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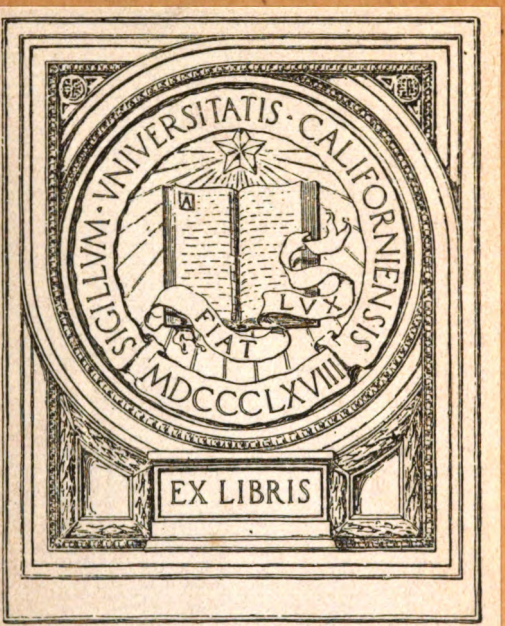

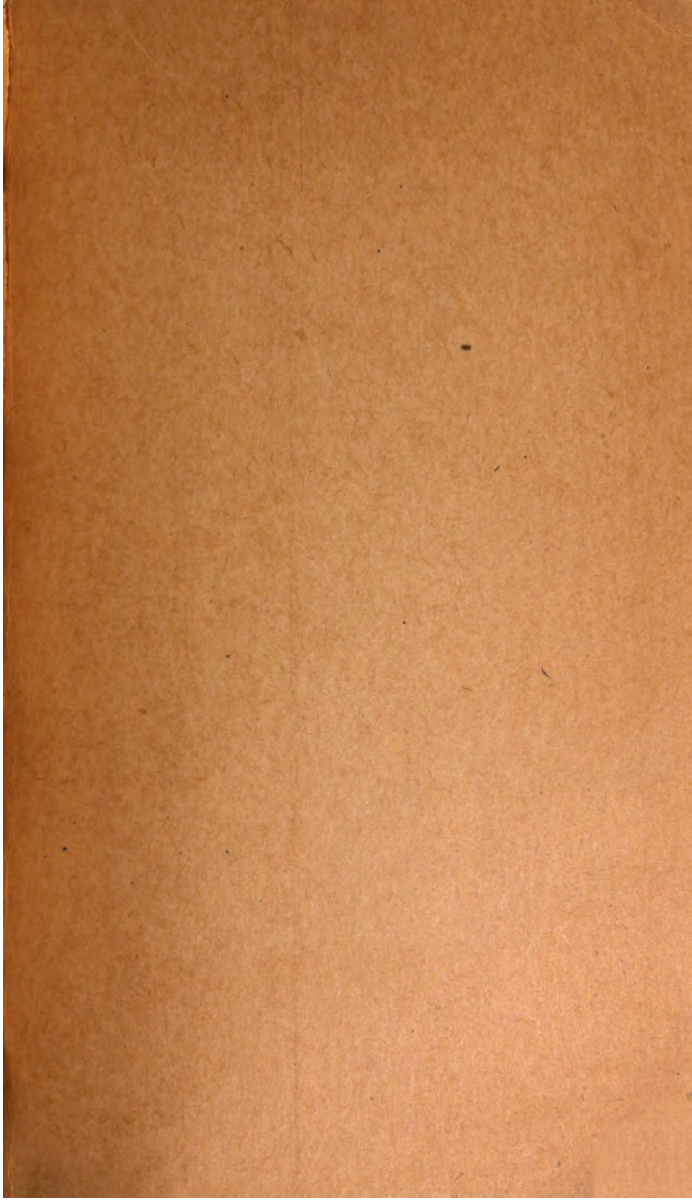

COCK ROBIN'S DECEASE

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COCK ROBIN'S DECEASE

An Irregular Inquest

BY

EDWARD THOMPSON

Published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at The Hogarth Press, 52 Tavistock Square, London, W.C. 1

1928

Summon your jury! Unto Loxias' hall
Bring in the body and the accused ones all.
He is a Prophet, and can separate
The true and false of devious, hot debate.
Masters, your places find; the lawyers fee,
That shall unmask this foul conspiracy,
And say where Robin had his wounds; and when;
In leafy chace or bandits' murky den;
Whether the Many-headed spilt his gore;
Or fell Barabbas his thin life-thread shore;
Or that cloak-featured press whose arrows spray
Poor poesy's tempestuous, windring way.
We must know all; and shall with gesture stern
Each evil face drag to the corpse in turn,
Marking the while if from the tortured flesh,
To point its slayer, blood well forth afresh.

Our findings, if they please the Prophet's eyes,
Doubt not, shall reach the Muse's grave Assize.

Berkshire MS.; conjecturally sixteenth[1] century.

[1] But against this date that "portmanteau word" *windring* presents difficulties. The reader will remember that it occurs in *The Tempest*.

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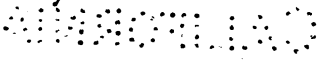
COCK ROBIN'S DECEASE

APOLOGY

If I believed that the general drift of this essay represented my own opinion only, I should not publish it. For I am one who some years back passed out of the ranks of what Mr Robert Graves once called "practising poets," and I might therefore be considered disqualified to speak. But in editing the "Sixpenny Poets" I learnt what I believe is still unknown to the general public, how impossible the writing or publishing of poetry has become, except by the wealthy. I thought my errand, to demand the gift of valuable copyrights, reasonably impudent; but I found myself, again and again, regarded with pity and amazement, as one doubtfully

"quite stalwart in his wits"; and in one case, where I asked with hesitation for a poet well known and in his prose certainly almost a "best-seller," his publisher metaphorically threw his whole list at me. "You can take any poet you like."



THE FACT OF THE MURDER ESTABLISHED

It is commonly believed that the present is a time when a taste for poetry is widely diffused. This is ascribed sometimes to the War, which "brought us face to face with reality" and spiritualised this generation. As is well known, books of verse had a vogue a dozen years ago; indeed, looking back, one remembers slim pamphlets of an incredibly exiguous prettiness that gave their authors both reputation and sales that now—the sales, at any rate—would

not be attained by a book of Robert Bridges or Walter de la Mare. I have often seen the assertion that this wide diffusion of poetic taste and of hunger for poetry has been shown by the circulation of Messrs Benn's *Sixpenny Poets*; that series, so reviewers were in the habit of saying, proved that there is a public for good poetry "at a reasonable price." Which gives me the chance to clear myself from an imputation that has sometimes lain heavily on my conscience. For I, who edited that series, was never a Sixpennyite ("I was never a Wilkesite," said Wilkes to George III). I do not, and never did, consider sixpence "a reasonable price" for poetry. But I did, in the insight that comes from years of patient study of one's fellow-men and -women, perceive that sixpence was the valuation that the average reader set upon it.

