

ARTICLE V.

THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LYRIC POETRY.

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BEFORE taking up the special study of the Lyric as expressed in English Verse, it will conduce to clearness to note in brief The Origin and General Characteristics of Lyric Poetry, and the various forms which it has assumed in literary history.

Lyric Verse, as the name implies, was verse originally sung to the lyre, when bards and minstrels sang and played the songs which they composed. The oldest type of standard verse, as, also, the most natural, spontaneous, and simple, it claims, in this respect, a kind of priority over all competing forms. Though not especially illustrating some of the qualities of the epic, such as moral sublimity and vastness of outlook, nor some of the qualities of the dramatic, such as tragic intensity and general scenic effect, it possesses features of a high order peculiarly its own, and embraces an area of literary and emotional movement not so fully covered by any other forms.

ORIGIN OF LYRIC VERSE.

Its origin may be said to lie within the human heart itself, its common and special experiences, its expressible and inexpressible emotional life, so that it would not be aside from the truth to define Lyric Verse, as *The Metrical Expression of Human Feeling, The Metrical Expression of Thought through the Emotions as a Medium.*

SOME OF ITS CHARACTERISTICS.

1. It is an eminently Subjective type of verse, as distinct both from epic and dramatic, expressing the innermost sen-

sibilities of the poet himself. Instead of following the plan of the epist as a narrator of events, or that of the dramatist in representing the thoughts and experiences of others, the lyric records the ever-changing life of the lyrist himself as a man, both in his individual character and as related to the nations or the race.

The lyric is the interpreter of the world within, its desires and hopes and fears and loves and hates. Lyric Verse is thus essentially realistic, as the drama from its imitative character cannot be, and the epic from its historic and descriptive character cannot be,—a form of verse in which the author can never act by deputy, but only in the way of a heart-to-heart interview, immediate and personal. Hence, its unwonted vitality and currency; so that what is popularly called literature and life, nowhere finds a more fitting example. It is literature in living forms.

2. The lyric may be said to exhibit the possible and actual union of the Subjective and Objective, so that emotion shall never become an end in itself, but terminate, at length, on some external and worthy object, which object, indeed, has furnished the occasion for its expression. Thus it is in the lyrics of friendship and patriotism and religion,—in those Lyrics of the Hearth Side, as Dunbar calls them,—where the outward object elicits the inward feeling, and determines the measure and character of its utterance. No sentiment that begins and ends in itself can be real and normal, its healthy character always being confirmed by the fact that it always seeks and finds an object external to itself.

3. The Comprehensiveness of the Lyric is another of its notable features, wider in its range than the epic or dramatic, and expressing in one or another of its forms every experience possible to man, and reaching out, at length, beyond the finite and

human into the region of the infinite. That lyric cry of which the poets speak comes from the deepest depths, and reaches to the highest heights. It is this breadth of area that is one of the most engaging elements of lyrical study, ever inviting the student to new investigation and ever rewarding him with wider vision.

4. As an additional feature, it may be noted, that the Structure of the Lyric, the sonnet apart, is without limitation, while as to the sonnet itself, though the number of the lines cannot vary, the variety of the rhyme, as in Milton, Shakespeare, and Byron, may be such as to allow the poet the fullest individual freedom.

THE FORMS OF THE LYRIC.

In the light of what we have found to be true as to the scope of the lyric, it would be just to say, that the external poetic form which the lyric may assume may be as varied as human feeling itself, there being no emotion known to the human heart which could not embody itself, and has not embodied itself, in some idyllic structure. More specifically, however, convenient classifications may be adopted, as emphasizing this or that particular feature. Hence, we have Sacred and Secular Lyrics,—the Sacred including the Scriptural or Biblical, the Religious and the Moral, as illustrated, respectively, in Hebrew verse, in the hymns of the church, and in such ethical poems as Spenser's "Heavenly Love" and "Heavenly Beauty." Under the Secular, would fall all other species,—the Pastoral, as Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar;" the Elegiac, as Arnold's "Thyrsis;" the Humorous, as Burns's "Jolly Beggars;" the National, as the Patriotic Sonnets of Milton; the Amatory, as the Love Songs of Moore; the Descriptive, as Shelley's "Ode to the Skylark;" the Convivial, as the songs of Burns, and all those specimens that come under the caption of Ballads, as found in

Thackeray and Tennyson, in many of which the border line between the epic and the lyric is almost too dim for discernment, so that the phrase "an epical lyric" or "a lyrical epic" is not without justification. In "Comus," we have a dramatic lyric. Further still, if necessary, all lyrics might be reduced to the class of Odes, the fact that they were originally set to music and sung to the lyre not being so strictly applicable in the freer classification of later criticism.

