

A Very Early Essay

by **Thomas Merton**

Editor's Note: Thomas Merton literally wrote from his early childhood on, as has frequently been pointed out. The bulk of these juvenile writings has not survived — probably. Now, in addition to the four stories discovered in 1993 in the possession of his cousin Frank Merton Trier, an early “school essay” has been unearthed in the archives at the Library of Oakham School. Written in July, 1931, when he was sixteen, Merton was the rough equivalent of what we would call a Junior in high school. The essay won one of Oakham’s academic prizes for 1931, the Bailey English Prize. It is reprinted here by permission of the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Librarian of Oakham Public School, Oakham, England.

Liber Nugarum Oakhamiensium. 1925 (Draft 6)

Inedible Trifles. Unconsidered Nothings, unsuited to the wider scope of the printed page, yet not wholly unworthy of preservation, whose frail point may perhaps stir into fruition soil as yet barren - even of trifles.

The output of poetry of permanent value during the present century has been negligible . . . by Thomas Merton (The Bailey English Prize 1931) (b. 1915 - d. 1968). Merton was 16 years old when he wrote this essay.

The twentieth century is as yet young. It has, in fact, only just passed its thirty first birthday. Of those thirty one years, four have been occupied in the most tremendous and most exhausting struggle in history: a struggle which has left its mark so deeply impressed upon civilized nations that although thirteen years have elapsed since the armistice, the world has scarcely yet recovered from so terrible a blow. Four years of raging disease: thirteen years of convalescence. There remain fourteen years of comparative health; fourteen years of peace; fourteen years saturated with the influence of the previous age. Indeed it was hardly until the coronation of George V that the twentieth century followed the example of all centuries and revolted against its predecessor. Hence, most of the twenty produced since the death of Queen Victoria, is very like that written in the last twenty years of her reign - hardly unnaturally, since it is the work of poets born in that age, who having survived their century, live and write on in another. It would be impossible to separate twentieth century from late Victorian poetry.

Furthermore, the bulk of our poetry is still written by these authors because the sons of the present century, and the latter generations of the last, have been very cruelly treated. The World War levied its toll from all walks of life and young poets, already considered promising fell in the field of battle. Many who would have later become writers of poetry, must also have been killed, and only those who were too old to go to the front have survived. Unfortunately, too, poetry is hardly encouraged. In our days the bulk of the population, either because it is so worn out by its economic

struggle against such great odds, or because this struggle has been never allowed it to combat intellectual laziness and cultivate good taste, prefers to amuse itself, intellectually at the minimum cost of effort. The novelist is encouraged to sacrifice style, character painting, everything, to an easily readable plot. In the case of the theatre we find this same thing developed a step further, for here even the plot matters little if there is only a brilliant spectacle to divert the eye for an hour or so. Finally, the cinema requires the least mental effort of all, and of all has the most dangerous influence. The class that will read poetry or encourage it, in such a population, must necessarily be very small.

But let us consider some of our despised modern poets!

If we glance through the works of almost any of them, we are first struck by their nervous energy and their fine imagery; perhaps modern writers have arrived at realism beyond everything else. Some indeed have carried it to such an extent that they allow a morbid outlook to grow upon them; these turn away from the beautiful until they have no eyes for anything but the sordid: but they are extremists. The uninitiated, however, often think of Epstein and only Epstein when they hear modern art mentioned: That is because the "Daily Mail" is not sure of its ground in attacking Russell-Flint on Laura Knight, and they consequently never hear of them. In the same way modern literature is no sooner mentioned than the man in the street thinks of the extremists, and dispenses them with a laugh.

But hear the voice of Masefield:

Clean, green, windy billows, notching out the sky,
 Grey clouds tattered into rags, sea winds blowing high
 and the ships, under topsails, beating, thrashing by
 and the mewing of the Herring Gull.

[Cardigan Bay]

Pope was a poet because he wanted to be one, because he had been encouraged to be one, all his life; he set himself to cultivate the art of writing verse and attained perfection in it.

Masefield was a sailor, and as a sailor he had learned to love the sea - a love which is doubtless no greater than that felt by any other seafaring man: But suddenly this love found a voice in him, and at no definite point in his life he becomes a poet - and a true poet.

He began to sing his great love of nature, in the sea, in his earlier poems; later he began to write about the English countryside. He wrote of the men he had known himself; the seamen, the dock-hands. He writes of men in the humbler walks of life as he says himself:

“Not of the princes and prelates with periwigged charioteers
Riding triumphantly laurelled, to lap the fat of the years
Rather the scorned, the rejected, the men hemmed in with the Spears.”