In all grave seriousness though, there were good reasons justifying the six-

pennyising of contemporary poetry; and the series did to some extent get round—a monstrous detour—the reviewers and anthologists, and make some fine living poets known to a public which could not afford to buy their separate books. When I escaped from the series I had seen enough to be surer than ever that if we could have a greater honesty—competence it is not reasonable to ask—in the reviewing of poetry, and some wider channel of approach to the public that is too diffident to claim an interest in poetry, poetry could have a chance again.

Every publisher knows that poetry was never in a worse slough of neglect than at present. In proof of this, let two facts stare us in the face. First, there is at the present moment no publisher who would at his own expense publish a *new* poet. (If there is, let him speak, that we may all look at a brave man.) I can see, looking round the now

fairly familiar ranks of the Barabbadae, one partial exception to my statement, but, since he is publishing this essay, I cannot say what I think of the poetry he publishes. (My opinion would be quite respectful, but, in brief, I think his activities here valuable chiefly as a part of his effort towards freedom and freshness of thinking.)

The reader will object that verse continues to be published. Yes; at the author's expense, or verse by established writers. No doubt Edward Shanks and W. J. Turner and John Freeman find publishers; but hardly even verse by these would stir a publisher to any enthusiasm as a commercial man. Or a writer who has a reasonably good name for his prose might find a publisher willing to sanction the aberration of rhyme, especially if he were given "an option" on a novel afterwards. But if William Shakespeare were to come forward now with *Venus and Adonis* or

John Keats with *Sleep and Poetry* (excellent collocation!)—the illustrations are unsatisfactory, for first books of verse often deserve to be turned down on their merits; if I were a publisher I should turn down *Venus and Adonis* simply because the world is so cluttered up with better stuff—neither of these eminent authors would find a publisher. But both, of course, found one in their own day, and both made some money by these very immature and imperfect books.

My second fact is this: no *new* poetic reputation has been made for some years. The last reputation with real solid bottom to it was Edmund Blunden's, made nearly eight years ago. Humbert Wolfe? Mr Wolfe published verse long ago and the beginnings of some fame were already there; also, his reputation has come so dazzlingly and tempestuously that opinion has not yet settled about it. And, if I pass Mr

Wolfe as an exception to my belief that no new reputation belongs to the last four years, there are also one or two partial exceptions—Roy Campbell, for example. But *The Flaming Terrapin* is now quite an old affair.

I am not going on with partial exceptions. The reader can test my statement for himself, and he will find it startlingly true. Nor can we take comfort from the reflection that this is a normal state of things. Thirty-five, thirty, twenty-five years ago, in the Dark Ages before the War had revealed to us our love of poetry—when there were no sixpennies, and poetry was rarely published "at a reasonable price" —there was seldom the passage of a year without some new reputation—a reputation that represented some real believers and was not all an unconvincing noise made by half a dozen pairs of clapping hands.

THE ACCUSED

Publishers and Poets

It is matter of notorious truth that publishers are grossly commercial in outlook, and blind to all excellence except of the marketable sort. No one will expect me, an author, to stand up for them. And yet—as an author by whom publishers have often lost money but rarely made it—I have a kindness for them. Every publisher seems to have a side on which he is vulnerable, however clad in mail of shrewdness else. There is one London publisher who finds himself almost physically unable to reject a MS. in which he sees the name of Pan or such words as *dryad* and *naiad*, so great is the glamour that the world of Hellas threw over his unclassically educated youth. Another cannot resist any book that is vigorously "agin

the Government" (and in the Government I include God and Religion and the Primrose League, and literature that is aware of Tennyson, Browning, Thackeray, or anyone who died before 1910, except Blake and Samuel Butler). You can place almost any competently written *prose* MS., if you know where to send it (which agents do not). Publishers constantly take at their own cost books that they know have only an outside chance of paying expenses—take them because they like them and think they *ought* to be liked by others. This is one reason why they go bankrupt "at the rate of one a week."[1] It was the public and the press that gave up poetry first, not the publishers; publishers continued accepting and issuing verse as long as they possibly could, and a great deal longer than they should have done had they been commercially wise.

[1] Sir Ernest Benn, Address at Ipswich, November 24, 1927.

Any panel of living poets, inquiring into this question of "Who killed Cock Robin?" would dismiss first of the accused the publishers—with some admonition for errors of judgment, but with no serious stain on their character.

And, after all, if the poets do not know about this matter, who does?

Yet—and this is the fact that the supporters of the "poetry at a reasonable price will sell" theory were muddily groping in their minds for—publishers and poets (a second batch of the accused now make their appearance in our court) are blamed for the books that contained a sixteen-line poem spilt over two pages and a four-line epigram occupying a whole page solely to itself—a tiny handful of verse priced at six shillings or even more. Certainly there have been such books, some of them scandalously thin value for the money asked; and they have helped to build up in booksellers and in those unhappy men,

publishers' travellers, a distaste that has reinforced the public's. The public reasonably wants something for its money. Why accumulate slim volumes when sooner or later there will be a collected edition? "Thank God, we can now have a complete edition!" as the enthusiastic "poetry-lover" said when he heard that Matthew Arnold was dead. And you need not wait for a poet's death. If you will wait until he is forty, you will get your collected edition; he won't write many short poems after that, the vast bulk of the world's good lyrical poetry has been written by men under thirty. If these meagre, mean little volumes are aimed at "the collector," they are aimed at a bird who daily waxes scarcer and warier —he has been "had" by so many suddenly inflated reputations in the last eight years, that have gone to little in six months. Better stick to de la Mare and Housman and Kipling, and not

risk money on Blunden and Drinkwater and the Sitwells. It is noteworthy that the private presses that used to issue, as recently as five years back, limited editions at a guinea or so of poets newly famous, seem to have gone out of business. This is another proof, where proof abounds, that poetry has become unmarketable, even when "signed and numbered," with all sorts of filigree thrown in. Nor would any true poet care to be known only to the collectors.

The public undeniably wants bulk for its money. It is even grumbling at novels that, instead of the proper hundred thousand words for 7s. 6d., give only seventy thousand or less. This discontent inevitably reacts on the publisher; it was a publisher who expressed to me his grief at the conduct of a fellow-publisher. "He has the cheek to make up and sell as 7s. 6d. novels stories that have only sixty thousand words in them." And when

I displayed to another publisher my surprise at the big sale of Robert Graves' *Lawrence and the Arabs*—not from any disregard for its author, but merely because I had thought that we had all had enough of Lawrence for the time being—the publisher slewed his chair round in amazement at my dullness. "Why, look at the *size* of the book, man! Just *look* at what they get for 7s. 6d.! It's astonishing value for the money!" And it is not merely the exciting quality of his material that has sold seventy thousand of Mr Masefield's *Collected Poems*; for sheer bulk, the book is a most satisfying bargain.

