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The Romantic Movement in English Poetry by Arthur Symons

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belong to them, including the *Discourse concerning Satire* and the *Dedication of the Æneis*, so that altogether about half of Dryden's critical essays appear in this volume. The works are arranged in chronological order, with full accounts of the form in which they appeared; and the texts have been most carefully collated with the early editions. The editor justly observes that the chronological arrangement 'should give the reader a clearer conception of Dryden's literary development, and of his relation to the politics of his time, than the classified arrangement hitherto followed.' The volume is made more complete and interesting by the addition in appendix of poems and translations which have been attributed to Dryden, or in which he may have had a hand, as the *Essay upon Satire*, for which he was assaulted in Rose Alley, and a translation of Boileau's *Art Poétique*, which he probably revised.

There is an excellent portrait, a well-written biography, and a sufficient supply of notes, which for the most part are satisfactory. Sometimes, however, an explanation is adopted from Scott without sufficient consideration; as in the note on *Annus Mirabilis*, stanza cci. Here there is certainly no reference to Henry III: the meaning is that the cause of the English was so just, that Henry IV, the first Bourbon, would in this instance refuse to side with his descendant, who was their enemy. Again in *Absalom and Achitophel*, l. 196, the true interpretation is probably that of Churton Collins, that David would have composed one of his psalms in honour of Achitophel, and so Heaven would have been deprived of at least one song of praise.

G. C. MACAULAY.

CAMBRIDGE.

*The Romantic Movement in English Poetry.* By ARTHUR SYMONS. London: Constable. 1909. 8vo. 344 pp.

A book coming from Mr Arthur Symons could scarcely be other than good, but this particular volume excels anticipation and must certainly be ranked as among the best gifts of recent criticism.

The scheme of the book is somewhat peculiar. Mr Symons has neither tried to develop the history of the Romantic Movement in a regular sequence, nor attempted to trace to their sources the different tendencies expressing themselves at that epoch: he has simply taken individual authors as they were, without any attempt to classify or connect them. In a very interesting and able introduction he defends his method, or rather his lack of method: he asserts that the modern endeavour to find a vital relation between the poet and his age is essentially wrong; there is no such relation:

It is the poet who, by his genius, makes the taste of the time. All that 'conflicts of tendencies' and the like have to do with the poet is to help him now and again to a convenient form....No great poet ever owed any essential part of his genius to his age; at the most he may have owed to his age the opportunity of an easy achievement.

Surely Mr Symons is a little too hasty. If genius means only sheer ability, pure capacity of mind and nothing else, then it is obvious that a poet does not and cannot owe any essential part of it to his own age. But, if genius means not only capacity, but also inspiration, then surely a poet may owe to his time a very essential part indeed.

The examples which Mr Symons himself cites to prove his point—Chatterton and Pope—seem to cut both ways. Chatterton was certainly not inspired by his age, but it is quite open to anyone to say that he perished because he found it so uncongenial; while, as for Pope, is it so certain that he was no poet, nothing but ‘a writer of extraordinary pure capacity?’ Are there not passionate lines in the *Eloisa*, and beautiful descriptions in the *Iliad*, which seem to suggest that in another age Pope might have been a truly powerful love poet or a really fine nature poet? Is it not possible that the ability was there and only the inspiration wanting? These are Mr Symons’ own examples, and if we turn to other writers, the theory is still more doubtful. There is Spenser. As *Mother Hubbard’s Tale* shows he might have been Pope’s equal in scathing satire, but he chose to write the *Faerie Queene* instead. Had his age nothing to do with that choice? Or again, there is Dryden. Had he not the true ‘heroic stuff’ in him and was he not denied his full genius because his age gave him no inspiration? Does he not suggest a marred Elizabethan, spoilt because astray in a meaner time?

