



BOOKS



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Alfred Noyes and the Poetry of Youth

A Survey by CHRISTIAN GAUSS,
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WATCHERS OF THE SKY. By Alfred Noyes. Frederick A. Stokes Company.

IN this new volume, "Watchers of the Sky," by Alfred Noyes, I am reminded how rapidly we pass into the past. Ever since he first delighted us with his adventurous, daring and defiant "Drake" and those sumptuous and richly lilted lyrics like "Come Down to Kew in Lilac Time" he has been to us not a poet for youth but a poet of youth.

This quality of youth in poetry is far rarer than is generally believed, and it is a quality which Mr. Noyes possesses in abundant measure, particularly when we compare him to the proudly proclaimed younger poets. Indeed, I am very frequently inclined to believe that the so-called "younger poets" as poets are not young at all, that whatever other qualities they may have this one they have not. None of our contemporary poets, for instance, is young in the carefree, rollicking fashion in which Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman were young in the "Songs from Vagabondia" thirty years ago. And yet Taine has said in his discussion of Musset that youth is the greatest gift which a poet can bring to an old civilization.

I do not mean to imply that this is the greatest quality of poetry by any means, and I am well aware that there are great poetic ages in which the spirit of youth is entirely wanting. There is little of it in the age of Pericles; there is almost none in the great French century of Louis XVI. Boileau and Racine never wrote a line of it, nor did Lafontaine, even when he devised his Fables supposedly for children. It is in the age of Pope and Dryden, Shelley, who fell upon the thorns of life and bled, was never really young. Byron put but little of it into his verse though his letters are full of it. Wordsworth left us almost no record of that blissful time in his own life which he reports to us as having been "very Heaven." Indeed, above many ages in poetry we might write as epigraph:

That time of year thou mayest
in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none,
or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake
against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late
the sweet birds sang.

II.

There are, however, individual poets who are richly endowed with this quality. Anacreon wrote the poetry of youth until past 80. Sappho wrote it, and so did Catullus. So did the unknown author of "Aucassin and Nicolette," and in certain ages, such as the "spacious time of great Elizabeth" and the heyday of the French Romantics, we find it quite generally.

I am sure that my younger friends like Edmund Wilson, Jr., John Peale Bishop and Scott Fitzgerald would tell me that the new school is bringing back the spirit of youth into poetry. I confess I cannot find it except in an occasional bird song of the late Francis Ledwidge and now and then hiding coyly and shyly behind certain of the magical verses of Walter de la Mare. Strangely enough, these are not leaders in the movement, and I am forced again to wonder whether the younger poets give us the poetry of youth at all and whether in their haste to rejuvenate poetry they have not forgotten to introduce that rather capital quality the spirit of youth itself. Where is the spirit of youth in Amy Lowell or in that ablest and most

conscientious of our American poets, Robert Frost?

Neither can I find it in that group of English poets, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves or D. H. Lawrence. Instead of genuine enthusiasm and joyous acceptance of life they give us contentiousness and animalism. I regret to find from my own experience that one can be contentious at any age, and as for the work of Mr. Lawrence is often so crammed that there is room for almost nothing else, I would remind the reader that of this quality or malady, as you please, Baron Hulot, an old man, died long ago in Balzac's "Cousine Bette," and even much longer ago Dante wrote a little volume, "The New Life," instinct with the spirit of youth in which you will look in vain for any touch of animalism.

The spirit of youth may express itself in many forms and in poetry of greater or less quality, and Mr. Noyes might very well resent our trying to push him into the Pantheon on this count or on this count alone. He is certainly not Keats nor the youthful Morris nor Swinburne, but in this respect he has a quality common to these three and he stands somewhere in their line. I mean to imply for the present only that Mr. Noyes has behind him a tradition of richness, of exuberance, of unslackening enthusiasm, and that these are qualities of youth and qualities sufficiently rare in poetry to be worthy of remark.

III.

Indeed, so far as this enthusiasm and joyous acceptance of life go, I find on scanning the roster of contemporary poets that they are exemplified particularly in the work of Vachel Lindsay and Alfred Noyes. Together, if they will allow me to say so, they make a jocund company, and I do not find it strange, disparate as they are in technique and substance, that each should so fully appreciate the work of the other.

So, after a long sweep, I am back again with Alfred Noyes, and if I was reminded how rapidly we pass into the past, it was because as I

reached for the word "youth" I suddenly recalled that Alfred Noyes is no longer very young. He is, to be sure, far from old, and this later work shows that he has not yet

cause he has renewed his inspiration.

