

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH
POETRY IMMEDIATELY BEFORE
THE WAR (1900-1914)¹

PERHAPS no truth has been more insistently and clearly illuminated for us by the lurid light of the past four years than that the thought and spiritual attitude of a nation is the most important fact about it. This thought and attitude can best be found in a nation's literature, and, more especially, in its poetry. It has seemed to me, therefore, that it may be of interest to attempt to trace, necessarily very briefly, some of the characteristics of English poetry immediately before the Great War.

You will remember the outburst of feeling on the part of the Germans at the beginning of the war and what a revelation their mentality was to us. It seemed to most of us in England as if we had been walking carelessly and gaily along a flowering meadow and found ourselves suddenly at the brink of a hideous pit. We saw—as we might have seen for many years previously, had we read their literature with attention—that they had been shaping themselves for war, getting into the attitude of mind for it, during a whole generation. They believed that war is a great and holy thing, “a weapon of Almighty God,” “a medicine applied by God to heal a sick world,” and that the love of peace is a national evil. War, consequently, came to be looked upon not as a possibility that may occur, but as a necessity that must come, and the sooner the better. You may

¹A lecture prepared for delivery at the Rice Institute on the occasion of the visit of the British Educational Mission.

ask what this creed of war-mania has to do with modern poetry. Well, it is interesting to remember that this creed precisely was the inspiring force of one of the modern European movements of art, which expressed itself in painting and poetry alike, and went by the name of Futurism. It originally started in Austria but was taken up by an Italian, who identified himself with it. Nine or ten years ago, when this movement was first arousing interest in England, I remember reading the poetical creed or manifesto of Marinetti, and thinking what a wild and violent thing it was, although full of vigor and vitality. On rereading it not long after the outbreak of war, I was amazed to find that it was precisely—in some respects word for word—the war creed of the Germans. It expressed the same ideals of force, speed and destruction, the same glorification of war, of danger, of energy, the same contempt for peace, and the same ideals of beauty.

We will sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. The essential elements of our poetry are audacity and revolt. Literature having hitherto magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and sleep, we will exalt aggressive movement, feverish insomnia, the step of the gymnast, the somersault, the smack in the face, and the blow of the fist.

We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched with a new beauty, the beauty of speed.

There is no beauty except in strife; no masterpiece without an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault upon unknown forces, summoning them to crouch before man.

We will glorify war—the only hygiene of the world, militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas that kill, the contempt for effeminacy.

These are the terms in which Marinetti announced the beliefs underlying his art. He and his fellow-poets glorify speed, strife, and destruction, as in his fierce song in which

he celebrates death and the destruction of the earth by the ocean, and which has this refrain:

Destroy! destroy! destroy! . . .
 For no beauty exists but alone in the sound of this savage command
 Which is keen like the blade of a guillotine,
 Destroy! destroy! destroy!

Destroy! destroy! destroy!
 For no beauty exists but alone in the sound of this terrible word,
 This shattering word like a hammer of Cyclops,
 Destroy! destroy! destroy!

Distruzione, F. T. Marinetti, 1911.

Never before, I believe, in the history of the civilized world has the blood-lust, the sheer delight of killing one's fellow-creatures, been sung by poets as it is by this group. Hear two lines of the song *From the Barracks*:

After all, it is fine to discharge thick volleys among packed heads.
 We are strong; we are strong; we desire to test the beauty of strength.

Aeroplani, Paolo Buzzi, 1908.

An interesting proof of the way in which this creed was used in song to animate and inspire German soldiers is the *Song of War*, which was found on the body of a German prisoner between Cividale and Udine in November, 1917, and which was printed at the time in the English press. Here are some verses of it:

Armed son of Germany, forward! 'Tis the hour of joy and of glory.
 O gunner, the great cannon, the invulnerable brother, calls thee.
 Was it not made to rejuvenate the world?
 O rifleman, see, thou art the force that conquers even death.
 No obstacle avails—where'er thou goest and enterest, there enters
 Germany.

O horseman, spur, fight, cast down—we await a harvest of heads;
 guide thy steed like a winged storm. That trembling flesh is
 ready to enrich the fields that will be thine and thy children's.

Have no weak pity on women and children. The son of the van-
 quished has often been the victor of the morrow. Of what use
 is victory if the morrow brings revenge?

Why, in killing thine enemy, shouldst thou leave thy son's enemy alive?
 Armed son of Germany, forward! Destroy, break, cast down, spear
 —burn, kill, kill, kill—the path of glory is before us!

