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# POETRY TO-DAY

BY

IOLO A. WILLIAMS

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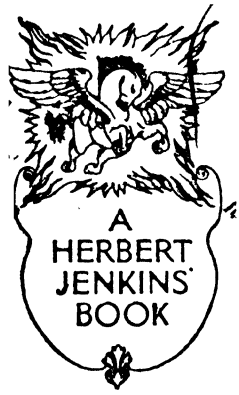


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## *NOTE*

Most of the quotations, used as illustrations in this Essay, are merely short extracts. The following poems, however, are quoted in full:

"Customs Die Hard", by Mr. J. C. Squire (From *The Survival of the Fittest*. Allen & Unwin.).

"The Ship", by Mr. J. C. Squire (From *Poems in One Volume*. Heinemann).

"They are not long, the weeping and the laughter", by the late Ernest Dowson (From *Poems*. John Lane).

"An Epitaph", by Mr. Walter de la Mare (From *The Listeners*. Constable).

"Clear Eyes", by Mr. Walter de la Mare (From *Motley*. Constable).

"Everyone Sang", by Mr. Siegfried Sassoon (From *War Poems*. Heinemann).

My very best thanks are due to the above-mentioned authors and publishers for granting me permission to use these poems.

I. A. W.

# POETRY TO-DAY

# POETRY TO-DAY

## I

IT is usually wise, when writing upon a subject, to begin by defining it, as exactly as possible, so that the reader may be made to understand what it is that the author is proposing to discuss. *Poetry To-day*, which is to be the subject of this brochure, presents, however, to the unhappy writer who endeavours to follow such a procedure, this difficulty—that while it is quite possible to define the word " To-day ", it is not necessary, and that, on the other hand, it is most desirable to define "Poetry", but unfortunately impossible. Many persons have tried to say what poetry is. Wordsworth (I think) approached pretty near to one aspect of the truth when he said that poetry was emotion recollected in tranquillity, a remark which at least contains a realisation of the fact that poetry is not a thing

created hastily, thoughtlessly almost, by a mind violently agitated by some strong emotion. The public loves to believe, and has been encouraged to do so by some poets, that a poem is the instantaneous outcome of inspiration, that the poet has but to have his soul stirred by some sight, to strike his breast with one hand, to throw the other before him into the air, and—heigh presto!—the poem is ready to be written out and sent to the printer. Wordsworth knew better than that. He knew that an art needs more from its practitioner than inspiration, it needs labour and thought. The emotion which is the seed of the poem must lie in the poet's mind for some time before it germinates, and as it grows it must be tended and trimmed so that the grown plant may be as shapely and perfect as possible.

It is perhaps for this reason that so many of the best poems are melancholy, for melancholy is not an emotion roused, like anger, or indignation, or laughter, upon the immediate contemplation of a particular event, but a quality of thought and feeling that (for some reason which we need not consider here) more or less constantly pervades the minds of a large number of the most sensitive and intelligent people. The scene, which arouses the poet's original

emotion, may be gay and lively enough; but he does not immediately convert his emotion into a poem; he lets it lie in his mind for perhaps years, and, when the poem finally emerges, it may show that the writer's melancholy has permeated the whole thing, and converted some brilliantly shining and happy vision into a reflection, perhaps even more exquisitely beautiful, but sad and subdued—transposed, as it were, into a minor key. Thus "emotion recollected in tranquillity" tends usually to change its character in the process, and very often, from the nature of the human mind, the change is from gay to grave, from joy to wistfulness. How pervasive is melancholy in English poetry may be shown by the instance of Mr. Belloc, who is usually reckoned a cheerful writer, but yet cannot avoid converting to sadness such a scene as that of a girl dancing in a Spanish inn:

> Glancing,
> Dancing,
> Backing and advancing,
> Snapping of the clapper to the spin
> Out and in—
> And the Ting, Tong, Tang of the guitar!
> Do you remember an Inn,
> Miranda?
> Do you remember an Inn?

It is safe to surmise that, when Mr. Belloc witnessed that dance, he did not weep, rather, I should guess, he rejoiced; but in converting its recollection into a poem he achieves a slow, sad music that wrings the very heart of the reader. The emotion is, in essence, that which is always aroused by man's yearning to give one more day of life to things desirable but—of their nature—transient and fugitive. It is perhaps the most generally pervading of all human feelings, save that of love; it is the "Eheu fugaces" of Horace, and—equally—the instinct that leads us to recall, almost with tears, the comic songs of years gone by and to think wistfully of "At Trinity Church I met my doom" and "Her golden hair was hanging down her back". It is an emotion that rouses us when we meet it, even, in the foolish, as Shakespeare very well knew:

> Jesu! Jesu! dead! a' drew a good bow; and dead! a' shot a fine shoot; John a Gaunt loved him well, and betted much money on his head. Dead!

Shallow was a fool, but, nevertheless, he makes us share his feeling.

We have reason to suppose, then, that when emotion is recollected in tranquillity it is also very frequently transmuted by the temperament and prevailing cast of mind of the poet. Even so, however, there is more than this necessary for the making of a poem, for it is clear that recollected emotion could quite as well be expressed in prose as in poetry. Prose, indeed, may have a poetical quality, but it cannot be poetry, for there is, as a perfectly sound instinct tells us, somewhere a dividing line between the two, though we do not know its exact position. In trying to clarify our ideas as to the nature of prose and poetry, we are like the scientist who believes that such a thing as a species exists, but cannot define it. Yet we are, I think, in a position to say not only that there is an essential distinction between the two forms of writing, but also that this lies in the element of repetition which is present in all poetry. Sometimes the repetition is of sounds, as in rhymed or alliterative verse, sometimes of rhythms, as in blank and other unrhymed verses; usually there is a combination of both kinds of repetition. But the repetition must be there for a piece of writing to be poetry. There must be an arrangement of the words so planned as to bring about, at more or

less regular intervals, the re-iteration of certain recognisable units, whether those units be combinations of the sounds of vowels and consonants, or of stressed and unstressed syllables. Whatever the nature of the unit of repetition, it must be there, and must contribute to the impression created by—in other words to the *sense* of—the composition as a whole. In prose the actual arrangement of the words is planned merely, as it were, to liberate most easily the meaning of the writer. In poetry, on the other hand, the words are so arranged as to produce by their very arrangement, as opposed to their dictionary definitions, a particular impression on the reader's mind.

It is difficult to see how this can be done except by the use of repetition, and certainly that has, in the past, always been the method adopted by poets. To write prose that is not like other prose is a thing that is not difficult of achievement, and I am inclined to wonder whether certain modern writers, in their attempts to evolve a new kind of poetry, are not merely writing an odd kind of prose. Perhaps it is that my mind is not sufficiently alert to grasp the unit of repetition (which I suggest must be present in all poetry) in the work of such

writers as Mr. Carl Sandburg. Mr. Sandburg, who has a considerable reputation in America, is a writer of much vigour, with a keen eye for those details in a scene which are essential to its presentation in words, and a quick mind. My only fear is that he has never given that mind to the consideration of the essentials of poetry and prose, and that, in his eagerness to write an original kind of poetry, he is writing something which has none of the essentials of poetry and few of the merits of prose. Here are a few lines from one of Mr. Sandburg's pieces:

> There is something terrible
> about a hurdy-gurdy,
> a gipsy man and woman,
> and a monkey in red flannel
> all stopping in front of a big house
> with a sign " For Rent " on the door
> and the blinds hanging loose
> and nobody home.
> I never saw this.
> I hope to God I never will.

That passage avoids many of the worst faults of bad poetry; it is not obscure, for instance; it contains an amusing thought, and it is not false in sentiment. Yet I find difficulty in

resisting the belief that Mr. Sandburg is barking up the wrong tree, or rather, perhaps, that he is barking up a very small shrub in the mistaken belief that it is a tree. Such lines as those I have just quoted seem rather to be notes for a piece of prose than part of a poem; and, indeed, Mr. Sandburg, and writers of his school, by omitting from their work that which is an essential thing in poetry, give us nothing to show that they are poets at all. It is as if a man were to build a pig-stye and then invite us to admire his skill in domestic architecture. Yet perhaps the saddest thing about much so-called " free-verse " is that it does not even substitute good prose for poetry, but a sort of hybrid which seems, like most hybrids, to be born sterile.

It is easy to deride the poetical form of any particular literary period, and it is a healthy thing that poets should constantly be seeking new forms; for since form is not merely a mould in which a poem is cast, but something which becomes a part of its content, since form is not an external thing to a poem, but something internal, it is clear that no poet can be writing truly original verse who is not in some degree an innovator in form. The difference is not always one that can

be measured, or set down in feet, or displayed in a scheme of rhymes—A. B. B. A., or what not—but certainly every poet, to give his work value, must contrive to give a shape of his own to those subtle but recognisable internal rhythms which are part of the life and being of a poem. In other words he must, as the journalists say, "Strike a note of his own".

This brings me, naturally enough I trust, to a point which can be studied in the light of another favourite definition of poetry. Prose, we are sometimes told, is the right words in the right order, but poetry is "the best words in the best order". The antithesis has, I must admit, always struck me as foolish. What, I pray, is the difference between "the right words" and "the best words"? But in any case, the answer to that question does not much matter, for words (like most other things) are not absolutely, and without qualification, best or worst. They are only best for a particular purpose, and, before we can make any such antithesis as that which I have quoted, we must consider whether the purposes of poetry and of prose are the same. It does not, I think, take very long for us to decide that they are by no means the same. The primary

object of written prose is, I take it, to put the reader in possession of certain facts; the best prose is that which uses words with the greatest individual precision and collective lucidity. It would almost be fair to say that the more one notices the style of a prose-writer, the worse it is. With poetry, however, the chief aim is not mere information. It is true that before the invention of printing much purely informative literature was written in verse. Treatises on husbandry, for example, were written by poets, and epics and ballads were versified history. But the reason for this was not that poetry was better suited than prose to the exposition of these subjects, but that, once written, it was more easily remembered. To-day, however, the printing press has made it unnecessary for us to carry all our knowledge in our heads, and poetry is no longer used as a mnemonic—except for such things as the gender rhymes which all small boys learn at school. Of these, however, I will take leave to omit consideration. Broadly speaking, poetry to-day is not intended to be informative, and those forms of it which originally won their position because verse was easier to remember than prose—the epic, the ballad, and the didactic poem—have,

each of them, fallen upon comparatively evil days.

Those kinds of poetry which, at the present time, have the greatest attraction for us, and are most successfully practised, are those which aim, not so much at telling us something, but at arousing in us some emotion—pity, or anger, or laughter, or scorn, or exultation; and poetry does this not only by the words it uses, but by the way it uses them, and by the tune it makes with them as it arranges them. It is hard to resist using a musical metaphor, for, indeed, in some ways poetry is essentially more nearly allied to music than to written prose, and, as music does, approaches the brain by way of the sense of hearing. Poetry has in its appeal a physical quality which is none the less potent because we find difficulty in saying of the emotion which a beautiful poem excites in us, how much is caused by the mere sound of the words, and how much by the sense which our brain attaches to them. The two appeals are, however, certainly there, and the perfection of a poem depends upon the blending and interadjustment of the one and the other. It is this mutual relation of sound to meaning that makes any comparison of what is the best word for poetry with what

is the right word for prose meaningless, for the words are wanted for different purposes.

It is impossible to create anything which is a blend of two different things, and still to keep each of those things at its highest individual perfection and purity. To do so would be to produce a mixture, in which the elements jostled one another crude and unaltered, rather than a compound. Therefore in poetry words are used neither at their highest precision of meaning and arrangement, nor at their greatest value as mere sounds. There must be compromise between the two elements, for the poet has to remember that he is relying for his effect upon their combined action upon the reader. The result is that in no poem, however great, can the choice and order of words be exactly that of prose; yet the poet must remember that the words which he is using, are things which have well known and accepted meanings in everyday prose, and he must not select, for their mere sound, words which have meanings that make them, in that place, either ludicrous or colourless. Similarly, he must reject words which, though admirable in sense, by their sound break his rhythm or otherwise jar with the musical effect at which he is aiming. There

has been much misunderstanding and loose thinking on this subject, and one is constantly seeing poets struggling as hard as they can to over-emphasise one or other of the two elements. Swinburne, for instance, was liable to be carried away by the sound of his words and to write verses that, often enough, made very little sense. Some of his disciples have succeeded in making no sense at all; and it is an interesting thing to note, incidentally, that Swinburne has had less influence on the technique of others than any poet of equal eminence, and that when his influence is apparent the result is usually deplorable. On the other hand, by neglecting the sound of their verses, many poets have failed as badly. I quoted, a page or two back, a few lines by Mr. Carl Sandburg, in which I felt this writer had made the mistake of deliberately neglecting the appeal of sound by excluding that repetitive element which I believe to be essential to the form of poetry. Others have, indeed, retained the form of the thing, but have forced their meaning too roughly into the mould. Even so great a man as Browning did this at times, so that, for the moment at least, he versified clumsily, instead of writing poetry:

No harm! It was not my fault
If you never turned your eye's tail up
As I shook upon E *in alt*,
Or ran the chromatic scale up.

Perhaps in these particular lines the effect was deliberate on Browning's part; but, deliberate or not, they furnish an admirable example of what I mean.

Now, by way of contrast, let me quote a stanza from one of the loveliest of all modern poems, Mr. Walter de la Mare's *All That's Past*, a piece the very thought of which never fails to recall the thrill it gave me when first I read it, about the year 1910 I suppose, in a short-lived magazine called (somewhat unhappily) *The Thrush*. This poem, to my mind, is a perfect example of the blending of the elements which are necessary in poetry. It consists of three stanzas, of which the last runs thus:

Very old are we men;
Our dreams are tales
Told in dim Eden
By Eve's nightingales;
We wake and whisper awhile,
But, the day gone by,
Silence and sleep like fields
Of amaranth lie.

