Review

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American Poems. Selected and edited by W. C. BRONSON. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Cambridge: University Press). 1912. 8vo. vii + 669 pp.

American literature possesses a peculiar interest for the English. The early colonists had behind them the same tradition that inspired our own poets, and there is a fascination in endeavouring to trace the influence of environment on what in its earlier stages at least is our own race, and noting the gradual emergence of those special characteristics which we are wont to term American. Much of the earlier verse is, as might naturally be expected, religious or didactic in tone—the work of men exiled for their faith. There is an almost pathetic simplicity and ruggedness about it. We miss the fire and mysticism of Vaughan or Crashaw, and the sweetness and delicacy of Herbert or Herrick, but the stumbling sincerity of those unspeakable paraphrases and homilies is affecting in its honesty. We entirely believe that ‘the reverend and excellent Mr Urian Oakes,’ who died in 1682,

‘— an *Uncomfortable Preacher* was,
I must confess. Hee made us cry *Alas!*
In sad *Despair*. Of what? Of *ever seeing*
A better Preacher while we have a being.
Hee, oh Hee was in *Doctrine, Life,* and all
Angelical and *Evangelical*....

but while we sympathise with the grief of his flock on his death, we cannot call its expression poetical. Anne Bradstreet ventures on a lighter vein, but is evidently nervous as to the reception she is likely to meet with:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits;
A Poets pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on Female wits:
If what I do prove well it won't advance;
They'll say it's stolen, or else it was by chance.

There is a curious absence of that quaintness and charm which mark contemporary English verse, quaintness which at its worst led to far-fetched ‘metaphysical’ conceits, but at its best is delightfully childlike and attractive. Rare indeed are such passages as that taken from Nicholas Noyes’ ‘Præfatory Poem to the little Book entituled *Christianus per ignem*’:

The *thoughts* are like a swarm of *Bees*,
That fly both *when* and *where* they please;
Those little folks both *work* and *play*
About a thousand *flow'rs* a day.

It is natural that the more artificial English poems of the later seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries should find no parallel among the pioneers who were making their way amidst a thousand dangers and difficulties. Life across the water was too stern and real a warfare for men to write poems to Fair Amorets and Sacharissas. Nor

are the few later attempts at tragic drama very successful. The blank verse is so extraordinarily blank, and the hatred of England—natural enough in eighteenth century American drama—occasionally leads to scenes as ludicrous as those in which D'Avenant depicts seventeenth century Spaniards. *The Battle of Bunkers-Hill*, written in 1776, contains a delightful interview between the English generals: 'Boston. *The British Army being Repuls'd, Sherwin is dispatch'd to General Gage for Assistance.*' General Gage's answer is brief and to the point:

Do as you please, Burgoyne, in this affair.
I'll hide myself in some deep vault beneath.

Our thoughts travel to another stage direction: 'Two Spaniards are likewise discovered sitting in their clokes, and appearing more solemn in ruffs—the one turning a spit while the other is basting an Indian prince who is roasted at an artificial fire' (D'Avenant: *Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*, 1658). Both show a patriotic detestation of the national enemy, rather than tragic dignity and reticence.

The feeling for Nature shown in the earlier poems is akin to that which inspires the 'local poets' mentioned by Dr Johnson. There is nothing as fine as the best of Thomson's work or as vivid and vigorous as the great passages in Cowper, but the pleasant easy observation of the various bards has the same mild attractiveness that we find in Dyer or Shenstone:

Beside yon church that beams a modest ray,
With tidy neatness reputably gay,
When, mild and fair as Eden's seventh-day light,
In silver silence shines the Sabbath bright,
In neat attire the village households come
And learn the pathway to the eternal home.
(*Greenfield Hill*, by Timothy Dwight, 1794.)

It is noteworthy that while the French Revolution inspired some of the most impassioned verse of the English Lake Poets, the American Revolution apparently produced nothing worth calling poetry:

Squash into the deep descended
Curs'd weed of China's coast:
Thus at once our fears were ended—
British rights shall ne'er be lost.

may be a truthful account of the Boston incident, but the poem would be more effective if its author had a less deeply rooted objection to using the word tea. This tendency to seek fine or unexpected phrases also mars some of the later work. The little poems of Emily Dickenson, for instance, not infrequently contain a pretty idea spoiled by an affected eccentricity of diction:

The rose did caper on her cheek,
Her bodice rose and fell;
Her pretty speech like drunken men
Did stagger pitiful.

A capering rose is a very unattractive flower, and prettiness is not usually the most striking quality of drunken men. The next poem in the volume which ends with the picture of a robin 'unrolling' his feathers and rowing himself

...softer home
Than oars divide the ocean
Too silver for a seam,
Or butterflies off bank of noon
Leap plashless as they swim,

leaves the English student of Nature hopelessly bewildered. Do American butterflies swim? And what is a bank of noon?

The greater part of the anthology is very wisely devoted to the extracts from the chief American poets of the nineteenth century—Bryant, Poe, Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, Whittier, Lowell, and last, and greatest of all, Whitman. These are on an altogether different level from the mass of minor poets whose work we have been considering. Not one of them is worthy to be ranked with that little band of immortals whose work rises above all limits of time and nationality, but if their speech sometimes falters at least a coal from the altar of poetry has touched their lips. It is easy to laugh at the cheap morality and sentimentality of Longfellow and to attribute his popularity to the same early Victorianism which placed a volume of Tupper upon every drawing-room table, but the fact remains that having found his own modest circle he lives there to-day, whereas Tupper is as dead as Anna Matilda and the Della Cruscans. Emerson and Whitman are living forces in literature, and with all their inequality, their lapses into the commonplace or the grotesque, no one can deny that they have something to contribute to poetry which is not to be found elsewhere. They are essentially American poets, and in them we are conscious both of the gulf which has gradually widened between English and American thought and expression, and of the vast poetic possibilities of the New World.

Professor Bronson has provided full and interesting notes including (1) 'the poet's theory of poetry when this can be given in his own words; (2) statements by the poet or his friends which throw light on the meaning of a poem, or give circumstances connected with the composition of it; (3) explanations of words, allusions, etc., which the student may find obscure; (4) variant readings of a few poems...; (5) quotations from sources and parallel passages to show the poet's literary relationship...; (6) specimens of contemporary criticism.' A Bibliography and Indices are also appended. Altogether the book is of extreme interest and value to the student of American poetry, and can be cordially recommended as a careful and scholarly piece of work.

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