MODERN LYRIC POETRY

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It is not possible to give a critical survey of modern lyric poetry, for such a survey is only possible when we have before us poetry from which we are removed by some distance of time. We know that to paint a landscape, the painter requires to see it at a proper perspective, and where this perspective is lacking the picture becomes defective. A proper perspective, therefore, is required to give a critical survey and in the case of contemporary poetry this perspective is lacking.

Besides this there is in every movement a period of growth, a point of culmination and then a period of decline. Take the rise of the English drama from such crude beginnings as Gorboduc, Ralph Roister Doister, and Gammer Gurton's Needle, its growth through the more finished works of Kyd, Greene, and Marlowe, its culmination in Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, and its decline, through the works of Beaumont and Fletcher, and Webster to the degenerate plays of the Restoration stage. Until the whole cycle is run it is impossible to adjudge true evaluations. Modern poetry is still in the process of growing. We may trace its beginnings in the reaction which set in against the sickening sweetness of the Tennysonian tradition with its wealth of onomatopoeia, its conventional worship of rural scenery, its soft cadences. We find a protest against this tradition even during the Victorian era in the Classicism of Arnold, in the compressed ruggedness of the style of Robert Browning, in the fine imaginativeness of Swinburne. This innate protest took a more definite and conscious form in the poets of the 'nineties. These poets do not form one group as far as literary ideals are concerned, but they were brought together by a psychological revolt against the

conventionalism and constraint of the Victorian era on the one hand, and a revolt against traditional forms and narrowness of subject matter on the other.

Even in the Victorian era, we find evidence of doubts and signals of revolt against its social and moral discipline, its narrow religiosity and dogmatism. We find Arnold trying to seek a compromise between his intellect and his faith, a prey to a strange restlessness. The socialism of Morris, the robust optimism of Browning, the aestheticism of Pater are all efforts to break away from this settled order of things, this narrow puritanism.

With the 'nineties comes a more open revolt. Oscar Wilde takes up the banner of aestheticism which Pater had preached before, but Oscar Wilde's aestheticism is not limited to academic and intellectual bounds. The life of the artist himself should be a work of art. No ban must be put on the artist in his search for intense and rare sensations; for the artist must rise superior to the rules of society and morality. This is the startling theory which Wilde popularises and throws like a bombshell on Victorian sedateness. John Davidson's poem "Holiday" very well expresses this spirit of the artist rising triumphant and immortal through experiences of great variety and intensity. Again in the following lines of Stephen Phillips we get the revolt against the artificiality and constraint of the life of the Victorian age which makes man a mere automaton.—

"Out from the mist, the mist, I cry;
Let not my soul of numbness die!
My life is furled in every limb,
And my existence groweth dim.
My senses all like weapons rust,
And lie disused in endless dust;
I may not love, I may not hate;
Slowly I feel my life abate.

I am discouraged by the street,
The pacing of monotonous feet ;
Faces of all emotions purged ;
From nothing into nothing urged ;
The living men that shadows go,
A vain procession to and fro.
The earth an unreal course doth run,
Haunted by a phantasmal sun.

Thou didst create me keen and bright.
Of hearing exquisite and sight.
Look on thy creature, muffled, furled,
That has no glory in thy world,
In odours that like arrows dart,
Beauty that overwhelms the heart.
I neither hear, nor smell, nor see;
But only glide perpetually."

Besides this there is a sounding of notes unsounded before. In the choice of subject matter there is no distinction as to this being poetical and that being unpoetical. This is not a sudden revolt. We can trace the gradual extension of materials for the treatment of poetry. We can see in the 16th century poets freely taking their material from the society around them, but in their treatment they very often surround their subject with conventional classicisms or rusticisms in order to make it poetical. In fact the style is mock-heroic. Wordsworth revolted against these artificialities and in simple straightforward language showed the beauty and romance of such rural characters as the Leech-gatherer or the Highland Reaper. For instance, let us take Pope's poem—"On Receiving from the Right Honourable the Lady Fancis Shirley a standish and two Pens.".