If ever there was a stanza which was calculated to destroy the notion that poetry is only another kind of prose, or that it aims at the same object as prose, it is this one. Try, for a moment, to shut your ears to the poetry of the thing, and force yourself to read the words as prose, taking account only of their prose meanings; you will find that, not only is the prose not the best prose, but it is pretty well meaningless. One could recast in prose a part of the meaning of the stanza, by talking of complexes, subconscious egos, and inherited characteristics; but a greater part would escape us. In truth, the force of the whole is a thing compounded of the meanings of the words used, and of the rhythms and sounds which they form. Only by the arrangement of these particular words in this particular poetic form can the whole of the poet's intention be made clear; and there is no way of paraphrasing what his verse says. Yet no violence is done either to the prose sense, or to the prose order, of the words; so that the reader's mind is not distressed (or entertained) by any such incongruities as inept versifiers are for ever producing in their verses. The poet here has kept a perfect balance between the two media—words as sound, and words as vehicles of definite ideas—in which

he is, when he is writing a poem, simultaneously working.

I wonder if we are now any nearer—not, indeed, to defining poetry, for that I believe to be impossible—but to understanding it and some of its essentials. I trust so; but, however that may be, the subject cannot be pursued here at much further length, for this booklet is not, primarily, an essay on the nature of poetry, but a discussion of the present state of the art. Yet one thing more must be said, before we pass on to our main task, and that is that poetry can be written on any subject which is susceptible to emotional treatment—which means, in practice, almost any subject in the world. Too often attempts have been made to limit the subject matter of poetry. All such attempts are fundamentally unsound, for anything, which is capable of being presented in some other way than as a bald statement of fact, is capable of being the subject of a poem. The eighteenth century realised this, but—taken as a whole—the nineteenth century did not, and was inclined to limit poetry to an admiring contemplation of the soul soaring, and to a discreet lament over the dissolution of the body. These things are, of course, perfectly proper subjects for

poetry, but they are by no means the only ones.

Happily, modern poets are beginning to realise that exaltation and melancholy, though they may be the commonest, are not the only states of mind suited to poetical expression. A poem may just as well be funny as sad, and is not then necessarily to be classed, somewhat contemptuously, as mere verse. Poetry, as I have tried to show, is a method of expression in which the sense of the words, and their rhythms and sounds, work together to produce an effect on the reader's mind. So long as there is true harmony between the two elements, the result is a poem, whatever the emotion governing them both may be. It is only when the comic effect is produced by a deliberate incongruity between rhythm and sense, when the result is in fact a parody, that we are justified in classing it as verse, a thing produced by mere cleverness and without depth of feeling—though not necessarily without inspiration (whatever that may be)—for when a writer feels deeply it is, I conceive, impossible for him to play with his emotion and, as it were, make fun of it, or, if it is possible, and he does it, he is deliberately refraining from writing poetry. It is within our daily experience that the emotions

of laughter, or of disgust, to mention only two, can affect us just as strongly as sorrow or joy; and they not only can be, but are, made into poetry. It would not be difficult to choose from modern poetry a series of quotations which would show the emotions which, generally speaking, the nineteenth century held to be unpoetical, made into poems. Let me quote, not a long series, but just two or three. As I write this essay there arrives on my desk a slender book, *The Dispassionate Pilgrim*, by a poet of whom I have never previously heard, and of whom I now know nothing, except that he shows considerable skill in writing just the kind of lightly witty poetry with which it suits me to illustrate my present point.

This poet's name is Mr. Colin D. B. Ellis, and this is how he begins one of his poems:

> Though my heart is bound to Chloris
> (Chloe, Amaryllis, Doris),
> Though I stoutly should condemn
> All inconstancy to—them,
> Though my love will never falter
> And my heart will never alter
> Till—I do not like to vow ;

Not, at any rate, just now——
Yet I see no valid reason
Why I should account it treason
If at times, and by the way,
I should let my glances stray
And appreciate the graces
Shown in unfamiliar faces.

Light enough, in all conscience; but it expresses a genuine feeling, and expresses it through the technique of poetry with an effect which could not otherwise be achieved. Therefore, I believe these lines to be poetry. Perhaps my reader may object that there is nothing very new in this kind of poetry, that it is in a legitimate line of descent from Prior and Praed and Austin Dobson. That is true, but the thing to be considered is this—how much was Prior read thirty years since, and has there not too often been a tendency to consider him, and Praed, and Dobson, and a dozen other poets who wrote lightly and wittily, as different *in kind* from their more solemn brothers? It is the general realisation that poetry can express a multitude of emotions that is a new thing to-day, or, rather, the revival of an old thing; it is not, except in a lesser degree, the existence of humorous poetry.

Now let us turn to another kind of poem, the political satire, which has often been looked down upon as a sort of poor relation of the better class of poem, though none has ever been able to deny altogether its kinship to poetry. Through the nineteenth century political satire was hardly written, if at all; but now one could put together quite a large body of verse of this kind, which would have great and obvious merits as poetry. There would be things by Mr. Belloc. There would be others by Mr. Chesterton, among them that masterpiece of political disgust, to which he was moved by the then Mr. F. E. Smith's extravagant remark that the Welsh Disestablishment Bill had "shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe". This is the last stanza of it:

It would greatly, I must own,
Soothe me, Smith,
If you left this theme alone,
Holy Smith!
For your legal cause or civil
You fight well and get your fee;
For your God or dream or devil
You will answer, not to me.

Talk about the pews and steeples
And the Cash that goes therewith!
But the souls of Christian peoples . . .
——Chuck it, Smith!

There would, I think, also be this war-time epigram by Mr. J. C. Squire:

Customs die hard in this our native land;
And still in Northern France, I understand,
Our gallant boys, as through the fray they forge,
Cry "God for Harmsworth! England and Lloyd George!"

And there would be other such things, which are poetry because their verse form is an essential part of the expression of some violent emotion of indignation, or disgust, aroused by the contemplation of current politics.

Our living poets are also realising that poetry is a language that includes even the broadly comic—as it did to some extent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here it is more difficult to select an example, for there is also such a thing as humorous verse, which is not what I am speaking about.

Mr. Chesterton, however, will once more give me exactly what I want:

> Old Noah he had an ostrich farm and fowls on the largest scale,
> He ate his egg with a ladle in an egg-cup big as a pail,
> And the soup he took was Elephant Soup and the fish he took was Whale,
> But they all were small to the cellar he took when he set out to sail,
> And Noah he often said to his wife when he sat down to dine,
> " I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine."

Perhaps because, as a teetotaller, I do not share Mr. Chesterton's, and Noah's, enthusiasm for wine, I feel that I am all the more likely to be giving a true and unbiassed opinion when I say that nothing on earth will persuade me that that exuberant and uproarious stanza is not poetry. Mr. Squire has put it—and quite rightly—in an anthology of modern poetry, side by side with the loveliest things of Mr. de la Mare, Rupert Brooke, James Elroy Flecker, Mr. Ralph Hodgson, and a dozen others. Would any anthologist of the nineteenth century have done that? And, if not,

may we not congratulate ourselves that our appreciation of the proper scope of poetry is becoming more catholic, better able to recognise perfection in whatever form we find it? It is a strange thing, this attempt which the nineteenth century made to limit the sphere of poetry, for there was no similar attempt to limit that of prose. A man might "dare to write as funny as" he could, and yet have no cause to fear for his reputation as a great prose-writer; in fact, the readers of prose rather liked it, and encouraged him to do it again; but let him dare to be funny, even rather funny, in a poem, and he was regarded as a trifler—a verdict which only such occasional robust and careless spirits as R. H. Barham dared to brave. In a sense, I suppose, this was intended as a compliment to poetry, which was held to be the nobler of the two arts, and therefore to be applied to the expression only of lofty thoughts. But if poetry is nobler than prose, is it not a good thing that we should laugh in poetry, and the more nobly the better?

With that I must—for lack of space—cut short these remarks on poetry, its nature and functions, in general, and proceed to the more particular part of this brief treatise—the state

of poetry to-day—which last word I do not (as I said in my opening sentences) think it necessary to define—further, of course, than to say that I do not mean it in its literal sense.

## II

When the twentieth century began there was a remarkable scarcity of Great Figures in English poetry, though England, looking back on the past hundred years, felt quite certain that poetry could only survive if it were practised by Great Figures. Tennyson, Browning, and Matthew Arnold were dead, and the only Great Figure that survived, Swinburne, had written his best work thirty years before, and, when he did write a poem, he was only, as a critic has said, "turning the handle of the old magnificent barrel-organ rapidly round and round." Moreover, England had never felt *quite* happy about Swinburne, and it was not mere Victorian prudishness that caused this uneasiness. Probably there never was a great English poet whose work was less typically English in feeling, and was, moreover, more curiously compounded of the æsthetically good and bad. It was clear, too, even at the time, that he had a most disastrous effect on those

versifiers who attempted to imitate him—so disastrous was it, in fact, that it is now almost impossible to recall even the names of any of them, and not a line of their work remains in memory, except a poem on the death of Artemus Ward, which began:

> Is he gone to a land of no laughter,
> This man who made mirth for us all?

This is still often quoted by journalists as by Swinburne himself, but in fact it was written by James Rhoades, an amiable poet of no great distinction.

Strangely enough, the only other poet who appeared in the year 1900 to stand any chance of being a Great Figure was Mr. Kipling, whose case, as a poet, was almost exactly parallel to that of Swinburne. His ethics were (for quite different reasons) thoroughly mistrusted by a large section of cultivated persons. "We have only two poets living," John Morley once remarked in conversation, "one is Swinburne and the other is that brute Kipling." His poetical technique was indeed original and individual. He used the language of the private soldier with extraordinary skill as the

medium for his *Barrack-Room Ballads*, a book which it is impossible not to read through—once, and at other times he could strike a lilt that still sings in the ears, though it is long since he wrote his best verse:—

Buy my English posies!
You that scorn the may,
Won't you greet a friend from home
Half the world away?
Green against the draggled drift,
Faint and frail and first—
Buy my Northern blood-root
And I'll know where you were nursed:
Robin down the logging-road whistles, "Come to me!"
Spring has found the maple-grove, the sap is running free;
All the winds of Canada call the ploughing-rain,
Take the flower and turn the hour, and kiss your love again.

To no man who wrote that could the title of poet be denied; but it is unusual for a poem by Mr. Kipling not to have about it, at any rate in places, a forced note, and an air as of a "stunt"—to use a useful slang term. In this respect he is like Swinburne, and like him, too, he has had a bad effect on his disciples in

verse, of whom Mr. Robert W. Service is the best known. Indeed, both Swinburne and Mr. Kipling have, apart from their own work, had a negligible influence on the main current of English poetry.

These two men, then, were the only two who had, at the beginning of the present century, any popularly recognised claim to be considered Great Figures. Contemporary criticism was not wholly satisfied with either of them. Opinion, generally, still held, in 1900, that (a) you must have Great Figures and that (b) no Great Figures could be Greater or more Figurative than Browning and Tennyson. It felt also that Swinburne and Mr. Kipling, great as they were, were not quite in the same tradition, and, though development and change were perhaps not undesirable, neither *Barrack-Room Ballads* nor *Poems and Ballads* seemed quite to fill the bill—and, anyhow, *Poems and Ballads* had been out thirty years. In fact, the new century was really (though it did not know it) looking for a change, but it was still expecting the change to happen on the old lines. The world waited for a new prophet, in a cloak of perhaps slightly modern cut, but still in a cloak, to pour out a new *Idylls of the King* or *Ring and the Book*. It did not think

that it might be on the verge of a period in which the poetic gift would be widely spread, when a large number of men and women would write a few lovely poems each, and when an old method of publication, the miscellany or anthology, would, as a natural consequence, come to be revived and be the most widely read form of poetical volume.

As a matter of fact, poetry was, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, already feeling its way towards this new phase in its history; but, as so often happens in the years preceding a great change in the form of literature, the earliest manifestations were largely ineffectual. The Romantic Revival was preluded by the Anna Sewards and Della Cruscans of the late eighteenth century, and, similarly, the last years of the nineteenth century saw the birth of Rhymers' Clubs and Celtic Revivals, which caused any amount of excitement at the time, though their rumour is only faint to-day. Both these movements—the Celtic (chiefly Irish) and the Decadent—were, in their different ways, attempts to find a new formula for the expression of eternal truths, and each was marked by attracting to it a number of writers who all wrote

very much the same sort of thing, only sometimes better and sometimes worse. In each case the best poets produced by a movement were those who were its least extreme members, those whose poems were least marked by the peculiarities of their school.

The great thing, if you were a "decadent" of the nineties, was to be as dissipatedly urban as possible. You wrote of sin, of the drinking of absinthe, of rouged cheeks and painted lips. You felt the influence of Swinburne a little, perhaps, but even more you were influenced by French poets—which showed itself, chiefly, in the fact that every separate poem you wrote was dedicated to a different person—you wrote your title at the top of the page, and then "For——", the dedicatee being preferably somebody with an extravagantly foreign name. I often think, indeed, that the poets of the nineties must have spent much of their time scanning the shops in the Mile End Road for suitable names to follow the word "For". You also showed how French you were by affecting the Roman Catholic Religion (which, by the way, was rejected by most French poets of that time). It was all slightly ridiculous, but it had its tragic side, for it spoilt the work of many men of talent, and a few of them, by

attempting to put their æsthetic theories of life into practice (which, as Lord Melbourne said of bringing religion into private life, "is going a damn sight too far"), died early and unfortunate deaths.

