

A NEW AMERICAN POET

BY EDWARD GARNETT

A SHORT time ago I found on a London bookstall an odd number of *The Poetry Review*, with examples of and comments on 'Modern American Poets,' — examples which whetted my curiosity. But the few quotations given appeared to me literary bric-à-brac, the fruit of light *liaisons* between American dilettantism and European models. Such poetry, æsthetic or sentimental, — reflections of vagrant influences, lyrical embroideries in the latest designs, with little imaginative insight into life or nature, — abounds in every generation. If sufficiently bizarre its pretensions are cried up in small Bohemian coteries; if sufficiently orthodox in tone and form, it may impress itself on that public which reads poetry as it looks idly at pictures, with sentimental appetite or from a vague respect for 'culture.' Next I turned to some American magazines at hand, and was brought to a pause by discovering some interesting verse by modern American poets, especially by women whose sincerity in the expression of the inner life of love compared well with the ambitious flights of some of their rivals. I learned indeed from a magazine article that the 'New Poetry' was in process of being hatched out by the younger school; and, no doubt, further researches would have yielded a harvest, had not a literary friend chanced to place in my hands a slim green volume, *North of Boston*, by Robert Frost.¹ I read it, and reread it. It seemed to me

¹ *North of Boston*, by ROBERT FROST. London: David Nutt, 1914.

that this poet was destined to take a permanent place in American literature. I asked myself why this book was issued by an English and not by an American publisher. And to this question I have found no answer.² I may add here, in parenthesis, that I know nothing of Mr. Robert Frost save the three or four particulars I gleaned from the English friend who sent me *North of Boston*.

In an illuminating paper on recent American fiction which I hope by and by, with the editor's permission, to discuss along with Mr. Owen Wister's smashing onslaught in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Mr. W. D. Howells remarks, 'By test of the native touch we should not find genuine some of the American writers whom Mr. Garnett accounts so.' No doubt Mr. Howells's stricture is just, and certain American novelists — whom he does not however particularize — have been too affected in spirit by European models. Indeed Frank Norris's early work, *Vandover and the Brute*, is quite continental in tone; and it is arguable that his study of the French Naturalists may have shown beneficial results later, in the breadth of scheme and clarity of *The Pit*.

This point of 'the native touch' raises difficult questions, for the ferment of foreign influence has often marked the point of departure and rise of powerful native writers, such as

² I am told, after writing this, that an American edition has been published by Henry Holt & Co. — THE AUTHOR.

Pushkin in Russia and Fenimore Cooper in America. Again, if we consider the fiction of Poe and Herman Melville, would it not be difficult to assess their genuineness by any standard or measure of 'native touch'? But I take it that Mr. Howells would ban as 'not genuine' only those writers whose originality in vision, tone, and style has been patently marred or nullified by their surrender to exotic influences.

So complex may be the interlacing strains that blend in a writer's literary ancestry and determine his style, that the question first to ask seems to me whether a given author is a fresh creative force, an original voice in literature. Such an authentic original force to me speaks from *North of Boston*. Surely a genuine New England voice, whatever be its literary debt to old-world English ancestry. Originality, the point is there, — for we may note that originality of tone and vision is always the stumbling-block to the common taste when the latter is invited to readjust its accepted standards.

On opening *North of Boston* we see the first lines to be stamped with the magic of *style*, of a style that obeys its own laws of grace and beauty and inner harmony.

Something there is that does n't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. . . .

Note the clarity of the images, the firm outline. How delicately the unobtrusive opening suggests the countryman's contemplative pleasure in his fields and woods. It seems so very quiet, the modern reader may complain, forgetting Wordsworth; and indeed, had Wordsworth written these lines, I think they must have stood in every English

anthology. And when we turn the page, the second poem, 'The Death of the Hired Man,' proves that this American poet has arrived, not indeed to challenge the English poet's possession of his territory, but to show how untrodden, how limitless are the stretching adjacent lands. 'The Death of the Hired Man' is a dramatic dialogue between husband and wife, a dialogue characterized by an exquisite precision of psychological insight. I note that two college professors have lately been taking Mr. Ruckstuhl to task for a new definition of poetry. Let us fly all such debates, following Goethe, who, condemning the 'aesthete who labors to express the nature of poetry and of poets,' exclaimed, 'What do we want with so much definition? A lively feeling of situations and an aptitude to describe them makes the poet.' This definition, though it does not cover the whole ground, is apropos to our purpose.