It is not necessary, however, to argue at length on Mr Symons’ theory. It is enough to say that, since he recognises no necessary connection between the poet and his age, each writer is for him a detached entity, standing quite apart from the rest, and the book thus resolves itself into a series of essays, varying in length from a paragraph to a number of pages, according to the value of the writer discussed. This want of connection makes the book appear somewhat disjointed; but there can be no doubt as to the value of the individual judgments, or of the catholic sympathies and wide range of taste which they reveal. Mr Symons also expresses his thought with a fineness of illustration that seems to give the substance double value. Take, for example, this phrase from the Introduction:

It was Dionysus that awoke in Burns, and has never been out of the blood of any authentic poet since. Burns is neither eighteenth nor nineteenth century, neither local nor temporary, but the very flame of man, speaking as a man has only spoken once or twice in the world. He taught no one anything that anyone could learn, but this ploughman was Apollo to Admetus, incarnate song.

The poets of the Romantic Movement, as Mr Symons views them, have only one thing really in common, that they bring ‘the emancipation of the world and of the mind and of the vehicle of poetry from the bondage of fact, opinion, formality and tradition; and when fact, opinion, formality and tradition go out, imagination comes in.’ This emancipation took different forms in the leading poets of the period, but in some way or other it is evidenced in all.

As we should expect, one of the best essays is that on Blake. Mr Symons explains, and no one ever explained better, the unique quality of Blake's poetry:

The voice of desire is not in it, nor the voice of passion, nor the cry of the heart, nor the cry of the sinner to God, nor of the lover of nature to nature....It is like the voice of wisdom in a child, who has not yet forgotten the world out of which the soul came. It is as spontaneous as the note of a bird ;...it is lyric thought.

Mr Symons notes subtly the difference between Wordsworth's nature poetry and Blake's. Blake esteemed even Wordsworth too much of a realist; to Blake nothing in nature exists in and for itself alone; everything is a type of some deeper reality; therefore to Blake nothing is trivial:

Thus he writes of the lamb and the tiger, of the joy and sorrow of infants, of the fly and the lily, as no poet of mere observation has ever written of them, going deeper into their essence than Wordsworth ever went into the heart of daffodils, or Shelley into the nerves of the sensitive plant.

There is less that is original in the essay on Wordsworth. Mr Symons agrees with Matthew Arnold in his general view of the poet as a writer absolutely simple, straightforward and sincere, so that, when he is at his best, nature seems to take the pen from him and write; and he agrees that Wordsworth's chief faults are his inequality and his occasional childishness. There are one or two especially felicitous observations such as the remark that Wordsworth had 'a Quaker wisdom and waited on the silent voices in "a wise passiveness" with that "happy stillness of the mind" in which truth may be received unsought.'

The essay on Coleridge is as subtle and as interesting as that on Blake though it perhaps charms less. Mr Symons does not take the common view of Coleridge as a poet whose capacity was largely spoilt by his absorption in philosophy; on the contrary he points out that both the poetry and the philosophy spring from the same root:

The poet and the philosopher are but two aspects of one reality; or, rather, the poetic and the philosophic attitudes are but two ways of seeing. The poet who is not also a philosopher is like a flower without a root....Poetry and metaphysics are alike a disengaging, for different ends, of the absolute element in things.

He justly points out that Coleridge's weakness as a philosopher is identical with his weakness as a poet! both result in a want of energy, the lack of a vitality sufficient to balance his intellect:

To Coleridge there was as much difficulty in belief as in action, for belief is itself an action of the mind. He was always anxious to believe anything that would carry him beyond the limits of time and space, but it was not often that he could give more than a speculative assent to even the most improbable of creeds. Always seeking fixity, his mind was too fluid for any anchor to hold in it. He drifted from speculation to speculation, often seeming to forget his aim by the way, in almost the collector's delight over the curiosities he had found in passing.

It is the same want of fixity that prevents his settling down to poetry; he has no sooner conceived his ideas than he doubts their value, and it is only when Wordsworth is at hand to reassure him that

he really achieves anything, because his friend gives him the confidence which was lacking in himself:

Had Coleridge been able to live uninterruptedly in the company of the Wordsworths, even with the unsympathetic wife at home, the opium in the cupboard, and the *magnum opus* on the desk, I am convinced that we should have had for our reading to-day all those poems which went down with him into silence.

