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AMERICAN POETRY COMES OF AGE

By
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I have discussed this article with two foreigners living in London. One, an American banker, was horrified. He warned me that if I wished to live here and succeed I must never attack the English in any way.

The other, a Canadian journalist, assured me that the Englishman loves to be attacked, because he subconsciously argues that his superiority has annoyed the antagonist. So, the more you insult him, the more flattered he feels.

I am inclined to agree with the Canadian that you English do not mind attack—but for a quite different reason. Long experience as a lawn tennis player has taught me that you possess the most splendid spirit of athletic sportsmanship in the world. When I took part in the Olympic Games in Athens, the British team were by far the best sportsmen in that athletic Babel, and it was thrilling to feel their influence leavening the international lump. We Americans are also good sportsmen. But we are second to you.

Now sportsmanship is a complex affair. It consists in (1) a passion for a fair field and no favour; (2) the grace of a good loser; (3) the grace of a good winner; (4) doggedness; and (5) team-work. And the greatest of these is the first.

Your athletes play so fairly and have such a sincere and generous regard for a sporting opponent, that I do not see how the literary men of the same nation can cherish any unsportsmanlike feelings of rancour for what they are about to read.

Is not ours an *entente* that exists on very hearty abuse of each other? I think that, unlike the *entente* with our Latin friends, wherein words must be delicately minced, we Anglo-Saxons can afford candour.

At times during the past decade I have thought of writing for some American review an article about British poetry.

It would be a peculiar sort of article. It would completely ignore the work of Masfield, Davies, Meredith, Dowson, Davidson, Binyon, Bridges, Brooke, Hardy, Newbolt, Hodgson, Kip-

ling, etc. It would, rather, after a few scathing words about Shakespeare and Milton, go out into the highways and hedges and, with diligent research, gather up the "sweet singers" of Basingstoke, Barnstaple, and Ballina, that my house might be full of straw dummies to knock down with loud coarse laughter, to the confusion of British poetry.

Of course, this sort of thing would not succeed in America. My fellow-citizens know and love your verse much too well for that. But, if I wrote it, I should be doing exactly what one of your well-known writers did to us nine years ago. In the November, 1913, number of *THE ENGLISH REVIEW*, Aleister Crowley wrote on Art in America.

His article was most readable. It bristles with wit and wisdom—and the wildest unsportsmanship. His survey of our graphic arts is short and simple. All he says of sculpture is: "The only American sculptor I know of is a Lithuanian living in Paris."

This is his idea of our painting: "After Whistler and Sargent, the former not even really American . . . there is literally nobody at all till we strike the geological stratum of Penrhyn Stanlaws (whose name is Adamson, and whose birthplace Dundee!) and Charles Dana Gibson, of whose parentage one neither knows nor wishes to know anything."

This conciseness of treatment leaves the more space for an elaborate consideration of our poetry. Mr. Crowley mentions fifty-three American poets, or alleged poets. Of these, only seven have ever been heard of by the average intelligent American poetry lover. The seven are: Whitman, Poe, Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant, Whittier, and Lowell.

Whitman he places highest. He calls him "a man whom I detest and despise," and wittily complains that "quotations from the catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores . . . make up three-quarters of his work." (We admit the catalogues, but deny the percentage.)

"I did well," writes Mr. Crowley, "to close my Whitman after a conscientious perusal, never to open it again, at least with the idea of obtaining anything of worth." After which he concludes: "Whitman is America . . . the spirit of the new continent made word."

This critic lumps Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier together as "barbers' assistants." James Russell Lowell's work he calls "altogether without merit. . . . His success is worth no more than that of a new kind of polecat might be." I think this may appeal to Americans as shedding a novel light upon the author of the Commemoration Ode.