"Yes I beheld the Athenian Queen
Descend in all her sober charms
'And take' (she said and smiled serene)
'Take at this hand celestial arms'.

... ...
Awed on my bended knees I fell,
Received the weapons of the sky,
And dipt them in the sable well
The fount of fame or Infamy.
What well? what weapons? Flavia cries
A standish steel and golden pen!
It came from Bertrand's, not the skies,
I gave it you to write again."

The subject in its simplicity and baldness may compare with any poem of the Georgian period but its stilted diction contrasts very unfavourably with the purity and beauty of Wordsworth's style —

"Whate'er the theme, the maiden sang,
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened motionless and still,
And as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore
Long after it was heard no more."

In these two themes, both have one common factor, in as much as both are simple and incidents taken from ordinary life. But Pope's subject has no poetic possibilities whereas Wordsworth's subject is full of infinite suggestions. Pope tries to raise his subject to the level of poetry by treating it mock-heroically, whereas Wordsworth clothes his subject matter with the fervour of the poet's imagination and thus raises it to the level of sublime poetry. The poets of the 'nineties like Pope treat of every day incidents but like Wordsworth their mode of treatment is simple and direct. They depend for their poetic appeal on the touching of some spring of emotion innate in the subject matter.

Village scenes, with the running brooks, gurgling streams, daisied grass, sounding church-bells, flocks of sheep and herds

of cattle had been so conventionalised that the poets of the 'nineties look for fresh sources of inspiration and they come to London with its teeming millions, its dusty streets, its brick-walled houses, its meanness and poverty with their pathetic and human appeal, its vice and sin with their suggestions of repulsion and terror. Laurence Binyon in his London Visions, Stephen Phillips in such poems as "The Wife," Ernest Dowson, John Davidson, all more or less take their inspiration from London scenes. Unlike the 18th Century poets it is not the glitter and fashion of society, the proud aristocratic beauty, that form the theme of their poetry. Rather the half-lighted back street, the gleam of the tavern window, the little street dancer, capture the imagination of the poet :—

"Lonely, save for a few faint stars, the sky
Dreams ; and lonely, below, the little street
Into its gloom retires, secluded and shy.
Scarcely the dumb roar enters this soft retreat ;
And all is dark, save where come flooding rays
From a tavern window : there, to the brisk measure
Of an organ that down in an alley merrily plays,
Two children, all alone and no one by,
Holding their tattered frocks, through an airy maze
Of motion, lightly threaded with nimble feet,
Dance sedately : face to face they gaze,
Their eyes shining, grave with a perfect pleasure."

This is the real contribution of the poets of the 'nineties. There is no suppression of facts, no denial of the realities of life. The dirt, the squalor of a London back street, the degradation and sinfulness of which the tavern is the symbol, are not only explored but made the background for two human flowers, whose pure joyousness, poverty and sin may tarnish but cannot destroy. This perfect silhouette taken from the London gutters will remain for ever one of the gems of English poets.

Towards the end of the 19th century the social conscience was awakened to the problem of the "Fallen Woman." The suffragist spirit gave birth to large-minded great-souled women like Josephine Butler who took up the question and came to the conclusion, that the "Fallen Woman", as she was called, was only the result of one-sided moral standards, of the closing up of many avenues of honest work to gentle women, who driven by poverty could only find refuge in the streets. This stirring of the national consciousness finds its reflex in poetry. Stephen Phillips in "The Wife"—"A true story done into verse", vividly pictures how a wife in order to bring bread to her invalid, starving husband, and her hungry child goes out into the street and sells her body. It is a whip to good society from its callousness, men from their brutality and sensuality, who would only give bread to the starving at such a price :—

"Her husband starved ; and gazed up in her face :
There was no crumb of bread in the bare place.