There is a twofold division of the Lyric, however, which is inclusive of all existing forms and a practical division for the student of verse.

These are Demonstrative and Reflective Lyrics, the feeling in the first being expressed in pronounced and positive form, and, in the second, in a subdued and modified form. Hence, all National and Humorous lyrics would be of the demonstrative type, as the Elegiac and Pastoral would be of the reflective type, some of the most notable lyrics being marked by the practical union and fusion of the two forms.

The second of these forms, the Reflective Lyric, is now especially prominent in literary criticism,—just what it is, and what its province, and just to what degree a song or an ode may be reflective and yet preserve its genuine emotional character. Suffice it to say, that the only condition is that the feeling shall always control the thought, that the poem shall never pass over to the domain of the didactic. Thus interpreted, these contemplative lyrics are found to constitute an important part of modern idyllic verse, genuine emotion, in its depth and tenderness, being so often beyond a full expression. The expression, at the most, must be subdued, restrained, and temperate.

THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LYRIC.

This we are now prepared to study intelligently. At the outset, we mark the suggestive fact that this Development has

been mainly in keeping with the general development of English poetry and, in fact, with that of English Letters. Hence, in the first expressions of our poetic and literary life, we find what we might expect to find, the simplest forms of lyric expression in ode and song, and no such elaborate examples as later Georgian or Victorian days reveal. To look for Wordsworth's great Ode or Tennyson's great Elegy before the days of Milton would be out of keeping with all historico-literary conditions.

In tracing thus the history of English Lyric, we may inquire, first of all, as to its pre-Elizabethan expression in its twofold period of Old and Middle English. Inasmuch as the Lyric is the oldest and most natural expression of a nation's literary life, we might rightfully expect to find some substantive examples of it in these earlier eras, even though embodied in the cruder forms consonant to a primitive age. This expectation is in part realized, and would have been much more fully so had not the political conditions of the people and their bitter struggle for a national life been so intense as often to make impossible any form of literary work.

Thus we have the Hymns and Metrical Homilies of the Old English period, its Odes and Sonnets, so often expressed on the reflective side, as occasioned by the strenuous life of the age. Hence, we have such examples as "The Lament of Deor" and "The Traveller's Song," "The Metres of Boethius," "The Death of Byrthnoth," "The Battle of Brunanburh," and the various legends of saints and heroes, in which the epic and the lyric about equally divide the poetry, there being in all the verse a note of seriousness so distinct and prolonged as to set its seal upon the literature at large.

After the Conquest, in the Middle English Era, the lyric assumes a freer form, as, here and there, it betokens the coming

of a better day. Here we find the martial songs of Minot, and Occleve's Lament for Chaucer, and numerous odes and ballads from anonymous authors, symbolic of a distinct idyllic movement presaging the Revival of Learning. Here the name of Chaucer is prominent. Just in what sense Chaucer may be called a lyric poet is still a debatable question, the broader term "descriptive" being generally applied as the best adapted to the special characteristics of his verse. An epic poet certainly he is not, nor in any valid sense dramatic, save, as in the "Canterbury Tales," we note a collection of characters portrayed with something like scenic effect.

Hence, the verse is either descriptive or lyric, the drift of criticism being in the direction of giving Chaucer credit for a measure of lyric skill hitherto denied him, or, at least, combining the two types of verse, the lyric and the descriptive, so as not unduly to emphasize either form. In the "Canterbury Tales," we note a distinctive lyric element, on the basis of which the criticism has been ventured that Chaucer may be called "our first English lyricist." It is in his shorter poems, however, that the claims to this distinction must be found, their very brevity conducing to lyric form, and offering the poet an opportunity for the expression of varied feeling. Such poems as "The Former Age," "Truth," "Gentilnesse," and "Lak of Stedfastnesse" are of this lyric order, while even so long a poem as "The Book of the Duchesse," written as a lament on the death of Blanche, may be regarded as a lyric of the elegiac order. Whatever these poems may or may not be, as descriptive, they are more lyrical than aught else, and serve to allow the critic to include the name of Chaucer in the roll of English lyricists, as indeed the first in time.