Mr Symons points out that the sub-conscious element plays a larger part in the poetry of Coleridge than in that of any other poet; his poems never seem to come by any intellectual process, neither by deliberate composition nor by conscious reflection; they do not arise from the waking consciousness as such, but seem to float from the background of the mind; his poems have always an affinity with the dream world, and some of the best are dreams pure and simple, such as *Kubla Khan*, of which Mr Symons says:

It has just enough meaning to give it bodily existence; otherwise it would be disembodied music. It seems to hover in the air, like one of the island enchantments of Prospero. It is music not made with hands, and the words seem, as they literally were, remembered.

It is the same element, as of a dream fully and completely accepted, which creates the charm of *The Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge can make us suspend our disbelief so willingly because to him the whole thing is real. He does not take it, of course, for the same kind of reality as that of the outer world; it belongs to a different sphere with different laws; but it has its own logic, and it is quite certainly existent: to Coleridge whatever affected his mind was real:

It is full of simple, daily emotion, transported, by an awful power of sight, to which the limits of reality are no barrier, into an unknown sea and air; it is realised throughout the whole of its ghastly and marvellous happenings; and there is in the narrative an ease, a buoyancy almost, which I can only compare with the music of Mozart, extracting its sweetness from the stuff of tragedy.

Mr Symons calls attention also to the peculiar love of colour which characterises all Coleridge's work, and to his intense delight in music.

The chapter on Byron is full of admirable things: Byron has been both so much over-praised and so unjustly depreciated, that it is a real relief to come upon someone who, like Mr Symons, can admire without idolatry, and acknowledge the poet's faults without representing him as a mere foil to Wordsworth or Shelley. He finds the keynote of Byron's life in his love of experience and sensation: Byron really saw life as a romantic adventure and his so-called 'pose,' which might indeed be a pose with another temperament, is with him perfectly sincere: 'he turned life, as it came to him, into an impossible kind of romance, invented by one who was romantic somewhat in the sense that a man becomes romantic when he loves...Convinced that "the great object of life is sensation—to feel that we exist, even though in pain," Byron was constantly satisfying himself of the latter part of his conviction.' Mr Symons admits that there is a great deal in Byron which

is merely oratorical, but thinks that, when the false glitter is removed, there still remains abundance of genuine metal. His romances have much 'pseudo-passion,' but also much real passion. The one thing that is always lacking in Byron is the sense of style, as really great poets possess it; he is too careless and impatient to attain perfection, and though he abounds in magnificent lines, he has no long passages, scarcely any stanzas which are truly perfect:

What is not there is precisely the magic which seems to make poetry its finer self, the perfume of the flower, that by which the flower is remembered, after its petals have dropped or withered.

It is not just to rank Byron as a mere actor; he may be that sometimes, but he is much more:

He is fundamentally sincere, which is the root of greatness; he has a firm hold on himself and on the world; he speaks to humanity in its own voice, heightened to a pitch which carries across Europe.

The secret of his great appeal to the average man lies in this fact—that with him as with the average man the world is overpoweringly real, is, indeed, the one thing that truly exists:

This quality of humanity was genius to him, and stood to him in the place of imagination. Whatever is best in his work is full of this kind of raw or naked humanity.

Shelley too hated custom and convention and the insular spirit of England, but it was not possible for him to lead the revolt against them half so effectively as Byron did, if only because they were so much less actual to him than to Byron, who was great enough to be profoundly discontented with the world, yet neither escaped from it, nor wished to escape; he loved life so dearly, that he wished to snatch and keep it as it slipped by:

To Byron life itself was imaginative, not the mere raw stuff out of which imagination could shape something quite different, something far more beautiful, but itself, its common hours, the places he passed on the way, a kind of poem in action. All his verse is an attempt to make his own poetry out of fragments of this great poem of life.