Of this school of poetry the most typical exponents were Ernest Dowson and Mr. Arthur Symons, with Lionel Johnson and Mr. Richard le Gallienne in attendance not far away. Mr. Symons wrote a perhaps larger volume of pure (if I may use that adjective) Yellow Book poetry than anyone else; yet it is not his work of this kind that is now remembered and put in anthologies, it is rather such pieces of much more normal verse as *The Crying of Water* and *The Broken Tryst* that are now quoted—and, indeed, they are much better and more charming than the mass of his early verse. But in Ernest Dowson's work the affected tawdryness which looks so foolish, to-day, in the poems of many of his contemporaries and associates, seems to have undergone a change which renders it neither affected nor tawdry. To this unhappy man the attitude, which many assumed so self-consciously, came naturally, and because of this sincerity the single volume of his collected poems is perhaps the only book, out of the many collections of

"decadent" verse which appeared during the nineties, which has to-day any meaning, and which one can read without either amusement or disgust—according to one's temperament. Dowson at least wrote truthfully, as truth appeared to him, and he had, moreover, considerable technical skill. One poem of his, *Non Sum Qualis Eram bonæ sub regno Cynaræ*, is probably the best known thing of its kind—and almost the only one of its kind that deserves to be remembered at all. It begins:

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara, thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

This did once for ever, perhaps, a thing which was in no urgent need of being done at all. A much deeper note it was that Dowson sounded in a little poem which is the best thing he ever wrote, and by which he may be remembered

by many generations of readers to whom the decadents of the nineties, and the two *Books of the Rhymers' Club*, are not even names:

They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
Love and desire and hate:
I think they have no portion in us after
We pass the gate.

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.

Lionel Johnson, of whom one thinks, almost inevitably, after Ernest Dowson, had yet not much in common with him as a poet. Some of his verse, it is true, has that over-precious diction which we associate with the typical poem of the school—

Roses from Paestan rosaries!
More goodly red and white was she:
Her red and white were harmonies,
Not matched upon a Paestan tree.——

but at its best his verse was far removed from this too highly perfumed frippery.

When he begins a poem called "A Friend" thus:

> All, that he came to give,
> He gave, and went again:
> I have seen one man live,
> I have seen one man reign,
> With all the graces in his train,

we feel that we are reading the work of a poet who has no need to bedizen his verse with Paestan rosaries, or what-not, but who is able to create strength out of simplicity.

Yet these men, though they had their merits, were not, in any case, big men, and the pernicious fashions of the school to which, in a greater or less degree they were attached, so infected the body of their work, that they have not even the stature to which it was in them, under more favourable conditions, to grow. The decadents were doomed to give no permanent twist to the course of English literature, for the motive of their work was born, not of a genuine creative impulse, but out of a groping search for novelty, and a mistaken idea that a cockneyfied Paris would

be a delectable city to live in, that Helicon was a back street in Soho.

The other poetic movement of the late nineteenth century, the Celtic revival, was far healthier in origin, yet it, too, was alien from the genius of English poetry. This movement was almost entirely Irish, and it let loose upon an astonished world a flood of Oisins, Shanachees, Deirdres, and other antique Irish personages with names which the generality found it hard to pronounce. The world to which these Irish poets invited the attention of English readers of poetry certainly possessed some of the charms of novelty, and perhaps other attractions, too; it was full of ancient legends, among which it was hard not to become a trifle puzzled, but which had beauty and strangeness; it had an engaging and novel abruptness and simplicity of diction, which seemed all the more refreshing by contrast with the somewhat fetid verbiage of the decadents. Yet, with all these advantages, Irish poets remained *Irish* poets, and the product of their muse remained something to be admired, something to be enjoyed, by English people, but not any permanent substitute for a strong and racy *English* poetry. The great heart of England might be content to sojourn

a century or more on the shores of Grasmere with Mr. Wordsworth, but it was disinclined to stop a tenth of that period with Mr. Yeats beside the Lake of Innisfree —a fact which Mr. Yeats, being not only an Irishman, but also a great poet, himself realised.

The Irish literary movement did, however, perform two services to our poetry—it showed that there was a surprisingly large number of Irish men and women who had it in them to write one or two good lyrics each; and it gave us two poets who were great enough to produce a large body of verse in which the local—the purely Irish—element was, if present at all, only incidental. These two poets were Mr. W. B. Yeats and Mr. George Russell, the latter of whom has always chosen—for some reason which is obscure to me—to write over the signature "A.E." Both these writers, though they began publishing poetry in the last century (how long ago that sounds!) are still, happily, living and practising their art; and though they have been the leaders of the Irish literary revival, they have never, to an outsider, seemed quite of it, and their fires still shine brightly now that—so far as poetry is concerned—Ireland is

producing very little that seems of much importance.

The purely Celtic part of the business, the mythology, even the Irish setting, seemed always to be something extraneous to the heart of Mr. Yeat's work, except his dramatic work, in which he was a good enough artist to make the legends, and the scene, live for us. Yet in his lyric poetry there is little that is definitely Irish. It is true that the famous *Lake Isle of Innisfree* ties us down with geographical exactitude; and very occasionally, as in *The Fiddler of Dooney*,

> When I play on my fiddle in Dooney
> Folk dance like a wave of the sea,
> My cousin is priest in Kilvarnet,
> My brother in Moharabuiee,

there is almost a faint echo of the stage Irishman; but usually, and usually in the best of Mr. Yeat's poems, there is very little that is distinctively Irish—except, indeed, in the titles, to which it frequently pleases him to give a strong Gaelic flavour. He calls one piece, for instance, *The Song of Wandering Aengus*, but he might almost as well have called it *The Song*

*of Robin Goodfellow*, for this is a sample of its quality:

I went out to the hazel wood,
  Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
  And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
  And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
  And caught a little silver trout.

It is a song of the fairy-land which is the world over, and not in Ireland only.

The admission must nevertheless be made that there is in a good deal of Mr. Yeat's poetry a cadence which does not seem to be quite that of an English writer, and it is perhaps in this respect that the Irishman in him comes out most strongly—though even thus Mr. Yeats cannot be accused of writing his poetry with a shilelagh. Take such exquisite lines as these:

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths,
Of night and light and the half light,

which form the opening, a thing of sheer delight, of one of Mr. Yeat's early poems. Yet our ear, even while it is delighted, tells us that the rhythm is not one that is native in any English shire—none the worse for that, perhaps, but still not quite the rhythm to move, down to its deepest core, an English, or a Welsh, or a Scotch heart.

Like Mr. Yeats, "A.E." is not—is something greater than—a painter of Irish interiors. He is a mystic, and his great gift is to create a lovely iridescent haze of words through which some truth shines, like a sun that is more glorious for the clouds its light irradiates. The defect of his work is that sometimes it makes one wonder whether the "y" in mystic should not be replaced by an "i". His work, at its best, may be most aptly described by applying to it two lovely stanzas from one of "A.E.'s" own poems:

Its edges foam'd with amethyst and rose,
Withers once more the old blue flower of day:
There where the ether like a diamond glows,
Its petals fade away.

A shadowy tumult stirs the dusky air;
Sparkle the delicate dews, the distant snows;

The great deep thrills—for through it everywhere
The breath of Beauty blows.

Try to picture that scene, and you will have some idea of what "A.E." can achieve, "the mystery and magnificence"—to quote another of his own phrases—of his most beautiful poems. Yet, here again, there is a quality, in this case a lack of definiteness, which prevents "A.E's." poetry from being completely satisfying to a large number of English readers. Indeed, the curious thing is how little influence the work of Mr. Yeats and Mr. Russell has had on the development of the main current of English poetry. They are universally admitted to be poets of the highest distinction, yet there is the general impression that, apart, as it were, from their personal value, they do not stand for any poetical truth which the English-speaking world, as a whole, feels to be of vital importance.

If this is true, as I believe it to be, of the two poets who have been able to rise far above the movement to which they belong, what chance of permanent appreciation, except of a minor kind, have any of the lesser writers of the Irish school? Alas, practically none. They will be remembered as the authors of

certain pretty lyrics, but otherwise it is hardly possible to avoid considering them as rustics, interesting for their curious local customs, but hardly in touch with the mind of the great world. When we are charmed by them, it is with their quaintness.

These, then, were the two chief schools of poetry of the nineties, and they are interesting for two reasons, first because they were not, at the time at any rate, dominated by any overpowering figures, but were groups of lyric writers held together by a certain community of ideas; and second, because their existence made natural—inevitable indeed—the revival of the Miscellany, or Anthology, a form of joint publication which has always flourished in periods where a large number of writers had some share of poetic ability. *The Book of the Rhymers' Club*, and *The Second Book of the Rhymers' Club*, contained many of the best lyrics of both the decadents and the Celts, and of some poets who were neither, for the two coteries did not by any means include within their limits all the poets who were writing at that time.

Some of those who stood outside, or only on the fringes of, the definite groups must be

mentioned here, very briefly, if we are to realise how, as it were, the stage was set for the entrance of those poets who, to-day, are singing most briskly round us. When the year 1900 came, what poets, other than those we have already recalled, were recognised as men and women of poetic talent? There was, for instance, Stephen Phillips, whose facile, and not altogether unpleasing, blank verse dramas were so vastly overpraised that, when the bubble burst, the world forgot that poor Phillips had any talent at all—which was doing him an injustice. There was Alice Meynell, possessor of a classical muse which could at times achieve great beauty. There was Francis Thompson, whose verse was so full of colour and sound, and so deeply felt, that he made one admire his very faults, his turgidity, his "latinate vocables", and his violences of accent and rhythm. There was Mr. (now Sir) William Watson, who—when he avoided the temptation to be pompous, a temptation which his facility in resonant diction made it hard for him to resist—wrote delightful lyrics, some excellent epigrams, and some graver memorial poems of merit. Sir William has, I think, a constitutional desire to be a little old-fashioned, and this has

caused him to have practically no influence on his juniors, and at times to be unjustly sneered at as a poet; but this foible will not eventually, when all our fashions are old, obscure the merits of some of his verse.

Two other poets, because of the influence they have had, must be spoken of—not indeed at length—but not quite perfunctorily. One of these was John Davidson, a poet of very remarkable ability, who had more to do with the shaping of modern verse than his present almost complete oblivion would indicate. Davidson's great lesson to other poets was that the poet's material lay everywhere around him, and that there was no need for him to go scouring the world for romantic spots. Davidson was the tonic for extreme Celticism, and for pseudo-Parisian decadence alike. He sought no strange settings for his poems; he handled in verse any subject that interested him; when he was in the country he wrote of what he saw there; and when circumstances confined him to Fleet Street he wrote about Fleet Street, often in accents of the purest beauty, and yet with an honesty of technique, an absence of false ornaments, that fills one with admiration. What could

be more touching, and more simple, than these lines from one of the *Fleet Street Eclogues*:—

> The wind that stirs the Fleet Street wires,
> And roams and quests about the Park,
> That wanders all across the shires,
> Humming the song of many a lark—
> The wind—it is the wind, whose breath,
> Perfumed with roses, wakes in me
> From shrouded slumbers deep as death
> A yet unfaded memory.

At a time when such an example was much needed, Davidson showed such part of the World as had ears to hear, how poetry, of a spare, even austere, beauty, might be written straight out of ordinary life. He showed one road along which poetry might develop honestly and naturally, and he had the courage to follow that road himself until, in the end, despair overcame him. Not all his work is of equal merit, but all of it shows some signs of the great quality of the mind that wrote it, and it is certainly time that a selection from his work—if not a collected edition of it—was published. When so many minor people are reprinted, it is sad that such a man as

John Davidson should be left almost forgotten in his original editions.

The other poet of the two is the present Poet Laureate, Dr. Robert Bridges, a man to whom many tributes have been paid, none, perhaps, more notable than the fact that the first volume of *Georgian Poetry* was dedicated to him. In a sense that dedication was typical, for it is a remarkable part of Dr. Bridges's achievement that no school of criticism, however prejudiced in favour of its own little circle, or however extravagant in its ordinary standards, has ever (with the single exception of the sometime critical staff of *John Bull*) been able to scoff at his work, to call it stupid, or dull, or artistically depraved. No one, in fact, has ever been able to treat Dr. Bridges's poetry with other than admiration and respect; and there has probably never before been an instance of a group of young poets launching the first manifesto of a new school of poetry, and dedicating it to the Poet Laureate. It was an occurrence so unusual as to seem (when considered in the abstract) almost out of nature—yet no one thought it strange when the Laureate was Dr. Bridges.

Historically speaking, the great value of the poetry of Dr. Bridges, as of that of John

Davidson, was that it showed the world that there was no need for a poet to strive for success through eccentricity. A poet, he demonstrated, need be neither a lunatic, nor a debauchee, nor intolerably lofty in his sentiments, nor a native of one of the remoter Arran Islands. It was enough—nay, it was demonstrably better—that he should infuse with his own individual idiom and music the metres, vocabulary, and even the kinds of theme, which his fathers had honoured before him. This Dr. Bridges has always been able to do, and where he has been an experimentalist in form, it has been in the direction of using old forms in a new way, as in his attempts—surprisingly successful ones—to use the Anglo-Saxon Alliterative measure, or the classical metres of Greek and Latin poetry, in modern English verse.

Dr. Bridges has always been one of the most thoroughly English of poets; he has never had to search for exotic delights to celebrate in his verse; his subjects he has found spread all around him, in marvellous profusion, as he dwelt in England. His themes have been love, friendship, death, and the loveliness of the English countryside, its gardens, its birds, and its flowers, and of the sea that lies round England.

He can make a poem out of a catalogue of some particular kind of beauty—of what he calls the *Idle Flowers*, for instance:—

King-cup and Fleur-de-lys
  Upon the marsh to meet
With Comfrey, Watermint,
  Loose-strife and Meadowsweet;

And all along the stream
  My care hath not forgot
Crowfoot's white galaxy
  And love's Forget-me-not.

