

Gosse, (Sir) Edmund William
The future of English
poetry

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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 25

The Future of English Poetry

By

Edmund Gosse, C.B.

June, 1913

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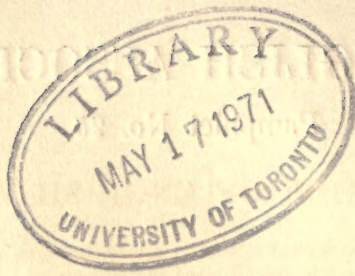
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THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH POETRY

J'ai vu le cheval rose ouvrir ses ailes d'or,
Et, flairant le laurier que je tenais encor,
Verdoyant à jamais, hier comme aujourd'hui,
Se cabrer vers le Jour et ruer vers la Nuit.

HENRI DE RÉGNIER.

IN venturing this afternoon to address an audience accustomed to listen to those whose positive authority is universally recognized, and in taking for my theme a subject not, like theirs, distinct in its definitions or consecrated by tradition and history, I am aware that I perform what you may, if you choose, call an act of blameworthy audacity. My subject is chimerical, vague, and founded on conjectures which you may well believe yourselves at least as well fitted as I am to propound. Nevertheless, and in no rash or paradoxical spirit, I invite you to join with me in some reflections on what is the probable course of English poetry during, let us say, the next hundred years. If I happen to be right, I hope some of the youngest persons present will say, when I am long turned to dust, what an illuminating prophet I was. If I happen to be wrong, why, no one will remember anything at all about the matter. In any case we may possibly be rewarded this afternoon by some agreeable hopes and by the contemplation of some pleasant analogies.

Our title takes for granted that English poetry¹ will continue, with whatever fluctuations, to be a living and abiding thing. This I must suppose that you all accede to, and that you do not look upon poetry as an art which is finished, or the harvest of classic verse as one which is fully reaped and garnered. That has been believed at one time and another, in various parts of the globe. I will mention one instance in the history of our own time: a quarter of a century ago, the practice of writing verse was deliberately abandoned in the literatures of the three Scandinavian countries, but particularly in that of Norway, where no poetry, in our sense, was written from about 1873 to 1885. It almost died out here in England in the middle of the fifteenth century; it ran very low in France at the end of the Middle Ages. But all these instances, whether ancient or modern, of the attempt to prove prose a sufficing medium

¹ I here use the word 'Poetry' (as Wordsworth did) as opposed to the word 'Prose', and synonymous with metrical composition.

for all expression of human thought have hitherto failed, and it is now almost certain that they will more and more languidly be revived, and with less and less conviction.

It was at one of the deadliest moments in the life of the art in England that George Gascoigne remarked, in his 'Epistle to the Reverend Divines' (1574) that 'It seemeth unto me that in all ages Poetry hath been not only permitted, but also it hath been thought a right good thing'. Poetry has occupied the purest and the fieriest minds in all ages, and you will remember that Plato, who excluded the poets from his philosophical Utopia, was nevertheless an exquisite writer of lyrical verse himself. So, to come down to our own day, Ibsen, who drove poetry out of the living language of his country, had been one of the most skilful of prosodical proficient. Such instances may allay our alarm. There cannot be any lasting force in arguments which remind us of the pious confessions of a redeemed burglar. It needs more than the zeal of a turncoat to drive Apollo out of Parnassus.

There will, therefore, we may be sure, continue to be English poetry written and printed. Can we form any idea of the probable character of it? There exists, in private hands, a picture by that ingenious water-colour painter of the late eighteenth century, William Gilpin. It is very fantastic, and means what you like, but it represents Pegasus, the horse of the Muses, careering in air on the vast white arc of his wings, against a sky so dark that it must symbolize the obscure discourse of those who write in prose. You are left quite doubtful whether he will strike the rocky terrace in the foreground with his slender, silver hooves, or will swoop down into the valley below, or will soar to heaven and out of sight. You are left by the painter in a pleasant uncertainty, but Hippocrene may break out anywhere, and of the vivacious courser himself all that we can be sure of is that we are certain to see him alighting before us when we least expect him.