Like Vergil he is a lover of nature and draws his inspiration from the beauties. Like Vergil he realises the hardships that must be undergone in man’s struggle or existence . . .

What is inspiration? What is communion with the holy ghost? What are these if not a sense of exhilaration in the mind, a sense of complete harmony with nature, with all the world? In the opening lines of “Tewksbury Road”, Masfield shows us how spontaneous inspiration is - one goes out on the road, and then:

“It is good to be out on the road, going one knows not where
Going through meadow and village one knows not whither or why,
Through the grey light drift of the dust and the keen cool rush of the air of the rain.
Under the flying clouds, and the broad blue lift of the sky.”

The land of the Severn inspired “Tewksbury Road.” John Davidson caught inspiration in Romney Marsh. He says:

“As I went down to Dymchurch wall
I heard the south sing o’er the land.”

In the same poem (“In Romney Marsh”) Davidson has seized the colour and the music of the marsh land:

“A veil of purple vapour flowed
acid trailed its fringe along the straits
the apple air like sapphire glowed
and roses filled Heaven’s central gates.”

He feels the music of the marshes time from “clash” of the waves on the beach, which:

“ . . . with all its organ stops
Again prolonged the soar . . .”

to the whine of the telegraph wire along the road between Romney and Hythe.

William Watson, also, in his poem “Ode in May” shows how he finds inspiration and happiness in nature.

“Let me go forth and share
 The overflowing sun
 With one wise friend of me
 Better than wise being fair
 Where the pewit wheels and dips
 On the heights of bracken and ling
 And South unto her leaflet tips
 Tingles with the Spring.”

These scoffed at Moderns! Have they not felt the same as Wordsworth as Vergil, as Heriot? Have they not burst into song to hymn the joy and glory of nature in Spring, when.

“Half the world a bridegroom is
 And the other half a bride” (Ode in May)

Do they realise nevertheless that man must continually struggle with nature, to live:

“We are the children of splendour and flame
 Of shuddering also and tears . . .”

Masefield, and indeed so do most of the other great modern poets, tell the tragedy and the hardship of life, but he does not allow this to shake his conviction in the supremacy of the good and the beautiful over evil and suffering in the world. He accepts suffering with resignation and turns his eyes towards beauty. A sailor stricken with fever, knowing that passengers have “brimmin’ buckets o’ quinine” and “bulging crates and pills” is told, himself, that

“The best cure for fever chills is shovellin’ bloody coal”

In the face of this unfairness, he only says: “Its hard, my son . . .” (“Fever Chills”)

But if most poets in the past have sought inspiration in Nature, and only departed from it as Pope did, for instance, to write about society, in Epigrams the modern search for realism has led many to sing of the town. “London Snow,” by Bridges, is perhaps one of the most striking.

Alice Meynell sees beauty in a London Street at night (November Blue):

“But when the gold and silver lamps
 Colour the London dew
 And misted by the winter damps
 The shops shine bright anew
 Blue comes to earth, it walks the street
 It dyes the wide air through
 A mimic sky about their feet
 The crowd go, crowned with blue . . .”

We have only to read these words to realise that Mrs. Meynell, like most moderns, has learned to find beauty in great cities. And what Romance is there, what mystery in a great city at night! Here Mrs. Meynell has painted a picture - vivid in its coloring - of a street early in the evening, all the shops are lit up; myriads of gay lights are reflected in the wet street.

Lawrence Binyon tells the attraction of the streets in the early hours of the morning, and the solitary figure of the road mender sitting by his brazier awakens in him strains of powerful music (The Roadmenders).

Yet another word or those who sung the works of man's hand "Chances" by Alice Meynell, and its daring, striking metaphors.

Brief in a flying night
 From the shaken tower
 A flock of Bells take flight
 And go, with the Hour.

One of the most delightful poets of the century was a victim of the world war; in him we find the freshness, the vivacity, the enthusiasm of youth, but great depth of feeling and great love of nature. Rupert Brooke died in Gallipoli in 1915.

In "Grantchester" we can seize almost all his characteristics at once, from the very beginning his love of nature, in flowers and trees, becomes apparent:

"Just now the lilac is in bloom
 All before my little worm
 And in my flower beds I think
 Smile the carnation and the pink
 And down the borders well I know
 The pansy and the poppy flow
 Oh! there the chestnuts summer through
 Beside the river make for you.
 A tunnel of green gloom and sleep
 Deeply above and green and deep
 The stream mysterious glides beneath
 Green as a dream and deep as death."

