by recognized Pre-Raphaelites but take a fairly high place among such works.

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Two younger poets, Swinburne and Morris, and a young painter, Burne-Jones (he was practically forced into painting by the enthusiasm of the others), became disciples of Rossetti after the original P.R.B. and its organ *The Germ* had fallen into desuetude. It was the work of this second boisterous group which centred itself round Rossetti at Oxford during the painting of the Union Hall, plus Christina Rossetti's poetry, that constituted the chief contributions to a "Pre-Raphaelitism", which had, except for Rossetti, lost touch with Italian archaism and found new fields in medieval legends and neo-classicism. The almost forgotten work of lesser poets shows how extensively the literary atmosphere was pervaded by similar aims. Thomas Woolner, the sculptor, was one of the contributors to *The Germ* and his verse, although it differs from that of his early associates, in owing more to Shelley than Keats, has often the family likeness. His superiors in poetry, the Irish William Allingham, and Richard Watson Dixon and John Nichol, who came under the Rossetti-Swinburne-Morris spell, also reveal their kinship. Allingham might be described almost as a lesser Christina Rossetti, Dixon a smaller Rossetti (but in part he was quite unlike Rossetti in his inclination for metaphysical thought), and Nichol, a fraction of a fraction of Swinburne. There were also Arthur O'Shaughnessy (1844-1881), Lord de Tabley (1835-1895) and Philip Bourke Marston (1850-1887), the blind poet, who, like Dixon and several other lesser men of the age, received the stimulus of Rossetti's forceful praise. Such poets might be regarded as precursors of the later and less original group of decadents in which Oscar Wilde occupied a position comparable with Rossetti's in the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

The best of the lesser Pre-Raphaelite poets was Canon Dixon (1833-1900). Most of his poetry was published in the 1880's, though he wrote in the 'fifties for the

Oxford and Cambridge Magazine which he helped Morris to found, and definitely revealed his poetic kinship in his first book, *Christ's Company*, as early as 1861. The pleasure in archaic words as well as themes which made Rossetti go hunting in the British Museum Reading Room for "stunning words" led Dixon to increase the difficulties for readers occasioned by his frequent peculiarities of syntax as a means of conveying recondite ideas. His lexical inclinations caused Gerard Manley Hopkins, another Oxford friend, to say that Dixon's readers needed a "Dixonary". Had Dixon been given to repartee he might have retorted effectively about the astonishing poet of "The Wreck of the Deutschland", the style of which is a queer amalgam of echoes and novelties in a new metre. The imitations of Browning and Swinburne had been consumed in the spiritual fervour of the poet. The peculiarities of Hopkins's style are to be noted. It is sufficient now to observe that his strangely vital poetry, written between 1876 and 1889, though amazingly kept unpublished by Bridges until 1918, occurs in its age as freakishly as a little later occurred Francis Thompson's and Charles Doughty's. It is more eccentric than either, for in these are more easily traceable the Pre-Raphaelite and Shakespearean influences felt at the same time in different degrees by several quite distinct poets. Thus Hopkins is the only important English poet of the last three decades of the nineteenth century who remains outside the Pre-Raphaelite movement, for even Meredith was affected by it.¹

Dixon's reputation was for a long time overshadowed by that of his greater poetic friends, and this probably added to a natural diffidence to check his writing. After *Historical Odes* (1864) no more of his verse appeared

¹ The assumption being that Tennyson and Browning had finished their best work.

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until 1883, when another historical and romantic poem was published. The full title of this is interesting : *Mano. A Poetical History of the Time of the Close of the Tenth Century, concerning the Adventures of a Norman Knight which fell part in Normandy part in Italy. In Four Books. . . .* This characteristic excursion into a remote past, in a medium compounded of colourful imagery and music and frequently metaphysical ideas, was followed by *Odes and Eclogues* (1884) and *Lyrical Poems* (1887). Dixon's abstractions, like Hopkins's, had a genuine mystical knowledge behind them. Mary Coleridge, another poetic friend with Pre-Raphaelite sympathies, who wrote a preface to Dixon's *Last Poems* noted that in these few traces " of the strong Pre-Raphaelitism that marked *Christ's Company* remain. The mystic, passionate religion of the deeper heart is no longer *visible* in signs and symbols, be they beautiful as those of ' Mary Magdalene ' or of ' St. John '—it is *audible*" Dixon is like Mary Coleridge in expressing often a religious feeling in poems not ostensibly religious ; two hymns in the *Last Poems* suggest that he could not have written religious poetry with the force of Hopkins or of Francis Thompson. The world was too real to him, and he himself lacked the concentration of faith. Not for nothing did he become so enthusiastic an associate of the Pre-Raphaelites. There were still signs of that youthful strain in the volumes published in the 'eighties. Among several instances is the excellent narrative of " Cephalus and Procris ". With *Lyrical Poems* the stage noted by Mary Coleridge is unmistakably approaching, but one is at least reminded of Rossetti's emotionally deep and mentally packed verse in its less gorgeous phase of " Woodspurge ", " The Cloud Confines " and " Soothsay ". In the early *Christ's Company*, besides the two beautiful poems mentioned by Mary Coleridge, nearly everything shows traces of the influences that swayed the Oxford poets. Robert Bridges pointed

out Dixon's pictorial and musical quality by quoting chiefly from these early poems.¹ In the following stanza from the vision in the poem on St. John, "it is as if Keats had turned Pre-Raphaelite", he says :

Ranged row on row they come ; the light of love
Burned softly in their eyes, row ranged on row
Of men in heavenly panoply, a grove
Of violet plumes and lifted swords ; below
And through, 'twixt arm and shoulder, and between
Plumed helm and helm, wild eyes and golden hair
And passionate lips ; with throngings here and there.

Equally pertinent among the same critic's quotations :

I came beside a still lagoon
Of inky blackness, whereupon,
Like a lake-lily, lay the moon,
White, ere her reign of gold begun.

And:

. . . her eyes gaze far beyond the hills
In meditation how the deep air fills
With sea-like purple all the hollow land.

Many such passages show that Dixon owed as much to Rossetti as to Keats, though Bridges most carefully discusses any poets except Rossetti as influences on Dixon. Adapting Bridges⁵ phraseology to the ecstatic loveliness of Dixon's " St. Mary Magdalene ", we might say it is as if the early Rossetti and the early Tennyson had been mixed in an intellect finer if less powerful than either possessed. To compare a poem with the early Rossetti and the early Tennyson is of course to admit the Keatsian flavour. After reading " Dream " (*Christ's Company*) one asks if any other nineteenth-century poets came nearer to the personal dream symbolism of Keats. " Dream " opens :

¹ *Poems* selected with a memoir by Robert Bridges (1909).

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With camel's hair I clothed my skin,
I fed my mouth with honey wild ;
And set me scarlet wool to spin,
And all my breast with hyssop filled ;
Upon my brow and cheeks and chin
A bird's blood spilled.

I took a broken reed to hold,
I took a sponge of gall to press ;
I took weak water-weeds to fold
About my sacrificial dress.

While maintaining the dream-like consequence of imagery and the submerged but continuous apocalyptic meaning, the poem increases in tension. The third and final section seals it as a composition beyond "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in spiritual meaning, something much nearer to Blake than Keats would ever have come, and something curiously and intimately near to Christina Rossetti:

With scarlet corded horn,
With frail wrecked knees and stumbling pace,
The scapegoat came :
His eyes took flesh and spirit dread in flame
At once, and he died looking toward my face.

To insist upon the superiority of spiritual content of this and several other fine lyrics of Dixon over anything that Keats did or could ever have done is by no means to maintain their superiority or even equality as poetry. Criticism which would do so is merely reacting against legacies of the "Art for Art's Sake" theory, as was Bridges', who not only would gladly have ignored Rossetti if he could, but said that he assumed as a matter of course Dixon's superiority as poet to Morris, on precisely the above grounds of spiritual content. William Morris's work is open to very serious adverse judgments, especially concerning his slovenly writing, but a critic who can say that "Dixon is of a very different calibre from Morris", meaning "that Dixon exhibited far

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higher poetic gifts ", has merely abandoned all sense of proportion. Bridges' fallacy is supported by a fallacious comparison of Morris's mild bit of colour painting :

Two red roses across the moon

with the Blakean flash :

With happiness stretched across the hills.

Dixon made to compete with Morris line for line would yield up most of his definitely Pre-Raphaelite lines rather than those which contain recondite ideas. He would soon drop behind in such a race ; but if the comparison were made of complete poems and total creative energy in poetry Morris would of course overwhelm him.

J. B. Leicester Warren, Lord de Tabley (1835-1895), is known to fewer readers than several of the poets already mentioned, but he calls for some attention. De Tabley's verse derives more from Browning and Tennyson than Rossetti and Swinburne, but he seems in his middle-period work to have learnt from Swinburne's virtues while avoiding his stylistic vices. This is apparent in the glowing " Ode to Pan " in the *Poems, Dramatic and Lyrical* (1893). Much of this volume was reprinted from forgotten volumes previously printed. De Tabley was as unlucky as Dixon in being overshadowed by a greater poet's kindred work. His first book of *Poems* (1859) was signed G. F. Preston and ignored. In the 'sixties four other volumes of verse by him appeared, signed William P. Lancaster. *Philoctetes* (1886), signed M. A., his best poem, was almost at once obscured by the *reclat* of Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*. *Philoctetes* cannot rank with Swinburne's poem, though it has passages of power, and it is not possible to share the enthusiasm of Robert Bridges. He wrote that " the neo-classical drama of the nineteenth century has many richer, but, even remembering *Atalanta*, I do not think that any is rarer than this—

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one of the most moving long poems of the century ". The truth is that here, as in other long pieces, De Tabley's style is too uneven and uncertain, and what moves die imagination in portions becomes tiring as a whole. De Tabley's excellence in passages has to be noted in surveying the " nature poetry " of the period. What is especially interesting in his lyrical poetry is the openly personal note added to Meredith's descriptions of " nature " .

THE PILGRIM CRANES

The pilgrim cranes are moving to their south,
The clouds are herded pale and rolling slow.
One flower is withered in the warm wind's mouth,
Whereby the gentle waters always flow.

The cloud-fire wanes beyond the lighted trees.
The sudden glory leaves the mountain dome.
Sleep into night, old anguish mine, and cease
To listen for a step that will not come.

The difference between romantic and classical poetry is often as slight essentially, though as obvious superficially, as the difference between the use of " I " and " we " by the writer of an anonymous article.

See again the last two of the four stanzas of " The Ocean Word " :

Soon will the ripple move again :
Soon will the shorelark flute its song :
And in sweet emphasis of pain
The rock-dove mourn the cliffs along.

Sweet shall resound the curlew's wail,
New sails come sweeping up the sea.
But all the ships that ever sail
Will bring no comfort home to me.

In " Ophelia ", a poem on a Pre-Raphaelitish background, may be seen his not infrequent mixing up of something Pre-Raphaelite in feeling and colour with Tennysonian phrases and soft-mindedness.

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A definitely Pre-Raphaelite anthology could be made of poems written in the quarter-century roughly between 1845 and 1870. Such a collection would illuminate the source of much of the best poetry written during the period we are surveying in this book. It might assist in the distinguishing of certain traits that we perhaps feel rather than logically isolate in Pre-Raphaelitism to name first some poems of the preceding Romantic Revival which occur to the mind as models or presages of the Pre-Raphaelite style.

KEATS : " The Eve of St. Mark ", " Hyperion " (first draft), " La Belle Dame Sans Merci " and " The Eve of St. Agnes " (in spite of its merely factual errors) and several sonnets.

COLERIDGE : " Christabel " and " The Rime of the Ancient Mariner ".

WORDSWORTH : " The Leech-Gatherer ", " The Reaper ", " The Reverie of Poor Susan " and the sonnet " Composed on Westminster Bridge ".

SHELLEY : " Alastor ", " The Cenci ", and a few lyrics.

This group of poems is marked by what we may describe as sharpness of sensory impressions made auxiliary to ideal (or imaginative) perception. The composition often has a dream-like effect, not only by the familiar yet far-away imagery, but also by the associational freedom of fantasy which is inseparable from the successful creation of such imagery.

Another characteristic, largely arising out of the one just noted, is the freshness of colour and naturalism of feeling. The word " naturalism " at once provokes a query about the weird or " supernatural " atmosphere which pervades poems like " Christabel " and " La Belle Dame ". The fascination of weirdness in such poems is not due to any sacrifice of naturalism in the psychology or imagery; it is actually enhanced because of the

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naturalism; as in Shakespeare's tragedies, universal emotions of love, hate, and fear are raised to extraordinary tension by an environment of natural imagery luridly displayed in a fantastic light by the more or less obvious use of the pathetic fallacy. But for this inward truth to nature in the double sense of realism, in description and psychology, the Romantic Revival through Coleridge would have made no progress from the already abundant eighteenth-century " Gothic " literature of strangeness and horror, in which dream-like imagery is exploited vainly in crude and falsely " romantic " themes. Just as Coleridge was the chief Romantic creator of mysterious atmosphere, so Rossetti is the fount of the mid-century revival of such hauntings of the unseen. The " supernatural " element therefore cannot be subtracted from what we envisage as Pre-Raphaelitism. Nevertheless the emphasis on accuracy of perception and a fresh naturalism of sentiment is clearly an equally important and a more exclusively Pre-Raphaelite characteristic. A strong sense of occult forces is a matter of temperament, but freshness of perception is possible to artists as different in temperament as Holman Hunt and Rossetti, or Coleridge and Wordsworth. There is nothing of a photographic realism in the art of either, at their best. In the *Prelude* Wordsworth stresses the idealizing process of the creative imagination, attributing to the poet's newly created world the poise of fixed laws, according to which is maintained

an ennobling interchange
Of action from without and from within ;
The excellence, pure function, and best power
Both of the objects seen, and eye that sees.

No doubt an emphasis upon the " eye that sees " helped to give poetry of the early nineteenth century the character we label as Romantic, a stressing of the " objects seen " being conveniently regarded as a characteristic of

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either Realism or Classicism according to the context. Realism that excludes the idealization of the controlling imagination is such an empty conception, however, that it has been of small service to criticism. But when we examine the claims made for Classicism we find the term overloaded with implications.

Our preliminary examination of the elements found in so-called Pre-Raphaelite poetry has led beyond the concept of " Romanticism ", because some of the virtues, though none of the failures of Pre-Raphaelite poetry must, if these terms have any meaning, be described as classical. In so far as classicism refers to ancient Greek and Latin literature, it seems to mean, by contrast with medieval exuberance and disorder a logically obvious construction, a sense of proportion in imagery, and the natural presentation of human beings with attributes both good and evil that are rationally credible.

There is a strong modern tendency to associate with " classical " some part of the meaning attached to " truth ", and it probably derives from the Greek stress on the idea of imitation as the root of art. But the Greeks were not less concerned with inspiration or self-expression than the most romantic original writer of the modern age. They did not mean to stress the importance of imitating the " natural " language or the rational thought of contemporary life. As no less an authority than Gilbert Murray says, Shelley hit on the true meaning of *Mimesis*, as an attempt to be one with " that ideal perfection and energy which everyone feels to be the internal type of all he loves, admires, and would become ". Both *Mimesis* and a cognate expression *Methexis* (participation or communion) implied some kind of ecstasy, some reaching beyond " the prison of the bard's ordinary identity and experience ". And " the classical tradition is practically consistent in demanding both ecstasy and labour, both the Aoides and the Poietes, the singer and

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the maker ". This is **all** that concerns us, though Professor Murray goes on to insist that truth to fact and sobriety of statement are also characteristic of the tradition of Homer and the heroic literature which he calls the classical, and that romanticism is distinguished by a false exaggeration. His method of proving that all the real virtues are classical is delightfully simple. He merely seizes on the finest artists and usually the greatest poets—Homer and the Greek dramatists, Virgil and Milton—and to illustrate the chief romantic characteristic he refers to Hugo's *Hernani*, a Troubadour, and " certain Celtic heroes " who fight for thirty days on end without food. That this kind of distinction leads nowhere is sufficiently illustrated by the same authority's lecture on metre, where he sets a good specimen of Pope's verse against a good specimen of Rossetti's making Pope sound like a pianola. And yet he has to refer to Rossetti's as a " Romantic " passage.

" Combined gorgeousness and precision of the texture " is an admirable phrase that Professor Murray applies elsewhere¹ expressly to Homer and by implication in the former to Rossetti. It is not a bad definition for all the best Pre-Raphaelite poetry. Romanticism, then, cannot be limited to work which sacrifices truth to egotism, any more than Classicism is to be blamed for wooden diction and dull prosaicism in verse. The two are complementary virtues in good poetry, always present although varying according to the poet's mentality in the contribution which each makes to the character of the poetry. By his humane concerns and his insistence upon " natural " language and neglected normalities of life, Wordsworth is the most classical poet of the nineteenth century, and it is only the accident of his leadership of a literary revolt against effete poetics that has caused his

¹ " What English Poetry may still learn from Greek " : *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, Vol. I I I .

romantic quality to be so greatly exaggerated. He is as predominantly Classical as Coleridge was Romantic. Thus we see that our labels leave poetry of any epoch a mixture of vital elements that are universal, and all that arises for generalization is the predominance of certain of these elements.

The imaginative idealism which imparts to realistic imagery a symbolic or dream quality can be seen in the Pre-Raphaelite poetry as clearly as in the poems typical of the Romantic Revival which have been enumerated. What did alter considerably were the poetic "properties". There was much more borrowing from medieval and archaic themes, of the type of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and also, owing to Rossetti, from Christian hagiology. Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel" and translations from Dante led to Morris's invocation to his lady as "Madonna", and after Morris came a host of minor singers of Madonnas and lilies.

Patmore in his "Unknown Eros" odes (1877) opened a way in a new direction, for he was the least Romantic of the poets who contributed (as he does in the Odes) to Pre-Raphaelite poetry, and the most original after Rossetti. In the "Unknown Eros" he took the liturgical eroticism of Rossetti's House of Life from a blind-alley of passion and linked it to the wisdom of religion, with of course an authentic art of his own which certainly cannot be described as Romantic without straining the term. If in the long run the Romantic character seems to predominate in Pre-Raphaelite poetry, that is solely due to the temperamental leanings of the chief Pre-Raphaelite poets, notably Rossetti and Swinburne.

Against that previous list of poems we may put a list that roughly belongs to dates a quarter of a century later:

TENNYSON : "The Lady of Shalott", "The Palace of Art", "The Gardener's Daughter", "St. Agnes' Eve", "Mariana in the South".

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(It is noteworthy how Tennyson always fails to come to grips with reality if he deals like Wordsworth with homely and contemporary characters. His irrepressible moral humbuggery makes most of his narratives absurd, and undermines the vitality of the otherwise "Pre-Raphaelite" *Idylls of the King*.)

D. G. ROSSETTI : " The Blessed Damozel ", " The Bride's Prelude ", " Jenny ", " A Last Confession ", " Sister Helen ", " The Burden of Nineveh ", " The Staff and Scrip ", " A Trip to Paris and Belgium ; (i) London to Folkestone ", and several sonnets.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI : " An Apple Gathering ", " The Pink Mezereon ", " Sleep at Sea ", " The Convent Threshold ", " Goblin Market ", " Dream Love ", " Remember Me ".

A. C. SWINBURNE : " In the Orchard (Provençal Burden) ", " At a Month's End ", " The Leper ", " The Garden of Proserpine ", " Before the Mirror ", " Atalanta in Calydon ".

COVENTRY PATMORE : " To the Unknown Eros ".¹

WILLIAM MORRIS : " The Defence of Guinevere ", and other Romances. Tensely dramatic narratives like " The Haystack in the Floods " as well as the picturesque and dream-like " Rapunzel " and " Two Red Roses across the Moon ". His prose romances, like " The Hollow Land ", are also seen to have close affinities with Rossetti's small quantity of poetry in the form of prose fantasies.

DIXON : " St. Mary Magdalene ", " St. John ", " Cephalus and Procris ".

DE TABLEY : " Ophelia ", much of " Philoctetes ", the Ode to Pan.

MEREDITH : " Bellerophon ", " Love in the Valley ", " The Lark Ascending ".

¹ See Chapter vi.

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We have now to note that as early as 1866 Rossetti was already denying the relevancy of the term "Pre-Raphaelite" applied to himself, and a decade later Swinburne says in an unpublished letter¹:

Before 1860 my early work had no doubt a savour of the same influences as the earlier work of Morris and Rossetti,—but from the date of *Chastelard* and *Atalanta* onwards I cannot trace in any part of my work, classical, modern, or historic, a trace of any quality that could correctly or even plausibly be labelled "Pre-Raphaelite" either for praise or blame.

Swinburne carefully excludes "Atalanta in Calydon", presumably because of the classical theme and the brilliant improvisation on traditional metres, but the predominantly romantic colour of the poem is recognized at once in a contrast with his later "Erectheus" which he came to look upon as more Greek in spirit. And its association with Pre-Raphaelite poetry becomes inevitable when we compare it with the unmistakably Pre-Raphaelite "Philoctetes" by Lord de Tabley which was, unfortunately for the lesser poet, published less than a year before "Atalanta in Calydon".

As M. Lafourcade reminds us, the definitely "Pre-Raphaelite" portion of Swinburne's work, even excluding "Atalanta", is no inconsiderable one if it only includes most of the first series of *Poems and Ballads*. In fact, however, there is a good deal more of the "Pre-Raphaelite" in Swinburne than this, not only in many later lyrics and ballads but in the choice of a theme like that of *Tristram of Lyonesse*. Very different from Morris's treatment of a similar theme in *The Defence of Guinevere*, and owing little if anything to Malory, Swinburne's *Tristram*, it may be said, is medieval in theme and resplendently coloured because of the dominant influence over him of his Pre-Raphaelite friends. So a

¹ 2 April, 1876, to Nichol, quoted by M. Georges Lafourcade, *La jeunesse de Swinburne*, I I, p. 38.

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similar literary mood is felt in the more classical Arnold's poem, "Tristram and Iseult". Without the plaster morality of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," Arnold's poem shows the same reaching back to an archaic glamour and a definitely Pre-Raphaelite naturalism in sentiment and details. The glamorous atmosphere has faded almost away; it is not to be compared with the dream stillness and clarity of Morris and the early Swinburne, but the hints of it are strong enough to occupy the gap between those later Pre-Raphaelites and Francis Thompson, who is the next great poet in a succession which goes back past Rossetti and the youthful Tennyson to Keats and Coleridge and Blake, and thence to the old ballads and Malory. If the glamour of atmosphere and old and far-off things is sought in still later poetry, it can be traced in the eccentric and often powerful work of Charles Doughty, and in much of the work of Irish poets which has been grouped, thanks to W. B. Yeats, as belonging to the "Celtic Twilight". It is continued in such diverse modern English poets as Walter de la Mare, Gordon Bottomley and Edith Sitwell. Much of Edith Sitwell's poetry will be found undeniably descended from Pre-Raphaelitism, not in spite of her modern sources, but partially because of these, for the element shared in common between Rossetti and Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge, is also a distinctive strain in Baudelaire and his French successors. Fromentin, who died in 1877, was a French painter and writer contemporary with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood whose ideas often seem to agree with Rossetti's. He is significantly quoted by Ribot as saying¹:

My recollection of things, though very trustworthy, by no means has the exactness and general validity of an absolute record. As

¹ *The Creative Imagination*, chap. i, for the reminder of which I am indebted to Professor F. C. Prescott's *The Poetic Mind*, although I read Ribot many years ago*

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for the eleven words of that line are not only a prolix paraphrase for an invulnerable hope, but they bring no fresh image with them, and except for fulfilling a metrical necessity their ensemble is decidedly cacophonous. (Just try saying them over.) It is no wonder that "A Nympholept" contains two hundred and seventy-three lines to express a mood and vision which might have been more powerfully expressed in half the length. The tendency to wordiness is still more evident in the descriptive and occasional pieces, e.g. "Loch Torridon" and "Grace Darling", although even in such pieces there is actually as much rational thought as one could find in the majority of poems. Thought often more searching indeed than one would find in most of Tennyson's or Browning's poems, but the ideas jostle one another and are repeated, and the words often fail to carry additions to the ideas when such developments would increase the force of the poem. The mind is similarly jostled at the same time by another stylistic effect of Swinburne's verse. The couplets of *Tristram of Lyonesse*, in spite of the poet's skill in varying pauses and stresses, become very monotonous and every now and again make a din in the mind, so that Swinburne's allusive and adjectival manner often submerges the argument and the tale itself underneath that same half-transparent surface of weakly linked images which are found in "A Nympholept". Take this brief example from the first section, "The Sailing of the Swallow":

And with her sweet eyes sunken, and the mirth
Dead in their look as earth lies dead in earth
That reigned on earth and triumphed, Iseult said,
"Is it her shame of something done and dead
Or fear of something to be born and done
That so in her soul's eye puts out the sun?"

The dramatic inappropriateness of the language put into Iseult's mouth troubles the reader; but still more does

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the almost absurd employment of the word " dead " three times in these few lines, each time except the first without meaning other than that of a vague rhetoric. If earth that " lies dead in earth that reigned on earth and triumphed " means a corpse buried under a grave covered by grass and flowers, the imagery is a stylistic affectation that makes a clear idea vague ; but the injury to the poetry is even deeper than this, because the image of the triumphant earth, although the poet means beauty alone, suggests a glad beauty, which is the opposite of that intended by the description of Iseult's mirthless look. When he is at his best as in the noble " Ave Atque Vale " to Baudelaire, rhetoric is a perfection of the style, a light blowing on the flame of poetry :

For sparing of his sacred strength, not often
Among us darkling here the lord of light
Makes manifest his music and his might
In hearts that open and in lips that soften
With the soft flame and heat of songs that shine.
Thy lips indeed he touched with bitter wine,
And nourished them indeed with bitter bread ;
Yet surely from his hand thy soul's food came,
The fire that scarred thy spirit at his flame
Was lighted, and this hungering heart he fed
Who feeds our hearts with fame.

But it was Swinburne's rhetorical faults that minor poets were to echo for nearly two decades because the Swinburnean style in all its richness and its metrical force cannot be adapted to ecstasies less keen and intelligence less richly furnished than those of Swinburne at his highest level.

The deterioration in Swinburne's individual style has much in common with the insidious disintegration which belongs to a literary decadence, and is to be distinguished from the more consistent crudities in the style of William Morris, which prevent one ranking him with the great poets of the last century, just as in the succeeding genera-

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tion the inadequate technique of John Masefield robbed us of another major poet. Morris always lacked the artistic mastery of the literary medium which might have made his poetic fame secure, but his genius as a poet of the day-dreaming imagination, like Masefield's indeed, is not to be denied, and will for a long time yet hold youthful readers in thrall. But Swinburne's always eclectic diction and metrical skill are seen beginning in "Tristram of Lyonesse" to lack the divine necessity of expression. Many of the French experiments, from Mallarmé's musical symbolism to Verlaine's marvellous fluting with vowels, are due less to urgent needs of developing art than to the weakening of spiritual motives for great poetry.

If great poets can by example as well as influence encourage the writing of pseudo-poetry, it is not astonishing that every original impulse in poetry should be distorted or diluted by unoriginal writers, and "slosh" derived from the Rossetti-Morris-Swinburne movement is to be found at the end of the century even more easily than we can still find (in anthology selections, too) the "slosh" half a century earlier derived from the Romantic Revival. For pseudo-poetry quickly absorbs the preciousities of a literary decadence.

III

DECADENCE

Dowson—Middleton—Edmund John—Stephen Phillips—Le Gallienne and "Englishry"—A. E. Housman—Alice Meynell—Alfred Douglas and Catholicism—Flecker—J. A. Symonds—Wilde—Arthur Symons—"Happy Wanderer" songs—Lionel Johnson—Chronological fallacy of "the 'Nineties".

MAX NORDAU'S fantastic rant in *Degeneration* and M. H. Jackson's journalistic *tour-de-force*, *The Eighteen-Nineties*, have done much to distort the accepted view of later nineteenth-century literature. Not in the nineteenth century only but throughout the whole of European literature since the Greeks, those poets temperamentally susceptible to the effects of a phase of *ennui* in cultured society have revealed the tendency to moral and spiritual disorder in their style and mood. Enevating external influences exist at all times, though human societies do seem to undergo periodically phases of especial lassitude or staleness of culture. The poets who respond most readily by reason of their innate tendency to nescience are the authors of "decadent" poetry. Usually they appear to resort to an eclectic preciousity of language or subject derived from previous art, or to some revolutionary dislocation of the elements of their medium. Preciosity is really the first stage of a process that ends with disintegration of style and then of the associations of ideas. It is also a characteristic of decadent poets that they are exceptionally self-centred,

sometimes, as with Dowson, to a degree that may be described as morbid and certainly is enervating to an artist. In their efforts to escape from a futile silence they are always ready to seize upon rootless novelties of technique, such as Rimbaud's nonsensical colour-scheme for the vowels, with the seriousness of priests of a new cult. As the Wilde school did with the movement inspired by Rossetti, and as some youthful and self-conscious admirers of T. S. Eliot are doing in our own day, they often screen an inherent aimlessness with enthusiasm for some kind of first-rate work which provides easy possibilities of imitation on a lower level of creative energy.

A sign of what happened to the temperamentally decadent poets in England in what is known rather fallaciously as "the 'Nineties" is shown by Arthur Symons's statement (made without *arriere-pensee*) about Ernest Dowson (1867-1900) :

I remember his saying to me that his ideal of a line of verse was the line of Poe :

The viol, the violet, and the vine ;

and the gracious, not remote or unreal beauty, which clings about such words and images as these, was always to him the true poetical beauty. There never was a poet to whom verse came more naturally, for the song's sake ; his theories were all aesthetic, almost technical ones, such as the theory, indicated by his preference for the line of Poe, that the letter ' v ' was the most beautiful of the letters, and could never be brought into verse too often. ¹

Note, by the bye, the typical whittling down of " aesthetic," which has a so much wider and deeper application in the Greek sense of the art of perception through sensory impressions. The reduction of aesthetic theory to a toying with consonants and vowels (the patterning of which is but one of the rudiments of style) is comparable with the tendency of minor poets to speak of or

¹ Introductory Memoir in *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*.

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speaking to a sort of Pre-Raphaelite damsel whom they call "Beauty", notwithstanding the lesson of Rossetti himself, who did at least know the personification as "Sibylla Palmifera", whose shrine was under the arch of Life, guarded by love and death, terror and mystery.

The consequence of Dowson's deliberate attitude, added to his temperamental peculiarity which encouraged it, is that a true though slight genius for poetry left scarcely anything which would not be adequately described by the title of "Decorations" given to one section of his collected poems. "The Pierrot of the Minute", which is in the form of a single dramatic scene, is a dainty bit of porcelain which Aubrey Beardsley might have illustrated better than he did. And a genuine agony gave life to *Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae*. As for the rest of Dowson, apart from the pretty imitations of the lyrical Verlaine, one need but compare his poem "To a Dead Child" with Robert Bridges' poem with a similar title. Dowson's concludes with the characteristically wistful and trite :

Yes ; to be dead,
Dead, here with thee to-day,—
When all is said
'Twere good by thee to lay
My weary head.

The very best!
Ah, child so tired of play,
I stand confessed :
I want to come thy way,
And share thy rest.

Bridges' poem concludes :

Ah ! little at best can all our hopes avail us
To lift this sorrow, or cheer us, when in the dark,
Unwilling, alone we embark,
And the things we have seen and have known and
have heard of, fail us.

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The difference is not merely that Bridges' poem happens to be one of his best, which Dowson's is not. There is the difference in the quality of mind, and the expression of feeling. Bridges was a contemporary, though outliving Dowson by thirty years (he had written nearly all his best work when Dowson died). There was nothing in Dowson to be called up by the child's death except a sigh of self-pity, and even that sincerity his verse, except in the second of the above stanzas, is too feeble to express. Let the reader make the further comparisons, which the titles " Vain Hope " and " Vain Resolves " suggest, with Rossetti's terrible utterance in the sonnet " Vain Virtues ", and the longing in " The One Hope ". In addition to the difference between one poet's stature and another, is the unmistakable difference between poetic vitality and a literary disease. If there is life still in one or two of Dowson's poems, it is because in addition to his concern for curiosities of verbal music he had a sensitive ear for such music, and could make words sing sadly if not splendidly. No poet is quite negligible who achieves an individual music, though there may be in the singing, as in Dowson's, a very minimum of original music.

Richard Middleton (1889-1911) was another of the minor decadent poets who died young ; more than half of his power found expression in his prose stories and essays. In his verse ¹ he is more fervent but more frequently inadequate in expression than Dowson, perhaps because he attempted much more. When going over one's impressions of his poetry, which has an individuality as consistent as Dowson's, it is curious that one of the poems coming to mind is again inspired by a dead child, at least a young girl. The kinship with the verse of Wilde, Dowson and Symons is very clear in these characteristic stanzas by Middleton, but the style is purer than theirs :

¹ Middleton's verse appeared after his death in two volumes of *Poems and Songs*, 1912-1913.

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I've lit my tall, white candles and placed them by the bed,
Two by her little dancing feet, two by her nodding head ;
Ah, feet that dance not, eyes that see not, love for ever dead.

I've picked my tall white lilies, and lined them by her side,
In either hand a lily droops, a lily for my bride ;
She cannot feel nor see them, they watch her open-eyed.

And all the love God gave me, to spend in knightly quests,
In pomp and pride of living, with her, with her it rests,
In her silent lips and quiet eyes and the stillness of her breasts.

The earth yet lingers with me, and I yet see the sky,
The winds are here, and the sun and moon, and the stars that
multiply ;

And sometimes she is cold and dead, and sometimes it is I.

Between us now there stretches a dim unmeasured space
The loving dead can bridge not nor any living grace ;
I cannot hear her breathing, she cannot see my face.

My poor hands touch and tremble, my poor lips kiss and yearn
For a little sudden warmth—but the dead shall not return ;
The lilies droop and falter, the tall, white candles burn.

The chief one of many possible examples of the survival of the decadent mood and style in English poetry right up to the European War is that of Edmund John (1883-1917), a poet little known, whose genius resembles but is considerably greater than Dowson's. His *Flute of Sardonix* (1913) and *Symphonie Symbolique* (1919) are quite as "ninetyish" and equal to the most typical work of the indisputable 'nineties. Those who subscribe to the Celtic cult would trace his peculiar gift no doubt to his Welsh and Scotch ancestry. He was as much given to travelling for poetic impressions as Arthur Symons, but there is no sign in his eclectic poetry of his wide acquaintance with the world or of the intellectual agnosticism which he passed through while studying the scientific prophets of the evolutionary theory. The catastrophic effect on him of joining the British Army and being invalided out of it in 1916 is barely suggested

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by four brief poems to soldier friends. If you can imagine the urgent pain and for him unusually loud imagery of Walter de la Mare's two poems concerning the War, " Motley " and " The Marionettes ", somehow translated into softer and looser language, and a more erotic feeling, and incorporated in egotistical semi-dramatic fantasy that owes something to Oscar Wilde, you have a general idea of *Symphonie Symbolique*. It is hardly necessary to add that Aubrey Beardsley should have illustrated it. John's luxurious and simple verse, with its tendency to worn-out imagery and over-indulgence in sad words, gives his poetry a place among that of the decadent successors of Pre-Raphaelitism. The following stanzas from " Before Dawn " [*Flute of Sardonyx*] are selected for quotation because, while being a fair example of John's style, they contrast with the barer and more eloquent verses of Middle ton just quoted :

The watching candles have burned lorne and low,
Dim as the dreaming of the dying fire
As faint flames flickering o'er a funeral pyre,
Yet lingering, though lighted long ago
About the bitter loveliness of dead desire.

Like the red embers slowly seeking death
Beneath the ashes on my hearth to-night,
Lie half-hid gems, gleaming as Hope in flight
Veiled by the vain fair fragrance of Love's breath,
Amid the desolate dust of my delight. . . .

But why continue the quotation?

The roses, wine, and other properties found in the Baudelairean-Swinburnean lumber-room are more plentiful in some others of John's poems, such as " The Amulet of Seven Hours " and " Poeme Erotique ". Probably his best poem, at least the one which contains the most of his characteristically sensuous erotic wistfulness is " Salome ". The contrast of the simple diction and the exotic atmosphere is curious:

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A vast moon covers all the sable sky,
The hot moon, coloured yellow, seems to lie
Like a still, sensuous madness overhead,
Macabre as some strange sickness of the soul,
Slow, sinister, and painted deep with khol
That stains the languid lids of those long dead . . .

Half-veiled by visions shines the pallid light
Of marble steps that dream through the deep night,
Elusively where the strange moon-mist swims
Like secret music from a hidden lyre ;
And touched with fever like a swift faint fire
Upon curled lips that chant erotic hymns . . .

Held by the stillness, that has given it birth,
Wrapped with the odours of the perfumed earth,
Mournful and over-sweet, full-toned and low,
A long-drawn chord of music through the air
Is mingling with the fragrance of her hair
And winding round her slim soft ankles slow . . .

There would be more excuse for continuing the quotation this time, because John admirably maintains the same chanting effect while the dream-like picture of the dance is unrolled, as if we are looking into a diviner's pool of ink. There are twenty-one stanzas in the poem, which is not unworthy to be associated with Flaubert's famous *Conte*, though Salome is sentimentalized and the style is an extreme example of decadence. All the decadent poets sentimentalized the women they thought of as youthful, amorous and wicked.

It is enough perhaps to say of Stephen Phillips (1864-1915) that he did nothing which other poets had not done or were about to do better. He wrote almost entirely in the iambic pentameter, and used the line so neatly that for a decade nearly all readers overlooked the fact that the music and imagery were entirely pastiche, while the idea, when it was not borrowed, was trite. There are several well-known poets of to-day who are as empty as Phillips.

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Although the style is nearly as divorced from the content of the poetry as the work of another once highly praised poet contemporary of Phillips, William Watson, there are redeeming features in Phillips's work. His most characteristic poem is the blank-verse story of *Marpessa* (1897) in which, as was his wont, he cheapened and sentimentalized an ancient theme ; but if we forget the splendid associations of the Greek story of Marpessa and Apollo, and similarly the sources of the themes of his poetic dramas, there is always a residue of prettiness and grace to reward the reader. Phillips is very quotable as the author of single lines because his gift for aping the best poetry found its easiest expression in the five-foot iambic verse. *Paolo and Francesca* and *Nero* yield quite a lot of fake gems that will not bear scrutiny. These lines spoken by Paolo will suffice for example :

Remember how when first we met we stood
Stung with immortal recollections.
O face immured beside a fairy sea,
That leaned down at dead midnight to be kissed !
O beauty folded up in forests old !

Ulysses will be found more readable than the majority of forgotten poetic dramas, for the poet's skilful attempt to make a play involves a certain continuity of progress in the action, and some of the typical scenes, especially that of the suitors billeted on Penelope, are conceived as action-pictures on a stage. After re-reading the play, however, and searching for signs of authentic power, the best that one can do is to recall the useful service of Charles and Mary Lamb to young readers, when they made stories out of Shakespeare's plays. There is no more of the original vitality of the *Odyssey* in Phillips's *Ulysses* than there is of the dramatic Shakespeare in the Lambs' *Tales*. If Shakespeare had written an epic and Charles and Mary Lamb had tried to popularize it in the form of a play for schools, that would roughly parallel

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what Phillips did to Homer. And all the time that Phillips was a name to conjure with among the London *literati*, the far more original dramatic poems with classical and medieval figures by Ronald Ross had to be published at his own expense and were completely unknown to the public until recently.

It is possible to descend a little lower than the generally competent Phillips, among poets who have been well known if not famous, while examining the decadence in English Poetry. Our example for the next stage is Richard Le Gallienne. The affected attitude of the poet is revealed by the " Epistle Dedicatory " to *English Poems* (1892) which had run to five editions by 1895 :

**Hear the conclusion of the whole matter. You dream like mad,
you love like tinder, you aspire like a star-struck moth—for what ?
That you may hive little lyrics, and sell to a publisher for thirty
pieces of silver.**

It opens with a piece " To the Reader ", in which the poet says that

**Art was a palace once, things great and fair,
And strong and holy, found a temple there ;
Now 'tis a lazar-house of leprous men.
O shall we hear an English song again !
Still English larks mount in the merry morn,
An English May still brings an English thorn. . . .**

and so on. The poet goes on to imply that the leprosy, or " strange green flowers ", comes from France. He was consciously reacting against the contemporary element of so-called " decadence ", and yet both by the internal evidence of his verse and the external sign of a sonnet title (" In a copy of Mr. Swinburne's *Tristram* ") his admiration of the chief English singer of the French decadence is proclaimed. We have heard similar declarations of revolt since the European War against literary preoccupation with ugly themes, though the themes are

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slightly different and their treatment more than slightly different. Literary decadence may include but should not be confused with "slosh", such as Le Gallienne's, which, like the poor, apparently, we have always with us. It is a pity that the expounders of arguments that are interesting in themselves perhaps but irrelevant to poetry or the other Arts, nearly always express their personal prejudices and resentments in "sloshy" modes.

If we turn back to the would-be precious Le Gallienne, we are reminded by the gesture of championing *English* song in the above passage that Englishry was the pet theme of that un-English journalist, Rudyard Kipling, and that it has been one of the post-war revivals of the 'nineties, for not only have the Rudyards gone on Kipling, but rare spirits like Blunden and Sassoon have contributed to the sentimental side of "Englishry".¹

Note that the causes championed by sloshy writers are in the long run betrayed by their champions. Certainly the causes of "Nature Poetry" and of Englishry were not assisted by Le Gallienne's pretty and once popular puerilities. The almost unbelievable badness of *English Poems* is now useful merely to indicate the nullities that minor poetry was drifting into before the twentieth century opened; echoes of echoes of the Pre-Raphaelites mingled with echoes of Tennyson, who was charged a little later with having kept English poetry at a standstill for fifty years. The difference between Oscar Wilde's pastiche and Le Gallienne's is that Wilde's pretences might almost be described as sincerities, so true to him they were, while Le Gallienne's verse reeks with sham spirituality, and feeble fakings of traditional style. The best piece in *English Poems* is "Paolo and Francesca"; it is probably the best thing Le Gallienne ever did, not excepting his flowery version of Omar Khayyam, but

¹ Mr. J. C. Squire, gravely eulogistic, wrote that "Mr. Blunden has a relish for Englishry".

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it is never better than an echo of Keats's " St. Agnes' Eve ". Keats was an important literary ingredient of Pre-Raphaelitism, as we have seen.