We may put our trust in the persistence of Pegasus through his apparently aimless gyrations, and in the elasticity of the poetical spirit, and yet acknowledge that there are difficulties in the way of believing that verse will continue to be written in the English language for a quite indefinite period. Perhaps we may as well face one or two of these difficulties at once. The principal danger, then, to the future of poetry seems to me to rest in the necessity of freshness of expression. Every school of verse is a rising and a breaking wave. It rises, because its leaders have become capable of new forms of attractive expression; its crest is some writer, or several writers, of genius,

who combine skill and fire and luck at a moment of extreme opportunity; and then the wave breaks, because later writers cannot support the ecstasy, and only repeat formulas which have lost their attractiveness. Shirley would have been a portent, if he had flourished in 1595 and had written then as he did in 1645. Erasmus Darwin would be one of the miracles of prosody if 'The Loves of the Plants' could be dated 1689 instead of 1789. There must always be this fluctuation, this rise and fall in value, and what starts each new wave mounting out of the trough of the last is the instinctive demand for freshness of expression. *Cantate Domino* is the cry of youth, sing a *new* song unto the Lord.

But with the superabundant circulation of language year after year, week after week, by a myriad careful scribes, the possibilities of freshness grow rarer and rarer. The obvious, simple, poignant things seem to have all been said. It is not merely that the actual poems, like Gray's 'Elegy', and much of 'Hamlet', and some of Burns's songs, have been manipulated so often, and put to such pedestrian uses, that they are like rubbed coins, and begin to lose the very features of Apollo and the script of the Muses, but that the road seems closed to future bards who wish to speak with simplicity of similar straightforward things. In several of the literatures of modern Europe—those which began late, or struggled long against great disadvantages—it is still possible to produce pleasure by poems which describe primitive emotions in perfectly limpid language. But with us in England, I confess that it seems to me certain that whatever we retain, we can never any more have patience to listen to a new shepherd piping under the hawthorn-tree. Each generation is likely to be more acutely preoccupied than the last with the desire for novelty of expression. Accordingly, the sense of originality, which is so fervently demanded from every new school of writers, will force the poets of the future to sweep away all recognized impressions. The consequence must be, I think,—I confess so far as language is concerned that I see no escape from this,—that the natural uses of English and the obvious forms of our speech will be driven from our national poetry, as they are even now so generally being driven.

No doubt, in this condition, the originality of those who do contrive to write strongly and clearly will be more vigorously evident than ever. The poets will have to gird up their loins and take their sword in their hands. That wise man of the eighteenth century, to whom we never apply without some illuminating response, recommends that 'Qui saura penser de lui-même et former de nobles idées, qu'il prenne,

s'il peut, la manière et le tour élevé des maîtres'. These are words which should inspire every new aspirant to the laurel. 'S'il peut'; you see that Vauvenargues puts it so, because he does not wish that we should think that such victories as these are easy, or that any one else can help us to produce them. They are not easy, and they will be made more and more hard by the rubbed-out, conventionalized coinage of our language.

In this matter I think it probable that the little peoples, and the provinces which cultivate a national speech, will long find a great facility in expressing themselves in verse. I observe that it has recently been stated that Wales, which has always teemed with vernacular poets, has never possessed so many as she does at this time. I am debarred by what Keats called 'giant ignorance' from expressing an opinion on the subject, but I presume that in Welsh the resources of language are far from being so seriously exhausted as we have seen that they are in our own complicated sphere, where the cultivation of all the higher forms of poetic diction through five centuries has made simple expression extremely difficult. I am therefore ready to believe that in Welsh, as in Gaelic and in Erse, the poets have still wide fields of lyric, epic, and dramatic art untilled. We have seen, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Provençal poets capable of producing simple and thrilling numbers which are out of the reach of their sophisticated brethren who employ the worn locutions of the French language.

In new generations there is likely, we may be sure, to occur less description of plain material objects, because the aspect of these has already received every obvious tribute. So also there can hardly fail to be less precise enumeration of the primitive natural emotions, because this also has been done already, and repeated to satiety. It will not any longer satisfy to write

The rose is red, the violet blue,
And both are sweet, and so are you.

Reflections of this order were once felt to be exquisite, and they were so still as lately as when Blake and Wordsworth were young. But it is quite impossible that we should ever go back to them. Future poets will seek to analyse the redness of the rose, and will scout, as a fallacious observation, the statement that the violet is blue. All schemes of art become mechanical and insipid, and even their *naïvetés* lose their savour. Verse of excellent quality, in this primitive manner, can now be written to order by any smart little boy in a Grammar-school.