It was this keen sense of actuality which made Byron so eager for fame; being vividly conscious of the world he wished the world to be vividly conscious of him, and he succeeded, for he loomed with astonishing greatness in the mind of his age:

He could write of the Alps and fill the imagination of Europe with the mere fact of his presence there; adding history to Waterloo, because 'his tread was on an empire's dust,' when the history of that field had only just written itself.

Byron, maintains the author, is in many ways characteristically English; he has the English love of travel as Burton and Borrow had it: 'a world to roam through' is a necessity of his nature. So far as style is concerned, Byron, though he cannot rival other poets in purely poetic achievement, has a manner of his own in which he is unequalled—the colloquial. This is especially valuable to him in



his own sphere, as the man of the world; he is one of the few poets for whom society really exists, as human nature exists. His feeling for history is amazingly strong. 'Byron's thought...embraced Europe as another man's thought might have embraced the village from which he had risen.'

Notwithstanding all his great qualities the poet never achieved peace or tranquillity sufficient to possess his own soul, and the disturbance he created in others reacted injuriously upon himself:

How is content in life possible to those condemned to go about like magnets, attracting or repelling every animate thing, and tormented by the restlessness which their mere presence communicates to the air about them?

After his Byron Mr Symons' Shelley is disappointing. In his view the poet is, except in lyric, little better than Matthew Arnold's 'ineffectual angel.' He sees Shelley mainly as a visionary, a mystic unattached to earth, having no roots in reality. He surely fails to do justice to the fact that much of Shelley's work was produced by a very young man, and that it shows, even in a brief space, the most striking development in sanity and power of thought. We have only, for example, to compare the Shelley of *Queen Mab* with the Shelley of *Prometheus Unbound*, to see how far his mind had advanced in the interval. In the earlier poem he is an atheist of the most rampant and furious kind, who regards Christ as a mere imposter. In *Prometheus Unbound* Christ has become the supreme type of all human virtue, and the sight of his torture is the chief agony that the Titan has to endure. In the same way Shelley's philosophy shows an advance from mere Voltaireanism to Platonism, and from Platonism to a still wider synthesis; for in *The Triumph of Life* he represents Plato among those who, though dazzlingly great are still not the conquerors but the conquered of life. But this progressive advance in thought and sanity Mr Symons altogether neglects: he treats Shelley as if the poet were, from beginning to end, what another critic has called him, 'a footless bird of Paradise.' Occasionally too there are statements which seem inaccurate. Why, for instance, does Mr Symons say 'the daisy, which was the eye of day to Chaucer, is not visible as a speck in Shelley's wide landscape'? Surely the fact is that Shelley has written of the daisy almost as tenderly and even more beautifully than Chaucer himself:

Daisies, those pearl'd Arcturi of the earth,  
The constellated flower that never sets.

And there is another similar reference:

Where the melting hoar-frost wets  
The daisy-star that never sets.

This example is important, because Mr Symons takes it as typical of Shelley's whole method, and the deduction seems as misleading as the example.

Still there are many fine observations. We may quote this of *Epipsychidion* :

Just because it is without personal passion, because it is the worship of a shadow for a shadow, it has come to be this thing fearfully and wonderfully made, into which the mystical passion of Crashaw and the passionate casuistry of Donne seem to have passed as into a crucible,...and the draught is an elixir for all lovers.

Mr Symons also does full justice to Shelley's all-pervading grace of style :

Not only verse but poetry came to him so naturally that he could not keep it out, and the least fragment he wrote has poetry in it.

He praises the astonishing fineness of Shelley's technique, technique which seems an inspiration, it is so absolutely flawless. He says of the blank verse :

It has an illumined gravity, a shining crystal clearness, a luminous motion, with, in its ample tide, an 'ocean-like enchantment of strong sound' and a measure and order as of the paces of the boundless and cadenced sea.

