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## TRADITION IN POETRY

*by Edmund Blunden*

IN TAKING upon myself the task of defending Tradition in Poetry, I am under the necessity of appearing as an ancient and more or less venerable figure; others may come in aeroplanes, but I arrive on a bone-shaker; others may give a demonstration with electric stoves, but I freeze over my doleful brazier. Side-whiskers should have been worn. For tradition, in the eyes of many talented moderns, is what the comedians called "so most antimacassar". She is the mother of the antiquarians, the goddess of the belated, the spirit of the Sunday parlor where Martin Tupper's illuminated poems slumber with the padded photograph album on gray lace mats. It is this beldame who has most brutally refused to have the picture of the old rustic bridge by the mill taken down, and Signor Triangulo Martini's study of a modern beer-bottle put up in its place. She is always singing her muddled versions of Plantation Songs, but when her innocent daughter attempted to bring in a selection called "Le Chanteur de Jazz" she locked the piano. Willie came back from the University with a poem beginning:

GRONK?  
What?  
Yes—  
I said  
GRONK;

everybody thought it original, but she sniffed, and remarked, "I think you might moderate your language".

Something like this, I am afraid, is the sketch of tradition which passes in some of the advanced circles. Others come perhaps to bury her, and I to praise her; but let us be quite certain of the identity of the deceased. Even her worst enemies allow her considerable merits, when it comes to the business of life. Those ladies and gentlemen who vociferate the necessity for beginning the arts all over again, for making the world's library and art gallery a desert and then indulging in a new creation, do not seek out the desert for their nearest suitable conditions of work. They are not wholly superior to tradition. When they think the coast is clear, they make love to her. They like the houses she has made, the gardens, the villages. They preach their gospel where she has during the course of many centuries prepared the right sort of tabernacles—her great national systems of civilization, for example, and her magnificently equipped cities, Paris, London, New York, Berlin, Vienna. It is only by virtue of tradition that the new style of a poet or sculptor has a chance, and is eagerly scrutinized—not so eagerly, of course, as an ideal commonwealth would ensure, but still not too coldly, in this disengelled existence. If we can suppose ourselves for a moment back in the prehistoric times, we shall not easily find a cultural curiosity such as would require and support our various literary supplements and journals, let alone Mr. Eliot's poems. By a long and gradual education man has arrived at that state where it seems second nature to

be acquainted with literature, music, philosophy, criticism, and art at large; where experiment is not hopeless, because tradition is after all prepared to look at it, and to reject or modify or even to entertain it in the course of some years.

Experiment itself seems obliged to seek materials and implements from the stores of tradition. Considering poetry and the poet as our subject, we must ask ourselves what can be expressed, in what way, and to whom. The poet attempts the description, criticism, and fulfilment of life; or, since definition here is always sure to be argued over, we may say that he has emotional disturbances which require to be ordered into a calmness of achievement; or, being vigorous, he sings out of sheer glory, and being weary, he sings for luck and comfort. If these guesses at his secret may pass, we are to presume that the verse he writes will be rhythmical and musical (rhythm and tune being capable of endless variety), and united from first to last in a harmony or design of metre, not breaking away as though from the back of a wagon an irregular fall of sacks of coal was going on.

Verse, without further epithets, requires the sanction of natural movement; humanity cannot keep step with the noises of an accidental explosion in an ammunition dump. Ordered experience, recognizable rhythm—and, in addition to these, there is the melancholy fact that a poet must use known language. We may be sure that there is some sort of poetry in the communication of fishes, or the trumpeting of elephants, but we are incapable of borrowing those idioms, however aptly they might suit our unique emotions. A poet must employ the words and phrases that satisfy the mind and suit the throat of his fellow men.