Mr. Frost possesses a keen feeling for situation. And his fine, sure touch in clarifying our obscure instincts and clashing impulses, and in crystallizing them in sharp, precise images, — for that we cannot be too grateful. Observe the tense, simple dramatic action, foreshadowing conflict, in the opening lines of 'The Death of the Hired Man':

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. 'Silas is back.'
She pushed him outward with her through the
door
And shut it after her. 'Be kind,' she said.

'It's we who must be good to him now,' she urges. I wish I had space to quote the debate so simple in its homely force, so comprehending in its spiritual veracity; but I must restrict myself to these arresting lines and to the hushed, tragic close: —

Part of a moon was falling down the west
 Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
 Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw
 And spread her apron to it. She put out her
 hand

Among the harp-like morning-glory strings
 Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
 As if she played unheard the tenderness
 That wrought on him beside her in the night.
 'Warren,' she said, 'he has come home to die:
 You need n't be afraid he'll leave you this time.'

'Home,' he mocked gently.

'Yes, what else but home?
 It all depends on what you mean by home.
 Of course he's nothing to us, any more
 Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
 Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'

'Home is the place where, when you have to go
 there,
 They have to take you in.'

'I should have called it
 Something you somehow have n't to deserve.'

'You'll be surprised at him — how much he's
 broken,
 His working days are done; I'm sure of it.'

'I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'

'I have n't been. Go, look, see for yourself.
 But, Warren, please remember how it is:
 He's come to help you ditch the meadow.
 He has a plan. You must n't laugh at him.
 He may not speak of it, and then he may.
 I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
 Will hit or miss the moon.'

It hit the moon.
 Then there were three there making a dim row,
 The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned — too soon, it seemed to her,
 Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and
 waited.

'Warren,' she questioned.

'Dead,' was all he answered.

Yes, this is poetry, but of what order?
 the people may question, to whom for
 some reason poetry connotes the fervor
 of lyrical passion, the glow of romantic
 color, or the play of picturesque fancy.
 But it is precisely its quiet passion and

spiritual tenderness that betray this to
 be poetry of a rare order, 'the poetry of
 a true real natural vision of life,' which,
 as Goethe declared, 'demands descrip-
 tive power of the highest degree, ren-
 dering a poet's pictures so lifelike that
 they become actualities to every read-
 er.' One may indeed anticipate that
 the 'honorable minority' will appraise
 highly the spiritual beauty of the lines
 above quoted.

But what of his unconventional *genre*
 pictures, such as 'A Hundred Collars'?
 Is it necessary to carry the war against
 the enemy's cardboard fortresses of
 convention by using Goethe's further
 declaration:—

'At bottom no subject is unpoetical,
 if only the poet knows how to treat it
 aright.' The dictum is explicit: 'A
 true, real, natural vision of life . . . high
 descriptive power . . . pictures of life-
 like actuality . . . a lively feeling of
 situation' — if a poet possess these
 qualifications he may treat any theme
 or situation he pleases. Indeed, the
 more prosaic appears the vesture of ev-
 eryday life, the greater is the poet's tri-
 umph in seizing and representing the
 enduring human interest of its famil-
 iar features. In the characteristic fact,
 form, or feature the poet no less than
 the artist will discover essential lines
 and aspects of beauty. Nothing is
 barred to him, if he only have *vision*.
 Even the most eccentric divagations
 in human conduct can be exhibited in
 their true spiritual perspective by the
 psychologist of insight, as Browning
 repeatedly demonstrates. One sees no
 reason why Browning's 'Fra Lippo
 Lippi' with all its roughcast philo-
 sophic speculation should be 'poetry'
 and Mr. Frost's 'A Hundred Collars'
 should not; and indeed the purist must
 keep the gate closed on both or on
 neither. If I desired indeed to know
 whether a reader could really detect
 the genuine poet, when he appears

amid the crowd of *dilettanti*, I should ask his judgment on a typical unpromising passage in 'A Hundred Collars,' such as the following:—

'No room,' the night clerk said, 'Unless —'

Woodville's a place of shrieks and wandering lamps
And cars that shook and rattle — and *one* hotel.

'You say "unless."'

'Unless you would n't mind
Sharing a room with some one else.'

'Who is it?'

'A man.'

'So I should hope. What kind of man?'