... ...
She saw the room of every morsel reft,
And only her own body now is left.
Then like a martyr robing for the flame,
She wound the shawl about her without shame ;
Lo in the red shawl sacredly she burned,
Her face already into ashes turned !
And blind out of the brightness of his face
On to the street she came with wandering pace.
But at the door a moment did she quail,
Hearing her little son behind her wail;

... ...
And now with streaming face the door unlatched,
When lo, the long uproar of feet,
The huge dim fury of the street—"

Here follows a description of how she wanders through the street in a dream and its sights and sounds seem like

visions without substance or reality, till she finds the lover who is to supply the bread for her husband and child:—

"Faces like moths against her fly.
Like moths by brilliance lured to die ;
The clerk with spirit lately dead,
The decent clothes above him spread ;
The joyous cruel face of boys ;
Those dreadful shadows proffering toys ;
The constable with lifted hand
Conducting the orchestral Strand ;
A woman secretly distrest,
And staidly weeping dimly drest ;
A girl is vending flowers and fern,
Their very touch her fingers burn ;

...

But now she slowly trembles as she sees
The cruel lover that must give her ease :
Sated, arranged, he paced in moody stride,
With little lilies on his breast that died.
O meekly she beside him went away,
As dutifully as a daughter may."

And now we see her hurrying back with food for her dear ones :

"From that unrealized embrace
Swiftly she broke away with eager face ;
With food for him that called aloud,
She battled through the hostile crowd ;
An army to frustrate her bent
In sullen numbers 'gainst her sent."

And then comes the tragic climax when returning home she finds her husband dead :

"With her right arm the door she pushed,
And to the dead the *widow* rushed.

But at the sight so deeply was she torn,
She babbled to him like one lately born ;
And sorrowful dim sounds about him made,
That were not speech : and wildly to him prayed."

And from this frenzy of grief she is awakened by the touch of her little child :

"But as the woman, dying in her thought,
Looked upward ; at her dress her baby caught,
And she revived and toward her little son
Ventured, that he into her arms might run."

And with her baby pressed to her bosom she allows the soothing memories of her pure girlhood to cure the smart of her mind, and with daylight returns the conciousness of the realities of her bare existence and the feeling of gnawing hunger and she with her child eats the bread bought at such a price :—

"Till slowly with the gathering light to Life
Came back on her ; Desire and Dust and Strife ;
The huge and various world with murmur grand.
Time had begun to touch her with soft hand,
And sacred passing hours with all things new,
Divine forgetfulness and falling dew,
Then hunger pained : no thought she had, no care,
She and the child together ate that fare."

Wordworth's work is completed by these poets of the 'nineties. Wordsworth showed the dignity and beauty of the simple life of the country. The poets of the 'nineties portray the humanity, the pathos, the possibilities that lie hidden in the heavy, putrid, squalid atmosphere of the London streets. But often in our very strength lies our weakness. Instead of searching for pure and beautiful material amidst the bitter realities of London life poets began to revel in the squalor and the dirt of the city, the heavy, alcoholic atmosphere of the low taverns, the vice of the London streets, and with it came a revulsion of feeling.

The aestheticism of Wilde meets with a heavy fall and in "De Profundis" we have this revulsion voiced in passionate notes. Even those poets who themselves are the greatest seekers after these sensations find in them a hollowness which cannot ultimately satisfy. Thus we have Ernest Dowson writing—

"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."

Besides the poets of the 'nineties there was another school of poetry from which contemporary poetry draws much of its inspiration and which applies at least one of the notes which forms such a haunting echo of the contemporary poets. This is the note of mysticism, the element of the super-natural which has its direct origin in the Celtic Revival though we find its roots much further back in English poetry. The Celtic Revival has its origin in the Irish nationalist movement. A feeling of nationalism led to the study of the old Gaelic literature with its wealth of legends, tales and poems which released a large amount of new subject matter. The subject matter released had in it immense lyrical, mystical and imaginative possibilities, and thus grew up the school of the Celtic Revival whose most brilliant figure is William Butler Yeats who also forms the most significant figure of Georgian poetry. The poetry of Celtic Revival may be divided into two groups. One section depends directly for its subject matter on the old legends and is heroic in theme and romantic in manner. The other group consists of the shorter lyric poems which have a breeziness of manner and wildness of grace

also inherent in the old Gaelic poetry. But in both we get at times "the voice of Celtic sadness and of Celtic longing for infinite things....the vast and vague extravagance that lies at the bottom of the Celtic heart." We get this note implicit in the preface of "The Triumph of Maeve" by Miss Eva Gore Booth which is a narrative poem:—

