

The Poets and Nature

BY RAYMOND WEEKS



FROM ancient times until the present it has been a title of glory for one to say that what interests him is man. We have so long repeated the device of Terence, "Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto," that we forget the lengths to which man's pride has gone. He has called himself the lord of the universe, and has taught that all other animate beings were created for his use and pleasure.

As if to fortify him in this opinion, he possessed until the sixteenth century a system of astronomy which fitted like a glove his extravagant esteem of himself: the earth was believed to be the centre of the universe, the immutable point about which the sun and the planets revolved for the glory of mankind. Then came, in 1543, the Copernican astronomy, which, despite the opposition of the Church and the universities, replaced the Ptolemaic. The earth was discovered to be a mere atom, whirled about in a universe immensely superior to it.

Those of us who are interested in literature have a right to inquire how the poets met this astonishing discovery. Did they, true to their traditional rôle as seers, prophesy the discovery, or at least run to meet it with swift sandals? Or did they, like the clergy and most of the universities, wait until there was no danger in joining the revolution—until not to do so would cover them with ridicule?

The poets, unfortunately for their glory, followed the latter course. Not only was there no one among them who showed the prophetic gift, but—except for Giordano Bruno, known rather as a writer of prose—there was no one among them for many generations who dared to lisp a word of the great discovery. As early as 1576 Bruno taught in both prose and verse the wonderful new astronomy, and he received his reward at the hands of

the Inquisition, in February, 1600, when his ardent life went out in the flames.

His tragic death and the persecution of Galileo deterred the poets of all countries from allowing their imaginations to roam audibly through the vast concourse of the new universe, but writers of prose showed more courage. More than two centuries after the death of Copernicus, however, we find the French philosophical poets glad to assume the falsity of the Biblical astronomy, in order to toss chaff at the Church. Voltaire, from the fastness of his kingdom at Ferney, dared to say anything, and Saint-Lambert accepted the new cosmogony as early as 1769. Ten years later, the intrepid Roucher, who was to perish on the scaffold with André Chénier in 1794, followed suit. As for Chénier, his favorite dream was his poem "Hermes," which was to reproduce for his age the "De Rerum Natura" of Lucretius. To his ardent young spirit, science, being truth, was the handmaid of poetry.

In England, we find Cowley, Milton, Dryden, of course, Prior, and the others adhering to the Ptolemaic astronomy in their verse. The courageous if erratic Chatterton, however, accepted the new astronomy; and, shortly before his suicide in 1770, wrote a poem on the Copernican system. This was two hundred and twenty-seven years after the death of the Polish astronomer. Toward the close of the eighteenth century, Erasmus Darwin, scientist as well as poet, espoused the "new" astronomy, as did Wordsworth in 1799.

The nineteenth century witnessed the final emancipation of the Copernican theories from theological opposition. They at last crept into the Spanish universities even. The book of Copernicus was dropped from the Index of 1835, but it was still possible for Newman, preaching at Oxford in 1843, to speak as if it were a debatable question whether the earth moved or not. This was exactly three hundred years after the death of

Copernicus. It is evidently not easy to see in the typical poet of these three centuries the inspired bard, who, in the phrase of Horace, is the *sacer interpresque deorum*.

But rough waters lay ahead of poetry in the nineteenth century. Those absurd scientists precipitated a revolution in geology, paleontology, and biology, which paralleled the earlier one in celestial mechanics. The horrible theory of evolution, which had been forming for more than two thousand years, came to a head in 1859, with the publication of Darwin's "Origin of Species." Just as the earlier revolution had shown that the earth was not the pivot of the universe, so the new revolution attempted to show that man shared the slimy origin of the fishes, the serpents, and the grasshoppers, instead of being a conspicuous angel temporarily engaged in moulting. Of these two revolutions, the second touches us much more profoundly, as W. H. Hudson has said in "Far Away and Long Ago."

It is to be noted in passing that this second revolution, like the first, was brought to a culmination by men outside the universities.

The new theory moved to victory much faster than the former one, in which lies a measure of hope for the future of the race. The churches, and for a while most of the universities, opposed its acceptance. We know how bitterly the struggle raged, until to-day a smug clergy, beaten in the breach, has turned squarely about, and looks with shruggings upon a few shaggy preachers and bald-headed statesmen, who alone defend the beliefs universally held less than seventy-five years ago.

