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*Another Future of  
Poetry*

ROBERT GRAVES



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# ANOTHER FUTURE OF POETRY

BY

ROBERT GRAVES



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## ANOTHER FUTURE OF POETRY

MR ROBERT TREVELYAN has forestalled me in his little book *Thamyris, or Is there a Future for Poetry?* But I find his judgments for the most part so parochial, and his style so unadventurous, that in spite of the wide applause he has won from the elder critics, I am not deterred from signing a minority report at variance with his. Mr J. B. S. Haldane also, in his *Dædalus; or the Future of Science*, has a few lines to spare for the future of Poetry; and it would be well to treat of the views of both these writers before making an independent forecast.

Mr Trevelyan's chief concern is the change that has come over poetry since it ceased to be chanted or sung, and began a new life as the spoken, written, or printed line. Now these are important changes if not particularly new ones. The regular chanting or singing element in poetry had already begun to disappear in mediæval times, and except as a small and somewhat extravagant cult no longer survives, because it has been discovered that speech, particularly under emotion, though it does not employ the pure diatonic scale, has a music of its own which can be as agreeable as it is complex; and the chanting of modern poetry, so far from giving it richer life, has in my experience the exact opposite effect: the chant is seldom more than a self-conscious and lugubrious drone. The change from the chanted or spoken to the written or printed line is also no novelty, dating back as it does behind the invention of printing to the great copying schools of

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the ancient world ; these circulated books far more freely among the cultured classes than is now realised. But the effects on poetry of this change grow yearly more apparent. Books get cheaper and more numerous, public recitations fewer ; the Victorian habit of reading aloud in the home is dying ; poetic drama is on its last legs theatrically ; so that the spoken line is temporarily overshadowed by the printed line. True, poetry will never become a purely printed art, for the poet is too fond of the sound of his voice ; but unless new developments of broadcasting or a great simplification and improvement of the gramophone make it possible to listen to poetry with as great ease as one picks up a book of verse, the art of writing verse for the eye and the inner ear will progress, to the disadvantage of poetry composed for the outer ear. It is not enough to advise, as Mr Trevelyan does, that we should read with this inward ear and give the lines the same *tempo* as if they were being spoken. For poetry, when printed or written, has a unique character ; though we may owe it to our ear to translate typography into sound, the importance of the first visual impact must not be sentimentally discounted for the sake of the singing tradition.

There are startling variations in the acceptability of a poem, according to the style in which it is set down on the page. A poem type-written almost always looks unattractive. The conventions of setting down poetry are, as it were, the corridor through which we pass to the garden of imagination. If that corridor is white-tiled like the entrance to a public baths, or stuffy like the entrance to a museum, or posterized like the entrance to a tube station, we enter the garden in the wrong frame of mind. The typewriter is, in my experience, still too commercial to serve as a proper introduction to the receptive imaginative mood.

On the other hand, the original manuscript of a poem,

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to any reader who is at all sensitive to handwriting, will often give so much inside information as to the character and habits of the poet (far more than could be got by hearing the poet read the piece in question) that the oppression of personality in the handwriting may actually make it impossible to concentrate on the particular poem itself. There remains printing. But there is printing *and* printing. The habit, for instance, of printing English poetry in Italian types, or modern poems in old-English types, has a most confusing effect on the reader; and there is no poem that cannot be made more dignified than it ever was before, or more vulgar than anyone could expect it had the power of being, by judicious choice of print and printer and paper.

A small matter like the convention which gives a capital letter and a new line to every line of poetry is of immense importance. I never discovered how good Mr Sacheverell Sitwell's poems were until he had consented to use the initial capital letter, after two books in which the lower case was used. And then spelling. Who will deny that Milton's *On a Solemn Musick*, or Webster's *The White Divel*, or Blake's *The Tyger* get a powerful hold on our imaginations before we have even begun to read the poetry? Or who could read Keats' *St Agnes' Eve* in "simplifyd spelng," and still be entranced? These startling effects do not correspond with any change of tone or accent in the spoken line, and there are therefore many who will protest that these effects have nothing to do with the poetry itself. But this is to insist sentimentally on the absolute priority of the spoken line. The fact is, poetry read silently and poetry spoken aloud are divergent arts; and we may summarise their different characters as follows:

In the first place, the outward ear has a far shorter memory than the conjunction of eye and inward ear. It readily forgets end-rhymes separated by more than three

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intervening lines, unusual words recurring at a longish interval, and structural sign-posts of various kinds ; but it has a far greater sensitivity to the variation of vowel and consonant, to internal rhyme, and to awkward concurrence of consonants (technically called "syzygy"). I notice in Mr Turner's recent *Landscape of Cytherea* more than a few awkwardness of syzygy in contexts where a harmonious flow is intended. "Sun's shadow," "soul's gullies strewn," "frost's cascade," "these shadows shone," "rocks spring," occur on a single page ; and there are rhymes separated by nine and ten lines. As poetry for silent reading, both these irregularities are quite legitimate; the inward ear can and naturally does slur over its syzygal difficulties, and as the eye reads faster than the voice speaks, the rhyme-echo does not die away so quickly : but as spoken poetry the poem would be severely handicapped.