Apropos of the kindred insincerity linking the poetic failures of men so different as Wilde and Le Gallienne, " On Some Recent Editions of Oscar Wilde " may be read in Le Gallienne's "*New Poems*" (1910) :

These are the poems of that tragic one,
Who, loving beauty much, loved life too well ;
Therefore, to-night he makes his bed in hell.
Gone are the grace and glory—all is gone. . . .

The poet's courageous championship earns respect, but it does not prevent the thought occurring that Wilde's tragedy was that he never was " tragic ", and it is highly doubtful if he understood by " beauty " more than a decorated degradation of art. He was too egotistical and insincere. In illustration of this statement, there is Wilde's once admired play, *Salome*, which should be compared with Edmund John's superior poem. Then turn to such rubbish in Le Gallienne's *New Poems* as the piece, " To Mrs. Langtry, on Her Departure for America ".

I do not bring you flowers,
Or singing birds,
To say farewell,

the poet begins, and surprisingly adds,

Nor even words.

The piece has forty-three lines, but the explanation of the foregoing is probably in the conclusion :

My little hoard of star-dust
Here I bring,
As offering.

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Poetic licence. Here is a bit more of the star-dust:

Nor to the altar of your eyes
Do I bring sighs ;
Such antiquated tribute
To the youth
Of the eternal Spring
I do not bring.
And, surely—stars above !—
I bring you not
That miracle called love. . . .

This kind of thing was being written in the nineteen hundreds by a poet with a fashionable reputation, and one who could help to make or mar other reputations as a reviewer.

There are signs that Le Gallienne, and others of whom he was a type, had they abandoned more quickly their sweet hells, noble sins, portable altars and pastiche metaphors might have done some respectable work under new influences. In the first two pieces of *New Poems* Le Gallienne writes on the small nations of Europe. " The Cry of the Little Peoples " and " Christmas in War-Time " (referring to the Boer War) contain promises of the revelation of an individual poet. If we could finally say why he never won to the integrity of his contemporary, John Davidson, we should have established a vital principle by which to explain the authenticity of poetry, which is not at all the same as the greatness of poetry. This distinction at least should become evident enough in the following pages.

It seems at first like a contradiction to bring A. E. Housman into this group of decadent poets because where even Lionel Johnson failed to reach the classical sense of style as a hard and clear medium of exact expression, Housman is supremely successful. Nobody could have made the same narrow metrical scope of his chosen metre give up more tunes and sustain more lofty moments

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as it does in the famous *Shropshire Lad* (1896) and *Last Poems* (1922). The unflinching contact of himself and his words, which is after all another phrase for artistic sincerity, enables the poet to make his voice carry far beyond the narrow plot he cultivates so assiduously. Within the mental range of such brevity as that of the "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" in *Last Poems*, no other poem by a non-combatant inspired by the European War of 1914-1918 can convey a comparable sense of power. Similarly a universal mood sings in the songs of the Shropshire countryside, the Roman past of which dominates the poet's imagination, and the satirical note has a sarcasm of rarely penetrating power, as in his advice to those who object to the pessimism of his singing :

**Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think :
Look into the pewter pot
To see the world as the world's not.**

So far Housman might as well have been classed with the Anti-Decadents. But the poetry of "The Shropshire Lad" owes its distinction to a necessary uniformity of mood and preciousness of style. It is the opposite extreme to the Kiplingesque noises and journalistic idiom. Monotony and inanity menace the prolonged sorrows of the Shropshire lad. The exquisite lyrical completeness of the interludes like "Clunton and Clunbury" and "Bredon Hill" offer but momentary relief from a starkness that—like a drama needing more chiaroscuro in the action—loses force by reiteration. The monotony of tone is a sign of the eclecticism of the controlled style, and fundamentally it seems due to a limitation of energy as much as to discipline. By a fine literary tact, the poet allowed himself just as wide a span as his creative energy could adequately fill. An attempt to express a wider range of intuition, a greater abundance of imagery, a richer salvaging from the deeps of dream,

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would have resulted in loss not gain of power in his verse, and an almost perfect illustration of this is afforded by the work of his brother Laurence Housman, who ranges from pseudo-mystical religious lyrics, often full of pseudo-Rossettian imagery, through simple eroticism to a haunted vision of the weird outskirts of common life. His later experiments in dramatic forms like the *Little Plays of St. Francis* reveal an intellectual bent, but are no addition to English poetry. The poet contemporary with A. E. Housman whom he reminds us of is Alice Meynell, whose preciousness and distinction of manner also seem to be a result of the poet's resistance to disintegrating environment. In her verse, as in Housman's, the language at its most perfect seems to be on the verge of etiolation, as if so much has been refined away that there is no more to be done with these words. This is decadence with preciousness. The suggestion that the words are exhausted is of course delusive. The effect belongs to the poet's style. With a very similar vocabulary, and often similar themes, a G. K. Chesterton rollicks and swaggers and occasionally bursts into glory on the waves of enthusiastic rhythm. These other poets seem to have lost contact with the sources of enthusiasm. Ecstasy does touch their poetry at times, but it is an ecstasy of regret which seals them of the sorrowful tribe of decadent singers. (By now it should be clear that "decadent" is not necessarily a term of critical reproach, but a distinguishing and explanatory epithet.)

The reasons for including A. E. Housman and Alice Meynell among the decadent poets apply to Lord Alfred Douglas. The majority of Douglas's poems belong to the period around the turn of the century, though in his *Collected Complete Poems* (1928) and *Collected Satires* (1926) will be found later work up to the post-war era. Among the *Poems* are included some nonsensical satirical verse, *The Pongo Papers* (1907) and some brief "Tails with a

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Twist*' which rarely succeed either as nonsense or as satire. But as a successor of Lear and "Carroll" and precursor of Belloc and Chesterton, and several later poets in this vein, Douglas is not negligible. As for the sonnets and lyrical poems, the poetry in them is both meagre and derivative, and full of poetical clichés lazily used again instead of revitalized. No word or phrase has been so much used in good poems as not to be susceptible of renewed life, but far too often in Douglas's work we find such weakly used diction as "dead forgotten days", "tangled maze", "sweetest things", "muted strings", and an excessive quantity of dreams and beams. The best written of the sonnets usually echo Rossetti's much finer sonnets so plainly that it is difficult to give them their small due of originality, but in the rare instances where the style and the form are united and the poet's own, he achieves a singular completeness of effect, an intellectual music of ideas. Thus in his "Sonnet on the Sonnet" he treads in the wake of greater poets and makes a contribution to their testimonies. "Beauty and the Hunter" is exceptional in reminding us of Rossetti's sonnet-tunes, and yet standing as an individual poem. Listen to the sextet:

**With what gold nets, what silver-pointed spears
May we surprise her, what slim flutes inspire
With breath of what serene enchanted air?—
Wash we our starward gazing eyes with tears,
Till on their pools (drawn by our white desire)
She bend and look, and leave her image there.**

It is not very clear why the poet should have a footnote to the sonnet telling us "this is pure Catholic mysticism", since it answers to many other descriptions also, and is after all simply a renewal of old poetic symbolism for the beauty of wisdom; but he goes on to remind us that two or three years after writing the sonnet (in 1908 or 1909) he became a Catholic. A surprising proportion

of the decadent poets were converted to Catholicism, finding in the Catholic Church no doubt a stable symbolism for reality which they lacked. The characteristics of decadence, however, usually outweighed such artistic advantage ; possibly the need to create was rarely so strong that it could not be appeased by the spiritual comfort of a religious institution. When a Hopkins, a Patmore, a Francis Thompson, makes poetry with the very materials of their religion, it is because the Church or the Christian mythology is an inspiration to them rather than a consolation. This universal communion of poets and mystics is maintained in the sphere of spiritual realities where the discipline and the petty intolerances of institutional religion are irrelevant, and it explains why, to adapt a proverbial saying, there are as good Catholics outside the Church as ever were inside it. Also the artistic value to a poet of entering the Church in maturity will depend upon the cast of his mind and the qualities he brings with him. The retort that people who join the Catholic Church do so for personal and not artistic reasons would be reasonable but scarcely relevant, because what concerns us here is the creative power of the poet and the effect upon his poetry of such a change of environment. There does not seem to be evidence to prove that poets are improved as poets in this way, but there is a good deal of evidence to support a belief that some poets have owed much of their inspiration and artistic unity to a lifelong or virtually lifelong faith. The Christian Faith is not the only possible one, but undoubtedly it is the richest in aesthetic value to a European poet. But when it serves the purposes of egotistical self-pity, as minor poets so often make it serve, its principal artistic use, as a vehicle of renewed vision, is a Ulysses' bow which the dainty triflers cannot draw.

James Elroy Flecker, who follows Douglas chronologically, began as a contributor to the poetry of decadence ;

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it is not without significance that the first portion of his *Collected Poems*, the "Juvenilia", consists of translations and adaptations from Catullus, an invitation of Gautier, an adaptation from Novalis, and an Ode to Shelley. But the most of Flecker's mature work places him in another category, nearer to the main stream of English poetry.¹

More clearly, because of the greater superficial range and notable inequalities of style of the poet, the artistic disintegration of decadence can be observed in Arthur Symons's work. His *Collected Poems* open with the group "Days and Nights", dedicated in 1889 to Walter Pater. The first is a piece in sonnet form (though no sonnet), "The Opium Eater"; the second is "The Nun", the third "The Street Singer", the fourth "The Abandoned" (a prostitute who drowns herself) and the fifth, "Satiety", is the poet himself, who unconvincingly says:

**Come, kindly death, and let my flesh being grass,
Nourish some beast's sad life when I am gone. . . .**

I tire of all but swift oblivion.

Except in poems as egotistical as "Satiety", where he expresses the favourite mood of the minor poets, Symons's attitude towards fellow creatures, and his feeling for divine love and pity prove how he might have been a great poet if sensibility and wisdom could have made him so. But just as his poems in sonnet form are merely a rhyme-scheme, often lazily padded out, lacking the organic internal construction of a true sonnet, so most of his verse is haunted not so much by the verbal echoes of his poetic models, though his diction is generally imitative, as by some failure of spiritual conviction or mental concentration without which poetic form is insignificant. We may say that his sympathetic pictures of Street Singers and Blind Beggars are just as "ninetyish"

¹ Chapter viii.

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as his Nuns, Virgins, Absinthe Drinkers and Opium Smokers. To see how far English Poetry had degenerated along this path it is enough to compare the flawless tact, tenderness and strength in Rossetti's "Jenny" with Symons's self-indulgent kindness towards *files de joie*. The falseness of refinement into which sophistication and fear of reality had led the minor poets is reduced to patent absurdity in two stanzas of "Violet: Prelude", in the group "London Nights", dedicated (again significantly) to Paul Verlaine :

The orchid mostly is the flower I love,
And violets, the mere violets of the wood,
For all their sweetness, have not power to move
The curiosity that rules my blood.

Yet here, in this spice-laden atmosphere,
Where only nature is a thing unreal,
I found in just a violet planted here,
The artificial flower of my ideal.

In this mood of unconscious silliness Symons and many lesser men sang for two more decades of the white innocence of harlots in night-cafws, the scarlet suggestions of virginity, of exotic flowers, cosmetics and the poet's tiredness. Not one of their themes or moods but had been used more effectively by French and English poets during the preceding few decades. And the "sloshyness" of style which is so evident in the *Le Galliennes* is all the more painfully apparent in the work of a poet with Symons's possibilities. All poets have their weak moments, but Symons wrote too often and too easily in the vein and style of "Hallucination" :

One petal of a blood-red tulip pressed
Between the pages of a Baudelaire :
No more ; and I was suddenly aware
Of the white fragrant apple of a breast
On which my lips were pastured. . . .

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And so on—Baudelaire and Swinburne run to seed. The⁴ self-indulgent laxity of the day-dream seems to encourage the verbal laxity of style typified here by the incongruous ideas of "white-fragrant-apple-pastured". The poet seems quite pleased with it, and repeats "white fragrant apple" which then—fortunately for the reader—

"seemed to shrink and spire into a flame"

so bringing the first "Hallucination" to an end. "Hallucination (2)" follows all too readily, and potent words are once more turned into drivel.

Many of the verse writers "educated" by the universities last century indulged in verse that contains surprisingly obvious vices of style. It might suffice to say of the academic versifiers that their culture induced in them an erroneous belief that they were poets. Confronted with the work of Arthur Symons we have to seek the deeper cause of *ennui* to account for the failure. Symons, though more truly cultured than a university Don, was never in danger of having his mind squashed into any conventional mould of learning. The merely cultured versifiers of his day, the best of whom was Frederick Myers, no doubt were somewhat weakened by the bewilderment of beliefs and doubts in the atmosphere, but they had not so much poetry to spoil as Symons. Indicative of his disease is the theme of "The Chimaera" (*Images of Good and Evil*), a description of the poet's dream of his own doom of restlessness and unsatisfied egoism. The poem, in its sincere communication and unity of effect, is among his best. Such success in wording his personal problem or mood is rare, and it seems that generally he sought lightness or detachment as a means of preserving the fragile unity of his poems. Hence many of Symons's poems in suites, based on impressions at Venice, in Wales, in Ireland, are slight but charming essays, and like his often striking translations (especially those from the

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Spanish) remind us of that rather futile scholar and poet, John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), whose most valuable achievement was his translation of Michelangelo's sonnets. When Symonds was in a fit of romantic egoism he allowed himself to echo famous poets, especially Shelley, in lamentable travesties of the original. This echoing in debased style of justly admired poetry was so common as almost to be a characteristic of minor poetry until the work of John Davidson, Francis Thompson, and W. B. Yeats had cleared the air for the lesser poets.

Arthur Symons is an important instance of the weakness of decadence in poetry, just because he is so much more considerable than men like Symonds, and Oscar Wilde who, but for the freak "Ballad of Reading Gaol"—the nearest he ever came to poetic sincerity and genuine vision—would no longer be worth even mentioning except as a misinterpreter of Pre-Raphaelitism. As an erotic poet, when he forgets to be religious, Symons is sometimes original, happily combining the Latin honesty with the coloured diction of his blended literary sources. The first of the series entitled "Bianca" ("London Nights") is modern in the sense that it is not vitiated by the sophisticated sentimentality or cynicism of the time; except for the excessive employment of the epithet "white" (and perhaps the excessive heat of "virginity") it escapes, as few of his poems do, from the cloying languors of the decadence by its directness of experience and a firm inner structure which redeems some weaknesses in the phrasing.

BIANCA (i)

**Her checks are hot, her cheeks are white ;
The white girl hardly breathes to-night,
So faint the pulses come and go,
That waken to a smouldering glow
The morbid faintness of her white.**

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What drowsing heats of sense, desire
Longing and languorous, the fire
Of what white ashes, subtly mesh
The fascinations of her flesh
Into a breathing web of fire ?

Only her eyes, only her mouth,
Live, in the agony of drouth,
Athirst for that which may not be :
The desert of virginity
Aches in the hotness of her mouth.

I take her hands into my hands,
Silently, and she understands ;
I set my lips upon her lips ;
Shuddering to her finger-tips
She strains my hands within her hands.

I set my lips on hers ; they close
Into a false and phantom rose ;
Upon her thirsting lips I rain
A flood of kisses, and in vain ;
Her lips inexorably close.

Through her closed lips that cling to mine,
Her hands that hold me and entwine,
Her body that abandoned lies,
Rigid with sterile ecstasies,
A shiver knits her flesh to mine.

Life sucks into a mist remote
Her fainting lips, her throbbing throat;
Her lips that open to my lips,
And, hot against my finger-tips,
The pulses leaping in her throat.

The more objective attitude of description similarly strengthens the poems in which Symons seems to be painting an exotic character. Even so, as we read " To a Gitana dancing ; Seville ", which is in a series entitled " Souls in the Balance " (" Images of Good and Evil "), the thought occurs, how surprised and amused the hard-working dancer would probably have been by the slightly false attitude of her poet :

Because you are fair as the souls of the lost are fair. . . .

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It was certainly the poet, whose intellect rather than his soul, was lost, the poet who wrote in the same series as the above, "The Dogs", which begins :

My desires are upon me like dogs, I beat them back,
Yet they yelp upon my track ;
And I know that my soul one day shall lie at their feet,
And my soul be these dogs' meat.

What a long distance from the creative sensuality of a Rossetti or a Baudelaire poetry had descended ! The failure of the minor poets to re-create the moving beauty which they found in life may be traced to the nervous restlessness of that portion of society they lived in. An alternative to the luxuries of religious aspirations which were only sentimental with them, was found in day-dreams of "nature" and free-hearted tramping of the Open Road. In the new century this kind of aspiration became a fashion, but it is interesting to find in Symons's "Wanderer's Song" ("Images of Good and Evil") :

I have had enough of women, and enough of love,
But the land waits, and the sea waits, and day and night is enough ;
Give me a long white road, and the grey wide path of the sea
And the wind's will, and the bird's will, and the heart-ache still
in me,

the precursor of the most popular poems of W. B. Yeats, John Masefield, Gerald Gould, Eva Gore-Booth, and others. In each of these instances, namely, "Innisfree", "Wander-Thirst", "Sea-Fever", and "The Little Waves of Breffny", the poems were not among the best work of these poets, who of course vary greatly in stature, though I have arranged their names in the order of importance which it seems to me belongs to them.

Arthur Symons was one of the best genuinely decadent poets, excepting Lionel Johnson (1867-1902), who in his disordered life and his sympathies was even more of his period than his best poems, which are gravely exalted in

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mood and imbued sometimes with the Latin sense of austere graceful style which Symons too generously attributed to Dowson's. Self-conscious sophistication, and preciosity of style, both characteristics of decadence, might be attributed (notwithstanding Holbrook Jackson's lively record, *The Eighteen-Nineties*), as much to the 1870's and 1880's as to the 'nineties, because of the few really decadent poets of the time quite half belong to that and the preceding decade. Pater, who is regarded as the arch-priest of the English decadence, became influential in the 1860's, as a Fellow of Brasenose. His chief writing were published in the 1870's and 1880's. J. A. Symonds's work also appeared in the 1870's and 1880's. Oscar Wilde's meretricious *Poems* were published in 1881. Dowson, Middleton, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, and these Awful Warnings, Stephen Phillips and Le Gallienne, are certainly related chronologically with the 'nineties. So in answer to Bernard Shaw's question: "Did these things really happen, or did you invent it all?" Jackson (and the intellectual gentlemen of to-day who are playing on his harp without realizing it) can always let off a series of names. It is a pity that the appropriate names have not more weight, but if you want to cook up a generalization about a literary period it is fairly easy to keep the names that would ruin the argument out of the account. If the present purpose were merely to undermine the chronological fallacy of the 'nineties, the argument might be concluded with a reminder of Edmund John, whose *Flute of Sardonix* (1913) and *Symphonie Symbolique* (1919) already referred to, could only be described, according to the 'nineties hypothesis, as a fragment of that era accidentally overlooked and just discovered in an old drawer. But John was a schoolboy in the 'nineties. He died of heart disease in 1917 after being invalided out of the British Army. He is decadent not by any aping

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of the Wilde sort of verse, but in his temperamental nostalgia and hopeless pursuit of peace through eroticism.

We shall find in surveying the period more closely that not only is the theory of the 'nineties' decadence chronologically a fallacy but that it distorts the perspective in a more serious way than this. The most important poets of the last two decades of the nineteenth century were definitely not decadent.

IV

ANTI-DECADENCE (i)

Hopkins—Doughty—Meredith as anti-Tennysonian—Henley anticipates Eliot—James Thomson—Wilfrid Blunt, an underrated poet—Austin Dobson and Locker-Lampson—R. L. Stevenson—Hardy—William Barnes—Hardy's poetry of curious thought—Cf Edward Thomas and De la Mare—Gordon Bottomley—Francis Thompson.

MUCH—indeed nearly all the best—poetry written in the last two decades of the nineteenth century contrasts in mood and style, in faults and virtues, with the so-called *fin de Steele* work. So much does the important poetry indeed outreach and outweigh all the "decadent" work that the end of the century would now be regarded as a time of revival if historians and critics had not distorted the perspective to make it fit the theory of decadence.

One of the chief poets of the whole period occurs at the outset of the period. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit priest, whose manuscripts were kept unpublished until 1918 by his friend Robert Bridges, died in 1889 and wrote the main body of his poetry between that date and 1876. That long delay in giving to the world such pregnant work is a contributory cause of the erroneous textbook view of the period of English poetry that followed the Pre-Raphaelite. A further cause, no doubt, is the necessarily slow appreciation of an equally eccentric poet of importance, Charles Doughty, who began to publish his verse early this century.

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Much of Hopkins's importance to us is in the value of his prosodic experiment, but his theory would not count for much if he had not also proved his quality as a poet. This, however, is wrapt up in his boldness as a technical experimenter, and a reader unacquainted with the collected *Poems* can scarcely gain an idea of it from quotation without at least considering the account of " Sprung Rhythm " which occurs in the chapter on Technical Experiments. Hopkins's style is a wonderful amalgam of idiomatic speech and sudden archaisms and coinages, while the essentially simple and forcible rhythm is often puzzling to the eye rather than to the ear because it runs over line-ends and stanzas much more frequently and with a far swifter movement than is common to classical English poetry since the early Elizabethans. The plangent rhythm often seems to pour past the line-ends so that the ordinary rhymes are converted into internal rhymes, making the poem into a wave of excitement in the mind. The poet's masterly use of clashing alliterations and rapid sequences of adjectives and nouns, not to speak here of the bold displacements of the customary grammatical order, all help to bewilder the reader at a first acquaintance. But bewilderment soon gives place to pleasure, for the excitement is not alone that of novelty or simply of strong rhythm, though when the ear has caught his Sprung Rhythm it excites the mind as effectually as Swinburne's metrical feats ; more effectually, because the extreme development of the classical measures tends to a hypnotic monotony, but Hopkins strengthens the natural speech rhythms so that the pauses of the verse have a dramatic significance. He also mixes the plainest prosaicisms with his bright imagery and rich metaphor, trusting to the rhythm to carry these off. His longest and perhaps his most important poem, the ode-like " Wreck of the Deutschland ", certainly could not have sustained so much of this:

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**She was first of a five and came
Of a coifed sisterhood . . .**

but for the effect of speed produced by the diction and the rhythm. Hopkins's boldness in diction was unparalleled by any contemporary poet, and scarcely equalled by Francis Thompson or Charles Doughty, but it is usually splendidly justified by results : " The Wreck of the Deutschland " rings with vivid eloquence like this :

**For the infinite air is unkind,
And the sea flint-flake, black-backed in the regular blow,
Sitting Eastnortheast, in cursed quarter, the wind ;
Wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivelled snow
Spins to the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps.**

Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, edited by Robert Bridges, is in size a modest collection of verse, consisting of a few " Early Poems ", the complete mature poems of 1876-1889, and a section consisting of Unfinished Poems and Fragments, which includes some notable things, especially a strongly written opening scene of a poetic drama entitled " St. Winfred's Well ", in which the poet's study of Shakespearian diction is obvious. The subject was typical, for Hopkins's poetry reveals his Catholic worship and outlook as consistently as Francis Thompson's, but with metaphysical ideas that are occasionally more alien to the majority of readers. The reader of his poem " The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe " will be reminded not only of Thompson's forcible simplicities in his slighter poems, but also of Coventry Patmore's intellectually controlled symbolism. Patmore and Hopkins were friends and it was, according to Edmund Gosse, on the advice of Hopkins that Patmore burned his " Sponsa Dei ", the completest expression of his ideas about divine and human love. Hopkins looked at it as a priest rather than as a poet, presumably, and told Patmore that it went too far in " telling secrets ",

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Charles Montague Doughty (1843-1927) is primarily a great prose writer by virtue of his *Arabia Deserta*, a unique record in a masterly style of strange experiences which few men could have survived, leave alone use as material for an artistic masterpiece. After that, one finds that the eccentric power in his verse, the epic-like *Dawn in Britain* (1906) which is full of archaic revivals of early English diction, especially of the sixteenth century, and *Adam Cast Forth* (1906), and *Mansoul, or the Riddle of the World* (1920), is obviously an essential expression of an extraordinary personality but of secondary importance. His clarity in describing, especially details of natural scenes—this is very noticeable in another volume, *The Cliffs* (1909)—reminds us of the Pre-Raphaelites, but the dominant characteristic of his verse, apart from the eccentricities of diction, is its slow, grave sonority, and its impressive imagery of vast and still objects. We often get an impression, especially in *Mansoul*, which has passages of Dantesque gloom, that we have picked up the wrong book and are reading again in *Arabia Deserta* ! The essentially poetic and unintellectual quality of Doughty's imagination gives him a place among the poets of dream.

In what, for convenience of classification, we regard as anti-decadent poetry at the end of last century, there is often an evident opposition to the Tennysonian tradition. This was still supreme in popularity with the reading public as Pre-Raphaelitism was in literary circles. All that the public knew about Pre-Raphaelitism was confined to house decoration. The resolute avoidance of the Tennysonian manner is noticeable in George Meredith (1828-1909). Not much need be said of *Modern Love*, published in 1862 : it was a failure of literary tact at least, and a mistaken application of Browning's idiomatic treatment of more objectively

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envisaged themes. The virtues of the sequence of sixteen-line 'sonnet-like stanzas describing a dead passion were novelistic rather than poetic. After reading through them one seems to have read an ironic story of the failure of married love.¹ There are some memorable poignancies, and subtle perceptions, of course, for the writer was Meredith, but the immediacy of his concern with the characters of the man and woman encouraged his prevailing bent for intellectual criticism, and the hint of Byronic cheapness in the display of erotic pain is queerly emphasized by the rather strident cleverness of comment. Meredith's poetic fame rests more securely upon the poetry that expressed both his loving observation of the countryside and his philosophical interest in "nature's" cyclic life. He could not help resembling Tennyson in his preoccupations, for he had much in common with that more harmonious if shallower mind. Hence no doubt his limitations of style in verse came to be peculiarities consciously insisted on, to differentiate the verse from that of the poet whose fame and popularity still overshadowed the age. With Tennyson's refinement of intellect, and a much wider understanding of human beings, Meredith was hardened into pugnacity by his difficulty in securing a congenial social environment. Much of Meredith's intellectual dandyism is a compensation for external disharmonies, and the incomplete paganism of his philosophy is his chief weapon against the prevailing conventions of Victorian church-goers, University Dons and public-schoolboys in high offices, that threatened to suffocate him and his like. The excellent volume of his *Selected Poems*, first published in 1897, leaves no doubt in a modern reader's mind of his survival as an important poet, but the inconclusiveness of the individual character revealed, the wavering unity of this

¹ An interesting modern example of the same genre is Gerald Gould's "Monogamy".

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poet's whole body of poetry, which might reasonably be attributed to the Selection, actually reflects the effect of the original volumes from which the poems and extracts were taken. Chiefly they were *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883), *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life* (1887), and *A Reading of Earth* (1888). Meredith seems to wrench neo-classicism in poetry from the grasp of Tennyson and Swinburne, so that he may apply to it a negation of any accepted faith, in the form of his own "reading of earth". This impression, gained from poems like "Melampus" and "The Day of the Daughter of Hades", has to be modified. We find that his choice of themes shows no leaning to the Greek, but is guided solely by a preference for themes and arguments that contrasted with the tone of most poetry of his time, especially the Tennysonian. Thus he will turn to historical legend for a violent theme like the "Nuptials of Attila" as readily as to classical myth for an un-Victorian scale of values. His gifts as a novelist help to make the pseudo-narratives interesting even though the interjection of his restless thoughts and the frequent failures of rhythm are difficulties that need not be there. His eccentricities of style lack the necessity and justification of Hopkins's, for instance, because when Meredith succeeds best with colour and music to express emotion, as in "Love in the Valley", or exceeds his customary depth of intuition as in "Earth and Man", "The Hymn to Colour", and "The Woods of Westermain", and that very moving short poem, "Bellerophon", the style conforms more closely to current convention. In his harshnesses of style then, as in his substitution of earth-worship for any form of faith in other worlds, we suspect an inartistic element of conscious pugnacity, a reaction against current tastes, and so far as the suspicion is justified, Meredith falls short as a poet. He remains among the English poets of the second rank by reason of a mere half-dozen of his

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poems, but poems which make nearly all the verse published at the same time by other poets seem cheap in comparison. The powerful effect produced by his best poems is due less to their verbal texture, which is barely adequate,¹ than to an unusual union of the genuine seer with the merely reactionary pessimist. The pessimist in him, instead of coming out into the open like Hardy, kept up inconvincing pretence of finding satisfying faith in the concept of Earth as Mother of the human race. He was driven to accept all that was implied by Tennyson's " Nature red in tooth and claw " as part of a beneficent natural scheme of progress through struggle which included the human race, and of course this led him into temperamental as well as ethical self-contradictions, and possibly curtailed his creative energy in poetry. We can only feel to-day that the poet of " Earth and Man ", unsupported as was the revolutionary Swinburne, by the complete Greek vision of destiny, was a rather heroic Crusader who suffered from an ineradicable weakness. The weakness was an instinctive sympathy with elements among the spiritual forces besieging his isolated citadel of independence. Now that the conditions of that contest have passed away Meredith's poetic vision of Earth " once worshipped Prime of Powers " and still a loving if implacable Mother of Man has rich potentiality for modern poetry.

Among the lesser poets to be noticed as opposed to the decadent temper is W. E. Henley (1849-1903). Had Henley not experimented boldly in form and matter he would be only a little more noteworthy than some of the lesser poets who have been barely mentioned, or

¹ Even the richest of them, " Love in the Valley ", is lyrically inferior to George Darley's wonderful " Song " which no doubt suggested it:

" Sweet in her green dell the flower of beauty slumbers."

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some (such as Aubrey de Vere, Richard Henry Home, William Cory and the Earl of Lytton) who have not been even named before. Perhaps Henley might have been a greater poet if his fresh and original work, especially the vivid impressions in *London Voluntaries and Other Verses* (1893) and the earlier suite "In Hospital" describing his sensations as a patient in Edinburgh Infirmary, had won sooner the public appreciation they deserved. Instead, he became a great journalist and editor, but there is in his verse an original and modern note that has only been fully used since the War in English poetry, by T. S. Eliot, a kind of perverse choice of commonplace or macabre facts and images, and a contempt for merely traditional poetic associations. Some of the sonnets which occur in the "In Hospital" suite are at least masterly character sketches, in which Henley successfully uses his idiomatic diction in regular metre. His experiments in irregular and unrhymed verse have also to be noted. The element in his poetry which wears worst is that slightly affected valorousness of tone heard in the anthology piece, "Out of the night that covers me", which he wrote *in memoriam* a friend. Inferior also—possibly because we have lost touch with the mood—seems the verse that shows his fondness for the sword "clanging imperious". This boyish bravado may owe something to reaction against the graceful hopelessness of decadence, but a more personal source of it may be found in his long struggle with poverty and neglect, and also to the lifelong physical invalidism of an extremely forcible personality, just as Swinburne's more violently erotic verse was an ideal compensation for subnormal virility. At the same time it must be admitted that Henley's innate fineness gave to his patriotic poetry such as *Pro Rege Nostro*, and even his elegy on Queen Victoria (*Reginae Dilectissimae Victorias Epicedia*), a nobility with which the bouncing vulgarity of Rudyard Kipling

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(his successor in this strain) makes a lamentable contrast. Although the work of James Thomson (1834-1882) strictly occurs just before our period, by reason of its uncompromising pessimism in his chief poem, "The City of Dreadful Night", and the satirical jibes in short pieces at orthodox religion, he reaches forward as did Thomas Hardy to our own age. Moreover, he undoubtedly influenced Henley, who became a champion of his neglected work. The remarkable attempt at a narrative of contemporary life in lyrical mood and measures in "Sunday up the River", quite apart from the sombre magnificence of the too-drawn-out "City of Dreadful Night", proves in Thomson an originality deeper than Henley's and akin to John Davidson's.

Exceptionally interesting among the lesser non-decadent poets of the age, is the at-present-underestimated Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840-1922). Not only were his versions of *The Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia* (1903) a superb and rarely equalled work as translation from an Oriental literature,¹ but in freshness of diction and imagery (to some extent owing to his clever stylization to suggest the Arab minstrel's speech) and unconventional but highly effective metre, Blunt is a genuine poet superior to the majority of his contemporaries. The thoughtlessly accepted view of Blunt in our textbooks is neatly repeated by Earle Welby². The historian can say polite things about poets like Edmund Gosse, but does not hesitate to dismiss Blunt as a man who wrote exceptionally good sonnets, but really used his energies in politics and the breeding of Arab horses. It is true that he wrote some good sonnets. Indeed, the sequence *The Love Sonnets of Proteus*, first published in 1880, which are to be found in the valuable collection published in

¹ His metrical version is based on his wife's literal prose translation of the Arabic.

² *Popular History of English Poetry*.

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1898,¹ is surely a much more interesting addition to English poetry than Meredith's *Modern Love*, in which, says the surprising Welby, "almost all the finest qualities of Meredith combine to make a masterpiece". If this were indeed true Meredith could be dismissed as a cheaper Byron. In the "Love Sonnets" (which are not all sonnets in form) the poet is unequal in style but daring in the rejection of merely poetic diction for racy speech. The technical experiments of Blunt are always very individual, but a special acknowledgment must be made of the force of the personal idiom of the poet which survives in his love poetry as does that of no other nineteenth-century poet of secondary rank. His *Esther: A Young Man's Tragedy*, is a narrative of a young Englishman's adventure in Lyons, told in the first person in forty-eight sonnet-stanzas. It is as freshly different from the minor decadents' poeticizing of "sin" as the version of the Arab *Golden Odes* is to the moribund verse translations by professors of Oriental languages. A step further towards a prosaic idiom is the sequence entitled "The Idler's Calendar". This is a contribution to the stock of "society verse" practised consummately by Austin Dobson (1840-1921), and also by Frederick Locker-Lampson (i 821-1895). Under the same head would come also Blunt's unusual experiment, "Griselda, a Society Novel in Rhymed Verse", and his plentiful verse, mostly in sonnet form, of a hunting man, which is omitted from the volume of selected *Poems*.

Another poet who is a better artist than many would give him credit for, notwithstanding his statement that he regarded verse as a relief after writing prose, was R. L. Stevenson (1850-1894). At this time of day it is easy to underrate Stevenson's quality, and to forget how much more original was his style in the 1880's and 1890's

¹ *The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt*, selected and arranged by W. E. Henley and George Wyndham.

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than it appears in a retrospect that includes the acres of falsely simple verse that cropped up in the sunshine of Stevenson's later popularity. He must also be credited with rivalling Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song* in his *Child's Garden of Verses*, as a writer of childish verse possessing poetic qualities. He was able in his *Underwoods* to use a genuine lyrical gift and to express sincerely many feelings that harmonized with Victorian sentimentality about the home and individual destiny. There was also, in spite of his extreme modesty about his own verse, behind his cheerful simplicity an intellectual opposition and a temperamental aversion to perverse manifestations of the decadent poetic mood. "The verses entitled 'A Portrait', so unlike anything else my husband ever wrote," says Mrs. Stevenson,¹ arose as follows. "He had just finished with wondering disgust, a book of poems in the most musical English, but excessively morbid and unpleasant in sentiment.⁵⁵ It is sufficient to quote the opening stanzas to prove the depth of the poet's repugnance :

I am a kind of farthing dip,
Unfriendly to the nose and eyes ;
A blue-behinded ape, I skip
Upon the trees of Paradise.

At mankind's feast I take my place
In solemn, sanctimonious state,
And have the air of saying grace
While I defile the dinner-plate.

The title of the book that so upset Stevenson would be interesting. By it we should be able to estimate how much of his antagonism to the decadence was due to clarity of vision and how much was an uncontrollable puritanism in him, that "something of the shorter-

¹ Prefatory Note to *Underwoods* in Tusitala Edition of **the Works**, Vol. 22.

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catechist" noted by Henley, as curiously blended with "lover and sensualist", Hamlet and Ariel. Stevenson claimed, in self-depreciation, only a prose quality in his verse, but that prose quality of definite and economical diction, and an absence of half-said nothings encouraged a quite important reaction against the vices of literary decadence, although in its turn it unfortunately became a literary fashion after 1910. The contrast between the almost classical serenity and directness of Stevenson and the otiose sweetness of the minor decadents is illustrated by Stevenson's "Bright is the Ring of Words" and Arthur O'Shaughnessy's "We are the Music Makers"¹

The poetry of Thomas Hardy is more consistent than Meredith's in its clear-eyed pessimism, but cannot be equalled or excelled in its own sphere of elemental vision except by other Hardys, who will respond to an environment differing greatly from his, which was essentially Victorian. More so than in Meredith's, the enduring interest of Hardy's poetry comes from his gifts as novelist. Meredith's narratives and pseudo-narratives are often witty or ironic dissertations on a general idea and suggest an incompletely developed satirical poet. It is characteristic, for instance, that "The Nuptials of Attila" concludes with the reflection :

**Big the senseless Titans loom,
Through a mist of common doom
Striving which shall die the last;
Till a gentle-breathing morn
Frees the stream from bank to bank.
So the Empire built of scorn
Agonized, dissolved and sank.
Of the Queen no more was told
Than of leaf on Danube rolled,**

¹The very "ninetyish" O'Shaughnessy died in 1881, and his work was published in the 'seventies !

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and the ballad narrative "Aneurin's Harp" with a sardonic warning against England's worship of Mammon :

Has she ears to take forewarnings
She will cleanse her of her stains,
Feed and speed for braver mornings
Valorously the growth of brains.
Power, the hard man knit for action,
Reads each nation on the brow,
Cripple, fool and petrification,
Fall to him—are falling now !

This is not Hardy's way. Thomas Hardy, perhaps because intellectually he was so unsophisticated compared with Meredith, but also undoubtedly owing to a finer gift for dramatic narrative, speaks from an implicit mental attitude towards existence which he is content to find confirmed in what he sees of human life. His perceptions even in the briefest lyrics tend to take an internal structure of narrative—a succession of events (though the events may be only ideas and images) which has the rise and fall of a little story. Hardy is even less of a singer in verse than Meredith, though he can often softly chant, but he has a more consistently appropriate style in spite of its crudities. The rhythm of his so-called lyrics is not fluctuant enough to be called musical. Rather is it architectural and static, an arrangement of fragments one on the other. Line is added to line in a determined pattern, but the lines only on rare occasions generate a circuit of pure song. When this does happen the homely diction gets enspendoured by the revelation, as it does in Wordsworth's best lines, incarnating some divine significance.

" Monumental " is the epithet that occurs to one confronted with Hardy's " epic drama " *The Dynasts*, but is not the effect of it largely an imposition of sheer physical mass ? Will we not increasingly, and with justification, select an ode here and a lyric there from that

huge historical novel in verse, and be content with abbreviations of the linking movements? As poetry, can one assert that it reveals a potency comparable with that of Hardy's best prose? There might have been a different verdict on *The Dynasts* if Hardy's command of the verbal medium had in any way resembled Shakespeare's versatility and consummateness, but lacking that, Hardy's attempt to write an epic-drama (the necessity for such a monstrous term implied this argument) was bound to be a failure from the point of view of an ideal achievement. Apart from the question whether the mere size of *The Dynasts* is justified, after struggling through it one can but recognize how much is the actual achievement beyond the reach of more than half a dozen poets in English. "Critics can never be made to understand that the failure may be greater than the success," Hardy's wife, apropos of her husband's work, says, and illustrates the conviction: "To have strength to roll a stone weighing a hundredweight to the top of the mount is a success, and to have the strength to roll a stone of ten hundredweight only half-way up that mount is a failure. But the latter is two or three times as strong a deed."¹ But strength in the performer is an entirely irrelevant matter except it produce a valuable deed. In any art the achievement and not the artist's personal resources is the basis of our appreciation. If rolling a ten-hundredweight stone only half-way up a hill means that it will roll down again, while rolling it to the top ensures that it will stay there, then it is a greater achievement to roll the smaller stone to the top. (For the analogy we have to assume that the artist's communication is represented by getting the stone to the top of the mount.) The other performance is a futile display of misdirected energy. Having faced Mrs. Hardy's plausible argument, however, let us at once distinguish between Thomas Hardy's use of his power

¹ *The Late Tears of Thomas Hardy* (1930).

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and anything so futile as rolling a boulder half-way up a **hill**-and letting it run down again. Hardy's achievement **would** have been just as powerful, nay more powerful, if he had attempted something less than a work more ambitious in scope than any other single poem or play in the language. We make a sufficient admission of the power of *The Dynasts* if we see how great it would have been in prose. But for his decision to abandon the novel and return to verse Hardy might well have made *The Dynasts* his masterpiece in prose fiction, and had he done so can we not believe that it might have rivalled Tolstoi's *War and Peace*? The poetry in *The Dynasts* is in fragments and owes its qualities to the poet's revived excitement over situations and characters that do not so much grow out of the whole drama as fit into a well-schemed picture. In other words it is essentially the same as that of the *Wessex Poems* (1898), *Poems of the Past and Present* (1902), *Time's Laughing Stocks* (1909), and the later volumes, *Satires of Circumstance* (1914), *Moments of Vision* (1917), etc. There is a bigger proportion of inferior verse in these and still other collections, because the average quality of style in the lyrical and elegiac interludes of *The Dynasts*, is usually equal to Hardy's best. The fact that Hardy edited a volume of *Select Poems of William Barnes* is a reminder that his verse usually has for raw material bucolic local scenes similar to Barnes's.

Barnes (1801-1886) had far less to express than Hardy and his aim was scholarly, but his resources of style (nearly always in Dorset dialect) are adequate to their modest purpose, which was merely to display the dialect in pleasing, often moving, narratives and songs of bucolic character. Hardy's stature is due to a spiritual urgency in him and a powerfully moving imagination which made it impossible for him to confine his art to description or sympathetic interpretation of actual life. Everything he perceived was steeped in that ideal vision proclaimed by

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Wordsworth. In its opposition to easy sentiment or comforting but untested belief his attitude resembled Meredith's, and differed from it in a deeper stoicism and profounder understanding called up by a despair that Meredith refused to admit, and that the poet of *The City of Dreadful Night* and John Davidson were not morally strong enough to sustain. In the long run, however, Hardy is likely to be remembered and most appreciated as a poet of human existence reduced to simple and universally significant elements, as in the vision of the ploughman :

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass ;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though dynasties pass. . . .

Cleverer poets without Hardy's deeply-rooted simplicity and unsophisticated wisdom will attempt in vain such glimpses or startle us into attention as Hardy so often does by his conceits and curious thoughts. Here is an interesting contrast. After the above, read Louis Golding's series of rhetorically brilliant but unmoving statements in " Ploughman at the Plough " (*Shepherd Singing Ragtime*, 1921), such as :

Only for the soil which stares
Glean into God's face he cares. . . .

In his wrist more strength is hid
Than in the monstrous Pyramid. . . .

Dawn to dusk with God he stands,
The Earth poised on his brown hands.