This creed never met with much response in England, although it had a certain effect upon a small school of English writers and painters. The result of this mostly was a striving after effect, violence, affectation of form or wild freaks of verse. Some of it slightly affected our greater writers. It affected, too, the aims and work of the small group of poets who called themselves "Imagistes." The Futurist painter aims at representing not a picture of a concrete object, but what he calls a plastic abstraction of an emotion, a state of mind, usually a state of excitement; and in literature he does this by presenting a series of impressions, by the use of "wireless imagination," as Marinetti calls it. The definition of an Image issued by this poetic group shows their affinity in aim: "An Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . . It is the presentation of such a complex instantaneously, which gives that sense of sudden liberation, that sense of freedom from time-limits and space-limits, that sense of sudden growth which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art."

Speaking broadly, the Futurist world is a world of revolt and rebellion, a world roused to a violent reaction against every form of weakness, sentiment, effeminacy, comfortable softness, luxury,—against the worship of precedent and convention. It has something in it which is great; it is adventurous, magnificent and utterly fearless. But there is *more in it which is not great, which is ruthless, brutal, entirely selfish, a deification of brute force; and this element, which we certainly find in modern art, especially*

between 1900 and 1914, is, I believe, a weakness, a falsity, and will not endure.

On the other hand, there has been in recent years, particularly in France, Belgium and England, a growing amount of poetry which is animated by a totally different spirit; by an immense human sympathy and a love of life in all its manifestations, in weakness as well as in strength, but especially a sympathy with the life of the poor and suffering. This burning spirit of sympathy with the lives of the common people—miners, pit workers, machine workers, workers in dangerous trades—is a new thing in English poetry, and it is very significant. It is the first poetic expression of a movement which, in the natural reaction after war, now seems to fit the entire western world, a movement of realization and assertion of the intolerable conditions of the lives of the very poor—a realization of the horror and the tragedy and yet the beauty of it, together with the conviction that it cannot any longer be suffered, but must at all costs be remedied. This poetry is represented in England most notably by Wilfred Wilson Gibson and also, to some extent, by Masfield, and it is inspired partly by the spirit we find in Whitman in America, Verhaeren in Belgium and in the little group of Unanimists in France.

The Unanimists were a little band of young French poets who, in the early twentieth century, dreamed a dream which a little resembled that of their English brothers more than a hundred years earlier of the Pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehanna. They resolved to found a monastery, without an abbot but with a printing press, where they and their families could live together and pursue their artistic aims untrammelled by the world. They found an ideal re-

treat near Paris, where they lived for fourteen months working at the production of artistically printed books and giving open-air recitals of their poems and exhibitions of their paintings. They aroused much interest; but finally lack of means dispersed them; the publications did not pay, and the heavy rental was too much for them. But though they are scattered, and the "Abbaye" has become a dream, their work lives on, and the writings of Georges Duhamel, Charles Vildrac, Jules Romains, René Arcos, Georges and Cecile Perin, and others of the little company, are well known to-day.

The Unanimist creed is peculiarly interesting because it seems to me the direct antithesis to that of brute force and violence and domination by physical strength. It is an attitude of sympathy, of a penetrating understanding of the human heart, irrespective of rank or outer circumstances, a belief in the humanity which makes the whole world kin, and in the dominating and all-conquering force—not of guns and bombs and bayonets—but of sympathy and love, a belief which is summed up, for instance, in the last poem, *Les Conquéranrs*, in Charles Vildrac's remarkable little volume *Le Livre d'Amour*. This describes the symbolic conqueror, who, without an army or arms, goes on foot through a country, spreading his love and goodness of heart by his mere presence, until finally all the people love him because of his great love. He kindles the flame in them and thus they in their turn become conquerors.

Voici le conquérant sans armée,
 Mais le seul conquérant,
 Celui qui sait parler à tous, hommes et femmes,
 Et peut parer leur cils de leurs plus belles larmes,
 Et leur rendre le rire limpide des enfants.
 Ses armes, ce sont des yeux cordiaux,

74 English Poetry Before the War

Des bontés attentives qui étonnent
C'est la façon dont sa voix aide ses paroles,
C'est en lui une flamme dansante de flambeau.

The universal kinship of humanity is well expressed in *La Seule Chanson* in the same volume, where Vildrac pictures three men, entirely different: a country wagoner, a great seigneur and a shopman from the town. He describes them. They are alike in one thing only. They have each lost a child. If, he says, you had them all here to-night and you sang to them that song of the poor man who, only half clothed in the cold night, is carrying his little child rolled up warmly in his big coat,—

Si tu chanterais cela sans tourner la tête
A cause des yeux et de la pudeur—
Tu n'entendrais peut-être
Que le bruit étranglé d'un seul sanglot.