We have agreed, however, to believe that poetry, as an art, in one shape or another, will escape from the bankruptcy of language, and that Pegasus, with whatever strange and unexpected gambollings, will continue to accompany us. But of one thing we may be quite sure, that it will only be at the cost of much that we at present admire and like that the continuity of the art of verse will be preserved. If I could suddenly present to you some characteristic passages of the best English poetry of 1963, I doubt extremely whether I should be able to persuade you of their merits. I am not sure that you would understand what the poet intended to convey, any more than the Earl of Surrey would have understood the satires of Donne, or Coleridge have enjoyed the odes of George Meredith. Young minds invariably display their vitality by attacking the accepted forms of expression, and then they look about for novelties, which they cultivate with what seems to their elders to be extravagance. Before we attempt to form an idea, however shadowy, of what poetry will be in the future, we must disabuse ourselves of the delusion that it will be a repetition of what is now produced and accepted. Nor can we hope by any exercise of philosophy to do away with the embarrassing and painful, but after all perhaps healthful antagonism between those who look forward and those who live in the past. The earnestness expended on new work will always render young men incapable of doing justice to what is a very little older than themselves; and the piety with which the elderly regard what gave them full satisfaction in their days of emotional freshness will always make it difficult for them to be just to what seems built on the ruins of what they loved.

If there is any feature which we can scarcely be wrong in detecting in our vision of the poetry of the future it is an elaboration which must follow on the need for novelty of which I have spoken. I expect to find the modern poet accepting more or less consciously an ever-increasing symbolic subtlety of expression. If we could read his verses, which are still unwritten, I feel sure that we should consider them obscure. That is to say, we should find that in his anxiety not to repeat what had been said before him, and in his horror of the trite and the superficial, he will achieve effect and attach interest *obscuris vera involvens*—wrapping the truth in darkness. The 'darkness' will be relative, as his own contemporaries, being more instructed and sophisticated than we are, will find those things transparent, or at least translucent, which remain opaque enough to us. And, of course, as epithets and adjectives that seem fresh to us will smell of the inkhorn to him, he will have to exert his

ingenuity to find parallel expressions which would startle us by their oddity if we met with them now.

A danger, therefore, which the poets of the future will need all their ingenuity to avoid, will be the cultivation of a patent artificiality, a forcing of the note until it ceases to rouse an echo in the human heart. There will be a determination to sweep away all previously recognized impressions. Affectation, that is to say the obtaining of an effect by illegitimate means, is an offence against the Muses which they never fail to avenge by oblivion or by a curtailed and impeded circulation. We may instructively examine the history of literature with special attention to this fault, and we find it in all cases to have been fatal. It was fatal to the poetry of Alexandria, which closed, as you know, in an obscurity to which the title of Lycophronic darkness has been given from the name of its most extravagant exponent. It was fatal to several highly-gifted writers of the close of the Elizabethan period, who endeavoured to give freshness to an outworn scheme of poetic ornament ; I need only remind you of the impenetrable cloud or fog, by Cyril Tourneur, called *The Transform'd Metamorphosis*, and of the cryptic rhymed dramas of Lord Brooke. It has not been fatal, I hope, but I think desperately perilous to a beautiful talent of our own age, the amiable Stéphane Mallarmé. Nothing, I feel, is more dangerous to the health of poetry than the praise given by a group of irresponsible disciples to verse which transfers commonplace thought to an exaggerated, violent, and involved scheme of diction, and I confess that I should regard the future of poetry in this country with much more apprehension than I do, if I believed that the purely learned poet, the prosodical pedant, was destined to become paramount amongst us. That would, indeed, threaten the permanence of the art ; and it is for that reason that I look with a certain measure of alarm on the excess of verbiage about poetry which attends not merely criticism, which matters little, but the actual production and creation. I am confident, however, that the common sense of readers will always bring about a reaction in favour of sanity and lucidity.

One great objection to the introduction of a tortured and affected style into verse-writing is the sacrifice which has to be made of that dignity and sweetness, that suave elevation, which marks all successful masterpieces. Perhaps as difficult a quality to attain as any which the poetry of the future will be called upon to study is stateliness, what the French call 'la vraie hauteur'. This elevation of style, this dignity, is foreign to democracies, and it is hard to sustain it in the rude air of modern life. It easily degenerates, as Europe

saw it degenerate for a century and a half, into pomposity relieved by flatness. It is apt to become a mere sonorous rhetoric, a cultivation of empty fine phrases. If we examine the serious poetry of the end of the seventeenth and the greater part of the eighteenth century, —especially in the other countries of Europe, for England was never without some dew on the threshing-floor,—if we examine it in France, for instance, between Racine and André Chénier, we are obliged to recognize that it was very rarely both genuine and appropriate. The Romantic Revival, which we are beginning ungratefully to decry, did at least restore to poetry the sense of a genuine stateliness of expression, which once more gave it the requisite dignity, and made it a vehicle for the vital and the noble sentiments of humanity.