The next obvious difference is that poetry of simple content can become very significant when spoken. The same poem, printed, is intellectually negligible, and one is tempted to say, "My ear deceived me" ; whereas poetry of highly concentrated content is impossible to hear with enjoyment until it has been read and thoroughly digested by the eye. The eye is a very summary, shrewd, supercilious organ, as it were the Enquiries Clerk of the Mind, and cannot be bothered with a visiting poem that has no air of immediate distinction to commend it ; and the beauty of a poem may lie—quite adventitiously, the Eye will claim—in the inflections of voice intended by the poet, inflections for which the printer has not yet discovered even an approximate notation. The ear is a much simpler and sympathetic official, and once button-holed will often commend to the management what the eye would call a most undeserving case, for though the ear may be wilfully blind, the eye is inclined to deafness. The ear can never properly appreciate a difficult poem of remote reference, intricate structure, and unusual

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diction. For when a poem is printed it is always possible to refer back, to pause and puzzle, and still keep the continuity of rhyme alive. In the spoken poem there is no such licence; once a spoken poem begins, its rhyme-echoes and the rhyme of its parts are quite destroyed by any puzzling or interruption.

The ear and eye are both fallible in their interpretations of the poet's intentions, but in different ways. The ear may mishear words such as "all together" or "in deed," as if they were "altogether" and "indeed," and make even wilder mistakes, particularly with proper names, and cannot readily distinguish, say, between *discreet* and *discrete*; whereas the eye can go even farther astray, particularly in the mistaking of rhythm. A regular two-stress line like Swinburne's *Hertha* can be read as a four-stress line, or *vice versa*. Even the careful examination of the context sometimes prevents the poet's intention if it be, say, ironic or playful, from coming through, and I have given an instance in my *Poetic Unreason* of a passage in Shakespeare—

"Passed there a buck this way?  
No, but two does,"

being mistaken by the eye for an intentionally absurd *non-sequitur* where "does" was read as a verb and not as a substantive.

The future of Poetry then will be concerned for a start with the problem how the outward ear, which carries with it the inward eye, and the outward eye, which carries with it the inward ear, may be satisfied by the same poem equally. It is a problem partly of word-mechanics and partly of psychology. On the whole, the adjustment tends at present to be unfair to the ear. A striking exception is Mr Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, the American, whose verses are all primarily intended for recitation. They have a very bare look in print, and a directness of state-

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ment which the Enquiries Clerk finds positively rustic ; but as Mr Lindsay himself recites them, they are strangely effective. A fair adjustment between written or spoken poetry is, I believe, possible once the demands of each are fully and equally realised. For instance, it may be desirable in the ear's interest to allow time for a mental adjustment after, and even before, the use of an unusual word or one highly charged with reference. In Shakespeare's

"It would rather,  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,"

there is a distinct pause made after "the multitudinous" by the concurrence of two *s's*, and between "seas" and "incarnadine" there is again a tendency to give a slight pause, owing perhaps to the displacement of "would" from the word it governs.

So also a modern poet, Mr Bertram Higgins, in his poem *Ulysses in Ithaca*, writes :

"Robbed of its element of wet,  
And discrete on a dune,"

where the unusual word "discrete," which has to be distinguished from "discreet," is given an introducing pause by the necessity of separating the *d* of "and" and the *d* of "discrete," and a following pause by the tendency to avoid putting a heavy stress on the word "on." It must be noticed that these pauses, which have the effect almost of inverted commas, do to some extent help the ear to recognise, uninformed by the eye, that it is not the ordinary "discreet" which is being used. The details of this adjustment we may leave future poets to settle ; and if ever they re-introduce, with a difference, the Alexandrian tricks of shaping poems in the form of wings, crosses, pyramids, and so on, and burying acrostics in them solely for the ingenious delight of the eye ; or if

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they write poetry solely for public declamation, that is no concern of ours. Eye poetry and ear poetry are both worthy arts, if distinguished. At this point it must be observed that though the subsidiary senses—smell, touch, taste—are not the direct means by which we take in poetry, as inward senses they are most important vehicles of thought, and must be used to give completeness to the poetic life. To return to Mr Trevelyan : he conducts an enquiry into the future of verse forms, and comes to the conclusion that anything may happen—but he sincerely hopes that it won't. Several of his statements puzzle me a good deal—for instance, this : “Blank verse is the oldest of our verse forms,” which is wildly unhistorical, even if, as Mr Trevelyan suggests oddly enough, Chaucer's rhymed couplet can be so regarded. And again, “The conscious principle according to which English verse has been written from the time of Chaucer until recent years has been that of syllable counting”; this is only true of one of the main strands of English poetry. It is true that this has been the principle of the cultured prosody imposed on English from the Continent, and productive of a great deal of noble verse; but the earlier native prosody, which takes small stock of syllables, reckoning instead musically by the stress-centres of the line and the time interval between them, has never been driven from popular poetry, and has frequently been adopted by poets of culture. The readiest examples of native prosody are to be found in nursery rhyme and country ballad :

“ Misty, moisty was the morn,  
Chilly was the weather ;  
There I met an old man,  
Dressed all in leather,  
Dressed all in leather  
Against the wind and rain.  
It was, how do you do ? and how do you do ?  
And how do you do ? again.

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“ There once was a man  
    So vain and so proud,  
He walked on stilts  
    To be seen by the crowd,  
Up above the chimney-pots,  
    Tall as a mast,  
And all the people ran about  
    Shouting till he passed.”