If theology was the first to suffer in the new revolution, poetry did not escape. The poets faced a world turned topsy-turvy. A multitude of their ingenious, sentimental explanations of life appeared as absurd as any speculations of mediæval scholasticism. To judge properly the way in which the poets reacted to the new ideas, one should bear in mind that evolution did not come to them as an entire surprise in the works of Wallace and Darwin. The close of the eighteenth century had seen a quickening of scientific thought on these lines, especially in

France, England, and Germany; and the whole first half of the nineteenth century was filled with the research of a half-dozen "evolutionists," mostly British and French. With the exception of Huxley, the British scientists enjoyed two great advantages: most of them possessed private fortune, and they were not professors. They were thus independent of the attacks of the clergy and society. As for Huxley, young and courageous, he occupied a well-intrenched chair in the Royal College of Surgeons. In the forties a school of liberal science came into being at Oxford, and by the fifties several professors in England were expounding theories which their opponents might call "certainly not orthodox, and probably immoral." In France, the situation was less favorable, mainly because the Restoration crippled scientific study.

As for the French poets, the sombre Vigny, revered for his confidence in the future of science, withdrew from the world too soon to give poetic form to the new conception of organic life. As early as 1848, however, a young poet addicted to science, Louis Bouilhet, became a convert to what he called the identity of species. He, like Chénier, projected a modern "De Rerum Natura," and published in 1853 "Les Fossiles," a poem in which he skilfully used the recent studies in geology and paleontology. In the late sixties, Madame Ackermann incorporated evolutionary notions in her philosophic verse. She was followed by others, especially by Sully Prudhomme, who became the great exponent of evolution among French poets.

In England, Tennyson is lauded as the friend of science, and such he was; but those who praise him as an advance prophet of evolution are mistaken. During his college years and those immediately following, young men of education in Great Britain were everywhere discussing the theories of Lamarck, Saint-Hilaire, Lyell, Doctor Wells, Dean Herbert, and Patrick Matthews, as to natural selection, fixed species, the age of life on the earth, etc. The often-quoted passages in "In Memoriam," which seem to have been written in 1844, and which treat of what may be called evolution, show in Tennyson the friend of science, but not

the prophet. In one of these passages, where he speaks of the processes of nature, occur two lines which may be said to indicate in him a prevision of the modern lady-typist:

"So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life."

When Tennyson bids us

"Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die,"

the supposed anthropological allusion in the second line is fortuitous, whatever family accent it may appear to bring us.

Browning possessed greater intellect than Tennyson, and was more of a liberal, but we find in him no prophetic vision of the new nature, no warm defense of the theories of Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, and Spencer.

Matthew Arnold is known as the unfailing friend of the scientific awakening of his century, a reputation due rather to his prose than to his verse, of which he wrote little after 1857, when he became professor of poetry at Oxford. "Empedocles on Etna," published in 1852, and several other of his poems, are informed with the scientific spirit, yet nowhere show the fabled prophetic gift of the traditional bard.

Despite the bitter resistance of the clergy and of conservative society on both sides of the Atlantic, the new ideas spread rapidly. The mid-Victorian poets and their American disciples hardly knew what to sing about. After some gloomy moments, they came forward and commenced to sing of the beauty of law, order, and harmony in nature (as if Lucretius had never sung of these things), passed on to tell of the long ascent through which predestined man had mounted, and ended by taking this as proof of a long and glorious future. Across this future they projected for humanity an immense viaduct, whose use they denied to the other animals. As we see, they were trying to "save the pieces." They were not content, like the scientists, to see some glint of light along the ragged edge of things. They were not deterred at seeing so much broken harness trailing among the stars.

The new theory of the world meant a return to the Lucretian view of nature as

a whole—of man occupying a certain place and no more. The submission of poetry to this view was only partial and cannot have been sincere. Poets became more anthropocentric than ever: they *would* sing of man, that is, of themselves. Instead of deriving from evolution its great principle of the fraternity of animate creatures, they derived the lonely grandeur and exceptional divinity of man, and left the impression that science proved this!

Thus, as will appear more fully, the other animals "lost out." But this, alas! was not the first time in their unending calvary. When the religions of Greece and Rome fell into dust, and Christianity arose upon their ruins, it seemed that an altruistic belief was about to lead to a proper view of man as a part, but only a part, of animate nature. A natural extension of the principle that all men are brothers would make all the races of animals brothers. But the new religion failed to complete the generous gesture of its founder.

All poetry of the last sixty years, which, as Dryden says, closes with "diapason full in man," is beautiful in a restricted sense only; and Whitman's boast, "I avowedly chant the great pride of man in himself," and its many variations are commendable for their impudence and nothing else. We have had, it is true, in the last sixty years some "pretty poems" about animals and some nice prattle about nature; but how many of these attempts equal the passion of Wordsworth's early work? As for poems which express pity for our brother animals, do any of them surpass the accents of Cowper or Burns? Thanks to the twist which the poets and the clergy have given to evolution, the other animals have sustained a relative loss in the scale of existence. We have played with them "heads we win, tails you lose."

