

NEAR POETRY

By Aleister Crowley

Thoughts on Blank Verse with Special Reference to Mr. Robert Frost

Mr. Robert Frost, in his "Revelation," writes: "But, oh, the agitated heart, Till some one find us really out." Mr. Frost need not be agitated any longer.

In this country nobody seems to know what poetry is—the expression of thought in musical language. Some understand it so little that they do not even try to insert wither essential; they find it easier merely to advertise their "poetry!" The level of poetry in these States is that of a children's school; backward children at that. There is a juxtaposition of words without idea or rhythm. (The truth is, of course, that the ideas are too profound and the rhythms too subtle for poor lovers of Sophocles and Horace and Shakespeare and Keats to perceive their excellence.) But some few still try to imitate Tennyson and other metrical persons. Mr. Robert Frost is one of them. He is ambitious, too, though perhaps he know it not, for he tries to write blank verse.

Blank verse is the hardest of all metrical forms, because it is the easiest. One can easily train oneself to talk blank verse; after a week it comes as naturally as prose. But to write good blank verse is so difficult that there are barely half a dozen writers who have ever achieved a sustained passage. The evenness of the measure deadens its glow. One must pack every line with flaming images, unexpected metaphors, tremendous ideas, or the metre pulls the poet down to the level of—bad prose.

Narrative in blank verse is practically impossible. Even Shakespeare, for the most part, exchanges Pegasus for a wooden horse, when he attempts it; he excels only in dramatic monologue. Milton succeeded in the battle-scene in "Paradise Lost," and here and there in "Comus"; most of the rest is as dull as a Scotch sermon. Shelley has a few fine passages in "Prometheus Unbound" and "The Cenci." Keats was the most successful of all; his "Hyperion" is the greatest blank verse in the language. Tennyson never wrote a dozen good lines of it; Swinburne has only one excellent passage, the description of the hunt in "Atalanta."

We must therefore praise Mr. Robert Frost with sound of sackbut, pshawm, dulcimer and all kinds of musick; he is evidently Browning's hero, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp! . . . This high man, aiming at a million."

Only Browning's man missed a unit—and Mr. Frost missed the whole show. His thought is the most wooden commonplace. Perhaps he knows it, and his unerring sense of harmony has induced him to fit the words accordingly:

"I believe
She does look like you. Stay the way you are,
The nose is just the same, and so's the chin—
Making allowance, making due allowance."

"You poor dear, great, great, great, great Granny!"

Here we agree.
One need not quote continuously; it is all alike. Sometimes it doesn't even scan:

"He appeared to forget to keep his hold,
But advanced with her as she crossed the grass."

"Who's we?—some stockholders in Boston?
I'll go outdoors, by gad, and won't come back."

(Mt own feeling, quite, just now. But my Editor, whom my respect for the dead will not permit me to compare to Nero, Attila and Torquemada, insists on my wading steadily through this stuff with the view of finding a tolerable passage, if there be one. I think I will try to fool him.)

"You riddle with your genealogy.
Like a Viola (Viola!). I don't follow you."

"I only mean my mother was a Stark
Several times over, and by marrying father
No more than brought us back into the name."

"One ought not to be thrown into confusion
By a plain statement of relationship."

In these burning words—so simple, yet so eloquent—we have, crystallized yet incandescent, the glowing romance of centuries. This passionate drama of incest . . .

"John's a bad farmer. I'm not blaming him.
Take it year in, year out, he doesn't make much.
We came here for a home for me, you know,
Estelle to do the housework for the board
Of both of us. But look how it turns out."

The epic of the corn! Is there anything like this in Virgil's "Georgics"? Could Milton have written these tremendous, these tragic lines? Could Shelley have thrilled us thus? Coleridge? Poe? Shakespeare? I believe not. Browning sometimes nodded; but he would have done better than this under chloroform:

"It's not that Len didn't want the best for me.
It was his plan our moving over in
Beside the lake from where that day I showed you
We used to live—ten miles from anywhere.
We didn't change without some sacrifice,
But Len went at it to make up the loss."

Here the Editor looks over my shoulder.
"Can you find *nothing* in it, dear man? A critic should be a star-finder, not a fault-finder," says he.

Yes! here's the autobiography of Mr. Frost's "art"—splendidly done, in two lines and a half:

"Try speaking. Say 'Hello!' " "Hello. Hello."
"What do you hear? "I hear an empty room—
You know—it sounds that way."

[Next month we propose to deal with Mr. G. Santayanna.—Ed.]