This excuse for the neglect of poetry has been overworked. The last generation bought slim volumes of poetry—Davidson's *Fleet Street Eclogues* (two series) and other books by him that were no larger, books also by William Watson, Stephen Phillips, Norman Gale. If I am not mistaken, Laurence Binyon

sold more largely thirty years ago than he does to-day. No; people (a third accused, the public, makes a premature appearance) do not like poetry. If you emphasise the slim volumes, I must ask notice for such books also as Siegfried Sassoon's two 3s. 6d. ones; you get plenty there for a small enough sum. When, in pursuance of my practice of getting all I could, I had screwed out of Sassoon the last line that could be packed into an "Augustan" format, he wrote at the bottom of the list, "Damn good sixpennyworth," to which his publisher added a caustic agreement. But the two 3s. 6d. books are equally good value for seven sixpences; and they are not the only books by living poets of which this is true. The public is not going to get off on the "slim expensive volume" plea.

In any case, you will never have poetry that is decent dished out in the novel's lavish style. (And even the

novelist, if he has any self-respect, finds it hard to give as freely as custom and the circulating libraries demand.) That is why a poet who has to write novels is a slinking and cowardly person, ashamed of his garrulity;[1] and a poet who has never so degraded himself feels horror when he hears that a man whom he knows has written—for *print*—eighty, ninety, even a hundred thousand words. "Do you mean to say," said my neighbour, the Poet Laureate, looking up from an advertisement in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "that you have gone on, day after day, writing down words, until you have made a big book—a novel!"

The poets, then, can be acquitted for the present, with the publishers. But they will not altogether escape the Court. Some of them will appear before us again—both in their proper quality and as reviewers. This is merely a remand.

[1] *Cf.* Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, cx, cxi.

The Public

We may as well admit that poetry cannot expect, nor do poets as a rule worry at not getting, the sales of novels and the more exciting kind of memoirs. As a matter of fact, the sales of even supposedly successful novels are often ridiculously smaller than is thought. Not only has Cock Robin been killed—Jack Sparrow, his drab-coated brother prose, can hardly keep alive. You could gather together in one room a company of novelists whose names are famous, or almost famous, and whose work is respected by people whose respect they are glad to have, such writers as—but I had better keep to generalities; and, having gathered them, if you said, "Hands up those who sell three thousand copies in the British Isles," the two or three who responded would feel embarrassingly conspicuous. I do not know how long the people I have

in mind take to write a novel, but I think that an average of nine months is probable, though some at a really tremendous strain have to take less time. The financial return must be considered a wretched one. The successful business man will settle a ten thousand pounds deal without any noise; but for a book to bring in a hundred pounds of royalties the author has to be boomed till his name is known from Land's End to John o' Groats (or at any rate, Aberdeen). The circulating-library habit has done good to some who otherwise would not find a publisher at all; but it has made it necessary for others to do a great deal more pot-boiling and to write even their most serious books more hurriedly than is good for them.

Verse, of course, is in a far more wretched case. If a book of verse got "a decent show" in the press and came out of it well enough to convince careful

readers that it was not all a ramp—for the public has got terribly afraid of having some dreadful "pup" sold to it, after some of the books of verse that have been recommended to it—we ought to have enough comfortably-off "poetry-lovers" to buy 5000 copies of it. But the sales of well-known poets are grotesquely low. Humbert Wolfe's *Requiem* sold 7000; that figure is a portent. It is a success as outstanding as the 100,000 sales of *The Constant Nymph* or *If Winter Comes*. Robert Graves' *Mockbeggar Hall*, one of his best books, sold 289 copies; it may have sold another half-dozen after he told me this. Edith Sitwell, at a time when everyone knew her name, could not sell more than 300. She does better now. But if the publishers made known what they have sold the last five years of poets as well established as a dozen who will come to the reader's memory, and we threw together all

the sales, excluding "sheets" and "colonials," and divided by the number of poets and books, the resultant figure would be nearer 200 than 500.

Things are bad in the book business, and are going to get worse; for there have come upon us very rapidly two institutions that in conjunction are going to prove not less revolutionary of mankind's mental habits and outlook than the printing press, the discovery of America, or the industrialisation of the West by machinery have proved. These institutions are the cinema and broadcasting by wireless. Now that we have information on all subjects provided by the B.B.C., there is going to be an end of the cheap libraries that have in the past given us so much taut and often excellently scholarly information. Demos intends to get his "home university," with the minimum of effort and expenditure, over a pipe at his fireside. Books will more than

ever be a backwater of life, frequented only by those with a considerable surplus both of leisure and money. Such a reading class will scorn cheap handbooks, and in any case will not be numerous enough to make such enterprises pay their way. But it will be numerous enough to keep up a flickering existence for books more highly priced that minister directly to amusement. And, if America continues to buy books, then British authors with self-respect will still be able, as they are now, to write, if they are lucky enough to appeal to transatlantic taste.

But we need not step into the shadow before time compels us to. We may note that neither the B.B.C. nor the movies will make things much worse for poetry than they are at present.

Editors and their Reviewers

We are now on the track of the chief murderers. Let us first take the ex-

tenuating circumstances of the editor's case.

Last year, I read somewhere, a mile of new books was added to the British Museum library. Sir Ernest Benn says that 12,000 books on an average are published each year in these islands. Mr Hugh Walpole, with a generosity not always found in those whose reputation is established, has said recently[1] that it is harder than ever, harder than in his own struggling days, for an author to gain recognition; he added, "and the press could not and did not review the mass of novels with anything like adequacy." He might have pointed out that editors lighten their task by not reviewing poetry at all. However, editors have this excuse, that there is a flood of books with which they could not cope, even if they wished.

The author's case is hard, and harder than is inevitable. There is far less

[1] Annual Dinner of Society of Authors, 1927.

space given to reviewing than before the War. Twenty years ago—many less years ago—there were several important journals that existed mainly for literature that have gone. I think of the *Athenæum*, the *Academy*, the *Literary World*, the *Saturday Westminster Gazette*. The daily papers also reviewed books pretty regularly, as a matter of habit; such a weekly as *Land and Water* had space to notice books. Now, except when a book comes along that is considered "news" or whose author is of outstanding eminence, the reviewing of our daily press, with hardly an exception, is negligible. Publishers and authors would agree that review copies sent to the daily press are usually a wasted postage. We still have our weeklies; but I have the impression that even in these politics have encroached largely on the space once given to books. And poetry has gone to the wall first. The vast majority of copies

of books of verse sent to editors are never reviewed at all. Publishers know, and poets know, that there is no hearing for verse; that it happens, not occasionally but constantly, that sixty copies are sent out, and less than ten notices are printed. And *such* notices! (but I shall come to that presently).