A certain revival, in much altered dress, of the so-called metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century was one

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of the natural developments last century after the ebb of the great poetic waves that came from the previous Romantic Revival. In their different ways Patmore and Francis Thompson, and Meredith and Hardy are all exceptionally "metaphysical" among their contemporaries, though Hardy is perhaps better described as a poet of curious or dramatic thoughts than as metaphysical. No other poet this century so frequently wrote that poetry of thought which ranges from the seriously gnomic to the unexpected surmise or the merely quaint reflection. Assuming that Patmore is left out of the argument as being concerned with a particular system of religious symbolism and that Francis Thompson, when he is not employing Patmore's ideas more splendidly, merely treats a few scientific notions imaginatively, we can say that only Meredith compares at all with Hardy in this respect. As we have seen, Meredith's thought was at once more philosophical and less native to his mind than Hardy's. Certainly it lacks the surprising and personal quality, as of ideas just discovered, in the thoughts expressed poetically by Hardy and by no other Victorian except Rossetti and Browning in a very small proportion of their verse.

The range of Hardy's queer reflections is naturally much wider than that of the above poets. They have a resemblance at times to Browning's psychological ruminations, but are never sophisticated or obscure like Browning's. Typical of their half-whimsical and wholly sad mood is the idea of "The Strange House".¹ The poet imagines Maxgate, his home, occupied eighty years later by strangers who can feel the psychic influences left from the dim past which is the poet's own lifetime there. Not the general idea but the particular application and quaintly unexpected presentment surprises the reader into attention and sympathy. He makes the strangers in the

¹ *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, 1922.

house discuss their eerie experiences. One has seen a figure on the stairs, another says :

" I hear the piano playing—
Just as a ghost might play."

"—O, but what are you saying?
There's no piano to-day ;
Their old one was sold and broken . . ."

It is like Hardy, too, to try the same idea in a different context, so in " The Ghost of the Past " he puts his elderly self there in place of the strangers in the above poem :

We two kept house, the Past and I,
The Past and I ;
Through all my tasks it hovered nigh,
Leaving me never alone.
It was a spectral housekeeping
Where fell no jarring tone,
As strange, as still a housekeeping
As ever has been known.

As daily I went up the stair
And down the stair,
I did not mind the Bygone there—
The Present once to me ;
Its moving meek companionship
I wished might ever be,
There was in that companionship
Something of ecstasy. . . .

As the poem progresses to a perfectly appointed end a " something of ecstasy" that is less regret than the rapture of perceiving affects the reader as well as the poet. So out of quite hackneyed themes Hardy achieves his most surprising results. An idea as familiar as **that** of the ghost of the Past is, thanks to Keats, that of " The Self-Same Song ". Hardy is never deterred by any fear of being hackneyed. Much of his virtue as a poet is due to this lack of the stifling self-consciousness of cleverer men. In " The Self-Same Song " the poet observes that a bird's song is the same as the song heard long ago by

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him at the same place. This leads him to the further twist of the thought:

—But it's not the self-same bird—
No : perished to dust is he. . . .
As also are those who heard
That song with me.

Hardy's prolixity of ideas, often expressed inadequately though rarely without some ingenuity of presentation, may be accounted for by his experience and skill as a writer of fiction ; but if the abundance and perhaps also the not infrequent lapses into the prosaicisms or banalities of style may be traced to the discursive hand of the teller of tales, the surprising quality of his thoughts embodied in reflective poetry certainly pertains to his poetic gift. Hardy is one of the most imaginative of poets. His curious thoughts are but outlets for the questing imagination. Walter de la Mare is akin to him in this, and so is Edward Thomas, whose diction also has something of the simple necessity of Hardy's. Thomas's delicate perceptions gathering like dew-crystals on an evening flower upon some haunting idea are to be seen or heard in many a poem. In " I Never Saw that Land Before " he recalls some gentle English valley he once visited and expects never to visit again. Through his pain and gladness affection for it deepened in him, and yet:

I neither expected anything
Nor yet remembered : but some goal
I touched then ; and if I could sing
What would not even whisper my soul
As I went on my journeying,

I should use, as the trees and birds did,
A language not to be betrayed ;
And what was hid should still be hid
Excepting from those like me made
Who answer when such whispers bid.

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There is a subtlety of music beyond Hardy, but very similar is the feeling. A more evident parallel, that includes a contrast, is the reflection in "October", where after describing with his delicate particularity of detail the natural scene before him on a warm spring-like autumn day, the poet says suddenly :

and now I might
As happy be as earth is beautiful
Were I some other. . . .
Some day I shall think this a happy day,
And this mood by the name of melancholy
Shall no more blackened and obscured be.

In "The Best of Time" Hardy reflects on a series of significantly commonplace events in the following way :

We went a day's excursion to the stream,
Basked by the bank, and bent to the ripple-gleam,
And I did not know
That life would show
However it might flower, no finer glow.

Hardy here is content to repeat what he knows by heart, that happiness is never present to the consciousness but always before or after, but Thomas's poem seems to arrive at a discovery unforeseen in the first half of it. Thomas never reached the maturity of experience in which poets begin to extend without deepening their testament of beauty.

The suggested comparison with Walter de la Mare leads to a qualification. Along with a greater verbal cunning de la Mare's thought in poetry, while it is often content with equally familiar reflections :

But beauty vanishes, beauty passes ;
However rare—rare it be ;
And when I crumble, who will remember
This lady of the West Country ?

has also a tendency to delve into the inexplicable which is evident even in his poetry of childhood.

That he is at home only in the poetry of dream is revealed by the more frequent failures of his verse when the "restless thought" convinces him of its futility. At first, in the volume *Poems* (1906), his mind's questing could find happy scope in lyrics that touch curious reflection with ghostly hints, or in those "Characters from Shakespeare", in which the poet broods over the greater poet's vision of human nature. In that phase he is still in close contact with the ancient dream-world. The sonnet "Anatomy", much inferior though it is to his best poetry, illustrates this:

By chance my fingers, resting on my face,
 Stayed suddenly where in its orbit shone
 The lamp of all things beautiful; then on,
 Following more needfully, did softly trace
 Each arch and prominence and hollow place
 That shall revealed be when all else is gone—
 Warmth, colour, roundness—to oblivion,
 And nothing left but darkness and disgrace.

Life like a moment passed seemed then to be ;
 A transient dream this raiment that it wore ;
 While spelled my hand out its mortality.
 Made certain all that had seemed doubt before :
 Proved—O how vaguely, yet how lucidly !—
 How much death does : and yet can do no more.

This poet could, along the path of reflection in poetry, arrive nowhere else but at the conclusion that his "restless thought" is summed up in futility. The conclusion of one of his finest poems significantly entitled "Vain Questioning" (*Motley*, 1918) is :

Where blooms the flower when her petals fade,
 Where sleepeth echo by earth's music made,
 Where all things transient to the changeless win,
 There waits the peace thy spirit dwelleth in.

But this is the peace of oblivious Death, the end of the cycle that began with the untroubled darkness in the

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womb. The poet cannot range or penetrate reality in thought because of the ubiquitous problems of his own mysterious heart, which he can only urge into quietness with the argument:

All this—thy world—an end shall make ;
Planet to sun return again ;
The universe, to sleep from wake,
In a last peace remain.

Alas, the futility of care
That, spinning thought to thought, doth weave
An idle argument on the air
We love not, nor believe.

He returns in his latest poetry, before devoting the mature energy of his mind, to visionary prose, as Hardy did, to an insistence upon the companionship of a dream when " the night comes ".

De la Mare's slight kinship in mood with the decadent poets is shared by his contemporary, Gordon Bottomley, whose work is confined to verse, and who is in verse a poet of our time excelled by very few in stature. The early *Poems At White Nights* (1899), *The Gate of Smaragdus* (1904), and *Chambers of Imagery* (First series, 1907), especially passages in " A Vision of Giorgione : Three Variations on a Venetian Theme ", reveal a rich sensuousness as delicate as Keats's in " Endymion " with an atmosphere derived too directly from the Rossetti-Morris Pre-Raphaelitism. The Venetian " Variations ", for example, begin with " A Concert of Giorgione ". Giorgione had a clavichord in his studio, to make music at night when the light had gone from Venice. It is evening, and his pupil Paris, a boy, stands with him at the window :

Paris:

The sky's last rose falls into the water ;
It sinks and melts, and, melting, sinks once more.
The far bell tilts, and a stale star or two
Left over from last night blink like the bell.

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A ceaseless fountain of flies is rising and falling,
They are as calm as one more dimness falling
On the last water, where my heart feels falling.
O falling, falling, till the world is done.

The clear gorgeousness of this, which Bottomley often equals, is that of a master of sensuous diction unequalled since Rossetti, but in the extremely languishing mood was a hint of a danger that dogged the poet's verbal felicity. That danger was nearly always kept at bay by his dramatic power in his plays, and a deeply reflective mentality which found splendid vesture in elegiac and lyrical verse. His *Poems of Thirty Tears* (1925) is a collection of extraordinary interest, revealing a curiously questing mind as well as an exceptional devotion to the art of poetry. A verdict given as early as 1907 by Edward Thomas, that " Mr. Bottomley has always been an artist faithfully and curiously endeavouring to follow and capture his private intuitions about life " is well sustained by the collection of his non-dramatic poems. It opens with a characteristic poem, " Atlantis ", in which the gorgeous language is a fitting veil of grand intuitions. It is to my mind, as an expression of the same idea, worth the whole of Robert Bridges' long *Testament of Beauty*, and its mere twenty-nine lines conclude with a more searching thought than is to be found in that ostensibly philosophical thesis :

Poetry is founded on the hearts of men :
Though in Nirvana or the Heavenly courts
The principle of beauty shall persist,
Its body of poetry, as the body of man,
Is but a terrene form, a terrene use,
That swifter being will not loiter with ;
And, when mankind is dead and the world cold,
Poetry's immortality will pass.

Those remarkable ode-like poems which he calls " hymns ", " A Hymn of Imagination ", " A Hymn of

Touch ", "A Hymn of Form ", illustrate both his reflective vision and how he usually differs from the so-called " metaphysical " poets who either use conceits or surprise half-formed questions in their own minds. Bottomley is excellent in the detailed imagery, but he prefers a broad theme to play with. The strength that his poetry, often the most gorgeous, possesses is intellectual. Poems like " *Homunculus in Penumbra* " sound the dominant note :—

" When I look down my limbs and moving breast
 I know that on a day these will commence
 To contradict my being that bids them be
 And sets the harmony by which they live.
 I love to cleanse them ; they reply to me,
 Exuding, sloughing, duteously renewing,
 For cleansing is the nature of their growth ;
 Yet in that day they shall deny my will,
 And turn to filth, refuse, and dirty water,
 While a dispersing sentience that was I
 Stands close thereby in trouble, in travail
 With words those lips delay to utter in time,
 In awe-full agony lest that flesh dissolve
 Before I can get into it again.

" And when I see it buried I shall cry out :
 If it is given to fire, I shall have throes
 Of suffering, of unbearable regret,
 Longing, apprehension, that shall bind
 Yet, yet a little while the loosening wreaths
 Of sentience that are continent of me :
 Then shame and dread shall be the heart of me
 Because I have no body to hide my thoughts,
 That are being scanned, as if by unseen eyes,
 Pursued and judged, ineuctably judged,
 I shivering in that exposure
 To estimation, to distinguishing
 Reproach and sympathy unbearable,
 Until dissemination is complete."

Rare in English poetry is the ruthless intellectual courage and triumphant form of that. It compares interestingly with a very different ode on the same theme

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by Patmore,¹ and part of Francis Thompson's "Anthem of Earth," where that poem comes nearest to Donne in imagery and spirit. In Bottomley's poem metaphors hardly enters—a banishment exceptional in his work—because of the urgency of the apprehension of bodily dissolution. Thompson could afford his magnificence about the body's corruption because that is but a foil to the unplumbed mysteries beyond. He avoids the personal agony of the natural man who must return to Mother Earth, by hitching his chariot to a star and mocking a narrow material science from the airy eminence of his imaginative faith. Death preoccupies the poets in various moods and has been a frequent theme in modern poetry.

¹ See Chapter VI

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W. B. Teats—Ronald Ross—John Davidson—The Oppression of Society—Kipling—T. E. Brown—Henry J Vewbolt—Robert Bridges.

LIKE Bottomley and de la Mare, William Butler Yeats (1865-) showed imaginative affinities with decadence but quickly outgrew them and employed with a mastery unequalled by any poet of his time, the commonest and oldest literary symbols. In 1889 appeared *The Wanderings of Oisín*, which in spite of the dialogue form is a lyrical narrative with periods of dream-like magnificence. The poetic play, *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), also based on Irish legend, and the early collection of poems, *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), revealed a rare poetic genius, whose originality was never in danger from the strongly traditional and romantic character of his diction and much of his imagery. An effect of novelty, moreover, was lent to much of this verse by the images and names taken from Irish literature and folk-tale. The poet possessed a mastery of metre and a power of saying exactly what he wanted to say which enabled him to introduce beautiful effects in an idiomatic speech rhythm woven into conventional verse forms. From the beginning he appears to have had nothing to learn from Robert Bridges about the possibilities of accentual verse. The very popular "Lake Isle of Innisfree" in *The Rose* (1893), another early volume of poems, indicates this addition to a technique which at first seemed to be

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derived equally from the Rossettis and the French Parnassians. The poem, in the same collection as "Innis-free", which is based on a sonnet by Ronsard and is equally famous, "When You Are Old", shows how in the most conventional metre and ancient dream imagery Yeats could already use natural speech rhythms with uncommon ease. In his poems with Irish themes or moods this distinctive beauty of his style finds the readiest expression, and in *The Wind Among the Reeds* accounts for the most exquisite lyrical utterances of this poet. All those poems are of the poetry of dream, and it is significant that language of old romance is so frequently freshened with his Gaelic borrowings. When he amended some of these early poems the change was always for the worse if it involved dropping the Irish names or even the spellings that contained something of his peculiar music, like the substitution of "Mother Mary's" for "Maurya's" in the last line of "The Unappeasable Host".

So mentally alert a poet as Yeats required more than the rich medium of a dream-like atmosphere, and that he could command a harder, sharper style was shown at least as early as the 1904 volume, *In the Seven Woods*, while "The Mask" in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1912) shows how he was to use it for his peculiar gnomic symbolism in the later works. Most frequently this clear, uncoloured style is used for the many poems he wrote on Irish politics. The death of several Irish leaders in the war-time rebellion of 1916, men like Pearse, Connolly, and Macdonagh, came nearer than all the controversies of his alert lifetime to shake Yeats's interior peace, and to draw him from his always carefully cultivated artistic detachment. The political poems in, for instance, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and *The Tower* (1928), though not among Yeats's finest poetry, have surprising passages of power, and others in which prosaic and idiomatic language is made to seem more

significant solely because of the concealed skill of the poet, whose mastery of simple metres never fails and is here allied with his capacity for almost epigrammatic definiteness of statement. As we were considering the modern poetry of curious thought written by Thomas Hardy and others, this strain in Yeats's work ought not to be forgotten. Apart from his creative playing with mystical and magical symbols (which his fellow countryman, "A.E.", uses more like a real mystic), Yeats has always been inclined to the metaphysical and the merely curious reflection in poetry. From ideas that remind us now of Donne, now of Blake, Yeats's gnomic poetry ranges to such personal speculations as those in the "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (*The Tower*). He wishes always to keep the intellect free without allowing emotion, even of his individual kind of patriotism, to dry up. In "A Prayer for My Daughter" (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, 1921) are two stanzas very interesting biographically :

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
 The sort of beauty that I have approved,
 Prosper but little, has dried up of late,
 Yet knows that to be choked with hate
 May well be of all evil chances chief.
 If there's no hatred in a mind
 Assault and battery of the wind
 Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
 So let her think opinions are accursed.
 Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
 Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
 Because of her opinionated mind
 Barter that horn and every good
 By quieter natures understood
 For an old bellows full of angry wind ?

And the prime result of "all hatred driven hence" is that

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The soul recovers radical innocence
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will. . . .

In such reflections Yeats establishes a better claim to mystical wisdom than in the rich and suggestive phantasmagoria of his imagination playing with occult symbols and with folk-lore. All that is justifiably exploited material for poetry, and is not to be valued according to the demonstrative truth of its explicit statements. But notable among the later poems are those which use either the Irish atmosphere or some of the occult symbolism of more gorgeous verse to present an intellectual argument as well as a mood. In *Per Arnica Silentia Lunae* (1918) in the form of a sort of Platonic dialogue, but in beautifully carved verse, is a debate between the two sides of the ego, and the correspondence of these is plainly suggested with the modern psychological dichotomy of the self into conscious and unconscious. Yeats has studied psychology up to as far as he found it useful for his poetic philosophy, and his poems that embody philosophical argument require of the reader a sense of a background of ideas older and more extensive than psychology. In the volume *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) are three notable pieces in this vein : " The double vision of Michael Robartes ", " Ego dominus Tuus " (which is reprinted from *Per Arnica Silentia Lunae*), and " The Phases of the Moon ". Michael Robartes, who comes into all these, is one of Yeats's favourite symbols of Man, or of himself, or of Gaelic Ireland, thus serving as a visible link between the detached artist and so much of Yeats as can be called a politician or a patriot.

His greatness can be perceived not only in the rare beauty of his loveliest poems, but also in the range and variety of the work which impresses its unity so

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strongly upon us. He has brought more poetry to the theatre than any poet since the ending of the Elizabethan period. In the form of narrative as well as play he has exerted an intellectual influence by his intelligent exploitation of archaic myth and poetry that many lesser poets have ineffectually imitated. His range in lyrical and gnomic verse may be summed up by saying that he writes with equal success

Down by the Salley gardens my love and I did meet
and

The Primum Mobile that fashioned us
Has made the very owls in circles move.

Sir Ronald Ross (1857-1932) published in 1930 a volume of *Poems* which included pieces written as far back as the 1870's, but he was not known as poet until just before the War. Fame as a medical scientist pre-dated and probably helped to delay the world's recognition of his genius in literature, but while exiled from the intellectual world of London, as a member of the Indian Medical Service, he struck out a path for himself in poetry. The strong individuality of this ardent mind, which had to express itself in mathematics as well as medical research, proved in prose and poetry an authentic originality. He combined lyrical and gnomic qualities in a poetry that makes his books prominent in the spate of verse printed this century. First there was *In Exile*, privately printed in 1906, the suite of little stanzas in groups which the poet called "Sonnetelles", recording his moods as a scientist in the research in India on the malaria-mosquito theory. Followed *Fables* (1907), twenty of his allegorical poems which were subsequently included in *Fables and Satires* (1928), and *Philosophies* (1910). In 1928 the extraordinary collection of *Poems* written between 1878 and 1928 appeared. Some of the poems included in the last-named volume show a strong Tennysonian strain, as

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clearly as his earliest inspiration¹ revealed kinship with the German romanticism which appealed to Rossetti. When he achieves his own distinctive style he gives us the exaltation and power of *Alastor*, his longest lyrical poem, of which one can say that it sustains well the company of Shelley's poem with the same theme. The brief "Star March" will serve as an example of the sonority and distinction of his traditional and yet personal style :

Who shall not adore thee, Queen of Splendour,
Or can any mortal dread thee?—
Angel of the Vision where is God, and sender
Of swift Stars, O Night Divine.

We can see the troops of fierce Stars tramping ;
Hear the thunder of their footstep ;
Sirius and his legions in the vanward, stamping
With wild rhythm of immortal song.

Lo, his crest of silver smokes with splendour
Of the deep-descending Day-Star,
And his falchion flashes in the light, Ascender
Of thy heav'ns, O Shade Sublime !

Giant and the Child of God, Canobus,
With the flaming Sirius twin-born,
Far above the shadow of the dark world globous,
Shakes his spear in the light supern.

Holder of the Veil of Heav'n asunder,
Sirius and Canobus hail thee ;
Vega and Aldebaran with songs of thunder
Hymn thee in thy deeps divine.

What this song does not show is the poet's deep humanitarian and moral feelings. While his tendency to the sculptured-picturesque leads, through the "decor" of "The Black Pool" (*Poems*), for instance, to comparison with some fantasy by Leconte de Lisle in the first half, characteristically the poem changes into an Apologue on Love and Death. Apologue was the name he justly

¹ See page 10.

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gave to a group of poems in *Philosophies*. That behind his art there was also a deliberate rejection of the decadent interpretation of beauty is often made explicit. The sonnet "Thought" in which he champions the scientist's pursuit of truth against a somewhat degraded view of song as a pleasant idleness, was due no doubt to a conflict in him between two mutually inimical ambitions, but it also came of the impressions he gained of the contemporary literary world during the periods he spent on leave from India during the 1880's and 1890's. Among the many indications of his conscious attitude is the witty skit on drawing-room and "Arty" society in *Edgar, or the New Pygmalion*, and a passage in the rather monotonous and lengthy poem, *The Setting Sun* (1912), which is directed against the decadent simplicity left over from the end of the previous century :

Indeed we're now so very civil
We will not even look at evil,
And know, but dare not name, the devil.
Our gentle poets cannot prose,
Without some camphor to the nose,
Even of Virtue (without clo'es) ;
And rather sing (with caution, Ma'am)
Of Mary and her little Lamb ;
Or, when they strike a sterner stave
Fall fainting on each other's grave ;
Or, lest they suffer further fall,
Write beautyf'ly of no't at all—
Forgetting Phoebus bears an arm
To smite, as well as one to charm.

The considerable element of satire in Ross's work indicates his strong humanitarian concern. Although they are often humorous and often purely poetic, the collection of his *Fables and Satires* is, in the fables as well as in the pieces designated satires, principally satirical, and ranges in subject from particular questions, such as Peace and the Nations, to general themes like Philo-

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sophers, Kings, Provincialism, and so on, while the argument is illustrated wittily through iEsop's symbolical animals. The most moving of the "Sonnetelles" of *In Exile* bring him repeatedly to a hurrying indignation at the miseries of the people in India and reflections upon the spiritual dishonesties of the cultured and comfortable ; such tirades are interludes to his prayers for strength and his praise of man's divine gift of Reason. This scientist-poet can pray to his God with the humility of a saint. *In Exile* was in effect the diary of a medical scientist, working at a difficult problem in uncongenial physical and human surroundings. It tells the researcher's moods of hope and despair, self-pity and pity for others, and darkest fears and stern resolution, right up to the triumph of an actual and world-famous discovery—that of the germs of human malaria in the stomach tissues of an anopheles mosquito. It is unique in this historical sense. As poetry it moves the mind like any other passionate expression in musical language of profound feelings. There is no questioning the true lyrical quality of the best of the "sonnetelles", though it may be remarked that the rhythm of ideas eloquently expressed counts for more than is usual in lyrical poetry. And as a whole *In Exile* is characterized by gnomic wisdom, the fine indignations of a noble mind, and the revelation of a soul's privacy of prayer.

It may have occurred to the reader already that for comparison rather than contrast John Davidson is the poet contemporary with "In Exile" to whom we should turn. Ross's intellectual range, the accident of his occupation in India and acquired devotion to medical science, may have saved him from a conflict as wasteful as that which ravaged Davidson, a man of undoubtedly powerful genius.

John Davidson (1857-1909) is certainly among the poets who consciously revolted against the spiritual

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environment of his time, though his pessimism is a weapon rather than a conviction, as was James Thomson's just before him. Where Thomson was rhetorical, Davidson is fiercely bald in language, where Thomson was picturesquely sinister in describing human misery, Davidson can sometimes thrill us with awe. One is never quite sure with Davidson in his savage mood whether he is grinning or weeping, whether the mingled fierceness and eloquence of poems like "A Ballad of Heaven" and the "Ballad in Blank Verse of the Making of a Poet" are ultimately ironic or state all that the poet felt. In either event his heroism troubles the reader. Davidson's own career was as tragic as any of the human lives he described in his dramas and ballad narratives. It was tragic in a sense that does not apply to the lesser poets of the age who took to drink or to the Roman Catholic Church, or both, in trying to escape, like James Thomson, Dowson, Johnson and Middleton; or quickly by suicide, as we must assume that Davidson himself did, since he clearly described his intention and manner of ending his life. An unachieved greatness throbs as a continual promise in his work. This starts with a verse drama *Bruce* (1886), written while he was still a schoolmaster, after he had left Edinburgh University. Three years later he rashly entered London to become a journalist. The city was to seem to him in this guise as truly as it was for Thomson a "City of Dreadful Night", but Davidson's energetic mind turned outwards sufficiently to embody his emotional and spiritual problems in semi-dramatic presentations of contemporary society. It is clear that he made a sustained effort to master his environment and break free of the spiritual maelstrom that drew him back into himself with a hungry nostalgia. *Smith : A Tragic Farce*,¹ written at Crieff in 1886, three years before he went into Fleet Street, often has an urgent

¹ See *Plays*, by John Davidson, 1894.

note of personal confession. The speech of Hallowes, the poet who is going to die on the mountain rather than face failure and misery any longer, in the opening of Act III, is Davidson voicing his own sense of futility in such an insane world. His moral boldness is accompanied by a bold application of old verse forms to new purposes. The "Ballad in Blank Verse of the Making of a Poet" does not relinquish any eloquence he is capable of. The sonority of lines like these matches the most plangent passages in his dramas :

He saw Apollo on the Dardan beach ;
 The waves lay still ; the winds hung motionless,
 And held their breath to hear the rebel god,
 Conquered and doomed, with stormy sobbing song,
 And crashing discords of his golden lyre,
 Reluctantly compel the walls of Troy,
 Unquarried and unhewn, in supple lines
 And massive strength to rise about the town.

But a hollow ringing is heard in the resounding eloquence as it goes on, reminding us that the Tennysonian era was just ending, and no doubt Davidson appealed more effectively to his own period as he does to us by the human drama of that curious poem. The theme is the conflict between the Scottish youth alight with bright pagan dreams of beauty and desire, and his parents' calvinistic Christianity. And tragically pursuing his dream in the modern world,

rushing from the house
 He sought the outcast Aphrodite, dull,
 Tawdry, unbeautiful, but still divine
 Even in the dark streets of a noisome port.

There is a passion and rhythmical progress in the story that belongs less to a ballad than to a notable narrative poem. Even to-day when these struggles between a narrow religious orthodoxy and the intuitive egoism of

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youth seem like battles long ago, the passion and pity of it live again in Davidson's vivid, nervous narrative, triumphing over, even using—often magnificently—the poetic style that was already a little effete. Davidson had exceptional command of verse, especially in the rhythms of dramatic blank verse, and a rich store of metaphorical imagery for his penetrating perceptions, yet he never seems, even in his ambitious plays, to achieve what was in him to achieve. There was a spiritual malady in himself which gave circumstance an additional destructive power over him, for the fine and freshly forceful lyrical poems in *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1893) and *Ballads and Songs* (1894) did not go unrecognized, and his plays received praise that was almost excessive, striking though they still seem in spite of their rash imitation of Shakespearian phrase and verse. There is often a kinship with Meredith in the more propagandist poems, in which he tried to speak for the age. In "To the New Men" he says :

Heat the furnace hot,
Smelt the things of thought
Into dross and dew ;
Mould the world anew. . .

Knowledge is power? Above
All else, knowledge is love,

but his insistence on love as an ideal of life is vaguer than Meredith's advocacy of "brains" ; even in the plays, which are dramatic variations of the theme, he has a less essential revelation to make than Shelley or Rossetti. The piece "To the New Woman" is like the other half of the testament contained in the invocation to the New Men ; he predicts that the women

Now you surely know
The wrongs of womanhead
At last are fairly dead

will see again that

Love and love alone,
As simple as can be,
Can make this life atone,

but the conclusion of the argument shows that it is but an echo of an earlier echo of Goethe by F. B. Money-Coutts:

And meet your splendid doom,
On heaven-scaling wings,
Women, from whose bright womb
The radiant future springs !

The urgency of Davidson's emotion enabled him to use an archaic background and fantastic imagery as effectively as he used vivid pictures of contemporary life. "A Ballad of Hell" (which is of course not a ballad though the story is told in simple quatrains and the common 2,2 : 2,2 measure) is a fiercely modern poem of Davidson's own time, although the name of the villain is Malespina and the woman he marries instead of his affianced love is Blanche of Valensay. The betrayed woman keeps a compact which Malespina had no intention of keeping himself, to die and meet again in hell. She kills herself, but when she has discovered his perfidy, marches out from among the whimpering lost ones and climbs to heaven, which

welcomed that soul which knew not fear ;
Amazed to find it could rejoice,
Hell raised a hoarse half-human cheer.

As we look back on these burning poems with our half-alienated eyes a sense of having escaped from a spiritual prison invades the mind. What the stronger Meredith had already discovered and fought against from a distance, the oppression of fear, intellectual, economic and moral, that weighed on the close of the Victorian Age, was enough to drive intelligent poets of inharmonious

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temperament to almost frantic violence of revolt. Davidson's humane indignations preserved him from absolute artistic futility, and resulted in those haunting pictures of contemporary life in his *Fleet Street Eclogues* and *Ballads*. Here and there also is a lyric which reveals only the strong virtues of his style, and remains musical and taut, like the stanzas written on Romney Marsh, and "Piper Play!", a song inspired by the wage-slavery of industrialism which was to invoke others, including Gordon Bottomley's "To Iron-Founders and Others", and an eloquent sonnet by Thomas Moulton on "Labour". Often Davidson's ballads, like the vignette of the married clerk's life in London, "Thirty Bob a Week", suffer artistically by the indignation of the poet's social conscience, and yet they still seem to point to achievements which our gloomiest young poets of to-day might do better to aim at than to ape T. S. Eliot. Davidson's ballads of common life can be read to-day with more pleasure than Kipling's. But Kipling became popular because he avoided any serious criticism of society and merely banged a tin-tray of falsely romantic imperialism.

Rudyard Kipling has added nothing to a small poetic stature in the past quarter of a century. In the true sense Kipling is vulgar without being universal because his language lacks always the finality of good poetry. But the Tommies of his *Barrack Room Ballads* phase are more real to his readers than is the person to whom the dogmatic platitudes of the later "If" are applicable, yet a doubt haunts the reader as to whether Tommy Atkins also is just a trick of invention. That doubt is only modified by a conviction that the singer of tribal lays must have studied the life of the common soldier closely and sympathetically before he began to sentimentalize the type. Touch after touch, now of brilliant impressionism of an action in progress, now of soldiers' talk, compel a recognition of a new development of

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English dialect poetry. For something of the sort is the true Kipling's work in verse. What William Barnes did with Dorset characters and T. E. Brown (1830-1897), through the mouth of his typical fisherman, Tom Baynes, with Manx, Kipling did with the somewhat artificial cockney of London soldiers in India, and even his virtuosity in technical language, including engineering and nautical terms, may be regarded as skilful imitations of jargons that have the exclusiveness of dialects. To chanty and to ballad rhythms with a crude energy of sound unprecedented in verse with any claim to English poetry, Kipling was an explosive *new* force in the literary world of his day. Time may be both kind and unkind with him. It will help to cover in oblivion the many instances when his commonplace mind is betrayed by the service of base political purposes, as when he showed the adventurers and profiteers what patriotic tones and abuse of the "enemy" would serve them with the British people, once the small community of Boers had been found to stand in the way of imperial wealth and power. It is too soon to forget that Kipling, for he is liable still to burst out into hymns of hate and national vainglory. We have not forgotten either the more pretentious Kipling striking prophetic attitudes. At his best in that vein, as in the very popular "Recessional", he achieves no more than a borrowed dignity, wearing a Biblical mantle with a difference—the difference that is of a street-corner orator of empire who absorbed Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* in youth. His racy poetry of simple rough men gives him a high place in "Colonial" poetry, among the Adam Lindsay Gordons and Robert Services. In spite of previous remarks likening it to English "dialect" poetry, on reflection one cannot see that it will maintain its position there. Does one not already prefer the much-less-known T. E. Brown's *Fo'c'sle Tarns* (1881) and his other narrative poetry, *The Doctor* (1887) and *The Manx*

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Witch (1889) ? Reasons for the choice are abundant, but the most important is that Brown loves his people and Kipling just exploits his ; Brown's style is usually an incarnation of his fisherfolk, while Kipling's is a sort of strident Salvation-Army-hymning improvisation on tags and phrases of vulgar speech. The style has no inner necessity : it is the deliberated manner of a clever journalist aiming at certain telling effects. Brown, by his sense of permanent values, is a poet before being a recorder. Is not the converse true of Kipling ? When Robert Bridges praised the vigour of Henry Newbolt's ballads and songs as an achievement that did not depend on flouting the poetic art, he might well have had some of Kipling's noisier drumming in mind. Even in his local patriotism, Kipling compares unfavourably with Newbolt and several other contemporaries. In his well-known "Sussex", for example, the officious cleverness of every detail and pat comment somehow interferes with a full appreciation of the poem. If this seems to anybody mere carping, let them turn from Kipling's "Sussex" to Hilaire Belloc's less competent "The South Country", or that lovely song of his about the quiet Evenlode. One does not turn from Newbolt's poems to find the same thing done more attractively by other poets. Kipling's stature as a writer should not be reckoned on the basis of his verse. He is essentially a prose writer and storyteller.

Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-) seems always to have been a more than usually careful craftsman in verse. More subtle than Kipling's, but lacking nevertheless in the *nuances* of verbal suggestiveness, his style suggests affinities with R. L. Stevenson. He began as a young poet of the 'nineties in revolt against the overshadowing tradition of the Tennysonian nobility, and his *Mordred* (1895) was a poetic drama in which he attempted (to quote his own words) "to supplant the Tennysonian

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figure of Arthur as 'the blameless King' by bringing back from Malory the very different hero of a very different story—a dark and genuinely tragic one, akin to the earlier scenes of the *Nibelungenlied*".¹ One can but say that this comment is more interesting than the drama, and feel surprise that a mind seemingly so well fitted to continue working in the vein of William Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung* should never have rivalled Morris's epic quality and power.

After *Mordred* appeared Newbolt's *Admirals All* (1897), followed by other volumes until the representative collection *Poems: New and Old* (1912) was published. He does not appear to have added to his poetic stature since then, although he contributed to the poetry of the European War. *Poems: New and Old* includes some of the best-written ballads and songs of naval fights and public school *esprit de corps* in the language. One is forced to admit that this summary, unless one really can be moved by the public school spirit and the celebration of martial valour, is not an appealing one. Perhaps it is that the horrors of modern life which so oppressed Davidson and which attained a logical climax in the European War make Newbolt's urbane celebrations and romanticizing of history seem curiously remote from reality, even when they involve touches of the Kiplingesque jargon of "common speech". There is nevertheless some unfairness in dismissing this work of so attractive a mind as being transient as Kipling's. It is characteristic that in his "Hymn in the Time of War and Tumult" (a much better poem than Kipling's popular "Recessional") the poet says :

**Remember not the days of shame,
The hands with rapine dyed,
The wavering will, the baser aim,
The brute material pride :**

¹ *New Paths on Helicon : Commentary.*

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Remember, Lord, the years of faith,
The spirits humbly brave,
The strength that died defying death,
The love that loved the slave.

And any approach as close as Newbolt comes at times to perfection in an economical style must surely imply some enduring quality. There is the true music of poetry as well as the louder sound of the reciting voice in some of his naval ballads, like " Outward Bound " and " Sailing at Dawn ", and this lyrical gift allied to metrical skill enables him to write songs for music as few modern poets can.

Thanks to his metrical skill, controllable emotion, and interest in music, Robert Bridges (1844-1930) also shines as a writer of songs. The natural simplicity of his diction in the *Shorter Poems* resembles Stevenson's and Newbolt's in contrast with decadent echoes of both the Tennysonian and the Pre-Raphaelite tones. Although his last book, *The Testament of Beauty*, was published in 1930, Bridges is chronologically as well as by his temper a poet of last century. As far back as 1876 appeared his first book, a collection of twenty-four sonnets, followed in 1883 by a mask, *Prometheus the Firegiver*, one of his skilful technical experiments in classical revival. In 1885 appeared the first version of the polished narrative poem *Eros and Psyche*. So far he was combining Latin scholarship with skilful imitations of classical English poetry in the line of Spenser-Milton-Keats, generally steering clear of contemporary influences, though at moments in *Eros and Psyche* he seems unable to forget how close he is to Tennyson. Bridges began to be important with the publication in 1890 of *Shorter Poems*, Books I-IV. A fifth book of *Shorter Poems* was to appear, and in these volumes and two others, *New Poems* and *October and Other Poems*, is to be found his work that matters rather than in his metrical exercises, classical revivals in verse drama, and the

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ambitiously long poems including the philosophical and prosaic *Testament of Beauty*. Bridges' poetry is essentially lyrical, but nowhere miraculous. Although he consciously aimed at the effect of " native wood notes wild ", he cannot penetrate into the rarest regions of verbal magic. " My song be like an air ! " expresses his lyrical aim, but Yeats wrote :

I made it out of a mouthful of air.

But comparison with Yeats is unfair to Bridges, who is a delightful poet of cultured happiness and middle-class refinement, and among the best of our poets of typically English scenery. His craft as a metrician, however, operates the verse medium very often when feeling and necessity of vision are deficient. Even in the personal lover's-diary, *The Growth of Love*, there are far too many occasions when the poet's pen and mind seem to be moving mechanically. Perhaps that collection of sixty-nine sonnets was in any case too ambitious a scheme for Bridges's definitely limited capacity for matching depth of emotion with profundity of insight or magnificence of vision. He also indulges in that dangerous play of fancy which has so often had to serve in place of imagination, making " Beauty ", for instance, a person, so that he can sentimentalize the divided aims of the Lover-poet.¹ His mere prettiness of fancy finds more appropriate play in the lighter lyrics, as when in " The Cliff-Top " he makes a cloud and the ocean refer to each other. What a startling contrast :

But were I thou, O ocean,
I would not chafe and fret
As thou, because a limit
To thy desires is set

makes with Ross's exciting dialogue between Rock and Ocean—a conversation of Titans.²

¹ See Sonnet 56.

² In *Philosophies*.

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His happiest achievements, apart from a very few personal songs of emotion and thought (like " My delight and thy delight " in *New Poems*, and " On a Dead Child "), are what might be described as lyrics on set subjects. There is the song of the yellow sea poppy, one of the best things of its kind in the language, a ship sailing by, " Nightingales ", " The Downs ", " London Snow ", and so on. Bridges' practice and study of metrical forms gave him command of a flexible medium, but there is not much to be said for his technical superiority to other good poets. He was not quite intelligent enough nor vitally powerful enough to advance the art of poetry in the only way it can be advanced—by new achievements. Where even Swinburne could be overburdened with metrical equipment, there is no wonder that Bridges (who sometimes amazingly misunderstood the basic principles of English prosody) should so often sound like a prosodical gramophone. In short, Bridges' innovations that are actually poetic achievements and not prosodical exercises, are small when set beside his chief contemporaries, the revolutionary Hopkins, the rich whirlwind, Francis Thompson, the powerful visionary, Charles Doughty, or the master of dream symbolism, W. B. Yeats. Only a long succession of academic praises of Bridges by people suffering from very similar mental restrictions derived from the old-fashioned English class educational system could have culminated in the extraordinary chorus of excited eulogy which greeted this scholarly minor poet's verbose *Testament of Beauty*. What was said about this prosaic and rhetorical but skilful metric exercise in unoriginal uplifting thought in the English Press, if exhibited in a collection, would supply a most damning illustration of the meaning of " middle-class culture ".

VI

POETRY OF DREAM (i)

The stuff of dreams—Reality—Religious and poetic symbols—The early Tennyson—Coleridge—Patmore's symbolism—His "Unknown Eros"—Francis Thompson—Common themes of dream poetry—D. G. Rossetti—Christina Rossetti—Blake—Teats and old sorceries—"A.E"—The Gaelic tradition.

EVERYBODY who can remember dreams is aware of the imaginative wealth of that world of partially concealed significance which the mind inhabits beyond the threshold of consciousness. Poetic communication is largely the externalizing of dream processes so that the original experience or sense of reality may be communicated to other minds. We do not know enough about the stuff of dreams to say whether any particular images or order of events are an authentic reflection of reality, but we are able to share that experience which we call beauty when they are made concrete to the sensual mind. Æsthetic apprehension is more subtle than scientific comprehension.

In the last fifty years much progress has been made in the scientific knowledge of dreams without displacing that relation between aesthetic awareness and the impersonal function of science, which is to measure and demonstrate. Psychological analysis has rationalized knowledge that goes back to the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, and uncovered the emotional situations which the mind tends to conceal from conscious attention by

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masking in the Protean symbols of desire. The states of inspiration which mystics and scientists can experience in common with poets remain nevertheless very largely an undiscovered country ; we know them by their external fruits, and it is a reasonable assumption now that all the creative achievements of human personality are the work of the mind as a whole (which includes emotions) and not merely of that superficial and small portion whose instruments are arithmetic and logic.

Poetry is more than dream. It is that primitive energy of mind shaped by the intellect which uses words to express more than it can fully understand. That the stuff of poetry should always have consisted largely of the stuff of dreams is therefore a natural consequence : the universal myth-making tendency of poets is little else but dreaming significantly about human nature and destiny. Much of the symbolic imagery of dreams in the same way is incorporated in literature as the language of imagination through which the poet can awaken us to recognition of his original perceptions. Human minds being fundamentally similar, the private dreams of a poet resemble in essentials the private dreams of others, just as the reasoning faculty which enables a scientist to deduce that the earth goes round the sun enables others to share in the knowledge when it has been expressed. There is, however, always a fringe of mystery around the expression of the dreaming mind's intuitions because of the infinite possibilities of the imaginative response to it, whereas it is in the nature of a scientific demonstration to admit of only one valid rational response.

This sense of penetrating into mysteries which concern us closely is the chief gift of poetry, and the experience of initiation is nothing else but the sense of beauty.

The eighteenth-century Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* described dreams as " the imaginations of those that sleep ", confining imagination to the conception of illusory

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images, and he explains the many instances in history in visions like that of Brutus on the eve of Philippi as due to a confusion of the mind waking out of a dream ; which of course does not explain away visions that seem to be significant. Then he observes:

From this ignorance of how to distinguish dreams and other strong fancies from vision and sense, did arise the greatest part of the religion of the Gentiles in times past, that worshipped satyrs, fawns, nymphs, and the like ; and nowadays the opinion that rude people have of fairies, ghosts and goblins, and of the power of witches.