In these three great problems incurred in the making of verse, tradition silently and powerfully intervenes. The poet is a noble creature, an epoch-making being, but behind him there is this mighty mother, and

he is her poem. She brought him up, and in his impressible years gave him association, circumstance, sympathy, distaste, imagery, character—and probably bad handwriting. How much even of our emotions is our own? How much that stirs us is not due to the race, or family, or circle which sent us forward into the world? I cannot imagine that my own disposition is uncommon; I know from the evidence of my manuscripts that it is a poetical disposition, and an eager though not a fierce one; yet the things that have moved me, and the judgments I have formed, must be seen to originate in the type of life and feeling which I most fully experienced. Tradition, when, in the person of my old schoolmaster she chose to train me on the English plan, to insist on my learning closely the Old Testament, songs of “Cherry-Ripe” and “I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows”, and maxims such as “Trifles even lead to heaven” and “Punctuality is the soul of business”, decided my mental habit. I thought I could play truant from her and her everlasting lectures on character, but she was on the river and in the wood before me; bringing her barges along or bundling her faggots or calling me in her strong dialect. Among other things, she indicated that the Church was the center of the village and her calendar the essential year-book of man in nature; Easter was no ideal ceremony but the bright triumph of Spring; Advent was in every way the remedy, the hope of those dark and shorn weeks when life was drooping. She also assured me that shoeing horses and baking bread and hitting a cricket-ball were not so simple as they looked, and that we should get on faster if I observed certain points discovered by herself some considerable age before I was thought about. She even compelled me to keep a diary, recording the state of the weather, the news of the day, my private and public life, and my reading; and she saw that this was not skipped. In short it would require a separate volume to recount all the influences of tradition on the

present witness, but it would be the best volume to accompany such attempts at poetry as came in due season. For she governed their sources.

For the matter of the poet's rhythm and versification, tradition is again an unescapable Elizabeth, or, as she has been more familiarly styled, Gammer Gurton or Mother Goose. First of all, there are those mysterious rhythms on which the world goes round and man, body and soul, with it. I shall not go so far as to assert that my latterly unpopular heroine organized those; the tide, the galloping horse, the homeward rooks, the wind in the corn, the pulse of the blood, the traveling cannonade of thunder, the play of echo, the tripping of deer, the poisoning of the hawk-moth—these and the multitude of primeval rhythms besides are older than herself. But she has from a very early date adapted these to the purpose of human utterance fit to be retained in the memory, "from grave to gay, from lively to severe", and we are as much her disciplined children in this respect as in the fact of our not calling for our lunch with a stone axe in hand. We begin experience to the tune of "Awake my soul", we close it to the tune of "Abide with me" or "O God, our help". We receive before we are aware of it an extraordinary miscellany of verse forms, from the nursery rhyme to the popular success of the music hall. We cannot evade it; our metrical consciousness is traditional. "Traditional" is not to be translated according to the versifying ambitions or discontents of an individual.

We may go on, and must go on, exploring the cave of harmony; the peculiar turn of each one's fate and insight will require an exactitude of response in verbal music; but the great series of metrical inventions which tradition has already evolved is almost capable of supplying the main rhythm and cadence for any one of our new instances of poetic passion. I am not the first by any means to point out that Gammer Gurton, though a stranger to limited editions and the

disquisitions on prosody, could do almost anything she liked with a few dozen words of English.

I cannot avoid quoting some examples of her genius: *Experiments in Metre*. By *A Lady of England*—the original A.L.O.E. They are to be taken, for the moment, simply in reference to the notion I have been putting forward on traditional conditions of versecraft. First, "The Bouncing Girl":

What care I how black I be?  
Twenty pounds will marry me;  
If twenty don't, forty shall,  
For I'm my mother's bouncing gal.

Then, "The Tell-Tale":

I will tell my own daddy when he comes home  
What little good work my mammy has done;  
She has earned a penny, spent a groat,  
And a hole is torn in the baby's new coat.

The last two stanzas of "Giles Collins and Proud Lady Anna":

Lady Anna was buried in the east,  
Giles Collins was buried in the west;  
There grew a lily from Giles Collins  
That touched Lady Ann's breast, breast,  
That touched Lady Anna's breast.