The reader may think I am referring to the neglect of those still numerous little books for whose publication the author has paid, and whose quality (in many, but by no means all instances) would justify an even heavier fine than he or she has self-imposed. I am not. A writer who would get fifty reviews, many of them careful ones, of a book of prose, will often get far less than a dozen notices, mostly mere mentions, of a book of verse. It is hard to believe that, after showing brains and imaginative power in his prose, he has become a fool because he writes in verse. Similar neglect is often meted out to

books by writers whose main, or even sole, effort has been made in verse, with admitted success. I do not see how publishers can be expected to take the risk of issuing verse if it is not going to be reviewed. One leading publisher told me this year that he had now given up the practice of sending out verse for review; on the rare occasions when he published it, he sent out about six copies to editorial offices, and about a dozen to authors of reputation who were known to care for poetry, in the hope that they would send him back some word enthusiastic enough to be used in advertisement or might even write a review themselves.

When verse is reviewed, it is done in batches; the victims are gathered in a tumbril. I once had as a neighbour a well-known poet who was also a regular reviewer, and I used to watch him at his fell work. Nine poets to be all settled in six hundred words! He was

not unkindly; but the odds were that one of the nine would be a writer whom he considered "important" (a favourite word of his). The other eight books, seeing this monster advance to take first bite at the six-hundred-words ration, must have known that their own commons would be short.

> If that should stay to dine, he said,
> There won't be much for us.

But they were lucky to be sent out for réview at all. If at this moment editors had their offices raided, poetry of the past three years would be found stacked high in some—and the nearest second-hand bookseller would furnish damning evidence against the others, in shelves crammed with books whose pages had not been cut.

Moreover, there is little chance of periodical publication for the poet to-day. Time was, not so long since, when every good weekly had its regular poem. Now weeks pass poemless with

Nation, *New Statesman*, and the rest. Some of these papers certainly do not publish twenty poems a year, where they used to publish at least fifty-two.

Of Reviewers more especially

The novelist—if he gets noticed at all—will get reviews that will make him feel very humble, because of their generosity. Specialist books, those that demand a close study of the subject before a man can review them at all, are commonly reviewed with a patience, thoroughness, knowledge, and fairness that are entirely admirable. Two classes of books are abominably reviewed, books of verse and books on India; the reason is the same in each case, distaste. No subject bores us more than India, and nearly all of us dislike poetry; and a larger proportion of the few who do like poetry are outside the professional literary class than inside it. Poetry is not only skimpily treated, but when

reviewed at all is reviewed far worse than any other class of literature. The impression obtains that no experience or ability is needed here, but merely a certain sappy exuberance and complacency. Most reviews are flaccid and meaningless, and the writers ought to be caned for the tags and thin-worn phrases that they use—"No lover of poetry can afford to miss this book." And the enthusiastic reviews are in such towering vein that they have been a considerable factor in the process by which our language has been losing pith and edge. In the brief notices at the end of the *Times Literary Supplement*—which are meant to be, and are understood as, dismissal—you will often find praise which, if words meant anything, would be good enough for Milton or Sophocles. When we want to be understood as commending really good work we have to be absurd.

Very few have any genuine opinion of

their own where poetry is concerned. We are all bound to have no opinions in a vast number of matters, or only opinions lightly and tentatively held. But somewhere, surely, we should have opinions for which we would show fight, and which we would not relinquish except for good reason shown. But in poetry few, even of those who review it, hold opinions of any conviction. I suppose this is true all through of current literature, which is why within three months of a great writer's death there is always such a slump in his reputation; for some years we had been repeating things we did not honestly believe. But this "turn-over" of reputation is most pronounced by far with a poet's fame—for people *care* about prose, they form genuine opinions here and will put up their fists in defence.

Thirty years ago Stephen Phillips was being reviewed with praise almost more than any poet has ever deserved; he

was being reviewed as Mr Humbert Wolfe was last year. I juxtapose Phillips and Mr Wolfe merely as the best-reviewed poets of their time; and note further that against Mr Wolfe's spectacular seven thousand, Phillips's *Herod* and *Paolo and Francesca* sold their twenty thousands, *Marpessa* its ten thousands, his *Poems* more than *Marpessa*. *Herod*, according to Mr Max Beerbohm, was

> so fiery coloured, so intense, the character so largely projected, the action so relentlessly progresses till the final drops of awe are wrung from us, that only the greatest of dramatic poets could accompany with verse quite worthy of it.

Paolo and Francesca, according to William Archer, was

> A thing of exquisite poetic form, yet tingling from first to last with intense dramatic life. Mr Phillips has achieved the impossible. Sardou could not have ordered the action more skilfully, Tennyson could not have clothed the passion in words of purer loveliness;

according to Sir Owen Seaman, Mr Phillips had

written a great dramatic poem which happens also to be a great poetic drama. We are justified in speaking of Mr Phillips's achievement as something without parallel in our age;

according to Churton Collins, the play

unquestionably places Mr Phillips in the first rank of modern dramatists and of modern poetry. It does more, it claims his kinship with the aristocrats of his art: with Sophocles and with Dante;

according to Mr Richard le Gallienne,

Poetry like this has not been written in England for many a long day, and it is Mr Phillips's double success that it is essentially and through and through dramatic poetry; for, while *Paolo and Francesca* is a noble poem, it is so, largely, for the reason that it is noble drama as well. It would be impossible to exaggerate one's gratitude to Mr Phillips for this priceless gift of new beauty.

It is natural for contemporaries to overrate a poet who appeals to them;

but my complaint is not that Phillips was overrated, but that his stupendous place was so swiftly and completely levelled with the ground. It is many years now since anyone has dared to suggest that he was even a meritorious poet at all (though he was one), or anything but a rhetorician. Yet some of those who so extolled him are still great nabobs in our literature, and have a share in shaping current judgment. If I had said half the things that they said, I would be prepared to fight for my opinion thirty years later, unless I had entirely changed it.

Praise almost as ecstatic was occasionally given to John Davidson, who still has the smouldering ashes of a reputation, thanks to the two poems that the anthologies copy. But his fame, like that of Phillips, went so entirely that of neither of these poets—so eminent to their own generation—has there been any collected edition, or

even an attempt at a selection. Davidson's work is full of flaws; you can see what necessity did, driving him on to one *tour de force* after another, always saying to himself, "Let me but have a really decent return for this book, and then I will write what I want to write." It is what poets—and artistic minds using prose — will increasingly be tempted to say to themselves. "Oh, let me but once—I *must* have the ability somewhere, if I could but fling and torture the whole of myself into a mould so alien from me—do a book that will succeed like *If Winter Comes* or, at any rate, *Dusty Answer*. Then I can write at leisure, sure of a remnant who will stay faithful to me, and numerous enough for me to pay my way." But this never happens; for the price of pot-boiling is that for the rest of this incarnation you shall continue chopping and fetching wood. So, then, Davidson's work is full of hurry and

strain, and he works with fables and themes hastily devised and thrown up into a flimsy trellis. But how crammed with magnificence it is! No other English verse is shot and variegated with such gorgeous colouring.