Two evolutionary catchwords, "the struggle for existence" and "the survival of the fittest," seem to have sufficed to ease the sordid conscience of men, who thus justified red-handed brutality toward other creatures. The poets have in the main merely reflected this attitude, although they are by profession supposed to be gentle and kind.

The sinister thing is that the spread of a belief in evolution coincided with a spread of fury in our destruction of animal life. And let us not delude ourselves as to another point: it was not the yellow race or the black race that accelerated the massacre of the earth's most beautiful, most innocent creatures, but it was the so-called Christian and civilized races! It has been in the main men of English speech and of Neo-Latin speech who have been the most pitiless. This has been partly a result of our great prosperity. We have been submerged under the impedimenta of success. Our materials have outrun our intellect, and our intellect has outrun our emotions.

It will be worth while for us as students of literature, and therefore to a limited extent students of life, to listen for a few minutes to some of the cruelties inflicted by men on helpless nature in this era of material gluttony, mechanical inventiveness, and perverted moral instruction. As you read this horrible recital, ask yourself how many poets of the last sixty years you can name who have protested against these crimes.

First, take the chapter of plumage and furs. With our gold, we have enlisted the other races in the extermination of birds and mammals which is going on in all the islands of the globe, throughout Africa and Europe, in the Americas, in China, in India even. London is the centre of this trade. The furs sold by one British firm, totalled in one year shortly before the Great War 11,650,000. During the same year, the sale of bird corpses by four London firms ran into untold millions. For the rarer species, there were such items as 80,000 humming-birds, 40,000 birds of paradise, 250,000 egrets. No one can tell the total sales for London, or for the other great markets, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, New York, St. Louis. This plumage goes for the most part to embellish heads that have never suffered from rain or snow or wind or sun; and as for the furs, they go mainly to cover shoulders that have never shivered. In general, the wish of the wearer is to add to charms already triumphant, or to arrest the decline of beauty which has already done enough harm. Why should wealth and beauty fail to profit by the

working out of the great, newly discovered laws of evolution?

One who doubts the hardening of the Occidental heart in recent times has but to read of the increased "hunting" and "shooting" of parked beasts and birds in Europe, or to read several of the hundreds of books on hunting, such as Sir Henry Seton-Karr's "My Sporting Holidays." Let him read the proud record of Henry Bailey, who boasts of bringing down seven elephants in five minutes, or that where Newman, the ivory-hunter, tells of slaughtering twenty-three elephants in one day!

We of the United States have shed more innocent blood than any other "civilized" nation. In a brief time, we have extinguished 95 per cent of the wild animal life, and this mainly for our pleasure. A million and a half of us take out annually a license to hunt, and a million others hunt on their own land without licenses. In Louisiana alone there were slaughtered for market in the year 1909-1910, 5,700,000 birds and 2,600,000 mammals. Some of us remember the time when immense flocks of passenger-pigeons darkened the sky in their flight. The last survivor of this species recently died in captivity in the Zoological Garden at Cincinnati. And some of us remember when the Great Plains were black under the herds of buffaloes. We know how they were shot for sport, and left lying where they fell. Colonel Henry Inman says that in some regions one could walk all day, stepping on the dead bodies without touching the earth. It was found later that the skeletons of the buffaloes could be converted into fertilizer. According to an estimate, there were gathered and shipped from Kansas alone, in thirteen years, the bones of 31,000,000 buffaloes.

Yet the poets sang of God's loving universe! In the presence of this death-struggle of nature with cruel man, they wrote on such subjects as "To My Soul," "Walking by Moonlight," "To My Lady's Fan." Of pity for the world of hunted, dying creatures, little or none. If they have admitted kinship with the other animals, they have generally added: "But I am different; I am not as they; I have in me an indwelling God; I am divine." A few poets have in modern times written lines of protest against this bru-

tality; or, at least, lines of real tenderness for the other animals. Most of them, however, have not progressed beyond Pope's shameful lines:

"Man cares for all: to birds he gives his woods,
To beasts his pastures, and to fish his floods;"

or the shocking falsity of Wordsworth's

"Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her;"

or Browning's cruel blast:

"God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world!"

Mr. W. H. Davies says in a pretty poem, called "Nature's Friend," that all things love him. It will be harder than he thinks for us to recover our lost position in creation. There are too many dead bodies piled against the door between nature and man for us, short of long ages, to arrive at the sanctity ascribed to St. Francis, of whom it was said that "not a bird upon the tree but half forgave his being human."