'I know him; he's all right. A man's a man.
Separate beds of course you understand.'

The night clerk blinked his eyes and dared him on.

'Who's that man sleeping in the office chair?
Has he had the refusal of my chance?'

'He was afraid of being robbed or murdered.
What do you say?'

'I'll have to have a bed.'

The night clerk led him up three flights of stairs
And down a narrow passage full of doors,
At the last one of which he knocked and entered.

'Lafe, here's a fellow wants to share your room.'

'Show him this way. I'm not afraid of him.
I'm not so drunk I can't take care of myself.'

The night clerk clapped a bedstead on the foot.
'This will be yours. Good night,' he said, and
went.

The Doctor looked at Lafe and looked away.
A man? A brute. Naked above the waist,
He sat there creased and shining in the light,
Fumbling the buttons in a well-starched shirt.
'I'm moving into a size-larger shirt.
I've felt mean lately; mean's no name for it.
I've found just what the matter was to-night:
I've been a-choking like a nursery tree
When it outgrows the wire band of its name-tag.
I blamed it on the hot spell we've been having.
'Twas nothing but my foolish hanging back,
Not liking to own up I'd grown a size.
Number eighteen this is. What size do you wear?'

The Doctor caught his throat convulsively.
'Oh-ah-fourteen-fourteen.'

The whole colloquy between this tipsy provincial reporter, Lafayette, and the scared doctor, will, at the first blush, seem to be out of court to the ordinary citizen trained from childhood to recognize as 'poetical,' say Bryant's 'Thanatopsis.' The latter is a good example of 'the noble manner,' but the reader who enjoys it does not therefore turn away with a puzzled frown from Holmes's 'The Wonderful One-hoss Shay.'

But is Mr. Frost then a humorist? the reader may inquire, seeing a gleam of light. Humor has its place in his work; that is to say, our author's moods take their rise from his contemplative scrutiny of *character* in men and nature, and he responds equally to a tragic episode or a humorous situation. But, like creators greater in achievement, his humorous perception is interwoven with many other strands of apprehension, and in his *genre* pictures, sympathy blends with ironical appreciation of grave issues, to endow them with unique temperamental flavor. If one styled 'Mending Wall' and 'A Hundred Collars' idyls of New England life, the reader might remark sarcastically that they do not seem very idyllic; but idyls they are none the less, not in the corrupted sense of pseudo-Arcadian pastorals, but in the original meaning of 'little pictures.' One may contend that 'The Housekeeper' is cast in the same gossiping style as Theocritus's idyl, 'The Ladies of Syracuse,' with its prattle of provincial ladies over their household affairs and the crush in the Alexandrian streets at the Festival of Adonis. And one may wager that this famous poem shocked the academic taste of the day by its unconventionality, and would not indeed, please modern professors, were it not the work of a Greek poet who

lived three hundred years before Christ.

It is not indeed a bad precept for readers who wish to savor the distinctive quality of new original talents to judge them first by the *human interest* of what they present. Were this simple plan followed, a Browning or a Whitman would not be kept waiting so long in the chilling shadow of contemporary disapproval. Regard simply the people in Mr. Frost's dramatic dialogues, their motives and feelings, their intercourse and the clash of their outlooks, and note how these little canvases, painted with quiet, deep understanding of life's incongruous everyday web, begin to glow with subtle color. Observe how the author in 'A Servant to Servants,' picturing the native or local surroundings, makes the *essentials* live and speak in a woman's homely confession of her fear of madness.

But it is best to give an example of Mr. Frost's emotional force, and in quoting a passage from 'Home Burial' I say unhesitatingly that for tragic poignancy this piece stands by itself in American poetry. How dramatic is the action, in this moment of revelation of the tragic rift sundering man and wife!

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke,
Advancing toward her: 'What is it you see
From up there always — for I want to know.'
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull,
He said to gain time: 'What is it you see,'
Mounting until she cowered under him.
'I will find out now — you must tell me, dear.'
She, in her place, refused him any help
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he would n't see,
Blind creature; and a while he did n't see.
But at last he murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.'

'What is it — what?' she said.

'Just that I see.'

'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is.'

'The wonder is I did n't see at once.

I never noticed it from here before.

I must be wanted to it — that's the reason.

The little graveyard where my people are!

So small the window frames the whole of it.

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,

Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight.

On the sidehill. We have n't to mind those.