As we approach the Modern Era, we note the opening of a lyrical epoch in the reign of Henry the Eighth, and in the verse

of Wyatt and Surrey. It is the Era of Preparation, opening the way for those later lyric developments that have made our literature so notable. The Sonnet now appears for the first time, through the special agency of Howard, Earl of Surrey, which is enough in itself to give to the period substantive lyric repute, and insure a still further expression of it in the days of Elizabeth. It is a fact of interest that, at the very dawn of the Revival of Learning and of Poetry in England, much of the innermost spirit of the revival is revealed in the line of lyric verse as best expressing the essential character of that new and broader life which as early as the reign of Henry the Seventh began to manifest its presence. In Modern English Poetry proper, there are several distinctive Lyrical Periods,—the Elizabethan, Stuart, Augustan, Later Georgian, and Victorian. It is, indeed, this special lyrical impulse, coming from Italy into England, that introduced so auspiciously the Age of Elizabeth and insured its high poetic type.

The Elizabethan Lyrics. We notice in the Golden Age, an age of impulse and awakening, the coincident expression of lyric and dramatic verse, and often so related and fused that there is no better name for much of Elizabethan poetry than the lyrico-dramatic, as seen in those "old melodious lays" of which the American poet Whittier writes. In fact, the lyric movement was now fully under way, and no form of verse could be produced which was not affected by it. If Spenser penned an epic and the dramatists wrote plays, so clear and full was the lyric note in it all that the dullest ear could hear it, a remarkable feature of the period being that the lyrical spirit was so pronounced that no poet of any standing failed to evince it. Hence, the various collections of Songs and Sonnets that have been gathered out of the province of Elizabethan verse, some of the choicest of them coming from the secondary poets of the time,

whose only claim to recognition lay in the fact that they caught the prevailing lyric impulse, and to the full measure of their ability reproduced and diffused it. It was so with Lodge and Greene and Briton and Daniel and Sidney and Donne and Browne and Barnes and Drummond and numerous others, playwrights and sonneteers, who felt that a new poetic era had dawned, and that it called for a distinctly dramatic and emotional order of verse. Hence, Spenser penned his sonnets and his shorter idyllic poems to give this impulse full expression, as seen in his "Shepherd's Calendar," his "Complaints," and his spousal and bridal songs.

So Shakespeare, as a matter of course, embodied a portion of his capacious power in lyric, as seen in all his non-dramatic poems, such as "Venus and Adonis," as, also, through and through the texture of his dramas, and, most especially, in that remarkable series of sonnets on the basis of which he is entitled to rank as the leading lyricist as well as dramatist of his time.

It is this exquisite lyricism, as the critics call it, which furnishes still another proof of the poetic wealth and scope of that remarkable man whom we know as Shakespeare, whose commanding genius seems to assume increasing area and potency as the centuries come and go.

The Stuart and Augustan eras, dating from 1603 to 1727, marks an interval of a century and a quarter of varied literary feature, but mainly of a non-lyrical type. The notable work of Milton, in the troublous days of the Stuarts, serves to mark by contrast the otherwise general lyric decline, such secondary poets as Herbert and Wither and Donne and Carew and Prior and Gay and Davenant aiming to preserve a kind of lyric sequence in English letters.

Of Milton's lyrics suffice it to say, that, isolated as they were in the center of the general lyrical destitution of the time, noth-

ing like them had as yet appeared. They serve to preserve the lyric history, and also prove that such an order of verse might appear under the most unfriendly conditions. It was thus that Milton, the last of the Elizabethans and the herald of the Georgians, stood midway between the two great lyrical eras, looking before and after.

No English poet ever appeared more opportunely both for the interests of Poetry and those of general letters, nor is it at all difficult to see that, had he not appeared when he did and with the genius he had, the rise of the romantic era in English verse might have been deferred for half a century, and Victorian Poetry been a much later and less notable development.

If the special Reasons for the decadence of the Elizabethan Lyric, after the death of James the First, be sought, some of them, at least, are clearly manifest.

One of them is found in the political character of the age, especially through the Stuart and Commonwealth eras, while, on through the revolution of 1688 and the partisan issues of the Age of Anne, the environment was anything but friendly to genuine idyllic product.

Still again, the wild Excesses of the Revolution were enough to stifle all pure poetic fervor, so that no man, save Milton, could pen a lyrical masterpiece and maintain an exalted quality of poetic work. Pope, in his Pastorals, and Dryden, in his Odes, made but few attempts in lyrics of any success, while violent and abusive satire served to reveal the extravagant temper of the time.