One can scarcely conceive anything more directly opposed to what one may call the "Prussian spirit" than the attitude in these poems.

These then are the two great opposing forces which were at work in Europe at the beginning of this century; it was the clash of these forces which ultimately brought about the great world conflagration; and yet few people, if any, recognized that they had already been manifested as the underlying spirit respectively of two struggling and little known groups of artists, the Futurists and the Unanimists.

I have said that the Futurist creed had little effect in England except upon a small and unimportant group of writers. In the work of John Masefield, however, there can, I think, be traced a curious combination of these two opposite forces. There is in him something of the spirit of violence and of destruction; though what he wants to destroy is the old social order, the conditions of life which

press upon the poor and the ignorant, its brutality, its sordid cruelty. What rouses him to violence is the hypocrisy, often unconscious, of the upper classes in their dealings with the poor, the abuses of landlordism, the falseness of much that goes by the name of Christianity. When Saul Kane, in his semi-drunken exaltation, turns on the parson and speaks a few plain words to him as man to man, one feels that the poet shares with him his passionate indignation at the wrong, the injustice, the intolerableness of it all.

You teach the ground-down starving man
 That Squire's greed's Jehovah's plan.
 You get his learning circumvented
 Lest it should make him discontented
 (Better a brutal, starving nation
 Than men with thoughts above their station),
 You let him neither read nor think,
 You goad his wretched soul to drink
 And then to jail, the drunken boor. . . .
 But quite your damn'dest want of grace
 Is what you do to save your face;
 The way you sit astride the gates
 By padding wages out of rates;
 Your Christmas gifts of shoddy blankets
 That every working soul may thank its
 Loving parson, loving squire,
 Through whom he can't afford a fire. . . .
 O, what you are, and what you preach,
 And what you do, and what you teach,
 Is not God's word, nor honest schism,
 But Devil's cant and pauperism.

This violence of feeling, the expression of which, one must remember, is put into the mouth of a drunken poacher, is also felt in Masfield's art. There are many passages in these later poems which make one feel as if the aim of them had been to produce a startling effect at all costs,—passages which shock and disturb the reader by their vio-

76 English Poetry Before the War

lence, but which, I think, in the main produce a feeling of weakness rather than of strength. Take, for instance, the description, early in *The Everlasting Mercy*,¹ of Saul Kane and his friend Billy Myers setting snares in a field:

By Dead Man's Thorn, while setting wires,
 Who should come up but Billy Myers,
 A friend of mine, who used to be
 As black a sprig of hell as me,
 With whom I'd planned, to save encroachin',
 Which fields and coverts each should poach in.
 Now when he saw me set my snare,
 He tells me "Get to hell from there.
 This field is mine," he says, "by right;
 If you poach here, there'll be a fight.
 Out now," he says, "and leave your wire;
 It's mine."

 "It ain't."

 "You put."

 "You liar."

"You closhy put."

 "You bloody liar."

"This is my field."

 "This is my wire."

"I'm ruler here."

 "You ain't."

 "I am."

"I'll fight you for it."

 "Right, by damn."

This is absolutely characteristic of Masefield; it is not a solitary passage at the apex of a crisis, but you get pages and pages of it until your ears and senses become deadened by the reverberation. It is interesting to compare the voices of the poets. Masefield here and elsewhere gives the impression of shouting, whereas Gibson, while narrating an equally moving theme, talks rapidly in a low voice, and

¹ *The Everlasting Mercy*, by John Masefield, Macmillan Co., New York.

is consequently more impressive. On the other hand, none of these modern poets have more fully than Masefield a love of beauty, none has a more ardent desire for a finer, deeper spiritual life, none, I think, has a deeper sense of brotherhood. His sensitiveness to the suffering of others is intense; intense also his sympathy and insight, as, for instance, in *The Dauber*; his deep human feeling, as in *August, 1914*; his belief in the power of love, as one sees in so many of the *Ballads and Poems*. So that one can trace distinctly these two different spirits in his work, and he seems to some extent to be torn between them.

He has never, I think, surpassed the beauty of his earlier ballads and lyrics. The salt-water ballads, songs of the sea and ships written by a lover of the sea and ships, one who knows them closely and intimately, have a swing, a vigor, a movement which is very attractive, and which seems to come very easily to the writer, as in *Spanish Waters*. His power of calling up an atmosphere is remarkable, as in *London Town*, which seems to me to breathe the very spirit of Elizabethan England. Shakespeare might have sung it when, weary of town life, he was setting forth to revisit his own Warwickshire country. Or his little vivid word pictures, as for instance, the three powerful short stanzas of *Cargoes*, when, with a few strokes depicting a ship and her cargo, he gives first the spirit of the ancient world, then the spacious days of the Renaissance, and, finally, the modern life of smoke and steam and iron and cheap manufacture.

