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Poetry and Archaeology

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POETRY AND ARCHÆOLOGY

Undoubtedly archæology is a strange word for anyone to be using in connection with the poetry of men like Mr. Masefield or Mr. Gibson; and probably it were well to explain immediately what I mean in using it. Unless I am much mistaken, both archæology, in the ordinary sense of the word, and naturalism were born of that prolific mother of strange children, the Romantic Movement. And more than this, besides having the same mother the two are so remarkably alike as to make me suspect that they must be twins. For what is archæology, after all, but the attempt to picture the actual, every-day life of a people by means of palpable existing evidence? Idealist "dreams" are rigidly eschewed; and whether or not the result is one-sided and eminently unsatisfactory is a matter wholly beside the question. But what is naturalism, save a very similar effort at picturing in precisely the same way the life of present-day people? Naturalism pretends to scientific exactness, but is actually pseudo-scientific; and so is archæology all too often. Now it is plain to a great many people that what Mr. Masefield is giving us in his long narratives is naturalism in poetry. He is providing stores of material for future historians and archæologists, whether or not he is writing for other sections of posterity. In other words, it seems to me, Mr. Masefield, in pursuing the "archæological" trend in literature which was first made prominent by Flaubert and Zola and which has been carried on so well in the field of the English novel by Mr. George Moore, has done a very limited and very impermanent thing. He has been writing about the passing, ever-changing affairs of a particular class, more truly, perhaps, of a particular section of a particular class, and this with fundamental unimaginativeness.

To make my meaning clearer we need not just yet turn to either of the young men who most obviously are following at present, in this sense at least, the great tradition of English poetry, we may turn rather to a little poem written by Mr. Masefield himself some three or four years before he achieved anything like his present fame and popularity. This little intaglio—*Cargoes* it is called—cut with rare tact and finest skill,

has the right ring, and the contrast between it and the spirit behind *The Everlasting Mercy* or *The Widow in the Bye Street* is evident at a glance:

“Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
With a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

“Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,
Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,
With a cargo of diamonds,
Emeralds, amethysts,
Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.

“Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke-stack,
Butting through the channel in the mad March days,
With a cargo of Tyne coal,
Road-rails, pig-lead,
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.”

Now it is something of this kind, I protest, that we must look for if we are anxious to discover the truest poetry, and it is something of this kind, a quality of timelessness, which we do find to a certain degree in the work of at least two contemporary English poets, Mr. William H. Davies and Mr. D. H. Lawrence. It is significant that neither of them is very well-known, and that neither of them has as yet achieved the distinction of finding an American publisher for his verse.¹

Of course it may be desirable, but it certainly is not necessary, that a poet should have been an actual tramp at one time; nor is it any more necessary, though perhaps equally desirable, that he should have only one leg—the other being made out of wood, with an iron or rubber cap on its end, according to the owner's taste in the matter of conspicuousness. Yet to listen to some of the men who have written about Mr. Davies one is led to think that these two things are almost more important than his poetry. Indeed, it would appear as if these critics, in their boundless enthusiasm over Mr. Davies's experiences as a tramp and over his wooden leg, gave voice to their praise of his poems in a merely incidental way! It is the same story with Mr. John Helston, a more recent “discovery” of some London literary circle; to read

¹ Since this was written, however, one of our publishers has imported Mr. Lawrence's works *in toto*, his verse along with the rest.

about him you would suppose that the most fundamental circumstance concerning him was the fact that he has been a working mechanic. These little things are interesting, but after all they cannot be of essential importance, in either case. Of this personal side of Mr. Davies's life you will find out everything there is for you to know if you read his *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*; and if anyone is anxious to spend a wholly delightful afternoon and evening it would be hard to recommend to him a book more fascinating. There you will see pictured the life of a real, if most exceptional, tramp; you will learn how Mr. Davies spent a whole winter moving from one comfortable gaol in Michigan to another; you will discover his not at all flattering opinion of certain American laws; you will be told that the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad is the easiest one in our country for tramps to "beat";—and numberless other things which you may never have suspected. There also will you learn of Mr. Davies's first and most discouraging experiences as a beginning poet—and it is all told with a charming naïveté, with the curious directness and the semi-formality of one who is obviously not used to the English language considered as a written medium of expression. Compared with the body of the work its preface by Mr. Bernard Shaw, although done—to use his own words—"in his well-known manner," is very mild and uninteresting. Towards the end of the volume one learns that it was through Mr. Shaw that Mr. Davies finally achieved success in London; and he says of him that he is "a playwright, an Irishman, as to whose mental qualifications the world is divided, but whose heart is unquestionably great." This, about Mr. Shaw! Someone, Mr. Stephen Gwynn, I think, has remarked that it was probably in revenge for this judgment that Mr. Shaw gave the book its monstrously inappropriate title.