“ At Wednesbury there was a cocking,  
    A match between Newton and Scroggin ;  
The colliers and nailers left work  
    And all to old Spittle’s went jogging.  
To see this noble sport  
    Many noblemen resorted,  
And though they had but little money  
    Yet that little they freely sported.”

Though the syllables in each case number most irregularly, nobody can deny that the pieces scan.

In the earliest English verse these stress-centres (for often the stress is not on one syllable but, as in *how do you do?* and *how do you do?* spread over two or three) are marked clearly by alliteration. Anglo-Saxon verse is all alliterative and stressed, its syllables are uncounted. In the fourteenth century came William Langland, a contemporary of Chaucer’s. Though the most famous of the middle English poets to revive the Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre, he was by no means the only one. In the sixteenth century John Skelton, in my opinion one of the three or four outstanding English poets, though reducing the alliteration, adding rhyme, and even using the lineal arrangement of rhyme-royal, wrote in the native style as often as in the Continental. In the seventeenth century, Shakespeare, who had been dominated at his first visit to London by the Continental prosody in vogue at the theatres, gradually re-discovered his popular inheritance, and developed the foppish blank verse that

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Surrey and Wyatt had brought from Italy into a metre in which both principles, native and Continental, interacted ; it was a metre capable at times of stresses as turbulent as those in *Beowulf*, while at others it would still strut syllabically like a fine gentleman.

The two principles of prosody correspond in a marked way with contrary habits of life, with political principles : the Continental, with the classical principle of pre-ordained structure, law and order, culture spreading downwards from the educated classes—the feudal principle ; the native English, with what Mr John Ransom calls the Gothic principle, one of organic and unforeseen growth, warm blood, impulsive generosity and frightful error—the communal principle, threatening the classic scheme from below. The rare poets who have contrived to reconcile the two principles have always had, like Skelton and Shakespeare, one foot firmly planted in the aristocratic set and the other equally firmly in the crowd. The future of English prosody depends enormously on the outcome of the class antagonism that undoubtedly is now in full swing. A Red victory would bring with it, I believe, a renewal of the native prosody in a fairly pure form, as the White domination of the eighteenth century made for pure Classicism, and kept it dominant until the Romantic Revival, intimately connected with the French Revolution, re-introduced stress-prosody.

Dr Scripture has made one very important point about classical prosody : that it is tinged with what he calls the typographical fallacy, namely, that the space between printed letters and the space between printed words represent an actual time-interval, or at least that it is possible to divide a verse up into feet by driving wedges between syllables ; whereas, excepting definite long pauses for ease or emphasis, poetry as spoken is really one continuous flow of the voice-stream, and when a sensitive instrument is set to record it, there is nothing of a regular

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rise and fall in the resultant wavy line drawn to indicate either syllables or feet; that most of English classical poetry, while conforming typographically to the syllable-counting principle and to the rigid dualism of "short or long?" that goes with it, gets its quality from a far subtler musical scheme than that of an ordered sequence of approximately identical feet, iambs, dactyls and what not; that, in fact, the musical delight we derive from, say, Gray's *Elegy* is not and never was one of elementary arithmetic, but is based really on the variance of distance, pitch, and sonority between what custom arithmetically marks off as identical feet. This is not to deny the legitimacy of thinking in syllables. A syllable is a useful convention, and its adoption in classical poetry has led to the calming and slowing down of rhythm, suitable for grave and reflective thought. Its neglect, in the prosody of stress-centres, has made for fury and ecstasy.

This brings us to Mr Trevelyan's account of *vers libre*. He writes "success of 'free verse' is in proportion to the degree in which we are made aware of a fixed metrical base underlying the irregularities. But what are we to think of this kind of thing?—

'Come, my songs, let us express our baser passions.  
Let us express our envy for the man with a steady  
job and no worry about the future.'"

He comments: "But it would almost seem that at times free verse is no more than an excuse for uttering futilities and ineptitudes that we should not have dared to express in honest prose." Honest prose indeed: an appeal to prejudice! And what about the enormous amount of futile and inept verse in traditional dress? And why "fixed metrical base"?

One of the most remarkable developments of modern music has been the constant changing of time and idiom in the course of even a short piece; at each change it is

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the listener's obligation no less than the musician's to be aware of the change. So in poetry, to limit poetry to a fixed metrical base is asking for trouble. The monstrous effect of standardising the rhythm of even so ancient a poem as *The Holy Land of Walsingham* to a fixed metrical base will readily be admitted.

The claim of free verse is that actually each line, not only each stanza or passage, may be subject to a new musical change. Now if the reader does not recognise this change, it is his fault as much as it is the poet's; and if he does, and still doesn't like the rhythm, that again is as much his fault as the poet's that their musical taste differs. Admitted, few poets who write free verse have any great sense of musical unity; they cannot often relate the changes to any appreciable unity of structure. But this can be and has been done; and the failure to get more than an episodic interest in a poem is just as marked in poems written in stanzas or couplets as in free verse. Local rhythmic felicities in English poetry are, comparatively, far more numerous than poems whose general rhythmic structure commends itself without remarkable local excitements.