But it is in the series of delicate lyrics and songs of love and friendship that the force of which I speak is dominant. Here Masefield is at his best, and expresses what is best and most individual in the English spirit and atmosphere, as he does so completely in *August, 1914*. His pictures of Eng-

78 English Poetry Before the War

lish country are exquisite and unforgettable, and here again the power of reproducing atmosphere is almost magical:—

The twilight comes; the sun
Dips down and sets,
The boys have done
Play at the nets.

In a warm golden glow
The woods are steeped.
The shadows grow;
The bat has cheeped.

Sweet smells the new-mown hay;
The mowers pass
Home, each his way,
Through the grass.

The night wind stirs the fern,
A night-jar spins;
The windows burn
In the inns.

Dusky it grows. The moon!
The dews descend.
Love, can this beauty in our hearts end?¹

Has the peculiar quality and character of a June evening in England ever been more exquisitely rendered? The same delicacy and truth are to be found in *The West Wind*, *Tewkesbury Road*, *The Wild Duck* and others, and we feel with him the love of the road and its magic, we taste the joys of friendship, we hear the cry of the birds, the call of the west wind and of the sea, the appeal of the spirit and of beauty. I think there is in many of these poems a strength, a reserve, a depth of feeling, a solemnity of aspiration, which seem in some degree to have been lost in the later ones, where one often feels that the poet's

¹ *June Twilight*, in *Ballads and Poems*, by John Masefield, Macmillan Co., New York.

nerves have been jangled and his sensitiveness so hurt that he was forced to cry aloud in his pain.

What one may call the Unanimist spirit, then, is the predominant one in English verse in the early years of the twentieth century. It is to be seen very clearly in the work of such writers as Wilfred Wilson Gibson, W. H. Davies, James Stephens, Ralph Hodgson or Lascelles Abercrombie. In this connection, Mr. Gibson's work during these years, as, for instance, in *Fires* and *Daily Bread*, is perhaps the most remarkable, for, in some sense, it is a new departure in poetry, new in form and treatment and very successful. He began by writing romantic verse of the ordinary kind, full of color and glamour. Then there came silence for a time, and when he wrote again, it was not of the myth and legend of the past but of the actual, unlovely realities of every day. In the meantime he must surely have gone down into the mines, through the factories and into the squalor of the slums, for it is from these that he has wrung a new music, clear, poignant and stirring, with a strange beauty all its own. Like a greater poet before him, he has turned from the joys of romance and of sensuous beauty, he passed them for a nobler life, where he

may find the agonies, the strife
Of human hearts.

For, like Keats, his conception of the high mission of the poet is as one

to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let him rest.

These later poems are a series of narrative-dramas or drama-dialogues, absolutely simple in conception and expression, bare and unadorned, and yet intensely poetic, because of the strength of vision which informs them. They are amazingly vivid and stirring. They deal, for the most

part, with some one incident—generally dramatic or tragic, but not always—in the lives of the poor, the workers in slums and villages. They lay bare some little bit of the workaday existence of those engaged in the common trades or the common life,—miners, stokers, lighthouse keepers, poachers, tramps, quarrymen, navvies, factory hands, small shopkeepers, stone-breakers, fishermen, farm laborers and their wives and children. And the way in which we see revealed the beauty and the poetry in these lives, as well as the tragedy and the ugliness, is, I think, one of the finest and most significant achievements of modern art. In Gibson's little prefatory verse to *Fires* he gives, in his own way, his account of the change which has passed over his art, its aim and scope; of the transition from the beauty and color of the world of romance to the stark and bare reality of modern industrial life:

Snug in my easy chair,
I stirred the fire to flame.
Fantastically fair,
The flickering fancies came,
Born of heart's desire:
Amber woodland streaming;
Topaz islands dreaming;
Sunset-cities gleaming,
Spire on burning spire;
.
.
.
.
.
Fancies, fugitive and fair,
Flashed with singing through the air;
Till, dazzled by the drowsy glare,
I shut my eyes to heat and light;
And saw, in sudden night,
Crouched in the dripping dark,
With streaming shoulders stark,
The man who hews the coal to feed my fire.