There blew a cold north-easterly wind  
And cut this lily in twain  
Which never there was seen before,  
And it never will again, again,  
And it never will again.

"Poor Robin" comes with a prophecy of Keats:

The north-wind doth blow  
And we shall have snow,  
And what will poor Robin do then,  
Poor thing?

He'll sit in a barn  
And keep himself warm,  
And hide his head under his wing,  
Poor thing.

"Pippen Hill" is Housmanish:

As I was going up Pippen Hill  
Pippen Hill was dirty,  
There I met a pretty Miss

And she dropped me a curtsy.  
 Little Miss, pretty Miss,  
 Blessings light upon you!  
 If I had half a crown in purse  
 I'd spend it all upon you!

"Dame Widdle Waddle":

Old Mother Widdle Waddle jumpt out of bed,  
 And out at the casement she popt her head  
 Crying,

"The house is on fire, the gray goose is dead  
 And the fox he is come to the town, oh!"

"The Man in the Wilderness" is in that run  
 of verse which to my sense has always been  
 most translucent, melodious, and natural in  
 the work of Miss Sitwell:

The man in the wilderness asked me,  
 "How many strawberries grow in the sea?"  
 I answered him as I thought good;  
 "As many as strawberries grow in the wood."

And here is the syncopator in "Hinx Minx";

Hinx, Minx! the old witch winks,  
 The fat begins to fry:  
 There's nobody at home but jumping Joan  
 And father, mother and I!

The last of these very few of the casual ditties of old tradition—she merely throws them off for the nursery—reminds me of the most recent experiment in metre which I have met with. Mr. J. M. March's boxing-poem called *The Set-Up* comes from America, and since the English edition is "limited to two thousand copies" at half a guinea it is plainly considered something conspicuously new in verse. It is on this model:

The bell hammered,  
 Staccato,  
 Swift.  
 The announcer's arm began to lift.  
 He bellowed,  
 Mouth wide:  
 Turning from side to side:

"LA-A-DE-EES—AN"  
 Gents . . .  
 LA-A-DE-EES—AN'

Gents . . ."  
 His voice roared out;  
 Echoed;  
 Immense:  
 "T h e N e x t  
 B o u t  
 O f t h e E V E N I N G  
 W i l l B e . . ."  
 ". . . What's dat he says—?"  
 ". . . Who—?"  
 ". . . Don't ask me!"

It may appear odd, but the old lady accompanied the poet to the ringside. The twentieth-century independent is in the tradition.

There remains the gift, the inevitable element of words and turns of phrase, and once more no poet is asked to make something out of nothing. The new taste and the new situation require a fresh composition, but the race has perfected the resources of speech. It is given to few individuals to fabricate new words which become part of our conversation and our feeling, and those individuals are men like Coleridge with a particular philological comprehension, men whose startling life of ideas has been nourished from the beginning on the acquaintance of all types of talk and all literary methods. Immense assurance is needed by one who snubs tradition and her vocabulary and comes forward with his new coinage of quaintnesses and euphemisms. Meanwhile, if ever poets found the mystery of expressive word and idiom ready to their hands, they are the poets who write in English. They have only to keep their ears open, whether it is in the town street or the village inn, to make themselves masters of verb, adjective, metaphor, proverbial allusion, and other means of eloquence combining sound and sense like pony and van. Let them copy old Burton of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, leaning over the bridge at Oxford and shaking his sides at the vigorous dialogues of the bargees. The "vulgar tongue", as it is called, is a work of genius, and even its violences should make a man desirous of equipping himself for pithy, en-

terprise with the pen rejoice at the imaginative accuracy of the common man. The question before the house of bards is not what to concoct, but what to recapture out of the prodigious word-experience of the English-speaking man. We have all the linguistic gold that we, and our grandsons and our great-grandsons even more brilliant than we, can keep in beneficial movement.