In the painting of landscape, he has always been peculiarly happy, and his poems are full of scenes described with that natural orderliness which seems to be of the essence of the charm of the English countryside, where not only moors, lakes, forests and rivers, the works of Nature unassisted, but the works of man, the fields, the hedges, the copses and even the buildings, seem part of the rightful order of things, to have been always there, and to be no intrusion upon the beautiful, but part of Beauty itself. Dr. Bridges seems to have in his poetry just the right quality wherewith to seize the settled, ordered loveliness of

rural England, and constantly our mind's eye is caught by some perfectly drawn picture:

Betwixt two billows of the downs
The little hamlet lies,
And nothing sees but the bald crowns
Of the hills, and the blue skies.

Clustering beneath the long descent
And grey slopes of the wold,
The red roofs nestle, oversprent
With lichen yellow as gold.

Or, again in another kind, there could be no more complete realisation of the qualities of an autumn day than there is in the unnamed poem which opens with these two stanzas:—

The storm is over, the land hushes to rest:
The tyrannous wind, it's strength fordone,
Is fallen back in the west
To couch with the sinking sun.
The last clouds fare
With fainting speed, and their thin streamers fly
In melting drifts of the sky.
Already the birds in the air
Appear again; the rooks return to their haunt,
And one by one,
Proclaiming aloud their care,
Renew their peaceful chant.

Torn and shattered the trees their branches again
reset,
They trim afresh the fair
Few green and golden leaves withheld from the
storm,
And awhile will be handsome yet.
To-morrow's sun shall caress
Their remnant of loveliness:
In quiet days for a time
Sad Autumn lingering warm
Shall humour their faded prime.

Every word in that passage adds its peculiar touch of line or colour to the composition of the picture; and it is worth noting the complete freedom which the chosen metre gives to the poet, without even letting the reader forget that the metre is present, and without for a moment deserting perfect precision, both of sound and of sense, in favour of any sort of untidyness or looseness. It is no wonder that so perfect, and so competent, an artist has always had the admiration of his fellow men-of-letters.

The general public has usually preferred the more purely lyrical of Dr. Bridges's poems, such pieces, for instance, as "I will not let thee go", or "When Death to either shall come", or "I love all beauteous things", which, with others, are familiar from their inclusion in

innumerable anthologies. Yet perhaps his finest things are those which combine the lyric and descriptive elements equally. The most familiar of these are two poems that show his power of sustaining elaborate metres, without losing quality either of thought or of music, the exquisite *Whither*, *O splendid ship, thy white sails crowding*, and *Nightingales*:—

> Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,
> And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom
> Ye learn your song:
> Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,
> Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air
> Bloom the year long!

As lovely an outburst of fancy as modern poetry can show us.

These, then, were some of the chief figures among the poets who were already men of note when the twentieth century began. Can we see, in their assembly, anything which should fire the imagination of the young century, and set excitedly, rejoicingly, upon their way those who have become the accepted poets of what is now to-day? It is perhaps a little

hard. Swinburne and Mr. Kipling were men whose work was full of technical tricks which were, possibly, bearable in them—because of their other great qualities—but either odious or ludicrous in their followers. The decadents and the Irishmen, taken as schoools, were evident backwaters, hardly communicating with the main stream of English poetry—though not without curious interest of their own—and, of the Irishmen, the two men, Mr. Yeats and Mr. Russell, who had the force to raise themselves above mere local celebrity, have always remained, so far as the island of Great Britain was concerned, distinguished strangers, honoured, beloved even, but not admitted quite into the final intimacy of our thoughts and emotions. Francis Thompson was an extravagant, Mrs. Meynell a writer of charming occasional poems, both of them deliberately —or so it seemed—setting themselves to write, or rather perhaps, to *feel*, with an exaggerated singularity. John Davidson and Dr. Bridges were more in sympathy with the habitual tenour of our national mind, and have, I think, exerted great influence on younger English poets. Especially is this true of Dr. Bridges, for Davidson's work never attained quite the public it deserved, and has, of late

years, been increasingly neglected. These make a distinguished gathering of poets, indeed, but they do not include the man who has had more influence than any other in the minds of our contemporary poets.

In the year 1896, a certain distinguished Latin scholar published his first—and until comparatively recently his last—book of verse. The scholar's name was A. E. Housman, his book was called *A Shropshire Lad*, and it contained sixty-three short lyrics. A constant stream of editions had succeeded that first edition, and I should imagine that a larger number of copies has been sold of this book than of any other book of verse by a living writer. It is impossible to read *A Shropshire Lad* without realising that here is a collection of poems that is almost pure gold throughout; and for multitudes of readers, who never set foot in Shropshire, these poems have made familiar—almost to holiness—the county where

> The vane on Hughley Steeple
> Veers bright, a far-known sign,

and

> Clunton and Clunbury,
> Clungunford and Clun,
> Are the quietest places
> Under the sun.

I commented earlier in this essay on melancholy as a prevailing cast of mind among a very large number of English poets and—I might have added—of lovers of English poetry. Never has this been more forcibly illustrated than by the popularity of *A Shropshire Lad*, for Mr. Housman's philosophy is one of gloom almost savagely emphasised, from which no escape, in the ordinary sense of that word, is allowed to the reader. No concessions are made. The poet cannot sing a *Reveille* without concluding with the thought that

> Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
> Breath's a ware that will not keep.
> Up, lad: when the journey's over
> There'll be time enough to sleep.

He cannot see the cherry-tree in bloom without thinking of the time when he will no longer be there to see it. He cannot sing *God Save the Queen* at a jubilee without reflecting that

> Now, when the flame they watch not towers
> Above the soil they trod,
> Lads, we'll remember friends of ours
> Who shared the work with God.

Death for him is an ever-present companion, the fate of all things lovely, and the desert of all things foul. It is a state of mind which only the strong could bear, and it is no wonder that he counsels suicide to the weak:—

> And if your hand or foot offend you,
> Cut it off, lad, and be whole ;
> But play the man, stand up and end you,
> When your sickness is your soul.

Yet, if there is no escape from the oppression of death, there are alleviations. There is everywhere physical beauty to be seen and adored, and there is the feeling that the glory of life lies in the struggle with circumstance, not in the victory, and that the soul of man is, indeed, all the nobler in that defeat is the inevitable end. The attitude is one of pessimism without surrender, of despair without weakness.

How great is the love of, the exultation in, beauty which manages, in *A Shropshire Lad*, to survive the fatalism of the poet's attitude, is shown by a score of stanzas which are known to almost every lover of poetry. The loveliness of the English spring has perhaps never

been put more feelingly, more exquisitely, than in the poem which begins

> Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
> Is hung with bloom along the bough,
> And stands about the woodland ride
> Wearing white for Eastertide.

Or, again, in that other one,

> 'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock town
> The golden broom should blow ;
> The hawthorn sprinkled up and down
> Should charge the land with snow.

Throughout the work there is instant recognition of those things which are good and lovely in the world, the flowers, the wood tossing under the storm, the poplars sighing "about the glimmering weirs", the young men racing, or playing games, or coming in to the fair. These things do not cease to be beautiful, to the poet, because all the time he feels the presence of their doom; rather are they the more beautiful for that, and the more to be admired while the "seventy springs" yet endure.

The feeling of strength, which is in these

poems, comes from their diction and versification, as much as from their thought. Victorian poetry, it may be said—so far as it is possible to generalise on such a subject—laid the emphasis of poetry very largely on a heightening of language, and in the exclusion of plain words and images. The poet was expected to feel, and speak, differently from other men, and to hold himself aloof from the ordinary commerce of the world. The result was, inevitably, that many poets thereby made themselves appear not greater, but weaker, than their fellow men, and seemed to isolate themselves because they were too frail to sustain the buffets of ordinary life. Mr. Housman broke right away from this tradition. He chose, habitually, the plainest words and metres, wherein to express his thoughts; he aimed rather at exactitude than at grandiloquence. That this was deliberate on his part is, I think, clear, for he is capable of the purely verbal effect when it suits his purpose, as witness such a stanza as

> Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters,
> Trampled to the floor it spanned,
> And the tent of night in tatters
> Straws the sky-pavilioned land.

But as a rule he makes his effects by the sparest means. He delights in the octosyllabic, in preference to the more resounding decasyllabic, or heroic, couplet. He never puts in a word just because it sounds fine, and he is not afraid of the most homely images, such as

> And long will stand the empty plate,
> And dinner will be cold,

or

> Where shall one halt to deliver
> This luggage I'd lief set down ?

Moreover, if his sense demands it, he is quite prepared to write a passage in a completely colloquial, almost slangy, style, which must have sounded strangely, to the ears of 1896, in a book of verse which there was no taking anything but seriously:

> " Terence, this is stupid stuff :
> You eat your victuals fast enough ;
> There can't be much amiss, 'tis clear,
> To see the rate you drink your beer.
> But oh, good Lord, the verse you make,
> It gives a chap the belly-ache.
> The cow, the old cow, she is dead ;
> It sleeps well, the hornéd head :
> We poor lads, 'tis our turn now
> To hear such tunes as killed the cow."

Is there any other poet, I wonder, who has dared so to parody his own style in his own first book?

It was *A Shropshire Lad*, I believe, that more than anything else set the minds of the young poets of the twentieth century working in new ways, exploring new subjects and new methods of treatment. In particular this book taught them to appreciate economy of means, to see through the sham of mere lavishness of phrase and sound, and to try to cultivate what one may call an *honest* technique of poetry. Chiefly through the influence of Mr. Housman the sharper, brisker, lyric measures came back into popularity, and it began to be realised that it was possible to express a solemn emotion in forms other than the sonnet. At the same time there was nothing outrageous about Mr. Housman's influence, nothing wantonly iconoclastic. There was no seeking after the merely strange, no attempt to please the gutter by reproducing its stench. There was only a fervent, yet simply-expressed, realisation of the loveliness of the English countryside, of the beauty of life, and of the sadness of death—which things are, after all, the material of most of the greatest English poetry. It was not an influence to which fools took kindly,

for it left them very little with which to clothe their folly. But it was one of the healthiest influences—in spite of the pessimism of *A Shropshire Lad* itself—for it was in the direct descent from the best of our own poetry, and from that of Greece and Rome before it.

Naturally, Mr. Housman's influence took time to work its effect, and, as I have tried to point out, there were other sane influences at work, among them that of Dr. Bridges. But there was in *A Shropshire Lad* the flash of something sharp, and bright, and rich, which was the very thing which, as one century passed into another, was needed to set England off on a new era of poesy.

## III

Such, then, was the scene, and for the first ten years of the twentieth century it did not change much. Some figures disappeared, other new ones appeared, but it was not until about the year 1910 that—as it seems, on looking back—a new feeling was in the air, and the world began to be full of young poets, of whom their contemporaries thought a great deal, and their seniors, for the most part, not much, or at any rate, not much that was friendly. What first definitely attracted public attention was the publication, in 1912, of a miscellany of verse entitled *Georgian Poetry*, and edited by one E.M., who, it became known, was Mr. Edward Marsh, a civil servant and patron of the arts. "This volume," said the editor in his prefatory note, "is issued in the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty". The poems included in *Georgian Poetry* were

all drawn from books published in 1911 or 1912, when King George V, after whom the volume was called, was but newly come to the throne. The title was, in its way, a stroke of genius, for it insinuated that, as the reign was a new one, so was the poetry new; and, moreover, it had the advantage—which somewhat strangely always *is* an advantage—of employing an old word in a new sense. Everyone knew what Georgian furniture or Georgian architecture was; but clearly this poetry, by these young writers, was not Georgian in that sense. It became, therefore, hard for the inquisitive to avoid buying the collection in order to find out for themselves; which is one of the ways, I take it, in which a title can prove its excellence.

The poets who contributed to this miscellany were seventeen in number, and it may be as well to mention their names here. They were Lascelles Abercrombie, Gordon Bottomley, Rupert Brooke, G. K. Chesterton, W. H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater, J. E. Flecker, W. W. Gibson, D. H. Lawrence, John Masefield, Harold Monro, T. Sturge Moore, Sir Ronald Ross, E. B. Sargant, James Stephens, and R. C. Trevelyan. The more one studies this list, the more heterogeneous

does it appear, and in fact the Georgian Poets—at any rate as represented in Mr. Marsh's anthologies (four later volumes appeared, the last in 1922)—never were all of one type, or school; in which, of course, they resembled most other schools of poets. Leaving aside, for the moment, those poets who were added in later volumes, we see that among those in the original collection there were several who belonged to a generation that was rather Edwardian than Georgian. Two, at any rate, Mr. Sturge Moore and Mr. R. C. Trevelyan, had commenced as poets in the reign of Queen Victoria. And even those who were still young in 1910 were of all sorts of shapes and sizes.

It will not be possible, in a study of this length, to attempt to give critical estimates of every one of the writers who contributed to *Georgian Poetry;* but some account of the work of certain of them must be given. In all there were included in the series of first volumes, each drawn from the publications of two years, examples of the verse of some forty poets, and it is not easy to know which to select—or rather it is not easy to know which to omit, for all were writers of some merit. Yet I shall try, somehow, to select

those who appear to me to be most representative, for this, rather than absolute merit, appears to be the most convenient test to adopt here.

In many ways the most typical, because to him the adjective Georgian applied most aptly, was Rupert Brooke. His first book of verse had been published in 1911, he was a man of obvious ability, and he was only twenty-five years old; if there was anyone who could be taken as representative of the young intellectual life of the years just before the war, it was surely he. Yet how am I to write dispassionately of the poetry of so dazzling and delightful a figure? As one gets older, one can view even one's friends' productions with some degree of calmness, and with some trust in one's power of delivering a fair judgment. Yet is it possible for me to judge fairly work which I first read at twenty, and with whose author, on many a summer morning, I breakfasted in that Old Vicarage garden at Grantchester and bathed in

> . . . the water sweet and cool,
> Gentle and brown, above the pool?

I do not know. It is only possible for me to

record certain impressions, and to hope that they are true and just.