At first, I suspect, Mr. Davies's London friends gave him such generous and such high praise, at least in part, because he was something of a curiosity. They are always "discovering" odd things and people in London; and it is hard work keeping up with the kaleidoscopic waxing and waning of literary suns, or moons. I have mentioned Mr. John Helston, who only a few months ago "emerged" from the deep obscurity of London lower-class life, as a typical example of this process, and Mr. Rabindranath Tagore, an "oddity" of yet more recent date, may serve as another. Well, Mr. Davies first saw the light in much the

same manner; but he has done a curious and most exceptional thing; he has kept his light steadily shining now for something over six years, and at the end of that period his position is distinctly higher and more secure than ever. In this time he has published several small volumes of verse,¹ besides various poems that have appeared in magazines and that have not yet been collected. The tone of these volumes has remained throughout consistent; in the last as in the first there is the same naïve, fresh point of view, expressed in simple language that is perfectly appropriate; the same love for nature and comprehension of its powers for calming and satisfying the mind of man; the same delicate fancy playing on through his work, the same keen insight illuminating his little vignettes of life. By this it is clear that Mr. Davies has remained quite unspoiled by recognition and success. He has pursued his way simply and unaffectedly; indubitably and naturally, gratified over the pleasure he has been able to give others, but remaining himself unchanged and undesirous of change, contented with doing the best that in him lies in the manner native to himself. The only difference I detect in Mr. Davies's work, produced by the passage of time, is not one of kind, but one of quality, and one that we can all heartily approve of. Practice has given him an ever increasing sureness of touch in bodying forth his ideas, an increasing facility in the use of words, and a more stable control over the flights of his fancy.

Mr. Davies, as was said, concerns himself with things permanent rather than ephemeral in their nature, and so has placed himself in line with those who have contributed to the lasting store of English song. At present there is no indication that his place in that company could be other than a very minor one, but he has been seriously compared with such men as Herrick, and Blake, and Wordsworth. There are many scattered similarities, in turns of thought and speech, between him and Blake, but an actual comparison of the two is hard on Mr. Davies. There is lying before me a poem of the latter's very similar in subject to one of Blake's earliest pieces, and it is enlightening to consider them side by side. Could there be anything more lovely in its severe restraint and measured stateliness than Blake's brief invocation to the muses?

¹ The titles of Mr. Davies's collected verse are as follows: *The Soul's Destroyer and Other Poems*, *New Poems*, *Nature Poems and Others*, *Farewell to Poesy and other Pieces*, *Songs of Joy and Others*, *Foliage*.

“Whether on Ida’s shady brow,
Or in the chambers of the East,
The chambers of the sun, that now
From antient melody have ceas’d;

“Whether in Heav’n ye wander fair,
Or the green corners of the earth,
Or the blue regions of the air
Where the melodious winds have birth;

“Whether on chrystal rocks ye rove,
Beneath the bosom of the sea
Wand’ring in many a coral grove,
Fair Nine, forsaking Poetry!

“How have you left the antient love
That bards of old enjoy’d in you!
The languid strings do scarcely move!
The sound is forc’d, the notes are few!”

If now we glance at Mr. Davies’s *Farewell to Poesy* we see at once what a falling off is there, what serious lack of the things that go to make up the supreme beauty of Blake’s lines.

“Sweet Poesy, why art thou dumb!
I loved thee as my captive bird,
That sang me songs when spring was gone,
And birds of freedom were not heard;
Nor dreamt thou wouldst turn false and cold
When needed most, by men grown old.

“Sweet Poesy, why art thou dumb!
I fear thy singing days are done;
The poet in my soul is dying,
And every charm in life is gone;
In vain birds scold and flowers do plead—
The poet dies, his heart doth bleed.”

The comparison of Mr. Davies with Wordsworth is the most obvious one, for like Wordsworth he has concerned himself very largely with giving form to his conception of the helpfulness of nature in the spiritual life of man. Unfortunately this resemblance extends even to those poems of Wordsworth’s in which he descended swiftly and unconsciously to the merely humorous level. Certainly it may be contended that Mr. Davies’s understanding of nature and of country folk is not so full or so subtle as Wordsworth’s was; but his language is more homely, and while his skill in metre is not so great, his understanding is keen and very sound. The delicacy and beauty

of Mr. Davies's fancy, too, is a thing that cannot be overlooked by anyone familiar with his work. He says, of the kingfisher:

"It was the Rainbow gave thee birth,
And left thee all her lovely hues;
And, as her mother's name was Tears,
So runs it in thy blood to choose
For haunts the lonely pools, and keep
In company with trees that weep."

And the same quality is scarcely less evident in the following:

"As butterflies are but winged flowers,
Half sorry for their change, who fain,
So still and long they lie on leaves,
Would be thought flowers again—

"E'en so my thoughts, that should expand,
And grow to higher themes above,
Return like butterflies to lie
On the old things I love."