The Whitmanic couplet that Mr Trevelyan holds out for scorn seems to me clear enough: the long second line expresses admirably the rhythm of a man, in fact, with a steady job and no worries about the future. And again, all "honest prose" is capable of reduction to poetry by the simple expedient of letting it fall into short lines, each capable of a rhythm. Most sermons, for instance, can be readily reduced to blank verse. Conversely, all traditional verse can be written and read as prose; rhymes, "poetical" inversions, and archaisms are the only ingredients that give it away at all easily. But the fact is, that in reading prose or in reading verse quite a different attitude is adopted by the reader, and it is this attitude more than the intrinsic quality of the writing that logically

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decides whether it is prose or poetry that is being read. Of this I shall shortly treat.

Meanwhile let us turn from Mr Trevelyan to Mr J. B. S. Haldane, our second prophet. In his remarkable essay on the *Future of Science*, Mr J. B. S. Haldane, while lavish of his quotations from poets living and dead, takes a gloomy view of the poetic scene. He holds that the decay of Poetry to-day is due to the defective education of the poets ; the poet must understand his subject-matter. He affirms that at present not a single competent poet understands industrial life, that no poet since Shelley has been up to date in chemical knowledge, and that if we want poets to interpret physical science, which is, says Mr Haldane, vastly more stimulating to the imagination than the Classics, we must see that our possible poets are instructed in science and economics.

“ Not until our poets are once more drawn from the educated classes (I speak as a scientist) will they appeal to the average man by showing him that beauty in his own life, as Homer and Virgil appealed to the street urchins who scrawled their verses on the walls of Pompeii.”

There is a wonderful amount of loose thinking in this short paragraph ; the last sentence particularly is brimful of mischief and mis-statement. It reads as a challenge ; but accepting it as a professional poet, I must allow Mr Haldane choice of weapons, which will of course be the scientific method. Then to isolate his facts or assumptions, test them critically in turn, tabulating them with (a), (b), and (c).

(a) *Poetry is in decay because Poetry has lost touch with Science : and Science is the chief interest of the average Englishman to-day.*

My comment is that decay pre-supposes a prime ; but Poetry has never had a prime in which it has been in touch with the *average man*, except in societies where the poet

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has not yet specialised as a bard, and which are so homogeneous that all duties and pastimes are interchangeable; or in advanced societies where, in a common calamity or triumph, the distinction of class, education, occupation, and so on temporarily disappear, and the consequent poetry has an appeal as wide as it is intense. Decay and prime then are purely local phenomena, occurring in different levels of society, which as high-brow, low-brow, and mezzo-brow have no discoverable literary contact; and even so they are not absolute terms, as one may talk of the prime and decay of roses, or of the human body. Shakespeare's *Tempest* in one sense is the prime of English imaginative drama; but if the prime is to be put at Marlow's *Tamerlaine* or Kidd's *Spanish Tragedy*, the *Tempest* must be admitted to show signs of the decay of those elements which made the former plays admirable.

Moreover, Science itself is not the interest of the average Englishman any more than Poetry. There is a high-brow science class really interested in its developments, a mezzo-brow science class grateful for the comfort it provides, and a low-brow class more or less indifferent to it, except as its development affects wages and labour. And even within the limits of brow-classification, what does "average" mean? Until a cerebral index can be arranged to decide intelligence as readily as a cephalic index decides race, and until poems can be subjected to a critical analysis as readily as physical substances are to spectral analysis, we cannot scientifically assume that an average can in either case be struck.

(b) *There has been no poet up to date in chemistry since Shelley; our competent poets are also uneducated in the science of economics, and unacquainted with industrial life.*

I don't know in the least what "competent" means to Mr Haldane. Professional scientists, he says, have no

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perception of literary form ; and since he admits that he is now talking as a scientist, the only meaning that he can rightly attach to "competent" is "well spoken of in literary circles"—and literary circles are notoriously fallible and fickle. Mr Haldane is sadly misinformed about the education of living poets. Among the most competent of these, according to the contemporary high-brow valuation, are to be found an architect, a mining engineer, an economic expert, a navvy, a scavenger, a senator, a natural historian, a museum official, a professional soldier, a clerk in the Standard Oil Company, a tramp, a dog-breeder, a peer, a seaman, and a metaphysician. This may be confirmed by the short biographies given in Mr Louis Untermeyer's *Modern British Poets*. For a poet who has been up to date in Science since Shelley, what about Francis Thompson ? At one time it was his chief interest.

(c) *Really competent poets interpret life : therefore well-educated poets of the future will achieve great poetry chiefly by interpreting Science and Industry, which are the only forms of life at present not suffering from decay.*

When a scientist talks about interpretation then difficulties begin. The nearest he can get to interpretation is a simplification of technical language into something rudely resembling unlearned speech : "Einstein made Easy." "Mendelism at a Glance." These are interpretations, but they differ from poetic interpretation in respecting the original structure of thought, at any rate, in outline. The scientific method is consistently one of accurate equations and reasonable cross-references, e.g. "The sum of the squares on the smaller sides of a right-angled triangle is equal to the square on the hypotenuse side"; or "water is formed of two parts hydrogen gas to one part of oxygen"; or "the negroid races may be