In this interesting verdict is the germ of the important truth just enunciated, that the satyrs and other images he refers to are symbols created by the dreaming mind and providing literature and the other arts, not less than religion, with a universal language of imagery. There is among the poets from the seventeenth century onwards a frequent realization of this profound truth which modern psychology has more fully elaborated. The mystical Blake was a poet and painter who submitted his imagination so completely to the impulses of his unconscious mental processes that his art often attains its dynamic power at the expense of coherence. In the prophetic books of Blake may be seen the consequences to literature of a powerful mind's extreme obedience to the irrational dream impulses. The extraordinarily intelligent poet Shelley, who had a fine gift of philosophical exposition in prose, wrote a note which, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, may be regarded as a presage of the modern attitude. It is such a remarkable fragment that no apology is needed to quote it at length. It is entitled " Difficulty of Analysing the Human Mind ".

If it were possible that a person should give a faithful history of his being, from the earliest epochs of his recollection, a picture would be presented such as the world has never contemplated before. A mirror would be held up to all men in which they might behold their own recollections, and, in dim perspective, their shadowy

hopes and fears,—all that they dare not, or that, daring and desiring, they could not expose to the open eyes of day. But thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits. It is like a river whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outwards ;—like one in dread who speeds through the recesses of some haunted pile, and dares not look behind. The caverns of the mind are obscure, and shadowy ; or pervaded with a lustre, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals. If it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed—if, at the moment of our presence there, we could define the results of our experience, if the passage from sensation to reflection—from a state of passive perception to voluntary contemplation, were not so dizzying and so tumultuous, this attempt would be less difficult.

Most of the errors of philosophers have arisen from considering the human being in a point of view too detailed and circumscribed. He is not a moral, and an intellectual,—but also, and pre-eminently, an imaginative being. His own mind is his law ; his own mind is all things to him. If we would arrive at any knowledge which would be serviceable from the practical conclusions to which it leads, we ought to consider the mind of man and the universe as the great whole on which to exercise our speculations. Here, above all, verbal disputes ought to be laid aside, though this has long been their chosen field of battle. It imports little to inquire whether thought be distinct from the objects of thought. The use of the words *external* and *internal*, as applied to the establishment of this distinction, has been . . . merely an affair of words, and as the dispute deserves, to say, that when speaking of the objects of thought, we indeed only describe one of the forms of thought—or that, speaking of thought, we only apprehend one of the operations of the universal system of beings.

Now, if there is one strongly marked quality of English poetry since Rossetti, it is the prevalence of the atmosphere that suggests a vision or dream. Vividness here goes with an exciting remoteness, and it is scarcely stretching the view of Pre-Raphaelitism already expounded to ascribe to that revival of Romantic poetry the special function of conveying more richly the atmosphere of dream which has always entered into poetry. The early, and on the whole the best, Tennyson of the " Lady of Shalott", " The Lotos-Eaters ", and so on, who seemed to have a

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kinship with both the poets of the Romantic Revival and with the Pre-Raphaelites might be described as more of a poet of dream in comparison with the later philosophical and moral Tennyson. There is no avoiding the conclusion that Coleridge, the most completely Romantic of the great poets, is essentially a poet of dream. The three poems "Christabel", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan", by which principally he ranks as a master, are essentially dream poetry. The test is not of course whether the poet (as he did to "Kubla Khan") attributes to a poem the character of a faithful report of a dream or vision, but rather that in composition his mind brought from beyond the level of consciousness enough unfathomed excitement to cause a subtle change in the relations of words to each other. The change from their comparatively quiescent condition in a dictionary is the same as the change which must always occur when language ceases to be prosaic and becomes evocative; but in this dream poetry emotive power is applied in a slightly higher degree, with a corresponding lesser elaboration of reasonable thought. The unusually subsidiary character of the reason in such poetry is not to be confused with a lack of intellectual control of the medium. This is evident enough in a poet as intellectual as Coventry Patmore, much of whose best work is a rich commerce with the symbol of dream as well as the symbols of divine love. The distinction is in reality not wanted. The religious symbolism which Patmore adapted to his own needs is but a symmetrical arrangement of elements which originate in dreams. We may note that Patmore, like Donne, tends to identify perfect earthly love with Divine or supernatural love. Teresa and other mystics who inspired Patmore clearly reject such a synthesis, but very often in the most fervent expressions of their love of God their words and imagery are scarcely distinguishable from the dream symbolism

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of the noblest secular love poetry. Patmore, of course, realized this, and his poetry is his attempt to reconcile earthly and divine love in a cycle of somewhat esoteric ideas which are absent from the simpler passionate poetry of Rossetti. When Patmore fails as a poet in the fine odes it is through allowing the comparative triviality of his busy intellect to obscure the deeper motives of that elaborately systematized vision of love. There is a tendency to be always stating instead of implying the universal elements in the particular, the eternal in the temporal, and it is illustrated by his readiness to rhyme joy with toy. Toys, the toys of love especially, can become vehicles of wisdom and ecstasy, and then the poet can scarcely afford Patmore's slightly whimsical recognition of their nature as toys, for that is really superseded. It seems that among the reasons which guided Patmore in choosing the form of the irregular ode for his deepest poetry, although he did not recognize or at least state it, is the greater freedom to pursue imaginative associations which it gave to him. Words did not come to him easily, and rhythms and imagery did not well up in almost complete expressiveness in his mind as they did for Francis Thompson. The occult riches were there, but they could easily be sidetracked and suppressed by his conscious argument ; the formal narrowness of the 2 : 2 couplet and stanza which he used for long stretches of his poetry of domestic love and everyday life encouraged that prosaic bent, because only by being prosaic could he " get on with it " and tell us so many of the trifles which he wanted to treat as if they were worthy of poetic record. Continually in reading *The Angel in the House* we find ourselves sympathizing with the argument and regretting the deadness of the verse. Patmore's acute and independent intellect made him forceful in satire, and usually in this poetry intended to be homely, the best passages are a statement of some general aspect of his argument.

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For example, " The Song of Songs" in Book II of the " Angel" :

The pulse of War, whose bloody heats
Sane purposes insanely work,
Now with fraternal frenzy beats,
And binds the Christian to the Turk,
And shrieking fifes and braggart flags,
Through quiet England, teach our breath
The courage corporate that drags
The coward to heroic death,
Too late for song ! Who henceforth sings,
Must fledge his heavenly flight with more
Song-worthy and heroic things
Than hasty home-destroying war. . . .

it is followed by a still better passage :

I saw three Cupids (so I dream'd),
Who made three kites, on which were drawn,
In letters that like roses gleam'd
' Plato ', ' Anacreon ', and ' Vaughan '.
The boy who held by Plato tried
His airy venture first ; all sail,
It heav'nward rushed till scarce descried,
Then pitch'd and dropp'd, for want of tail.
Anacreon's Love, with shouts of mirth
That pride of spirit thus should fall,
To his kite link'd a lump of earth,
And, lo, it would not soar at all.
Last, my disciple freighted his
With a long streamer made of flowers,
The children of the sod, and this
Rose in the sun, and flew for hours.

The determination to put his argument first is obvious, but do we not feel that he needed the narrow metrical scope of the verse to help him in suppressing the dark hints of less rational but richer intuitions ready to be called up by that bald account of an apocalyptic dream ? The answer is surely in the Odes " To the Unknown Eros", where among the Victorian archnesses and the courageous homeliness of details, are sudden crystallizations in poetry,

instead of mere assertions, of the deeper realities. Surely the more capacious metrical form now helps the poet to bring into it more of the passion of perception. Even his "metaphysical" conceits now often take on the necessity of poetry, as when he writes of the Body :

Reverberating dome,
Of music cunningly built home
Against the void and indolent disgrace
Of unresponsive space ;
Little sequester'd pleasure-house
For God and for His Spouse . . .

and the rest of that fine passage, and the surface of his argument is frequently shot through with unwonted glories:

What rumour'd heavens are these
Which not a poet sings,
O, Unknown Eros ? What this breeze
Of sudden wings
Speeding at far returns of time from interstellar space
To fan my very face,
And gone as fleet,
Through delicatest ether feathering soft their solitary beat,
With ne'er a light plume dropped, nor any (race
To speak of whence they came, or whither they depart ? . . .

Anything that can be said for Patmore as a poet of the regions of mind which are manifested in dreams applies much more evidently and with fewer qualifications to Francis Thompson, who intellectually may be regarded as Patmore's disciple but as a poet is greater than Patmore. A cavalier treatment of the language, and an occasional passage written with an over-ornate flourish, cheapening to grandiloquence the grandeur of his highest moments—such faults can be admitted readily in Thompson. They are very different from the more pervasive deficiencies of Patmore's poetry, and are the faults of a poet with greater virtues. The superiority on the whole of the best of the contents of *New Poems* (1897) over the best of the *Poems* (1893) and *Sister Songs* (1895) agrees

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with a considerable restriction of his freedom in coining words and playing strange pranks with words already coined. There was a rare and happy conjunction in Thompson of adequate intellectual concepts and the uprush of the imagery and music which reflected the deeper sources of his perceptions. The artistic value of this conjunction was increased by the inner harmony of Thompson's mind. He lived truly in a dream world, secluded from irrelevancies of the waking world not less by his physical sufferings and inability to keep up normal relations with society than by his borrowing most of his ideas, and his Catholic faith, rich as it was in ready-made moulds for the flooding inspiration of a few years. Comparing himself with Thompson, Patmore said : " My Catholicism was acquired, his inherent," and to " Catholicism " might be added mysticism. The statement reflects on the contrasting merits and faults of both poets. You are never impressed by Thompson's intellectual integrity or his courage, and his best poetry is better described as poetry of dream than poetry of Catholic faith, though it often has a rich content of faith. In the torrential ode " The Hound of Heaven ", faith is undoubtedly more than a convenient mould for the poet's dream symbolism of the frightened child pursued by authority. Nevertheless the peculiar appeal of the poem to other minds is certainly not its expression of Christian faith or any ideas about repentance and grace. It is the atmosphere and imitation of a dream state that has obvious associations with childhood, but is capable of symbolizing psychic situations common to most individuals throughout this mortal life. Eventually, does not Death become that pursuer, to one who fears Death ? So much of the poetry of dream contains the symbolism of death and of rebirth because together they cover our feelings about mortality. The converse of the fear of death, the longing for peace, is also universal and equally potent.

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The dream satisfaction of the longing for security and peace has been symbolized from the most ancient-times in the imagery of paradise and of a divine Mother. Thompson's " Mistress of Vision " embodies both, for the Mother is a symbol interchangeable with both Earth and Heaven, a final refuge, an end to that troubled journey which starts thence. The key is given to us in the opening of the poem :

Secret was the garden ;
Set i' the pathless awe
Where no star its breath can draw.
Life, that is its warden,
Sits behind the fosse of death. Mine eyes saw
not, and I saw.

Typical of the dream symbolism also is Thompson's vision of the eyes of the divine woman who is one with the divine garden :

Many changes rise on
Their phantasmal mysteries.
They grow to an horizon
Where earth and heaven meet ;
And like a wing that dies on
The vague twilight verges,
Many a sinking dream doth fleet
Lessening down their secrecies.
And, as dusk with day converges,
Their orbs are troublously
Over-gloomed and over-glowed with hope and
fear of things to be.

Essentially the eyes have a dream symbolism similar to that of any hollow, covert place, and in *Sister Songs* there is another occurrence of the image :

The water-wraith that cries
From those eternal sorrows of thy pictured eyes
Entwines and draws me down their soundless intricacies.

Thompson is expressing in poetry by means of such primitive symbolism the soul's return to the lost paradise, or from time into eternity, or from this waking life that

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Shelley described as the dream into the death that he imagined was but the veil that hid reality from us. There is no end to the theological and philosophical variations upon these basic ideas that reside in the dreaming soul, but though the superficial argument may vary infinitely we know at once when the poetry is calling us to the same secret regions.

The images borrowed by Rossetti from Catholicism, such as we find in "The Blessed Damozel," his *Beata Beatrix* and his pagan sibyls (who also are essentially the same as Madonnas) were expressions of his private dream-world, which owing to the energy of his mind and depth of his emotions, was exceptionally rich. He can subdue the images from nature to the same urgent need of delving into the secret recesses. Beginning his lovely "Nocturne" with a clearly realized argument concerning the dream-world, he asks the god of Sleep :

Master, is it soothly said
That, as echoes of man's speech
Far in secret clefts are made,
So do all men's bodies reach
Shadows o'er thy sunken beach,—
Shape or shade
In those halls pour tray ed of each ?

And as the dream-pursuit of the beloved goes on he continually draws upon the ever-potent imagery of nature :

Suddenly her face is there :
So do mounting vapours wreath
Subtle-scented transports where
The black firwood sets its teeth ;
Lilies share
Secret waters there, and breathe.

It can be hardly necessary to remind any reader of the haunting images in Rossetti's poetry of dark pools (the equivalent of woman's eyes), cloud-shadowed skies and woods, the wan moon that is like the "soul-sequestered face" of his divine woman, the sibylline sea, and the

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lurid dream atmosphere of those remarkable prose fragments, "The Orchard Pit" and "The Doom of the Sirens". In both of these the archaic or remote setting, a prominent characteristic of Pre-Raphaelite work, is unmistakably Rossetti's artistic means for expressing dream motives. All the imagery—the thick fur-like yielding foliage of the trees, the Pit, the doomful woman, the apple blood-red at core, in "The Orchard Pit"—the awful Sirens, the looming Rock, the deserted Oracle of the grove, in "The Doom of the Sirens"—all that belongs to the most ancient dream symbolism of myth and quasi-religious poetry.

Most of the dream-like poetry of Rossetti's friends and disciples, Swinburne and Morris, was inspired by his own poetry or painting, and it never has such a convincing beauty. An exception ought to be made of Swinburne's poetry of the ancient hell or covered-in place—the hollow hill of Venus—and of its emotional equivalent, the garden of Proserpine. The substance of dreams is the substance of Christina Rossetti's poetry, to a degree rare among poets, and though her imagery differs much from that of the poets named already, it is noteworthy that the emotional impulses behind it are not unlike theirs. Especially is this true of her constant turning towards death and a paradise which she names as "Dream Land". Her greatest single poem, the semi-narrative and lyrical "Goblin Market" is charged with an eerie atmosphere that comes from the dream source of this conflict between desire and fear of the sensual world. The crowding of the poem with its quaint and sinister population of goblins is a true picture of the mind's turmoil in dreams that are symbolic equivalents for unresolved wishes. Her most powerful poem, "The Convent Threshold", reveals in glimpses that paradisaical alternative to the hostile or feared world which she could not escape. It shines or sings to us from the simpler and luxurious poems,

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" Sleep at Sea ", " Dream Love ", " Passing Away " in which her companionship in the dream world with her brother and with the Swinburne of poems like " The Garden of Proserpine " is too evident to need demonstration. As we are reminded also of the early William Morris in his imaginative fairy-tale mood, the connection, which is clear enough in Francis Thompson and some later poets with the Pre-Raphaelite strain in poetry becomes once more too prominent for any denial. Rossetti is the immediate source of all this poetry, which of course beyond him can be traced in the great Romantic poets earlier in the century, and then further into the " Gothic " literature. The most potent mind of them all occurs at the early stage of the Romantic Revival. It was that of William Blake, and it is significant that Rossetti discovered Blake for himself and did more than anybody else to bring him into influential prominence last century. In his enthusiasm Rossetti as usual involved other poets, and Swinburne's study of Blake was entirely due to Rossetti's influence, for Swinburne had very little in common with the subject of his eloquent eulogy. Discussing the dream-like panorama offered by Blake's imagination, in his Notes for Gilchrist's study, Rossetti finely describes Blake's pictures of lurid horizons behind lonely lovers on lonely hills ; the dark sublimities of the Biblical themes, the vitality of figures of women and of angels. In the last three designs for the Book of Job he

would specially direct attention to the exquisite beauty of the female figures. Nothing proves more thoroughly how free was the spiritualism of Blake's art from any ascetic tinge. These women are given to us no less noble in body than in soul ; large-eyed, and large-armed also ; such as a man may love with all his life.

This at first surprises one. It is such an unusual criticism of the seer who has inspired the most elaborate exegeses of esoteric symbolism. But it is acute criticism, and Rossetti's direct perception of Blake's character came

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of his own emotional response. The secret of Blake's creative energy and his triumphs of expression over the gravest technical obstructions, is in his vast capacity for desire. His 'libido', as modern psychology would describe that energy, is immense. The tremendous outward urge of the forces in his soul drove him to build up, for lack of sufficient traditional material in his intellectual acquirements, a whole universe of his own thought-forms, a personal mythology.

The many minor poets who have used the material or mood of dreaming show that the mere occurrence of dream-like imagery or atmosphere is not evidence of any exceptional power. The majority of the lesser poets are inclined to work the same veins as their most influential predecessors, and the great quantity of verse more or less explicitly inspired by dream subjects which was written during the second half of last century and the early part of this can be traced to the Romantic Revival as extended and deepened by Rossetti. The popularity of archaic themes among the lesser poets—usually in their early phases—is another form of this poetry of dream. Several poets of the present day who are known for quite different work—Wilfred Gibson is a good example—began with ballads or narratives about harpers, Arthurian knights, and medievalized Helens. Such work is nearly always very imitative and lacking in artistic control. Sometimes, however, the poet who begins in this vein develops into a true poet of the dreaming mind.

No poet in the whole course of English literature has devoted his art and his intellectual resources so thoroughly as W. B. Yeats to externalizing in poetry the dreaming mind. For Yeats this was a spiritual escape from the dominant materialism of science and realism of contemporary art, and his intellectual integrity compelled him eventually to carry the quest for a hidden reality beyond the confines of the purely literary legacies of

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romance. His prose no less than his verse absorbs **the raw** materials of philosophy and folk-lore and returns **them** to us after they have been dipped in the dark waters of imagination. How the intellect elaborates and shapes the primitive dream material of fairy tale, myth and magical lore is readily seen in the glamorous prose of *Rosa Alchemica* and many other evocative passages in deeply reflective essays in his *Celtic Twilight* and *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and indeed through his unique *Autobiographies*, which are the diaries of a mind always seeking truth in beauty, and rumours of that " more dream-heavy land " than this of which he knew beauty to be native. It would scarcely be just to describe the later Yeats as a disillusioned poet because of the evident failure of the intellect to establish a scientific basis for that magical reality of beauty. From the earliest phase of his art there is clearly implied an intuitive grasp of the distinction between spiritual reality and the scientific reality known to the waking mind. His study of Blake alone would have made him aware of that distinction which is the same as that between Blake's " Eternity " and " Time ". The rewards and also the penalty of solitude, bitterness and also the consummation of death, the unvanquishable glory in apparent defeat, are conceptions that help the intellectual shaping of the phantasmagoria as early as *The Wanderings of Usheen*, *The Countess Cathleen*, and *The Shadowy Waters*, and as late as *The Tower*. In a stanza of " Demon and Beast " (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, 1921), with an uncommonly religious fervour Yeats has illustrated the conviction that burns through all his variations upon the theme of the indestructible paradise envisaged here as beauty :

O what a sweetness strayed
Through barren Thebaid,
Or by the Mareotic sea
When that exultant Anthony

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And twice a thousand more
Starved upon the shore
And withered to a bag of bones :
What had the Caesars but their thrones ?

And for all the external failures he would—this is most evident in his grieving political poems on Ireland—be able to pray with T. S. Eliot that the spirit of man might redeem

The unread vision in the higher dream.

Which is but Blake's Eternity again.

Is not the hermit of the Thebaid a brother of Usheen ?
Think of those almost homely last lines after the marvel of his wanderings :

Ah, me, to be shaken with coughing and broken with old age and pain,
Without laughter, a show unto children, alone with remembrance and fear ;
All emptied of purple hours as a beggar's cloak in the rain,
As a hay-cock out on the flood, or a wolf sucked under a weir.

It were sad to gaze on the blessed and no man I loved of old there ;
I throw down the chain of small stones ! when life in my body has ceased,

I will go to Gaolte, and Conan, and Bran, Sgeolan, Lomair,
And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast.

And Usheen is a brother to Forgael who would cross " The Shadowy Waters " to find the underlying beauty that is

Miracle, ecstasy, the impossible hope. . . .

The philosophical interest which Yeats inspires by his creative playing with old sorceries and splendid faiths ought strictly to be considered secondary to the results of it in poetry. Many a scholarly recluse has acquired learning and wisdom besides which that of Yeats would seem childish, but always in poetry the activity of intellect is ready to provide mental furniture for imagination.

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The authenticity and greatness of William Butler Yeats is not affected by a scientific opinion upon the value of theosophical lore, the validity of the evidence for fairies or for spiritualistic phenomena, the nature of magical symbols, or the reality in ancient legends. Yeats is Yeats because not only was his mind always drawn to the lode of dreams but he proved a wonderful artist to make poetry out of that vein. From the haunting melody of "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams" to splendours of language and metaphors rarely given to English poetry since Shakespeare such as we find in the most poetic of his plays, Yeats is first of all a creative artist, and his work a refutation of the too narrow conception of dream poetry which was expressed by the late Professor of English at Oxford in a lecture at Princeton University, when he asserted that "the real high poetry cannot be made out of dreams".¹ The true poetry of dreams does not lack discipline, either of technique or of spirit.

George Russell, whose poetry has always been signed "A.E.", is an Irish poet who has much in common with W. B. Yeats, but has more profoundly studied the spiritual realities which it is the business of poetry merely to re-create in the imagination. A recent essay, *Song and Its Fountains* (1932), is a perfectly consistent supplement to the more naive poetic speculations in his early prose *Candle of Vision*, and though his verse never attains the splendour or the musical subtlety of Yeats's, it more frequently achieves what was Yeats's object also, the testimony of beautiful mysteries. He knows more deeply than Yeats, because he is a mystic whose ecstatic experience preceded imagination's quest. His *Collected Poems* (1913) supply a necessary link in modern poetry between the glamorous paradise of ancestral dreams and the religious intuition of unchanging values. In a poem

¹ *Romance*, by Sir Walter Raleigh (two lectures).

entitled " Symbolism ", A.E. makes his attitude unusually explicit:

Nearer to Thee, not by delusion led,
Though there no house fires burn nor bright eyes gaze :
We rise, but by the symbol charioted,
Through loved things rising up to Love's own ways :
By these the soul unto the vast has wings
And sets the seal celestial on all mortal things.

Rarely in poetry that is not quite among our greatest is the cloudy symbol, the vast vagueness of an evocative phrase ever justified, but nearly always it is valuable in A.E.'s verse, because there is so deep a fringe of long-pondered mystery (not mystification) beyond his scarcely adequate language. We know precisely the meaning of his almost commonplace but strangely transformed words when he sings in one of his rapturous visions :

As from our dream we died away
Far off I felt the outer things :
Your wind-blown tresses round me play,
Your bosom's gentle murmurings.

And far away our faces met
As on the verge of the vast spheres :
And in the night our cheeks were wet,
I could not say with dew or tears.

O gate by which I entered in !
O face and hair ! O lips and eyes !
Through you again the world I win,
How far away from Paradise !

Like Yeats, A.E. has drawn freely upon the Gaelic tradition, and prefers Angus to Eros, Dana to Hertha, Lugh to Apollo, the Druid to the Eleusinian mystery, though none better than he knows their kinship in the ancestral wisdom of mankind which is revealed in poetic symbols of ecstasy.

VII

POETRY OF DREAM (ii)

Charles Doughty — Thomas Hardy — Edward Thomas — Robert Crawford — Quiller-Couch, Margaret L. Woods and "weirdness" — Childish emotions the bases of creation in art — Walter de la Mare — More subtle psychology of modern dream poetry — The macabre — Edith Sitwell — Critical dream poetry — W. J. Turner — J. C. Squire — Edgell Rickword.

THE work of both Charles Doughty and Thomas Hardy reveals the visionary and prophetic character of dream poetry. Doughty's unsophisticated simplicity is a prerequisite of the apocalyptic note sounded in his strange epic poems, *Mansoul, or The Riddle of the World* and *The Dawn in Britain*. That we are reminded of Dante is no more than to say that Dante's greater masterpiece is also a vision full of dream symbols intellectually shaped in epic form. What was characteristic of the best Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting, the union of realistic detail and ideal conception or atmosphere is now seen to be the distinguishing characteristic of the finest visionary poetry. It is evident enough in Yeats's, especially his Irish poems, even when the two are contrasted as the eternal rose in the heart and the creak of a lumbering cart. In Doughty's slow grave measures every phase of the visionary immensity is accompanied by a series of vignette-clear glimpses of familiar things, especially of the English countryside. His most powerful lines mingle the two elements, using, for instance, the image of sea

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waves to describe the vast rocky cleft in *Mansoul*, that leads to the Underworlds:

Gaunt, hollow-eaved, with overhanging rocks,
Is that grim gap ; as stiffened were blown seas
Great rampant folding wave to sudden stone.

(Owing to Doughty's avoidance of the apostrophe to show the possessive case, it is not evident in this that " seas " means " sea's ".) Just as the conscious reasoning and the philosophy in the poem is queerly insignificant, the fundamental dream source of the important imagery brings life to the poem and creates something that belongs to Doughty the artist, not the thinker (in the ordinary sense of that word). What he wrote in *Arabia Deserta*, his masterpiece, is not less true of his visionary encounters with divine beings and lost spirits in the Dantesque Underworld than of the Arabian Desert he in the body traversed and in the soul absorbed : " We are in the world and not in the world. . . . And looking then upon that infinite spectacle, this life of the wasted flesh seemed to me ebbing, and the spirit to waver her eyes wings unto that divine obscurity."

Thomas Hardy, who can so easily be placed in different contexts, was rightly recognized by Arthur Machen as a creator in words of the visionary reality that alone signifies anything to the essential self. Hardy's true work, Machen says, is not in his novelistic depicting of society, but in the shaping for us of ecstasy by means of symbols ; and for him the symbol he understands is, no doubt, the passion of love, and with it the symbol of red, lonely ploughlands, of deep overshadowed lanes that climb the hills and wander into lands that we know not, of dark woods that hide a secret, of strange, immemorial barrows where one may have communion with the souls of the dead.¹

What Machen meant when he referred to " the unconsciousness of Mr. Hardy's art " might be applied equally

Hieroglyphics (1902).

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well to Doughty's but to no other considerable modern poet of the dreaming mind.

In the 1890's Arthur Quiller-Couch promised in his early work as a poet to revive the ballad-like weirdness of Rossetti, but his energies were soon divided between academic work and poetically imaginative prose fiction. Quiller-Couch's facility in conventional verse forms was indicated by clever parodies as well as some too-derivative poetry in classical moods, but the exceptional quality of his imagination when he wrote some of his best ballad-poems can still be felt. If only he had been impelled to pursue his art as a poet more consistently, one feels after reading some of his *Poems and Ballads* (1896), he might now appear a more authentic poet of the 'nineties than the majority of the poets whose names are always associated with that decade. He would have occupied a position roughly mid-way between Hardy and de la Mare. His kinship should be apparent in this :

As I walked out on Hallows' E'en,
I saw the moon swing thin and green ;
I saw beside, in Fiddler's Wynd,
Two hands that moved upon a blind.

As I walked out on Martin's Feast,
I heard a woman say to a priest—
" His grave is *digged*, his shroud his sewn ;
And the child shall pass for his very own."

But whiles they stood beside his tomb,
I heard the babe laugh out in her womb—
" My hair will be black as his was red,
And I have a mole where his heart bled."

Margaret L. Woods, a contemporary of Quiller-Couch, also showed a promise of reviving the weird atmosphere of " Gothic " romance in poetry, but her impulse was more transient than his, mainly owing to her contemplative cast, but also we cannot forget the surprising indication of her failure in mere taste in *Wild Justice*. In a

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prefatory note to that romantic drama she was at pains to say that she owed the first lines of the ballad beginning the play to the wonderful old ballad couplet quoted in *Wilthering Heights*:

**It was far in the night and the bairnies grat,
The mither beneath the mools heard that.**

Why did the poet not just use the lines as they were instead of making her Nelto sing :

**In the dead of the night the children were weeping,
The mother heard that where she lay sleeping,
And scratched at the coffin lid.**

As if to confirm the self-betrayal, she adds four more lines of false and commonplace verbiage :

**The shrill of the lark, the scream of the owl,
The dogs that bark, and the storms that howl—
She never had heard them where she lay hid,
But she heard her poor little children weeping.**

One is not surprised after this that the dialogue of the play, in spite of much force, is not convincing.

Quiller-Couch's nearest counterpart since de la Mare is perhaps Herbert Palmer, whose curiously ballad-like effects are due to a genuinely unsophisticated mind capable of being profoundly moved by unconscious impulses.

How closely in contact with the pregnant underworld of the mind Edward Thomas's subtly suggestive poetry is may be seen in ostensible dream poetry, like "A Dream", in which the poet records a dream of walking over familiar fields with a friend and coming suddenly upon a strange river :

**Its dark waters were bursting out most bright
From a great mountain's heart into the light.
They ran a short course under the sun, then back
Into a pit they plunged, once more as black
As at their birth.**

And so bemused " by the roar and hiss, and by the mighty motion of the abyss " he forgot his friend, but at last

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waking " from waters unto men ", he turned to his friend and prophesied that he would revisit that place. Thomas's knowledgeable love of the English countryside is continually a gateway to the country lit by a light that never was on sea or land. " Sedge-warblers ", containing some of his loveliest lines of description, opens :

This beauty made me dream there was a time
Long past and irrecoverable, a clime
Where any brook so radiant racing clear
Through buttercup and kingcup bright as brass
But gentle, nourishing the meadow grass
That leans and scurries in the wind, would bear
Another beauty, divine and feminine,
Child to the sun, a nymph whose soul unstained
Gould love all day, and never hate or tire,
A lover of mortal or immortal kin.

In the lovely poem, " Lights Out ", he says :

I have come to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose
Their way, however straight,
Or winding, soon or late ;
They cannot choose.

The poem concludes :

The tall forest towers ;
Its cloudy foliage lowers
Ahead, shelf above shelf;
Its silence I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
And myself.

That underworld which is this one lit up by a divine dream is the same as " the wood of thoughts " in " Cock-Crow " :

Out of the wood of thoughts that grow by night
To be cut down by the sharp axe of light,—
Out of the night, two cocks together crow,
Cleaving the darkness with a silver blow.

There are several good minor poets whose work since the War belongs to this order, and among them Robert Crawford at times reminds us of Thomas in the English section (some of his poems are in Scottish dialect) of *In Quiet Fields* (1929). In " At the Eleventh Hour " when :

The world stood out just for a minute
Discovered with the jewel in it . . .

and " Bells and Sleep " :

Out of to-day I wandered back
Through a dream-gate, noiselessly slack,
Which hangs on Sleep's infolded track.

There wandering, I never knew
The bell had smithied silence to
A wide green parish wet with dew.

For sound dreamt on itself till tone
Shook down a silk sky of its own,
And grew the grass and made the stone. . . .

Dream poetry, more evidently than any other, produces involuntary and unpremeditated effects. Its imagery cannot be controlled entirely by the conscious mind, and the poet records it in verbal sound that has something of the emotional influence of music. Thus the ordinary resources of words as dictionary symbols for intellectual concepts are ancillary to the siren appeal of dream. The mind's regression in dreaming to memories of childhood has been illuminated by the modern pseudo-science of psychology as largely a kind of wish fulfilment and an escape from the limitations of actual life. Unfortunately for the standards of literary appreciation, some of our ultra-modern critics have made the profound mistake of supposing that infantile motives in poetry (and all expressions of nostalgia and of the quest for the lost paradise are infantile in origin) are a sort of silliness which intelligent people like themselves ought to despise. This intellectual superficiality—it is a form of snobbery—

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must hamper the understanding appreciation of poetry as much as could any deficiency of imagination. Imaginative escape from the limitations of actual life is the prime motive of all the creative achievements of mankind, and not a sort of paltry cowardice. Those who fit perfectly into the world as it is and never experience the loneliness of longing for an exiled beauty are not the most courageous and intelligent but those who have sold their spiritual birthright for a mess of pottage.

The earliest emotional situations formed in the child's mind are patterns of universal significance, and the so-called wish fulfilment of dreams is the primitive form of creation. Dream Poetry that especially voices regret at the mortality of lovely things, and vibrates with the aery rumours of a paradise beyond the grasp of time is part of the human mind's creation of a spiritual reality. The metaphysical argument as to the nature of that reality, whether it is purely subjective or pre-exists our awareness of it, is not strictly relevant to the appreciation of poetry. Ultimately our beliefs about reality are reducible to faith. The quest of unearthly beauty in poetry that reflects in subtly-altered hues the beauty of earth, is a childish activity because it is profound. The lifelong and often bitter experience of renunciation, when we find that our physical fingers cannot reach the moon, is a universal one. A fundamental motive of life and therefore of all creative activity is the desire for atonement or union. It is our essential nature to want to round the cape of good hope, to complete an ideal circle, to attain fullness and security of that elusive joy which visits the mind. The need is always there, consciously but in a changed shape appealing to common-sense, or suppressed and incompletely revealed in dreams. If the mind of a poet by that fusion of the unconscious emotional energy and the controlling intellect—a fusion that we recognize as creative imagination—gives concrete expression to that innate

longing for union, his communication is a magical kiss of liberation and ecstasy, and that we recognize as beauty.

Walter de la Mare (1873-) has been in his verse a poet of dream almost entirely, and when he could no longer draw freely enough upon the dreaming mind's uncontrollable music and imagery he ceased to be the exquisite lyrist and mingled a greater intellectual content with his intuitions in imaginative prose fiction. His poetic career was foreshadowed by the coloured and carefully cadenced prose of *Henry Brocken*, in which Francis Thompson, reviewing it, found " a true sense of dream, an alluring play of fantasy ". Henry Brocken's dream journey takes him into those " regions where the wise and the imaginative and the immortal have been before him ", a region to which the poetry of dream is always beckoning. De la Mare's poetic craft and his subtlety of perception produced some of the finest dream lyrics of our time. His characteristic music often reminds us of the weird old ballads, and yet his imagery answers to the requirement specified by Walter Pater in reference to the " change of temper in regard to the supernatural which has passed over the whole modern mind " : " The modern mind, so minutely self-scrutinizing, if it is to be affected at all by a sense of the supernatural, needs to be more finely touched than was possible in the older, romantic presentment of it." ¹ The simplicity of de la Mare's dream poetry is essential to that quality which may not unjustly be called " magical " in spite of much modern criticism intended to explain as yet inexplicable effects. His verse often reminds us of Pater's other comment on Coleridge's dream poetry :

It is this finer, more delicately marvellous supernaturalism, fruit of his more delicate psychology, that Coleridge infuses into romantic adventure . . . and with a fineness of weird effect in *The Ancient Mariner*, unknown in those older, more simple, romantic legends and ballads.

¹ *Appreciations*; Coleridge.

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To-day the mystery of dream is not readily conveyed into the romantic adventure externalized as in *The Ancient Mariner*. Only the most imaginative of modern prose fiction has in our day been able so to externalize the dream in romantic adventure, while Gordon Bottomley has succeeded in bringing it to birth in the drama. Yeats's *Shadowy Waters* is a dream poem akin to *The Wanderings of Usheen* rather than a drama. The lyrical poet concerned only with presenting the dream in its mysterious beauty of image and music is driven by our psychological sophistication to the method of the ballad without dramatic action beyond what may be implicit in a monologue. Many of Yeats's lengthy dream poems can only be explained as due to the isolation of a powerful mind at odds with the contemporary world of thought.

Walter de la Mare's lyrical poetry owes its special appeal to a simple veracity to the inspiration of the dream. He is a poet of the secluded garden where Thompson's Mistress of Vision weaves her spells, and of the closely related home of silence remote from the world :

In dreams a dark chateau
Stands ever open to me,
In far ravines dream-waters flow,
Descending soundlessly. . . .

Memories of the paradisal garden are awakened by all hints of beauty :

When music sounds, gone is the earth I know
And all her lovely things even lovelier grow ;
Her flowers in vision flame, her forest trees
Lift burdened branches, stilled with ecstasies.

The longing spirit's goal is

Where all things transient to the changeless win.

But in this world of change the human heart is a traveller pursuing an endless quest. Again using old romantic imagery to symbolize the dream, de la Mare represents

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that eternal wanderer as a sort of knight-errant, and the house at whose moonlit door he knocks is the old chateau, more subtly eerie than the deserted ruins of Gothic romance. Eeriness in de la Mare's poetry rarely approaches the macabre, and when it does the peculiar subtlety of his music is lost in a style that seems a little forced, as if the fantasy were no longer spontaneous but half-invented. Even the artfully composed metre scarcely induces in us a strong enough will to believe while reading " Thus Her Tale " ¹:

Spake the fire-tinged bramble, bossed with gleaming fruit and blossoming,

Gently serpentine in the air a blunted tongue :

" Far too long these bones I hide have blackened in my covert here

Too long their pesty odour to my sweetness now hath clung.

Would they were gross clay, and their evil spell removed from me.

How much lovelier I, if my roots not thence had sprung."

The poem gives speech to the thorn tree, the wind, a willow tree, a toad, a brook, a rock, an owl, the moon, and the spectre of the woman buried underneath the thorn tree. They all comment upon the fate of her who killed herself for unrequited love. It is like a very skilful imitation of the atmosphere of an old ballad, but it is less moving than Edith Sitwell's early poem, " The Mother ", in which a woman who has been murdered by her son for the sake of a paramour, soliloquizes in the wormy grave. These macabre poems are akin to the romantic weirdness of atmosphere which can always be traced to nightmare imagery, but no modern poet can create poetry successfully in this vein once he has become intellectually sophisticated. Rossetti's extraordinary ability to produce weird atmosphere came from the force of his emotional belief in impossibilities, which was less undermined than Yeats's, for example, by the sceptical intellect.

¹ Separately published in 1923,

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Much of Edith Sitwell's *Sleeping Beauty* is a kind of dream, and the rococo figures in some of her *Fafade* pieces and the *Bucolic Comedies* owe their poetic value to the dream-like quality of this furniture for the "artificial paradise". With a more conscious purpose in *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot obviously imitates as well as borrows from the dream order of images and events, but if we were disposed to deny that poetry of dream can be written by a poet of critical intellect, there would be Walter J. Turner (1889-) as well as the greater W. B. Yeats to confound us. Whatever may be said of his analytical obscurities (as in *Landscape of Cytherea*, 1923, and *New Poems*, 1928) and his sarcastic satire (as in *Miss America*, 1930), an uncommon imaginative power is never long entirely absent, and cannot go unrecognized by any reader of *The Hunter and other Poems* (1916), *The Dark Fire* (1918), and *In Time Like Glass* (1921). The quest of remoteness in his early verse in the romantic choice of remote subjects, such as that of "The Caves of Auvergne" or the vivid description of "A Ritual Dance" of natives in the primeval forest is summed up in a passage of the unsatisfactory piece "Love : A Dream" :

On a deep mountain lake there sailed a swan,
Far, far away from any human soul;
And daily swam with her a speckled trout,
Who only left her when deep thunder rolled—
Sinking far down where that swan could not dive,
So that she tasted bitterest pangs of love,
And drooped upon the water like to die.
And when that trout came near with the blue sky
She brightened over the water like a sail
Lifted for harbour after a winter gale.
No solitary ship sailing a land-locked sea
With her own shadow, and no lonely cloud
In water moored, abandoned by the wind,
To substance and to spirit cloven, seemed
So deeply one as that strange pair I dreamed,
Among the mountains woven in my mind. . . .

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Turner was more successful in several child-like poems which employ the directness of a Blake-like simplicity with apocalyptic intimations. "The Lion" is one of these. It is an exciting poem, better described perhaps as visionary than as dream-like. His intellectual alertness has, like that of Yeats, been devoted to elucidating the spiritual meanings of those glamorous images familiar to poetry. They are, he says, in "The Forest Bird"

but beauty's fading flags
Her perishable delights
But in transparency of thought
Out of the branched, dark-foliaged wood
There flits a strange, soft glimmering light,
Shy as a forest bird.
Most lovely and most shy it comes
From realms of sense unknown,
And sings of earthly doom
Of an immortal happiness
In the soul's deepening gloom—

The queer poem "Under" by J. C. Squire (1884- is the most imaginative in his collection of *Poems* (1926), but though it actually is a record of a significant dream the effect of this picture of the mind's underworld is allegorical rather than dream-like, for the poet has not the gift of subtle verbal evocation. His easy-going natural rhythm and the plain narrative sequence of the plainly-told events leave all the imaginative quality to be inferred from the main images—the half-lit room, the rapid rivulet running under the floor-boards, and the nightmarish aquarium of talking fishes. The poem indeed provides us with an example of true fantasy which has been set down in words that fail to evoke the atmosphere in which alone the images can resume their original imaginative energy. It might be described as half-way to the ironic use of dream imagery which has characterized so much modern decadent poetry. Any

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reader of Edgell Rickword's *Invocations to Angels* (1928) will "recognize that this vein has not been exhausted by Eliot, Turner and Edith Sitwell. Rickword is indeed more powerful than any of these. His intention is more than usually explicit and the imagery less metaphysical than in his most impressive poems, in "Prelude Dream and Divagation", in the second part of which the poet reflects on the mind in sleep after a day spent "chasing fetishes" of life :

In shallows of sleep with this litter round us
we lie at the mercy of terror's totems.
The nurslings of nature, necessity's goths,
chalk-faced, stripe-drawn, silvery grotesques,
mercury-hued, like mirrors or metaphors
of destruction, its deeds and unknown dreads,
come marching to cow us from turbulent steppes.
In a landscape we lie, moonlit enough
to open endless avenues of unavailing woe
and pools of such purity leopards of gold
on glistening fringes flicker in fear.

VIII

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Francis Thompson's liberating influence—Flecker, compared with Blunt—Recitative verse—Gordon Bottomley—G. K. Chesterton—John Masefield—W. W. Gibson—Kipling—Noyes—Be Hoc—Sturge Moore—Abercrombie—"Michael Field"—Margaret L. Woods—Muriel Stuart—Rachel A. Taylor—Herbert Trench—Drinkwater—"Gentlemanly poetry"—Maurice Baring—Binyon—Herbert Palmer—Roy Campbell.