If now before we turn—and in appearance through what a wide distance the turn will take us!—to the poetry of Mr. D. H. Lawrence, we should try to sum up the peculiar quality that Mr. Davies's work is of, we might say simply that he is through innate tendency the naïve child of the English countryside, the delighted and delightful child of nature, suddenly grown articulate.

In Mr. Lawrence we find, and more indubitably than in Mr. Davies, the qualities that make for literary permanence. Mr. Davies is probably not known very widely in America, and the name of Mr. Lawrence must be even more unfamiliar to us. I fancy that this ratio will hold good for England, too, and that, wherever Mr. Lawrence is known, he is thought of as a novelist rather than as a poet. At the present time he has published four novels; all of them show real power, and give one good reason for holding forth high hopes of his future work. But it is to the poet, and not to the novelist, that I would here call attention. In the spring of 1913 Mr. Lawrence's first and only volume of poems, *Love Poems and Others*, was published, and its appearance caused no particular stir that I know of—though why it did not, save on the ground of a monumental irony, it is very difficult to guess.

George Meredith once, in writing about the poems of Mrs. Alice Meynell, remarked that "some of her lines have the living tremor in them." We can with perfect justice say the same thing of Mr. Lawrence. The red blood of life itself leaps through his poems; everlasting reality is there—not in any fantastic and ultimately impossible sense of the word, but in its true sense. Here is passion ennobled, not through any so-called transformation in which its real nature is lost, but through a vivid realisation of its uttermost meaning and significance. All this comes to Mr. Lawrence as if in a vision:

"The train beats frantic in haste, and struggles away
 From this ruddy terror of birth that has slid down
 From out of the loins of night to flame our way
 With fear; but God, I am glad, so glad that I drown
 My terror with joy of confirmation, for now
 Lies God all red before me, and I am glad . . .
 Yea like the fire that boils within this ball
 Of earth, and quickens all herself with flowers,
 God burns within the stiffened clay of us;
 And every flash of thought that we and ours
 Send up to heaven, and every movement, does
 Fly like a spark from this God-fire of passion;
 And pain of birth, and joy of the begetting,
 And sweat of labour, and the meanest fashion
 Of fretting or of gladness, but the jetting
 Of a trail of the great fire against the sky
 Where we can see it, a jet from the innermost fire:
 And even in the watery shells that lie
 Alive within the oozy under-mire,
 A grain of this same fire I can descry."

Like Mr. Davies—and yet in how vastly different a way!—Mr. Lawrence is concerned with things that are perennial, permanent, and perhaps more lasting than the rocks imbedded in the earth, with elemental things and their meaning for us. And I am of the opinion that Mr. Lawrence has already cut out for himself a place, albeit a small one, in the lasting body of English song. Fault may be found with the curious *heaviness* of his metres. But this is only a superficial difficulty; and on closer acquaintance these by no means dainty poems seem—in the words used by Fitzgerald of Shakespeare's sonnets—to be "all stuck about my heart, like the ballads that used to be on the walls of London." I think that probably this "heaviness"

comes, at least in part, from the fact that Mr. Lawrence has read Walt Whitman a great deal. My sense of what is due to patriotism, if nothing else, would forbid my deprecating this acquaintance with Whitman—so very obvious in such a poem as *Transformations*—and yet I could wish that more of Mr. Lawrence's verse moved with something of the quickness and ease of *Kisses in the Train*:

"I saw the midlands
 Revolve through her hair;
 The fields of autumn
 Stretching bare,
 And sheep on the pasture
 Tossed back in a scare. . . .

"And the world all whirling
 Around in joy
 Like the dance of a dervish
 Did destroy
 My sense—and my reason
 Spun like a toy.

"But firm at the centre
 My heart was found;
 Her own to my perfect
 Heart-beat bound,
 Like a magnet's keeper
 Closing the round."

Greatness in literature has frequently been defined as the expression of the thing that everybody has believed or felt. Now whether this is a true definition of literary greatness or not, at all events when one is compelled to use this phrase in connection with a piece of work it is pretty safe to say that the work in question carries with it a fair degree of universality, and hence of permanence. And that, as a last word, is precisely what I would claim for the poetry of both Mr. Davies and Mr. Lawrence. Their work may not be extremely important, but of its kind it is the truest poetry, it is genuine and full of life, not for a moment, not for a generation, but in a permanent and lasting way. This, too, is the reason why I have here considered them together, for by this characteristic they are marked off as being essentially different from the men of naturalistic tendencies who are at present to the fore, and as essentially different also from

other versifiers of the day who have set out with aims generally similar to their own but who have ended up in mere conventionalism or adherence to a lifeless tradition.

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