He exaggerates nothing; there is no violence in his method, no strong language, no horrors are dwelt upon. Though

his subject is akin to that of Masfield, his method is entirely different. He shows us the happiness of these people as well as their sorrows; he shows us their capacities, their endurance, courage, pride, patience, love, as well as their ignorance and their sin. He does this by making them speak themselves in language which appears to be quite natural; it is so unobtrusive that you do not think about it. You think of what they are saying, not of how they are saying it. That is his great art, and it is quite definitely practised. This is clear from a very interesting little article of his (in the *Poetry Review*, March, 1912) on the future of the poetic drama, which throws light on his methods and aims and, as regards poetic diction, is the modern equivalent of Wordsworth's famous *Preface*. Gibson points out that it is not the poet's business to give a mere phonographic record of actual speech, but rather, what is much more difficult, to interpret the inarticulateness of emotion. For instance, the epithet of the English navy is a convention, just as much as the most poetical phrase of the poetaster. The business of the poet is not to record this adjective, "the pitiful 'bloody' of the inarticulate," but to interpret it.

The three books of *Fires*¹ appeared in 1912-13 and *Daily Bread*¹ in 1913. *Fires* is a series of twenty-one short narrative poems, or poems partly narrative, partly dramatic. *Daily Bread* consists of eighteen short dramas, with this verse as preface:

All life moving to one measure—
Daily bread, daily bread—
Bread of life and bread of labour,
Bread of bitterness and sorrow,

¹The several quotations in this lecture from *Fires* and *Daily Bread* are used with the kind permission of the publishers, the Macmillan Company of New York.

Hand-to-mouth and no to-morrow,
 Dearth for housemate, death for neighbour.

“Yet, when all the babes are fed,
 Love, are there not crumbs to treasure?”

Gibson is a poet it is very difficult to quote from. You practically cannot do it successfully; you need to read the whole poem to judge of its effect; and this in itself is a clue to one very marked quality of his work. It is interesting to find that it is the same quality that dominates Thomas Hardy's work, and which, I think, is very strong in modern poetry, and that is, a sense of form. Gibson's poetical imagination, his vision, expresses itself, not in the magic of words, not in decoration or images, or color or melody, but in the creation as a whole, in its shape, outline, form, proportion. It has been pointed out (in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1914) that Gibson's poetry has certain qualities which occur typically in music. That is, he has the power of dissolving and re-crystallizing, as it were, a whole set of emotions into a new creation; and it is this peculiar formative power which enables him to turn the commonplace life of every day into the strange, disturbing life of poetry. In such poems, for instance, as *The Brothers*, *Holiday*, *On the Road*, or *The Night Shift* you feel this quality overwhelmingly.

Take *The Night Shift* (*Daily Bread*, p. 119). The scene is a miner's cottage at early dawn. The miner's young wife has just had her first child and she is lying with her new-born baby by her side, utterly exhausted. That is the first emotional theme. But, in the meantime, her husband, who has been working on the night shift, has been trapped in the mine by an explosion,

And there's but little hope
 That any man will leave the pit alive.

The girl is being tended by her husband's mother, who knows the dreadful news, but dare not tell it to her in her feeble condition :

Aye, but not yet ;
For she's in need of sleep.
When there's no help,
And she must know,
Then 'twill be time enough
To break the news to her.
Perhaps, when she has slept a bit,
She will be strong to bear much
That's now beyond her strength.

That is the second emotional theme; and these two are stated and restated and elaborated and combined into a kind of fugue,—the girl, longing for her husband's return, picturing his joy when he learns he is the father of a son, begins to hear, half conscious, half in a trance, the tapping of his pick, and gradually, though no one has told her of the accident, she grows into a terrified, telepathic consciousness of her trapped husband's sensations.

JENNY. I thought it was the clock.

TAMAR. The clock has stopt.

JENNY. It must be in my head then—
It keeps on tapping—tapping—
He'll soon be home.
But I'm so tired,
And cannot keep awake.
I'll sleep—
Till he comes home.
And, Tamar, you'll be sure to waken me
The moment he comes home?
You'll not forget?

TAMAR. Nay, lass, I'll not forget.

JENNY. (*Drowsily sinking back into unconsciousness.*)
It keeps on tapping—tapping—
Tap—tap—tap—tap—

TAMAR. Till he comes home—
 Ah, God, how shall I tell her!
 For I must tell her soon;
 I cannot keep it from her long.
 And I, his mother,
 Must be the first to tell his wife
 That he—
 But he may come yet—
 And she must know nought now.
 For she's too weakly,
 And 'twould kill her outright.

.

JENNY. (*Sitting up suddenly in bed and gazing into vacancy.*)
 Hark!