THE splendour and unabashed magnificence of Francis Thompson's poetry, though incurring some just reprobation for its occasional excesses, had a liberating influence in English poetry at a time when there was strong tendency to self-conscious restraint. Many of the minor poets' literary diction, full of weak echoes and fearful preciousness, the still overshadowing influence of Tennysonian and Swinburnean skill, must have produced some sterility but for the unconscious courage of a god's fool of poetry like Thompson. Francis Thompson's incontestable virtues so far outweighed his lavish faults that his verbal cornucopia made even Davidson's Shakespearianism in the plays seem not only excusable but full of promise of a renaissance. If any reader had doubts about the state of Thompson's diction in "Sister Songs", "A Corymbus for Autumn", the "Ode to the Setting Sun", and the widely appreciated "Hound of Heaven", there was still too much evidence of genius in the extravagance to allow contempt to go with disap-

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proval. And when his *New Poems* showed a severer control over the diction and thought, with even richer intuitions and subtler rhythms, the only reasonable response was gratitude. The poet who could write those astonishing early poems, so unlike anything belonging to the contemporary poetry, proved by poems as diverse as the metaphysical "Orient Ode" and the "Ode for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, 1897" that magnificence and enthusiasm were not obsolete and could be consonant with good poetry. It was realized also that in his finest brief poems, such as "The Kingdom of God", "Field-Flower", "To a Snowflake", Thompson could control that magnificence to make it serve the purpose of simple and poignant emotion wedded to mystical wisdom. Those new singers who temperamentally were fitted to wear his cloak with a difference, could ignore the admonitory fingers pointing to A. E. Housmans and Alice Meynells as models of poetic economy. Thompson, whose early work showed traces of the style of many of the English poets he had passionately read, notably Shakespeare, Shelley and Rossetti, quickly began to leave his own impressions upon the early work of succeeding poets. His influence has been active up to the post-war period, in style of poets so various as F. Victor Branford and Edgell Rickword.

Among his immediate successors who felt his influence and benefited by its effect upon critical fashion, was James Elroy Flecker (1884-1914). Flecker's early admiration of Shelley is an indication of innate sympathy with Thompson, but his artistic development was to take him far from Thompson and also from the most Greek of the great Romantic poets. His *Golden Journey to Samarkand*, the best known and most characteristic of his poems, appeared in 1913, two years after his *Forty-Two Poems*. It was plainly the achievement of an essentially Romantic poet avoiding the weaknesses of decadence **and**

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the narrowness imposed upon poets of a lesser genius by **the** conscious avoidance of literary imitation. In **the** more spacious general atmosphere for poetry which was Thompson's legacy, Flecker found a path to achievement by a cultivation of the graces and formality of what is always regarded as "Classical" style, but using the polished and controlled form as a vessel for an extremely personal and romantic sense of beauty, in which a love of Greek poetry and mythology had a big part.

Flecker's poetic complexion is most easily observed in some of the simplest of his poems, like that "To Poet a Thousand Years Hence", in which his emulation of the stylistic virtues of the French Parnassians leaves room always for the most personal vision and manner :

I who am dead a thousand years,
And wrote this sweet archaic song,
Send you my words for messengers
The way I shall not pass along. . . .

O friend unseen, unborn, unknown,
Student of our sweet English tongue,
Read out my words at night, alone :
I was a poet, I was young. . . .

He never was old enough, probably, to reach his full stature in poetry, but the body of his work ranges from dream-like but somewhat aimless splendour of the early "Bridge of Fire" to the vivid serenity of "The Old Ships". It includes verse as plangently musical and as unwonted, though not so subtle, as Thompson's. This fearless eloquence is nearly always roused by his favourite mood of romantic Orientalism. Deservedly popular, and worthy of respect from those that care for poetic craftsmanship, the pseudo-Arabic poems, "The Golden Journey to Samarkand", "The Gates of Damascus", "Saadabad", "Yasmin : A Ghazel", and the "War Song of the Saracens", are not to be compared in value either for a sense of the primitive Orient or for depth of

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feeling with Wilfred Hunt's versions of pagan Arabic poetry.¹ Even in technique in the deeper sense, **Blunt** is far superior to Flecker's skilful trifling with elementary metres and evocative word-symbols. What made those decorative poems of Flecker's notable and lends to them an interest still is the expression of the poet's self-intoxication with a fantastic world in such a brassy splendour of sound and elementary colour. Many other English poets and prose writers in the preceding two hundred years had tried to work the gold and silver vein of an Orientalism seen through rose-coloured spectacles, but they lacked either the right degree of seriousness or the sufficiently stylized diction to convey it. Probably, in addition to his personal proclivities Flecker's study of Baudelaire, Gautier and the Parnassians was responsible for a success which, menaced though it was by such possibilities of repetition on lower levels as his scenic play, *Hassan*, in those few poems will remain individual and possibly a source of better things by later poets. There was always more than artificiality in this freakish revival of the Oriental romance ; the poet who wrote the irresistibly drumming " War Song of the Saracens " was quite absorbed by his vision and knew its physical and literary background :

**We are they who come faster than fate : we are they who ride
early or late :**

**We storm at your ivory gate : Pale Kings of the Sunset, beware !
Not on silk nor in samet we lie, not in curtained solemnity die
Among women who chatter and cry, and children who mumble a
prayer.**

**But we sleep by the ropes of the camp, and we rise with a shout,
and we tramp**

**With the sun or the moon for a lamp, and the spray of the wind
in our hair. . . .**

¹ An exception should be made perhaps of Flecker's charming poem after the original by a Turkish lady : " The Hamman Name ".

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In trying to sum up the peculiar contribution made by Flecker to poetry of the pre-war period, one discovers that his most eloquent poems are exceptionally *recitative*. The eloquence, unlike Thompson's, is unburdened by subtle shades of suggestion, and intuitions throwing out shoots of imagery in all directions, and the plangent rhythms are correspondingly simple and suited to the inflexions of speech in declamation. This was a quality which had almost died out of English poetry ; it had become the monopoly of doggerel-writers.

The more lavish freedom brought into the poetic atmosphere while the great Victorian poets' influence remained still oppressive, plainly affected Gordon Bottomley (1874--). His careful art was given more scope to express an inborn luxuriance of vision, for the encouragement of Rossetti's example had begun to dwindle in the miasma of feeble imitations. We feel that the sonority and richness of Bottomley's grave poems must have been aided by those ampler airs blowing from Helicon, enabling him to brave successfully the narrow-minded prophets of "simplicity" and to write when he wanted to like this :

Imagination's towers appear,
And every tower is a steep prolonging
Of the earth's radius dark and sheer.
Like swart birds thronging
Into a sunset safe and near—
Or down horizons shimmering hence,
Swift precipices of radiance, baffling wings—
Or gleaming white against the dense
And thunderous presences of immortal things—
Imagination's measureless towcrings
Bear down upon the beds of reality,
Accede to gravity for inmost law
Where the earth's radius and their cores agree
To raise externes of awe.

Baseless Invention is the newer god,
A liquorous and incontinent quality,
The blind men's fingering upon the veil.

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Here intellect intrudes, the mode
Of building wonders mentally ;
And in this styptical, this pale
And secondary blindness of the brain
The limits of experience decide.
Mental immoderation is in vain ;
It closes up, where sympathy makes wide
Man's comprehension of dissimilar things ;
It sets man to believe himself his guide,
His standard too : ay, and it has denied
Imagination's murmurings
(The only conscience that is not pride)

Because Imagination hath dissension
From brain-wrought marvellings.
The nourishing of religions is Invention,
Wonders and furbishings ;
There merchants of the incredible, in contention,
Postulate Divinity apart
From knowledge or perception ; crude desire
Seeks an Unknown for gaping at, a mart
Where virtue whips God's first debentures higher :
Nor may Imagination's shining
Reveal *in* them the mirror where
God shines reply most heavenly fair—
Divinity dawns through passions of divining ;
Who yearns for God will seek Him in the heart. . . .¹

It is not without significance that so much of Bottomley's poetry is in richly-wrought dramatic blank verse that can generally be declaimed. His intellectual divergence from the Catholic faith of Thompson only emphasizes the imaginative and musical qualities which the two poets share in common.

For an almost comically extreme illustration of the new care-free flourishing of English verse turn to Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-), who, by the bye, has the traditional Catholic mentality of Thompson. Nothing could contrast so utterly with A. E. Housman's " Shrop-

¹ From " A Hymn of Imagination " in *Poems of Thirty Tears* (1925).

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shire Lad ", while possessing some of the same background of inspiration, as Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse* (1911). The great advantage to Chesterton of his Christian background, which freed him from any need of borrowing dishevelled fineries left over from Rossetti-Morris-Swinburne romance, is brought out by a further comparison of the *Wild Knight* (1900) :

The wasting thistle whitens on my crest,
The barren grasses blow upon my spear,
A green pale pennon : blazon of wild faith
And love of fruitless things : yea of my love,
Among the golden loves of all the knights,
Alone : most hopeless, sweet and blasphemous,
The love of God,

with his spiritual brother, the solitary knight seen by Walter de la Mare's Henry Brocken, pursuing his Death-doomed quest of " La Belle Dame Sans Merci ". De la Mare had to outgrow his early enchantments that owed too much to the over-ripeness of literary decadence, but Chesterton, with a less accomplished technique, was able to step at once upon the high road of his journey as a poet. The extent of his liberation from oppressive literary fashions is shown more imposingly in the careless vigour of his *Ballad of the White Horse*, a lyrical chronicle divided into eight " Books", which uses legendary material of the kind that Rossetti, Morris, Swinburne and Tennyson had used, without resembling any of them, unless it be Morris in his sword-and-buckler manner. Chesterton can even afford to use clichés :

For he sang of a wheel returning,
And the mire trod back to mire,
And how red hells and golden heavens
Are castles in the fire :

with complete impunity, because of the urgency of what he wants to communicate. In Chesterton, rather than in his contemporaries Newbolt and Kipling, is heard the

enduring cult of England, the patriotism not of a public school or of militant imperialism, but of a religious tradition and a revolutionary simplicity not heard in English verse after Blake. It would be possible to describe the essential Chesterton as a less literary John Davidson inspired by a harmonizing faith, but his just-adequate diction and boldness of rhetoric in his finest verse are better adapted to the poet's crusading fervour than Davidson's style ever was to his complicated inspiration. The boldness and literary crudity of Chesterton produced a big proportion of inadequately written poetry, quite apart from his political squibs and satirical sarcasms, for he is never master of the finer shades of verbal music or metaphor ; but what is left after making severe deductions is a valuable contribution to English poetry in the early twentieth century. The forcible plainness of his diction suits equally well such wisdom in hyberbolic parable as " The Donkey " :

When fishes flew and forests walked
 And figs grew upon thorn,
 Some moment when the moon was blood
 Then surely I was born . . .

and the glow of revelation in " The Sword of Surprise " :

Sunder me from my bones, O sword of God,
 Till they stand stark and strange as do the trees ;
 That I whose heart goes up with the soaring woods
 May marvel as much at these. . . .

He can transfer the excitement to the strongly beating rhythms of elementary metre, and give us in " The Ballad of St. Barbara" and " Lepanto" a rollicking music that is never less than necessary to the genuine boyish fervour of the poet. This is clearly a part of the new recitative poetry which was first practised most effectually by John Davidson, but required the liberating influence of Thompson's torrential splendours to develop freely in the self-conscious aftermath of Victorianism.

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By reason partly of a more literary style and persistent attempts to reproduce the effects of rhyme royal and other stanzaic devices acquired from old Italian and French by Chaucer and his pre-Elizabethan successors, John Masefield (1874-), the successor of Robert Bridges as Poet Laureate, and the chief writer of popular narrative verse in the early twentieth century, has not contributed so much as we should expect to recitative poetry. Nevertheless, if his best poems are not his most popular ones—"The Everlasting Mercy", "The Daffodil Fields", and "The Widow in the Bye-Street", those have at least a force and freshness which in the early twentieth century was a surprising quality, resembling that of Chesterton's ballad-narratives. Masefield's style, however, suffers from what appears to be a conviction of the poet that force is necessarily a virtue. Violence frequently takes the place of strength, giving an effect of sensational journalism to the verse. It is perhaps as much by literary faults and melodramatic exaggeration as by his profound pity and often lovely imagery that Masefield, to a much greater degree than Newbolt, Kipling, or Noyes, struck the inert mass of the public into some degree of awareness of new poetry. The worst of Masefield is mixed with gleams of something precious and exciting. Excepting possibly the narrative of *Dawber*, where the poet has a favourite background of sea and sailing, and the more controlled and realistic manner of the later *Reynard the Fox*, his unequal style sustains the impulse better in the briefer lyrical poems, a few of his *Salt Water Ballads*, and a good deal of the contents of the *IMlingdon Downs*, which is mainly a sequence of sonnets. It is noteworthy that the verse has still a recitative quality, although it expresses the reflective maturity of a poet who is trying to envisage the reality behind the glittering phantasmagoria of life. He is trying to reconcile those splendid dreams of youth, those heroisms of manhood, the bitterness and

the beauty which so often inspire the narratives with an exhilarating nobility. Inwoven with the reflections "on the spiritual values of existence is a tribute to a person whose love has come to seem the main barrier against the tides of solitude and despair. Let us recognize the unobscured and admirable eloquence of the language of those sonnets of a poet haunted by the mysterious imminence of a reality of which he can but record an unsuccessful quest :

You are more beautiful than women are,
 Wiser than men, stronger than ribbed death,
 Juster than Time, more constant than the star,
 Dearer than love, more intimate than breath,
 Having all art, all science, all control
 Over the still unsmithied, even as Time
 Cradles the generations of man's soul.
 You are the light to guide, the way to climb,
 So, having followed beauty, having bowed
 To wisdom and to death, to law, to power,
 I, like a blind man, stumble in the crowd
 Into the darkness of a deeper hour,
 Where in the lonely silence I may wait
 The prayed-for gleam—your hand **upon** the **gate**.

The best of Masfield may well be in fragments of his narratives after all. In their most eloquent passages they are superior to Wilfred W. Gibson's less faulty dramatic stories in verse which appeared in many volumes, beginning with *Stone/olds*, *Daily Bread* and *Fires*. Gibson's vignette-like studies of poor people's tragedies in the great industrial towns have little of the imaginative clarity that belongs to poetry ; this is to be sought rather in his dramatic episodes of peasant-folk in the north England countryside. The narrative movement and comparative baldness of the often idiomatic diction make much of Gibson's work a contribution to the poetry that is best spoken. But the essential Masfield after all is a twentieth-century Morris, and there is little of Morris's work **that**

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can be declaimed without a danger of losing the dream-like suggestions that are usually its principal justification.

Rudyard Kipling's verse is eminently recitative, and the simplicity of the communication, like that of Alfred Noyes (1880-), is matched by absence of those remote associations and half-heard music which clings to poetry that must be heard with the inner ear. Neither has added anything to the poetic tradition by their happy fluency and a popularity which must have brought many unliterary readers to a realization that there was English poetry later than Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade". Noyes, especially, with the above qualification, is capable of a graceful freshness in his *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern*, which makes him an admirable singer of the folk-dancing revivalist mood; but though the unself-conscious enthusiasm of his songs of seamen, and especially of the long, half-doggerel *Drake* produced very little original poetry, it has had an exhilarating effect upon simple readers. Kipling is in a sense more himself than Noyes as a maker of popular song, for he is untroubled by any tendency to attempt a deeper imaginative criticism such as prompted Alfred Noyes to some horrific descriptions of the beastliness of war (*The Wine Press*, 1913) and a too-ambitious "epic" of scientific heroes in *The Torchbearers*. Fluency of versification and an abundant stream of mostly stale imagery, leave this poetized series of biographical sketches like a huge soggy loaf with a few crisp patches on the surface. But the vastness of the plan would have been too much for a greater poet.

For the graver eloquence akin to Gordon Bottomley's, but sometimes with the enthusiastic fervour of Chesterton, there is Hilaire Belloc (1870-), who has in common with Henry Newbolt the artistic tact of a really literary poet making verse that is forcible and simple enough for declamation. Belloc is otherwise quite unlike Newbolt.

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His music and mood often resembles that of the finest French Parnassian poetry. In some of his sonnets also he achieves the cameo completeness of Heredia, and when his mood deepens he becomes the ghostly brother of Baudelaire in a nostalgia of home. No translator of Baudelaire has ever come so near to his spirit and consummate simplicity as Belloc in original sonnets like No. XXVI (*Sonnets and Verse*, 1923):

O my companion, O my sister Sleep. . . .

His lyrical poems usually have the same grave and sonorous music and uncomplicated imagery. Consider the beautiful "Stanzas Written on Battersea Bridge During a South-Westerly Gale", the first of which is:

**The woods and downs have caught the mid-December,
The noisy woods and high sea-downs of home ;
The wind has found me and I do remember
The strong scent of the foam . . .**

and the last, like an epilogue to the mood :

**England, to me that never have malingered,
Nor spoken falsely, nor your flattery used,
Nor even in my rightful garden lingered :—
What have you not refused ?**

There is also the Belloc capable of sharper if less subtle cut-and-thrust of satirical sarcasm than Chesterton, whose poems in this vein are akin to the anti-Puritanism of the drinking-songs of both poets. The gay Belloc can also do a metrical dance as perfect as the glorious "Tarentella", which sets the lips of the silent reader moving as it would set dancing the feet of those who heard it recited. Perhaps it is because of his deeper feeling that when he does attempt a ballad-like poem of seafaring he is more authentic in the *genre* than any of the English poets who have reached a large public with their ballads and what not of the nautical "briny". I do not know any poem of its kind as good as Belloc's "The Chaunty

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of **the 'Nona'**," except the tragic "**Rambling Sailor**" of Charlotte Mew.

The triumph of poetry over conventionalized thought and diction is frequent in the work of T. Sturge Moore (1870-), whose collected *Poems* were published in 1931 and 1932, but he does not ever quite reach the height of, for example, Laurence Binyon's few exalted moments. In texture of diction he is more ornate than Gordon Bottomley, the poet he most resembles, but he is liable to disconcerting lapses into dullness, and his semi-dramatic poems lack Bottomley's intensity. This may be in part the consequence of Moore's extraordinarily rich visualizing faculty. The close-woven and gorgeous diction in his poems that evoke legends and legendary figures is the medium for an imagination that most finely expresses intuitions in pictures. He succeeds where Keats failed in translating the poetry of Greek myth into the sophisticated vision of a beauty that has all the associations of subsequent European poetry behind it. Some of the later dramatic poems acquired speed of movement at the expense of poetry, for baldness does not suit the poet's expression, and after the gorgeous perfection of "The Centaur's Booty" and the magnificent passages in *Judas*, it is equally disappointing to see his failure if he tries to make a speech in verse partly colloquial. Consider the opening address of the Curtain Bearer in the poetic scene of "Medea", the first of the little plays in *Tragic Mothers* (1920).

You doubt of ghost and angel god and jinn,
You think those bodied like you the sole speakers
Who put a show of wisdom into words
Here on this planet piebald with pale seas.
But those less hoodwinked with to-day, still hear
Voices in chancelled wood and panelled room ;
Since thought can run too long on such smooth rails,
I ask your minds to shake off their stale faith
That things are always merely what they seem. . . .

And so on. Such a horrid kind of sheer badness never even menaces Gordon Bottomley or Lascelles Abercrombie, another contemporary with whom Sturge Moore has imaginative affinities.

Lascelles Abercrombie (1881-) concentrated more upon experiments in diction and metre, rather in the craftsman's manner of Robert Bridges, but the metaphorical and often metaphysical texture of his poetry is like Bottomley's and Sturge Moore's and quite unlike Bridges'. Abercrombie is obviously one of the eloquent poets, and the semi-dramatic blank verse which constitutes the greater part of his work, usually respects the movements of common speech. Hence a recitative quality is often sustained which would otherwise be more frequently submerged by metaphorical complexities of idea. These characteristics are noticeable in the early *Interludes* (1908) and the dramatic narratives with archaic Christian themes like *The Sale of St. Thomas* (1911). The poet has always been inclined to metaphysical thought, but his verse is so rich in sound and sensuous imagery, and a dramatic play of opposed ideas, that intellect is translated into a sensible beauty much as is Gordon Bottomley's and Moore's. These poets exemplify the only version of Pre-Raphaelite poetic art which was possible in the early twentieth century. The full title of *Emblems of Love Designed in Several Discourses* (1912), suggests the mixture of passion and speculation so frequently embodied in Abercrombie's verse. The scheme is worked out in a series of dramatic sketches of different types of women in love, from Vashti to Judith, the three sections being entitled "Discovery and Prophecy", "Imperfection", and "Virginity and Perfection". How, in essence, he is in sympathy with Rossetti, the exotic poet, is sufficiently revealed by the argument, but not the awkward verse, of the "Epilogue" :

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What shall we do for Love these days ?
How shall we make an altar-blaze
To smite the horny eyes of men
With the rumour of our Heaven,
And to the unbelievers prove
Our service to our dear god, Love?
What torches shall we lift above
The crowd that pushes through the mire,
To amaze the dark heads with strange fire ?

The gist of the whole discourse is the poet's desire for " the wonder of love made visible ", but his premeditated aim leads him frequently into verbosity that perhaps is weaker when read than it would sound spoken. Consider the following fragment of dialogue from " Katrina " in Part Two of *The Emblems of Love* :

KATRINA (*in SYLVAN'S arms*). Sylvan, I have been
So wrencht and fearfully used. It was as if
This being that I live in had become
A savage endless water, wild with purpose
To tire me out and drown me.

SYLVAN. Yes, I know :
Like swimming against a mighty will, that wears
The cruelty, the race and scolding spray
Of monstrous passionate water.

This is not only undramatic but is weak as poetry. When the theme better fits the rhetoric, Abercrombie's poetry has room for its natural eloquence. This is seen repeatedly in the " Vashti " section, especially in the dialogue between King Ahasuerus and the Court Poet. Ahasuerus, the mighty King in love, speaks the following, for instance :

You kings, you thrones that burn about the world,
Whom yet I king, lifted higher above you
Than you are lifted up above your folks :
This is my day. I have agreed with Heaven,
My fellow in the fear of the world, to have
This day unshar'd ; and it is all mine,

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All that the Gods from baseless fires and steams
Have harden'd into the place and kind of the world :
The great high quiet journey of the stars,
And all the golden hours which the sun
Utters aloft in heaven ;—the whole is mine
To fill with ceremonies of my throne.
This one day, I am where Heaven and I
Commonly stand together ; you shall not have
Shelter from me in a worshipt God to-day,
Kings : look yonder at many-power'd night,
Telling her beauty to the sea and taking
The prone adoring waters into her blue
Desire, setting them as herself on flame
With perils of joy, lending them her achieved
Raptures, her white experiences of stars.
So shall your souls lie under me these hours ;
As they were waters shall they be beneath
My burning, set alight with me, and none
Escape from utterly understanding me
And why I am so kindled in my soul.

The two women poets, Katherine Harris Bradley and her niece, Edith E. Cooper, who in a unique and life-long poetic collaboration used the signature " Michael Field ", for their joint work in grave lyrical poems and poetic dramas, beginning with *Callirrhoe*, a drama (1884) and ending with the posthumous volume of poems *In the Name of Time* (1919), are among the poets who gave their art the widest possible scope in form and diction. If their dramatic poems are always too literary and too far from life for drama, they have at least something of the dream-like arabesque quality of T. Sturge Moore, and a frequent vividness of phrase, narrative rather than dramatic, worthy of Tennyson. They resemble Sturge Moore also in dividing most of their work between Greek mythology and Biblical themes, with sometimes an excursion in the wake of Swinburne to a picturesque historical figure. Their unself-conscious devotion to the grand manner of Victorian poetry as developed from the poet of *Hyperion* to the Homeric Tennyson, is rewarded, one

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feels, often enough to preserve at least many passages from the plays, and some of the descriptive and reflective verse. If their language often exceeds necessity, it can also rouse perception, as in the description of the rebel Absalom receiving King David's reconciliatory kiss :

**And, lo, beneath that awful benison,
A thief's face glittered, sniffing at the gems
Of the bent crown as they were cassia-stems ;
While the young years heard but the rolling on
Of chariots, and a tumult, broke amain
By rumour of an aged monarch slain.**

Many lyrical passages proclaim the combined influence of Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, and to a less extent this may be said of the earlier work at least of Margaret L. Woods, whose play, *The Princess of Hanover*, correctly indicates her Victorian background. The conception of royalty there belongs entirely to the age of Prince Albert and the highly moral wars by which Britain brought light to the darkness of ignorant peoples and incidentally extended the imperial sway of the Queen-Mother. At one with that epochal vision is the sentimentalizing poetry about Oxford which first won her the praise of the academic critics at the end of last century. The group of her Oxford poems, " Oxford Bells " (in her *Collected Poems*, 1914) is in two long parts, in skilfully handled and yet unsatisfying *terza rima*. She possessed uncommon command of diction and metre in the heavier style, being less lyrical than " Michael Field ". The poet's skill is again obvious in the different descriptive theme of " High Tide on the Victoria Embankment ", which belongs to the group of her London poems, and has a certain dignity in its eloquence. When all is said, her best poems, and those by which she is likely to survive at all, are much influenced by Francis Thompson, for an intellectual awareness of mystical realities is her chief motive. The long poem, " The

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Return " (*The Return and Other Poems*, 1921), is a lengthy mystical poem in which the central emotion is well sustained throughout its fifty-six stanzas. Both in the mood and the movement it recalls Francis Thompson's brief and less accomplished "The Kingdom of God"¹; the opening strikes the dominant key :

**Heart of the world from which I wandered
Seeking life's lonely keen delight,
Soul of the world from which I severed,
Caught in the wheel of day and night,

To Thee for all it held I render
Here in this transient dwelling, praise,
Ere from its glimmering door for ever
I pass on Thine unending ways.**

Even so brief a fragment suggests her greater philosophical breadth, and the poem as a whole possesses the nobility of a philosophical understanding rather than the simple poignancy of faith. The deeply religious feeling conveyed by it, however, was a necessary part of the poet's inspiration. If she is not with Christina Rossetti among the poets of piety, "The Return" and a few others, notably the solemn "Good Friday Night" ("Now lies the Lord in a most quiet bed"), have a place among the best modern religious poetry.

Resembling Mrs. Woods in deliberate craftsmanship and unlyrical gravity of language is Muriel Stuart. She has been imaginatively attracted by the figure of Christ, but lacks the sure mystical sense of Margaret Woods. There is an element of the melodramatic in *Christ at Carnival* (1916), but the vividness of imagery recurs with more convincing poignancy of feeling in the contents of *The Cockpit of Idols*, especially in brief semi-dramatic narrative pieces. Poignancy of feeling, especially in erotic themes, which receive a treatment that could never be mistaken for that of a male poet, does not enable

¹ But it was probably inspired by F. W. Myers' "Saint Paul".

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Muriel Stuart to write lyrically. Her measures, **even in** the form of the irregular ode, have the formality of deliberation. The absence of spontaneity is compensated for by craft and a fine skill of phrase as much as we could expect it to be. This is evident in her poem entitled "The Seed Shop", which at first reading seems well shaped and just adequate to the imaginative thought. A closer scrutiny shows that the three stanzas which follow the first one are merely rhetorical repetitions. The last line of the first stanza :

Here in a quiet and dusty room they lie,
Faded as crumbled stone or shifting sand,
Forlorn as ashes, shrivelled, scentless, dry—
Meadows and gardens running through my hand,

contains the idea of the poem that concludes :

Here I can blow a garden with my breath,
And in my hand a forest lies asleep.

It is possible to take away stanzas and even to alter the order of lines in Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard", and the same laborious piecing together on a smaller scale, but often with very similar effects, no doubt is responsible for Muriel Stuart's poems, even when they cry out with emotion.

Another woman poet whose verse is a verbal cameo, with richer though more derivative colours and rhythms, is Rachel Annand Taylor. She began her career much earlier than Muriel Stuart with a volume of *Poems* in 1904, but though her long devotion to verse and to renaissance poetry and painting has lifted her out of the rut of versifiers, one feels that the proportion of original poetry to emotional rhetoric is too small and inconstant. And her later *End of Fiametta* (1923) does not show any advance from her best early work, which is in her approaches to lyrical ecstasy always controlled **and** sometimes marred by the external form :

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The Daughter of Herodias,
She danced in gold and red
Upon the floors of chrysophras :—
The light of flaming cities broke
Behind her sumptuous head. . . .

The Italian cult adopted by Mrs. Taylor and other lesser poets after Browning is occasionally reflected in the wide-ranging works of Herbert Trench (1865-1923), whose failure to be one of the important poets of the period is not easy to account for. He is scholarly and somewhat too dignified, and although Irish his excursions into Gaelic subjects and moods, notably the long early narrative poem, "Deirdre Wedded", are entirely insignificant beside the more racial achievements of W. B. Yeats, not to mention other "Celtic" contributions to English poetry. Typical Gaelic imagery loses its atmosphere in Trench's ornate and Tennysonian verse. A similar failure of authenticity attends his other narratives, "The Queen of Gothland" (a rather Meredithian excursion into a William Morris theme) and "Apollo and the Seaman". The last, however, contains some fine parts, probably because the vein of Greek mythology suited the scholarly imagination of so academic a poet. There is an increase also of the fine descriptive touches that occur in the other narratives when the poet envisages natural scenery. Part 3, "The Ship", almost reaches his highest level, and in Part V, "The Tale of Apollo", the heavy diction often is illuminated by a fine image like

Saturn in his moat of moons
Glass'd in unsounded night. . . .

The best of Trench is in the miscellaneous "Shorter Poems" (in the collected *Poems* in two volumes, 1919), some of which would have to be described as "Longer Poems" in the works of many other poets, for too often Trench's reflective and occasionally lyrical poems ramble

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along with insufficient pressure and a continuously lessening" excuse. His mastery of traditional forms and diction made him an accomplished occasional poet; his " Stanzas to Tolstoi in His Old Age " are impressive in their kind, and we learn with astonishment that the suggestive poem in three parts, " To a Dead Poet ", was written at request on the previous day to be read at a public banquet in London to commemorate the birth of Edgar Allan Poe ! From its opening :

If the meteor mind, swift-ranger,
Destroyer and all-changer,
Must die on earth a stranger
 Leaving a trail
 Of brilliance frail
A portent and a danger

to the far-off conclusion :

Glory unto thee, high Beauty, light in the dreariness,
Poised fragility, pure with the spirit's clearness . . .

the invocation is never less than interesting, though it stresses the gulf between the wild genius of the dead poet and the modest strain of originality so overlaid with academic verbiage in the eulogist. The matching of adequate emotion and a completely traditional form produces the admirable elegy, " Song for the Funeral of a Boy ", and the eloquent " Requiem of Archangels for the World ", which succeeds in the face of every probability, as estimated by the conventionality of the language. When he can freely draw upon natural imagery that appeals to him, as in the " ode from Italy in time of war " entitled " Night Under Monte Rosa ", his verse attains to a sonorous felicity of magnificent description that no poet of the time except Ronald Ross could equal; and his ode to a Nightingale singing before Dawn can only be described as a triumph of ecstasy in derivative poetry.

Among the older generation of contemporary poets,

John Drinkwater (1882-) is capable, at his best, of a neatness of form and justice of sentiment that remind us of a Caroline poet, and it is at once a sign of his peculiar stylistic virtue and his imaginative limitation, that his best lyrics are like eloquent little speeches, and remind us of the suave dignity of his little dramas in verse, admirably adapted to the inflexions of the speaking voice. His balanced and finely-shaped utterance demands a less severe control than the more passionate Belloc's, but it could not be bettered in its own small and unoriginal sphere :

For all ill words that I have spoken,
For all clear moods that I have broken,
For all despite and hasty breath,
Forgive me, Love, forgive me, Death.

The remaining six stanzas of " Last Confessional ", precisely patterned on this one, and never faltering in the eloquent rhetorical progress, reveal his distinctive oratorical note, which has probably a better claim to the much-abused term " classical " as used for " Latin " than any of the poems of the form-carving poets of the late nineteenth century, even the best of them, Lionel Johnson and A. E. Housman. The danger that has dogged Drinkwater's fondness for noble-sounding clarity is the triteness of moral idealism unfired by passion, and probably a bigger proportion of his non-dramatic verse will be found poetic where it is devoted not to saying fine thoughts but to affectionate description or reminiscence, and those half-whimsical trifles inspired by a commonplace or a legendary character seen as a symbol, such as " Mrs. Willow " and the perfect little rhyme about " Rameses and Romeo and Ariadne ".

If it is possible to use the phrase " gentlemanly poetry " without too strong an effect of derogation, one might justly so describe Drinkwater's, and a great deal of the

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lesser poets' work this century. There is an unbroken line of such urbane, discreet, and unprofound poetry from Robert Bridges to Edward Shanks, by poets who usually are sufficiently well-equipped as writers to satisfy the middle-class "educated" reader. In this lineage also are Laurence Binyon and Maurice Baring among the pre-war generation of poets. The versatile Maurice Baring's career in poetry goes back to 1902, with *The Black Prince and other Poems*, and included a big collection in 1911 and another one in 1920. He rarely fails to master the metrical form he uses—even the sonnet in his hands can be perfectly turned—while the utterance without seeming artificial is never, even in love poems, such as a member of the most conventional West End club might not publish without losing caste among his fellows. It is characteristic of the verse which is gentlemanly for certain, and poetry with luck, that "Nature" is purged of all but the pretty and the urbanely charming: the hidden gods that the Greeks knew do not exist in the urbane vision, and if the gentlemanly poets should try to embody something of that primordial terror they reduce it to some degree of Aldous Huxley's cultured cynicism. Consider what mere excuses for pretty sentiment Drinkwater finds in country lanes and "coloured counties". Baring, in a really deeply-felt poem on friends killed in the War, such as *Difugere Nives*, 1917, addressed to J. G. Squire, somehow says all the things, and no more, that an exceptionally cultured and sincere speaker might say in a funeral speech to brother officers. No single intuition belongs to the speaker: everything is borrowed. The faith and the expression of it are precisely what we could anticipate, a mixture of sentimentalized Greek myth (of Acheron) associated with memories of "grinds" at school, the medieval scythe of Death, and the "abyss"; the accepted but unrealized Christian faith about meeting "the deathless dead". Tremendous

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realities of experience gave birth to these symbols which have been cheapened into polite poetic clichés. It is not surprising therefore that the five opening stanzas of *Diffugere Nives*, which are filled with "nature" pictures illustrating an undoubtedly sincere love of the English countryside, have an effect of pretty trifling :

The snows have fled, the hail, the lashing rain,
 Before the Spring.
The grass is starred with buttercups again,
 The blackbirds sing. . . .

This kind of thing, spoken with telling vocal intonations, is the very perfect substance of a gentleman's speech on a solemn occasion, but that it is not poetry, even of the feeblest, is surely apparent? And yet, as exemplifying the falsity of English bourgeois literary standards which make of most true poets spiritual aliens, until they are dead or ruined, be it noted that *Diffugere Nives*, to J. C. S., is the first of the pieces by which Maurice Baring is represented in an anthology edited by that same J. G. S.¹ The preceding remarks can be applied to nearly all the verse of Laurence Binyon, except that his finer sense of verbal music and a ripeness of craft which often makes his verse too derivative, on a few occasions of passionate realization have produced a true and original poem. His lyric measures share the elegiac weight of his heavy odes, in which the core of imaginative life is usually too feeble to burn through the conventional verbal vesture. This is, I think, true even of the much-praised and sometimes eloquent *Syrens* (1925). When something of the seriousness and even the swaying movement of Binyon's odes mingles with poignant feeling, then we get the undeniable beauty of his strange slow song of poor children

¹ *Selections from Modern Poets*, made by J. C. Squire, 1921. This anthology sold so well that the Editor produced a "Second Series" of "Modern Poets".

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dancing in the street by the light from a tavern window,
while

" Lonely, save for a few faint stars, the sky
Dreams ".

The little dancers,

" Their eyes shining, grave with a perfect pleasure ",

will go on dancing for ever in their beauty, like the Greek figures on Keats's Urn. It is a song and it dances, yet it has the movement of blank verse and the solemnity of a confession. Perhaps we may say it is the confession of the highly cultured man's spirit self-abased before a suddenly apprehended elementary beauty. The grave eloquence of the poet again reaches a poetic intensity completely justifying the polished form in his war-song " For the Fallen ". In this all the hackneyed metaphors and the sonorous diction which stuffs out his odes and semi-dramatic poems, become vibrant and alive. These triumphs of authentic poetry are neither gentlemanly nor whatever may be regarded as the opposite of gentlemanly. They exist on a plane where such conceptions are irrelevant, but they may be of rarer occurrence because of the pressure of a bourgeois taste which always favours competent conventionality and admits original genius too often in accident and for some irrelevant reason.

The poetic career of Herbert Edward Palmer (1880-) was belated, but he holds a respectable position among the poets considered in this chapter, and it is safe to say that the appearance of his *Collected Poems* will extend his fame considerably. The new timbre of inharmonious modernity sounded in John Davidson's rebellious ballad poems is heard again, with deeper romantic overtones in Palmer's finest work. He is as unreliable in poetic quality as Davidson, and more fallible in mere skill of utterance than any contemporary poet who at all approaches him in power. The briefest

explanation of his unsubmerged roality is that he has a little of Blake's dynamic force, and a temperamental kinship with the true primitive balladry. I see no reason to qualify the critical summary of his quality which appeared in a Selection of his poems:

" He brings into poetry a note of improvisation lacking in most contemporary verse, and at his best the fire and swing of his work are unsurpassed by any contemporary."¹

" Fire and swing ", but rarely the penetrating intensity which demands perfection of the medium.

Palmer's frequent crudeness of expression is often due to the struggle of strong conflicting feelings. When he succeeds in embodying adequately a rumour of the dark turmoil, it is as if the voice of an old minstrel, come to life in the complex modern world of disillusionment and false idealism, were singing of a lost integrity and a quondam royalty of spirit. The Rossetti of weird omens and of the most powerful literary revival of balladry last century, to the exclusion of the great sensual artist and lover of woman, is part of Palmer's imaginative background, shared also by Ronald Ross with similar sources in German romance. There is a touch of Ishmaelitish bitterness and independence in Palmer, which is often strangely mingled with his innate Puritanism, and a primitive faith in the benignant, paternal God ready to succour the proud outcast from his enemies. It is in keeping with this picture of his inharmonious and irrepressible genius that he should have written a poetic drama of *Villon* more Villonesque than anything else in English literature. Palmer's passionately mocking and wistful spirit speaks in his early volumes *Two Fishers, Two Foemen, Two Minstrels*, but it gains a fuller utterance in some of his mature satirical poems, and his *Songs of Salvation, Sin, and Satire*, while in the later *Armed Muse* is a more

¹ Foreword to *Herbert Edward Palmer*, 1931, in *Augustan Books of Poetry*.

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consistent mingling of his sense of the weird with his generally abortive ferocity of indignation. A big proportion of his shorter poems resemble the strange narrative ballad *Jonah* in capturing the rapid violence of the early ballad, and mingling with this an individual version of the half-despairing bitterness of the post-war epoch which justly pointed out T. S. Eliot as its prophet in poetry. In a preface to *Two Minstrels*, the poet says of a piece in that volume, entitled "The Wolf Knight", that "it was sung in the solitudes of the Valley of the Shadow of Death. So shall his harp oft-times be tuned who dwelleth in the wilderness." Except that the touch of wild mockery typical of Palmer is not indicated, it is like a text not only for much of his own work, but for a great deal of the significant poetry written by others in the atmosphere of *The Waste Land*. His spiritual quest of the impossible and, to speak truth, the often inadequately envisaged, is admirably summed up in "The Dream Privateer":

I have eaten bitter aloes, I have drunken of the brine,
I have moored my craft in safety under banyan tree and pine.
High flotillas swerve asunder and fly in fear of me
When I hoist my sails of Wonder and swoop down upon the sea.

Among the poets of the younger generation none more clearly belongs to this chapter than the picturesque Roy Campbell (1902-), a Scot who lived in South Africa after the War, castigated the South African bourgeoisie in *The Wayzgoose*, a violently sarcastic satire, came to London, and ultimately settled in the south of France as fisherman and owner of fishing boats; a champion in Mediterranean fishing-boat races, and occasionally a toreador! This inadequate outline of the chiaroscuro of his bare thirty years points correctly (as such biographical signs rarely do) to the character of the poet's work. It is violent and blazing with elementary colour, often deficient in the finest qualities of perception and

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craftsmanship, but redeemed by a vital splendour and necessity of being which gives to Roy Campbell*an exceptional position in the newest English poetry, one which no reader of his books, *The Flaming Terrapin* and *Adamastor: Poems*, can help believing will grow more important and influential yet. *The Flaming Terrapin* was unusual as a piece of original myth-making by a modern poet, and still more exceptional in its irresistible *Han* which carried the ecstasy of the young poet's inspiration over most forbidding gulfs of faulty craftsmanship. The Terrapin symbolized an escape of post-war youth from the contemporary spiritual chaos and mental sickness. Using the old theme of Noah's Ark for human destiny, the poetic power of life, embodied in the fiery Terrapin, is represented as towing the Ark over the primeval deeps to Mount Ararat, Noah symbolizing the saved race of mankind. There are powerful images, and occasionally lines of a glowing beauty that is like the imaginative incarnation of the splendid Terrapin, but the poet is in such a hurry that what with satirical asides and sarcastic denunciations, and the Marlowesque extravagance of metaphors, the heroic couplet in which the poem is cast undergoes a treatment that suggests a heavy old-fashioned brougham banging along a rough road, towed by a motor-lorry. The following personal aside of the poet in Part I indicates well the mood of this crudely magnificent poem :

How often have I lost this fervent mood,
And gone down dingy thoroughfares to brood
On evils like my own from day to day ;
" Life is a dusty corridor," I say,
" Shut at both ends.*" But far across the plain,
Old Ocean growls and tosses his grey mane,
Pawing the rocks in all his old unrest
Or lifting lazily on some white crest
His pale foam-feathers for the moon to burn—
Then to my veins I feel new sap return,

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Strength tightens up my sinews long grown dull,
And in the old charred crater of the skull
Light strikes the slow somnambulistic mind
And sweeps her forth to ride the rushing wind,
And stamping on the hill-tops high in air,
To shake the golden bonfire of her hair.

In a separately published poem, *Pomegranates* (1931), the poet, contemplating the symbolic beauty of the fruit, says

Their form eludes the clearest phrase,

and this new perception of mystery that lies just beyond the scope of expression accompanies a considerable refinement of his style, which has increased in subtlety. The rare and entirely admirable force of the new poetry which he has brought to the post-war age in *The Flaming Terrapin* and *Adamastor : Poems* is capable of magnificence—that is indeed its most valuable quality for us. It did not lend itself to the nuances of atmosphere that the differently accomplished styles of W. B. Yeats, Walter de la Mare and W. J. Turner, for example, can create ; which may be observed in a poem like " The Sleeper " :

She lies so still, her only motion
The waves of hair that round her sleep
Revolving to their hushed explosion
Of fragrance on the shores of sleep.
Is it my spirit or her flesh
That takes this breathless, silver swoon ? . . .