Let us now turn, in our conjectural survey, from the form to the subjects with which the poetry of the future is likely to be engaged. Here we are confronted with the fact that, if we examine the whole of history, we see that the domain of verse has been persistently narrowed by the incursions of a more and more powerful and wide-embracing prose. At the dawn of civilization poetry had it all its own way. If instruction was desired upon any sphere of human knowledge or energy, the bard produced it in a prosodical shape, combining with the dignity of form the aid which the memory borrowed from a pattern or a song. Thus you conceive of a Hesiod before you think of a Homer, and the earliest poetry was probably of a purely didactic kind. As time went on, prose, with its exact pedestrian method, took over more and more completely the whole province of information, but it was not until the nineteenth century that the last strongholds of the poetry of instruction were stormed. I will, if you please, bring this home to you by an example which may surprise you.

The subject which I have taken the liberty of discussing with you this afternoon has not often occupied the serious attention of critics. But it was attempted, by no less a person than Wordsworth, more than a hundred years ago. I make no excuse for repeating to you the remarkable passage in which he expressed his convictions in the famous Preface of 1800 :

If the labours of men of science,—Wordsworth said,—should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present ; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of Science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the

Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.

It is plain, then, that, writing in the year 1800, Wordsworth believed that a kind of modified and sublimated didactic poetry would come into vogue in the course of the nineteenth century. He stood on the threshold of a new age, and he cast his vatic gaze across it much in the same spirit as we are trying to do to-day. But if any warning were needed to assure us of the vanity of prophesying, it would surely be the error of one so sublimely gifted and so enriched with the spoils of meditation. The belief of Wordsworth was that the poetry of the future would deal, in some vaguely inspired fashion, with the discoveries of science. But when we look back over the field of 113 years, how much do we find our national poetry enriched with ore from the mines of mineralogy or botany or chemistry? It is difficult to see that there has been so much as an effort made to develop poetry in this or in any similar direction. Perhaps the nearest approach to what Wordsworth conceived as probable was attempted by Tennyson, particularly in those parts of *In Memoriam* where he dragged in analogies to geological discoveries and the biological theories of his time. Well, these are just those parts of Tennyson which are now most universally repudiated as lifeless and jejune.

Wordsworth did not confine himself to predicting a revival of didactic poetry, the poetry of information, such as, in a very crude form, had prevailed all over Europe in his own childhood, but he conceived a wide social activity for writers of verse. He foresaw that the Poet would 'bind together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time'. I suppose that in composing those huge works, so full of scattered beauties, but in their entirety so dry and solid, 'The Excursion' and 'The Prelude', he was consciously attempting to inaugurate this scheme of a wide and all-embracing social poetry. Nor do I suppose that efforts of this kind will ever cease to be made. We have seen a gifted writer in whom the memory is perhaps even more surprisingly developed than the imagination, employ the stores of his experience to enrich a social poetry the elements of which,

prima facie, should be deeply attractive to us all. But I do not know that the experiments of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, brilliant as they are, are calculated to encourage the poets of the future to pursue their lyric celebration of machinery and sociology and the mysteries of natural religion. Already is it not that portion of his work which we approach with most languor, in spite of its originality and its outlook upon 'the vast empire of human society'? And lesser poets than he who seek for popularity by such violent means are not, I think, rewarded by the distinguished loyalty of the best readers. We are startled by their novelty, and we admire them for the moment; but when, a few years later, we return to them, we are apt to observe with distress how

their lean and flashy songs
Grate on their scannel pipes of wretched straw.