And what is more delightful than this:

"And spectral dance before the dawn
 A hundred vicars down the lawn . . .
 And off between the boughs is seen
 The sly shade of a rural dean"

On the last line of the poem

..... oh yet!

Stands the church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea

Yet we have but to turn to his poem “Death” to discover all his depth of feeling:

“ . . . These had seen movement and heard music, known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended
Felt the quick stir of wonder sat alone
Touched flower and furs and cheeks: all this is ended.”

and later:

“Frost with a gesture stays the waves that dance and wandering loveliness.”

There is also in Brooke a sweet melancholy. Yet it is always mixed with his exuberant playfulness; some of his poems make me want to always imagine him as out on a windy hill, in spring, and laughing for pure joy:

“Today I have been happy all the day
I held the meaning of you and wove
Its laughter with the dancing light o’ the spray
And sowed the sky with tiny clouds of love.”

Yet he shows much more seriousness again, almost sadness in a “Song”

“And suddenly the wind comes soft
And spring is here again
And the Hawthorne quickens with buds of green
And my heart with beds of pain.”

With this we come to the melancholy and conscience in modern poets: Let us turn again to Masefield who shows it in many of his poems. The Romance in the “The Golden City of St. Mary” is indeed enchanting:

“ . . . out beyond the sunset, could I but find the way
In a sleepy blue laguna which widens to a bay
And there’s the blessed city - so the sailors say
The golden city of St. Mary.”

Oh! The everlasting dreaming, the pursuit of the ideal, the longing for complete rest . . . complete happiness! So, Masefield, who has so deeply felt the beauty of nature, who has realised the hardships of life, also cherishes his ideal of perfect happiness; he dreams of Heaven, if you prefer it!

W B Yeats also felt this in a difficult way rather with the attitude of "Mine be a cot beside the Hill" - the ideal of a quiet haven after a stormy life, the ideal of rest and perfect peace, of contentedness in simplicity:

"I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree
And a small cabin build me, of clay and wattles made
Nine bean rows will I have there, and a hive for the honey bee
And live alone in the bee loud glade."

Such briefly is a glimpse at the varied beauties of modern poetry, the varied shades of delicate feeling in the poets of our age: some melancholic or contemplative; some exuberant or playful; some energetic and dramatic. Surely we realise that this poetry will not die, even if it were only to live for its value as a further, experimental, step in the history of literature, the vivid modern style. But has it not still some further value? Can we fail to appreciate its beauty? Can Masfield, Brooke, Bridges, Alice Meynell, Lawrence Binyon, John Davidson, ever die?

Let us compare the annals of literature in previous centuries. Our predecessor, the XIXth, it is true was extraordinarily rich in poets even before it had attained the same age as ours. But in those early years of last century the greatest of all English poets flourished. It is hard to compare any modern names with those of Shelley & Keats, or with that of Wordsworth. But before 1730 scarcely more than three great poets were writing: Pope, Dryden, and Congreve. Even Dryden really belongs to the XVIIth century. Surely we are richer in poets than was that century! Surely no other century out of the XIXth has seen such great poets in its first thirty years as we have!

Every age since the first dawn of the world has had its poets. Can there even be a man who does not, at one time or other of his life feel himself in communion with some almighty force? Is there a man who has never felt himself overwhelmed with a weight of feelings from which he seeks to purge himself? The poet finds solace in writing poetry. Others, to whom this means of expression is barred, must seek purgation in the reading of poetry. Although great sentiments such as love are fundamentally the same throughout all time, nevertheless each age lends its particular flavour to such emotions; thus the modern poet ought to appeal most to the modern mind, and although we none the less appreciate Shakespeare, the modern poet ought to purge us more efficaciously since his mind is ours.

This twentieth century, in which poetry has had so poor a chance to thrive, this century which although young, has suffered an appalling calamity from which it is still struggling to recover, is bound to see yet other generations of poets. It is the nature of man to fill great emotions always. "Suctavit con meum" [sic] is the Latin equivalent for the opening words of a psalm; we will always feel the need for purgation from emotions.

However smug, however mechanized the age, poetry can never be killed, there has never been a generation born, nor will there ever be one without a true poet in it.

As long as there are men there will be poetry.

T F Merton 24.7.31