

THE POETRY REVIEW

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THE FUTURE OF POETRY

WARFARE was the original expression of man's physical consciousness; poetry was the first sign of the spirit. Its earliest function was to excite heroic emotion by means of imaginative or passionate language. The song of the young world was like a sounding-board, a drum; a very echo of the elementary passions. Metre and meaning were one; the medium of expression was coincident with the necessity for it. The bard was as much a power as the hero himself.

The young nations strode through the world to the clatter and rush of song; it was the natural voice of the spirit. But presently the minstrel replaced the bard; love was made the chief motive, and war became incidental. Selection replaced impulse; treatment became independent of substance, metre of subject.

Then last, the minstrel became poet, and the poet became man of letters—a creator instead of a medium of creation, a great still power rather than a whirlwind. Language, now entirely plastic, was carved, moulded or stretched to the will of the manipulator; it took on conceits and shades, artificial colours and cadences. Words became exhausted of their meaning; and new masters had to re-handle them, or to invent others. The height of artificiality was reached, a permanent stock of expressions came into use, and a regular poetic jargon was invented, which became obligatory to anyone who wished to write correct poetry.

And now prose, being a properly effective medium of expression, for many purposes, superseded poetry. Rhythmical sentences were composed without the restraint of metre, and the poetic jargon became increasingly alienated from normal language. The poet himself pushed this disadvantage by professing to despise prose, and seeking more and more to differentiate his own diction. There were some reactions, as that of Wordsworth, but, on the whole, the situation became only aggravated, and it is now, at last absolutely necessary for the fetters of stereotyped poetic language to be shaken off.

The poets of the present and the future must re-define, through their work, the true function of poetry. For, though it has become partly, and will become wholly, intellectualized; in spite of innumerable experiments in subject, rhythm and form, straining of metre, novelties in cadence, in spite of fluency, technique, originality, it still must be said that modern poetry is devoid of any real function or aim.

It would be both easy and attractive to attribute these conditions to the unsatisfactory standard of poetic criticism, but such an argument would not be altogether tenable. The reason must be sought deeper; in the fact, namely, that modern poetry fails to express the real aspirations of life. Just as the jargon is distinct from normal language, so the substance is alien to life. Moreover, these two characteristics are interdependent, and the use of a normal vocabulary will not be possible with dignity until poets learn again to represent with dignity and naturalness every aspect and manifestation of life. The experiments of Whitman and Carpenter solve nothing. These authors, and their imitators, have shirked the problem by simply dispensing with metre, and their work, however fluent and rhythmical, nevertheless cannot be called *poetry*. If the word were henceforth to be used solely to specify the nature of the thought expressed, and no longer to designate a certain particular manner of expressing it, then more than half the imaginative and philosophical prose that is now being written might immediately be called Poetry.

Yet the tendencies of the school of Whitman certainly indicate much more than those of any of the imperialistic school of Kipling, or of the hundred poetasters who whimper their loves and their troubles, unheeded and unrequired. Something different is necessary in modern poetry than sentimental patriotism or a mere delight in poetical verbiage. The modern poet's equipment must include, apart from the natural adoration of beauty, a clear and sound grasp upon facts, and a stupendous aptitude for assimilation. Moreover he may suffer from no illusions as to calling or divine inspiration, but, with the simple faith of a forerunner, must work on persistently and delightedly towards an invisible goal. For that goal is nothing less than the final re-welding of metre to meaning; and it cannot, in the nature of things, be achieved until man has attained a second innocence, a self-obliviousness beyond self-consciousness, a super-

consciousness; that condition, in fact, produced only by a complete knowledge of his own meaning.

When the soul shall authoritatively and finally rule the body, then poetry may conclusively represent the aspirations of life. Then also may be accomplished that perfect harmony of language which alone can annul the poetic jargon. The functions of poetry will be inherent in its natural form, which, inevitably, will yield only to the spirit able to mould it; form will be elusive as sunlight, yet enduring as marble. Then words will indeed be *winged*, and will sweep in flight across the world with the dignity and glorious symmetry of great flocks of birds.

Meanwhile, as Ben Jonson expressed it, "who seeks to cast a living line must sweat." The poet of to-day is unavoidably Man of Letters. His work must have a certain quality of the study; it must "savour of bitten nails." The taint of acute self-consciousness will ruin most of it; natural beauty of form emerges painfully at last from intense labour. The most successful poets are those who treat remote subjects in conventional metres, achieving beauty only through a fastidious selection of topic, language and form.

The public, as a whole, does not demand or appreciate the pure expression of beauty. Its cultured members expect to find in poetry, if anything, repose from material and nervous anxiety; an apt or chiselled phrase strokes the appetites and tickles the imagination. The more general public merely enjoys its platitudes and truisms jerked on to the understanding in line and rhyme; truth put into metre sounds overwhelmingly true, and quotations can be tossed about like balls. Great men have a way of quoting poetry in their speeches, just as though they read it every evening. Vaguely enthusiastic people compose majestic phrases about it; lawyers try to intimidate the jury with it; from hundreds of pulpits it is recited to yawning congregations: meanwhile the tendency that shall find an issue, the spirit that shall at last sing, threads delicately, almost furtively, through obscure and shadowy places towards a future when the earth shall be wrapped in light.

Poetry is uninteresting to-day in that degree only that it is remote from life. It need not treat necessarily of events, deeds or episodes, but it must be fundamental, vital, innate, or nothing at all. It must be packed

and tense with meaning; no line may be thin, no link may rattle. And in the future, when it has become natural and keen, there will be *improvisatori* again, who will lavish us their poems carelessly, like a plant its flowers. Then life will have become greater than literature, and days than verses. In its final majestic simplicity, memorable poetry will be passed from man to man, like the song of primitive peoples, and there will be rhapsodists to speak it without declamation or mannerism. Sentimentalism will be understood no more, realism will not be tolerated; and poetry, springing from the roots of life, will flower into natural and perfect language, bright with dreams and tense with meaning. Metre will serve substance; form will be one with expression, metaphor with thought; poetry will be the call of spirit to spirit, the very throb of the heart of Nature, as expressed in her ultimate manifestation—man.

HAROLD MONRO.