If, therefore, I venture upon a prophecy, where all the greater prophets, my predecessors, have failed, it is to suggest that the energy of future poets will not be largely exercised on themes of this intrepid social character, but that as civilization more and more tightly lays hold upon literature, and excludes the purest form of it from one province after another, poetry will, in its own defence, cultivate more and more what Hazlitt calls 'a mere effusion of natural sensibility'. Hazlitt used the phrase in derision, but we may accept it seriously, and not shrink from adopting it. In most public remarks about current and coming literature in the abstract, I marvel at the confidence with which it is taken for granted that the sphere of interest occupied by writers of the imagination is sure to grow wider and wider. It is expected to embrace the world, to take part in a universal scheme of pacification, to immortalize imperial events, to be as public as possible. But surely it is more and more clearly proved that prose is the suitable medium for such grandiose themes as these. Within the last year our minds have been galvanized into collective sympathy by two great sensations of catastrophe, each case wearing the most thrilling form that tragedy can take in the revolt of nature against the feverish advances of mankind. I suppose we may consider the destruction of the *Titanic* and the loss of Captain Scott's expedition as two absolutely typical examples of what is thought by journalists to be fitting material for poetry. Yet by common consent, these tragic occurrences did not awaken our numerous poets to any really remarkable effort, lyrical or elegiac. No ode or threnody could equal in vibrating passion Captain Scott's last testament. These are matters in which the

fullness of a wholly sincere statement in prose does not require, does not even admit, the introduction of the symbol. The impact of the sentiments of horror and pity is too sudden and forcible.

My own view is that, whether to its advantage or not, the poetry of the future is likely to be very much occupied with subjects, and with those alone, which cannot be expressed in the prose of the best-edited newspaper. In fact, if I were to say what it is which I think coming poets will have more and more to be on their guard against, I should define it as a too rigid determination never to examine subjects which are of collective interest to the race at large. I dread lest the intense cultivation of the Ego, in minutest analysis and microscopical observation of one's self, should become the sole preoccupation of the future poet. I will not tell you that I dread lest this should be one of his principal preoccupations, for that would be to give way to a cheery piece of mid-Victorian hypocrisy which would be unworthy of you and of me alike. The time is past when intelligent persons ought to warn writers of the imagination not to cultivate self-analysis, since it is the only safeguard against the follies of an unbridled romanticism. But although the ivory tower offers a most valuable retreat, and although the poets may be strongly recommended to prolong their *villeggiatura* there, it should not be the year-long habitation of any healthy intelligence.

I do not question that the closing up of the poetic field, the depending more and more completely for artistic effect upon an 'effusion of natural sensibility', will isolate the poet from his fellows. He will be tempted, in the pursuit of the symbol which illustrates his emotion, to draw farther and farther away from contact with the world. He will wrap his singing-ropes not over his limbs only, but over his face, and treat his readers with exemplary disdain. We must be prepared, or our successors must, to find frequently revealed the kind of poet who not merely sees nothing superior to himself, but nothing except himself. I am not concerned to say that this will be unfortunate or blameworthy; the moralist of the future must attend to that. But I can believe that this unyielding and inscrutable attitude may produce some fine artistic effects. I can believe that both intensity and dignity may be gained by this sacrifice of the plainer human responsibilities, although I am not prepared to say at what loss of other qualities. It is clear that such a writer will not allow the public to dictate to him the nature or form of his lyric message, and he will have to depend for success entirely on the positive value of his verse.

The isolation of the poets of the future is likely to lead them to

band themselves more closely together for mutual protection against the reasonable world. The mystery of verse is like other abstruse and recondite mysteries,—it strikes the ordinary fleshly man as absurd. The claim of the poet on human sympathy, if we regard it merely from the world's standpoint, is gratuitous, vague, and silly. In an entirely sensible and well-conducted social system, what place will there be for the sorrows of Tasso and Byron, for the rage of Dante, for the misanthropy of Alfred de Vigny, for the perversity of Verlaine, for the rowdiness of Marlowe?—the higher the note of the lyre, the more ridiculous is the attitude of the lyrist, and the coarse public applauds the violence of Diogenes when he tramples on the pride of the poets with a greater pride than theirs. I cannot help thinking that this attitude of the sacred bard, maundering from the summit of his ivory tower, and hollowed out and made haggard by a kind of sublime moral neuralgia, will have to be abandoned as a relic of the dead romantic past. So far as it is preserved by the poets of the future it will be peculiar to those monasteries of song, those 'little clans', of which I am now about to speak as likely more and more to prevail.