Having disposed of these seven known poets, Mr. Crowley goes on to have a rollicking good time with the forty-six unknown straw dummies, knocking them slap-bang off their unsought pedestals with constantly renewed zest, quoting a ridiculous bit of doggerel here and there, and giving the impression to those unfamiliar with the subject that this is a conscientiously compiled *resume* of the chief American poets. It is, in fact, compiled with somewhat the same conscientious care that Mr. Crowley accords to our sculpture when he disregards MacMonnies, French, Barnard, the Borglums, and St. Gaudens, to concentrate on "a Lithuanian living in Paris."

This article of Mr. Crowley's followed other articles in your reviews which had dealt with our poetry in a somewhat similar spirit.

In December, 1911, Mr. Filson Young went even further than Mr. Crowley, and denied that we possessed any literature at all. Turning his back resolutely on all compromise, he refused to recognize even Whitman, Poe and Co. In this instance again The English Review served as a vehicle for international candour.

"The time of literature in America is not yet," wrote Mr. Young; "but though the Americans are not a nation of writers, they are in the state which necessarily precedes that—they are a nation of readers. England still produces literature, but has ceased to read it; France has almost ceased to produce it. Surely in time this great nation of readers need not fear that they will not produce writers."

To stimuli like these which I have quoted, we Americans readily reacted. They hurt. Not because we have ever been over-sensitive to fair criticisms. But these were not fair. We felt that, in this respect, the greatest sportsmen in the world had failed in sportsmanship. These blows were more than a shade below the belt.

However, we tried to minimize the incident. We told ourselves that literary Britain as a whole did not think quite as badly of us as all that. And everything would have been promptly forgotten if you had not begun the practice of sending literary missionaries ever thicker and faster to our benighted land, to show us what real poetry was.

These celebrated authors, whose books we had long known and appreciated, approached us in somewhat the same spirit (though with perhaps different motives) as that in which the traditional foreign missionary used to approach the traditional incumbent of "Greenland's icy mountains."

Shall we whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,—
Shall we to men benighted
The lamp of truth deny?

they seemed to ask themselves. The answer was invariably in the negative

Still true to the good old-fashioned missionary custom, your apostles did not pay us the compliment of inquiring what was this mistaken poetic religion of ours from whose errors they were to convert us. With certain delightful exceptions (notable John Masefield, John Drinkwater, Laurence Housman, and Laurence Binyon), they were so preoccupied with real poetry that they never had occasion to bother with our alleged verse. They may have read Mr. Crowley and Mr. Young and felt further research useless.

But instead of a tactful reticence about this fact when they rose to address us, they usually screwed in a mental monocle and declared that they knew little or nothing about our own poetry, but they would now tell us about Poetry.

Of course, it is undeniable that W. B. Yeats, in addressing the Poetry Society of America, mentioned by name four American poets. But three of the names were new to us, and sounded as though they had been selected from Mr. Crowley's forty-six immortals. And the fourth was that naughty boy of American literature, Ezra Pound, who represents to us our own loftiest poetic achievement—about as accurately as a scarlet flannel petticoat represents it to an enthusiastic bull.



The other day I saw a sight which made me hope that John Bull is ready to recognize his son's majority. In walking past your National Gallery I noticed that a bronze monument had recently been erected on the otherwise empty grounds before that beloved institution.

Looking more closely, I discovered, to my stupefaction, that this sole occupant of the Nation Gallery's front yard was an American! There stood George Washington, the man who took your colonies from you, within two stone's throws of that other George, his royal antagonist.

How stunning of you! You have made one of the most superbly sportsmanlike gestures that one nation has ever made to another.

I think it means that you realise your son has matured and that you are glad of it. I think that, in placing the maker of America before your artistic pantheon, you implicitly recognize the coming of age of our national arts.

But if I am too optimistic about this, and you have placed Washington before the National Gallery merely because that was the one site in London still unoccupied by monumental sculpture, allow us to suggest that you offer Messrs. Young and Crowley a year's course in sportsmanship at Queen's; and conscript your anthologists into football teams; and pluck the monocles from the minds of your next batch of poetic missionaries before they embark for the icy mountains of America with a fresh consignment of "wisdom from on high."