In the "Watchers of the Sky" he is giving us another epic, another story of hardship and heroism and devotion. In this case, however, it is not, like "Drake," a story of devotion to England and a celebration of the hardy triumphs of the voyagers. The discoverers who are here sung—for Alfred Noyes cannot help singing—are not the discoverers of islands and continents but of stars and planets and suns. His theme is one which has long awaited its poet and it would almost seem as if he had picked up the gauntlet cast down by Andre Chénier in his "Invention" where he foretold that the modern singers should and would some day celebrate the discoveries of Galileo and Kepler and the makers of modern science, just as Virgil in his time had celebrated the discovery of Rome.

This is precisely what Noyes has done, and he has given his work unity and intensity of interest by treating in sequence the astronomers since the days of Copernicus and their struggles to give us a new heaven and a new earth. The theme was full of pitfalls, and artist that he is Alfred Noyes has avoided them. Knowing that poetry is not sincere and that it must deal with the human and the concrete, he chooses as his subject not so much astronomy as a line of astronomers who pass the torch from hand to hand, shedding about them as they go an ever widening circle of light. His theme, in short, is the heroism of the scientists. To treat it he has selected the central figures in this illustrious line of watchers of the skies and in each case deals with some dramatic and intensely human incident or incidents in their battling against ignorance and superstition. He begins with Copernicus on his deathbed waiting for his book, that record of a life's work which had been so marred and censored that his wife and friends dared not show it to him ere he closed his eyes forever. This is followed by the moving story of the turbulent Dane,

Tycho Brahe, with his rise to fame and later fall into disgrace. Then comes Kepler, to whom Brahe turned over his observations on a thousand stars, and the tragedy of Kepler's exile. Then Galileo and his trial and renunciation and tardy triumph through John Milton. Newton and the Herschels follow down to the discovery by Adams and Le Verrier of the planet Neptune through computations based on Newton's laws. With this complete unfolding of the story of our planetary system the volume closes, though we understand that it is to be but the first of a series of three which will deal with the triumphs of modern science in general.

IV.

The volume is written in blank verse, the fluent, accomplished, musical verse of Mr. Noyes, which seems spontaneously to break into the lyrics with which it is interspersed. He knows how to tell his story and does not lose himself, as Swinburne did, in a maze of glimmering words. If any fault is to be found with his narrative method it will probably be that scientists and perhaps some others will feel that in order to give his theme human interest he has here and there allowed himself to overromance his material.

The verse itself is in the main traditional English blank verse, though the poet does not fear to give us the twelve or thirteen syllable line with five beats, as in the following passage:

"Jeppe raised his matted head, with
a chuckle of glee,
Quiet as the gurgle of joy in a dark
rockpool
When the first ripple and wash of
the first springtide
Flows bubbling under the dry sun-
blackened fringe
Of seaweed. . . ."

In the main he believes, as he has Kepler tell Sir Henry Wotton:
"For even in verse half of the joy,
I think,
Is just to pass the torch from hand
to hand
An undimmed splendor."

Into such lines he packs his rich, apt and telling imagery as when Swift writes of a probable attack upon Newton's character by Voltaire:

"Think of him
As of a viper writhing at the base
Of some great statue. Let the veno-
mous tongue
Flicker against the marble as it may,
It cannot wound it."

Of all the chapters or cantos the most moving is that on Tycho Brahe, perhaps, since in his wild and romantic story Mr. Noyes found matter made to his hand. Of Tycho's duel, which left his face marred for life so that he was later to wear a mask of gold, he tells us:

"They fought, at midnight, in a
wood, with swords,
And not a spark of light but those
that leapt
Blue from the clashing blades.
Tycho had lost
His moon and stars awhile, almost
his life:
For, in one furious bout, his ene-
my's blade
Dashed like a scribble of lightning
into the face
Of Tycho Brahe, and left him splut-
tering blood,
Groping through that dark wood
with outstretched hands
To fall in a death-black swoon."

Such extracts convey so fair an idea of Mr. Noyes's quality that further discussion is unnecessary, though I exclude with regret certain songs, particularly the song of Jeppe the dwarf, in which we have not

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Alfred Noyes.

closed the book of life. His new volume indicates that he has merely begun to read in another chapter and if he has changed it is only be-

his wife and friends dared not show it to him ere he closed his eyes forever. This is followed by the moving story of the turbulent Dane,

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