It is when tradition herself fails, through some commotion or malady, that we lose sight of the economy of human achievement. When she, by the bad effects of industrial greed and European War, or by half-education, is not sure of herself, we suffer for it. In the eighteenth century the Briton built his house "From Halfpenny's exact designs": he appeared a trifle ridiculous in his solemnity, but his doors closed quietly, his fireplaces were generous, and his house-front looked out like a square of mild sunlight between his groves and garden walls. Halfpenny's designs costing too much to satisfy a new mania, we turned to plaster and disproportion; and now we have what is fairly described as the architectural obscenity of the vile medleys of tooth-paste and face-cream packages stuck along our highways, "residences". Something like this has been allowed to happen, in spite of Sir James Murray and the Fowlers, with the English language. A relaxed generation contents itself with, no, glories in, a farrago of vapid and dissonant expressions, which are applied more or less without alteration to all heads of interest. We see the superficial, and the worst incoherences of that, spreading "like danger in a wood". The alphabetism of the counterfeit gives us as a perpetual epithet the valuable indicatory word "nice", e.g.: "a nice cathedral"; the stirring verb "mix" ("she doesn't mix"); or "love" ("I'd love an Austin"). I will not pursue this leafless track, but return from it to the turnpike road of tradition, and ask whether the poets will stand for clear and various communication or the opposite. If they wish for an antidote to idiocy and an

inspiration for sound recreation, let them go to a farmer's ordinary, a scientist's lecture, or an eighteenth-century schoolbook.

In fact, I will recite for them a passage, every way accordant with my own convictions on the nature of poetic inheritance and progress, from a schoolbook published in 1748. Even the title-page exhibits a seasoned discrimination of language which makes it a model even to the most visionary;

THE  
PRECEPTOR:

containing  
A General Course of Education  
wherein

THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

of  
POLITE LEARNING

are laid down

In a way most suitable for trying the GENIUS,  
and advancing the  
Instruction of YOUTH.

When we come to the "Lesson on Poetry", we may take with us the trivial and undistinguishing cant which a hundred modern reviews of verse cause to seem the only possibility, but it will soon fly like a mist before this sturdy sunlight:

"Tho' Invention be the Mother of Poetry, yet this Child is like all others, born naked, and must be nourished with Care, cloath'd with Exactness and Elegance, educated with Industry, instructed with Art, improved by Application, corrected with Severity, and accomplished with Labour and with Time, before it arrives at any great Perfection or Growth. 'Tis certain, that no Composition requires so many Ingredients, or of more different Sorts, than this; nor that to excel in any Qualities, there are necessary so many Gifts of Nature, and so many Improvements of Learning and of Art. For there must be an universal Genius, of great Compass, as well as great Elevation. There must be a sprightly Imagination or Fancy, fertile in a thousand Productions, ranging over infinite Ground, piercing into every Corner, and by

the Light of that true poetical Fire, discovering a thousand little Bodies or Images in the World, and Similitudes among them, unseen to common Eyes, and which could not be discover'd without the Rays of that Sun. Besides the Heat of Invention and Liveliness of Wit, there must be the Coldness of Good Sense, and Soundness of Judgment, to distinguish between Things and Conceptions, which at first sight, or upon short Glance, seem alike; to chuse among infinite Productions of Wit and Fancy, which are worth preserving and cultivating, and which are better stifled in the Birth, or thrown away when they are born, as not worth bringing up.

"Without the Forces of Wit, all Poetry is flat and languishing; without the succours of Judgment, 'tis wild and extravagant. The true Wonder of Poesy is, that such Contraries must meet to compose it; a Genius both penetrating and solid; in Expression both Delicacy and Force; and the Frame or Fabric of a true Poem, must have something both sublime and just, amazing and agreeable. There must be a great Agitation of Mind to invent, a great Calm to judge and correct; there must be upon the same Tree, and at the same time, both Flower and Fruit. To work up this Metal into exquisite Figure, there must be employed the Fire, the Chissel, and the File. There must be a general Knowledge both of Nature and the Arts; and to go to the lowest that can be, there are required Genius, Judgment and Application; for without this last, all the rest will not serve Turn, and none ever was a great Poet that applied himself much to anything else."