I have taken the reviewing of the generation immediately before my own, because there is a common opinion that taste and judgment in poetry have been steadily improving since the admittedly bad days when Wordsworth and Shelley were turned down by the press. It is believed, especially, that we who live to-day are better in this respect than even the last generation. We are *not* better, we are worse where poetry is concerned, as could be proved by the poetry-reviewing of a century ago. When we are smug at the expense of the one age that has been singled out as scandalously stupid, it is out of ignorance both of the poets who were criticised and of the reviews that are

condemned. Keats, we all know, was criticised sharply; but he was not criticised more unjustly than many another poet. If he had lived another three years he would have been accepted; and *Endymion*, which some of the critics mauled, is full of faults and its tags are abominable, as the *Quarterly* rightly pointed out. The *Quarterly's* tone was no worse than that of at least one much-admired critic of to-day. And the *Edinburgh* had sensibility enough to feel that the poem was full of freshness—the freshness that you never get in England, for it rains so incessantly that you never know what makes the memory ache to remember, the scent of the long-dry dust when the showers strike it. Shelley was worse reviewed than Keats, was the one poet who did receive real injustice, for reasons other than his poetic sins. But his poetic sins were not small. *Adonais* and the *West Wind* came late in his life; early came *Queen*

Mab, *The Revolt of Islam*, and *Prometheus Unbound*.

Here let me digress, and ask to have the commentators, those who teach and annotate our "classics," put into the dock beside the reviewers. It is certain that a great many of the best criticisms of books are spoken, and never come into print. But people who in their school-days disliked stuff that they were told was admirable assume that poetry is "not in their line," and they never vex themselves with it thereafter. It is Shakespeare's worst literature that we read first; and, reading in the editor's "Preface" what glorious stuff *The Merchant of Venice* is, and how divine the rhetorical—thoroughly competent, but brassy, unrhythmical, prosaic—speeches in *Julius Cæsar* are, most of us, knowing that in our soul we are uncomfortable, blame the soul (that spark of God!) for an unpoetic, blinded thing, but nevertheless avoid verse when school-days

are done. Dr Johnson, the best of all commentators on Shakespeare, long ago told the truth about *Cymbeline*:

> This play has many just sentiments, some natural dialogues, and some pleasing scenes, but they are obtained at the expense of much incongruity.
>
> To remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct, the confusion of the names and manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life, were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation.

That is, *Cymbeline* is a thoroughly botched and bad piece of work, and only the miracle of the poetry surrounding Imogen has hidden this from general awareness. *The Merchant of Venice* is not this, of course—"unresisting imbecility"; but it is not poetry, and we ought to be told this in our school-days —and told it in the plainest language. Johnson's truthfulness is needed in all the teaching of our established poetry. When correcting a number of papers by

elementary school teachers a few years ago, I was struck by their obvious dislike—often almost hatred—of Shelley; but not one of them dared say what he thought, for fear that the examiner would plough him. Yet what he thought would have been far better sense, had he known, than the official judgments that he had learnt by heart and which he set down—not even then managing to hide altogether the wrigglings of distaste and unbelief. These men, who had been to no university and no public school, dared not say how dull and poor they had—quite reasonably, in the examiner's opinion—found *Prometheus Unbound*; it made me unhappy, for I knew that they would never again voluntarily read any poetry, and that they would pass on their own vivid horror of it. They considered that they had to praise also that detestable poem, *Isabella*. But we who review books are equal cowards. Every book

that has won lofty praise in the last eight years ought to be reviewed again. It would be good for us to decide if Ralph Hodgson's *Bull* really is the altogether delectable and glorious thing we were told not so long ago; if the concluding chorus of *The Dynasts* really is sublime; if *The Death of Society* (for prose should come up too) deserved the Hawthornden Prize and the praise given it recently by a pontifical person, that either this or *A Passage to India* is "the most distinguished book" of the last decade. We need honesty for the prevalent cults of the hour also. It would sift away a lot of nonsense if we said what we feel. Samuel Butler might then be seen to be just as much a preacher as Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and we might remember preachers who took themselves with less devastating solemnity and were more human and humorous creatures. Even Blake might seem less toweringly great than we are

always being told he is, and the worship of Donne might seem a bit silly.

Verifiable by observation, the fact is this; so much of contemporary reputation, more so now than ever before, is insincere, the repetition of what we have heard other, more prominently placed, dullards say, that often all that is needed to upset a reputation is for *one* man to challenge it with honesty and vigour. If he speaks like a man of sense and gives reason for his heresy, the trick is done. No one need be afraid of speaking his opinion of a contemporary poet frankly (or, for that matter, a novelist), *if he has taken pains to be sure* that it *is* his opinion and is grounded on first-hand investigation. There will be a few parrots crying that Mr Jones has shown not the poet's short-comings but his own—a few second-hand sarcasms will be flung at him, out of minds that are one vast rag-bag. But not ten per cent. of those who praise the work

whose worth he questions have read it; and of these ten only one is *sure* of what the others have hitherto lightly assumed to be their opinion.

Nevertheless, *real* reputations still exist. Conrad's was real, Kipling's is real; in poetry, Bridges' and de la Mare's are real. For these depend not on reviewers but on lovers, they have managed to get past the reviewers—an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. (Nor will it profit you to have got past, if you have got past because of their stupidity or fraud. Your reputation will be a sham one, waiting for the first man who can throw a stone straight.) Reviewers have often treated Mr Bridges scurvily; as he would say himself, it does not matter a damn. Those who know him *know*; and neither this nor any subsequent generation will ever be so completely fooled as to lose this knowledge. And we have other poets—a few—who are safe enough.

A man is all right once he has found his public.

POETRY FOR THE EAR; AND FOR THE EYE

Our poetry reviewers—and many of our poets—need to be jerked back to first principles. They do not know what poetry is. Wordsworth says:

> All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; and, though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.