The remaining lines do not complete the evocation begun here, and the cause is not alone in the mere force of imagination that startles us in the " hushed explosion " : it is partly a question of verbal pattern. Such evanescent atmosphere as a poem in the mood of " The Sleeper " needs can be dissipated by cacophonous collisions of consonants. The " Of-fragrance " and " that-takes," " breathless-silver " in the above extract are paralleled by similar flaws farther on. But in what seems to be his

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characteristic style and mood up to date, that of the "Dedication" of *Adamastor* :

Firing a golden fusillade of words,

he is incomparable in modern poetry and the most heartening proof in our age that English poetry is not near a decline yet. Primitive scenery and elementary instinctive life, which he has mainly drawn upon his South African impressions for, provide the richest material for his plangent and glorious imagery. It is wonderful what force he can put into such conventional metrical patterns as the quatrain of five-foot lines, rhymed *a-b a-b*, in "The Zulu Girl", "The Sisters", and "The Albatross", and the Italian sestet of "Tristan da Cunha"; while the sonnet in his hands becomes a new thing to English poetry, as the vehicle of a descriptive and rounded-off poem such as we should look for in the work of French Parnassians. Certainly no modern English poet has used the sonnet so cavalierly and splendidly as Campbell does in "The Zebras," if we except the revolutionary treatment of the form by Hopkins.

IX

SIMPLE POETRY

Bridges—Irish poets—"Simplicity" and "poetry of the countryside"—Ralph Hodgson—"Song of Honour" and false simplicity—James Stephens—W. H. Davies and genuine simplicity—Charlotte Mew—The sham battle of "Romanticism v. Classicism"—Monro—Sassoon—War Poets.

SIMPLICITY may be variously defined, and it cannot be used with any claim to severe correctness as a label by which to distinguish one kind of poetry from another. This admission can be taken for granted, and it might be applied as reasonably to the conception of eloquence which has just served for another grouping. There is in these terms just enough suggestion of literary realities belonging to the period under review to excuse the use of them as convenient labels. In the revival of poetry which immediately succeeded the fading of the prime glories of the mid-nineteenth century, there appears to be movements in two main directions, one, as we have seen, towards an ampler eloquence, occasionally rising to the magnificent, notably exemplified by Francis Thompson; the other making for a reduction of style to the essentials of utterance, foreshadowed by some of Henley's and Blunt's rejections of tradition, but completely practised in their own limited spheres by Christina Rossetti, Alice Meynell, Housman, Middleton, and R. L. Stevenson. The cult of simplicity in style encouraged a conscious avoidance of the flabbily huge images of "cosmic"

poetasters as well as reams of worthless though simple enough verse. But it also suited the temper of a few genuine poets, most happily perhaps of Robert Bridges, William H. Davies, Peter Quennell, L. A. G. Strong, Charlotte Mew, Harold Monro, Edward Thomas, and Siegfried Sassoon, Frank Prewett, James Stephens, Seumas O'Sullivan, Padraic Colum, Bertram Higgins, F. R. Higgins, and several other "Celtic" poets, both Irish, like these, and Scottish, like Violet Jacob and "Hugh MacDiarmid".¹ The elasticity of the character of simplicity now imputed to such various poets is illustrated not only by the diversity of the content of their verse, but by the obvious applicability of the label to others, who are more conveniently considered in a different context. Nevertheless, simplicity, whether primarily of diction and rhythm, or of idea and imagery, is a sufficiently distinctive attribute to excuse the rough grouping of the poets already mentioned, and some more who are contemporaries of the youngest of those.

Bridges was included among the anti-decadents by reason of his evidently cultivated distinction of manner. His scholarly awareness of previous models enabled him—apart from his classical experiments and his finally triumphant tendency (in *The Testament of Beauty*) to theorize—to fulfil himself as an individual lyrical poet. From his earliest *Shorter Poems* to his late *October*, he can capture an impression or a flying mood in the simplest possible diction; but the simplicity, so far as metre and word-patterning are concerned, is artful, and the spontaneity never outruns a craft that in the less sharply-felt poems could often weaken its impact upon other minds. As a poet of thankful praise Bridges has much in common with the far less trained, but richer, genius of W. H. Davies. He sings best of the secondary feelings and accidental events of happy love; the full emotion

¹ C. M. Grieve.

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he can only suggest by turning outward to the processes of nature that play an accompaniment to his mood, even by contrast, as of a melancholy sea :

**For to the gain life's summer saves,
My solemn joy's increasing store,
The tossing of his mournful waves
Makes sweetest music evermore.**

The constant renewal of ecstasy finds constant reason in the potential paradise of earth :

**I love all beauteous things,
I seek and adore them ;
God hath no better praise,
And man in his hasty days
Is honoured for them.**

And this leaning of his mind makes him one of the " nature poets " who seek not consolation or dark secrets but texts for delight.

James Stephens's, Colum's and other Irish poets', and William H. Davies's poetry also might so often be described as " nature " poetry that we are reminded of a true connection between the modern cultivated simplicity and the poetry which is perhaps better described as poetry of the countryside than as " nature " poetry, since it usually avoids the divine deeps and mystical significance of " nature ". There are occasions, notably in Stephens, when the refreshing surface of country sentiment is broken through, but the generalization will be found to bear the exceptions without breaking down. It applies even when the poet is concerned primarily with another theme, to which a natural scene is merely background, as it is in all of Masefield's narratives, and in the fierce gentleness of several briefly lyrics by Hodgson. It is, however, an error to attend to Ralph Hodgson's subject too closely. His only distinction so far as theme goes, is, in having written " The Bull ", to be one of the very few good poets of animal life. Otherwise his alpha

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and omega in verse is pure song, excepting only that a note of personal indignation lifts his voice a little higher to denounce the stupid cruelty of humans in their treatment of animals and birds. A motive somewhat similar, which without his exquisite tact would have produced a slushily sentimental ballad, inspires "The Gipsy Girl" who

fawned and whined " Sweet gentlemen,
A penny for three tries ! "
—But oh, the den of wild things in
The darkness of her eyes !

He makes his characteristic song out of elementary emotions and ideas, so that a personally poignant feeling can find a general expression: all that would hamper the singing of the words can be sloughed away. The metrical device is similarly elementary, and usually relies upon artful rhyming and obvious alliteration to maintain the rhythmic emphasis and variety:

Eve, with her basket, was
Deep in the bells and grass
Wading in bells and grass
Up to her knees,
Picking a dish of sweet
Berries and plums to eat,
Down in the bells and grass
Under the trees.

Here and farther on in the poem :

Oh, had our simple Eve
Seen through the make-believe ! . . .

the tone seems personal, deeply affectionate, avuncular, but the second stanza insists that the reader shall not forget the traditional theme which the poet is pretending to sing:

Mute as a mouse in a
Corner the cobra lay,
Curled round a bough of the
Cinnamon tall . . .

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Now to get even **and**
Humble proud heaven and
Now was the moment or
Never at all.

It is very skilful doggerel. Is there any reason except alliteration for " mouse ", " corner " and " cobra ", and is not the effect ruined anyhow, if you realize the possibilities of the theme, and how the poet gets his miniature perfection by a suspicious ease in avoiding all its tremendous implications ?

Is not the famous " Song of Honour " liable to a similar unlucky fate with later readers ? Leaving out of account (if possible—but is it possible ?) the comparison with Christopher Smart's fiery " Song of David ", which is most unfortunately suggested by the movement and rhyming, how is it possible to cherish such a poem in the mind, when the idea of it is so much grander than the expression ? Here truly is a curious reversal of the commoner fault of poets using diction richer than its content of feeling. But not strictly a reversal, because Hodgson does not overcharge his simple diction with poetic meanings. His diction is actually otiose and loose. If he did so overcharge the words we should feel that some breaking down of the external poem would be a cheap price for the vistas opened to the imagination. The dissatisfaction which comes after a prolonged acquaintance with the poem is undoubtedly due to a misapplication of the extremely simple style. The opening paragraph, being merely descriptive " nature poetry ", such as the style is adapted to, is beautiful and suggestive.

After this the poem sustains an increased tension through the next two paragraphs. Then the poet's limited power of imagination is really exhausted. He is on the brink of deep perception, but what words, what sentiments come to him ? Is the long remainder of the poem, which was intended to rise to climax, a

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slipping away down slopes of pseudo-mystical imagery and sentimentality? Does not the repetition of words and phrases, instead of producing the emphasis of ineffable conviction, gradually become shrill and cheap?—the "again, again", "the bells and bells of song", "the song of fighters great and small",¹ and the still weaker repetitions at the start of successive lines, matching the looseness and prosaicness of the phrases :

The song of men all sorts and kinds,
As many tempers, moods and minds
As leaves are on a tree,
As many faiths and castes and creeds,
As many human bloods and breeds
As in the world may be . . .

Only the Dionysian exuberance of a Francis Thompson could carry off such slovenliness and lose it in the tremendous mystery of his vision. Perhaps the complaint that "The Song of Honour" arouses is explained not only by the inconsequence of the images in the poem—an inconsequence that proves a deficiency of imaginative power—but the very evident disclosures of the poet's satisfaction with a reduction of the grand to the pretty, a reversal of the imaginative process of discovering infinity in the finite. We are justifiably doubtful of the profundity of those :

men divinely wise
Who look and see in starry skies
Not stars so much as robins' eyes,
And when these pale away
Hear flocks of shiny pleiades
Among the plums and apple trees
Sing in the summer day—

and this revolting prettification of the tremendous Blake is succeeded immediately by :

¹ "The Lord God made them all", we remember.

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The song of all both high and low
To some blest vision true,
The song of beggars when they throw
The crust of pity all men owe
To hungry sparrows in the snow
Old beggars hungry too . . .

Is not such an ooze of treacle *revolting*? No wonder "The Song of Honour" has been so popular! Where the theme gives him enough but not too much scope, as in "The Bull" and the very charming poem on "The Bride", do we find the best of Ralph Hodgson.

James Stephens's capacity for unexpected depths makes his grouping here questionable, but the predominant impression left by his curiously mixed poetry is of a cultivated baldness and a deliberately assumed simple-mindedness. Few modern poets are so difficult to assess. The too frequent playfulness of his manner is apt to turn into an unpleasant archness. He is, one feels one moment, too clever by half, and the next moment one wonders if his extraordinary simple-mindedness is a pose. If the poem is written in a serious manner, as in "Check" (*Adventures of Seumas Beg*, 1915), the seriousness is only in the manner, for the vision is childish and trivial, with just a hint of imaginative suggestion in the triviality. The night is "She", creeping through the garden up to the house and in the room

where I was hid :
But no matter what she did
To everything that was without,
She could not put my candle out.
So I stared at the night, and she
Stared back solemnly at me.

Something between Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses* and Walter de la Mare's *Songs of Childhood*, is it not? Stephens is perhaps mainly a poet of childhood, in which case our reluctance to be impressed by his apparently more weighty poems may easily be out of place. Con-

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sider the, for him, exceptionally long "Prelude and Song" (*Hill of Vision*, 1912), how it really owes its life to the ecstatic dancing moments of song, and not in the easy daintiness of the ode-like periods where the poet apostrophizes "a little wind", or those rather artificially idiomatic exclamations in the section allotted to "The Song", which are mingled with lines reminiscent of English poets from Spenser to Browning! But how different from the feeble literary echoes of decadent poetry are those playful equivalents of the originals! And eventually the poet's elation gainsays our grumbling, and he will pipe us after him, as he would the birds:

**O follow, follow, follow !
Blackbird, thrush, and swallow ;
The air is soft, the sun is shining through
The dancing boughs ;
A little while me company along
And I will go with you ;
Arouse, arouse !
Among the leaves I sing my pleasant song.**

Ultimately we may come to the conviction that no poet of the first quarter of this century, not even his great fellow-countryman, W. B. Yeats, has more frequently justified the admiring astonishment implied in the verdict "Miracle!" Not only does reflection in his verse go tiptoe for a flight, and mystical wisdom flee into Blake-like enigma, but if he chooses to make a bird-song ("I cling and swing, on a branch") most of our modern nature poetry beside it is tame as a gentle prose essay; and there is no telling when a phrase will not transport the imagination. Has he not made a poetic imitation of sea-billows in "The Main Deep" with a handful of such phrases ending with

**Chill-rushing,
Hush-hushing,
. . . Hush-hushing . . .**

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Stephens's metres often are devices to suggest an ecstatic spontaneity, but the spontaneity of William H. Davies, the Welsh poet born in 1871, is more perfectly at one with the simplest forms. In the two volumes of his *Collected Poems* will be found certainly a good deal of inferior pastiche in which the poet seems to be imitating himself and certain earlier lyrical poets, both Elizabethan and Caroline, but there is a severe limit to the number of miracles that any poet can achieve, and among singers who have wedded " wood notes wild " to the memorable perceptions that make poetry, he has an honorable and permanent place beyond the reach of doubt. He is equally happy, in his most successful moments, in singing of a dark mood or a mental process :

**My mind has thunderstorms
That brood for heavy hours :
Until they rain me words
My thoughts are drooping flowers
And sulking, silent birds,**

as of those beautiful gaieties and tranquillities of nature which so many poets have tried to embody in the confession of a mood. " A rainbow and a cuckoo " coming together call from him a song of praise ; a buxom woman rippling with laughter stirs in him a responsive gusto. And what ultimately makes his lyrical moments memorable is an imaginative reach that constantly shocks us into new perceptions while his ostensible aim seems to be a reflection on life. Thus in " The Ox " :

**Why should I pause, poor beast, to praise
Thy back so red, thy sides so white ;
And on thy brow the curls in which
Thy mournful eyes take no delight?**

He cannot take the thoughtless pleasure of a child in making friends with those creatures whose term of life is determined by humankind.

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Nay, I'll not miss what I'll not find,
And I'll find no fond cares for thee ;
So, take away those great sad eyes
That stare across yon fence at me.

The poem is pedestrian, and only Davies could recover it from the flatness that it seems doomed to end in :

See you that Robin, by himself,
Perched on that leafless apple branch,
His breast like one red apple left—
The last and best of all—by chance ?

His argument is that he prefers to heed a bird whose recurring appearance will cease only when God wills, but though the argument, as his arguments usually are, is interesting and belongs to the poetry of curious thought, his own peculiar achievement is the far-fetched simile of objects—the robin's breast and the last ripe apple, here, now happily mated in the imagination. We may have doubts about a great deal of his reflective verse, but the pleasure that the discoveries of his direct and poetic sight give us need no confirming demonstration :

What happy mortal sees that mountain now,
The white cascade that's shining on its brow ;
The white cascade that's both a bird and star,
That has a ten mile voice and shines as far ?

The natural homeliness of the diction is always a stylistic perfection where imagination joins hands with his playful fancy :

One morning, when the world was grey and cold,
And every face looked dull and full of care,
There passed me, puffing clouds of silver breath,
A lovely maiden, with a jaunty air.

The red carnations flamed in both her cheeks,
Her teeth all there and shown ; while either eye
Shone like a little pool on Ghristchurch Hill
When it has stolen more than half the sky. . . .

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If there are any modern critics too "intelligent" to enjoy Davies, they badly need that little extra understanding which will tell them when the mere intellect is an impertinence.

It may be that John Drinkwater would fare better among the simple poets than where we have placed him for his persistently eloquent tone. This compact neatness of utterance with a somewhat more intellectual understanding, but in moods that often resemble Davies', yield several good lyrics, but the ceremonious dignity and the inclination to say fine things predominate. He cannot resist the temptation to justify the ways of wisdom to an earnest audience in a teachers' training college.

Charlotte Mew (1870-1928) is one of those simple poets whose work makes that of most seem cheap. Set, for example, "On a Dead Child", one of the most skilful and certainly the most poignant of Robert Bridges' poems, beside Charlotte Mew's "Beside the Bed": it almost completely loses its power to stir any feelings, and yet "Beside the Bed", as indeed is all of the work of this tragic woman,¹ is simple to the verge of baldness in idea and diction, and the soft swing of the rhythm, so vibrant with necessity is it, seems less the result of artifice than accident. The loveliness of her poetry, often inspired by her feeling for earth's loveliness, is nearly always deepened by those premonitions of the grave or of the dark dream world that have woven into the texture of English poetry its richest threads. The two modest collections of her poems, *The Farmer's Bride* (1915) and *The Rambling Sailor* (1929), contain such treasure that praise of her is

¹ She died in a nursing-home by her own hand after a breakdown, following the death of her mother and a sister. A friend has attributed her preoccupation with death and disaster largely to the vicissitudes of a life of poverty, which was slightly relieved in 1922 when the combined influence of Thomas Hardy, John Masefield and Walter de la Mare secured for her a Civil List Pension of £75 a year.

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tempted towards extravagance. Sometimes she is a spiritual sister and equal of Christina Rossetti, but she is capable of macabre intensities the like of which we can find nowhere among contemporary poets except in a few of Edith Sitwells poems like "The Mother" (afterwards reset as "The Hambone and the Heart"), but when her poetry envisages the peasant girl in "The Farmer's Bride" or that other lost fairy imprisoned in human clay, "The Changeling", neither Walter de la Mare nor Thomas Hardy, with whom are obvious affinities, are names that suffice to describe an eerie unhappiness more passionate and intense than anything in English literature since *Withering Heights*. And when her words throb with the passionate mysteries of unhuman nature her unpremeditated transmutations of natural speech resemble Edward Thomas's happiest miracles but exceed them always, sooner or later, with omens of lonely tragedy. "The Forest Road" in its opening is very like Thomas :

The forest road,
The infinite straight road stretching away
World without end : the breathless road between the walls
Of the black listening trees : the hushed, grey road
Beyond the window that you shut to-night
Crying that you would look at it by day—
There is a shadow there that sings and calls,
But not for you.

Thereafter the poem goes wild with sorrowful longing for a dead person, for the shadows and the singing on the road have rapt the poet into that eternity of imagination proclaimed by Blake as the real world :

The road ! the road !
There is a shadow there : I see my soul,
I hear my soul, singing among the trees !

That essentially romantic weirdness of demon-inspired vision (which is just as Greek as it is medieval) contrasts

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with the much commoner and shallower sense of half-seen realities exemplified by most of Masefield's verse in this vein :

Death lies in wait for you, you wild thing in the wood,
Shy-footed beauty dear, half-seen, half-understood,
Glimpsed in the beech-wood dim and in the dropping fir,
Shy like a fawn and sweet and beauty's minister.
Glimpsed as in flying clouds by night the little moon,
A wonder, a delight, a paleness passing soon.

These vaguely expressed because vaguely realized intimations of reality are constantly used as a flail wherewith to beat a dummy Romanticism by critics who for inscrutable reasons of their own suppose that " Classicism " is the Ormuzd and " Romanticism " the Ahriman of the poetic universe. The denigration of Romanticism has become a fashionable pursuit of our intellectuals ; it now involves other absurdities beyond blindness to the necessarily equal division of virtues and vices between Romanticism and Classicism, the two halves of poetry after the most fundamental dichotomy that is possible to criticism has been made. A very modern fad is to associate the virtues of economy and simplicity with " classicism " and their opposites with " romanticism ", but it should be evident to the reader that such distinctions could not be applied respectively to the two groups that have been labelled, not without reasons shown, as " Eloquent " and " Simple ". It is questionable even if the poets in these groups would be found to show a tendency to suit the alternative titles of " Romantic " and " Classical ". About half of the " Eloquent " poets might be regarded as predominantly classical in mood and manner, and similarly quite half of these " Simple " poets are distinctly romantic. Of the remaining two who can be most conveniently considered here, Harold Monro is perhaps classical, but Siegfried Sassoon is romantic.

Harold Monro (1879-1932) gradually acquired his dis-

tinctive style, for in the early dramatic narrative of *Judas* (1908) and much of the volume *Before Dawn: Poems and Impressions* (1911) he coloured his diction rather like William Morris. Considering the amount of nonsense he wrote about poetry when defending modern experiments, the prevalence of his artistic tact in his mature work is something to be grateful for. The truth is that his devotion to transparency of style and natural rhythm of speech, while it brought to him an economical and sufficiently flexible utterance, is not his most essential quality as a poet. That is rather in his impressionism, and an exceptional constancy in objectifying a personal vision, expressing mood and independent judgments on life by almost allegorical description of trifles which he could make significance. The title of *Strange Meetings* (1917) is characteristic, and so is the curious thought of the tide-piece, which opens :

If suddenly a clod of earth should rise,
 And walk about, and breathe, and speak, and love,
 How one would tremble, and in what surprise
 Gasp : " Can you move " ?

I see men walking, and I always feel :
 " Earth ! How have you done this ? What can you be ? "
 I can't learn how to know men, or conceal
 How strange they are to me.

If the context of his verse were confined to such rather *rkherche* curiosities of thought as the above or this :

It is difficult to tell:
 (Though we feel it well),
 How the surface of the land
 Budded into head and hand :
 But it is a great surprise
 How it blossomed into eyes

his work would be an interesting but not important offshoot of the poetry of metaphysical conceits. In reading it our interest would always be dogged by a disappoint-

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ment at the triviality of the communication of ideas which have evoked and can yet evoke tremendous poetry :

The stars must make an awful noise
In whirling round the sky ;
Yet somehow I can't even hear
Their loudest song or sigh.
So it is wonderful to think
One blackbird can outsing
The voice of all the swarming stars
On any day in spring.

As in too much of the intellectual poetry of our day—such as Herbert Read's—all the value is in the idea ; the internal discontinuity by which that superficial surprise is sprung in the second of those stanzas comes from a process opposite to that which vitalizes W. H. Davies' reflections in verse. Instead of sharing the poet's feeling (which scarcely animates the argument, anyhow) the thoughtful reader wants to question the truth of the epigram. It may be clever but it certainly is not " wonderful to think ". It might be less clever but could be immensely more wonderful to hear in a blackbird's song the urgent rhythm of the universe. But if this poet's rather too conscious avoidance of anything hackneyed in thought or imagery leads him to themes that employ his gift for impressionistic poetry, the result is another story altogether. His essayistic charm is extended over the familiar external details of life, absorbing them in a complete picture of his mood. Essentially a town poet in love with the countryside, he does not avoid the commonplace elements of the escape to green fields ; rather does he revel in them. The conventional form of the sonnet is used for twelve loose stanzas of an impressionistic description of a " Week-End " holiday. Henley cannot compete with him here, and his sensuous pleasure in the objects of material and mental comfort transforms

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them so that we share perfectly the experience of finding again the little friendly house in the country that stares through all its windows at the green, and " the smiling tea-pot with contented spout" that " thinks of the boiling water ", and we believe that

The key will stammer, and the door reply,
The hall wake, yawn, and smile ; the torpid stair
Will grumble at our feet, the table cry :
" Fetch my belongings for me ; I am bare."

When the affectionate fancy gives momentous place to awakening imagination we still believe, because Monro was, after all, a poet as well as a delightful impressionist :

A clatter ! something in the attic falls.
A ghost has lifted up his robes and fled.
The loitering shadows move along the walls ;
Then silence very slowly lifts his head.

A simple couplet in the sixth of the sonnets suggests the underlying seriousness of the sensuous happiness :

Coffee, be fragrant. Porridge in my plate,
Increase the vigour to fulfil my fate.

The grass is not only cool and bright ; to the poet it is everlasting ; night here is deep restfulness, but as

the great sun is slipping under ground
Grip firmly !—How the earth is whirling round.

It is this curiously searching quality in the mind of a sensuous materialist that enables him to make unusual poetry of animals—a cat drinking milk—or of " nature ". After reading Monro's " Trees ", many modern excursions into nature poetry, with apparently similar general themes, such as the more voluble essays in verse by John Freeman (e.g. " Beechwood "), J. G. Squire's " Birds ", and a fearful abundance of others, are seen to be trite and intolerably dull.

By contrast, Siegfried Sassoon's best poems often seem

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too brief, as if the hell of the European War which called from him some of the fiercest satirical poems of the time, had made him fearful of his own depths and his capacity for ecstasy, which even during the war he could not lose ; soldiers singing could make him tremble at beauty :

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted ;
And beauty came like the setting sun :
My heart was shaken with tears ; and horror
Drifted away. . . . O, but Everyone
Was a bird ; and the song was wordless ; the singing will never
be done.

But unless he is rapt away like this, or subtly overcome in his contemplation of " the glorying forest " wind shaken, so that he would fade.

In the warm, rustling music of the hours
That guard your ancient wisdom, till my dream
Moves with the chant and whisper of the glade,

his ironic mind, peopled still with the tragic ghosts of war, is ever alert to restrain enthusiasm or to condemn the cheapening of spiritual values by shallow-minded and shallow-hearted slickness. The restraint is costly that has allowed him so rarely to give the perfected utterance to his unfailing intuitions of beauty : " The Power and the Glory " :

*Let there be life, said God. And what he wrought
Went past in myriad marching lives, and brought
This hour, this quiet room, and my small thought
Holding invisible vastness in his hands. . . .*

The meaning of loneliness pursues him ; the word alone is " life endured and known " to his unflinching penetration, but in poetry he has not transcended the expression of angry pity and love wrenched from him during the war for that satirical offensive, the exact economy of his language and the forceful directness of his imagination

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made him chief among the English poet soldiers who waged mental strife against the foulness of war.

With Siegfried Sassoon we reach the war and post-war generation of poets, a majority of whom could be suitably grouped here. In addition to the diversity of their gifts and temperaments which has again to be remarked is the mere number of them. The occurrence of too many names is of course largely a consequence of surveying work that is still too near for a permanent perspective—we cannot yet see the wood for the trees ; but it cannot be doubted that since 1918 an unprecedented number of writers have proved themselves poets. The argument is sufficiently maintained by making a mere list—and certainly an incomplete and often unfairly exclusive list—of not yet mentioned names of contemporary poets who have served the cult of simplicity, in diction at least if not always in intellectual content. Such a list includes Charles Williams, A. St. John Adcock, J. Redwood Anderson, Austin Clarke, Francis Brett Young, Richard Church, Osbert Sitwell, Richard Aldington, Edward L. Davidson, Clifford Bax, Rupert Croft-Cooke, Chris Massie, W. Force Stead, C. Henry Warren, Geoffrey Faber, and a good many women poets, including Katharine Tynan, " H. D ", Sylvia Townsend Warner, Rose Macauley, Anna Whickham, Helen Parry Eden, Viola Meynell, and Eleanor Farjeon whose earlier lyrical poetry has been unjustly neglected since she became known as a writer of light verse and of children's poetry. Several of these poets are taken account of in other chapters, and it is not feasible to analyse the diverse values and characteristics of them all. Sometimes the poet's cultured style seems to carry an inadequate content of conviction or imaginative passion; Edward Shanks's long pale, and merely literary dramatic poem *The Qjjeen of China* and his equally long-winded derivative narra-

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tive poem, " **The Fireless Town** ", are examples of such **cultured** pastiche, by a poet who does more worth-while **brief** poems of lyrical emotion or things in description. A few of his descriptive poems, mostly later than that volume, seemed good enough to refer to particularly in the chapter on nature poetry, but there is no poetry in *The Queen of China and other Poems* that seems to me so authentic as much of the work of several of Shanks's almost unknown contemporaries.

A different kind of notable failure is that of Herbert Read, who apparently tries to avoid the consequences of deficiency of musical sense and imaginative aridity by a deliberate avoidance of evocative metaphor and a verse-freedom that lends itself to sharp prosaic statements rather than to poetry. The poignancy of his feeling when he describes the emotions of a combatant soldier make his war poems much the most memorable of the things he has done in verse. His later verse is either loaded with intellectual concepts and symbols in language almost as abstract as George Eliot's similar failure in verse, or expresses sardonic reflections of commonplace life. When he allows himself the rare luxury of evocative figures, the hardness of the style still keeps the statement within the bounds of suggestive prose. The forcible descriptive imagery in " *Penumbra* ", for instance, in which the poet records impressions in a tea-shop as he watches a seemingly ill-mated couple dressed in mourning, might easily belong to a few prose sentences in a vividly written sketch.

The poets whose achievement wholly or mainly could be classed as war-time poetry are so predominantly of the type described in this chapter that the reader is asked to excuse the inclusion here of such a distinctive element in modern poetry. One has to say war-time poetry for the verse written between 1914 and 1919

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because most of the verse written by the men who knew the war at first hand was an emotional escape from it, generally to the favourite themes of the green English countryside, the fields, the mossy churchyards, old mills and winding rivers and some beloved person who like these readily symbolized home for most of them. Nearly all the poetry which faced the reality of the war was written by soldiers, but the best work generally lacked the satirical or cynical ferocity of the verse of those who most keenly perceived the intolerable beastliness and spiritual waste. But there were some among the poets who knew personally and felt deeply the inexcusable abomination who nevertheless wrote poems that compete as poetry with the war poems of older and more accomplished poets like Walter de la Mare, Laurence Binyon, John Masefield,¹ and Henry Newbolt, who realized it from a greater distance. Among these true soldier war poets, besides Sassoon, should be mentioned Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Osbert Sitwell (1892-), The Hon. Evan Morgan (1893-), J. C. Squire (1884-), whose humour was quite as effective a weapon as the irony and sarcasm of the more earnest satirists, Neil Munro (1864-1930), Robert Graves (1895-), Herbert Read (1893-), F. Victor Branford (1891-), Edmund Blunden (1896-), and Robert Nichols (1893-). There were also Julian Grenfell (1888-1915) and Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), singers of the war, certainly, but not permitted to stay long enough to lose the traditional illusions with which we all began it. Whatever could be said in adverse criticism of their work as war poetry is the less called for now that the truer utterances of others has given to theirs an air of remoteness which is strictly the attribute of

¹ Masefield served in the Royal Army Medical Corps on Gallipoli and wrote afterwards his strong prose account of it, " Gallipoli " ; but his war poem, " August 1914 ", was written as a civilian poet.

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the poetry of romantic poses. Grenfell's "Into Battle" was the expression of a fine type of the professional soldier and fox-hunting gentleman, but it might as well have been written for an action in the Boer War. Rupert Brooke, who was a civilian soldier and a true poet, inherited the ideas about the nobility of being slaughtered for uncomprehended causes, but there are signs in his pre-war ironic poems that he would soon have joined the courageous poets who voiced their disillusionment and turned their guns of satire upon the comfortable people at home who went on preaching the patriotism of hatred and the glory of sacrifice for others.

There were also a number of soldier-poets who would not or could not move themselves to write mainly war poetry during the years of horror. Often they suffered personally all that the poets of war did, and most of them died young. On this pathetic roll of honour we find among others the names of Francis Ledwidge (1892-1917), the charming Irish singer of green fields, Edward Thomas (1878-1917), Charles H. Sorley (1892-1915), Leslie Coulson (1889-1916), W. N. Hodgson ("Edward Melbourne") (1893-1916), and E. Wyndham Tennant (1897-1916). The war-time poets of this class, who preferred to sing of the beautiful country for whose sake they had gone into hell, but who survived for maturer work, include F. W. Harvey (1888-) and Geoffrey Dearmer (1903-).

X

THE REAL DECADENCE

Bizarre poetic furniture—Suggestive obscurity—French influences—Osbert Sitwell—Aldous Huxley—T. S. Eliot and culmination of poetic clowning—Edgell Rickword's and Alan Porter's power—Herbert Palmer's "Cinder Thursday."

THE observations on the comparatively unimportant English decadence at the end of last century may be applied to a more serious decadent movement which made itself apparent just after the war, and to some degree as a consequence of the spiritual unsettlement caused by the war. The greater part of the verse written by the soldier poets during the war was evidently a means of escape from their actual environment, and the poetry written after the war betrayed the loss of direction, the ennui ending in desperation of a spiritual chaos. The environment was conducive to decadence in poetry, and the immediate consequence was a new quest by poets for remote or bizarre material for the imagination. It accompanied bizarreries in painting and music, and a fashion for artificial and toy-like *decor* with Russian ballet and pseudo-Oriental scenes on the stage. Even imitative verse like Edward Shanks's "Queen of China", and the more vital poetic drama of W. B. Nichols (his *Song of Sharruk* ought to be better known) showed the movement of taste. Edith Sitwell's extremely clever early poetry emphasized the tendency in the new decadence to avoid the deadly actualities of the contemporary world by

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resort to a world of toys. In part this was a regression to childhood, but in the art of a poet of her imaginative energy it quickly assumed the character of a witty dream poetry with satirical implications. In a book published five years ago,¹ I reminded English readers that this new movement, composed in part of angry clowning and in part of a new artificial paradise for the imagination, was essentially a belated revival and development of the French decadence of last century, which unlike the English was in the late nineteenth century the really dominating character of literature in France. The early cult of the baroque art and decorative imagery by Edith Sitwell and her brothers was an unconscious response on their part to the *same frisson* in the literary atmosphere ; but in Edith Sitwell's and T. S. Eliot's poetry a much closer and more fruitful contact was made with the old cult of the *paradis artificiel* inaugurated by Baudelaire, and developed by Mallarmé into the cult of suggestive obscurities of meaning. The titles of two of Edith Sitwell's early volumes, *Clowns' Houses* and *The Wooden Pegasus*, indicate the toy-like or decorative imagery of most of the poems, but one must realize the tragedy of the unhappy clown to expect so much poignant feeling and sardonic humour in this glittering verse. In many of these poems is an approach to the jatinical nonsense of the " Fagade " series in *Bucolic Comedies*. " Minstrels " describes a seaside town's promenade where a band of pierrots is performing, and the whimsical descriptive phrases suddenly give us a glimpse of eternity ; the queer tunes from the band gape in the air from the far side of the boundaries of this world ; but " Time is hard to kill ! " sighs the poet. In other poems, Time is a drum ; it beats on like the beating of a restless heart. Whenever the theme of the poem reaches below the glittering surface of impressions (until the publication of *Troy Town* at least), the

¹ *The Three Sitwells*.

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same weary and ironical mood supervenes. In her introduction to *Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet* she wrote :

Life is a perpetual Can-can, and underneath the rays of the stage, seas, buildings, gush from the crude, blue planes and cubes of faces as though they were fiery astral manes. This terrible gaiety is nothing but a rope ladder up which we must climb to escape from the bottomless pits. But in what air and under what skies shall we find ourselves when we have climbed to the topmost rung of that ladder we dare not guess.

True, this was written to contrast the mentality of Western civilized society with the clearer outlook brought to it by the Russian Ballet, but the gist of it is explicit or implicit in too many of the poems for this conscious criticism of life not to be rooted in the deepest emotions of the poet. It is no accident that in writing of the Russian Ballet Miss Sitwell quotes from Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations* and from Laforgue's *Les Moralites Legendaires*. If in Rimbaud she finds the refuge of artificiality, the detached restfulness of a puppet world, it is Laforgue—doomed and disillusioned Laforgue—who supplies the cynicism and ironic flippancy :

In Petrouchka we see mirrored for us, in these clear sharp outlines and moments, all the philosophy of Laforgue, as the puppets move somnambulantly through the dark of our hearts. For this ballet, alone among them all, shatters our glass house about our ears and leaves us terrified, haunted by its tragedy. The music, harsh, crackling rags of laughter, shrieks at us like some brightly-painted Punch and Judy show, upon grass as shrill as anger, as dulled as hate. Sometimes it jangles thin as the wires on which these half-human puppets move ; or a little hurdy-gurdy valse sounds hollow, with the emptiness of the hearts of passing people, " vivant de cans-cans de clocher, disent : ' Quel temps fera-t-il demain,' * Voici Phiver qui vient.' ' Nous n'avons pas eu de prunes cette annee.' "

And (she says) there is one march, quick and terrible, in which the drum-taps are nothing but the anguished beat of the clown's heart as he makes his endless battle against materialism. And we know that we are watching our own tragedy.

Two noteworthy pieces, " Clown's Luck " (in *Troy*

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Park) and "Clowns' Houses" (in *The Wooden Pegasus*), would reveal clearly enough the poet in this mood identified with the eternal clown, the fool of God, even if a great part of her essay on the Russian Ballet were not found versified in Canto Sixteen of *The Sleeping Beauty*. The world watching the ballet is the same as that

**low-hung country of the blind,—
A sensual touch upon the heart and mind,**

the world of the rural fair. The faith of religion cannot breathe in the narrow house of the soul hungering for a realized and unattainable earthly paradise. Watching the clown in Petrouchka we "watch our own tragedy," because:

**Do we not all know that little room with the hopeful tinsel stars
and the badly-painted ancestral portrait of God? Have we not
all battered our heads through the flimsy paper-walls—only to find
blackness?**

Much of that spirit of the tragic clown enters into her best poetry, from the horror of the drunken and staring prostitute, "Duckie," to the rather Baudelairean "Nocturnes", but all the rococo eighteenth-century furniture which the poet exploited in the creation of an artificial world, was often employed for that elegant furniture of the verse which has been described as her witty dream poetry.

Osbert Sitwell (1892-) began as one of the satirical soldier poets, and with a less deep irony than his sister wrote after the war some pungently sarcastic verse reminding us in its mixture of humour and beauty with the sarcasm, of Ronald Ross's post-war Satires.¹ He was fond of using the hymn rhythms of Bishop Heber, one of his ancestors, for his irreverent sallies :

**Tall arches rise to imitate
The jaws of Jonah's whale. Up flows
The chant. Thin spinsters sibilate
Beneath a full-blown gothic rose.**

¹ In *Fables and Satires*,

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Pillars surge upward, break in spray
Upon the high and fretted roof;
But children scream outside—betray
The urging of a cloven hoof.

His "Nursery Rhyme" goes :

The dusky king of Malabar
Is chief of Eastern Potentates,
Yet he wears no clothes except
The jewels that decency dictates.

A thousand Malabaric wives
Roam beneath green-tufted palms ;
Revel in the vileness
That Bishop Heber psalms. . . .

And presently comes to one of the satirist's stock characters, "Mrs. Freudenthal in furs", day-dreaming while the orchestra plays in the restaurant :

Mrs. Freudenthal day-dreams
—Ice-spoon half-way to her nose—
Till the girl in ochre screams,
Hits out at the girl in rose.

This is not at all the way
To act in large and smart hotels ;
Angrily the couples sway,
Eagerly the riot swells.

Girls who cannot act with grace
Should learn behaviour ; stay at home ;
A convent is the proper place.
Why not join the Church of Rome ?

A waiter nearly drops the tray
—Twenty tea-cups in one hand.
Now the band joins in the fray,
Fighting for the Promised Land.

Osbert Sitwell is always direct and simple as a satirist though he strikes deeper in the earlier "War Poems"¹ especially "Sheep Song". The sheep declare that "we are the greatest sheep in the world,

¹ In *Argonaut and Juggernaut*.

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There are no sheep like us.
We come of an imperial bleat.

But they watch the blood " drip and ooze on the walls "
of the world, and their lambs fattened for slaughter.
Their eyes conceal " all the secrets of the vacuum ".
They can be moved to action, for they bleat when the
head sheep bleats and

When he stampedes
—Heavy with foot-rot—
We gallop after him
Until
In our frenzy
We trip him up
—And a new sheep leads us.

They will not trust herdsman again because, although
these warned them not to stampede,

Yet we were forced to do so.
Then the black lamb asked,
Saying, " Why did we start this glorious Gadarene descent ? "
And the herd bleated angrily,
" We went in with clean feet,
And we will come out with empty heads.
We gain nothing by it,
Therefore
It is a noble thing to do.
We are stampeding to end stampedes.
We are fighting for lambs
Who are never likely to be born.
When once a sheep gets its blood up
The goats will remember. . . . "
But the herdsman swooped down
Shouting
" Get back to your pens there."

Osbert Sitwell's less important early work has no
relation like his sister's to the French decadents, and
belongs to quite another order of verse, nearer to Chester-
ton's crusading poetry than to decadence. But the very
superficiality of the objects of the poet's animosity throws

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some light upon the social atmosphere which affected the really influential and necessary decadent poetry of Edith Sitwell and T. S. Eliot. So too one may find the elements of the revolt against traditional ideals in the superficial poetry of Aldous Huxley, who really is an intellectual decadent, most of whose work has been destructive in purpose and nostalgic in mood. A characteristic utterance is to be found in an early poem, "Complaint of a Poet Manque 'V The complaint opens:

We judge by appearances merely :
If I can't think strangely, I can at least look queerly.
So I grew the hair so long on my head
That my mother wouldn't know me,
Till a woman in a night-club said
As I was passing by,
"Hullo, here comes Salome. ..."

Some of Huxley's early poems, like the clever one of Job in the whale's belly, remain in the mind as distinct achievements. They are all characterized by revolutionary cynicism and traditional technique.

But Edith Sitwell and T. S. Eliot were able to develop a technique which can only be described as decadent, for expressing their reaction to the spiritual "waste land" of contemporary society. Edith Sitwell was attracted to the deliberate artificiality of imagery as were Beaudelaire and Rimbaud because it implied a rejection of the actual world while expressing deep personal motives ; but a further stage of the French literary decadence was a variation of Mallarme's obscurities of sense. Most clearly revealed in Jules Laforgue is the beginning of a literary technique for making new associations by dislocating the normal sequences of conscious thought. The Laforgue of the *Moralitis Legendaires* fashioned a technique which was in part a resistance to literary traditions, but more effectively a vehicle for a peculiarly exacerbated

¹ Published in *Wheels*, 1919, an anthology of contemporary poets.

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sensitiveness. In his aim of externalizing sensibility, by a mixture of impressionism and enigmatic evocation of moods, Laforgue hit on the device of breaking up the idea-associations of traditional poetry. Disassociation of ideas has been carried to extremes, ending in a refusal to employ the traditional verbal symbols of expression, in the work of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, but obedience to the imaginative spontaneity of images has always been liable in Edith Sitwells poetry to interrupt the intellectual meaning, as may be seen most easily in "The Sleeping Beauty", a quite disjointed narrative that yet possesses the emotional unity of a poem. In her mature and powerfully satirical poem, "Gold Coast Customs"¹ the discontinuity, if we are to accept her account of the composition, is a deliberate technical device to make the mind aware of several layers of argument simultaneously. "The poem", she says, "is built up in three tiers, like the floors of a house. The bottom tier is the negro swamp, which is a phantom spiritual state, and on it, the other two tiers—the terrible slum of the beggars, and the terrible slum of the cannibal rich—are built. The image of the "shrunk heads" (my expression for rich decadents, and, in one case—i.e.

**" and the trophies with long black hair, shrunk heads
that drunken shrunk upon tumbled beds"—**

for the drunken prostitutes of the slums), was taken from the shrunk heads among the Polynesian exhibits at the British Museum, those heads whence the bones and the brains have been removed and which have been filled with sand.

I was once asked by a reader why I had used the term "giggling mud". The reason is this: mud, if it is so thick as to constitute, almost, a swamp, produces little bubbles, which, when they break, look like the dimples about a laughing mouth; thick mud has, too, when your foot sinks into it, a sound like a suppressed giggle.

¹The last piece in her *Collected Poems*.