Moreover, the age was one of prose, especially so in the Commonwealth and Augustan eras, the revolutionary influences and polemic character of the era demanding it, as also the revolutionary influences that prevailed after the dominance of poetry in the Golden Age. To this prose development, Milton

himself contributed, while Temple and Dryden, Swift and Addison, gave it a permanent place and repute in English Letters. In the meantime, the lyric interest, though in abeyance, was still existent, quietly preparing for new expression. When, at the close of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, George the Second came to the throne, in 1727, this new expression was demanded by the logic of events, and the publication of the poems of Beattie and Goldsmith, in 1761, ushered in the second lyrical age of English Letters, the accession of George the Third, in 1760, marking the coincidence of English government and English Letters.

In the later Georgian Era (1727-1837), we come to what is called, by way of eminence, the New Poetry, as distinct from that immediately antecedent to it, what Mr. Gosse has well described, in the phrase "the Dawn of Naturalism," as distinct from the mechanism of the age preceding, the new spirit of a new era, sharply distinguished in tone and aim from the poetic canons established by Dryden and Pope. In fact, we are standing here at the rise of the Romantic School, at the point of transition from the classicism of the Augustan Age to the romanticism of the Georgian; and the fact of interest in our studies at this point is, that this radical change of poetic spirit and ideal expressed itself primarily and mainly in the sphere of lyric verse, the very characteristic of the lyric as spontaneous and emotional asserting itself as the chief characteristic of the new economy, so that the terms "Romanticism" and "Lyrism" are synchronous and synonymous, the birth of Burns, in 1759, just a year preceding the coronation of George the Third, giving all needed promise of a new awakening in the realm of English balladry. Already, in the reign of George the Second, manifest signs of the new and higher movement were at hand, in Thomson's "Seasons," in Shenstone's "Schoolmistress,"

and in the general temper of the time. The publication, in 1765, of Percy's "Reliques of Ancient English Poetry," a virtual reproduction of the Old English specimen of lyric, served, at one and the same time, to recall the nation to its earlier poetic life, and to stimulate anew the specific idyllic drift of the age. It is not at all strange, but strictly in the line of literary law and sequence, that, when this "Liberal Movement" in English Verse fairly opened, scores of poets of greater and lesser note should have responded to the poetic demand and added to the expanding volume of native lyric. Hence, the verse of Crabbe and Campbell, of Coleridge and Cowper, the ballads of Moore, and the phenomenal work of Byron and Wordsworth and Burns! Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, in the reign of George the Third, confirmed the lyric purpose of the antecedent era of Percy's *Reliques*, reinstating the Old English lyric in Modern English days, and revealing to the literary public the important fact that English lyric was as old as English history and letters and, in a sense, expressed, as no other poetic form could have done, the distinguishing features of English character and life.

Nor was this great lyric development altogether without its obstacles. 1. Something of the formal influence of Augustan days still remained. 2. Moreover, the second classical period of German Literature was exactly coterminous with the rise of this anti-classical English movement. 3. Still further, the increasing prominence of prose, and, often, on the philosophic and technical side, is notable, appearing in such works as Kames' "Elements of Criticism," Blackstone's "Commentaries," Burnet's "Origin of Language," Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations," and the philosophy of Reid and Priestley and Dugald Stewart. 4. Lastly, there was a general movement of the age as modern toward the dominance of the material and practical.

All this was anti-poetical and, especially, anti-lyrical, and, yet, the lyric impulse was pronounced enough to assert its claims and hold its course well on through the period to the opening of the Victorian Age. Throughout this long reign of sixty years, the absence of any high expression of epic or dramatic verse is altogether noteworthy, the literary product of the time, with but few exceptions, being divisible into prose and lyric verse. Herein lies one of the characteristics of the age, which is almost of the nature of an eccentricity, that it should express in such abundant measure the two extremes of literary art,—prose, and the most emotional form of verse; the practical and the passionate; the technical treatises of science and philosophy, and the simplest ballads of domestic life. A partial explanation of this anomaly lies in the fact that the preceding age of classicism expressed itself in prose, and the new spirit of the poetic Renaissance, as an era of mental and social freedom, expressed itself in ode and sonnet, it being reserved for the age succeeding to harmonize these extremes and reveal the presence of literary unity.