That definition—like Arnold's, like any that could be made—is too narrow; but it includes two elements that are present in all great poetry, and in most good poetry, spontaneity and deliberateness. It is the spontaneity on which we need to insist to-day—not that we

have a superabundance of the long brooding out of which poetry is born, but we have an abundance of cleverness. During the last dozen years a great deal of work has passed as poetry which is only carpentry. The technical difficulties of verse are trivial—of free verse, still more trivial—and can be mastered by anyone above a certain low grade of ability; good verse is common to-day, though nothing like as common as it was five years ago. Verse was then being written by a great many people, some of them gaining considerable reputation as poets, who ought to have left it alone. As Mr Robert Graves observed to me, poetry, like the building trade, suffered from dilution of labour. During the temporary boom in poetry (which has been followed by so utter a slump) some brilliant writers made their first hit with a smartly written book of verse; they then passed on to their real and more arduous job, and have since written

novels, short stories, or essays. It is safe to prophesy that they will not vex the Muse again for this incarnation. They are under no illusion; they know they are not poets, though they have passed as such.

"Why, father, is the net removed?"
"Son, it hath caught the fish."

Verse is not, in its really poetical manifestations, an extraneous ornament, the work of deft brains. The mind has been stirred by an impulse that demands rhythmical expression; there have been waves of rhythm within, which create waves of rhythm in language. Just as certain movements of the mind cry out for music as their satisfaction, so others cry out for poetry. If a man is a great poet, his verse corresponds—though not necessarily, or even usually, at once—to his thought as the movements of a vigorously healthy body correspond to the brain's direction; thought and rhythmical impulse work as one. There

must be a deliberate element, however hidden, or the rhythmical impulse could not appear as language. But that deliberate element in happy moments works so swiftly, incisively, and infallibly, that it becomes a second spontaneity; and, even when the poetry has resulted from hard effort, has the effect and virtue of spontaneity. So poetry must be read from within—not judged by externals, by the show it makes on the printed page.

Now, if the rhythmical core, impulse, beginning, whatever we decide to call it, is slight or almost non-existent, a good craftsman can still write what is good verse; English has a great deal of this kind of verse, much of it so pleasant that it achieves some of the function of poetry, and it would be ungrateful not to call it poetry. Nevertheless, true poetry is sign-marked by its rhythmical source, and a poet's prose—not that abomination "poetic prose"—is, when it treats of a subject imaginatively and

not merely analytically, a thing visibly excited even when triumphant, like a man marching in the Eleusinian Procession. Poetry is for the ear, not primarily for the eye (though the eye may powerfully reinforce the appeal to the ear); and it is not for the outer ear (though this may have reason to rejoice in it), but for the inward ear that catches sounds subtler than any noise. And, when a contemporary has produced a genuine poem, this rhythm moves visibly through its words. The rhythm may be tremulous with happiness, as well as joyous with the writer's absolute command, as in

> I have loved flowers that fade,
> Within whose magic tents
> Rich hues have marriage made
> With sweet unmemoried scents;[1]

it may be bewildered, with catches and breaks of the voice, as in *The Little Ghost who died for Love*:[2]

[1] Robert Bridges. [2] Edith Sitwell.

Fear not, O maidens, shivering
As bunches of the dew-drenched leaves
In the calm moonlight . . . it is the cold
sends quivering

(Note, O reader, how complete is the identification of poet and her theme; the verse itself, in the extension and sudden compression of the last six words, is a shudder.)

My voice, a little nightingale that grieves.
Now Time beats not, and dead Love is forgotten,
The spirit too is dead and dank and rotten,

And I forget the moment when I ran
Between my lover and the sworded man—
Blinded with terror lest I lose his heart.

But the rhythmic impulse is there; and when the impulse is there the metre can be trusted to see to itself; it can even be the apparent negation of rhythm (as the counter of syllables on his fingers would think) when the rhythm within the brain is a floating, inconsequent thing, evoked by a picture diaphanous and mist-suffused:

In still midsummer night
When the moon is late
And the stars all watery and white
For her coming wait,

A spirit whose eyes are possest
By wonder new
Passeth—her arms upon her breast
Enwrapt from the dew

In a raiment of azure fold
With diaper
Of flower's embroidery of gold
Bestarr'd with silver.

The daisy folk are awake
Their carpet to spread,
And the thron'd stars gazing on her make
Fresh crowns for her head,

Netted in her floating hair
As she drifteth free
Between the starriness of the air
And the starry lea,

From the silent-shadow'd vale
By the west wind drawn
Aloft to melt into the pale
Moonrise of dawn.[1]

---

[1] Robert Bridges.

For some time, however, our reviewers have been misled by poetry that has been written for the *eye*; and it is through the eye that they judge of it. Verse that aims at giving the effect of colour, that splashes the printed page with vivid words, has been more readily accepted than any other. Good poets know well how the eye collaborates with the ear, and have often been glad to use words that deceive a sense—that of seeing—which is continually forcing itself (wrongfully) into an assessor's position. Results have sometimes justified them; but it is a dangerous trick, for soon the eye takes control and the inner ear is forgotten. Then the poet will *collect* his poem from the world outside, and it will remain a thing external. Mr W. J. Turner's poetry is like no one else's, and his earlier books had their own elegiac rhythm acting on the reader like a charm, so that he was drowsed with pleasure; but there was

an attention to colour that has since grown excessive. Here are typical lines from his earlier work:

Carved on the azure air white peacocks fly,
Their fanning wings stir not the crystal trees,
Bright parrots fade through dimming turquoise days,
And music scrolls its lightning calm and bright
On the pale sky where thunder cannot come.

This excessive appeal to the eye was present in nearly all the poets of the "Georgian Poetry" books. Now, because the sense of beauty weakens so easily, it is legitimate to strengthen it by whatever appeal; but the subsidiary appeal should not displace the soul and source of poetry. This needs the more emphasis, because our world is so amazingly rowdier than any world in which poets have lived before. Motor-cars honk, each with its separate discordance, along even the Damascus-Beirut road, Lebanon being now one of the

seven noisiest places on earth. In Oxford I sit daily, three storeys up in a side street, trying to teach an Oriental tongue, and I have to shout to be heard by men a yard away. I do not think we have begun to suspect how obtuse and hardened our sense of sound values has become; the more need, then, to keep some awareness in the inward ear.

We shall not get better poetry unless we get better criticism of it. A novelist practising his art gets a great deal of criticism that helps him; a poet gets none. If a poet is praised at all, it is usually for things that really show the line along which he is going presently to be precipitated to the abyss. Even in the case of poets whom we have been reading for years, so that we *ought* to know what they are, the odds are that they will be esteemed for what is least estimable. Hardy is alleged to be a great poet because of *The Dynasts*, or even because of his *Famous Tragedy of*

the Queen of Cornwall; de la Mare, who is always delightful but who is so—beyond all comparison—infinitely more glamorous and delightful in fifty other poems, is praised for his fairies, and the anthologist will ask for *Suppose* oftener than for any poem except *The Listeners*. *Suppose* comes from the one bad patch he has struck, those fairy pieces written to illustrate certain ugly pictures. Of our modern fairies—which are *not* the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—words adequately objurgatory have been uttered by Mr Kipling and Mr Forster. If so august a commination service is open to members of the public, I should like to lift my voice in the responses; it would be fervent. Drayton and Herrick have a lot to answer for.