Such is the style in which our tradition discusses an abstract subject, with a firmness of words never failing in aptitude, with a dramatic instancy yet no extravagance, and when a modern sees what he wishes to propound and has acquired that readiness of diction, he may go farther and introduce what novelty he will; he can be trusted not to use dynamite or cheap scent. Let us also refresh

our memories in respect of tradition's acute sense of description, given an external object. We have lately heard Mr. D. H. Lawrence as a poet of natural history; he has won the bewildering superlatives of Mr. Middleton Murry for such experiments as his poem to the baby tortoise, and his worshipper, quoting the lines

Alone, small insect,  
Tiny bright eye,  
Slow one,

observes that the piece "is lovely with a passion that all the sons of women have it in them to understand". I may be singular, but somehow I am still looking for the tortoise. The trouble is that I was made acquainted with tradition's ability to "notice such things". And I find actually more of poetry in, for example, the curt observations of Thomas Pennant on animals: "The cat, a useful but deceitful domestic: when pleased, purrs and moves its tail: when angry, spits, hisses, strikes with its foot: in walking, draws in its claws: drinks little: is fond of fish: the female very salacious; a piteous, jarring, squalling lover: the natural enemy of mice: watches them with great gravity: does not always reject vegetables: washes its face with its fore feet at the approach of a storm: sees by night: its eyes shine in the dark: always lights on its feet: proverbially tenacious of life: very cleanly: hates wet: is fond of perfumes; *marum*, *valerian*, *catmint*. The unaccountable antipathy of multitudes! beloved by the *Mahometans*: *Maillet*, who says that the cats of *Ægypt* are very beautiful, adds, that the inhabitants build hospitals for them". I have taken this quite ordinary example of traditional writing in order to illustrate the straightforward force of the language when it is modestly practised. I am only on the fringe of an immense subject, which may be comprised in few: new strength of diction can be best produced by a mature intelligence in the extant resources both printed and oral.

Tradition is not perfect, and may some-

times have a dead hand. But though she approves and supports many things which could be vastly improved—though, according to an old French song,

Hypocrisy and suave intrigue,  
Successful impudence and lying,  
Lawlessness with law in league,  
Talent in the gutter dying—  
Cant,  
Rant  
And superstition  
Are the favourites of Tradition—

still her merits far outweigh her faults. Viewed altogether, she is the edifice of experience, the constitution of our society, and the test of the future. In the sphere of the arts, she may appear as a grim Johnsonian critic, but she will listen to genius, because she knows that genius has listened to her though he may not have been aware of it. She herself is astonished and aggrieved when a steam-engine advances, leaving the driver of the stage-coach snapping his whip at the posturing smoke; or when the broadcasting program makes her lament the days of the silent evenings, interrupted by the old village bells; but she sleeps on it, and before long decides that the times are as good as they were. Her sentiment can never be outraged by what is shaped and revised according to the laws of evolution; she has only to look at a poster in the Subway, setting forth the means of transit through the ages, to feel at home in 1929 as in 1829; she may see even her stage-coach disguised as a bus. It is little different in the province of innovation and experiment on the part of the musician, the painter, and the poet. We cannot, unless we are creatures of the cave, the tripod, and the oracle, see clearly the works of art which she will choose to preserve out of the swarm of endeavors endlessly surrounding her; but the past can assure us that in all that is destined to survive there will be found no hysterical, miraculous, demon-begotten departure from the past. The leap forward will have been

made possible by a steady and accurately judged jumping-off place. In its preparation there need be no feverish anxiety or palaver about the future style of civilization. On this ground many modern talents come to grief; the terror of seeming five minutes behind next Friday distracts and exhausts. Those with things to say spend their enthusiasm in distorting the ways of saying them. So a village boy with a telegram to deliver trains a goat to accompany him, with a satchel round its neck, and in that the telegram—if the goat has not contrived to eat it on the road.