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readily distinguished by black skin, broad lips, and curly black hair." When therefore a scientist speaks of a poet "interpreting" industrial life he expects the interpretation to be as simple as Pythagoras' interpretation of the two sides of the right-angled triangle in terms of the hypotenuse, or any other interpretative formula of the physicist or anthropologist. Now, while it may be maintained that legitimate cross references can be made between the images or rhythms of a poem, and the physical and imaginative context from which that poem merged, the scientist cannot expect even in traditional (let alone modern) poetry to find any equational formula constant between the poem and its context. The scientific mind gets a rude shock when it learns, for instance, that whereas the original *Royal George* actually did go down, as Thomas Campbell relates, with Admiral Kempfenfeldt and his twice four hundred men on board, the original "schooner Hesperus" was not really wrecked at all, but reached Boston harbour with a damaged bowsprit only; the *female lashed to a mast*, which Longfellow noted in his diary of the same storm, belonged to a vessel whose fate was never "interpreted." Again, Longfellow's phrase about the old moon having the young moon on her arm is salvage, so to speak, from yet another wreck altogether, that of Sir Patrick Spens' ship on its return from "Norraway over the faem." And Sir Patrick Spens himself, if it comes to that, had historically speaking nothing whatever to do with either of the two voyages which, fused together as one, form the subject of "Sir Patrick Spens," the ballad.

! W. Cowper

That Mr Haldane is unaware how well educated many of our "competent poets" are is probably due to their refusal to interpret scientific or industrial experience in the way he intends; and the fact is, purely literary poets are those which appeal most to scientists, as Mr Haldane's own quotations prove. I don't imagine he would have

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much use for a modern *Purple Island* in physiology, a *Loves of the Plants* in botany, or a *Polyolbion* in geography ; and I haven't noticed him rushing into print with a retraction of his statements on Mr Noyes' account, whose recent accomplished epic, *The Torch-bearers*, purports to give a history of the triumphs of Science throughout the ages.

But we are forgetting those urchins of Pompeii. Were they really so entranced with the *Iliad* that they could not contain themselves when they saw a blank wall ? Surely a simpler explanation would be that they were airing their calligraphic accomplishments, and the first things that occurred to them to put down were lines of verse that had been beaten into them that day at school. On the nursery wall next door as I write is the inspiring reflection in chalk :

“ Dame Trot was an old woman with kind blue  
eyes and a white . . . ”

for I have two urchins learning to read and write, and their School Primer opens with this tale of Dame Trot. And does Mr Haldane remember the Greek epigram of the doctor who objected to his son learning Homer ? He complained that the boy came home with a rigmarole about one Achilles, who sent many valiant souls down to Hades. “ What good does that stuff do him ? Why, I myself, in the course of my profession, have done as much as Achilles.” That doctor anticipated (by two thousand years) Mr Haldane's view that the Classics were played out, but he was powerless to prevent a number of competent poets who have come since, including Virgil—whose works also the urchins scrawled on the Pompeian walls,—from sucking rich life from even the dry bones of Homer.

What, however, is the state of English Poetry to-day ? I would suggest that among the low-brow public—readers of say *Tit-Bits*, E. M. Hull, A. S. M. Hutchinson, Edgar

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Rice Burrows, Gene Stratton Porter—poetry is in a poor way. John Oxenham has had a success, but minute in proportion with his potential public. The causes are not obscure. This is the public created by elementary education; elementary education has been a by-product of industrialism, and is aimed not at a humarer culture, but at raising the industrial and civic efficiency of the masses. Poetry as it has been taught in the elementary schools in years gone by has, therefore, not encouraged many children on leaving school to continue their acquaintance with it; but novels and stories have formed no part of the curriculum, and can therefore be read without prejudice. The mezzo-brow public has had usually two or three years of schooling more than the low-brow public, and reads more reputably; it corresponds closely with the middle class, and is educated for the higher commercial groups of industrialism.

Open any one of the better monthly magazines of fiction: each story, though it falls short of literature with a capital L, is thoroughly workmanlike. It has a definite point to which it moves easily and economically; the characters, unless the story is definitely a farce, are convincing; the local colour is carefully applied. In two cases out of three a considerable demand is made on the reader's observation and memory for slight clues to the denouement occurring in the first page of the story; and even when the denouement comes, it comes quietly, perhaps in a single word, a mere gesture, by which the reader who has not cultivated the "short-story sense" will be completely baffled. But whereas the art of the short story has advanced enormously in the course of the last thirty years, and the intelligence of the short-story reader with it, the general run of verse that we find occasionally sandwiched between short stories in these magazines is as banal, nerveless, and amateur as could well be imagined.

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Now the difference is, there is a genuine and sincere demand for the short story on its own account. The question "is it literature?" does not arise. There is no such demand for verse. Its appearance at all in a shilling magazine is only a survival from the days before modern education and the short-story boom, when poetry was really read and enjoyed by the upper middle classes, the days when crowds queued up for a new canto of *Don Juan*, and a publisher could offer Thomas Moore 3000 guineas advanced royalties for *Lalla Rookh*. The publishing of poetry in volume form is similarly a mere window-dressing, a graceful tribute to the past, a sop to literature; but not a business proposition. The mezzo-brow attitude towards the poet has since the boom days become a most unhealthy one; it is like that of modern youth towards its parents, a sentiment that has gradually changed, after a series of disappointments and misunderstandings, from affectionate respect to scorn and indifference.

There is nothing wrong with poetry in itself, as there is nothing wrong with parenthood itself; both are inevitable forms of life. But the claim of a certain generation of parents to regulate the lives of their growing sons and daughters according to a traditional method cannot be met when that method is unsuited to the changed conditions of life. These sons and daughters will, however, soon marry and become parents themselves, however strongly they disapprove of parenthood; and poetry, like parenthood, is an instinct that cannot be long repressed.