To his friends, especially, I think, to those of them who, like myself, were a little his junior, Rupert Brooke's poems seemed the very voice of their age. He seemed to express thoughts which we should have liked to utter, but could not for lack of skill. This, as I see it now, indicates that there was probably a good deal that was immature in much of his work. It is only in a few of his latest poems —he was only about 28 when he died in 1915— that he seems, now, to have sounded a really full, adult chord. In much of his work, even of the best, there is an undergraduate touch— but what a delightful, youthful flavour this gives it:—

> And in that garden, black and white,
> Creep whispers through the grass all night;
> And spectral dance, before the dawn,
> A hundred Vicars down the lawn;
> Curates, long dust, will come and go
> On lissome, clerical printless, toe;
> And oft between the boughs is seen
> The sly shade of a Rural Dean. . . .

Is there not in that the very voice of youth,

imagining, for the sheer fun of the thing, one charming extravagance after another? He always had, too, a full enjoyment of high spirited irreverence, to which he gave extremely neat play in such poems as that in which he imagines a fish's thoughts on Heaven:

> One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
> Shall come of Water and of Mud ;
> And, sure, the reverent eye must see
> A Purpose in Liquidity.
> We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
> The future is not Wholly Dry.
> Mud unto mud !—Death eddies near—
> Not here the appointed end, not here !
> But somewhere, beyond Space and Time,
> Is wetter water, slimier slime !
> And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
> Who swam ere rivers were begun,
> Immense, of fishy form and mind,
> Squamous, omnipotent, and kind ;
> And under that Almighty Fin,
> The littlest fish may enter in.

Perhaps, too, it is a sign of the young poet, that he quite obviously loved verse-making for its own sake, as he also loved juggling with thoughts as an exercise for his skill. Even in

some of his later work, such as the lovely *Tiare Tahiti*, we see this delighted playing with, and working out of, an idea, when the poet seems rather to be trying to show us what he can do with it, than offering it to us as an eternal truth:

> And you'll no longer swing and sway
> Divinely down the scented shade,
> Where feet to Ambulation fade,
> And moons are lost in endless Day.
> How shall we wind these wreaths of ours,
> Where there are neither heads nor flowers ?
> Oh, Heaven's Heaven !—but we'll be missing
> The palms, and sunlight, and the south ;
> And there's an end, I think, of kissing,
> When our mouths are one with Mouth.

At the age at which I was, when first I read these poems, that joyous verse-making, that gusto for putting an idea through its paces, was one of the things I most loved in a poem; and I find it hard, if not impossible, to look at them from any point of view but that from which I first saw them. Rupert Brooke seemed to personify the young poetry of 1912, just as a couple of years later he seemed to sum up, in that short group of sonnets, the enthusiasm

and self-dedication of the young man turned soldier:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England. . . .

I think that, to his Cambridge friends, that last phase, which captured the imagination of the great world, has never seemed quite the most characteristic part of Rupert Brooke's career—perhaps only because we did not see him during that time. But even in this it was still youth that he typified, as for us he had typified another kind of youth. It is strange to think that, were he alive to-day, he would be forty—the idea seems a self-contradiction—and as for the poems, I feel that I, at least, cannot look at them otherwise than as the perfect expression of what young men's minds were like fifteen years since. It is impossible sometimes not to wonder what superstructure Rupert Brooke would have added to that early achievement; but this wonder, when it comes, is of a dim, academic kind, for it seemed so natural and right that he should write the poems he did, and the man who

would have written the later work I never knew.

Another contributor to the original volume of *Georgian Poetry* was dead even before Rupert Brooke—James Elroy Flecker. In that volume he was represented by only two poems, one a Nativity dialogue between Joseph and Mary, which is not one of the most characteristic of Flecker's pieces, and the other the now well-known *Queen's Song:*

Had I the power
  To Midas given of old
To touch a flower
  And leave the petals gold,
I then might touch thy face,
  Delightful boy,
And leave a metal grace,
  A graven joy.

This is a poem over which Flecker took endless trouble, and of which variant versions exist. In its final form it is an admirable example of his very skilful art, his precision of diction, his sureness of rhythm. It has not, perhaps, the richness of colour which he achieved in some of his last work, published in the two books from which selections were

printed in the second volume of *Georgian Poetry*, *The Golden Journey to Samarkand* and *The Old Ships*. The latter of these books was called after a poem which begins :

> I have seen old ships sail like swans asleep
> Beyond the village which men still call Tyre,

an opening which comprises in itself amazing qualities both pictorial and romantic. But his most remarkable gift was his power of re-creating in English verse the atmosphere of the Orient. I have not been in Asia, and I cannot say, therefore, whether Flecker's Oriental poems have caught " the true note of the East ". I can only say that to an ignoramus they seem to be the very voice of the Bagdad of our imaginations—which is, after all, a far more important thing than the other. Whether the world of these poems exists in geography or only in imagination matters not a jot, all that matters is that it exists in the poems, and in the reader's mind after he has read them. They glow with colour, and go to hauntingly lovely rhythms:

> How splendid in the morning glows the lily :
> with what grace he throws

His supplication to the rose: do roses nod the
head, Yasmin?

But when the silver dove descends I find the little
flower of friends
Whose very name that sweetly ends I say when
I have said, Yasmin.

That is an extraordinary *tour-de-force* in making an alien idiom clear to us—and it is more than that. What a pure sound of romance there is, too, in this quatrain spoken by one of the pilgrims in *The Golden Journey to Samarkand*:—

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

There is, of course, in these oriental poems of Flecker's a dramatic quality—as of a poet creating a beauty which is in truth the beauty of another world, and of other souls, than his. It is perhaps this dramatic quality which made these poems so effective, when they were incorporated in his posthumously produced play, *Hassan*,

which is certainly the most successful, both theatrically and artistically, of recent poetic dramas.

It would be pleasant, were there space for it, to write a page or two about each of the other Georgian poets, quoting a line here, and a stanza there, to illustrate points in the argument. To write, for instance, of Mr. Drinkwater, who has often failed as a poet through adopting a style too portentous, or too mannered, for his theme; and yet has been capable, on occasion, of a poem like those two stanzas which he calls *Birthright*, and of which the second runs thus—

> Theirs was the bitterness we know
> Because the clouds of hawthorn keep
> So short a state, and kisses go
> To tombs unfathomably deep,
> While Rameses and Romeo
> And little Ariadne sleep.

Only sheer inspiration (which, as I hinted once before, is a thing that I am not prepared to define) can produce verse of that kind, and whatever the final verdict on the bulk of Mr. Drinkwater's poetry may be, his name is safe in the keeping of "Rameses and Romeo and

Little Ariadne." It would be agreeable, too, to try to formulate a sane view of the work of Mr. Wilfrid Gibson, a poet who—if ever man was—has been vilely treated by the critics; for they began—say fifteen years ago—by writing of him at enormous length and as if he were a genius of the first magnitude, and then went on to pass him over, to forget him almost entirely, as if he were a man of no account at all. Mr. Gibson began, as a very young man, on a wrong tack, then he struck a vein which brought him great success. He took to writing, in *Daily Bread* and other similar books, short narrative poems, composed in a level, rather drab, kind of verse which was very effective in the telling of the "simple annals" in which he specialised. Recently Mr. Gibson has written mostly lyric poetry, for which, as it seems to me, the individual accent of his verse is less well suited; but in the work of his middle period he appears, in my judgment, to have had something to say, an aspect of life to interpret, and to have done so with individuality and some distinction. I can understand those people who always disliked his work, but surely those who lauded it one day, and the next neglected it, were behaving shabbily. It is not thus irrespons-

ibly that criticism, even in the newspapers, should be written.

Unfortunately (or perhaps, the reader will say, fortunately) this is only a very short book, and a selection must be made. That being so, I cannot help but choose two poets who are still actively practising their art, who are still at the height of their powers, and who have, each of them, written some of the very loveliest of modern lyrics. These two are Mr. Walter de la Mare and Mr. W. H. Davies.

Mr. de la Mare's first book, *Songs of Childhood*, was published, as by "Walter Ramal," as long ago as 1902. It is not now, I think, the chief monument of his genius, though the monetary value of its first edition is, I fancy, somewhere between thirty and forty pounds. With his second book, however, the *Poems* of 1906, his true vein was unmistakably evident; but it was not until after that book, if my memory does not play me a trick, that there appeared the first poem of Mr. de la Mare's to catch the ear of a comparatively wide public. I, personally, first saw it when it was quoted in an article in the *English Review*, somewhere about the year 1910, I suppose. I learnt it by heart, at once, for it was the kind of poem

that made me feel that such loveliness must not be allowed to slip from my grasp, and from that day to this I have never forgotten it:—

> Here lies a most beautiful lady,
> Light of step and heart was she;
> I think she was the most beautiful lady
> That ever was in the West Country.
> But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;
> However rare, rare it be;
> And when I crumble, who will remember
> This lady of the West Country?

The ingredients of that might seem, at a first glance, to be old and worn enough; but it is nevertheless true that this short lyric—as we are now in a position to see—could have been written by no other poet, not only of to-day, but of any day, except Mr. de la Mare. Compare it with any other of the many exquisite things which he has since written and the voice is heard to be the same. Mr. de la Mare's music—so wistful, so heart-rending in effect—is a most strikingly individual thing. With other poets it is nearly always possible to anticipate, by just a fraction of a second, which way a particular phrase is going to move, and we

judge its success, or failure, largely by the extent to which it satisfies our anticipation. It is, with most poets, as if their poetry, as it proceeded, set certain chords sounding, which demanded to be resolved in definite ways, as in a piece of harmony. But with Mr. de la Mare's poetry this is not so. One can never be sure which way his phrases are about to twist; there is, as it were, no accompanying harmony to guide the melody. The rhythms he makes are all pure melody, like some of the modal folk-song tunes, or like the tunes which are written for primitive instruments like the pipe; and as those tunes do, so do Mr. de la Mare's melodies seem, not to move confidently on to a certain end, but to feel their way there, almost hesitatingly, so that it is only when a phrase of his is finished that we can appreciate its shape and know that it is good. I know of no other poet who has written in this way, and Mr. de la Mare, at his best, can achieve with it an other-worldly beauty that unmans one, and can only be paid with tears.

In all of the loveliest of Mr. de la Mare's more emotional poems, this thin, exquisitely-wavering line of melody, like the music of some primitive and forgotten people, is present;

and it has, at any rate on me, an effect at once more ethereal and more physical than that of any other verse I know. This quality, which I have tried, ever so haltingly, to interpret for the reader, is present in the poem I have just quoted, as it is in the single stanza which I used in illustration of a point in the first section of this little treatise. No one but Mr. de la Mare could have written either of those things, nor could anyone else have written this from another poem:

> Look thy last on all things lovely,
> Every hour. Let no night
> Seal thy sense in deathly slumber
> Till to delight
> Thou have paid thy utmost blessing ;
> Since that all things thou wouldst praise
> Beauty took from those who loved them
> In other days.

Or this complete lyric:

> Clear eyes do dim at last,
> And cheeks outlive their rose.
> Time, heedless of the past,
> No loving-kindness knows ;
> Chill unto mortal lip
> Still Lethe flows.

Griefs, too, but brief while stay,
  And sorrow, being o'er,
Its salt tears shed away,
  Woundeth the heart no more.
Stealthily lave those waters
  That solemn shore.

Ah, then, sweet face burn on,
  While yet quick memory lives!
And Sorrow, ere thou art gone,
  Know that my heart forgives—
Ere yet, grown cold in peace,
  It loves not, nor grieves.

Has any modern poet written more beautifully, or more individually, than that?

Accuracy compels me to add, as a sort of footnote to what I have here written of Mr. de la Mare, that he has frequently also adopted another manner, in which he seems possessed of a mischievous, nonsense-loving, imp, under whose influence he writes such things as

Do diddle di do,
  Poor Jim Jay
Got stuck fast
  In Yesterday. . .

and the rest of it. But entertaining and agreeable as such pieces are, they are not in the

same world as those other poems of his, which appear to me to be, unassailably, the best lyric poetry which this century has yet produced.

There could hardly be a greater contrast to Mr. de la Mare's poetry than that of Mr. William H. Davies, who was also by no means a new poet when the first volume of *Georgian Poetry* appeared. There is nothing otherworldly about Mr. Davies; to him, indeed, this world seems so good that all he wishes for is to be allowed to sit and look at it. There is nothing subtle about Mr. Davies—at least, it appears so, though I suspect him to be a deal less artless than he seems; be that as it may, it is certain that to all appearances he is able to make a poem out of a bald assertion that it is agreeable to watch white sheep feeding on green grass. This he is able to do so startlingly, on occasion, that we feel as if the thought were one of surpassing originality and depth. He seems to have the power of suddenly shining a stray light upon some familiar object of the countryside, and of making all its colours glow so that we feel that never before have we appreciated fully its beauties. This is almost the only gift that Mr. Davis possesses, but he has had it for many years, and time

does nothing to dim the brilliance of that sudden illuminating ray. It is true that sometimes he can achieve a purely musical effect, as in

> Sweet Stay-at-Home, sweet Well-content
> Thou knowest of no strange continent;

but usually he is content to produce the lovely visual effects, of which he is master, in his own habitually simple diction. His touch is not certain, even within his own province, and when he steps outside it he sometimes produces the most ludicrous effects. But, like all poets, Mr. Davies has the right to have his failures forgotten, except in so far as they help to throw light on his method, and to be judged by his successes. His task has been to show us the loveliest days of a country existence,

> When Primroses are out in Spring,
> And small, blue violets come between;
> When merry birds sing on boughs green,
> And rills, as soon as born, must sing.