In France, where the interest in poetry has, during the last generation, been far more keen and more abundant than anywhere else in the world, we already see a tendency to the formation of such experimental houses of song. There has been hitherto no great success attending any one of these bodies, which soon break up, but the effort to form them is perhaps instructive. I took considerable interest in the Abbaye de Creteil, which was a collectivist experiment of this kind. It was founded in October 1906, and it was dissolved in consequence of internal dissensions in January 1908. It was an attempt to create, in defiance of the public, in contemptuous disregard of established 'literary opinion', a sort of prosodical chapel or school of poetry. It was to be the active centre of energy for a new generation, and there were five founders, each of whom was highly ambitious to distinguish himself in verse. At Creteil there was a printing-press in a great park, so that the members should be altogether independent of the outside world. The poets were to cultivate the garden and keep house with the sale of the produce. When not at work, there were recitations, discussions, exhibitions of sketches, for they were mixed up with the latest vagaries of the Cubists and Post-impressionists.

This particular experiment lasted only fifteen months, and I cannot conscientiously say that I think it was in any way a success. No one among the abbatial founders of Creteil had, to be quite frank, any measure of talent in proportion to his daring. They were

involved in vague and nebulous ideas, mixed up with what I am afraid I must call charlatans, the refuse and the wreckage of other arts. Yet I consider that it is interesting to note that the lay monks of Creteil were in a sense correct when they announced that they were performing 'a heroic act', an act symbolical of the way in which poetry would in the future disdainfully protect itself against the invasion of common sense, the dreadful impact of the sensual world. I think you will do well, if you wish to pursue the subject of our conjectural discourse, to keep your eye on this tendency to a poetical collectivism. We have not noticed much evidence of it yet in England, but it is beginning to stir a good deal in France and Italy. After all, the highest poetry is a mysterious thing, like the practices of the Society of Rosicrucians, of whom it was said, 'Our House of the Holy Ghost, though a hundred thousand men should have looked upon it, is yet doomed to remain untouched, imperturbable, out of sight, and unrevealed to the whole godless world for ever.' If I am sure of anything, it is that the Poets of the Future will look upon massive schemes of universal technical education, and such democratic reforms as those which are now occupying the enthusiasm and energy of our friend the Lord Chancellor, as peculiarly hateful expositions of the godlessness of a godless world.

To turn to another branch of our subject, it appears to me very likely that sexual love may cease to be the predominant theme in the lyrical poetry of the future. Erotic sentiment has perhaps unduly occupied the imaginative art of the past. In particular, the poets of the late nineteenth century were interested to excess in love. There was a sort of obsession of sex among them, as though life presented no other phenomenon worthy of the attention of the artist. All over Europe, with the various tincture of differing national habit and custom, this was the mark of the sophistication of the poets, sometimes delicately and craftily exhibited, but often, as in foreign examples which will easily occur to your memory, rankly, as with the tiresome persistence of a slightly stale perfume, an irritating odour of last night's opopanax or vervain. And this is the one point, almost I think the only point, in which the rather absurd and certainly very noisy and hoydenish manifestoes of the so-called Futurists, led by M. Marinetti and his crew of iconoclasts, are worthy of our serious attention. It is a plank in their platform, you know, to banish eroticism, of the good kind and of the bad, from the practice of the future. I do not, to say the truth, find much help for the inquiry we have taken up to-day, in the manifestoes of these raucous young gentlemen, who, when they have succeeded in flinging the

ruins of the leprous palaces of Venice into its small stinking canals, will find themselves hard put to it to build anything beautiful in the place of them. But in their reaction against 'the eternal feminine', they may, I think, very possibly be followed by the serious poets of the future.

Those who have watched rather closely the recent developments of poetry in England have been struck with the fact that it tends more and more in the direction of the dramatic, not necessarily in the form of what is known as pure drama, particularly adapted for representation to listening audiences behind the footlights, but in the increased study of life in its exhibitions of energy. This may seem to be inconsistent with the tendency, of which I spoke just now, to withdraw from the world itself, either into an egotistical isolation or into some cloistered association of more or less independent figures united only in a rebellious and contemptuous disdain of public opinion. But the inconsistency may very well be one solely in appearance. It may well happen that the avoidance of all companionship with the stereotyped social surfaces of life, the ignorance,—really, the happy and hieratic ignorance,—of what 'people', in the fussy sense, are supposed to be saying and doing, may actually help the poet to come more fruitfully and penetratingly to what lies under the surface, to what is essential and permanent and notable in the solid earth of human character. Hence, I think it not improbable that the poetry of the future may become more and more dramatic, although perhaps by a series of acts of definite creation, rather than as the result of observation, which will be left to the ever-increasing adroitness of the brilliant masters of our prose.