It is time we sorted out our opinions of the poetry of our time. We have taken over a deal of verse from the War, when all of us had so much hysteria and false sentiment in our minds. Verse has

the trick of making nonsense stick like a burr. We have long ago forgotten the equally silly excitements that we all poured into newspapers, speeches, private letters; but our anthologies keep in everlasting remembrance Miss Rose Macaulay's *Many Sisters to Many Brothers*:

> Oh, it's you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck:
>
> . . . . . .
>
> But for me—a war is poor fun!

Messrs Dent's *Modern Poetry* ("King's Treasuries" series) has an editor who speaks of "the majesty of thought" in Mr Hardy's *Men Who March Away*, which Sir Henry Newbolt, if I remember rightly, called the greatest poem produced by the War. Mr Hardy's verse needs no man's praise; but its merits are not here, in this poem so irrelevant to what the men we knew were and did and thought:

Is it a purblind prank, O think you,
Friend with the musing eye,
Who watch us stepping by
With doubt and dolorous sigh?
Can much pondering so hoodwink you!
Is it a purblind prank, O think you,
Friend with the musing eye?

The poem may pass for what it was—a piece wrung from an unpoetic mood for an occasion.

Both *Modern Poetry* and *Poems of To-day* include Mr Robert Nichols' *The Assault*; the editor of the former speaks of its "terrific power of subjective expression." All that need be said in reply is, Mr Nichols could not possibly have written it *after* he had been to the Front. Its proper place is in the *Battle Stories Magazine*, which an American public supports and whose needs are indicated in *The Writers' and Artists' Year-Book*:

While American or Canadian heroes are preferred, stories with British heroes are acceptable, and English writers are cordially

invited to contribute. . . . Stories must abound in action and suspense, and contain physical encounters with the enemy.

Again, the anthologists always take Mr Nichols' *Farewell to Place of Comfort*, with which, indeed, *Poems of To-day, Second Series*, opens. The poem has its graceful moments, and one statelily pretty—no, perhaps more than pretty —picture:

Day like a tragic actor plays his rôle
To the last whispered word, and falls gold-clad.

But our age, which, in the absence of ability to see nobler things, is missing imagination in poetry and rejoicing in conceits—last year all our reviewers were thrilled by Mr Humbert Wolfe's shy, delicious noun that at last found itself beside its adjective,—does Mr Nichols wrong in supposing this the best he can do. There is another Nichols who wrote *The Sprig of Lime*, a poem masculine and all one piece, mag-

nificent in rhythmic march, thought, and imagination; if any poet of his generation has written another poem as great, I should like to know its name. Not less lovely is his *Seventeen*. It is probable that, if he had met with adequate criticism — from others or from himself,—Mr Nichols would have become a great poet.

However, to travel towards a note of peace and reconcilement with ourselves, America, where still the poet has a place and may hope to sell more than a few hundred copies, gets guidance beside which our own is a miracle of competence. I have before me the latest great American poem, *Tristram*, by a writer whose name is in high regard our side of the Atlantic also, Mr Edwin Arlington Robinson. This is in its thirteenth large printing, which must at least signify something [1] out of the dreams of any English poet but Mr

[1] Fifty thousand sales.

Kipling and Mr Masefield; and three of the most prominent of American critics, in three of the chief American journals, tell us how fine it is:

"'Tristram' is a great love poem filled with the nostalgic ardor of passion, heightened inevitably by its simplicity, and impressive because of its driving ardor. With this poem Mr Robinson may challenge any poet living on earth to-day."

"What makes the poem notable, what makes it specifically distinguished in the roll of his works, is the intensity of its emotion; passion sweeps through it with a vigor and beauty that are new, in this full resonance, to Mr Robinson's art. In 'Tristram' Mr Robinson has created, in its noblest guise, the ecstasy of passion."

"It is a poem which for beauty, for technique, for dramatic skill is the equal at least of any great narrative poem in the English language. From first to last it moves majestically and poignantly. In its course we are given some of the most exquisite love poetry America has produced."

I will disqualify myself at once by saying that I find it hard to believe that

any poem which deals with Helen of Troy or Judas Iscariot or Tristram and Iseult can be anything but cold hash. But I will be fair, for I will not say what I think of *Tristram*; I will merely quote at random—any page will do, for it is of equal quality throughout, never deviating above or below its characteristic standard.

Queen Morgan, coming closer, put a small
And cat-like hand on Tristram: "In this world
Of lies, you lay a burden on my virtue
When you would teach me a new alphabet.
I'll turn my poor wits inside out, of course,
Telling an angry king how sick you are—
With wine or whatsoever. Though I shall
know
The one right reason why you are not merry,
I'll never scatter it, not for the King's life—
Though I might for the Queen's. Isolt should
live,
If only to be sorry she came here—
With you—away from Ireland to be married
To a man old enough to bury himself.
But kings are kings, and by contriving find
Ways over many walls. This being their
fate, . . .

There are two hundred pages equally excellent, any one of which will furnish examples of what is some of the most exquisite love poetry America has produced:

Isolt, almost as with a frightened leap,
Muffled his mouth with hers in a long kiss,
Blending in their catastrophe two fires
That made one fire. . . .

Gawaine, recovered early from a wound
Within a soon-recuperating heart,
Waved a gay hat on board for two gray eyes
On shore. . . .

He had been there,
She thought, but not with her. He had died there,
But not for her. He had not thought of her,
Perhaps, and that was strange. He had been all,
And would be always all there was for her,
And he had not come back to her alive,
Not even to go again. It was like that
For women, sometimes, and might be so too often
For women like her. She hoped there were not many
Of them, or many to be. . . .

RESUSCITATION MEASURES

It is hard to believe that English poetry has any achievement ahead of it that can equal its magnificence of the past. It is certain that no poetry is being published now that is first-rate, unless our reviewers have overlooked it. Mr Leonard Woolf has recently written that in his opinion no masterpiece—he is thinking of prose mainly, of course—is written without some central core of faith or religion or philosophy—call it what you will, but it must be something that keeps the whole book "at an even temperature." We cannot get that; and those of us who are writing are humbly aware that we have nothing like enough to say, for the space in which we must say it.