There it is again—
 A sound of tapping—
 I hear it tapping, tapping—
 Like a pick—
 Tap—tap—tap—tap—

TAMAR. A pick—
 Ah, God!
 Nay, daughter; there is nothing.
 You must lie quiet now.

.

JENNY. (*Sitting up again suddenly.*)
 Will no one stop that tapping?
 I cannot sleep for it.
 I think that someone is shut in somewhere,
 And trying to get out.
 Will no one let them out,
 And stop the tapping?
 It keeps on tapping, tapping—
 Tap—tap—tap—tap—
 And I can scarcely breathe,
 The darkness is so thick.
 It stifles me.

.

So cold, so cold,
 And yet—I cannot breathe—

The darkness is so thick, so hot:
 It's like a furnace-blast
 Upon my brow;
 And weighs so heavily,
 As though great rocks were hanging overhead!
 And dripping, dripping—
 I cannot lift my feet,
 The water holds them,
 It's creeping—creeping—creeping—
 My wet hair drags me down.
 Ah, God!
 Will no one stop that tapping—
 I cannot sleep—
 And I would sleep
 Till he comes home—
 Tap—tap—tap—tap—
 (*Sinks back exhausted.*)

TAMAR. O God, have mercy on her—and on me!
 She hears,
 And yet,
 She knows not what she hears.
 But I,
 Though I hear nothing,
 I know all.
 Robert, my son!

The immense amount of atmosphere and psychology which these two themes bring with them is amazing: the gray dawn, the collier's life, the quiet in the little cottage after the tension of the child's birth, the neighbors coming in with the appalling news, the mother quenching her own grief for her son and trying to put off his wife with non-committal answers to calm her; and her suffering when, in her delirium, the girl seems to guess her own tragedy. All these various threads, or chords, are worked up together in something of the way a musician would use his themes. And the result is poetry.

Holiday has the same qualities—the factory girl who has

86 English Poetry Before the War

had her hand injured in the machine and who is lying unconscious, dying on the one holiday in the year :

- EVA. Her hands are never quiet.
 POLLY. She's tending the machine;
 And slipping in the brush-backs
 As we do all day long.
 Day after day, and every day,
 Year in, year out, year in, year out,
 Save Sunday and the holiday—
 To think to-day's a holiday—
 And what a holiday for her!
 EVA. She cannot rest a moment.
 Her hands are working, working—

And her mother and sister talk of her and of her passionate love of dancing, and her sister tells how she danced on the holiday last year all day—waving a branch of hawthorn, till she, looking on, felt faint and dizzy; but

 when I called to stop her,
 She only laughed, and answered:
 That she could dance for ever—
 For ever in the sunshine,
 Until she dropt down dead.
 Then Daniel stopped the music,
 Suddenly—
 Her feet stopt with it:
 And, she nearly tumbled:
 But, Daniel caught her in his arms:
 And she was dazed and quiet:
 And scarcely spoke a word,
 Till we were home in bed,
 And I had blown the light out.
 I did not take much notice at the time:
 For I was half-asleep:
 Yet I remember every word,
 As though she said them over, lying there:
 "At least, I've danced a day away!
 To-morrow we'll be working—
 To-morrow and to-morrow
 Till we're dead."

A little later her lover brings in a branch of hawthorn, and when she smells it she gets out of bed, takes it from him, and begins dancing, and then suddenly drops down dead.

Here the alternating themes, which are intertwined and repeated until they culminate at the end, are: the tragedy of the grind of work; the rare holiday; the danger of the machine and what it has done to the girl; her love of life, of movement, of music, and of flowers; the love of her mother and sister and the rough navy.

The Shop (*Fires*, Book I) is, I think, of all these narrative dramas my favorite, for it has peculiar charm and atmosphere and it escapes tragedy. The background is the "hubbub of the foundry" where the engineer works who tells the story of the small boy who falls ill of pneumonia, recovers and goes to his parents' native Cornwall to recuperate. The boy is the son of the owner of the little general shop where the workman buys his evening paper, and the picture of the shop, night after night, the tin-tinkle of the bell as he opens the door, the smell of the groceries, the anxious father scarcely able to attend to his customers, the poor child with the hacking cough who buys a penny loaf and a farthing's worth of tea, the tension of the boy's illness, the joy of the parents when he reaches the West Country and revels in the primroses and pigs; all this is painted with peculiar tenderness and vividness; and the musical interweaving of the two themes of the strange unmerited suffering of children and the delicious joys of the country is accentuated by the tune beaten out each day in the workman's brain in the clatter of the workshop and the chiming of the anvils:

And in the workshop, all through the next day,
The anvils had another tune to play—
Primroses and primroses and primroses:

The bellows puffing out: It's strange, it's strange
That little ones should suffer so—
And now, my hammer, at a blow:
I'd like to take them all, to-night!
And in the clouds of steam and white-hot glow,
I seemed to see primroses everywhere,
Primroses and primroses and primroses.