The poets, then, in the years that followed the acceptance of evolution, continued to show docility by going along with the mob. They were of their generation, not apart from it, and not above it. Their voices sounded hollower and hollower, and their estate sank lower and lower. But as a Daughter of the American Revolution has said, the longest worm has a turning. The worm turned shortly after the close of the last century. At that time retribution descended upon poetry. Her devotees separated into two hostile camps.

One of these camps—the Old Guard—has taken refuge in a fortress on a hill. Around the walls press the opposing forces, carrying banners of violent colors—green, yellow, purple, saffron, indigo, red, with twenty kinds of musical instruments, adjuncts of valor, all blaring, shrilling, beating or bleating at once. Upon banners of the attacking host are to be seen such words as impressionists, vers libristes, imagists, vorticists, cubists, satanists, futurists, polyphonists, paroxysmists, diabolists, staccatoists, contortionists, energumenists, dadaists.

If you converse with one of the beleaguering heroes when he is off duty, you

may learn some of the rules of his camp, such as: Be "different," be peculiar. . . . Scrap the past. . . . Beat the big bass drum. . . . All you require to succeed is a disordered imagination, lungs of brass, and unlimited impudence. . . . Splash crude colors over everything, especially green and yellow. . . . As a guiding principle, remember that, if you can prove anything, everything else becomes automatically true. . . . Use whenever you can, and even when you can't, certain words which are sacred amongst us, such as: blood, red-blooded, bleeding, stabbing, hissing, far-flung, sobbing, thrills, threnody, psaltery, chrysoprase, mauve, gargoyles, pericarps, mandarins, turquoise, jade (the stone not the girl), yellow, green. . . . Never say "Preface," say "Foreword." . . . Talk about yourself as much as possible. Remember that the more trivial the subject, the better the poem. . . . When you have nothing to say, say it with italics. . . . Treat all persons and things with the utmost familiarity. Punch nature in the ribs. Slap God on the back. For Lincoln, say Abe; for Washington, George; for Whitman, Old Walt; for Alexander the Great, Ellic.

Among these rules for success, several may not meet our approval; but here are others, and this way lies hope: Be brief. . . . Read your verses aloud as you compose them. . . . Suppress four-fifths of your adjectives. . . . Employ only *le mot juste*. . . . Avoid ready-made locutions. . . . Treat all of life.

"Treat all of life!" Yet what do they mean by "all of life," these reforming poets? We open one of their books, and we find:

"Life!
Startling, vigorous life,
That squirms under my touch,
And baffles me when I try to examine it,
Or hurls me back without apology,
Leaving my ego ruffled and preening itself."

Although somewhat ruffled ourselves, we are not daunted. We read many of these poets, and we discover that they actually treat nearly everything, from a cabbage to a constellation, from a shirt to a freight-train. As we read, we note that they like noisy things, and that they talk much of themselves. They make us think of steam-riveters.

We soon see that they are pantheists. They believe that they are a part of all things, that all things are a part of them, and that everything is a part of everything else. Their pantheistic system is one of standardized parts, such as constitutes the prosperity of the city of Detroit.

Their pantheism is also remarkable in that it affirms what may be called delayed metempsychosis or dormant identity. You meet one of these poets. You converse with him. He converses with you. You come to think that you know him. It is an error! One of these days he will casually inform you that he is—or was—the last of the Pharaohs. Or a none-too seductive and only normally unsettling poetess confesses to you that she was Cleopatra. Thus you move on from agreeable surprise to agreeable surprise, and come to know life as it is. From delayed metempsychosis has developed what may be called the “Cycle of Babylon,” since it found its first great example in Henley’s famous lines:

“I was a king in Babylon,
And you were a Christian slave.”

We are disquieted to see among our poets so many descendants of the ancient royalties of Babylon, Syria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The slopes of Parnassus have gone purple.

In yet another way the new poets, and their short-haired rivals as well, have shown a passion for real life. They have cultivated a geographic acquaintance with the earth’s remote provinces, such as the planets, comets, suns, moons, asteroids, heaven, and hell. Some of them could, with their eyes closed, draw a fairly accurate map of several of these provinces, especially of the last two. Instead of wasting their time writing about the death-agony of nature at the hands of man, they choose subjects like these: “The Smithy of God,” “A Masque of the Gods,” “Riders of the Stars,” “Christ in Hades,” “The Runner in the Sky,” “The Falconer of God,” “The Hounds of Hell,” “Around the Sun,” “The Testimony of the Suns,” “The Bells of Heaven,” “The Celestial Circus,” “The Path of the Stars,” “The Daughter of the Stars,” “Unborn Stars,” “The Huntress of the Stars,” “The Rider of the Sun-Fire,”

“Beyond the Stars,” “How I Walked in the Jungle of Heaven,” “Sky High.” It is true that many of these poems, despite their alluring titles, treat of things mundane. None the less, the titles remain significant of the sustained interest felt by scores of our poets in life as it is—all of life.