I have said that the past can assure us how far poetical discovery and adventure is related to what was previously ascertained and imparted. Poetry is a family, and her genealogical tree may be investigated with patience and reward. Sometimes a particular branch of this family is remarkable for a rich succession of "likenesses" in difference. If we trace Virgil or Milton through posterity, we shall be busy for many years; from their fountain-heads (yet those fountains were supplied from their predecessors in usual measure) many a fine stream of verse went its own way through the personalities and emotions of other poets, long since recognized as masters. I should like to close my wandering thoughts on the newness of poetical action that is always implicit in a devotion to former excellence, with references to the work of some whose genius is unmistakably original and kindling with revelation. Time allows us now a perspective of such a phenomenon as Blake. We know his hand, "the trick of that voice we do well remember". We see him single in the field, or attended only by his angels. But poetically he is not unaccompanied; the Elizabethan dramatists with their lyrical enjoyments and splendid panoramas of fate and mortality are there. A figure who might not be expected in such company is there also. Watts's Hymns are no longer the common knowledge of England, but in Blake's time they were so,

and he transfused their celestial moments  
into his own visionary illuminings.

Come, lead me to some lofty shade,  
Where turtles moan their loves;  
Tall shadows were for lovers made  
And grief becomes the groves. . .

Jesus! the God of might and love  
New-moulds our limbs of cumbrous clay;  
Quick as seraphic flames we move,  
Active and young and fair as they.

Our airy feet with unknown flight  
Swift as the motions of desire  
Run up the hills of heavenly light  
And leave the weltering world in fire. . .

There are many stanzas like these in Isaac Watts, which have their soft but clear echoes in Blake's lyrics.

Coleridge again is known as a poet new in his own day and new in ours; he was continually experimenting, and in metre his experiments set free a countless host of melodies; almost, one might say, a fresh prosody. But even this magician did not experiment without the help of his old friend Tradition. We do not take away any of the life and spring of his

Never, believe me,  
Appear the immortals,

when we realize that the origin of this freedom is a German lyric; nor when we know that a German folksong underlies "Something Childish but very Natural" is the charm broken. Repeating with pleasure the stanza beginning

Once again, sweet Willow, lave thee!  
Why stays my Love?

we are repeating what was suggested by the Welsh air "All Through the Night". Even "Christabel" is rhythmically a renovation and enrichment of nursery-rhyme measure. And there is that apparently unprecedented and inimitable poem "Kubla Khan"—from the air, from the wood beyond the world? Let Coleridge himself give his statement on the genesis of "Kubla Khan":

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effect of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in "Purchas's Pilgrimage": "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto: and thus ten miles of fertile ground were enclosed with a wall". The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort.

Summertime in the country, to be sure, and a solitary place, and the anodyne, and Purchas, and the genius of dreams, are all felt as presences in the ensuing fantasy which surpasses all our fantasies; but that is not all. For rhythmical sequences and surprises, for verbal music and ideal scenery, Coleridge's secret recollection of two poems by William Collins (themselves descended in some characteristics from Dryden), must partly have our thanks. Those poems are the "Ode on the Passions", with its "prophetic sounds" of the "war-denouncing trumpet", its music of instrument and nature,

Through glades and glooms the mingled measure stole;

and the "Ode on the Poetical Character", which Coleridge honors in an early preface, and

Where tangled round the jealous steep,  
Strange shades o'erbrow the vallies deep,  
And holy genii guard the rock,  
Its glooms embrown, its springs unlock.

Without pausing to elaborate this—I imagine that is all done in Professor John Livingston

Lowes's *Road to Xanadu*—I hasten on to find Milton's great ghost and oriental vision joining in the symphony, whether in the reminiscence of

Southward through Eden went a river large,

Nor changed his course, but through the shaggy  
hill

Passed underneath ingulphed,

to "rise a fresh fountain and with many a rill Water the glade"; or of other, or all his landscapes of romance and wonder.