But I understand: it is not the stones,

But the child's mound —'

'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

He entreats his wife to let him into her grief, and not to carry it, this time, to some one else. He entreats her to tell him why the loss of her first child has bred in her such rankling bitterness toward him, and why every word of his about the dead child gives her such offense.

— 'And it's come to this,

A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'

'You can't because you don't know how.

If you had any feelings, you that dug

With your own hand — how could you? — his
little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,

Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

Leap up like that, like that, and land so lightly

And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

I thought, Who is that man? I did n't know you.

And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs

To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice

Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,

But I went near to see with my own eyes.

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes

Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave

And talk about your everyday concerns.

You had stood the spade up against the wall

Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.'

'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.

I'm cursed, God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'

'I can repeat the very words you were saying.

"Three foggy mornings and one rainy day

Will rot the best birch fence a man can build."

Think of it, talk like that at such a time!

What had how long it takes a birch to rot

To do with what was in the darkened parlor.

You *could* n't care! The nearest friends can go

With any one to death, comes so far short

They might as well not try to go at all.
 No, from the time when one is sick to death,
 One is alone, and he dies more alone.
 Friends make pretence of following to the grave,
 But before one is in it, their minds are turned
 And making the best of their way back to life
 And living people, and things they understand.
 But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
 If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't.'

Here is vision, bearing the flame of
 piercing feeling in the living word. How
 exquisitely the strain of the mother's
 anguish is felt in that naked image, —

'Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
 Leap up like that, like that, and land so lightly.'

Perhaps some readers, deceived by the
 supreme simplicity of this passage, may
 not see what art has inspired its perfect
 naturalness. It is indeed the perfection
 of poetic realism, both in observation
 and in deep insight into the heart. How
 well most of us know, after we have
 followed the funeral and stood by the
 grave-side of some man near to us, that
 baffled, uneasy self-questioning, 'Why
 do I feel so little? Is it possible I have
 no more sorrow or regret to feel at this
 death?' But what other poet has said
 this with such moving, exquisite felicity?

I have quoted 'Home Burial' partly
 from the belief that its dramatic inten-
 sity will best level any popular barrier
 to the recognition of its author's crea-
 tive originality. But one does not ex-
 pect that even a sensitive taste will re-
 spond so readily to the rare flavor of
 'The Mountain' as did the American
 people to Whittier's 'Snowbound,' fifty
 years back. The imagery of the Qua-
 ker poet's idyl, perfectly suited to its
 purpose of mirroring with faithful sin-
 cerity the wintry landscape and the
 pursuits and character of a New Eng-
 land farmer's family, is marked by no
 peculiar delicacy or originality of style.
 Mr. Frost, on the other hand, may dis-
 appoint readers who prefer grandeur
 and breadth of outline or magical depth
 of coloring to delicate atmospheric
 imagery.

But the attentive reader will soon
 discover that Mr. Frost's cunning im-
 pressionism produces a subtle cumu-
 lative effect, and that by his use of
 pauses, digressions, and the crafty en-
 visagement of his subject at fresh an-
 gles, he secures a pervading feeling of
 the mass and movement and elusive
 force of nature. He is a master of his
 exacting medium, blank verse, — a new
 master. The reader must pause and
 pause again before he can judge him, so
 unobtrusive and quiet are these 'ef-
 fects,' so subtle the appeal of the whole.
 One can, indeed, return to his poems
 again and again without exhausting
 their quiet imaginative spell. For in-
 stance, the reader will note how the
 feeling of the mountain's mighty bulk
 and hanging mass, its vast elbowing
 flanks, its watching domination of the
 near fields and scattered farmsteads,
 begins to grow upon him, till he too is
 possessed by the idea of exploring its
 high ravines, its fountain springs and
 granite terraces. One of the surest tests
 of fine art is whether our imagination
 harks back to it, fascinated in after con-
 templation, or whether our interest is
 suddenly exhausted both in it and the
 subject. And 'The Mountain' shows
 that the poet has known how to seize
 and present the mysterious force and
 essence of living nature.