"There is no rest for the soul that has seen the wild eyes of
Maeve,
No rest for the heart once caught in the net of her yellow
hair,
No quiet for the fallen wind, no peace for the broken wave
Rising and falling, falling and rising with soft sounds every-
where;
There is no rest for the soul that has seen the wild eyes of
Maeve.
I have seen Maeve of the Battles wandering over the hill,
And I know that the deed that is in my heart is her deed;
And my soul is blown about by the wild winds of her will;
For always the living must follow whither the dead would
lead;
I have seen Maeve of the Battles wandering over the hills."

Again we find its haunting echo of the longing in the lyrical rapture of Yeats' "Lake Isle of Innisfree—"

"And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning where the cricket
sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings."

But there is in this school of poetry a gayer and a simpler note, for instance, in the works of Joseph Campbell. His work does not rise to the heights of Yeats but there is in it a raciness, an egotism truly Irish—

"I am the mountainy singer—
The voice of the peasant's dream,

The cry of the wind on the wooded hill,
The leap of the fish in the stream.
Quiet and love I sing,
The carn on the mountain crest,
The cailin in her lover's arms,
The child at its mother's breast."

Or again,

"I will go with my father a-ploughing
To the green field by the sea,
And the rooks and the crows and the seagulls
Will come flocking after me.
I will sing to the patient horses
With the lark in the white of the air,
And my father will sing the plough-song
That blesses the cleaving share."

Here we have the truly modern note with its contempt for romantic and artificial forms, its straightforwardness of expression, its breeziness and delight in itself which forms the essence of Georgian poetry.

The short-lived brilliance of the 'nineties came to a premature close, and while the Irish singers were evolving a new school, there was in England a period when not much poetry was published. It was a period when there was a search for new modes of expression, and the slim volumes of verse that were published were regarded as the output of a period of poetical barrenness. Just before the War however there was a change. From 1910 onwards there was a stream of poetry, the essence of which was different from the rather exotic bloomings of the 'nineties, drawing some of its inspiration from the Irish School but yet with a wider appeal and a more robust growth. Stinge Moore published his "Sicilian Idyll" in 1911, Lascelles Abercrombie his "Interludes and Poems" in 1908, James Elroy Flecker his 'Collected Poems' in 1916, Lady Margaret Sackville her "Songs of Aphrodite" in 1913, Rupert Brooke his collected poems in 1918, William H. Davies his 'Collected

Poems' in 1916, Walter de la Mare his "Listeners" and other poems in 1912; Wilfred Wilson Gibson his collected poems in 1918, John Masefield his collected poems and plays in 1918. The poetry published shows that a very rich and varied school of Georgian poetry is in the process of evolution. The fetters broken by the poets of the 'nineties allowed the Georgians freer scope, the Irish school stimulated their imagination.

I have already said that it is not possible to give any critical survey of Georgian poetry. I shall therefore only content myself with showing a few tendencies of modern poetry, and, if there is time, end by some recitations.

In the first place the Georgians have made a distinct contribution to English poetry in their treatment of Nature. In the older poets Nature was only too often used to form a pretty and harmonious background for their themes as in Tennyson, or it was used to hang some mortal reflection on as in Wordsworth, but in the Georgian there is a frank delight in Nature herself. There is no need for musical cadences in language to enrich her beauty, there is no need of any excuse for appreciating her loveliness nor do thoughts of human conditions and morals dim her glory.