Sometimes he will draw a human parallel from the scenes he surveys, as in the

graphic and lovely little poem called *Thunderstorms:*

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

A thought to the truth of which every writer will subscribe. Yet usually what the reader remembers best from a perusal of Mr. Davies's poems is either the poet's mental attitude of calm, lazy, watching—

> What is this life if, full of care,
> We have no time to stand and stare?
>
> No time to stand beneath the boughs
> And stare as long as sheep or cows—

or the actual lovely things he sees and illumines for us, the kingfisher, the meadows, the flowers, the

> —rich Autumn days,
> Ere comes the cold, leaf-picking wind,

the trees wet with rain, or

A Butterfly ;
That on a rough, hard rock
Happy can lie ;
Friendless and all alone
On this unsweetened stone.

Would any other poet have used that adjective "unsweetened"? Yet how apt, how expressive and just, it is. It is by such almost childlike felicities of diction, by the enviable life, and the clean, happy things, he celebrates in his poetry, that we remember Mr. Davies; and it is for them that we can always turn back to his poems for refreshment. His vein has never run dry. No book of his has been completely filled with masterpieces, yet no book has been without at least a few examples of his poetry at its best. His last book, if I remember right, was a small poetical alphabet, published about a year since; and a charming thing it was, too, which contained several admirable specimens of his art. His is one of the most thoroughly genuine, though specialised, poetical talents now flourishing in England.

Of the poets whose work appeared only in the second or later volumes of *Georgian Poetry*, the most important were Mr. Ralph Hodgson,

Mr. J. C. Squire, Mr. John Freeman, Mr. Shanks, and Miss V. Sackville-West, but of these the last appeared only in the final volume (published in 1922) and is chiefly important for a much later poem, *The Land*, which will be considered later in this book. Mr. Hodgson, a poet of real distinction, is the author of only a small number of poems, of which only about half-a-dozen form his chief claim to consideration. Apparently he has ceased to write poetry—it is certainly several years since he published any—but it will probably be many years before *The Bull*, *Eve*, and *The Song of Honour* are forgotten. The last of these was, at one time, the most admired of Mr. Hodgson's performances, and, indeed, it is a remarkable, sonorous, and well-sustained piece of work:

I heard the universal choir
The Sons of Light exalt their Sire
    With universal song,
Earth's lowliest and loudest notes,
Her million times ten million throats
    Exalt Him loud and long,
And lips and lungs and tongues of Grace
From every part and every place
Within the shining of His face,
    The universal throng.

But it is impossible to escape from the feeling that this poem is too close a parallel, both metrically and in tone, to Christopher Smart's *Song to David* to rank as a major achievement. To my mind *The Bull*, a picture of an old bull deposed from the leadership of the herd, and of his thoughts as he awaits death, is infinitely finer and more original than the *Song of Honour*, and shows quite as much grandeur of diction:

See him standing dewlap-deep
  In the rushes at the lake,
Surly, stupid, half-asleep,
  Waiting for his heart to break
And the birds to join the flies
Feasting at his bloodshot eyes,—

Standing with his head hung down
  In a stupor, dreaming things:
Green savannas, jungles brown,
  Battlefields and bellowings,
Bulls undone and lions dead
And vultures flapping overhead.

*Eve*, too, is a beautiful poem, telling in a delicate, singing metre, the tale of Eve's temptation by the serpent and of her fall:

" Eva ! " each syllable
Light as a flower fell,
" Eva ! " he whispered the
Wondering maid,
Soft as a bubble sung
Out of a linnet's lung,
Soft and most silverly
" Eva ! " he said.

It would be quite arguable that that is the prettiest stanza of modern English verse.

I find that almost inevitably I think first of a poet as the author of the earliest poem of his to catch my attention by having within it a tune that seemed to come from a new voice. Mr. de la Mare, as the reader already knows, comes back to me first as the author of " Here lies a most beautiful lady ", and Mr. John Freeman's name recalls to me a small poem of his which appeared in an early volume, the *Fifty Poems of* 1911:

Under the linden branches
They sit and whisper ;
Hardly a quiver
Of leaves, hardly a lisp or
Sigh in the air

Under the linden branches
They sit, and shiver
At the slow air's fingers
Drawn through the linden branches
Where the year's sweet lingers ;

That was how the poem began, but, unlike Mr. de la Mare's early poem, this lyric of Mr. Freeman's never, I think, became at all widely known; yet it seems to me a favourable example of his talent, not so rich in tone, perhaps, as some later poems of his, but still typical of a poet for whom trees, and their influence on landscape, have always had a fascination. It seems to me to have in it the same kind of rhythm as is in such more recent lines of Mr. Freeman's as:

Music comes
Sweetly from the trembling string
When wizard fingers sweep
Dreamily, half-asleep.

The qualities of his verse are not such as are easy to characterise in a few lines, and any generalisations which a critic may make have, like all such things, the inherent weakness that they apply only to those aspects of the

poet's work which interest most vividly the critic's mind. The first of the two main impressions left by Mr. Freeman's poetry is that of a singularly pure, lovable, contemplative mind, feeling for nature almost as a companion, certainly as something that is in some vague emotional contact with mankind—a very different kind of nature worship from the wide-eyed astonishment of Mr. Davies; and the second is that of a soft, unaccented, music, that lulls the mind to a pleasant melancholy. He is a poet who has poured out his feelings and thoughts copiously in verse, and not all of it succeeds in catching hold of the imagination. Indeed, one of his chief faults is an occasional lack of grip, which makes it not impossible for the reader's thoughts to wander far away from where the poet would have them. Sometimes, too, the influence of other poets is evident in his work—that, especially, of Mr. de la Mare, and, I think, occasionally that of "A. E." Yet when all this is said, and taken into consideration, there remain those attractive qualities of mind, and that soft, level, music:

I will ask primrose and violet to spend for you
Their smell and hue,

And the bold, trembling anemone awhile to
spare
Her flowers starry fair ;
Or the flushed wild apple and yet sweeter thorn
Their sweetness to keep
Longer than any fire-bosomed flower born
Between midnight and midnight deep.

These lines are typical of Mr. Freeman's attitude to nature, and also of his peculiar cadence. He cannot always command his effects with equal certainty, even in his own chosen sphere of poetry, and when he steps outside that sphere, as in a recent dramatic poem *Prince Absalom*, his distinction seems quite to desert him. Yet he can be very good, and has succeeded so often that it would be possible to compile a stout volume of selections which should contain nothing but his best, most characteristic, poems.

When, soon after the end of the war, Miss Warrender, that public-spirited lady, founded the Hawthornden Prize, to be given annually for a work of imagination written by a writer under forty-one, the first recipient was Mr. Edward Shanks. The award was generally approved, for Mr. Shanks was not only under forty-one, he was under thirty, his work showed great accomplishment, and—what English taste

particularly likes—a respect for tradition which was not slavery, and a staying power, the ability to carry out something more than a short lyric (in this case the something was a poetic drama, *The Queen of China*), which was not mere wind. Since that time Mr. Shanks's talent has developed; he has not ceased to be a traditionalist, for, since he can, in the accepted modes of poetry, express that which he feels, he has no need to strive after new methods; but his voice has grown in power and in richness. Precision and care come naturally to Mr. Shanks in his writing of poetry, but they do not—as indeed they should not—destroy the spontaneity or the sincerity, of the feeling which inspires it:

> No more upon my bosom rest thee,
> Too often have my hands caressed thee,
> My lips thou knowest well, too well;
> Lean to my heart no more thine ear
> My spirit's living truth to hear
> —It has no more to tell.
>
> . . . .
>
> Where has the flame departed? Where,
> Amid the waste of empty air,
> Is that which dwelt with us?
> Was it a fancy? Did we make
> Only a show for dead love's sake,
> It being so piteous?

Those two stanzas, from Mr. Shanks's *Woman's Song*, are as carefully adjusted as any that I know, yet the emotion in them almost hurts one to read.

In purely descriptive writing, for which Mr. Shanks has a considerable gift, he has great skill in catching the sensation of a moment, or a thing suddenly seen, for us, and in fixing it in verse. One of his poems, *A Lonely Place*, opens thus:

> The leafless trees, the untidy stack
> Last rainy summer raised in haste,
> Watch the sky turn from fair to black
> And watch the river fill and waste ;
>
> But never a footstep comes to trouble
> The sea-gulls in the new-sown corn,
> Or pigeons rising from late stubble
> And flashing lighter as they turn.
>
> Or if a footstep comes, 'tis mine,
> Sharp on the road or soft on grass :
> Silence divides along my line
> And shuts behind me as I pass.

It is hard to overpraise the skill that has gone to the writing of a passage like that. Its last two lines convey, with astonishing clarity, an

emotional experience for which the scene has been most cunningly prepared in the ten preceding ones. We see the place, and we share the experience, and we are made to do so by writing precise in the extreme, both in rhythm and in sense. There is not a word that is misplaced, or vague, and yet the impression is one of ease and simplicity. Sheridan once wrote of a would-be poet that

> You write with ease, to show your breeding,
> But easy writing's vile hard reading ;

and it would be almost fair to reverse the remark, and say that in poetry easy reading necessarily means vile hard writing. The careful and exact art of Mr. Shanks, which he applies so skilfully to the record of emotional experience, is one which deserves all admiration; and since he is now only in the middle thirties the world may hope to enjoy many more poems of his writing.

Now I have come to the last of the poets whose consideration, largely for convenience of arrangement, I have tagged on to their appearances in *Georgian Poetry*—Mr. J. C. Squire. As a man of letters Mr. Squire is as

prolific and various as Mr. Belloc or Mr. Chesterton, and as a poet he is even more so. He started by translating Beaudelaire, went on to parody most of his seniors and contemporaries, wrote political and comic poetry, and a number of lyrics and epigrams, and is the author of a series of longish poems which have steadily improved, each one upon its predecessor, in strength, originality and beauty. Further than this he has been, as editor and as anthologist, of the greatest service in picking out young poets of merit, and in bringing their work to the notice of the public. Not all the young men and women, whom Mr. Squire has helped, have turned out to be really good poets; but some have, some have developed in other directions, and many are still too young to have demonstrated where their talent will finally take them. I do not think that a single one of them has yet proved to be nothing but a dullard and a windbag. This, quite apart from his merits as poet, makes those who are interested in the future of English poetry peculiarly indebted to Mr. Squire.

Early in this little book I quoted one of this poet's political epigrams, and I can now only say of his political poetry that *The Survival*

*of the Fittest* is certainly one of the best books of its kind that has appeared for many years. It was, indeed, a real contribution to the expression of political thought during the years of the great war. Most, however, of what space Mr. Squire's work is to occupy here must be devoted to other aspects of it.

As a poet Mr. Squire has always been an experimentalist, though he had never flouted traditions which appeared to him to be sane and wise. He has a natural facility in literary form—it is this which has given him his knack of parody—and it has always been easy for him to fit what he wanted to say to what seemed the appropriate metre, or to invent new metres when they seemed called for. It is not very often that he has used the simplest verse forms —his predilection is for something more intricate—but when he does so, it is with distinction —in both senses of that word—and perhaps the happiest example of his work in this kind is *The Ship*:

There was no song nor shout of joy
  Nor beam of moon or sun,
When she came back from the voyage
  Long ago begun ;

But twilight on the waters
  Was quiet and grey,
And she glided steady, steady and pensive,
  Over the open bay.

Her sails were brown and ragged,
  And her crew hollow-eyed,
But their silent lips spoke content
  And their shoulders pride ;
Though she had no captives on her deck,
  And in her hold
There were no heaps of corn or timber
  Or silks or gold.

Yet lovely as that is, and though the form is handled with an individual accent, it is not so typical of Mr. Squire as, for instance, that strangely moving epitaph on a friend killed in the war, which the poet addressed *To A Bulldog*—

And though you run expectant as you always do
  To the uniforms we meet,
You'll never find Willy among all the soldiers
  In even the longest street—

or as that other poem, *Winter Nightfall*, where phrases which are in themselves, one would say, typically prosaic, are worked together to form a drably mysterious whole which is certainly a poem:

The old yellow stucco
Of the time of the Regent
Is flaking and peeling :
The rows of square windows
In the straight yellow building
  Are empty and still ;
And the dusty dark evergreens
Guarding the wicket
Are draped with wet cobwebs,
And above this poor wilderness
Toneless and sombre
  Is the flat of the hill.

Incidentally it may be mentioned that this interest in buildings, especially as they are documents in human history, recurs in other poems of Mr. Squire's. Suitably enough, it is in one stanza of the piece called *A House* that the feeling is most effectively and concisely put:

And this mean edifice, which some dull architect
  Built for an ignorant earth-turning hind,
Takes on the quality of that magnificent
  Unshakable dauntlessness of human kind.

Even these short quotations show, I think, that Mr. Squire has never been wholly contented with the ordinary range of lyric vocabulary. Nor, indeed, has he been satisfied to devote himself to the writing of short lyrics.

His ambition has always urged him (if we may judge from results) to attempt longer flights, and his attempts have usually taken one of two forms; he has either set out, in a poem of some length, to show one facet after another of some article of acknowledged beauty in the ordinary stock-in-trade of poetry; or else he has taken a subject, which has commonly been regarded with feelings the very reverse of poetical, and made a poem of his meditations upon it. In each kind there is an element of virtuosity in the method, especially in the former, of which the most notable examples are *Rivers* and *The Moon*. In both these poems the method is the same, a metre of some intricacy is adopted, and every variation upon the chosen theme is worked into it; the gem is lovingly handled and made to flash to every conceivable ray of light. In these poems Mr. Squire is able to achieve a rich and many-coloured beauty, which can only be conceived, fairly, from a perusal of each poem as a whole; these two stanzas from *Rivers* may, however, give some idea of it:

> O many and many are rivers,
> And beautiful are all rivers,
> And lovely is water everywhere
> That leaps or glides or stays;

Yet by starlight, moonlight or sunlight,
Long, long though they look, these wandering eyes,
Even on the fairest waters of dream,
Never untroubled gaze.