It is, again, largely because of an educational system which links poetry up with geometry and French as "subjects to be done"—and to be "done" in school is to be "done for" in private life—that poetry is viewed with as great suspicion by the intellectual middle classes as by their social inferiors. The pulpit has assisted in deepening this suspicion. The poet always, it is thought, has a sinister design on the reader. Either he is trying

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to put over a spiritual or historical message of some dry sort, or he is claiming genius and its anti-social privileges. In any case he is drawing the reader from the quiet paths of enjoyable reading to the stern mountain of literature, a region from which one customarily returns jaded, if improved, to impress other travellers with a satchel full of poetic specimens, chipped from the hard rocks and carefully ticketed. This mistrust of the poet ensures that, dead poets only being "done" in schools and universities, living poets cannot economically practise the art for a livelihood. Patronage is dead these two hundred years, and the high-brow public is not large enough to support its poets by casual purchase of their wares. The result is that the writing of poetry is now largely in the hands of gifted young amateurs, who publish a single book, and then leave poetry for the more serious and remunerative work of prose; of idlers with money who want a literary reputation, and find a series of lyrics less fatiguing to produce than a novel; and of retired judges, ambassadors, and heads of colleges and such, who crown their career with a volume of graceful verse,—people, in fact, who encourage rather than dispel the lack of confidence in poetry; so that it is next to impossible for a serious practising poet to get a hearing from the middle-class public, which is numerically large enough to support dozens of poets, and still less from the low-brow public, which could afford to make them all men of wealth.

The public that is acquiring a short-story sense and a film sense and a fast-traffic sense and a radio-sense is not a dull public; as it is not a dull public, neither is it a lazy public. The enthusiasm for the cross-word puzzle and for home-made radio sets proves that. The theory that because industrial, commercial, or professional life weighs so heavy, poetry, to make any appeal at all, must be a narcotic, can no longer stand. On the contrary, the daily round is so routine-ridden that, except where the standard

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of living is definitely below the poverty line, any stimulant to thought of an adventurous kind is most welcome, though indeed the adventure is bound by economic, ethical, religious, and educational limits. The poetry sense has not been correspondingly cultivated with these other new senses largely because poetry, properly understood, makes demands at variance with the utilitarian system of education and life. As a marketable commodity poetry is in a vicious circle: the less it is wanted the duller it gets, and the duller it gets the less it is wanted. A young workman cannot afford to apprentice himself to the poetry trade, which is suffering sadly from inefficiency and dilution. In the short-story trade wages are high. Though the goods are machine-cut, he has the satisfaction of knowing that they meet a genuine demand. The models improve in speed and finish yearly.

But it would be the greatest mistake to push this metaphor farther, to regard poetry as a sort of perpetual coach-building, and fiction as a sort of motor-car industry; to say that a Coronation coach, lumbering and heavily gilded, or a smart barouche with armorial designs on the door, drawn through the park by a pair of spanking greys, though all very well in their way, cannot be compared for speed, comfort, or distinction with a 1925 Rolls Royce. True, language and conditions of life have changed so completely in the last fifty years that the greater part of traditional English poetry is utterly out of date except to scholars; what was once the pride of the roads we now think of as a lumbering coach. But this is my contention: there is no reason why modern verse should not become to modern prose what the airplane is to the motor-car. Properly handled, poetry has certain mechanical advantages over prose: prose can never rise off the ground; it must keep to the roads or the open country. The low-brow, mezzo-brow, and the backward part even of the high-brow public does not realise this, and will demand

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an explanation of mechanical theory, if not a demonstration of practice.

Simply put, the intrinsic virtues of poetry are these: its rhythms, rhymes, and texture have an actual toxic effect on the central nervous system. In the resulting condition the imaginative powers are quickened and strengthened, voices are heard, images are called up, and various emotions felt of a far greater intensity than in waking life. This toxic effect is of greater or less strength according to the level of mental functioning required, which varies between the more or less sedate thought of day-dreaming and the monstrosities of trance or a deep sleep. The soup tablet firm that puts its advertisement into a rough rhyme—

“Why does the Huntsman devour the fox so ?  
Because there is nothing for dinner but Broxo,”

and the student who masters his lists of facts by help of a rhymed *memoria technica*—“In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue”—are alike aware of this physiological effect verse has on mental receptivity. But besides the greater vividness of image and strengthening of music, the heightening of receptivity and sensitivity that verse properly handled brings, there is another great contribution: that is the awareness of a whole region of hidden association and implication behind phrases that in prose would be accepted at their face value.

For instance, the adjective “pettifogging” would in prose be construed merely as the conventional insult for a lawyer. If the same adjective were to be used in poetry qualifying, say, a philosopher, there would be an increased vitality in the word, which thereupon, for those aware of its etymology, would recall its connection with Fugger, the great continental merchant banker whose minions, the little fuggers, were so sly at their trade. The philosopher would thus be accused of having a commercial

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mind, and the same attachment to verbal formula and ancient authority as a lawyer. At the same time the "fog" syllable would take on a life of its own ; "pettiness" and "fogginess," though conceptions not originally bound up with "pettifogging," would colour the lines in which they occurred, and mate with the hidden associations of the other words there contained. One of the chief powers of poetry is in the poet's ability to control these hidden or forgotten associations of words while remaining in the toxic condition of which I have spoken, so that they interact in a sense distinct from the face value of the poem, a sense which cannot be understood except by those in the same condition of heightened sensibility. Poetry is able to use both the method of logic and the method of fantastic thought, which is *sensorial hieroglyphic* ; and what cannot be expressed by either of these means can be conveyed in the musical side of poetry, the rhythm, rhyme, and texture, which have not of course fulfilled their function merely by inducing and maintaining the toxic condition.