And of the lyrics :

For spiritual energy the *Ode to the West Wind*, for untamable choric rapture the *Hymn to Pan*, for soft brilliance of colour and radiant light the *Lines written among the Euganean Hills*, are not less incomparable than the rarest of the songs ...in which the spirit of Fletcher seems returned to earth with a new magic from beyond the moon.

Like that on Shelley the essay on Keats suffers to some degree from the absence of any attempt to trace the development in the poet's mind and the gradual strengthening of his art, but there is much that is illuminating and suggestive. We may take, for instance, this passage :

All that swooning and trembling of his lovers, which English critics have found so unmanly, would at all events be very much at home in modern French poetry, where love is again, as it was to Catullus and to Propertius, a sickness, a poisoning or an exhausting madness. To find anything like the same frank subtlety of expression, we must, in English poetry, go back to the Elizabethan age, to which Keats so often comes as a kind of echo.

A great deal of Mr Symons' best work occurs in his studies of men who are not quite first rate such as Campbell, Moore and Landor. In Campbell he finds a great deal merely conventional and much that is quite *banal*; his one real passion was the passion for liberty; his love for his country was part of a wider human enthusiasm, and he was a patriot of all oppressed nationalities :

The dust from Kosciusko's grave, cast by a Polish patriot into the grave of Campbell in Westminster Abbey was a last appropriate homage to one who had always been 'the sanguine friend of freedom.'

The essay on Landor gives a keen and subtle analysis of that writer's genius—his classical aroma, his peculiar stateliness and charm—while freely admitting his limitations. Mr Symons traces both his qualities and his defects to his use of Latin as a poetic vehicle, and his



absorption of the Latin spirit; he unites 'whatever is characteristically English and whatever is characteristically Roman with the defects of every quality.' Landon's poems have virtues hardly found elsewhere in English, 'an exceptional, evasive, almost illegitimate charm'; but in attempting to make English do the work of Latin, he both strained its resources and neglected to avail himself of its true genius:

With a far less instinctive sense of the capacities of his own language than Herrick, Landon refused to admit that what might make a poem in Latin could fail to be a poem in English. He won over many secrets from that close language; but the ultimate secrets of his own language he never discovered.

The extracts given will be sufficient to show the value of the book; we need only add that something worthy of notice is to be found on almost every page.

L. WINSTANLEY.

ABERYSTWYTH.

*A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles.* Edited by SIR JAMES A. H. MURRAY. *Prophesy—Pyxis* (part of Vol. VII). Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1909. 4to. 204 pp.

The ultimate completion and success of this monumental work is now practically ensured. This 'treble section' completes Vol. vii (O—P), the whole of which has been edited by Sir James Murray himself. But this is not all; for we also have in hand the whole of the letter Q, a considerable portion of R, and the first section of S, for all of which Dr Craigie and Dr Bradley are responsible. The indefatigable editor of O and P is already beginning, in the most literal sense, to 'tackle' T, after some preliminary skirmishes with 'tabby,' 'taboo,' and 'tabor.'

Thus the portion already completed is more than three-fourths, and the remainder is well in hand and making good progress. The work stands in a very different position to that which it occupied in the early days which we can well remember, when the first considerable portion made its somewhat tardy appearance, extending to 352 pages, and labelled *A—Ant*. 'Read from *A* to *Ant*, thou sluggard; consider thy words, and be wise' was then a fitting comment.

It is a singular fact, only known to such as have had considerable lexicographical experience, that the difficulty of English words is influenced, to an appreciable extent, by the nature of the initial letter. Words beginning with the labial letters P, F, B are likely, upon the whole, to present peculiar difficulties; and, of all the letters in the alphabet, the worst to deal with is P. It contains words from a very large number of different languages, and but a comparatively small portion of these is of native origin. Further it contains, with the sole exception of S, a greater number of words than any other letter of the alphabet; even more than C, which in this respect comes near it. It is therefore a good thing that it has fallen to the lot of the original editor