For whatever stream I stand by,
And whatever river I dream of,
There is something still in the back of my mind
From very far away ;
There is something I saw and see not,
A country full of rivers
That stirs in my heart and speaks to me
More sure, more dear than they.

Yet beautiful as these poems are, they are less remarkable than the other group—that series which began years ago *In a Restaurant*, passed on, after an interval, to *The Rugger Match*, and last visited *The Stock Yard* at Chicago. The truth, I know, ought not to need demonstrating, but, in fact, Mr. Squire did perform a useful service to poetry, and letters in general, when he demonstrated (particularly in *The Rugger Match* and *The Stock Yard*) that anything capable of arousing strong feelings in human beings is potentially the stuff of poetry. And not only did he demonstrate a truth in some need of emphasis, but he wrote at least two really fine poems,

intensely original, yet not out of contact with tradition, and though strange not bizarre. These two poems, with their rushing, headlong, passages of description passing in and out of passages of meditation, are the finest work Mr. Squire has yet done, and two of the most notable of modern poems both from the point of view of technique and from that of intellectual content. They are, however, extraordinarily hard to quote from, and I shall not risk creating a false impression by offering a fragment as a specimen of the whole.

## IV

Between the first and the last volume of *Georgian Poetry* came, among other things, the four and a half years of the Great War, when every aspect of our national life was coloured by the horror and glory of the vast calamity. For those years England seemed to exist only as an adjunct of the battlefields; necessarily an art so closely in touch with life as Poetry could not but be affected by what was happening; and a great amount of verse, dealing directly with the war, was written both by spectators and by combatants. Much of this was mere sound and fury signifying nothing—or nothing that was creditable—but the time was one when men's emotions were being continually and violently agitated, with the result that, while many vented their emotion in mere recklessness (whether physical or intellectual), there were some whose natural expression was in poetry. Most of these were moved to but occasional self-expression

of this kind, but some few who have since made reputations as poets started to write as a result of their experiences in battle.

Fortunately the English poetry written during the Great War attracted the attention of a very sensitive collector—if I may use the word—Miss Jacqueline Trotter, who published in 1920 an anthology of war poems called (the title was the worst thing about it) *Valour and Vision*, of which an enlarged edition appeared in 1923. Many other anthologies of war poetry were also printed, but none of them was nearly so good as that of Miss Trotter. Her taste was admirable—and catholic, which was important—and she managed to bring into her book nearly everything that was of most value. In addition to this she adopted an excellent classification—the poems are arranged by the years to which they belong—which enables one to see how differently the poets were affected at different times, and how the intellectual and emotional attitude of the nation developed and fluctuated. Miss Trotter's book is the basis of most of the short section which is all that I can devote to the poetry of the Great War.

For the first few months of war such poetry as it inspired was written almost entirely by

the onlookers, the elder poets who watched it all happening, but who were not actually engaged in it. Mr. Kipling, who had written *The Absent-Minded Beggar* for the Boer War, produced a poem for this war too—but luckily one more dignified than that somewhat unfortunate composition. On reading through his 1914 poem, *For All We Have and Are*, to-day it appears a strange mixture; there is a good deal of the old note of semi-Biblical language tuned to the big drum, but there is at least one finely and simply written stanza:

> Comfort, content, delight,
> The ages' slow-bought gain,
> They shrivelled in a night.
> Only ourselves remain
> To face the naked days
> In silent fortitude,
> Through perils and dismays
> Renewed and re-renewed.

That was true, anyhow; and then there was the much quoted end:

> There is but one task for all—
> One life for each to give.
> Who stands if Freedom fall?
> Who dies if England live?

Well, that was true, too; and, in the chaos of 1914, it was almost the only bit of truth that men and women had to cling to. It was good that Mr. Kipling should have put it in those four clean-cut, vigorous lines.

On the whole, however, the country needed no exhortation, and quickly came to resent it. The non-combatant poets, taking the whole period of the war, had little to perform but the sad task of elegy. There was prayer, too, and perhaps the most touching of the prayers was by a woman, Mrs. Helen Parry Eden, in her poem *The Admonition—To Betsey*, when the child is bidden to pray for those who guard her,

> And guard all small and drowsy people
> Whom gentlest dusk doth disattire,
> Undressing by the nursery fire
> In unperturbed numbers
> On this side of the seas——
>
> *Remember, on your knees,*
> *The men who guard your slumbers.*

Mr. Squire's elegy, *To A Bulldog*, has already been mentioned, but, strangely, there were not very many other good elegies written.

There were, of course, a few—how could so much grief have come to England and not find its elegies?—and among them a peculiarly noble one, by Mr. Maurice Baring, in memory of Lord Lucas, who was killed flying in 1916. This is its conclusion:

You hear the solemn bell
At vespers, when the oriflammes are furled ;
And then you know that somewhere in the world,
That shines far-off beneath you like a gem,
They think of you, and when you think of them
You know that they will wipe away their tears,
And cast aside their fears ;
That they will have it so,
And in no otherwise ;
That it is well with them because they know,
With faithful eyes,
Fixed forward and turned upward to the skies,
That it is well with you,
Among the chosen few,
Among the very brave, the very true.

Yet beside these things, and a handful of others (of which the best were Mr. Thomas Hardy's *In the Time of the Breaking of Nations* and Mr. A. E. Housman's *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*), the war inspired very little good poetry in the older poets, or in those who were not engaged in it as combatants.

Of the soldier-poets themselves, almost the only one who wrote in, and of, 1914, was Rupert Brooke. He was, however, a poet who took to soldiering, and not a poet who was born of it. He came to the war with his poet's equipment ready, and he welcomed the call to action, with joy:

> Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with
> His hour,
> And caught our youth, and wakened us from
> sleeping,
> With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened
> power,
> To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
> Glad from a world grown old and cold and
> weary. . . .

It was a glorious adventure that called, something which ennobled and bettered those who took part in it, and through those of them who died in it

> Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
> And paid his subjects with a royal wage ;
> And Nobleness walks in our ways again ;
> And we have come into our heritage.

That was, indeed, the mind of the best

youth of England in 1914, and for some time after.

Rupert Brooke was followed, after a short interval, by a succession of brave young hearts, who sang, but too many of them, only once or twice before they were killed. Among these was Julian Grenfell, who fell in 1915, the same year in which he had written his poem *Into Battle*, beginning—

> The naked earth is warm with Spring,
> And with green grass and bursting trees
> Leans to the sun's gaze glorying,
> And quivers in the sunny breeze ;
>
> And Life is Colour and Warmth and Light,
> And a striving evermore for these ;
> And he is dead who will not fight,
> And who dies fighting has increase.

There is still in that something of the note of youth coming into its heritage through war; but, in fact, Rupert Brooke was almost the only poet who expressed that particular feeling fully and defiantly. The passage of even a few months altered men's sentiments, the idea of war as an adventure changed to that of war as a dutiful self-sacrifice, and from that again to the idea of war as some fearful incubus

which youth must shoulder, though with loathing. The one thing that was common to all states of mind was the consciousness that there was no option in the matter, youth had no alternative but to fight on and—if need be—die.

It was not until the second and third years of war that the poets who were, so to speak, born of it began to make their voices heard. Some, such as Edward Wyndham Tennant, had time for only one or two poems before they were killed. Tennant's single remembered piece is *Home Thoughts in Laventie*, which begins:

Green gardens in Laventie!
Soldiers only know the street
Where the mud is churned and splashed about
By battle-wending feet;
And yet beside one stricken house there is a glimpse of grass,
Look for it when you pass.

It ends thus:

I saw green banks of daffodil,
Slim poplars in the breeze,
Great tan-brown hares in gusty March
A-courting on the leas;

And meadows with their glittering streams, and
silver scurrying dace,
Home—what a perfect place!

Tennant was killed in 1916, but his attitude is already far from that of Rupert Brooke who died 1915.

Typical of the spirit of a still later phase of soldiering were the poems of another young man who gave his life—Wilfred Owen—who saw men dying, not as heroes, but "as cattle"; and yet horribly and strangely beautiful and noble in the act:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

His best known poem is *Greater Love*, a moving and almost *macabre* contrast of the love of a woman with the love and pity inspired by those whom he saw fall in battle:

Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English
dead.
Kindness of wooed and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.

O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

. . . . .

Heart, you were never hot,
Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;
And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

After Rupert Brooke's, Owen's was perhaps the most considerable poetic talent lost to us by the war, but, in Owen's case, it is even harder to attempt to guess what he would have done, had he lived, for his only poetry was evoked by the war itself, and we have nothing to hint to us how he would have responded to a different stimulus.

Happily, however, not all of the poets who first wrote as soldiers lost their lives; and among them were a number of men who have since continued their literary careers in civil life, and who have, in so doing, added to their reputations. Among these may be mentioned such poets as Mr. Siegfried Sassoon,

Mr. Robert Nichols and Mr. Robert Graves, each of whom is still writing with distinction.

Of the three poets mentioned in the last sentence, Mr. Nichols was probably the one least profoundly affected, at the time, by his surroundings, for he has always, both in the war and afterwards, had the trick of writing his poems with a certain deliberate striking of a pose—a flourish of the bard's cloak, as it were, a clearing of the throat, and a nicely calculated flash of the inspired eye. He does this very well, but it has always prevented him from seeming to be part of the scene of which he is writing:

> For the last time, may-be, upon the knoll
> I stand. The eve is golden, languid, sad . . .
> Day like a tragic actor plays his rôle
> To the last whispered word, and falls gold-clad.
> I, too, take leave of all I ever had.

So begins one of Mr. Nichols's war-poems, and it is hard to avoid feeling that it is he who "like a tragic actor plays his rôle". As regards his personal attitude to and in his art he has, in fact, more than any other writer of his generation and of comparable ability, set

himself the model of the traditional poet of the nineteenth century. In so far as this is so, he is, perhaps, not quite in harmony with his own age—but I must confess that I like to see him doing it.

Mr. Sassoon, in some of his poems inspired by the war, goes almost to the opposite extreme. Though he is often a commentator, he is even then always perfectly natural, commenting not aloofly but from out the thickest of the throng which he is describing. His fault is that he sometimes allows himself merely to enumerate. He records the details of a scene of horror, leaving it to make its own effect, and not planning that effect quite deliberately enough. When he writes such a passage as this—

> The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
> High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps;
> And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,
> Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;
> And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
> Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.

—he is actually, to my mind, being less effective

than if he were to write the same thing in prose. The verse form does not appear to have, in such lines, any definite contribution of its own to make, and therefore one is less, rather than more, affected by the truth of the scene depicted. But such passages are not the whole of Mr. Sassoon's war-poetry, nor indeed are they the most striking part of it. There are many of the pieces which are full of imagination, and in which the verse form is essential to the transference of the emotion from the poet to his reader. There is, for instance, the sonnet, *Dreamers*, which begins—

> Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
> Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows ;

and of which this is the sextet:

> I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
> And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
> Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
> And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
> Bank-holidays, and picture-shows, and spats,
> And going to the office in the train.

A whole mental attitude is caught and fixed

in those lines, in a way that could never have been contrived in a similar length of prose. It is noteworthy, too, that the very best of all Mr. Sassoon's war-poems—the best, indeed, I think, of all poems written by soldiers—contains not a single word that refers to the technicalities, or even to the existence, of war. Happily this poem is short enough to be quoted in its entirety:

> Everyone suddenly burst out singing ;
> And I was filled with such delight
> As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
> Winging wildly across the white
> Orchards and dark-green fields ; on—on—and out of sight.
>
> 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.

The strength of such a poem as that is, that it is filled with an emotion which could only have been experienced in such a crisis as the Great War—the only contribution of beauty and cleanliness which that vast horror brought

into men's lives—the joy, the holiness, of comradeship and common endeavour.

In much of his war-poetry Mr. Sassoon expressed the disgust which the later years of the war aroused in men's minds; but in his work, written since the war ended, he has often been content to be satirical in manner without fixing his satire on an object worthy of it. He has therefore often had to be content with sneering, when one feels that he would really have liked to be thoroughly and violently angry with something. This is not a healthy state of mind for a poet, though it may produce such amusing things as this opening of Mr. Sassoon's *Concert Interpretation:*

> The Audience pricks an intellectual ear . . .
> *Stravinsky . . . Quite the Concert of the Year*
>
> Forgetting now that none-so-distant date
> When they (or folk facsimilar in state
> Of mind) first heard with hisses—hoots—guffaws
> This abstract Symphony; (they booed because
> Stravinsky jumped their Wagner palisade
> With modes that seemed cacophonous and queer;)
> Forgetting now the hullabaloo they made,
> The Audience pricks an intellectual ear.

There is no mistaking the skill of that passage; but it makes me wonder whether Mr. Sassoon, like some other war-time poets, did not, after demobilisation, enter on—or revert to—what may be called the undergraduate state of mind, and attach an exaggerated importance to mere sharpening of wits. There are signs, however, in some of his very latest poems, that his mind is turning once more to those richer things of which *Everyone Sang*, and some other pieces, have proved him to be capable.

Purely as a war-poet Mr. Robert Graves is not, I think, of considerable stature, for the war was a thing from which the most individual side of his personality, and therefore the best parts of his verses, not so much shrank as instinctively withdrew. When War and its beastliness obtruded itself upon him, his natural poetic reaction was to think of what he would do when it was over, or else of the world which lay outside the battlefields—the mountains of Wales, for example, or other delectable spots. Even when he did not do this, when he dealt with the actual events of war, his instinct was to tell them as if they were something else. In *Corporal Stare*, for instance, an emotional experience is recorded—admirably, vividly—

as a ghost story. When Mr. Graves writes of a friend killed he puts the story in the form of a retelling of the tale of David and Goliath, with David the one who dies; and when the differences (or the similarities) between the old army and the new are his theme, it is not two British officers that argue over it, but Gracchus and Strabo, Romans:—

> "Strabo," said Gracchus, "you are strange to-night.
> The Legion is the Legion, it's all right.
> If these new men are slovenly, in your thinking,
> Hell take it! you'll not better them by drinking.
> They all try, Strabo; trust their hearts and hands.
> The Legion is the Legion while Rome stands,
> And these same men before the autumn's fall
> Shall bang old Vercingetorix out of Gaul."

