Poetry, An Overview: 1890s-1920s (review)

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REVIEWS

1. Poetry, An Overview: 1890s-1920s


The "high modernist mode" consists of the poetry of its pioneers: Pound, Eliot, and Yeats, with lesser lights thrown upon that of Stevens, Williams, and Marianne Moore. Perkins is a faithful guide through the mountains and valleys of verse in English from the 1890s to the 1920s. He alerts us that another volume, bringing us to the later twentieth century, will complete his history. Anyone interested in poetry during this era can not afford to bypass this account.

Addressing British and American poetic developments in our period, Perkins provides a more coherent survey than is available in works studying just one side of the coin; we sense no fracturing of his historian's sensibility, or of our own, when he steers us through the literary seas. After all, Frost got his start as a major poet while he was in England and associated with Edward Thomas. Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, T. S. Eliot, as well as numerous smaller fry, provide examples of Anglo-American literary bonds. We learn in a sentence, too, that the influence of Christina Rossetti and A. E. Housman even found their way into Sara Teasdale's verse. World War I Poetry, Georgian material, Imagism, Vorticism, and Futurism involve participants (often in hostile camps) on both sides of the ocean, and Perkins coordinates all sides into his chronology.

The twenty-three chapters are portioned into four large topics: "Poetry around the Turn of the Century," "Poetry in Rapport with a Public," "Popular Modernism," and "The Beginnings of the High Modernist Mode." Apart from those poets named above, Hardy and Frost alone are awarded separate chapters, which choice reveals Perkins's ideas about who's who among poets of the transition era and beyond. The format of the book is such that we receive first an illuminating laying of the ground; then move from this general backdrop into closeups of the versifiers representing its tendencies. I say "versifiers" not to demean any of the individual poets already listed, but to indicate that Perkins's nets bring in catches great and small.

Not only does this literary historian bring us both great and small, he gives us interesting reading about everyone. The milieu-life-and-works-with-criticism method is just right. Unlike many older literary histories, this one rides smoothly between factuality and interpretation. Instead of a grocery-list format, we encounter material that draws us back when we must intermittently put away the book. For example, Perkins notes A. E. Housman's balladry and the music-hall features in the poems, but eschews his famous "pessimism," surely a surprise for those
quick to damn and dismiss the professor-poet, but soundly conceived in the chronicler's mind.

Furthermore, we discern additional pluses in the way of information that all too often lurks too dimly in the background of courses in "modern" literature. Of course we recognize Pound's affinities with Browning, but how about those with Rossetti, Swinburne, Symons, McLeod and Dowson? And when were we last told that his first four books of poems differ little from those of a "typical Edwardian poet?" Likewise with T. S. Eliot. Who remembers instantly that he is very beholden to many of those Victorians whom, we might believe, he affected to despise, nay, that he also once taught Victorian Literature (in 1917)? Like much verse from the 90s, The Waste Land has as its core a vision of urban fantastical desolation and sterility. The ironies and other fantasticals that pepper his poems may descend from late Victorian and Edwardian humor, Perkins informs us, and it would be a rare reader who might think of Alice, the nonsense of Lear, or the comedy of Calverley as team mates, I'll warrant. All this, and much more, unfolds with convincing authority.

With Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Yeats, and Auden riding the range in courses for our times, it is refreshing to be reminded that writers of the 90s actually began "modern poetry." They also carry along the legacy from earlier Romanticism, which persists to the present. The generation of the 90s turned from the poet as seer or sage to emphasize impersonality of the poet and art for art's sake. As Perkins views the situation, the late nineteenth century remained essentially an age of prose fiction until forces were marshalled to create a poetic renaissance with many branches growing quickly and unequally. The Celtic Twilight, the Georgian impulse, Imagism (an all of its cousin isms), and Regionalism are but the cream of this crop.

Two names customarily associated with English literature in transition crop up here more often than others. That is paying respects once more to those poets mentioned in the first paragraph, Hardy and A. E. Housman receive their due, both as to their merits and defects. Although we already have a book assessing Hardy's importance to subsequent poetry in English, we discover new insights here, particularly with respect to his impact upon D. H. Lawrence. Like Hardy, Housman's bleak themes simultaneously attract readers and repel critics. He unites the classical and modern worlds by means of his simplicity in form throwing into greater relief his torment in facing a complicated, incoherent contemporary world. Balladry and the Bible reinforce the medium and the message in Housman, and Perkins detects his hovering near circumstances not hitherto attended by historians of English poetry.

Nobody who pursues the paths of poetry in our century should neglect Perkins's book. His labor is evident, though not tedious. His vision is balanced, and his style is compelling. All deftly mingle for our benefit.

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