This briefly is the theory of Poetry as I understand it ; but whether, and if so how soon, the poetry-sense will appear in a wide circle of readers is another question. I cannot foresee any immediate social or political change that will produce it. A great deal of poetry that has been popularly admired in times past has been admired for reasons unconcerned with the peculiar powers of poetry as I have just outlined them ; it has been admired merely for the elegance of the stories it told, or the morality of its sentiments, or the divine character it professed ; and it is doubtful, whether in Europe at least, there has ever been widely spread a poetry-sense which, once the added receptivity induced by verse has been taken into account, has been distinguishable from a prose-sense. Perhaps some discovery by which food and other necessities of life could everywhere be obtained locally, together with a

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solution of the population question, might give the necessary background to a national revitalising of Poetry ; for England must first be freed from the economic obsession which colours all human relations and qualities to-day. The difficulties of keeping supplies of food, clothing, and so on in circulation by the authority are now largely smoothed over by standardisation of goods, and by standardisation of the consumers' minds by education and the press. If supplies became more plentiful, and decentralisation of industry and therefore of standardised mentality became possible, poetry of a greater variety, freedom, and intensity might result. For the standardisation of mind has achieved the practical result that their immediate and formal characteristics of any matter under examination, usually recognised in terms of value or efficiency, are alone discerned ; other latent characteristics, spiritual or personal, are generally suppressed as contributing nothing to the mechanical purpose of life.

Meanwhile there is a small part of society which, being more or less independent of economic fashions, is at liberty to think for itself, and to have adventures in Poetry and Art beyond the bounds which enclose the middle class. This is not to say that the advanced poet is necessarily a man of wealth—wealth often brings with it mental languor—or even that he is always born into the independent classes ; but certainly any support he gets will be from men of independent means, and if he wishes to consolidate any success that naïveté has won for him, he must learn to speak the language of that class, and become as free from social prejudice as any of its members ; he must become aware of the history of the art he practises, and in the light of this history must discover what is strong in his own work and remain unabashed by the riches of his new experience. This advanced art is a very small part of the whole artistic output, and if the greatest

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immediate good of the greatest number is to be considered cannot be justified. Its practitioners are not, as I have said, paid a living wage, and direct patronage is dead ; that they manage to live at all and find time for their work is usually due to a certain amount of indirect patronage in the form of presents or of congenial appointments controlled by their admirers, enabling them to keep in touch with this independent society. But this art, freed from any retrograde temptations by the broken market for poetry in the backward part of society, is alone worth serious discussion, and has indeed begun to make as great a revolution in English poetry as, for instance, the one that came shortly after the Norman Conquest, when the love-song and the warm breath of classical literature from the South enriched an art that hitherto had been devoted almost entirely to war, terror, religion, and laments for the good old days.

Poetry has, in a word, begun to “ go round the corner.” The straight street in which English bards have for centuries walked is no longer so attractive, now that a concealed turning has been found opening up a new street or network of streets whose existence tradition hardly suspected. Traditionalists will even say of the adventurers : “ they have completely disappeared ; they are walking in the suburbs of poetry called alternatively Nonsense or Madness.” But it disturbs these traditionalists that the defections from the highway are numerous, and that the poets concerned cannot be accused of ignorance of the old ways, of mental unbalance in other departments of life, or of insincerity. As a well-dyed traditionalist once myself, I can recall my anger and impatience when reading advanced verse, which seemed to me utterly unlovely and meaningless ; anger and impatience still occasionally arise in me when I read, but for a different reason : I dislike poetry which, while discarding the old usages, does not make effective use of the

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new methods at its disposal, and I would be the last to deny that in the present transitional and experimental stage there are writers who have attempted to get notoriety by innovations and obscurities in which they do not themselves believe ; but I do not believe that they are very numerous.

This new departure can best be illustrated by an analogy from painting, because painting began the round-the-corner movement before poetry. The traditional view of portrait-painting in England has been that the likeness must be as nearly as possible photographic, and the colours similarly must imitate the natural colours of the body ; the pose and dress and background are also expected to be informative of the conditions and circumstances of the character depicted. But portrait-painting, owing largely to the competition of the camera, has taken a new turn ; a modern portrait represents hardly anything of what we may call the formal history and geography of the sitter. The rest is a new experience based on the relationship between painter and sitter. Whatever traits of character or circumstance in the sitter have impressed themselves most strongly on the painter form the nucleus of the design—sensorial hieroglyph again—and the design is harmonious with an untranslatable but none the less effective statement in terms of colour, texture, and form. Statement of what ? Of a unique experience to which the painter and sitter equally contribute. Traditional painting assumes that a speaking likeness of the thing painted, the likeness that a smooth pool of water or a good mirror would give, provided that the thing painted is a reputable object and properly posed, is the final goal of art. Traditional poetry similarly is, in intention at least, concerned with the translation into smooth verse, direct or allegorical, of selected and not always historical episodes in history, of selected slices of geography, and of idealised moods and characters.