This difference in the mode of treatment is still more accentuated if we compare modern poetry with some of the older poets. The strength and vigour which the compressed style of the Georgians gives their simple effortless productions contrast very refreshingly with the rather heavy-loaded carefully-thought-out productions of the older Nature poets. I shall illustrate this by contrasting two very familiar poems. One is "A Garden" of Marvell and the other "My Garden" by T. E. Brown. Here is Marvell's poem,—

"See how the flowers are at parade.
Under their colours stand displayed ;
Each regiment in order grows,
That of the Tulip, Pink and Rose,

But when the vigilant patrol
Of stars walks round the pole,
Their leaves that to the stalks are curl'd,
Seem to their staves the ensign furl'd.
Then in some flowers' beloved hut
Each bee as sentinel is shut,
And sleeps so too, but if once stirred,
She runs you through nor asks the word."

Then follows some moralising on the wretched condition to which the civil war had reduced England. T. E. Brown's poem runs thus :—

"A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot !
Rose plot,
Fringed pool,
Ferned grot—
The veriest school
Of peace ; and yet the fool
Contends that God is not—
Not God ! in gardens ! when the eve is cool ?
Nay, but I have a sign ;
'Tis very sure God walks in mine."

Marvell in cumbrous language metaphorically refers to the flowers as an army with the various beds as regiments standing, with their colours, at parade. The stalks and leaves are the staves and ensigns and the bee is the sentinel in her tower. The two rather discordant images—that of a garden, and an army, intermingled give an impression of strain and far-fetched effort and fail to move us, whereas in less than a score of words Brown gives the cool green fragrance of a garden and its charm possesses our soul. The simile and metaphor can raise us to heights of imaginative fervour and lyric rapture unattainable by the Georgian poets when in hands like Shelley, but in lesser poets they become mere clogs and weigh down our minds and imaginations. The immortal example of the felicitous heights to which the metaphor

and simile can raise us is to be found in Shelley's "Skylark."

The inspiration of the older Nature poets was drawn from natural atmospheres and they delight in painting these. Specially in Romantic poetry do we get these. It is the spirit of Nature that haunts them and the outward symbols are but manifestations of this inner spirit. Thus they heap symbol on symbol till the proper atmosphere is created. But in the Georgians it is the natural phenomenon itself that seizes the imagination of the poet. A casual something in a beautiful setting catches the eye of the poet and he gives us finely outlined brush drawing.—

"A ship, an isle, a sickle moon—
With few but with how splendid stars
The mirrors of the sea are strewn
Between their silver bars !
...
An isle beside an isle she lay,
The pale ship anchored in the bay,
While the young moon's port of gold
A star-ship—as the mirrors told—
Put forth its great and lonely light
To the unreflecting Ocean, Night.
And still a ship upon her seas,
The isle and the island cypresses
Went sailing on without the gale:
And still there moved the moon so pale,
A cresent ship without a sail !"

A ship at anchor in an island bay—the new moon overhead in a star-bespangled sky—their reflection in the clear waters—the moving clouds setting the whole scene in motion. This is the source of Flecker's inspiration and we get it portrayed as faithfully and as beautifully in this little poem as in the mirror of the waters of the bay.

Just as there is no straining, no effort in the style of the Georgian poet, so there is in him no searching after poetic material. He has the unique faculty of capturing the innate poetry that lies hidden in everyday things. A walk on Tewkesbury Road furnishes John Masefield with material for one of the finest of contemporary poems. He captures the mystery of the open road leading to unknown and strange places, he is filled with pleasure at the sight of the banks of the chattering brooks covered with ferns and wild flowers and the starry approach of evening, he revels in the cold air, the beat of the rain, and the wild cry of the birds. The casual sight of a fashionably dressed woman walking through the fields in spring impervious to its beauty fills Frances Cornford with resentment which he voices in a little poem. The sight of the road-menders waiting for morning in their rudely improvised hut in some lonely road, and then at dawn starting their labour, their hammer-beats echoing through the sunny morning air, a group of idle loiterers gathered around them, inspires Laurence Binyon with a poem which voices the modern attitude towards labour—the strong solid basis on which rests the beautiful ephemeral superstructure of civilization. A scarecrow erected in a field watching the changing seasons, News-boys running with tireless feet through the busy London streets, a tiny snowflake lying like a "filigree petal", street lanterns, shining like "jewels of the dark" over "the isles of solitude," left by the intermittent traffic—these are given lyrical expression. There is no fastidiousness in the choice of subject. There is a frank appreciation of all created things. Harvey shows us the comical beauty of ducks. The poem ends thus—

