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THE FUTURE
OF ENGLISH
POETRY

Edmund Gosse

The Future of English Poetry

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THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH POETRY

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

Henri de Régnier.

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

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

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

There will, therefore, we may be sure, continue to be English poetry written and printed. Can we form any idea of the probable character of it? There exists, in private hands, a picture by that

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

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

We may put our trust in the persistence of Pegasus through his apparently aimless gyrations, and in the elasticity of the poetical spirit, and yet acknowledge that there are difficulties in the way of believing that verse will continue to be written in the English language for a quite indefinite period. Perhaps we may as well face one or two of these difficulties at once. The principal danger, then, to the future of poetry seems to me to rest in the necessity of freshness of expression. Every school of verse is a rising and a breaking wave. It rises, because its leaders have become capable of new forms of attractive expression; its crest is some writer, or several writers, of genius, who combine skill and fire and luck at a moment of extreme opportuneness; and then the wave breaks, because later writers cannot support the ecstasy, and only repeat formulas which have lost their attractiveness. Shirley would have been a portent, if he had flourished in 1595 and had written then as he did in 1645. Erasmus Darwin would be one of the miracles of prosody if 'The Loves of the Plants' could be dated 1689 instead of 1789. There must always be this fluctuation, this rise and fall in value, and what starts each new wave mounting out of the trough of the last is the instinctive demand for freshness of expression. *Cantate Domino* is the cry of youth, sing a *new* song unto the Lord.

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

No doubt, in this condition, the originality of those who do contrive to write strongly and clearly will be more vigorously evident than ever. The poets will have to gird up their loins and take their sword in their hands. That wise man of the eighteenth century, to whom we never apply without some illuminating response, recommends that 'Qui saura penser de lui-même et former de nobles idées, qu'il prenne, s'il peut, la manière et le tour élevé des maîtres'. These are words which should inspire every new aspirant to the laurel. 'S'il peut'; you see that Vauvenargues puts it so, because he does not wish that we should think that such victories as these are easy, or that any one else can help us to produce them. They are not easy, and they will be made more and more hard by the rubbed-out, conventionalized coinage of our language.

In this matter I think it probable that the little peoples, and the provinces which cultivate a national speech, will long find a great facility in expressing themselves in verse. I observe that it has

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

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

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