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The mud to which I am referring in this poem is a spiritual **state** into which the cannibal rich are sinking deeper and deeper.¹

The style and mood of Laforgue's prose and verse last century (he died in 1887) induced a modern American critic² to describe him well as " the new buffoon of dusty eternities " who

sings the sorrows and complaints of a world peopled by fantastic souls, clowns, somnambulists, satyrs, poets, harlots, dainty girls, Cheret posters, pierrots, kings of psychopathic tastes, blithe birds, and sad coloured cemeteries.

In the lyrical, subjective moods the poets laughed at themselves ; when they externalized emotion they laughed with the same bitterness at the world. To produce a new, hard, cruel laughter at the stupidities and sins of the world was the task which Marinetti once urged upon the music-halls. Twenty years later he might have assigned the task to the " movies ", that glorious opportunity shamefully lost. But all the time this function was being performed by poets, painters and musicians.

Eliot as an artist is the most interesting of all the modern poets of decadence. *The Waste Land* is probably the greatest separate poem of modern decadence, a sort of imitative monument of the world's spiritual chaos and the futility of our material " progress ". He began in simpler poems to voice the disillusionment and nostalgia, and to apply a satirical criticism, devastating in its effects, upon social materialism. We find again the sardonic effect of a conventional hymn-tune accompanying this ironic bitterness, but with a power of expression beyond Siegfried Sassoon or Osbert Sitwell, in " Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar ". The frequent reminiscence of a pre-existent and parallel world of

¹ " Some Notes on My Own Poetry " in *Ten Contemporaries*, edited by John Gawsworth (1932).

² **James** Huneker.

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beauty belonging to previous creations of the poets is quite characteristic of the true decadent poetry :

But this or such was Bleistein's way :
A saggy bending of the knees
And elbows, with the palms turned out,
Chicago Semite Viennese.

A lustreless protrusive eye
Stares from the protozoic slime
At a perspective of Canaletto.
The smoky candle end of time
Declines. On the Rialto once.
The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.
Money in furs. The boatman smiles,
Princess Volupine extends
A meagre, blue-nailed, phthisic hand
To climb the waterstair. Lights, lights,
She entertains Sir Ferdinand

Klein. Who clipped the lion's wings
And flea'd his rump and pared his claws ?
Thought Burbank, meditating on
Time's ruin, and the seven laws.

Eliot's sensitive command of rhythm and finely used diction enables him to accomplish amazing things in this superficially cynical mood. His early "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"¹ not only conveys the weirdest suggestions of the music of an excited Epithalamium, but lines and images continually astonish the imagination into ecstatic recognition, notwithstanding the inevitable sneer or cynical repudiation of external beauty. This beauty of perception is always, as the evening "spread out against the sky"

Like a patient etherized upon a table

in the cynical desperation of the poetry. Eliot does not renounce any of the traditional resources of figurative

¹All these poems can most conveniently be read in his *Poems, 1909-1925*.

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language : he bends them to his destructive purpose. Any reader can recognize the poetic perceptions that run through the ironic clowning in the best of the brief poems. The agony, of the clowning :

For I have known them all already, known them all :
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons ;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room,

could not be felt but for the unsubdued realization of what lies beyond the futility. The cynicism and inconsequence of ideas in the poems, however, gradually becomes monotonous before the synthesis of the poet's vision is made in *The Waste Land* (1922). This is because too many of the shorter pieces lack the vision which redeems the cynicism. Several of them, like " A Cooking Egg ", would not have been missed as contributions to this poet's testament if omitted from the collection, and it is not evident why, except to parade his undeniable cleverness, he should have included some pieces in French that have the rhythm of English verse. Up to *The Waste Land* Eliot's verse is a more exhausting negation of faith than the gloomy nobility of James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*. But the vitality in *The Waste Land*, the effectiveness of its satirical clowning, is derived from its contrast of that not yet forgotten timeless beauty of reality which pre-exists and may ultimately submerge the plangent futility of a modern consciousness. Not that the poet ever affirms any vision other than that of the complete futility of life, but that, as we noted in some of his earlier poems, his creative mind is compelled to admit continually an ecstasy of perception which by its very nature refutes the denial of life. The process is akin to much pseudo-mystical poetry inspired by a contemplation of death as corruption. The intensity of the contemplation creates or reveals that " dazzling dark-

ness " which is the shadow of reality. The mood of the poet of " The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock ", who suddenly reflected :

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas

remains, when all is said, the personal argument of *The Waste Land*, which roams over a wide field of literature, history and anthropology to point the moral of modern futility and the poet's arid experience of the night of the soul. Though there are many passages where the sheer triumphs of language must excite the reader's mind in any case, a little of the force of the poem as a sustained argument will be lost without an attention to the numerous Notes supplied by the poet and a reading of Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance*. " Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem ", the poet tells us, were suggested by this book. The Notes are too numerous and varied for summary here, but the reader of James Joyce's *Ulysses* which is planned on the pattern of the narrative in Homer's epic may realize how acquaintance with *From Ritual to Romance* assists the intellectual appreciation of the construction and ideal drama of *The Waste Land*. The poem is a veritable *tour deforce* of decadence, attaining as complete an expression of the mood of nescience as the poet could command, and exploiting throughout the suggestiveness of literary echoes. The disjointed sequences of ideas on the surface, and the constant reunions of such sequences, much as melodic themes in a fugue separate, die out, return and reunite, is an extreme development of the literary imitation of simultaneity, a sort of bird's-eye view of the contents of the mind at a given moment. The simple and powerful poem, " The Hollow Men ", which concludes the volume of *Poems, 1909-1925* is the same in mood and method as *The Waste Land*, but in the uncomplicated unity of the single

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theme it can be more readily experienced by the reader. It is too, more evidently, one of the poems of death, for the hollow men who sing are the embodiment of the soul's aridity. The conclusion of this poem, that thrills with horror, is only a variation on the theme of the longer poem:

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Characteristic of this decadent poetry of despair is the reminiscence of childish nursery rhyme "Here we go round the prickly pear", and the equally evident imitation of a chanted liturgy in church. The echoes gathered by the poet from far and near for their evocative associations (which are frequently too erudite to be shared by many readers) may be compared with the poetic furniture used by other poets to create the *paradis artificiel*, for ultimately this poetry of negation achieves a creative affirmation. The intensity of the vision of *The Waste Land* proves a religious motive in the poet's imagination. So deep a despair implies the counterbalancing faith that knows an alternative spiritual home, and it does not seem to be an unwarranted assumption that the poet has passed beyond the phase which is strictly to be described as decadent to a more explicit affirmation. The publication of the *Poems* has been followed by some separate pieces, notably *Ash Wednesday*, *The Journey of the Magi*, *A Song for Simeon*, *Marina*, and *Animula*, in which the ceremonious clowning of *The Hollow Men* seems to relax something of its frenzy and admit a religious contemplation. But excepting only the beautiful diction of *Ash Wednesday*, the poet has given us nothing more as good as "The Hollow Men" and "The Waste Land", and there seems to be a danger of his style developing into mere tricks. **That** of a liturgical repetition and chant, for instance, is used most unconvincingly in *Marina*, not only because of

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the want of necessity in the images selected to describe mortality, but in relation to the rest of the verse.

Obscurity, too, once it lacks emotional necessity, serves no purpose except to capture the admiration of those who prefer Mumbo Jumbo eclecticism to poetry. Not only *Marina* but *Animula* is a trivial rehash of an idea in *The Waste Land*, and it would be regarded as trivial and confused in thought if the poet had not stuck to his device of mixing commonplace disconnected statements and remote allusions. The internal shapelessness of the piece (it really is no poem) may be sufficiently indicated by the contrast of

Issues from the hand of God, the simple soul
To a flat world of changing lights and noise . . .

which opens the first half, and the metaphysically very different

Issues from the hand of time the simple soul

which precedes the second half of the argument and parallels the earlier phrase by an unsatisfactory personification. In a poem which professes to sum up the destiny of an individual soul, we expect more discrimination between the metaphysical sense of words like " God " and " time ", but this unexpected obtuseness in so intellectual a poet will be found characteristic. As a thinker Eliot is as unsubtle as Tennyson, which is perhaps why he similarly became the voice of his age. It is certainly the reason why he is able to maintain his cynical irony so continuously in *The Waste Land*, otherwise the vistas to imagination opened up by the diverse objects of his scholarly treasure-trove would have broken up the Hamlet-mood. (By **the** way, in case admirers of this poet mistake the comparison with Tennyson for an injustice to Eliot, let us remember that Shakespeare's Hamlet is very small beer as a thinker. Everything depends upon intensity of mood and the verbal power of expression. *The Waste Land* is a modern *Hamlet*.)

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The mood of Laforgue and Eliot receives a new and pungent expression in the powerful and often witty verse of Edgell Rickword, whose *Invocations to Angels and The Happy New Tear* (1928) may be said to mark the culmination of the most intensely decadent period in the whole of English poetry. The similarity of background can be seen in "Necropolis" :

" I love you . . . love you . . . love you," she.
Like the inscription on a tomb
her words eat into me,
buried in the sodden gloom
of Earths November Sunday-afternoon.

Decayed fertility now wraps me close
in darkness of no-more-desire,
in damp and fusty sheets of fallen rose
rust-edged at touch of fire
burnt out, and staring coldly as the moon.

The obsession with the futility of love as a natural or sexual force has always been characteristic of decadent poetry. It has been a favourite theme of the French poets since Baudelaire. For a moment Edith Sitwell recognizes it in her prose introduction to *Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet*, where she remarks of that revival of primitive art, " Life is a perpetual Can-can ", and Eliot, in a late poem, makes his symbolic Sweeney say—it is a text on *The Waste Land*—that life consists of:

Birth, copulation and death.
That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all,
Birth, copulation, and death.

The theme recurs constantly in Rickword's often profound poems, and it is most plainly uttered in " Farewell to Fancy " :

The nubile daughters now escape
to any waste or open plot
where flowers or sweethearts may be got
for divination or feigned rape.

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On building sites by tall stark poles
sweetly their maiden languor droops.
O dandelions and rusty hoops
and low foundations in their souls !

This is the rock on which we build,
poets and pierrots, our True Church ;
the Founder blessing our long search
a boy with amorous mischief rilled.

Let us abjure the stately creeds,
Love's plangent groves and choristers,
with all that Eloquence confers
upon our elemental needs.

We will go with them by the tram
beyond the city's lamps, and sit
with such emotions as befit
those born between the *Plough* and *Ram*.

A much more significant expression is in the brilliant "Theme for *The Pseudo Faustus*" which does something that Sacheverell Sitwell did not quite succeed in doing with his long "Dr. Donne and Gargantua". The meaning of the poem is contained in the Cassandra-like prophecy of the conclusion, describing the fate of "the demonstrable world" as it appears to the modern pessimist:

Damned by foreknowledge, in the crowded hall
the tedious programme promises no end,
heaping fresh items in successive pain,
whirlpools and cataracts of scathing sound,
the sores and running ulcers that consume
the womb of silence and night's patient breast,
unless new instruments evoke release ;

the sabotage of all the delicate tools,
the swift insidious wheels, the quiet machines
where the cramped mind weaves endless slave designs ;

the massacre of all the innocent shapes
with tendril-clinging arms and pulpy lips,
bastards of hand-grips, spawn of self-distrust;
the desecration of ideal desire ;

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the violation of the veiled design ;
repudiation and the doom of pride,
the death-dance on the tight-rope of the will
taut over chaos crammed with serried masks ;

naked, and balanced on the brooding void.

A contrast with the literary devices of T. S. Eliot is the revival of metaphysical conceits which are often used by Rickword, but are seen to be essential for the expression of complicated feelings in Alan Porter's poetry. His volume, *The Signature of Pain and Other Poems* (1930), is probably a more significant pointer to the best poetry that the next generation is preparing than the already exhausted influence of *The Waste Land*. Porter, like Rickword, is a saturnine dreamer. He has at times, besides using the Shakespearean style of soliloquy, openly adopted the devices of our so-called "metaphysical" poets of the seventeenth century, so that one can hardly help recalling Donne. Although the poet's utterance appears to suffer the restriction of a self-consciousness almost as ubiquitous as Eliot's, much of the contents of *The Signature of Pain* can scarcely be regarded as a contribution to the post-war literary decadence, for the egocentric intensity of cynical denial too frequently gives place to the simple wisdom which ends "Love in Constancy" :

After much argument and pain
He finds at last the enigma plain.
 Love's honour is no whim,
 Love lies with him.
He makes himself, by prayer and fasting,
Constant : and love is everlasting.

and the conclusion of "Valediction" :

Heart, that the fine and crystal splinter
Pierced with the flush and throb of cold
Till the whole brilliant world was winter,
And shrank, and darkened, and was old,

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Shine with new warmth ! and, like the sun,
Who blesses the black twisted trees,
Who comforts all he looks upon
And gives the barren soil increase,
Remember not the *more and less*,
Better and worse, the *yours and mine* :
Shine out with such unthriftiness
That all things by reflection shine.

In the section of the book that is entitled, somewhat significantly, "Intellect and Fantasy", the poet sometimes reminds us of Ronald Ross in the mood of *Fables and Satires*. "The Transit of Joy" is a rather sarcastic fable, "The River" playfully cynical, "Herodotean Phoenix : Father and Son" is a piece of sentimental archaism. The poet's readiness to find the imaginative value of trifles, as of cosmic arguments, leads to surprising asides, as in "Bedlam Bill", a half-playful, half-satirical picture of idiocy. Because Bill's favourite pastime was throwing pennies into the pond until he had exhausted his mother's small legacy, the poet sees unworldly poetry in the idiot, and as Bill watches, we watch the pond, to some effect :

He loves to watch the curving spin
And hear the ponderous dropping-in :
Brown as a leaf the penny falls
But turns to gold with tiny balls
Of air, that, hating water, slip
From George's nose or underiip.
They shoulder off the mud and rise
Like pious Lamas to the skies,
Where they shall once again be free
And lose short-lived identity.
But, moment-while in prison pent
By walls of rainbow filament,
They tread the water, cross and glum,
Till the releasing burst is come.
Two frogs, as fat as alderman,
Who never thought to stir again,
So sweet it was to ponder there
With broad, incomprehensive stare,

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Stand now on no punctilio
But hurry-scurry scared below.
The flustered waterspider flees
In quaint rectangularities.
Vain every geometric whim !
The widening ripple snatches him :
He stands awhile, precarious,
Above this water Caucasus ;
Then, straddling desperately wide,
Flops down upon the further side.
Imperturbably the ring
Rides cocksure over everything ;
Till close the duckweed grapples it
And, pressing down those infinite
Pale shields, in tooth of all its pride
Compels it sobbing to subside.

Porter's interesting confession of the creative simplicity he has reached by way of intellectual sophistication, occurs in " The Cosmopolitan : To Edith Sitwell " :

Learn, all Time's vagrants, where to look,
And more, learn what to see—
Hard ground in a pale drudging brook,
Light in the substance of a tree.

Earth was ashen, mind a mist,
And mist the only day :
In every song a satirist,
Man but a motionable clay.

Almost I had put out these eyes,
The sun's own fury failed.
Slayer of childhood, father of lies,
Reason babbled and prevailed.

From this dark pride and stubborn dearth
Slowly my self was freed ;
John Clare uncovered infinite worth
In a cold worm, a common weed.

The minute wealth of nature there
With a new symbol smiles.
You, Edith, my interpreter,
Reveal the lost unfabled isles.

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Now the dew falls in beads of gold,
In clear blue stone the rain.
Wind and colour, heat and cold,
Are flesh, no phantom of the brain.

I travel through my native woods
And laugh all day to mark
The squirrel sputter in cross moods,
Or hear the happy woodlark.

Hard by grows many an Indian flower,
Cedar, and upas ;
Heraldic lions, hour by hour,
Trample down the yellow grass . . .

the conclusion being that though "sight dazzle and words fail", Beauty will be known by whoever can

Hold fast by every traveller's tale,
The world's true cosmopolitan.

As if to emphasize his escape from the dead-end of nescience, there are several satirical poems in *The Signature of Pain*, for his carefully carved verse shows that a quiet manner is not incompatible with fierceness. Usually there is not much sarcasm in these pieces, but the half-veiled eyes of an ironic humour meet ours. When, however, the poet frankly hits out, as he does in the piece entitled "The Dean"—

("how Fleet street winks, and sneaks him into fame!")

the consequences to the object of his detestation are serious.

To less intellectual poets whose imagination requires always the unhampered affirmation of faith, the extremely unsophisticated modern decadence has had a stifling effect, and the typical English reaction is voiced by Herbert Palmer in his entertaining poetic diatribe, *Cinder Thursday* (1931). The publishers⁵ description of this *rara avis* in the English book world is so good that we may be excused for suspecting the poet to have written

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it for them. The object of *Cinder Thursday*, we are told, is " by means of parody, satire, mockery and passion, and even by direct statement to point out some of the most alarming features of present-day disintegration both in literature and life."⁵⁵ One also detects a puckish smile on the lips of the poet, in the concluding statement that " it is called *Cinder Thursday*, because in point of time, it follows Ash Wednesday, and also because when coal ashes have been shaken through the sieve there generally remain a few cinders—which, cast upon the fire, add a new glow to the burning coal and wood ".

Now it must be said that most of the *Cinder Thursday* parodies are failures because they contrast with the superior style and rhythmical skill of Eliot, and where Eliot is deliberately obscure (which often saves the poetry from being slightly ridiculous in its sustained wailing) Palmer tries to parody the manner in a series of bald statements. In fact, the failure is so gross at times that it serves only to emphasize the sincerity and intensity of vision which made Eliot's *Waste Land* so moving and so depressing. Is this not our reaction on reading " The Sahara (with apologies to T. S. Eliot) " :

The wilderness shall blossom as a rose,
But with cactus.
Look backwards and forwards into the air.

" Sir, Sir, Oh Sir,
You are quiet in your chair.
Did you not hear me as I reached the highest stair ?
I have left my shopping parcel,
I have left my combinations,
I left them on your chair
When I came to ask some questions.
For certes you are learned, and curiously wise."

And her blue eyes rilled with tears as she stood before him there.
But shrugging his shoulders he chucked her under the chin,
And said rather cynically,
" Little Muse, Little Muse, I have need of your parcel.

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Your parcel contains infinite treasure in a narrow space ;
Your combinations . . ." The wind whistled and the hinges of
the door creaked,
And the tears ran swiftly down her pale and frightened cheeks,
" Not that, oh not that !
What will people think and say ?
I have never been so close to you as that."

And so on. Palmer himself in the succeeding piece is compelled to acknowledge his failure, because after referring to the faults of grammar and of affectations of erudition in *The Waste Land* and declaring it is

A hoax,
The most stupendous literary hoax since Adam,

he then admits precisely what in the preceding pages I have tried to explain as well as admit :

Yet in some abysmal way creative
Even in its disintegration,
Touched with the finger-nail of Donne
And the knuckle bones of Dante and Ezekiel,
Yet nearly all awry,
Deliberately and intuitively awry.
And wired.
God ! What a mousetrap !

The real Palmer finds expression in the sane and gorgeous nonsense of the final piece, " Dynamite and Lavender ", a most satisfactory testament of revolt by the kind of poet who has been unable to ignore the decadence, but can only be injured by it.

XI

NATURE POETRY

The beginnings of English nature poetry—Flower poems—De Tab ley—Dixon—Meredith—Bridges—Descriptive and visionary "nature poetry"—Francis Thompson—Abercrombie—John Freeman, Squire, Shanks and Company—Blundefi—Masefield—Gibson—Bernard Gilbert and other poets of rural life—Mary Coleridge—Osbert Sitwell—D. H. Lawrence.

THE blending of clearly-seen details with an ideal atmosphere which distinguished Pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry made an excellent medium for all that we customarily mean by the term "nature poetry". A somewhat vague "return to nature" was characteristic of the eighteenth-century romantic mood that preceded the Romantic Revival. Collins, an imaginative precursor of Blake, although prevented by contemporary literary fashion from expressing adequately his sense of "the shadowy tribes of Mind", was able to write in his "Ode to Evening" one of our best "nature poems", and one which, except for Blake's early lyrics, is unmatched by any other eighteenth-century poem of its kind for its subtle evocative quality. There has always been a great deal of verse describing sights and sounds of "nature", but even Wordsworth gave us in his verse only a small proportion of the genuine thing.

The true "nature poetry", which was not recognized as a distinct *genre* until Wordsworth became famous, may be said to start with Collins and Blake and perhaps Gray.

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Many poets, notably Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton among others, must be credited with drawing memorable imagery from Nature's vast reservoir of impressions, but their use of it is subsidiary to other purposes, and generally intended rather as decoration than interpretation, though Shakespeare does imaginatively blend "nature" and the human heart of his dramas. Before the eighteenth century, apart from the somewhat accidental use of natural imagery, the nearest approach to what we now think of as nature poetry was inspired by the love of gardens and interest in gardening. Marvell's famous poem is remarkable because the garden in his mind assumed a symbolic quality. The description of wild scenery remained the province of "Gothic" romance, a device for suggesting horror, until Walter Scott's verse and the wonderfully-faked Gaelic atmosphere of James Macpherson's Ossianic poems prepared a place in the public mind for the full development of nature poetry. The happy reinforcement of the Wordsworthian poetry with that of Keats and Shelley almost completed the process, which still needed Tennyson's influential and skilful addition of the classical feeling of the pastoral eclogue. In our own day the poetry of gardening has been revived, notably by Sacheverell Sitwell.

The poets of the past fifty years, drawing upon all that rich legacy, have gathered a big harvest of nature poetry, more varied and extensive perhaps than any other *genre*. A sign of the Pre-Raphaelite quality in the best of this modern nature poetry may be seen in the striking fact that good minor poets who failed in other directions usually succeeded if only spasmodically in "nature poetry". They may have been directly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, as was Canon Dixon, or by the Pre-Raphaelite Romantic sources, like Lord de Tabley, who brought to his admiration of Keats an individual and quite exceptional knowledge as well as love of nature.

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He does not intrude his study of botany, but the vivid accuracy of his descriptions of general effects as well as of details owe a lot to this discipline. Although De Tabley lacked the verbal resource of Tennyson, he is often as memorable as Tennyson whether describing the sky's

Avenues of the marmoreal dawn,

the sea as

The great white water-garland of the world

or the commoner appearances of flowers. English poetry is exceptionally happy in the poems or passages of poems inspired by a particular flower, and the almost forgotten De Tabley in this vein earns a secure place in that anthology as the poet of the tulip :

A giant tulip head and two pale leaves
Grew in the midmost of her chamber there,
A flaunting bloom, naked and undivine,
Rigid and bare,
Gaunt as a tawny bond-girl born to shame
With freckled cheeks and splotched side serpentine,
A gypsy among flowers,
Unmeet for bed or bowers
Virginal, where pure-handed damsels sleep. . . .

In his notable "Ode to Pan" (*Poems, Dramatic and Lyrical*, 1893) De Tabley brings, as only Swinburne did among his contemporaries, into English nature poetry the Greek sense of divinity. The Ode opens with the following passage :

The daedal and delightful earth,
Who may declare the secret of her birth ?

In wonder and the mist of days,
Between grey heaven and glancing main,
The ancient powers in mystic ways,
They bound her with a giant chain.

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So that she always might remain
Term to the wasted stars, eye to the risen rays.
They set around her, as a raiment, sea,
And vested her about with shining cloud,
That softened all its domes continually,
As to a music, when the wind grew loud.
They ringed the giant mountains firm as death ;
Flake after flake upon them came the snows,
Till spring was warming underneath
Their hoarded silence into vernal glows.
How then it snapt like a chain from its sleeping,
Fountain on fountain, with sound thro' the hills
Trembling, exuberant, gleaming and leaping,
Wrestle and trouble of down-going rills.
The shivering forests hearkened, and they cried
To the warm vernal current in delight,—
' Our tendril roots are cold, our branches dried
Sweetest child of the hill, give us wave warm as light ;
Lap and bathe, drench us thro' down our dry torrent seams
With coiling enormous sweet limitless streams ' . . .

And later the eloquent lines on Pan :

Pan is no cloudy ruler in dim haze,
No king of air-belts delicate afar,
But in the ripening slips and tangled ways
Of the blue cork-woods where the goat-herds are.
And we may find him by the bulrush pits,
Where the hot oxen chin-deep soaken lie ;
Or in the mulberry orchard grass he sits
With milky kex and marrowy hemlocks nigh ;
Where silken floating under-darnels tie
And mat the herbage of the summer floor.
A god he is, this Pan, content to dwell
Among us, nor disdains the damp and hot wood-smell.
He is a god and more.

Here we are reminded again that De Tabley is also among the visionary singers of " nature " who are not content with describing appearances.

Dixon's characteristic note is a fearful questioning of Nature. In his *Odes and Eclogues* (1884) and his *Lyrical Poems* (1887) and *Last Poems* (1900) this attitude persists.

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It contrasts with the Wordsworthia
reminds us of Rossetti, as in the poem
included in the selected *Poems* ed

(1909) :

Touch me not with *i*
If the spell is in thir
Neither drag me by
Through the valley fu
I will sit with thee b
The arbour of the tro
Where from the spotted
Creeps the ivy's snaky

Hear the more poigna
" Ode on Advancing

Thou goest more an
To the silent things
Emptier thy weary
Far ruined, and the
That recedes and
The shore and the
Groan, they cry a
And call the eter
To cease them fo
From her cold ti
Night, that is e
Though older *h*

Go down upo
The breakers
The spit ups
Where'er th'
Their sounc
That has ri
'Tis their s

Far-ruined
To thy c
And on
'Tis the

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And then, oh thou,
e sinkest now,
thee than the cry of silence, the cry
re, of the bird to the sky.

racteristics of George Meredith
of his poetry of earth has been
ect may be noted. For all his
mind, we may often suspect a
Meredith's poetic philosophy of

ease ; it **drifts**.
ids **its** course,
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of De Tabley and Dixon owing to his more controllable intuition. His content with views and impressions allied with a beautifully adapted style and metrical skill make him a notable poet of landscape, a quality which has always been appreciated.¹ But that famous "Shorter Poem" describing the race of the piled clouds after a gale across the countryside until they at last pass over the cliffed edge of England and cross the Channel and

Dapple in France the fertile plains,

reminds one irresistibly by its panorama of the effect of a bird's-eye view in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" as the poet describes the passing of the voice to the next valley and into a remote distance. Bridges' peculiar quality as a descriptive poet is responsible for the perfect success of the poem on the yellow sea poppy referred to in another context, as for the innumerable passages of pure pictorial description of the countryside. We do not ask from him profundities of interpretation: what he has to give us is a beautiful verbal texture and an always justly expressive rhythm for some of the most perfect description that has ever been put into English verse:

O bold majestic downs, smooth, fair and lonely ;
O still solitude, only matched in the skies ;
 Perilous in steep places,
 Soft in the level races,
Where sweeping in phantom silence the cloudland flies ;
With lovely undulation of fall and rise ;
 Entrenched with thickets thorned,
By delicate miniature dainty flowers adorned.

I climb your crown, and lo ! a sight surprising
Of sea in front uprising, steep and wide :
 And scattered ships ascending
 To heaven, lost in the blending

¹ See *Robert Bridges, A Critical Study*, by F. E. Brett Young (1914).

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Of distant blues, where water and sky divide,
Urging their engines against wind and tide,
 And all so small and low
They seem to be wearily pointing the way they would go.
The accumulated murmur of soft plashing,
Of waves on rocks dashing and searching the sands,
 Takes my ear, in the veering
 Baffled wind as rearing
Upright at the cliff, to the gullies and rifts he stands ;
And his conquering surges scour out over the lands ;
 While again at the foot of the downs
He masses his strength to recover the topmost crowns. . . .

The distinction between the two main types of nature poetry, that which relies mainly upon impressions and word-painting and that which draws upon nature as another poetry does upon dream for symbolic imagery, is clear enough in the contrast between Robert Bridges and Francis Thompson. Thompson's intuition reaches for " the smouldering core of mystery " and his greatest nature poems (for such may his " Anthem of Earth " and even the " Orient Ode " be called) are full of metaphysical conceits. Nevertheless, no reader who is not prejudiced against the visionary interpretation of nature can deny Thompson's power in sheer description when he chooses to exert it. Minute details in his poetry are as infrequent as in Wordsworth's and the accuracy of his descriptive language is not an accuracy that depends upon a knowledge of botany or even an interest in flowers and trees as individual expressions of nature. You might say that his poem " The Poppy " is not really a poem of the scarlet field poppy at all, but in the end how avoid the admission that in a few lines Thompson grasps more of the imaginative essence of the flower than Bridges does for his sea poppy ? Who, when all is admitted, has put more of the rose into poetry than Thompson with a few lines of the splendid " Ode to the Setting Sun " :

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Who made the splendid rose
Saturate with purple glows
Cupped to the marge with beauty ; a perfume-press
Whence the wind vintages
Gushes of warmed fragrance richer far
Than all the flavorful ooze of Cyprus' vats ?
Lo, in yon gale which waves her green cymar,
With dusky cheeks burnt red
She sways her heavy head,
Drunk with the must of her own odorousness ;
While in a moted trouble the vexed gnats
Maze and vibrate, and tease the noontide hush.

If Thompson can hold his own with the word painters, he goes far beyond their province in his vision of a sacerdotal Nature, subservient to a supreme will. While his poetry hymns the holy mysteries and his mind takes Shelleyan flights passages of consummate description occur which entitle him also to the rank of a poet of landscape and skyscape, too. How few among the English poets of nature can equal such description as this (the opening of " Contemplation ") :

This morning saw I, fled the shower,
The earth reclining in a lull of power :
The heavens, pursuing not their path,
Lay stretched out naked after bath,
Or so it seemed ; field, water, tree, were still,
Nor was there any purpose on the calm-browed hill.

The hill, which sometimes visibly is
Wrought with unresting energies,
Looked idly ; from the musing wood,
And every rock, a life renewed
Exhaled like an unconscious thought
When poets, dreaming unperplexed,
Dream that they dream of nought.
Nature one hour appears a thing unsexed,
Or to such serene balance brought
That her twin natures cease their sweet alarms,
And sleep in one another's arms.
The sun with resting pulses seems to brood,
And slacken its command upon my unurged blood.

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No matter how "metaphysical" the idea, his use of imagery from nature is always expressive, let it be but to clothe evanescent shapes in the mind

Whose robes are fluent crystal, crocus-hued,
Whose wings are wind a-fire, whose mantles wrought
From spray that falling rainbows shake to air.

Lascelles Abercrombie, another of the eloquent modern poets, is apt to become rhetorical in describing nature, and his metaphysical bent rarely allows him to see the object while seeing through it, so to speak, as Francis Thompson does, but when he is successful he is very good, as in "Ryton Firs".

Rhetoric with less urgent thought than Abercrombie's often marks the verse of John Freeman, a poet who too often seems to be using flowers and trees as excuses for practising his carefully-wrought verse, and though he asserted :

All that I was I am,
And the old childish joy now lives in me
At sight of a green field or a green tree,¹

rarely are we allowed to share his experience in the innumerable lines of verse that Freeman published, and his rare successes, which are lovely in thought and expression, are the briefer poems of love and regret.

Edmund Blunden (1896-) is widely known as a nature poet, and indeed his verse has been mainly devoted to rural scenes. According to Mr. Squire, Blunden's great merit, or one of the rather numerous merits which have been discovered by a friendly coterie of reviewers, is "a relish for Englishry". In a little book on *Nature in English Literature*² (1929) Edmund Blunden revealed his attitude to this subject by expressing admiration of those unpoetic writers on husbandry who stick

¹ "All that I was I am" : *Poems Old and New* (1920).

² A very poor essay indeed on so rich a subject.

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to facts, and scorn of those who readily turn a natural fact into a mystical symbol. Take this passage as typical:

I cannot for instance deceive myself that the surface of a work like " Pennant's History of Quadrupeds " (1781) is not dry and corrugated. But beneath it there is a regard for Nature's family which Pennant might claim to be much more genuine a communion with the spirit of the universe than the more ambitious reveries of those who saw men as trees walking. There is none of the mystic, or acting-mystic, in his description of animals' bodies and ways of life, but there is a most satisfying sense that the better they are known the better it must be for everybody.

Does this not leave a feeling that Blunden has spent all his respect upon the worthy natural historian and forgotten or refused to grant the greater importance of the mystic and poet? After all, it is no mean thing to be able to express a vision of men as trees and to see, with Blake, in a thistle by the path an angry old man. The only expression of dislike in the foregoing passage with which one can readily agree is " acting mystic ", for sham anything is not only of little worth but it stands in the way of recognition of real things. When the half-gods go, the gods appear. Blunden's attitude towards the poetry of Nature was probably shaped by his impatience with pseudo-mystical imagery. But it also shows an intellectual readiness to defend a weakness in much of his own poetry.

The volume of his *Poems* (1914-1930) is a collection which does full justice to the work which made him known to the British public as a " nature poet " and it is in much of the verse of these " English Scenes " that he is at his worst. You feel that he is at times " acting nature " as much as any poet could " act mystic ". One consequence of this weakening of his grasp on reality while playing with details which he does not make significant is that the longer pieces are dull and monotonous.

The metrical skill which distinguishes his best poetry seems to fail, and often an easy sentimentality takes its place. And his language then is wordy and weak, too, for the use of metre and rhyme without sufficient depth of experience in the words is deadly to expression. Always a mild reflection on old scenes or a merely pleasant description of rural sights is more readable in prose. Instead of selecting a few specially weak lines here and there, I will quote the final section of " Old Homes ", which is a series of nostalgic recollections of the poet's native village :

Vision on vision blooms ; long may they bloom,
 Through years that bring the philosophic gloom,
 Sweetening sleep with its strange agonies racked,
 And shedding dew on every parching tract,
 In every pleasant place a virtue adding,
 A herb of grace to keep the will from madding :
 And, happiest village, still I turn to you,
 The alabaster box of spikenard you :
 To your knoll trees, your slow canal return
 In your kind farms or cottages sojourn ;
 Enjoy the whim that on your church tower set
 The lead cowl like a Turkish minaret ;
 Beat all your bounds, record each kiln and shed,
 And watch the blue mists on each calm close spread.
 My day still breaks beyond your poplared East
 And in your pastoral still my life has rest.

The root of the trouble with this appears to be that the poet is stuffing out with familiar imagery a sentiment that he has failed to express. The above is only about a tenth of the piece, and the recollections just ramble on like a pleasant little prose essay up to this painfully forced conclusion, in which there is no indication of a true poet's mind. Words with tremendous associational value, like " vision " are misused, and the reference to " philosophic gloom " is a representative example of the poet " acting simple ", for a reading of his poetry shows him as a poet who absolutely *must* think about experience. In his

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mind there may have been a passionate feeling, but it was overwhelmed by all this pretty stock scenery. The third line of the above quotation refers to the mental agonies of the poet turned soldier in the War, and what those agonies were no reader of his book *Undertones of War*, needs to be reminded.

This *Poems* includes some war poems in the first section, and the long third section is entitled " War : Impacts and Delayed Actions ", a reminder that the poet grew up spiritually in the valley of the shadow, and his fine war poems are usually a mixture of nightmare recollection and ironic contemplation. The ironic effect is often left implicit in a contrast between brutal cruelties and some shining beauty of nature or human nature. The pungent little autobiographical war poems describe the experiences which compel the poet to look below appearances and to grope for a more durable foothold upon life. He has to reverse many standards of value. The nightmarish contrast of the full-blossomed summer in a peaceful village at home and the devil's shambles on the war front, at first can only be regarded as an agony. In " The Troubled Spirit " the poet looks at the poignant peace at evening around the village, and realizes that the summer has come and half gone, and he has come to it like a ghost to find it but a rumour in the past. The raptures of the maturing year which always thrilled him stage by stage, have throbbled here with a joy not his.

**So high flamed life when death was gesturing by,
So faint burns now.**

God on His ancient throne betrays some weariness " while Time smiles to himself ". That is the first, inconclusive despair of the poet become contemplative. But his very love of nature brings glimmerings of light to lead him out of the nightmare, not to a detached mood

but to a more self-possessed realization, in which he may wrestle with blind pain and fight still for the living loveliness yet undestroyed by mankind. There is a poem called "War Autobiography: Written in Illness", in which he recalls "stubborn joys that blossomed on" through every desolation. Sunny hours "even in shattered Festubert", and the light breaking into a black wood foul with lyddite vapour, in which he plucked a rose—such memories brought with them the rebirth of the child, until the increasing rage of the war dominated his mind and dulled it to weary despair again. But the experience was another stage on his path, and gradually the symbolism of childhood matures, and this young soldier, forced into the disillusionments of age, fights back with the poet's weapon, the verbal instrument which in his hands begins to accomplish miracles. And as his perception is clarified and deepened, the later poems are richer in content as well as more convincing reflections of Nature. The change is at first unwelcome, intimidating. In the section of the book entitled "Experience and Soliloquy" is a brief poem eloquent of his fear:

Blest is the man that sees and hears
 The shuttles of the eternal weaver,
 And shrieks not, sobs not savage tears,
 Burns not with fever.
 He is a tree that's finely planted
 Where a plunging cataract blanches,
 Spreading there as though enchanted
 His lucky branches. . . .

But what if I, whose different thews
 Scarce bear the dawning light unwincing,
 Discovered in some curious clues
 Vision commencing?
 I should be driftwood, moon and sun
 In gulping, groaning water-gorges
 Sucked down, shot high, and snatched and spun
 Through timeless orgies.

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Because he is still struggling there towards single-mindedness, or perhaps we should say whole-heartedness, the language lacks the final justice and power of his best later work. You feel that he so badly wanted to state the argument, that the emphasis on many of the important words is misplaced. For instance, a more accomplished poem on the same theme, instead of stressing in the third and fourth lines all the helpless violence that the true seer avoids would dwell upon the seer's undismayed perception. For the contrast with this is given in the last four lines of the poem.

In the final section of *Poems* there is a piece inspired by a new edition of that superb poem of mystical love, Christopher Smart's "Song to David", and the last poem in his book shows how he has achieved an attitude of slightly sardonic questioning of life :

I saw the sunlit vale, and the pastoral fairy-tale ;
The sweet and bitter scent of the may drifted by ;
And never have I seen such a bright bewildering green,
 But it looked like a lie,
 Like a kindly-meant lie.

When gods are in dispute, one a Sidney, one a brute,
It would seem that human sense might not know, might not spy,
But though Nature smile and feign, where foul play has stabbed
 and slain
 There's a witness, an eye,
 Nor will charm blind that eye.

Nymph of the upland song, and the sparkling leafage young,
For your merciful desire with these charms to beguile,
For ever be adored ; muses yield you rich reward ;
 But you fail, though you smile—
 That other does not smile.

Perhaps still more representative of the new, mature Blunden, is a poem called "Dream Encounters", in which again simple metre is given a fresh twist into unexpected rhythms to aid the expression of a mystical knowledge. Ultimately, this incarnation of the immaterial in

a concrete form which rouses other minds to share his vision is the greatest task of the nature poet. All his detailed knowledge, gathered by loving observation of Nature is material potentially valuable in such a transmutation, and Edmund Blunden may yet fulfil that task.

If in countering the over-insistence on the poet's bucolic character there remains the suggestion that fine things are lacking from his poetry of rural life, I have unintentionally been unjust ; but these good things are too often bright fragments embedded in a longer piece. The shorter poems, and with short lines, usually are the more successful in this kind. Few readers would not be carried along with the poet in such things as " Byroad ", which opens :

Who knows not that sweet gloom in spring
That waiting gloom, that grave delight
 In coming bloom,
 In the first flight
Of bird, or thought, so wild of wing ?

Now when round hedgerow's earthy claws
And painted shells that blanch near by
 The dark grass swells
 And from the eye
In buds each old black nest withdraws.

I might well go to my old haunt
And find the green brook brushing down
 By celandine
 And sedges brown
And hoppers' houses grimed and gaunt.

John Masefield, the present Poet Laureate, has made some contributions to nature poetry, mostly in descriptive passages in the course of his narratives. We should be imposing too narrow a definition upon nature poetry if the description of the hunted fox in his *Reynard the Fox* could not be taken into account as readily as the vignettes of the rural scene which are woven into the account of

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the hunt. Nevertheless Masfield could scarcely be thought of as one of the nature poets since his master Chaucer could not.

Wilfred W. Gibson (1878-) might be regarded as a modern and a greater Crabbe in his many dramatic and narrative vignettes of poor people's lives. He is usually simple in expression and uses the most tangy idiomatic speech with complete justification. Much of this picturesque presentation of the commonplace and often ugly details of modern life, sometimes illuminated by penetrating gleams of the poet's vision, reminds us, especially when the background is bucolic instead of urban, of the mordant, powerful, but more prosaic village pictures of Bernard Gilbert (1882-) who creates an atmosphere not unlike that in the novels of T. F. Powys. There is of course a close kinship between Gibson's, Gilbert's, and several other modern poets' work and much imaginative prose fiction in novels, tales and sketches of rural life. But Gibson's weakness in purely lyrical nature poetry is not unfairly placed in relief against the occasional successes of Mary Coleridge, when they can both be caught singing of the same countryside—Northumberland. Gibson, as soon as he lets go of a narrative or dramatic argument, is very apt to reveal his imaginative poverty :

O curlew calling
As water falling
As water into water falling,
You brim the cool of my heart with joy !

O curlew crying
As keen wind sighing
As keen wind through the grey reeds sighing
You stab the heat of my heart with fear !

This very feeble pastiche of other poets' music can be compared with Mary Coleridge's immediately convincing interpretation of local atmosphere :

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Bring light and air—the thin and shining air
Of the North land,
The light that falls on tower and garden there,
Close to the gold sea strand.
O the grey island in the rainbow haze,
And the long thin spits of land,
The roughening pastures and the stony ways
And the golden flash of the sand.

It is noteworthy that so many writers after Thomas Hardy, who are justly known as prose fictionists such as John Galsworthy, Eden Phillpotts, John Cowper Powys, A. E. Coppard, Osbert Sitwell, May Sinclair, Sheila Kaye-Smith, L. A. G. Strong, Martin Armstrong, Thomas Moulton and a dozen others have also written "nature poetry" of varying degrees of value—enough at least to prove that they possess some mental quality entitling them to the name of poet. The mere number of such poet fictionists and the total quantity of their work makes an adequate examination an embarrassing task perhaps better delayed until time has done some winnowing—a task at least that is beyond the scope of this survey. The most interesting and commonest feature of their work that leaps to the eye in looking at the foregoing list of names is the prevalence of rural background and characters. The poetic presentation of bucolic character has always been part of English nature poetry. Whether its tragic or humorous simplicities have the sombre cast of the vision of Hardy, Gilbert, and Gibson, or the witty humour of Osbert Sitwell, whose *England Reclaimed* makes a valuable addition to poetry of English life, and the occasionally gay profundity of F. W. Harvey, whose "Ducks" is one of the best humorous poems we possess, the rich garden pictures of Sacheverell Sitwell, the patient devotion of Blunden and Victoria Sackville-West, this poetry contains uncommonly rich material of classical humanity and racial sentiment.