"All God's jokes are good—even the practical ones!
And as for the duck, I think God must have smiled a bit
Seeing those bright eyes blink on the day He fashioned it.
And He's probably laughing still at the sound
that came out of its bill."

In "The Barn" Edmund Blunden gives all the homely details and there is no attempt to poetise his material or wrap it in mystical robes. We are given a sight of the big "unwieldy doors", the cracked rusty pump, the worm-eaten walls, the cobweb, the mildew and the dust. No note of mystery is introduced, rather there is a brutal denial of it :—

"The barn is old, and very old,
But not a place of spectral fear.
Cobwebs and dust and speckling sun
Come to old buildings every one.
Long since they made their dwelling here,
And here you may behold.
Nothing but simple wane and change ;
Your tread will wake no ghost, your voice
Will fall on silence undeterred.
No phantom wailing will be heard,
Only the farm's blithe cheerful noise ;
The barn is old, not strange."

I have referred before to the impatience which modern poets exhibit towards embellishments, and figures of speech. But modern poetry is very rich in expressive epithets, and turns of expression. The compressed yet vivid style of contemporary poetry attains its success through these epithets and word-combinations. Yet the words used in these word-combinations are very simple. The originality lies in their combination ;—thus the wisdom of the tramp gathered from his wanderings is described as "air-wide wisdom", Stevenson describes his wife as "steel-true and blade-straight," and her eyes as "eyes of gold and bramble-dew". The lanes of London are described as "the million-peopled lanes" and the roar of London as "an evermuttering prisoned storm," the ship in a setting of stars as "star-ship"; again we have the "mooned and argent breast" of night, "maternal hills" or "pilgrim soul", "curd-pale moon", etc.

Modern poetry is rich also in felicitous lines. Thus we have

"The sea's eye had a mist on it,"

Or, "The burning breezes flushing his old face,
Illumining the old thoughts in his eyes."

Or, "And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the
cricket sings ;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of linnet's wings.—"

I shall end with the note of the Supernatural which comes in ever and anon in an age in which science is trying to discover worlds of matter and thought unknown before. Through all the stark nakedness and realism of the present day, there is a rich stream of mysticism which refuses to be uprooted. In modern poetry too we have this stream, contrasting with the realistic portrayal of everyday things. And we find it peeping out in most strange places ; thus we find the note of wonder and the unexpected rising up amidst the humdrum, busy atmosphere of "Fleet Street :—"

I never see the news boys run
Amid the whirling street,
With sweet untiring feet,
To cry the latest venture done.
But I expect one day to hear
Them cry the crack of doom
And risings from the tomb
With great Archangel Michael near—
And see them running from the Fleet
As messengers of God,
With Heaven's tidings shod
About their brave unwearied feet."

We find the supernatural lurking behind the song of birds at dawn and even-tide, behind the music of the fiddlers

playing on the village green, behind the thoughts and dreams of mankind —

"Every dream that mortals dream, sleeping or awake,
Every lovely fragile hope—these the fairies take,
Delicately fashion them and give them back again
In tender limpid melodies that charm the hearts of men."

But no one amongst the English poets has struck the note of the supernatural with such imagination and beauty as Walter de la Mare. I shall therefore end by reciting his "Listeners" :—

"Is there anybody there ?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door ;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor :
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head :
And he smote upon the door again a second time ;
"Is there anybody there ?" he said.
But no one descended to the Traveller ;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men :
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Hearkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.

And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky. ;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head :—
"Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word," he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake :
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.