Not that we would live, even for the gain of their spiritual fervour, the lives our predecessors lived. The *Daily*

Herald this year, contrasting Mr Hardy's achievement with Browning's, called the latter "a full-fed Liberal loafing on a hill-top in Fiesole and proclaiming that 'God's in His Heaven; all's right with the world,'" and spoke of his "silly optimism." Poor Browning suffers as unjustly from misapplication of a remark, merely one in a sequence of phenomena, a sort of inventory of the universe at a certain moment—

> The lark's on the wing:
> The snail's on the thorn:
> God's in his heaven—

as Lord Oxford from misapplication of his famous "Wait and see." But we all have a certain sympathy with the *Daily Herald's* outburst. The universe has been taken from us. Instead, we have a world that, as a lady said to me, "is daily being tied by radio and all that sort of thing into a nasty, tight little ball." No wonder *concetti* are coming back, and are being hailed as masterly

imaginativeness. The plain truth is, we haven't a philosophy that will carry a great poem.

But while we wait for such a philosophy to come, something can be done to restore Cock Robin. If poetry is not publishable until the writer has made a name as a novelist or critic, or unless he is prepared to pay for it, then we are losing poetry. There must be at this present moment good poets whose names are quite unknown. Our dearth of genuine poetry has an economic cause, more immediate[1] than even its philosophic one; men who could write —in some cases, have written—poetry full of beauty, even if not of a quality that we dare call great, must write prose, as Hardy did for a quarter of a century, because they could not afford to write verse. If they ever return to verse, it will be with poetical muscles stiffened, as he did. And, though even

[1] But not deeper.

in the stiffness there may be an impressive strength, there has been meanwhile a loss. And they may never return.

There is a further loss to both the poet and his generation. One reason why poetry, if praised at all, is often overpraised by the writer's contemporaries is this: every writer whose work is really alive has something to say which is for his own contemporaries and for no one else. If his own age does not listen to him, then that part of his quality has been definitely lost. It was good that Byron and Swinburne were appreciated by men and women who felt the same excitements; for many of those excitements to us who have followed seem much ado about nothing. It is only my contemporaries who have lost what I have lost, who have learned what I have learned; so, if I have anything at all to say, part of it will be understood by them only. When we

see the rust of oblivion encroaching on the work of men and women as near to us as Carlyle and Ruskin, Emerson, Tennyson, Browning, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, we may be glad they got so much recognition when alive, so that the part of their work which makes little appeal to us nevertheless made its appeal, and so became part of the inherited experience of the English. In the full tide of their reputation they seemed altogether "immortal" to their contemporaries, as Stephen Phillips and William Watson seemed twenty-five years ago, as Thomas Hardy and de la Mare and John Galsworthy seem to us to-day. But the coming of new, unimaginable experience shreds away first this, and then that. There is no wise writer who does not remember the words spoken to Sapphira; the feet of the young men who are to bury him are at the door. When I told a poet and critic, in the first days of the

"sixpennies," that Rupert Brooke was selling more than the rest of the batch put together, he said in surprise, "I thought the Brooke bubble had been pricked long ago!" If Brooke had been alive, he could not have thought that, for a personality so vigorous and alert would have been still a force in our letters; Brooke would not yet have been forty. But Brooke was dead; and his critic had been too young when the War broke out to know what Brooke felt, and why others of us—who can see clearly enough all that can be urged against Brooke's work—are yet not prepared to dismiss it as rhetorical and empty.

I have said that there are almost certainly good poets in our midst who have never had even the beginnings of a hearing. If there are, then their work, if it misses its own generation, will miss all generations. The dullest Elizabethan had, and still has, a chance; some

kindred ass in our own time may discover him. But let no poet who is neglected to-day think that his work is going to be fished out of the bottomless forgetfulness of the future. It will be a long time before the thesis-writers are allowed to take our age, or anything written in it, as a subject; and when time has at last made us respectably ancient, so that even a university—even Oxford or Cambridge, even Harvard or Yale or Princeton—will think there is no shame in a scholar knowing that we once existed, mankind will have so many graver troubles to vex it that our bones will be left in peace. Besides, we are so numerous. No; for every writer, it is now or never.

Therefore, to bring back poetry and to give us more good poetry we all need to mend our ways. Publishers must publish it again; and I am afraid they must publish it, if it is in such volume as it usually is, not at the present prices

but at 3s. 6d., as Masefield's earlier books were published. The public must buy it. In England we cannot have—and do not want—a "Book of the Month Club." But it would not be a bad thing if some thousands of the people who can afford to buy poetry pledged themselves to buy a volume of new verse every four months—three a year. And they should not be allowed to consider that they had come within the meaning of the Act, if they had bought a book by Mr Kipling, Mr Masefield, Mr Humbert Wolfe, Mr Alfred Noyes, Mr John Oxenham, or Miss Fay Inchfawn; writers of so considerable a public should not be allowed to count, since they would be bought anyhow. The poets, too, must see to certain things; people often complain that the post-War popularity of poetry was strictly controlled by a few who made a close ring. Since in the nature of things writers of verse are likely to be

reviewers of it also, they must see to it that the public gets weaned of its present profound distrust and suspicion of verse reviews. For the public *is* suspicious; and with reason, for it has had some grievous bunkum palmed off upon it. It will not do to praise a poet enthusiastically, and then illustrate your praise with excerpts that every reader can see are commonplace or downright bad. If we continue to do this, there will never be any revival; that scarce creature, "the lover of poetry," who now is so continually having his attention drawn to a book that "he cannot afford to miss," will go on being blind to his interests, and will never turn up at the bookseller's counter.

Lastly, editors must send poetry out to be reviewed. At present every poet and every publisher knows that they do not. Better have abusive reviews, or silly reviews, than no reviews at all.

EPILOGUE

I, who with sixpenny crook to lilied meads
The Many-headed shepherded of late,
Merged in the flock that Psychopompos leads
To the Eumenides now dedicate
My staff (for those BENNign Ones gave it first)
And wallet that my frugal luncheons burst.

The little dark-haired fellow at the oar
Has touched the Stygian wharf; he eyes us stumbling.
"All obols ready!" As he comes ashore,
Ah me! what groping, hoping, grumbling, fumbling!
The poet damns his tattered cloak—at last
He finds his tanner[1] and is duly passed.

---

[1] *Obolos*, according to Liddell and Scott worth rather more than three halfpence. But then, this was in pre-War days, when three halfpence went as far as sixpence goes now, and sixpence a very long way indeed (Mr J. C. Squire refers to *Hamlet* v. i. 183, "a tanner will last you nine year").

Slow as a crowd that throngs to watch some
game
We gain our places; and the barge puts out.
The water glimmers with the lanthorn's
flame,
But on the cavernous walls no shadows
flout
Us who go shadowless—a huddled
group,
Like birds beneath dark wings in act
to swoop.

Where be thy fooleries now, and jolly quips?
Thy creaking rhymes that made the reader
sleep?
Thy sixpenny glim hath suffered long eclipse!
Mortality's each clout, a mouldering heap,
Lies on the bank; and Charon saith
—to wails—
"Thou goest where they hold no
jumble-sales."

Ascribed to Obolopherus of
Panium (*circa* 300 B.C.).

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