In these poems, then, as in those of many other writers during these years, we see the burning sympathy with the lives of the workers and the poor, the understanding and the sense of brotherhood which is so notable a feature in the attitude of the younger English poets toward their fellow-men.

In the small space that remains to me I will indicate some of the characteristics of this new poetry as seen in the attitude of the writers toward God or the Supreme Power. The change in the idea and presentation of God in the works of the twentieth-century poets as compared with those of the Victorian age is very marked and, I think, very significant. In the first place, the anthropomorphic God, the personal God, has gone. His dethronement by the present generation of thinkers is finely expressed in Rupert Brooke's sonnet called *Failure*. That the personal God—the God with the human attributes—has disappeared, is made clear in two opposite ways. First by the presentation of a totally different conception of the nature and character of the Supreme Power, such as we get with most remarkable force in a poem like Hardy's *Dynasts*, a conception of the immanent, urging will, a "sealed cognition" pressing change on change; and, on the other hand, by the intensification of the anthropomorphic conception to such a point that it is clear that it is purely symbolical. Many of the present-day poets speak freely and familiarly of God walking in the

garden, of God looking out of the window, of God laughing or suffering from grief and pain, from anxiety and weariness, much as Blake might have spoken of these things,—as he did speak of them when he said he saw God's face at the window, or a tree filled with angels, or that he could reach the sun with his hand, if he stretched it out. He spoke—as he wrote—symbolically, because he believed the reality to be so far transcending man's conception that no other method could avail. No one ever had a less material conception of God than Blake, and yet few writers and painters have materialized him so freely. This attitude toward the Supreme Power, as of childlike familiarity with a human being, is sometimes a little startling, but nearly always, I think, reverent, and based on a consciousness of so deep and mysterious a reality that symbolism is the only method of approaching an expression of it.

*The Lonely God*¹ by James Stephens is a good example of what I mean. It opens thus :

So Eden was deserted, and at eve
 Into the quiet place God came to grieve.
 His face was sad, His hands hung slackly down
 Along His robe; too sorrowful to frown
 He paced along the grassy paths and through
 The silent trees, and where the flowers grew
 Tended by Adam. All the birds had gone
 Out to the world, and singing was not one
 To cheer the lonely God out of His grief—
 The silence broken only when a leaf
 Tapt lightly on a leaf, or when the wind,
 Slow-handed, swayed the bushes to its mind.

And so along the base of a round hill,
 Rolling in fern, He bent His way until
 He neared the little hut which Adam made,
 And saw its dusky roof-tree overlaid

¹ *Georgian Poetry, 1911-1912*, published by the Poetry Shop, p. 183.

With greenest leaves. Here Adam and his spouse
 Were wont to nestle in their little house
 Snug at the dew-time: here He, standing sad,
 Sighed with the wind, nor any pleasure had
 In heavenly knowledge, for His darlings twain
 Had gone from Him to learn the feel of pain,
 And what was meant by sorrow and despair,—
 Drear knowledge for a Father to prepare.

Or a more light and playful method—but also with a deep underlying meaning, is to be found in Harold Monro's *The Rebellious Vine* (in *Children of Love*):

One day, the vine
 That clomb on God's own house
 Cried, "I will not *grow*,"
 And, "I will *not* grow,"
 And, "I *will* not grow,"
 And, "*I* will not grow."
 So God leaned out His head,
 And said:
 "You need not." Then the vine
 Fluttered its leaves, and cried to all the winds:
 "Oh, have I not permission from the Lord?
 And may I not begin to cease to grow?"
 But that wise God had pondered on the vine
 Before He made it.
 And, all the while it laboured *not* to grow,
 It grew; it grew;
 And all the time God knew.

James Stephens is the poet who most consistently has attitude of simple converse with the Deity, and with l as with Blake or George Herbert, it is very individual and attractive,—as in *The Sinner* who prayed in fury and would not be denied

To reach His ear, until at last He sighed—
 Thou urgent one, thy Father bids thee cease,
 Thy sin's forgiven, rise and go in peace.

At times he is extraordinarily like Blake in tone:

If a beggar to you shall say,
 "Give me a little bread, I pray,"—
 If you do not give him bread
 You will be hungry when he is fed—

He who locks a gate doth close
 Pity's heart against his woes;
 But he who opens one shall find
 God is standing just behind.