Necessarily discursive though it is, this survey cannot

afford to pass over D. H. Lawrence's powerful and quite distinct contribution with but a bare reference. Lawrence is the truest nature poet of all. Both the appearances of nature, in bird, plant, insect, and beast, and the meaning for man of the biological processes which lead to the miracles of natural life, are essentially the material of his wide vision. In his philosophical-erotic poetry images from nature, especially of flowers and fruits, are part of his means of expression, and often are described in their essence with an effect of revelation, but in his *Collected Poems*, the separate sections entitled *Fruits, Trees, Flowers, Creatures, Reptiles, Birds, Animals*, are something unprecedented and may prove, in the hackneyed phrase, "epoch-making" for English poetry. Here is a range, an accuracy and an intensity of perception beyond any of the literary naturalists and the mere writers on husbandry, and unequalled by any of our modern poets who try to describe nature, using familiar appearances to illustrate emotions. No fragmentary quotation can be other than unjust, for these poems, in spite of an appearance of looseness in their freedom of verse and interludes of colloquial phrasing, are indivisible single experiences that are linked together by the poet's penetrating and creative vision of the biological world, not of the laboratory but of the primitive wild.

XII

TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The prosody of Hopkins—Native English rhythm—Ezra Pound—"Free-verse" and the Imagist ideal—Whitman—Arnold—Henley—"H. D."—D. H. Lawrence—Narrative poetry—Prosaicism—James Thomson, Davidson, Patmore—Rossetti—Swinburne—Morris—Masefield—Poetic Drama—Earlier failures—Teats and Synge and Bottomley—Stephen Phillips and Ronald Ross—Some new narrative poems—Allied to much prose fiction.

THE two poets who have made the most interesting and probably in the long run the most influential technical innovations during the past half-century are Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ezra Pound. The influence of Hopkins has scarcely been felt yet because his collected *Poems* were not published until 1918. His Editor, the late Poet Laureate, had given to anthologies a few specimens of his early work, but this did not indicate the importance of the poet to us. This was in his bold and successful practice of what he called Sprung Rhythm, as a recognized device to be aimed at deliberately as the masters of English verse like Milton had aimed at, for example, metrical counterpoint, by displacements of stress. The new terms used by Hopkins for different kinds of "feet" and for the rhythmical effect of which he was merely the first modern poet to produce systematically may conceal from a hasty reader the simplicity of his prosody and the justice of the claims he makes for

it After asserting that sprung rhythm is the most natural of things, he tells us that it is found in :

(1) Common speech and written prose, when rhythm is perceived in them ;

(2) All but the most monotonously regular music, so that in the words of choruses and refrains and in songs written clearly to music it arises ;

(3) Nursery rhymes, weather saws, and so on ; because although " these may have been once made in running rhythm, the terminations having dropped off by the change of language, the stresses come together and so the rhythm is sprung "

(4) In common verse " when reversed or counterpointed for the same reason ".

By " running rhythm " the poet meant the customary rhythm of English verse since Chaucer, which consists of two basic feet, trochee and dactyl, the two often being mixed, but with one of them predominant. By " reversed feet " he means the usual shifting of stress from a metrically accented syllable to the metrically unaccented syllable. This kind of irregularity also is familiar, and has always been a necessary means of avoiding monotony. But if the reversal is repeated in two sequent feet, or is in some other way made so obvious that the ear cannot pass it over as a momentary irregularity, a

new or mounted rhythm is actually heard and at the same time that the mind naturally supplies the natural or standard foregoing rhythm . . . two rhythms are in some manner running at once, and we have something answerable to counterpoint in music, which is two or more strains of tune going on together, and this is Counterpoint Rhythm.

So far there is nothing that would be strange to a reader familiar with English poetry ; but instead of referring to Milton, " the great master of this kind of verse, and the choruses of *Samson Agonistes* " as Hopkins does, the verse of Coleridge's " Christabel " might be

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recommended to the reader as a much simpler example. Coleridge's use of accentual rhythm leads him naturally to this counterpoint, so that at moments when the rhythm has to suggest the excitement in the atmosphere, as with the striking of the castle clock, the fundamental trochaic measure is overlaid but not quite submerged by the faster dactylic produced by extra syllables that are too frequent to be heard as mere irregularities.

Hopkins's idea of sprung rhythm was a counterpoint rhythm so maintained that the original measure cannot assert itself. And in practice he measured it "by feet of one to four syllables, regularly, and for particular effects any number of weak or slack syllables may be used". In practice, this sprung rhythm increases the flexibility of the foot, which may consist of only the one stressed syllable or the one stressed syllable followed by three others plus "weak or slack syllables" irregularly appearing anywhere. This rhythm also involves a much freer running over of the line-ends and the stanzas than is customary in classical English verse. The opening eight lines of "The Loss of the *Eurydice*" look like two quatrains of a familiar pattern, but if they are read with the ear (as sprung rhythm requires) it will be found that the two quatrains are a rushing wave of verbal music, suited to the mood of the poem. The wave rises to a crest in the beginning of the second stanza, and thence curves back to the next of the serried billows that crowd forward :

The Eurydice—it concerned thee, O Lord :
Three hundred souls, O alas ! on board,
Some asleep unawakened, all un-
warned, eleven fathoms fallen

2

Where she foundered ! One stroke
Felled and furled them, the hearts of oak !
And flockbells off the aerial
Downs' forefalls beat to the burial.

3

For did she pride her, freighted fully, on
Bounden bales or a hoard of bullion ?—
Precious passing measure,
Lads and men her lade and treasure.

In the succeeding four stanzas note again the exciting effect of strange or strangely-used words, the loud alliterations, the sudden internal rhyme and the running over of lines into the next:

4

She had come from a cruise, training seamen—
Men, bold boys soon to be men :
Must it, worst weather,
Blast bole and bloom together ?

5

No Atlantic squall overwrought her
Or rearing billow of the Biscay water :
Home was hard at hand
And the blow bore from land.

6

And you were a liar, O blue March day.
Bright sun lanced fire in the heavenly bay ;
But what black Boreas wrecked her ? he
Game equipped, deadly-electric,

A beetling bald bright cloud through England
 Riding : there did storms not mingle ? and
 Hailropes hustle and grind their
 Heaven gravel ? wolf snow, worlds of it, wind there ?

My marking of stresses is only approximate because these often should be spread over more than one syllable, but in this comparatively simple example of the use of sprung rhythm is clearly heard the rhythm of the old English verse of *Pierce Ploughman*, which nearly all the academic prosodists have assumed was finally superseded by the Latin-French metres adapted to English verse along with rhyme by Chaucer and his successors.

In reading "The Loss of the *Eurydice*" it becomes evident that the division into a stanza form which the rhythm ignores is a justifiable device for suggesting the submerged common or running rhythm of the verse which consists of lines of three feet only. Any reader can accent the remaining stanzas on the pattern of the above.

Nothing could be simpler, for the ear can obey the natural speech rhythm far more safely than in reading common verse. The strong alliterations and the rhyming upon unwonted words or syllables are necessary adjuncts of sprung rhythm. The alliterative emphasis is an important factor in keeping the mind suspended over intervening syllables until it reaches the stress which marks another foot. Follows also a great increase in grammatical inversions, and extraordinarily long phrases consisting of a sequence of nouns or adjectives.

Both are of course liable to abuse, and Hopkins's occasionally difficult obscurities arise from his freedom in re-ordering customary grammatical relations, and I think that his excesses were due sometimes to the inevitable tendency of the verse to relapse from sprung rhythm into the ordinary running or mixed rhythm. His masterly

use of the sonnet form, which restricts the syllabic freedoms of his rhythm more than ordinary stanzas does not hide the fact that he was embarrassed sometimes by the insistent tendency of the trochaic (or iambic^x) measure to assert itself. Listen to the octet of "Duns Scotus's Oxford" and see if the movement does not seem to vacillate between the ordinary and the sprung rhythm. I have marked the stresses where the feet fall :

Towery city and branchy between towers ;

**Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmed, lake-charmed, rook-racked, river-
rounded ;**

**The dapple-eared lily below thee ; that country and town did
Once encounter in, here coped and poised powers ;**

Thou hast a base and brickish skirt there, sours

That neighbour-nature thy grey beauty is grounded

Best in ; graceless growth, thou hast confounded

Rural rural keeping—folk, flocks, and flowers.

But it may be not the least valuable quality of sprung rhythm to have this chameleonic propensity, so that in some measures its effect is rather to bring a new freedom to the common verse.

Note the effect upon a quatrain of four-foot lines which with slightly less emphatic displacements of stress would be an ordinary mixed rhythm (trochaic and dactylic, or iambic and anapaestic—whichever of the conventional principles of scansion is preferred). The first stanza of "Inversnaid", to an ear ignorant of the

¹ The common feet of English verse can be regarded as either trochaic and dactylic or iambic and anapaestic. It is merely a question of theory whether unstressed syllables at the beginning of a line can be ignored as part of the first foot, or must be admitted.

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possibilities of sprung rhythm, sounds as an almost too freely counterpointed iambic measure :

**This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home,**

though even the conventional but sensitive ear might detect such a lovely effect as the falling close of the fourth line, after the emphatic "Flutes". But the second stanza would be puzzling without a conscious awareness of sprung rhythm :

**A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-froth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.**

Actually the measure obeys the natural speech rhythm, so that the stanza form ought to be practically ignored in recitation. "Spring and Fall: to a Young Child" again suggests a very common trochaic couplet of four-foot lines, but this has to be abandoned, so it is better to begin the poem with the poet's sprung rhythm in mind ; the verse is so well composed that the stress-marks are hardly necessary, except to get the ear accustomed to listen for the speech rhythm (the stress-marks are inserted by the poet here, and the reader will find no difficulty in supplying the others) :

**Margaret, are you grieving
Over golden grove unleaving ?**

**Leaves, like the things of man, you
With yon fresh thoughts care for, can you ?**

**Ah ! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder**

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By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name :
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed :
It is the blight man was born for.
It is Margaret you mourn for. . . .

The fine accordance of mood and speech rhythm is due largely to the striking pauses and the gathering together now and again of the stresses on syllables that we should call spondees in common running rhythm. Evidently, then, there is no revolutionary change in our verse music here : what is revolutionary is the recognition of the principle of a rhythm hitherto used by accident, often while the poet was trying to imitate certain classical feet like the spondee (a single-syllable foot) and the various kinds of paeon (a four-syllable foot). But the new possibilities of metrical expressiveness opened up by sprung rhythm are more fully indicated elsewhere than in the comparatively simple examples so far quoted. The octet of the sonnet on " Duns Scotus's Oxford " was quoted as an example of an approach to the ordinary running rhythm, but in the beautiful sonnet entitled " The Windhover", sprung rhythm has full play and the consequence is, not the destruction of the sonnet form but an amazing amplification that would be impossible to classical prosody :

THE WINDHOVER : TO CHRIST OUR LORD
I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Fal-
con, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and
striding

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High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy ! then off, off forth on swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend :
the hurl and gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the
thing !

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle ! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a
billion

Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier !

No wonder of it : sheer plod makes plough down
sillion

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,

Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

The freedom of the rhythm owes its beauty of course not to the mere addition of syllables and ever-shifting stresses, but to the poet's mind working in a congenial medium. The rhythm is to be thought of as an additional opportunity for expression. Hopkins's peculiarities of diction are often such as nobody else could safely imitate, and occasionally injure his own work, but one frequent characteristic which seems surprisingly to have its fitting place in this verse that is built on speech rhythm is the undisguised prosaicism of phrases, usually idiomatic, which the poet finds useful to complete or to emphasize statements. Prose comes into its rightful due as the vehicle of ideas which may be necessary to the poet's evocation of a mood because it can be absorbed more easily into the flexible movement of sprung rhythm. " The Wreck of the *Deutschland* ", Hopkins's longest and greatest poem, contains the two extremes of his peculiar style—the prosaic and the intensely poetic. Compare these two stanzas :

On Saturday sailed from Bremen,

American-outward bound,

Take settler and seamen, tell men with women,

Two hundred souls in the round—

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O Father, not under thy feathers nor ever as guessing
The goal was a shoal, of a fourth the doom to be drowned :
Yet did the dark side of the bay of the blessing
Not vault them, the million of rounds of thy mercy not reeve even
them in ? . . .

For how to the heart's cheering
The down-dugged ground-hugged grey
Hovers off, the jay-blue heavens appearing
Of pied and peeled May !
Blue-beating and hoary-glow height; or night, still higher,
With belled fire and the moth-soft Milky Way,
What by your measure is the heaven of desire,
The treasure never eyesight got, nor was ever guessed what for the
hearing ?

The Catholic hagiology and Hopkins's somewhat metaphysical kind of mysticism, make the poem stranger to the majority of English readers than it might otherwise be, but there is nothing in it so intricate or so remote from common understanding that it might not be appreciated by sensitive readers who can enjoy the pseudo-mystical odes of Donne, Patmore and Francis Thompson. The poem must stand or fall, however, as an elegy, and it seems to me that as such, for its beauties of perception, sustained emotion, brilliant and exciting imagery, and sometimes perfectly marvellous music, to rank with the greatest English poems of its kind, with " Lycidas ", " Adonais ", " Thyrsis " and " Ave Atque Vale ". But the unaccustomed diction and endlessly surprising rhythm must be absorbed until they can be regarded as essentially belonging to the texture of the poem, or the cumulative effect will be dissipated in delight or bewilderment at details.

Exceptionally obvious in " The Wreck of the *Deutschland*" are the internal rhymes and assonances and the loud alliterations which in Hopkins's practice of it seem to be adjuncts of sprung rhythm. Many of the freak rhymes which he is encouraged to use owing to the

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dethronement of the line as the necessary verse unit are not essential to a successful employment of the rhythm, and may be accepted or condemned apart from it, as among the peculiarities of style which Hopkins apparently needed for his utterance. But it is easy to miss the aptness of such rhyming as that on the first syllable of "kingdom" in the previously quoted sonnet "The Windhover" owing to mental habit, for English rhymed poetry using the line as a unit has taught us to expect the rhymed syllable to complete at least a word, if not a phrase. There are other rhymes which only doggerel writers have dared use. We may take, for example, the rhyme "burn all" and "eternal", which Bridges specifically denounced. Consider again the effect produced by what appears to the eye as a familiar form of quatrain in "The loss of the *Eurydice*". The thirtieth and last stanza is :

**Not that hell knows redeeming,
But for souls sunk in seeming
Fresh, till doomfire burn all,
Prayer shall fetch pity eternal.**

When one reaches that by way of the sustained chanting of the poem, it could not occur spontaneously to the enchanted mind that the last rhyme was objectionable. Such an objection comes from the carping Satan of routine-cultured response. Would any reader with claims to sensitiveness wish to alter the equally musical displacements of syllabic stress in ballad and nursery rhymes, or even to the exchanges of rhymes for assonance, and irregular appearances of internal rhymes? If the poem is read through with the ear rather than the eye, the excitement of enhanced perception follows inevitably, and this is true of all Hopkins's mature poems.

In view of the claims made by the Imagists and other practitioners of *vers-libre*, the influence of Hopkins's

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theory and practice of sprung rhythm assumes an extra interest, that of a counterblast coming from the traditional side. Whereas *vers-libre* is an incomplete theory loosely adapted from the French, and intended to liberate poets from worn-out rhymes and poetic clichés by simply dropping overboard nearly all the accumulated treasures of English prosody, sprung rhythm has been implicit in all the raciest English poetry since Chaucer (it is often clearly heard in Skelton's verse) and before Chaucer it was the governing principle of Old English verse. Moreover, the assertion of natural speech rhythm which is the greatest virtue of English *vers-libre* as practised by Ezra Pound, Madox Ford, Sacheverell Sitwell, and other modern poets, is a necessary condition of poetically effective sprung rhythm. But, thanks to Hopkins, we know that sprung rhythm renders the discarding of rhyme, stanza, and other prosodic resources of poetry quite an unnecessary means to freshness of expression. There cannot be any doubt that the influence of Hopkins's *Poems* will reach far in the coming English poetry, and it will provide a rich alternative for those poets who do not find the adapted Latin measures satisfying. There will still be new poets to use the Latin forms, usually by study of French poetry, as Roy Campbell does with splendour in this generation. In looking round vainly for instances of modern poets putting Hopkins's theory into practise, I came across the curious instance of a poet who has sometimes used sprung rhythm as a principle of scansion. Edith Sitwell in her lighter and experimental poems, which show extraordinary metrical skill, provided an accidental confirmation of Hopkins's argument that sprung rhythm was quite natural to English verse, although it ceased to be employed deliberately by the poets in the sixteenth century. The verbal ingenuities of Edith Sitwell's *Fagade* and other pseudo-nonsense poems arose from experiments inspired by a study of

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music, and the rhythmical effects of nursery rhymes. The distinctive mingling of the primitive speech rhythm with the refinements of metrical craft is beautifully revealed in the musical accompaniment written by William Walton for the two gramophone records of *Fafade* made by the Decca company. Her short lines are often merely indications of rhymes that would appear in Hopkins's verse as internal rhymes emphasizing a stress :

Long steel grass—
The white soldiers pass—
The light is braying like an an.
See
The tall Spanish jade
With hair black as nightshade
Worn as a cockade !
Flee
Her eyes' gasconade
And her gowns* parade
(as stiff as a brigade)
Tee-hee !

This particular passage comes from a perfectly self-consistent piece which was a metrical experiment in pseudo-nonsense, by which words were made to reflect musical rhythms. A series of these experiments, entitled " *Facade* ", were spoken through a trumpet projected through a screen which concealed the speaker, and an astonishingly successful musical accompaniment was played. Among the critics who saw the point of this new entertainment was Mr. Ernest Newman, who wrote that although some of the metrical effects misfired with him when he read them " because I am not used to that sort of thing in the poetry I was brought up on "—" when the megaphone bellows the words at me with a sledge-hammer insistence on the *See*, *Flee*, *When* and *Sir*, I get the poet's idea, and, I must confess, enjoy it ".

The *When* and *Sir* referred to came from another piece

in *Fagade* (No. 27 of the series in *Collected Poems*) which begins ;

When
 Sir
 Beelzebub called for his syllabub in the hotel in Hell
 Where Proserpine first fell,
 Blue as the gendarmerie were the waves of the sea
 (Rocking and shocking the bar-maid).

The general reader may also be assisted by considering Walter de la Mare's " The Listeners " in which one hears in the light and crowded syllables of the metrical feet a movement that resembles sprung rhythm more than any ordinary rhythm of conventional verse, though the poem appears to have been composed on the principle of Coleridge's accentual rhythm, but with many feet of four or five syllables, a liberty that Coleridge did not venture to take.

When it is realized that the essential difference between sprung rhythm and the customary rhythm of English verse distinguishes much doggerel as well as old nursery rhymes from the verse of poetry, Hopkins's contribution will be seen as a recovery for poetry of valuable neglected elements of aesthetic pleasure. The unsophisticated writers of doggerel, when they are moved by some genuine feeling, instinctively exploit rhythmic devices that are native to the language. The point has been clearly made by Robert Graves in describing Old English verse that scans by stress-centres. In an essay that was intended to be a reply to R. C. Trevelyan's defence of orthodox verse in *Thanyris, or is there a Future for Poetry ?*^x Graves correctly countered Professor Trevelyan's insistence upon scanning by syllables, declaring that " this is true only of one of the main strands of English poetry ", It is true that this has been the principle of the cultured

¹ " The Future of English Poetry ", by Robert Graves *Fortnightly Review*, March, 1926.

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prosody imposed on English from the Continent and productive of a great deal of noble verse ; but the earlier native prosody which takes small stock of syllables, reckoning instead musically by the stress-centres of the line and the time interval between them, has never been driven from popular poetry and has frequently been adopted by poets of culture. The readiest examples of native prosody are to be found in nursery rhyme and country ballad :

Misty moisty was the morn,
Chilly was the weather ;
There I met an old man
Dressed all in leather,
Dressed all in leather
Against the wind and rain ;
It was how do you do ? and how do you do ?
And how do you do ? again.

There once was a man
So vain and so proud,
He walked on stilts
To be seen by the crowd,
Up above the chimney-pots
Tall as a mast,
And all the people ran about
Shouting till he passed.

At Wednesbury there was a cocking,
A match between Newton and Scroggin ;
The colliers and nailers left work
And all to old Spittle's went jogging :
To see this noble sport
Many noblemen resorted,
And though they had but little money,
Yet that little they freely sported.

Though the syllables in each case number most irregularly, nobody can deny that the pieces scan.

In the earliest English verse these stress-centres (for often the stress is not on one syllable but, as in *how do you do* and *how do you do*, spread over two or three) are marked clearly by alliteration.

Anglo-Saxon verse is all alliterative and stressed ; its syllables **are** uncounted. In the fourteenth century came William Langland, a contemporary of Chaucer's ; though the most famous of the middle English poets to revive the Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre, he was by no means the only one. In the sixteenth century John Skelton, one of the three or four outstanding English poets, though reducing the alliteration, adding rhyme and even using the lineal arrangement of rhyme-royal, wrote in the native style as often as the Continental. In the seventeenth century, Shakespeare, who had been dominated at his first visit to London by the Continental prosody in vogue at the theatres, gradually rediscovered his popular inheritance and developed the foppish blank verse that Surrey and Wyatt had brought from Italy into a metre in which both principles, native and Continental, interacted ; it was a metre capable at times of stress as turbulent as those in *Beowulf*, while at others it would still strut syllabically like a fine gentleman.

This is merely an amplification of Hopkins's argument in his " Preface " to his *Poems*, but it leaves the general reader with no more excuse for not understanding the principle involved.

Ezra Pound (1885-) is important, both as a poet and as the most influential revolutionary of this century. Not only did Pound give T. S. Eliot the cue for much of his own more consummate technique, but he was the only consistent upholder before the War of a new freedom for poets. He used classical and romantic metres as well as every form of unrhymed or half-rhymed free verse for moods romantic, classical, satirical, trivial. Readers unacquainted with the numerous small collections of Pound's work will find help in the hour of need from *Umbra : the Early Poems of Ezra Pound* (1920), which gives at the end an outline of his works, and *The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound* (1926). There is also an interesting *Selection* made and edited by T. S. Eliot, but it may be that his proper stature will not be seen until the series of " Cantos " which he has been composing for years, is completed and published as a whole.

At the end of *Umbra* appear five brief poems described

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as " The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme ", that remarkable scholar and critic who was killed in the War. They are all interesting but not least the fifth, which is written by Pound himself. It is " abbreviated from the conversation of Mr. T. E. H.". In free verse that might easily have had less value than prose, Pound has conveyed exactly the effect of a vivid talk, and more ; this is inexplicably a poem : it is one of the truest and most astonishing condensations of a civilian soldier's feelings in the trenches at night that could be found in all the verse and prose since published by soldiers.

The quality of brevity, with an easy-going manner, is Pound's virtue quite as much as that of his " free verse". Two poems in *Umbra* (they belonged to the original collection entitled *Persona*) are in both regular and irregular verse, and on account of their sardonic mood and ironic inconsequences are clearly forerunners of *The Waste Land*. As if to emphasize a relationship which other work of Pound's affirms, the poet gives us a page of " Notes " to " La Fraisine ", precisely in the manner of Eliot. He explains how his theme is suggested by a medieval legend about Miraut de Garrelas who " after the pains he bore a-loving Riels of Calidorn and that to none avail, ran mad in the forest". The references to several medieval sources are supplemented by a quotation from one, Janus of Basel, affirming that " when the soul is exhausted of fire " the spirit returns to primal nature and finds peace in the woods, becoming akin to faun and dryad. He then recalls that W. B. Yeats treated of such an elemental in his *Celtic Twilight*.

The scene of " La Fraisine " is " The Ash Wood of Malvern " and the hermit there recalls his lusty youth and his mature worldliness as a councillor, and declares that he has cast off the ways of men, and found a bride

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that was a tree by the still pool of Mar-nan-otha, who bids him praise

Naught but the wind that flutters in the leaves. . . .

He has wrapped folly and grief in an ellum leaf and left them under a stone.

And now men call me mad because I have thrown
All folly from me, putting it aside
To leave the old barren ways of men,
Because my bride
Is a pool of the wood, and
Though all men say I am mad
It is only that I am glad,—
Very glad, for my bride hath toward me a great love
That is sweeter than the love of women
That plague and burn and drive one away.

Aie-e ! 'Tis true that I am gay
Quite gay, for I have her alone here
And no man troubleth us.

Once when I was among the young men . . .
And they said I was quite strong, among the young men.
Once there was a woman . . .
. . . but I forget . . . she was . . .
. . . I hope she will not come again.

. . . I do not remember . . .
I think she hurt me once, but . . .
That was very long ago.

I do not like to remember things any more.

I like one little band of winds that blow
In the ash trees here :
For we are quite alone
Here 'mid the ash trees.

In "Cino (Italian Campagna, 1309, the open road)", Cino Polnesi, the exiled poet, speaks in the accents of another poetic clown, concluding

I have sung women in three cities
But it is all one.

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**I will sing of the white birds
In the blue waters of heaven,
The clouds that are spray to its sea.**

Many of the early poems remind us not only that Pound before the War was the only effective voice in English of the real decadence in France that Mallarmé, Laforgue and Rimbaud gave new directions to, but also that he has always been a scholarly poet, and that his romantic quest of untouched subjects led to the original reading that produced *The Spirit of Romance*, which is the most unconventional and vital piece of scholarly English discovery of its kind in this century. Among the harvest for which we may thank Pound's influence probably are the excellent translations of the medieval Romance poetry made by Richard Aldington in concise prose that resembles free verse in balance and fullness of image. For some purposes free verse is undoubtedly an excellent medium, and Ezra Pound deserves the credit of having been the most persistent demonstrator.

His erudition, moreover, though frequently displayed, is not used as a barrier of obscurity to prevent the unscholarly reader ignorant of French, Italian, Spanish, Latin, and Greek, and an indefinite number of works in all these languages, enjoying the verse as English poetry. In this he contrasts with Eliot, who adopted his devices for stimulating contemplation, but used erudition to assist in avoiding coherent statement that might be compromising to a too self-conscious poet.

Besides his wide scholarship, Pound is certainly the most versatile wit in modern English poetry. His wit pervades the poems of mixed serious and flippant moods, especially in the collection entitled *Lustra*. It flashes in epitaphs and in maxims that often are reminiscent of romantic Greek poetry. One of these very modern and very ancient epitaphs is :

**Leucis, who intended a Grand Passion,
Ends with a willingness to oblige.**

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Or " L'Art, 1910 " :

Green arsenic smeared on an egg-white cloth,
Crushed strawberries : come, let us feast our eyes !

In the second section of " A Song of Degrees " in *Lustra*, he makes the popular versions by Waley of Chinese poetry seem dull:

The wind moves above the wheat—
With a silver crashing,
A thin war of metal. . . .

There is often a romantic earnestness behind his badinage ; it is succinctly confessed in " Ite ".

Go, my songs, seek your praise from the young and from the intolerant

Move among the lovers of perfection alone.

Seek ever to stand in the hard Sophoclean light

And take your wounds from it gladly.

Two other pieces, " The Tea Shop " and " Ancient Music ", might be read as an example of how he achieves the expression of a poignant disillusionment and a tortured sympathy by the clowning manner, but without the verbal obscurities which have characterized nearly all the modern poetic clowning. Chinese and Japanese poetry have inspired him to some of his best things in so-called Imagist poetry, which may be likened to still-life painting. This he entitles " Liu-Ch'e " (I do not know how free the translation may be, but I think only the literal renderings of the scholarly Mrs. Florence Ayscough have given us anything so much like *poetry* from the Chinese) :

UU-CH'E

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,
Dust drifts over the court-yard,
There is no sound of foot-fall, and the leaves
Scurry into heaps and lie still,
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them :

A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

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But Pound has his tricks, too, **and** one is **to repeat such effects** :

IN A STATION OF THE METRO.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd ;
Petals on a wet black bough.

Perhaps the reminder is not uncalled for that the term " **free** verse " is adopted from the French *vers-libre*, and that French *vers-libre* was originally what we know as irregular verse. Matthew Arnold in " The Strayed Reveller " and " Dover Beach " wrote some perfect free verse, nearer to the modern idea of it than Patmore's skilful irregular odes. Whitman, who is often referred to as a pioneer of English free verse, more usually wrote rhythmical prose or verse that was not so irregular as it looked, but merely had the rhymes widely separated. The following is typical :

Come, lovely and soothing Death.
Undulate round the world serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day ; in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later, delicate Death.
Over the tree-tops I float thee a song !
Over the rising and sinking waves—over the myriad *fields* and the
prairies wide ;
Over the dense-packed cities all, and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy, to thee,
O Death.

It will be seen that this can scarcely be regarded even as irregular, if a slight rearrangement of the lines is made. Start new lines with

serenely,
to each (leaving " delicate Death " as a falling close)
over the myriad
and the prairies wide (another falling close)
and the teeming . . .
The last line would be "to thee, O Death ".

Henley, with his curious artistry, carried the so-called free verse of last century nearer to the modern practice, but he called it "unrhymed rhythms". His best effects are as good as they could be.

The cadence and poise which the Imagist ideal demanded has been most delicately achieved probably by the woman poet "H.D.", but hers is generally unrhymed almost regular verse, which is merely made slower with pauses due to the principle of separating each idea in a separate line. D. H. Lawrence, who used all forms of verse but often without a sufficient necessity for the particular form chosen, wrote more forcibly in free verse perhaps than any other modern English poet. Often it is the swinging verse of Whitman used with a finer sense of the speech rhythm, as in "The Sea". It is to be noted, however, that the second volume of his *Collected Poems* (1928) is described in a sub-title as "Unrhyming Poems", so that we need not be surprised to find the majority of them regular. (What we do unexpectedly find, however, are some strongly *rhymed* poems in this volume.) He is most justifiably unconventional in the free verse of what I have called his "nature poems"—*Trees, Creatures* and the other groups.

The new freedoms of rhythm and diction will probably make the last half-century appear to future readers as the most revolutionary period in English poetry since the Elizabethans came to exploit unused possibilities of the language, and it has necessarily a primary place in this survey. There have, however, been interesting developments of a less startling character, chiefly in the longer forms of narrative and drama. Idiomatic speech and prosaic homely details in narrative were countenanced in practice by Browning and Tennyson, so that less influential poets like T. E. Brown, James Thomson, and John Davidson did not suffer the disadvantage of being innovators on such counts as these. Patmore's "Angel in

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the House " brought upon him afterwards the disapproval of the literary, but the extremes to which he carried his plan of reporting the homely domestic life in verse, rather than the newness of the principle, accounted for that. The unexpected side of this kind of realism in the Victorian era is that the most impressive achievements up to this century in narrative make no contribution to that very modest approach to modernity. Rossetti's powerfully imaginative narratives were followed by Swinburne's, Morris's, and finally, a culmination of the archaic and eclectic, by Doughty's. The new realism in the poetic narrative received no fresh expression until John Masefield succeeded in shocking the public without alienating the critics by importing freshly violent but not always idiomatic slang into the dialogue of his " low life " characters. It must be acknowledged that the derivative romantic colour of his eloquent descriptive passages did not always mix very convincingly with the poet's version of the language of drunkards, hooligans and passionate murderers. These superficial violences attracted attention, but the real virtue of Masefield as a narrative poet was in conveying strong feeling, usually a profound pity for the " under-dog " (even a hunted fox), and a considerable power of dramatic story-telling. The sense of speed in his narratives is found upon examination to come largely from the poet's fondness for making things and people move about. This counts for more in the distinctive character of his work than the imagery. *Reynard the Fox* and *Right Royal* both describe contests of speed. A kind of race with time is the dramatic motive of nearly all his stories. Moreover, the chief characters run wildly (that is how we succeed in remembering the impossible Saul Kane in *The Everlasting Mercy*) or walk fast when agitated. Movement represents spiritual effort or the tension of suspense, and fortunately it generally calls from the poet corresponding verbal rhythms. Even

in the languorous Oriental poem " Enslaved ", the best passages are full of movements and sounds, even though introduced for contrast, e.g. :

The water hissed its life out on the sands,
 The wheel of heaven with all her glittering turned,
 The city window-lights no longer burned
 Then one by one the soldiers left their clatter ;
 The moon arose and walked upon the water,
 The sleepers turned to screen her from their eyes.
 A fishing-boat sailed past; the fishers' cries
 Rang in the darkness of the bay without.
 Her sail flapped as she creaked and stood about,
 Then eased, then leaned, then strained and stood away.
 Deep silence followed, save where breathers lay.

This effect, which is not an artful device but evidently instinctive, is found in Masfield's novels and plays also. The verse of the play, *Pompey the Great*, is indeed often exactly of this kind. While the plays have—sometimes by their very faults of derivative poetry and excesses of violence without power—helped to re-educate the public in an appreciation of poetic drama, they are not comparable with the genuine achievements in poetic drama of Swinburne, Davidson, Yeats, Synge, Gordon Bottomley, Ross, and even Lascelles Abercrombie.

The modern movement to restore poetry to the theatre may be said to have begun with the partial success of Byron, the fragmentary attempt of Keats, who did not live long enough to mature his craft, and the brilliant and eccentric achievement of Shelley in *The Cenci*. That first wave of enthusiasm ebbed, and the poet whose influence with the public in the succeeding period gave him the greatest opportunity lacked the gift. In his late years Tennyson made an attempt to write for the theatre, and his *Queen Mary*, written a year or two after Swinburne's unwieldy *Bothwell*, was produced in 1876 at the Lyceum in London. His son remarked that Tennyson's dramas " were written with the intention that actors

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should edit them for the stage, keeping them at the high poetic level". Swinburne, though he flouted essential requirements of a stage presentation in his torrential dramas was at least more serious than Tennyson, and wrote only what he conceived to be necessary to his conception. But Mr. Harley Granville-Barker has made an illuminating comment¹ upon the apparently obliging attitude of Tennyson, and in reference to his son's remark he observes that *Queen Mary* was indeed "edited", twenty-seven characters being cut out altogether, probably on the advice of Irving, who played the part of Philip of Spain. The work for the theatre which pretended to be literature was therefore done by minor writers, successors of the Sheridan Knowles-Bulwer Lytton altiloquence, like Westland Marston, W. S. Gilbert, and the fertile Tom Taylor. The feeling that the poet's art should not ignore the theatre was evidently widespread, for many poets produced plays in verse. These were usually of the type of Robert Bridges' metrical exercises in neo-classicism, and too remote from any vital drama for effective performance. Finally, Stephen Phillips by his fake Pre-Raphaelitism in dramatic form achieved a temporary *reclame* which in retrospect is astonishing ; for Yeats and Synge were already showing people of discernment what real poetic drama might be. An interesting contrast with Phillips is afforded by the dramatic verse of Ronald Ross, who attempted both neo-classical and medieval themes. Ross's dramatic poetry is all comparatively early work, and is confined to two full-length verse dramas—*Edgar, or the New Pygmalion* (1883) and *The Deformed Transformed* (1892) and some dramatic scenes which he called "Dramettas" (in *Psychologies*, 1919). With certain cuts suggested by the author himself, *The Deformed Transformed*, one cannot doubt, is not

¹ In *The Eighteen-Eighties. Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature.*

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only actable but is the strongest genuine drama with a medieval romantic atmosphere that has been done in our time. The only poetic play of its kind to compare with it is Herbert Palmer's admirable *Villon*, which is to some extent a biographical or chronicle play. *The Deformed Transformed* originated in an attempt to complete the fragment by Byron with the same title, by incorporating another traditional motive, that in Lermontor's "Demon". Readers of Ross's novel, *The Revels of Orsera*, will be familiar with the main story, for the novel was written as a fuller prose version of the play. The theme of a medieval Satan seeking human love for his own redemption reached Ross through the opera by Rubinstein based upon Lermontor's poem.¹ The single-act "Dramettas" were written by the poet during his second period of service in the Indian Medical Service, 1890-1894. They promised to do something for modern poetic drama which both Masfield and Drinkwater attempted later, and it is possible that the brief dramatic pieces in Drinkwater's *X = 0* owed something to Ross's example. Whatever Ross might have accomplished if he had not been absorbed by medical research, his actual achievement was only tentative and is chiefly interesting by contrast with the merely literary exercises of scholarly poets and the pastiche of those who like Phillips cheapened heroic themes. The fruitfulness of W. B. Yeats's work for the theatre is due to the fresh background of Irish life and legend as much as to his inherent dramatic sense, which one feels to be inadequate for great achievements. *The Countess Cathleen*, *The Shadowy Waters*, *The Land of Hearts Desire* show a fine tact in using ancient poetic themes while preserving as much of the essential human drama in them as possible, but their permanent value is surely in the pure poetry of the verse. J. M. Synge

¹I have given a full account of this and other dramas in another book: *Ronald Ross: Discoverer and Creator*.

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(1871-1909), whom Yeats encouraged to return to Ireland and help in the Dublin Theatre movement by writing the new drama, is a more convincing dramatist, and with his bitter humour and ferocious irony commands a wider range of mood than the lyrical and contemplative Yeats. The virtues of the author of *Riders to the Sea*, *The Play Boy of the Western World*, *The Well of the Saints*, *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *The Aran Islands* are, except for the astringent humour, in the genuinely poetic plays of Gordon Bottomley. His dramatic blank verse has something in its imagery of the dream-clarity of Yeats's, and the urgent pressure of Lascelles Abercrombie's successful moments in the grand manner. There is nothing in his verse to startle the ordinary cultured reader, and yet he is the most individual of stylists. His blank verse sings and cries, is tumultuous or restful, in expressing the motions of the drama ; and with no pretence of everyday realism he can make his characters speak naturally while speaking eloquently. There seems to be no one at present who can succeed to the chief of the Irish poetic playwrights or to the English poet of *King Lear's Wife*, *Midsummer Eve*, *Gruach*, *The Riding to Lithend*. The experiments, chiefly by Yeats and Ezra Pound, with the form of the classical Japanese *Noh* plays, do not seem to have given us a chamber drama yet that is likely to develop in modern soil. But Richard Church has used non-dramatic blank verse with a rare delicacy and concentration. One other sign of the continued development in the use of traditional forms must be mentioned, and that is Frank Kendon's successful variations on rhyme by assonance and alliteration in regular forms like that of the sonnet, an experiment which seems to have been inspired by Wilfrid Blunt's innovations in the *Love Sonnets of Proteus*. The brief lyric also has been given a delicate accuracy, terseness and narrative quality by L. A. G. Strong that can hardly be exceeded in the future.

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Since the War at least the narrative poem has shown signs of renewed vitality. The noteworthy achievements in this form vary widely in character, and include the at present unfulfilled promise of a modern Keats in I' Anson Fausset's *The Healing of Heaven* (1920) ; the fresh power of Roy Campbell's *Flaming Terrapin*; the forceful though traditional telling of the Chaldean epic of Gilgamesh and Ea-bani in Henry L. Webb's *The Everlasting Qitest*; romantic and somewhat enigmatic evocations like Edith Sitwell's *Sleeping Beauty* and Herbert Palmer's wild ballad of *Jonah*, and the curious adaptation of Chaucer's rhyme-royal stanza, rather in the manner of a Masfield narrative, in Clive Hamilton's *Dymer*. But when one thinks of the finest prose story-writing of our time, and realizes that most of it is the work of poets, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that a period exceptionally rich in poetic creation has put more imaginative energy into prose fiction than verse narrative. There is apparently no contemporary English narrative poet whose work can vie in power with the American, Robinson Jeffers.

Our survey at least leaves no room for pessimism about the immediate prospects of English poetry, and the past fifty years may well prove to have brought us to the eve of a greater renaissance than that which marked the end of last century and the beginning, of this.

APPENDIX

LIST OF BOOKS REFERRED TO IN CHAPTER I

(Copied from *Poems from Books*, 1927, edited by Thomas Moulton.)

- Poems of Thirty Tears.* By Gordon Bottomley. London : Constable & Co.
- Pelagea.* By A. E. Coppard. Waltham Saint Lawrence, Berks : Golden Cockerel Press.
- The Dark Breed.* A Book of Poems. By F. R. Higgins. London : Macmillan.
- Beauty the Pilgrim.* By Gerald Gould. London : Ernest Benn.
- Hamewith and other Poems.* By Charles Murray. London : Constable & Co.
- Persephone.* By John Drinkwater. Rudge & Co.
- The Making.* Poems by George Rostrevor Hamilton. London : William Heinemann.
- Rustic Elegies.* By Edith Sitwell. London : Duckworth.
- Moods without Measure.* By Richard Church. London : Ernest Benn.
- Requiem.* By Humbert Wolfe. London : Ernest Benn.
- Selected Poems.* By Muriel Stuart. London : Jonathan Cape.
- Collected Poems.* By G. K. Chesterton. London : Cecil Palmer.
- Dark of the Moon.* By Sara Teasdale. London : Jonathan Cape.
- The Apple-tree.* Poems by William Kerr. Leeds and London : William Heinemann.
- A Poet Passes.* By D. L. Kelleher. London : Ernest Benn.

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- Genesis: an Impression.* By Dorothy Wellesley. London: William Heinemann.
- The Cyder Feast, and other Poems.* By Sacheverell Sitwell. London: Duckworth.
- Poems.* By Camilla Doyle. London: Ernest Benn.
- Difficult Love.* By L. A. G. Strong. Oxford: Blackwell.
- The Country of Sweet Bells.* By Wilfred Rowland Child. Leeds and London: Swan Press and Messrs. Gay & Hancock.
- Brother Man.* By Eden Phillpotts. London: Richards.
- The Land.* A Poem by V. Sackville-West. London: Heinemann.
- Chamber Music.* By James Joyce. London: Jonathan Cape. (New edition.)
- The Broken Hearthstone.* By Margaret Cropper. London: Philip Allan.
- Collected Poems, 1913-1925.* By Herbert Read. London: Faber & Gwyer.
- Poems, 1927.* By S. Matthewman. Leeds and London: The Swan Press and Messrs. Gay & Hancock.
- Parrot Pie: Parodies and Imitations of Contemporaries.* By William Kean Seymour (W. K. S. of *Punch*). London: George G. Harrap & Co.
- Poems.* By Peter Quennell. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Babel: A Dramatic Poem.* By J. Redwood Anderson. London: Ernest Benn.
- The City.* By Ruth Manning Sanders. London: Ernest Benn.
- The Pyramid.* By Sherard Vines. London: Cobden Sanderson.
- Collected Poems: Volume IV.* By Alfred Noyes. Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons.

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