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FUTURIST POETRY

By M. HOLMES

IT would be interesting to know exactly what are the principles that govern the production of poetry of the Newer School. It is attractive to imagine that the new poets belong to the Impressionist School of thinkers and artists who have agreed to banish the technical enslavements of rhyme, metre, perspective, conventional line and colouring, etc., that were a *sine qua non* of work done in the earlier schools. Any normal person (if Education would only see to it that we were all, as nearly as possible, turned out normal) should be able to dance, sing a song, and make an Impressionist picture, and any normal person should also be able to write a poem. Why not? There is surely enough poetic material in the individual and collective life of to-day to need expressing, and enough emotion and artistic feeling in potential poets to appreciate it. And what a perfectly balanced, equable, pleasant tempered nation we should become, if a natural and beautiful means of expression were to be found for our stormy and suppressed emotions; we should be, in fact, normal and truly sane, if not exactly in the high Greek fashion, at any rate in a very sound educational and psychological sense indeed, and in accordance with theories of highly reputable origin that are, perhaps, better adapted than the pure Greek ones to the peculiar requirements and exigencies of our still untrained, uncultured Celtic or Teutonic natures. Judging from poems studied and contributed from various sources, some of the principles upon which poetry might be based would appear to be the following:

1. The golden rule is freedom. Hear the music, catch the rhythm, then write the poem because you want to and must. There is no getting away from Rule 1. If the rhythm suggesting words or the line doesn't come "from nowhere" there can be no poem. The very school-children bid us take warning by Wordsworth.

2. The second principle follows from the first. A poem written freely must be characteristic of its writer, and will, of course, be so far original. It will be the work of one who has no conscious models, but since we are all the result of the forces that have made us what we are, it will be in some sense or other reminiscent. It may be even literary!

3. The general form of the poem, the length of its lines, all, in

fact, that used to be stanza, metre and rhyme, will be decided by the grouping or phrasing of primitive emotion. The poem will be a burst of natural music, of melody that depends, as it were, upon the physical staying-power of the singer and also upon his mental endowment and artistic sense; for the blocking out of the poem into its natural divisions depends upon the quality of the poet's perception of the emotion that is the substance of the poem. The basis of the whole is musical rhythm. Music is poetry *dégagé*, absolutely pure and untrammelled; and poetry should be music with limitations very necessary, helpful and beautiful limitations, of course, but it is safer for poetry's sake to acknowledge them to be limitations. (We may here perhaps shake a friendly hand with the Phoneticians and Spelling Reformers, who are doing their best to help us to the true significance of the written symbol. If Phonetics would only publish that revised system of versification whereto all its studies so naturally tend!) The new poetry will not be written to be read with the eye. No poem is known to be a poem, except perhaps by a peculiarly trained literary instinct extremely difficult to define, until it is read aloud; it should of course be learnt by heart, then recited or declaimed or shouted (even acted or danced, were it not better to beware of the confusion of artistic "genres") according to the nature of it. But the literary presentment of the new poems will have a certain importance all the same: the printing of them will make some appeal to the eye because the length of the line, determined like musical phrasing or grouping, will be a considerable help to the reader and serve to indicate the presence and arrangement of rhythms, which, if they were not altogether absent from prose, would there be treated in a very different manner. There are many, indeed, endless devices that may be used to give to a poem the particular quality or beauty that distinguishes poetry from prose. No attempt may be made by futurist poets to systematise such devices, much less to legislate about their use; to seek to impose restrictions would be to deny the informing spirit of the movement. But that such devices will characterise the best work and tend naturally toward some sort of classification when the poetics of futurism are under discussion, seems practically certain. Cubism had its manifesto; and the old poetical rules, which were in their turn generalisations upon the practice of poets of former times, being done away, nature as well as critics abhors a vacuum. The really pleasant part, though, of this new movement is the beginning, when there are certainly no rules, apparently few principles, not too many masterpieces to create uncomfortable and bewildering precedents, and everyone can enjoy themselves writing poems just as they please.

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It is as if some Academy, more formidable and more ubiquitous even than the French one, had suddenly given the whole literary world a holiday and a poetic license to play around. Only the very good boys belated with their homework and the dullards will stay in and do penums. Among the devices and adornments that are perhaps likely to commend themselves to the writers of futurist poetry are: (*a*) imitations of natural rhythmic movements; (*b*) the use of words for their musical value, imitative and onomatopoetic words; (*c*) a skilful use of assonance, vowel music and vowel alliteration, whence the ear often derives an even more subtle satisfaction than from rhyme; (*d*) the free introduction of foreign words, where native words fail, and the restoration of native prose words conventionally excluded from the old poetic vocabulary. If this be so, what a vista of literary pleasure opens out before us when we pass in mental review the varied and, in the centuries, unique exotic interests and excitements that are such a marked feature of the present time! Now, perhaps, the Eastern influences may have due poetic justice done to them. The titles of Impressionist pictures are very often little artistic notes of the inevitableness of certain foreign words, and, in the case of English Impressionists, tributes of appreciative recognition, and at the same time capital illustrations of the principle we are advocating. Why, for instance, is *L'Homme au doigt blessé* so very different from *The Man with the Cut Finger* (we shrink from writing such a phrase as a translation), and so vastly superior to any English phrase for a certain artistic purpose? Why is *Les Wee Frees scrtant d'église* so exquisitely humorous? Think what a harvest of poetic invention and what stimulus is offered to new poets by the titles of the Royal Academy pictures! (*Punch* need not necessarily have all the fun). And who will write *the* poem on the horrid little pet dog to whom belongs the woman in furs? This perhaps borders on satire, and leads to the suggestion of another probable device by which fragments of the old poetic style, expressions, rhythms, sections even, may appear in the new poems to serve a satiric or a historic purpose, just as in novels (and in life) people with Victorian minds become additionally interesting when placed in modern, sometimes very modern, surroundings or situations. By such a device, characters in the new poems could be made to wear the poetic garb of their respective periods. The following poems may elucidate some of these points, and will certainly suggest others. No one, for instance, who has seen the Russian dancers can fail to feel some appreciation for this short poem, with its pregnant lyric intention, the cold frenzy of passion marked by its rhythm, and the skilful threefold division that makes direct appeal to thought:

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The Dance

With wide flung arms
With feet clinging to the earth
I will dance.
My breath sobs in my belly
For an old sorrow that has put out the sun;
An old, furious sorrow
I will grin,
I will bare my gums and grin
Like a grey wolf that has come upon a bear.*

The gaunt suggestibility in it is potent, whatever we may think of the workmanship. It has the realism of Russian novelists and something of the world-weariness and bitter wisdom of the *Ecclesiastes*. It is bald and crude and grim and bare, a poetic skeleton. It is, moreover, a protest. Why should poetry ever be expected to do the office of the traditional sick-nurse in a penny novelette, or of an opiate? There are moods when we have had enough of lulling and soothing and steeping the senses in aesthetic enjoyment. The next poem is less modern in tone and subject, and largely no doubt on account of its beautiful musical effect and comparative simplicity of treatment, will make a more general appeal. It may be compared to the impressionist landscapes which can usually be "understood" even of the multitude:

In a Garden

Gushing from the mouths of stone men
To spread at ease under the sky
In granite-lipped basins,
Where iris dabble their feet
And rustle to a passing wind,
The water fills the garden with its rushing,
In the midst of the quiet of close-clipped lawns.

Damp smell the ferns in tunnels of stone,
Where trickle and plash the fountains,
Marble fountains, yellowed with much water.

Splashing down moss-tarnished steps
It falls, the water;

*Printed in "The Egoist" of August 15th, 1913.

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And the air is throbbing with it;
With its gurgling and running;
With its leaping, and deep, cool murmur.

And I wished for night and you.
I wanted to see you in the swimming-pool,
White and shining in the silver-flecked water.

While the moon rode over the garden,
High in the arch of night,

And the scent of the lilac was heavy with stillness.
Night and the water, and you in your whiteness, bathing!*

The last example is more complex, personal and derivative. Its title varies between *Psychologiste* and *Type Psychologique*, which is harder. *Psychologiste*, be it noted, is a far less scientific and infinitely more natural and instinctive kind of a being than a psychologist! The poem is built up on a threefold plan, or two parts, and a hesitating and prolonged transition intended to mark the detached and ever-so-little negligent attitude so frequently observable in artistic people. The third part of the poem (nearly half as regards the actual number of lines) is suggestive of the effect upon such a temperament of some strong emotion that dominates and temporarily absorbs the whole being. The fuschia has some, though only a slight, significance in a prevailing tone of culture, kindness and happiness. The treatment of consonants and vowels calls for attention; there are examples of literary reminiscence, and probably some imitative musical effects are aimed at in the lines that describe the Fantasia:

Psychologiste

Lightly stepping, literary, resourceful,
Softly he touches the books in their ranks on the shelves,
Passing to place one here, another there,
In deft pursuance of some quaint device
Of literary charm—
Then pausing, for a moment stays.
Will he now lead some fairy child
To gather fallen fuchsias by the hedge?
Or friends delight with varied converse pure?

*Printed in the "Egoist" of August 15th, 1913.

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Or make the music sound again
Of Brahms, the "Papillons," a Chopin Prelude,
Or that Fantasia
Whose swaying arpeggi subdue the mind
To hear a voice, calling
Persistent, tenderly insisting,
A voice that sings,
And onward moves, upgathering unto itself
The depths and scales of intervening being
In a full major close.

Futurist poetry need not necessarily be a stumbling block in the way of the conservative or literary timid, nor too much repel the devotees of the older schools. After all, in poetry most assuredly the golden rule is freedom; moreover, on our own showing, it simply fails to be poetry if the reader does not share in the freedom and the enjoyment of it. All that Futurist poetry does is to prove itself historical and historically developing. Much of it is only a transformed survival of the work of the older poets and a tribute to their enduring influence. Of necessity it must be so. Futurism is weaving for herself out of the rich heritage of the poetic past the garment she will wear henceforth as the inspired Muse of the Present and the interpreter of its own peculiar visions and problems. Though the spirit is essentially modern, the principles and literary methods of Futurism, if we have in any sense rightly recognised and divined them, will generally find admirable illustration in various books of the Bible, in Blake's Prophetic Books, in a good deal of Anglo-Saxon poetry, in Swinburne, in Walt Whitman (and some of the best work of his disciple, Mr. Edward Carpenter), in Nietzsche and Verlaine, and many other modern French and German poets.