Other poets have this attitude too, as for instance, John Drinkwater in his *Malvern Lyrics (Poems of Love and Earth)*:

Surely God laughs a little when He hears
 The wind spun into music on the crest
 Of hills that change not with the changing years—
 I know He laughs, for laughter likes Him best.

Surely God laughs a little when He sees
 The shepherds in the valleys fold their sheep,
 And the long shadows falling from the trees
 Over the corn full eared for men to reap.

But it is not only the kindly, fatherly attributes of this God, so boldly represented in human form, which are dwelt upon. At times he is frankly and fearlessly arraigned, faced with the sin and injustice in the world; accused, weighed and found wanting. That is, I take it, that the conception of a personal God, of a beneficent Being such as we can conceive of, who could permit what is permitted here, is weighed and found wanting. Two very representative poems of this kind are *What the Devil Said*¹ and *The Last Judgment*, both by James Stephens. In the first the poet describes how God the Father, weary of praises, from his throne suddenly heard a little cry, and he looked over the sleeping Earth

¹ *The Hill of Vision*, Maunsel & Co., Ltd., Dublin, p. 87.

and the ice-capped pole down to the mountains until he found the spot whence the cry came:

He found it in a ditch outside a town,
A tattered, hungry woman crouching down,
By a dead Babe—so there was nought to do,
For what is done is done, and back He drew
Sad to His heaven of ivory and gold;
And, as He sat, all suddenly there rolled
From where the woman wept upon the sod
Satan's deep voice, "O thou unhappy God!"

The Last Judgment is curious and very impressive. God comes to judge the earth, and the people gather together:

From every side, from far and near they came,
The blind and battered and the lewd and lame,
The frightened people, and the helpless crew
Who hid in cellars—

They flock together, packed in their multitudes into the space

Between two stars—
They were silent, every awful stare,
With a dumb grin, was lifting anywhere,
When sudden He came stately, marching fleet
From the red sun, with fire about His feet,
And flaming brow—And as He walked in fire
Those million million muzzles lifted higher,
Stared at Him, grinned in fury, toned a yelp,
A vast, malignant query, *Did you help?*
And at the sound the jangled spaces threw
Echo to echo, thunders bit and flew
Through deeper thunders, into such a bay
The Judge stood frightened, turned and stole away.

It is clear that in poems such as these we have travelled a long way from Tennyson and Browning and even Swinburne. The yearning belief based largely on the desire to believe has gone; the poets no longer

faintly trust the larger hope.

So also has gone the insistence that all is working for good—

that Evil is null, is naught,
Is silence implying sound.

So also has gone the violent invective, the denunciation and scorn of Swinburne.

To summarize very briefly: the most remarkable points of change during these years, I find, are these—and I base them, of course, on a much larger range of poetry than I have been able to quote or even refer to:

1. A loss of fear—consequently less violent optimism or pessimism.
2. A more clear-eyed, sterner search for Truth, less swayed by the desire man has to see a good, to see an end in all things that he can understand.
3. A preparedness to face the possibility that the end, if end there be, may not only be unattractive but even repellent and horrifying to man, viewed from his present limited standpoint.
4. A realization that the Supreme Power in the Universe can only be endowed with human attributes as a means of symbolizing something otherwise inexpressible.

And, finally,

5. A conception that this Power may be Itself in process of evolving, and so incomplete, and that enrichment of the Divine Nature may be the result of the process of human evolution: that it may be working, not according to a definitely patterned plan outlined before It, but as the result of an impulse from within or from behind, of the final aim and result of which It is Itself unconscious.

I have, I fear, only touched on the fringe of what is a very far-reaching subject. These opening years of the new century, immediately before the world convulsion of 1914, are years of great ferment and activity and variety of thought. This expressed itself in England not only in the work of the older poets and in the magnificent drama which, to my mind, is the masterpiece of our oldest living poet, but also in the writings of a considerable number of young and

original poets, who seemed as if they were about to inaugurate a new and great era of English poetry. This was not to be. The war has come as a great cleansing storm, and like a storm it will both destroy and create. This high tragedy of nations will achieve, as of old, its "katharsis" or purgation of the emotions; and when the poets take up their pens again, it will be in a new world, and they will not write as they did before.

A fresh chapter in English Literature is about to begin. What will be written in it we cannot say. I believe wonderful things. We only know that this chapter which is closed contains much that is beautiful and moving, characteristic of England and her temperament, and full of interest as a reflection or embodiment of the thought and spirit of the time.

CAROLINE F. E. SPURGEON.