As a result of this obsession in creative drama, I suppose that we may expect to find in the poetry of the future a more steady hope for mankind than has up to the present time been exhibited. The result of an excessive observation of the startling facts of life, a work appropriate to the violent energy of realistic prose, has been a general exaggeration of the darker tints, an insistence on that prominence of what was called the 'sub-fuse' colours which art-critics of a century ago judged essential to sublimity in all art. In Continental literature, and particularly in the very latest Russian drama, this determination to see blackness and blackness only, to depict the ordinary scene of existence as a Valley of the Shadow of Despair, has been painfully frequent. In England we had a poet of considerable power, whose tragic figure crossed me in my youth, in whose work there is not a single gleam of hope or dignity for man;—I mean the unfortunate James Thompson, author of 'The City of Dreadful

Night'. I cannot but believe that the poetry of the future, being more deeply instructed, will insist less emphatically upon human failure and less savagely upon the revolt of man. I anticipate in the general tone of it an earnestness, a fullness of tribute to the noble passion of life, an utterance simple and direct. I believe that it will take as its theme the magnificence of the spectacle of Man's successful fight with Nature, not the grotesque and squalid picturesqueness of his occasional defeat.

Your chairman has admirably said, in one of his charming essays, that 'History may be abstract, science may be frankly inhuman, even art may be purely formal; but poetry must be full of human life'. This consideration, I think, may make us feel perfectly secure as to the ultimate maintenance of poetic expression. For humanity will always be with us, whatever changes may be introduced into our social system, whatever revolutions may occur in religion, in legality, in public order, or in the stratification of composite life. I confess the only atmosphere in which it is impossible for me to conceive of poetry as able to breathe would be one of complete and humdrum uniformity of existence, such as was dreamed of at one time, but I think is no longer so rigidly insisted on, by extreme socialistic reformers. As long as there is such variety of individual action possible as will give free scope to the energies and passions, the hopes and fears, of mankind, so long I think the element of plastic imagination will be found to insist on expression in the mode of formal art. It is quite possible that, as a result of extended knowledge and of the democratic instinct, a certain precipitant hardness of design, such as was presented in the nineteenth century by Tennyson in the blank verse lyrics in 'The Princess', by Browning in the more brilliant parts of 'One Word More', by Swinburne in his fulminating 'Sapphics', may be as little repeated as the analogous hardness of Dryden in 'MacFlecknoe' or the lapidary splendour of Gray in his 'Odes'. I should rather look, at least in the immediate future, to a revival of the liquid ease of Chaucer or the soft redundancies of 'The Faëry Queen'. The remarkable experiments of the Symbolists of twenty years ago, and their effect upon the whole body of French verse, lead me to expect a continuous movement in that direction.

It is difficult indeed to speak of the probable future of poetry without introducing the word Symbolism, over which there has raged so much windy warfare in the immediate past. I cannot help believing that the immense importance of this idea is one of the principal—perhaps the greatest discovery with regard to poetry which was made in the last generation. Symbols, among the ancient

Greeks, were, if I mistake not, the signs by which the initiated worshippers of Ceres or Cybele recognized their mysterious unison of heart. A symbol is an indication of an object, in opposition to a direct description of the same; it arouses the idea of it in the awakened soul; rings a bell, for we may almost put it so, which at once rouses the spirit and reminds it of some special event or imminent service. The importance of making this the foremost feature of poetry is not new, although it may be said that we have only lately, and only partially, become aware of its value. But, really, if you will consider it, all that the Symbolists have been saying is involved in Bacon's phrase that 'poetry conforms the shows of things to the desires of the soul, instead of subjecting the soul to external things'.

There could never be presented a subject less calculated to be wound up with a rhetorical flourish or to close in pompous affirmation than that which I have so temerarily brought before you this afternoon. I hope that you will not think that your time has been wasted while we have touched, lightly and erratically, like birds on boughs, upon some of the probable or possible features of the poetry of the future. Whatever you, or I, or the wisest of professors, may predict on this theme of the unborn poets, we may be certain that there will

hover in their restless heads
One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
Which into words no virtue

of ours can 'digest'. I began with the rococo image of a Pegasus, poised in the air, flashing and curvetting, petulantly refusing to alight on any expected spot. Let me return to it in closing, that I may suggest our only sage attitude to be one of always watching for his inevitable arrival, ready to put grateful lips to the waters of Hippocrene as soon as ever they bubble from the blow of his hoof.

EDMUND GOSSE.

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