To my way of thinking, none of Mr. Graves's war poems is anything like as good as the best of his civilian verses—if I may use such a phrase. Normally he is a poet of fancy, rather than imagination, and he has not scorned to go to school with the most cheerful rippler among English poets, John Skelton, and with the makers of nursery-rhymes:—

Lady, lovely lady,
  Careless and gay!
Once when a beggar called
  She gave her child away.

The beggar took the baby,
  Wrapped it in a shawl,
" Bring her back," the lady said,
  " Next time you call."

In such lines as those there is a purer nursery-rhyme note than any other poet has sounded for a long time, and in its own way it is undiluted song of considerable charm. Mr. Graves has, indeed, one of the most genuine lyric gifts, and a delightful trick of spontaneity. He can present you with a rhyme that seems as if it had shot merrily out of his mind without a moment's pause in the making—which is, no doubt, exactly his intention, for I am inclined to suspect him of a little professional humbug when he exclaims

How petty
To take
A merry little rhyme
In a jolly little time

And poke it,
And choke it,
Change it, arrange it,
Straight-lace it, deface it.

No effect in poetry—not even that of spontaneity—comes without "changing and arranging", and as for straight-lacing—well, I suspect that Mr. Graves's Muse is not so uncorsetted a lady as she would have us believe. Even in some of his very latest work this liveliness persists, though it has been having, during these last two or three years, a tough fight with an argumentative quality in Mr. Graves's poetry which I find less entertaining.

One of the most admirable of this poet's compositions is his poem on an inn-sign—*The General Elliott*, of whom

The potman cannot well recall,
The ostler never knew,
Whether his day was Malplaquet,
The Boyne, or Waterloo.

But there he hangs for tavern sign,
With foolish bold regard
For cock and hen and loitering men
And wagons down the yard.

I should be inclined to call this poem typical of Mr. Graves's work, were it not that certain

graver songs of his insist upon being remembered most feelingly of all. There is, among these, a comparatively late poem, *The Presence*, and that exquisite love-poem, *A Lover Since Childhood*, which opens thus:—

> Tangled in thought am I,
> Stumble in speech do I ?
> Do I blunder and blush for the reason why ?
> Wander aloof do I,
> Lean over gates and sigh,
> Making friends with the bee and the butterfly ?

A stately and measured music, surely, if ever there was one.

The total quantity of good English poetry directly inspired by the war was not great, but it was written by a very large number of poets, some of whom were poets only for one brief moment, others of whom passed on to other themes, though the war remained, I think, with many of them, for good or for evil, as an indirect stimulus. Yet looking even upon the small sum of war-poetry, in a narrow definition of that term, it is possible to feel proud that our nation, and especially that part of it which was fighting, could so movingly express, and record for posterity, the deepest

things that were in its mind. We may feel glad, too, that nearly all the best of this poetry was gathered together, and arranged, with such illuminating skill as Miss Trotter has shown in her anthology.

## V

The last page of my book draws very near now, and so much has not yet been said—so much, in truth, that most of it must be discarded. I am painfully conscious, among other things, that I am about to exclude from my brief survey the work of the greatest figure in modern literature, and quite possibly the best living poet, Mr. Thomas Hardy. I do so, partly because I am unwilling to attempt a short estimate of poetry so greatly English; but more because I feel that what little space yet remains may more suitably, in this particular study, be given to one or two younger writers. Mr. Hardy is indeed, in the truest sense of the phrase, a poet of to-day; but he is also an old man, and his verse is an old man's poetry—twisted and gnarled as an ancient yew tree, yet as full of beauty of line, and bearing as many green shoots.

Nothing has been said about the work of Mr. Gordon Bottomley, or of Mr. Lascelles

Abercrombie—both of whom are worthy of consideration. Mr. Masefield, too, must be excluded, though there is a great temptation here to discuss those narrative poems—*The Everlasting Mercy*, *The Widow in the Bye-Street*, and *The Daffodil Fields*—which caught us all so violently by the throat fifteen years since. Indeed, I cannot resist the temptation, not of discussion, but of merely suggesting that these poems were essentially melodramatic, with the good qualities of melodrama as well as its faults, and that melodrama is the hardest form in the world to which to impart an enduring excellence. I would also hazard the guess that *Biography*, which is to be found in the first volume of *Georgian Poetry*, is the best poem Mr. Masefield has ever written.

With even greater difficulty do I resign myself to saying, about Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc, nothing beyond what was said or implied by way of illustration in the first section of this essay. Mr. Chesterton is at his best when his poetry is a mixture of extravagance and seriousness; Mr. Belloc, I think, when he is quietly either tender or witty, as particularly in those verse epigrams with which he has so often, in recent years, delighted and obliged the world.

There are also the American poets, among whom there are at least three of very great ability—Mr. E. A. Robinson, Mr. Robert Frost and Mr. Vachel Lindsay—but for avoiding my obligations to these the motto of the series of which this book is one—"In England—Now"—gives me at least a formal excuse.

Even among the post-war generation of poets only a very few can be singled out individually, and I must heartlessly exclude all who, as it appears to me (which is the only available test, after all), have either always been on the wrong track, or have, after a good start, lost their way. Among the latter I regret especially Mr. W. J. Turner, who, some half-dozen or more years ago, wrote several charming things, and whose verse had a considerable power of calling up visual images, but who has recently become to me impenetrably obscure. Among the former, are the Sitwells, each of whom seems to be, sometimes wilfully, doing injustice to his or her peculiar abilities. In Mr. Osbert Sitwell, for instance, I feel sure that there is a satirist; yet I have never seen a satiric poem of his which he has troubled to polish to anything like perfection. He seems to be content to indicate,

roughly, with a cabbage stalk what he could do with a rapier if he were to try.

There are, however, three poets who have made reputations during the years since the war, and who must each of them have a paragraph or two, Mr. Martin Armstrong, Mr. Edmund Blunden, and Miss V. Sackville-West.

Mr. Armstrong may be first dismissed of these, because his poetical work (at least that of his post-war period) has been comparatively small in bulk, and because he seems to be turning more and more to prose. He has, however, written certain poems of great beauty, full of quiet descriptions of sights well observed. One of these, *The Buzzards*, is pretty well perfect in its kind:

> When evening came and the warm glow grew deeper,
> And every tree that bordered the green meadows
> And in the yellow cornfields every reaper
> And every corn-shock stood above their shadows
> Flung eastward from their feet in longer measure,
> Serenely far there swam in the sunny height
> A buzzard and his mate who took their pleasure
> Swirling and poising idly in golden light.

So runs the opening stanza of this very lovely descriptive poem. Yet Mr. Armstrong's chief

claim to distinction as a poet is his authorship of *Miss Thompson Goes Shopping*, a thing unique among recent poems, a tender, humorous and sympathetic short tale of a middle-aged country spinster, told in the most delightful octosyllabic couplets. Incidentally it is almost an ideal poem for reading aloud. I cannot, however, bring myself to detach a few lines from their text as a sample. My readers—if they do not already know this poem—must make its acquaintance for themselves. It is much to be hoped that Mr. Armstrong has not entirely deserted the practice of verse; but his emotions, even as recorded in his poems, are not of that violent or poignant kind which make it inevitable that his chief medium of expression should be poetry. It may be, therefore, that he will devote most of his future energies to the writing of prose.

Mr. Edmund Blunden might well have been classed among the poets whom the war brought forth, for some of his earliest work was written as a soldier. It is not for this, however, that he is chiefly known, and the most characteristic development of his talent is about as far removed from war as could well be imagined. It was not, I think, without an effort, or without regret, that he shook himself free from the old

war-associations; indeed he tells us so in one poem:

> About you spreads the world anew,
> The old fields all for your sense rejoice,
> Music has found her ancient voice,
> From the hills there's heaven on earth to view ;
> And kindly Mirth will raise his glass
> To bid you with dull Care go pass—
> And still you wander muttering on
> Over the shades of shadows gone.

Yet eventually the "old fields" conquered, and Mr. Blunden has written a large number of minutely detailed, descriptive poems of English country life. Rural England has, indeed, become the ruling passion of his life, so that, even when he was fulfilling a professorial appointment in Japan, it was not of the East, but of England, that still he chose to write. Perhaps the chief literary influence on his work has been that of John Clare, of whose poems Mr. Blunden has been a joint-editor.

Mr. Blunden's poetry is not without faults. The detail is almost too closely packed into the verse. He is apt to carry to the point of idiosyncracy the use of words which either

are, or look like, dialect. And though the accent of his verse is always clear, he often puts such an unmerciful number of consonants into his lines that it is a hard task to speak them. Yet he can write pure and lovely English such as this:—

> At Quincey's moat the squandering village ends,
> And there in the almshouse dwell the dearest
> friends
> Of all the village, two old dames that cling
> As close as any trueloves in the Spring.
> Long, long ago they passed three-score-and-ten,
> And in this doll's house lived together then ;
> All things they have in common, being so poor,
> And their one fear, Death's shadow at the door.
> Each sundown makes them mournful, each sunrise
> Brings back the brightness in their failing eyes.

It would be easy to quote many equally clearly and sweetly drawn pictures of England from Mr. Blunden's poems, but—since this is not an anthology—one is enough.

In 1921, Miss V. Sackville-West—the last poet of whom I shall write in this essay—published a book of verse called *Orchard and Vineyard*, which contained some well-turned

lines, some good pictures of the English country, and was clearly the work of a writer of feeling and intelligence. The best thing in it was a poem called *Sailing Ships*, written in nervous heroic couplets, and concluding with these attractive lines, in which fancy and grandeur were neatly mingled:—

> And some that beat up Channel homeward-bound
> I watched, and wondered what they might have
> found,
> What alien ports enriched their teeming hold
> With crates of fruit or bars of unwrought gold ?
> And thought how London clerks with paper-clips
> Had filed the bills of lading of those ships,
> Clerks that had never seen the embattled sea,
> But wrote down jettison and barratry,
> Perils, Adventures, and the Act of God,
> Having no vision of such wrath flung broad ;
> Wrote down with weary and accustomed pen
> The classic dangers of sea-faring men ;
> And wrote ' Restraint of Princes,' and ' the Acts
> Of the King's Enemies,' as vacant facts,
> Blind to the ambushed seas, the encircling roar
> Of angry nations foaming into war.

This made one feel that Miss Sackville-West was pretty good; it made one pay her the perhaps complacent compliment of saying that

she could write verse like a man; but it did not prepare one for the sustained strength and beauty of the long poem, *The Land*, which she published in 1926. This poem is one of the only two recent attempts at epic poetry which have even approached success—the other being Mr. Alfred Noyes's very fine *The Torch Bearers* —and curiously enough neither of them is what most epics have been, epics of individual adventure or heroism. Mr. Noyes's poem is an epic of man's conquest over scientific knowledge, Miss Sackville West's is an epic of man's struggle to win a livelihood from the earth by agriculture.

*The Land* is a modern Georgic of the Weald of Kent, and it details, season by season, the tasks of the farmer in his grim and never-ending struggle with nature for the possession of the soil. Miss Sackville-West writes at times with precision and much detail of the various agricultural processes, yet she never allows the reader to lose sight of her main theme. The swing of the whole thing, the powerful impression—gloomy in spite of its beauty—which it makes upon the mind, only a complete perusal can convey; but a quotation may give some idea of the care that has been taken with the technicalities, and of

the spare shapeliness of the verse of the descriptive passages:—

> Look to your stooking, for full many a field
> Of hearty grain and straw runs half to waste
> Through heedless stooking, and the proper yield
> Leaves half its measure to the rook and daw.
> But if you'd have full grain and ripened straw,
> After a week of drying fit to cart,
> Stooker, take up a sheaf in either hand,
> Between the ears and band,
> And swing them clear, and bring the butts apart
> Sharply to ground, ears sloping to a peak,
> (Ten sheaves for Kent), clashing together, braced,
> So that the little ridge be thatched and sleek,
> Firm to the wind, secure to rain and hail,
> That winnower and that flail,
> Those thieves of harvest, pilfering what they can
> In last-hour larceny from rival man.

There is not only description and knowledge in that, there is also imagination.

The main part of this poem is written in rhymed narrative verse of varied form; and as a sort of chorus a number of lyrics are introduced, many of them being very lovely things. Here, for example, are the first two stanzas of a *Nocturne* which comes at the end of the section called *Spring*:—

Now die the sounds. No whisper stirs the trees.
  Her pattern merged into the general web
The shriven day accepts her obsequies
      With humble ebb.

Now are the noiseless stars made visible
  That hidden by the day pursued their track,
And this one planet that we know too well
      Mantles in black.

Miss Sackville-West, before she wrote *The Land*, was very much a minor writer; but this noble poem has put her, so far as a contemporary may judge, firmly among the few most important living poets.

I have now come to the end of my book. Are there any general conclusions which can be drawn from what has been set out in the preceding pages? Only, I think, this, that the present time is one at which poets, as a whole, set themselves honest and manly standards in their art. They do not seek after strange vices, or foreign lands, to celebrate in their verses, but turn, with a love increased perhaps by the years of war through which most of them passed, to what England has to offer them, especially to the inexhaustible inspiration of the English countryside. They are learning

to write with an honest technique, without that inflated loftiness of diction which was the curse of the minor Victorian poets; and it is perhaps for this reason that, though we have no one great figure, we have a score of poets who have often written well, upon a constantly increasing variety of themes, and in varying moods. England has surely cause to be proud of her poets to-day, and to feel that the art which they practise is one in which she is in no immediate danger of losing her established eminence.

THE END