In pointing out some of the contacts between Coleridge's voyage of discovery and the ports of tradition, I must not be mistaken as belittling the splendor of his newness or as being blind to the individuality of the poem. Coleridge was necessary and only Coleridge. But (to paraphrase Browning's not very beautiful question) could Coleridge grow up without porridge? It may be objected to tradition that when her bewildering child presented her with "Kubla Khan" she struck

him in the face. Enter, in short, the *Quarterly Review* for September, 1816. *Quarterly* speaks:

It was in the year 1797, and in the summer season. Mr. Coleridge was in bad health;—the particular disease is not given; but the careful reader will form his own conjectures. . . . In that farm-house, he had a slight indisposition and had taken an anodyne, which threw him into a deep sleep in his chair (whether after dinner or not he omits to state . . .). The lines here given smell strongly, it must be owned, of the anodyne; and, but that an under-dose of a sedative produces contrary effects, we should inevitably have been lulled by them into forgetfulness of all things. Perhaps a dozen more lines such as the following would reduce the most irritable of critics to inaction.

And so on—"utterly destitute of value", "not a ray of genius". In spite of this bad beginning Tradition had to admit "Kubla" to the album, and presently the two got on famously together; so now we may stand looking for a "Kubla Khan" of our days, and if our poets are as traditional as Coleridge we may receive one.

## THE YOUNG CRITICS OF THE NINETEEN-TWENTIES

by Gorham B. Munson

I AM going to publish a dream, something that by "knowing" persons is no longer done. About seven years ago my first opus, a little monograph on the peculiar merits of Waldo Frank, announced among its pages of "front matter" that the author had in preparation a book entitled "Introducing the Twenties (A Series of Critical Studies)". No one has ever inquired what became of the projected work, but perhaps that is because it was easy to guess that the title represented only a dream.

It seemed to me in those days that the coloration of current literature in the United States was due to change very remarkably. I had read in 1921 an exciting essay by Malcolm Cowley in which he described the new aims of the "youngest generation", specified as comprising S. Foster Damon, Slater Brown, John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings and Kenneth Burke, and how they nourished themselves not on the tradition of yesterday but on the traditions of several centuries ago, how they mingled with this traditionalism a love of strangeness, and how fascinating to them were abstract problems of form and style. Later I had talked with Kenneth Burke and heard him remark to William Carlos Williams that the young men of the 'nineties had been bachelors and had gone in for intoxication in art, whereas the young Americans of the 'twenties were married men and wished for a quality of solidity in their art. Glenway Wescott, I recall, had come to New

York and told of the reaction carried on by Yvor Winters, Mark Turbyfill and himself against the "City of the Big Shoulders" school of Chicago writers. In their little reviews the new *jeunes* went on the warpath against the *Dial*, Mencken and Sherwood Anderson.

That fresh impulses did arise in American literary life at this time requires no argument now: readers of THE BOOKMAN need only to consult the survey, *American Poetry Since 1920*, written by Allen Tate (January, 1929), and the summing up by Kenneth Burke entitled *A Decade of American Fiction* (August, 1929), to have before them the evidence that motives differing very much from those that ruled such writers as Masters, Sandburg, Dreiser and Van Wyck Brooks have animated their young challengers. But in my dream I thought that *les jeunes* would find themselves more quickly, blossom, triumph over the Middle Generation, and rearrange their literary scene—all within a few years! Nothing like that happened. The once rebellious Middle Generation remained firm in its entrenchments. A number of the younger men "cracked up" in flight or scattered. There were brilliant solo performances—usually, like Hart Crane's *White Buildings* or Cummings's *The Enormous Room* or Burke's *The White Oxen*, not widely appreciated—but the Young Generation as a whole failed to acquire the weapons it needed to make its impress. For example, unlike the generation which preceded it,