Life! Such is at least their programme. But there is a part of life—and we know what it is—that they have not often treated. They have hardly gone farther than their predecessors in recognizing properly the fraternity of animate creatures, and when they approach nature it is generally with a chipper, jactant, familiar tone which amounts to a profanation.

We reflect on their programme, “all of life,” as we read their poems, and at last it occurs to us that prose has the same programme! We end by realizing that nearly all these new poets—all of the radical ones—are not poets; that, at most, they have but run a trolley-line through poetry. We may even come to believe that much the larger part of their production is to real poetry as the staple manufactured article of Connecticut is to nutmegs. When we first find that it is almost impossible to learn by heart one of their poems, we are distinctly shocked. We would remind some of them that wilful extravagance does not suit either poetry or prose; that, although noise means much in modern life, it is not everything, and that there are times when a poet is known by the silences he keeps; that cataleptic seizures and intoxicated half-visions can have nothing to do with art; and that because a piece of writing has neither rhyme nor reason does not mean, necessarily, that it is poetry.

Mr. Lowes has said in his excellent book, “Convention and Revolt in Poetry,” that “verse is *not* prose.” One may reverse this as a warning to those who write the new poetry: “prose is *not* verse.” In fact, most of our vers libre is merely prose adapted to the needs of skilful elocutionists. It was written to be recited. Unlike children in former generations, it should be heard, not seen. Vers libre impresses one as being an eccentric prose translation of an eccentric poetic original in an eccentric foreign language. One feels this most clearly, if,

after reading some imagist verse, one opens a volume of translations from Chinese poetry. The two are extraordinarily similar, except that the Chinese translations are superior. No vers-libre poem can survive, unless as a curiosity, or as part of the repertory of an elocutionist.

Yet all these criticisms would be mere detail if the young poets knew how false to science, to justice, and to honor their predecessors have been in turning the unity of nature into the disparity of nature, for the advantage of men and the ruin of the other animals—if they knew and would act on their knowledge. Furthermore, it would be mere detail, if the poets knew what was good for them. How can there be sincerity in their voices when they speak of nature, if they are the assassins of nature? Is sincerity of no importance in literature?

May we, as spectators and auditors of Parnassus, indulge even a remote hope that the new poets will end by rallying somewhat to the defense of the solidarity of nature? Yes, there is hope, because, for one thing, they are eager to reform the past. Despite their uncouth antics, they have really accomplished much. They have already forced a taking of stock. In a few brief years they have broken the mould of the conventionalized, sentimental poetry of the last seventy years of the nineteenth century. We had become unendurably weary of the singsong of that poetry, weary of verses with a sickly moral appended, weary of all the pretty

gestures which were nothing but convention, weary of seeing poets forever starting for Arcady and arriving in Arkansas. The new poets have changed much of this by their violent attack. They possess, then, the courage without which great things cannot be done. They possess, further, a resentment like that of the minstrel of Lacedæmon who was driven from his town for adding a string to the traditional lyre, and may easily be led to aid a good cause.

There is hope, finally, because most of these poets are not poets at all, but prose-writers—janizaries serving the Crescent, but born under the Cross. Nor is it an affront to call them prose-writers! We are under a misapprehension as to prose and poetry. It is prose which serves for most of the sacred things in life. Suppose that your brother is travelling in a distant country, and that you write to tell him that his mother and yours has passed into the great silence, and to express your grief for her, your love and sympathy for him. Suppose, too, that you are an excellent, an admirable poet. Will you write in verse, or in prose?

Let those who would be poets realize that there are still immense mysteries in life, and that it is our injustices which prevent us from having the right and the power to see them; that there are vast zones, as yet unexplored, where only those may penetrate who are intelligent, generous, tender, courageous, and . . . innocent.

The Poet

BY CHARLES W. KENNEDY

His soul was free of space and time,
Of every age, of every clime.

With absent heart and puzzled hands,
He dwelt in vague, familiar lands,

Reluctantly, with startled eyes,
Recalled from shores beyond surmise;

Mistaking trim New England trees
For gardens of Hesperides,

Or summoned from Gethsemane
To answer how he'd take his tea.