In nearly all Mr. Frost's quiet
 dramatic dialogues, his record of the
 present passing scene suggests how
 much has gone before, how much
 these people have lived through, what
 a lengthy chain of feelings and motives
 and circumstances has shaped their
 actions and mental attitudes. Thus in
 'The Housekeeper,' his picture of the
 stout old woman sitting there in her
 chair, talking over Estelle, her grown-
 up daughter, who, weary of her anom-
 alous position in the household, has left
 John and gone off and married another
 man, carries with it a rich sensation of

the women's sharp criticism of a procrastinating obstinate man. John is too dense in his masculine way to know how much he owes to them. This psychological sketch in its sharp actuality is worthy of Sarah Orne Jewett.

But why put it in poetry and not in prose? the reader may hazard. Well, it comes with greater intensity in rhythm and is more heightened and concentrated in effect thereby. If the reader will examine 'A Servant to Servants,' he will recognize that this narrative of a woman's haunting fear that she has inherited the streak of madness in her family, would lose in distinction and clarity were it told in prose. Yet so extraordinarily close to normal everyday speech is it that I anticipate some academic person may test its metre with a metronome, and declare that the verse is often awkward in its scansion. No doubt. But so also is the blank verse of many a master hard to scan, if the academic footrule be not applied with a nice comprehension of where to give and when to take. In 'A Servant to Servants' the tragic effect of this overdriven woman's unburdening herself of her load of painful memories and gloomy forebodings is to my mind a rare artistic achievement, — one that graves itself on the memory.

And now that we have praised *North of Boston* so freely, shall we not make certain stiff, critical reservations? Doubtless one would do so were one not conscious that Mr. Frost's fellow poets, his deserving rivals, will relieve one of the task. May I say to them here that because I believe Mr. Frost in *North of Boston* has found a way for himself, so I believe their roads lie also open before them. These roads are infinite, and will surely yield, now or to-morrow, vital discoveries. A slight defect of Mr. Frost's subtle realistic method, and one does not wish to slur

it over, is that it is sometimes difficult to grasp all the implications and bearings of his situations. His language in 'The Self-seeker' is highly figurative, too figurative perhaps for poetry. Again in 'The Generations of Men,' his method as art seems to be both a little casual and long-winded. In several of his poems, his fineness of psychological truth is perhaps in excess of his poetic beauty, — an inevitable defect of cool, fearless realism. And the corollary criticism no doubt will be heard, that from the intensity with which he makes us realize things we should gain a little more pleasure. But here one may add that there is pleasure and pleasure, and that it seems remarkable that this New England poet, so absorbed by the psychological drama of people's temperaments and conduct, should preserve such pure outlines and clear objectivity of style.

Is his talent a pure product of New England soil? I take it that just as Hawthorne owed a debt to English influence, so Mr. Frost owes one also. But his 'native touch' is declared by the subtle blend of outspokenness and reticence, of brooding conscience and grave humor. Speaking under correction, it appears to me that his creative vision, springing from New England soil, and calmly handing on the best and oldest American tradition, may be a little at variance with the cosmopolitan clamor of New York. It would be quaint indeed if Americans who, according to their magazines, are opening their hospitable bosoms to Mr. Rabindranath Tagore's spiritual poems and dramas of Bengal life, should rest oblivious of their own countryman. To certain citizens Mr. Frost's poems of the life of inconspicuous, humble New England folk may seem unattractively homely in comparison with the Eastern poet's lofty, mystical dramas; but by American critics this view will doubtless be

characterized as a manifestation of American provincialism. The critics know that a poet who has no 'message' to deliver to the world, whose work is not only bare of prettiness and sentimentality but is isolated and unaffected by this or that 'movement,' is easily set aside. Nothing is easier, since his appeal is neither to the interests nor caprices of the market. Ours indeed is peculiarly the day when everything pure, shy, and independent in art seems at the mercy of those who beat the big drum and shout their wares

through the megaphone. And knowing this, the critic of conscience will take for his watchword *quality*.

'Mr. Frost is a true poet, but not a *poetical* poet,' remarked a listener to whom I read 'A Servant to Servants,' leaving me wondering whether his verdict inclined the scales definitely to praise or blame. Of poetical poets we have so many! of literary poets so many! of drawing-room poets so many! — of academic and dilettanti poets so many! of imitative poets so many! but of original poets how few!

A GROUP OF POEMS

BY ROBERT FROST

BIRCHES

WHEN I see birches bend to left and right
 Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
 I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
 But swinging does n't bend them down to stay.
 Ice-storms do that. Often you must have seen them
 Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
 After a rain. They click upon themselves
 As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
 As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
 Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
 Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust —
 Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
 You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
 They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load
 And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed

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