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Modern poetry and modern painting do not set out to translate or interpret in the traditional sense, but to provide an independent experience, to which indeed formal history and geography are pre-requisites, and from which they may even be psychologically deduced, but in which they are not important interests in themselves. In giving this new experience it is found necessary to dispense with a great deal of grammatical, logical, and photographic convention ; with prejudices about the absolute and permanent value of particular kinds of truth, beauty, virtue, and harmony ; and with the restriction order under which caprice, error, and unsolved conflict have hitherto been debarred from giving poetry the same reality as life.

I can overhear the comment : “ better that poetry should perish utterly than lose its idealistic character.” So recently a pretty quarrel has been picked over an unidealistic though not particularly outrageous public monument in Hyde Park. It is fitting that obscene mutilations should have been committed on it by a party of law students who would stand politically for tradition and photographically idealistic accuracy. It is possible that this particular panel is definitely anti-traditional in conception and invites positive reprisals ; but there is this about much unidealistic modern art, that, though untraditional in its technique, character, and end, so it is most untraditional in not claiming superiority for itself over all existing forms. The new methods are not claimed as absolutely better, as all new schools hitherto have been ; they are only claimed as different, and as more suited to the moods of the party that professes them. Traditionalism and the new method (which, being a cousin of mathematic Relativity, may therefore borrow the name) do not deny each other any more than post-Euclidian geometry denies the local truth and coherence of Euclidian geometry. Advanced and traditional poetry can live side

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by side, and the same poet can employ both methods alternatively without self-contradiction.

I may conclude with a few particular statements about this new poetic Relativity. In subject—but to speak of the subject is to speak in terms of translation—so let us say in atmosphere and experience, it has no obvious bounds other than those to which the human mind is always subject. Laura Riding Gottschalk has put the claim clearly enough :

“The elder poets of England and America are still worshipping that old god Experience : ‘It is all there somewhere in life, the truth, and you must only let life flow over you, inundate you, and it will leave behind with you the fine sediment of proper feeling. You are clay, life is a potter, it is very wonderful. You are like this, like that, you are swept here and there, you are dead.’ But who has ever learned anything from experience ? Development comes through self-exercise, not through being hammered upon. The function of the new poetic mind is inductive rather than deductive. Life needs proving in Poetry, as well as in Science. The poet, the human impulse, is the only premise. He is the potter. He is the maker of beauty, since all form originates in him, and of meaning, since he names the content. Confronted by a terrifying, absorbing, fascinating universe, he does not cry out, ‘How big, how terrifying, how fascinating !’ and permits himself to be overcome by it, but answers it, since this universe, a thing apart, can be answered in no other way, atom for atom, in a recreated universe of his own, a universe defiantly intelligible.”

In grammar this new poetic Relativity adopts the syntactical convention of the thought-level on which it is staged. This may be regular enough, but if the mood

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reaches a point in fantasia where grammar becomes frayed and snaps, then it can dispense with grammar. In structure it is Protean ; there is no architectural pre-conception ; the growth is organic. In imagery it is only bound by the preference of the individual author for imagery of a particular kind, as that of touch, sound, motion, colour, shape or measurement, and by the conjectural intuition of the reader for remote allusions. One of the most remarkable traits of recent verse has been the qualification of the experience of one sense by that of another. So Miss Sitwell speaks of "clucking flowers," meaning flowers bent down so that they seem like hens clucking ; and of "early light creaking down," meaning light moving uncertainly in the early morning, out in angles and squares as it streams across a house, getting such a wooden quality that in its slow movement it may be almost said to creak ; "shrill grass," meaning grass so young and green that you would credit it with the piping voice of a fledgling or a child. In diction the mood determines the vocabulary : literary, exotic, archaic, commercial, homely, learned, or disgusting : and, as in Mr Eliot's *The Waste Land*, each of these vocabularies contributes in turn. In rhyme, rhythm, and texture it is evolving a music as complex and free as instrumental music. In implication, it draws freely on modern psychological research for the exploitation of the hidden symbolism and associations of words employed. In literary allusion it assumes an intimacy with the better-known imaginative writers in all languages. It makes severe demands upon the reader ; but the theory that the poet should do all the work and spoon-feed his reader is perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of traditional verse.

It is at present coloured by the mood of sceptic irony in which the society which approves these new methods lives : irony is the state which succeeds revolt and despair,

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as revolt and despair succeed complacency and certainty. But irony is not at all a final mood, it is more negative than positive in character, and must yield eventually to a richer and more constructive life. Poetry is moving into this new life more slowly than the graphic arts or music, because it is the art embracing all arts ; in the same way Philosophy is the science of sciences ; and until mathematics, theology, biology, and psychology have made and consolidated their separate advances, cannot take up its position in support. Perhaps the reason why advanced poetry is often so confusing to the student to-day is that in few cases have the musical, the pictorial, and the intellectual forces kept proper alignment in the general advance. And as a great many so-called philosophic systems are not strictly philosophy at all, but generalisations from psychological, theological, and mathematical or economic theory, so poetry self-styled that specialises in thought, in music, or in imagery, but in each case to the neglect of the other departments, is not strictly poetry. The actual technique and direction of poetry may suffer the most astounding changes, but to keep its name and continuity it must always remain a unique art, harmonising its contributory arts, and raising no organ of sense or thought to the magistracy of its fellows.

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