We are now brought to the final era, the Victorian, and the opening quarter of the last century, some of the lyrists of the later Georgian Era extending their influence on toward Victorian times, and thus coördinating the two centuries. It was thus with Wordsworth and Scott and Byron, Shelley and Keats and Moore, the last of the Georgians and the vanguard of the Victorians, setting the form for the English lyric yet to come. They ever insisted, as a lesson to their successors, that no type of verse in English should ever be allowed to supersede the poetry of the heart and of human life as it is daily lived in the home and village and under the simplest social surroundings. Nor has the lesson been unheeded by the masters of Victorian Verse,—by Mrs. Browning and Tennyson and Clough and

the Rosettis, each one of whom has done notable work in the line of the lyric, most of whom have done their best work therein, and some of them their only worthy work, while, in American Literature as a branch of English Letters, the early and continuous supremacy of the lyric is a fact that impresses the most casual observer. In fine, in so far as poetry is concerned, the Victorian Age, throughout, is characteristically lyrical, the dramatic monologues of Browning, the dramas of Arnold and Tennyson, not being sufficiently numerous and successful to mark the poetic feature of the time. Even with regard to Browning, the greatest intellectual force of the age in the sphere of verse, modern criticism is discovering more and more of that idyllic element that makes a poet impressive and imposing. The title of one of his Collections—"Dramatic Lyrics"—is itself proof in point that, even in the drama, his deepest feelings as a lyrist were enlisted. They might as justly be called Lyrical Dramas. So, in the collections "Dramatic Romances" and "Dramatis Personae," the same lyrico-dramatic factor is apparent. In this lyrical area, as in no other, did Robert Browning and Mrs. Browning come into poetic sympathy, and aim at a common ideal, it being true of Mrs. Browning that, with the one exception of her long descriptive poem, "Aurora Leigh," her entire poetic product was lyric. Even this poem has marked lyrical features. So, as to the classical and cultured Arnold, he would have in hand a difficult problem who aimed to disprove the assertion that his best poetic work was in the sphere of the reflective lyric, where he struggles to voice his deepest sentiments on God and man and truth and destiny. His theory that poetry is impassioned truth well expresses the character of his poetic ideal, as mainly a lyric one, nor can one read far into the volume of Arnold's verse without hearing that clear and often pathetic "lyric cry" that sounded the keynote of

much of his verse. Critics are still at work in determining the dominant type of Tennyson's verse, and that on which his fame is finally to rest. Is it in the semi-epical Idylls, in "Harold" and "Becket" as dramas, or in his various lyrics, short and long, gay and grave? To us, the question is scarcely debatable, not only by reason of the fact that the larger part of his product is lyric, but that herein his poetic genius finds its fitting place and home, the best portions of his plays and narrative verse being the lyric portions. The titles of the collection, "English Idylls," "Ballads and Other Poems," indicate this. The earliest collection "Poems Chiefly Lyrical" might mark the character of his best endeavor, his poetic masterpiece, "In Memoriam," being the finest expression of English elegy. Thus have the later lyrists held themselves true to Elizabethan and Georgian models, and thus have they happily preserved the historic continuity and repute of English lyric verse.

A suggestion of interest emerges as to English Contemporary Lyric Verse,—that of the late Edwin Arnold, of Swinburne and Austin and Watson. Is it maintaining the standard already established, and is it giving any valid promise of still larger result?

The four respective names we have cited are sufficient to indicate a high degree of lyric merit and promise. Of Swinburne it may safely be said, that, whatever meritorious work he has done in the classical or modern English drama, it is his lyrical verse that best entitles him to fame. His "Studies in Song" and "Songs before Sunrise" and "Century of Roundels" and "Poems and Ballads" have no superior in Victorian verse, either as to their internal idyllic character or their external artistic form, the richness and resonance of the rhythm being especially notable. Of the late Edwin Arnold, it may be said, that in such Collections as "Pearls of Faith"

and "Italian Idylls" he has successfully embodied in lyric form much of that wealth of Asiatic imagery which appears so conspicuously in his "Light of Asia" and "Light of the World." From a study of Alfred Austin's "Interludes" and "English Lyrics" and "Soliloquies in Song" no candid critic can fail to see that, while the note they strike is not Tennyson's, it is a genuine lyric note. Of the recently collected poems of Watson, who is a lyrist only, we may confidently affirm that he is maintaining the earlier English lyrical traditions of Chaucer and Spenser and Milton. If to these masters we add the names of Lang and Dobson and Buchanan, we are amply warranted in indorsing the language of Stedman as he speaks of "that new cycle of lyrical achievement" which is to follow, as he believes, closely upon the ending of the Victorian Era.

Lyric poetry, as the poetry of the heart, makes its permanence assured. So long as human nature is what it is in its fundamental affections and passions, so long will the "lyric cry" be heard among us, and become, thereby, a literary as well as a moral necessity. Even when sensualism may prevail, as at the Restoration, or a materialistic philosophy, as in the closing decades of the last century, some Milton or Tennyson will arise to protest, in the lyrical strains of a "Comus" or "The Vision of Sin," against the prevailing profligacy, and recall the English people to their best antecedents and ideals.