CHAPTER XXXIII

ROBERT BRIDGES

THIS poet, one of the greatest of the English minor poets of our time, and represented in literature by a very considerable bulk of work, happens to be one of the least known. He was never popular; and even to-day, when recognition is coming to him slowly, almost as slowly as it came to George Meredith, he is chiefly read by the cultivated classes. There are several reasons for this. One is that he is altogether an old-fashioned poet, writing with the feeling of the eighteenth rather than of the nineteenth century, so that persons in search of novelty are not likely to look at him. Then again he is not a thinker, except at the rarest moments, not touched at all by the scientific ideas of the nineteenth century. For that reason a great many people, accustomed to look for philosophy in poetry, do not care about his verse. I must confess that I myself should not have read him, had it not been for a beautiful criticism of his work published some five years ago. That tempted me to study him, with pleasant results. But I then found a third reason for his unpopularity — want of passion. When everything else is missing that attracts intellectual attention to a poet, everything strange, novel, and philosophical, he may still become popular if he has strong emotion, deep feeling. But Robert Bridges has neither. He is somewhat cool, even when he is not cold; his colours are never strong, though they are always natural; and there is something faint about his music that makes you think of the music of insects, of night crickets or locusts. You may therefore begin to wonder that I should speak about him at all. If

a poet has no philosophy, no originality, and no passion, what can there be in him? Well, a great deal. It is not necessary to be original in order to be a poet; it is only necessary to say old things somewhat better than they have been said before. Such a non-original poet of excellence may be a great lover of nature; for nature has been described in a million ways, and we are not tired of the descriptions. Again, the feeling need not be very strong; it is not strong in Wordsworth, except at moments. I think that the charm of Robert Bridges, who is especially a nature-poet, lies in his love of quiet effects, pale colours, small soft sounds, all the dreaminess and all the gentleness of still and beautiful days. Some of us like strong sounds, blazing colours, heavy scents of flowers and fruits; but some of us do not —we prefer rest and coolness and quiet tones. And I think that to Japanese feeling Robert Bridges ought to make an appeal. Much of his work makes me think of the old Japanese colour-prints of spring, summer, autumn, and winter landscapes. He is particularly fond of painting these; perhaps half of his poetry, certainly a third of it, deals with descriptions of the seasons. There is nothing tropical in these descriptions, because they are true to English landscape, the only landscape that he knows well. Now there is a good deal in English landscape, in the colours of the English seasons, that resembles what is familiar to us in the aspects of Japanese nature.

I cannot tell you very much about the poet himself; he has left his personality out of the reach of public curiosity. I can only tell you that he was born in 1844 and that he is a country doctor, which is very interesting, for it is not often that a man can follow the busy duties of a country physician and find time to make poetry. But Dr. Bridges has been able to make two volumes of poetry which take very high rank; and a whole school of minor poets has been classed under the head of "Robert Bridges and his followers" in the new Encyclopedia of English poets.

I do not intend at once to tire you by quoting this

poet's descriptions of the seasons; I only want to interest you in him, and if I can do that, you will be apt to read these descriptions for yourselves. I am going to pick out bits, here and there, which seem to me beautiful in themselves, independently of their subjects. Indeed, I think this is the way that Robert Bridges wants us to read him. At the beginning of Book IV of the "Shorter Poems" (you will be interested to know that most of his poems have no titles), he himself tells us what his whole purpose is, in these pretty stanzas:

I love all beauteous things,
  I seek and adore them;
God hath no better praise,
And man in his hasty days
  Is honoured for them.

I too will something make
  And joy in the making;
Altho' to-morrow it seem
Like the empty words of a dream
  Remembered on waking.

With this hint I have no hesitation in beginning this lecture on Robert Bridges by picking out what seems to me almost the only philosophical poem in the whole of his work. The philosophy is not very deep, but the poem is haunting.

ΕΡΩΣ

Why hast thou nothing in thy face?
Thou idol of the human race,
Thou tyrant of the human heart,
The flower of lovely youth that art;
Yea, and that standest in thy youth
An image of eternal Truth,
With thy exuberant flesh so fair,
That only Pheidias might compare,
Ere from his chaste marmoreal form

Time had decayed the colours warm;
Like to his gods in thy proud dress
Thy starry sheen of nakedness.

Surely thy body is thy mind,
For in thy face is nought to find,
Only thy soft unchristen'd smile,
That shadows neither love nor guile,
But shameless will and power immense,
In secret sensuous innocence.

O king of joy, what is thy thought?
I dream thou knowest it is nought,
And wouldst in darkness come, but thou
Makest the light where'er thou go.
Ah yet no victim of thy grace,
None who e'er long'd for thy embrace,
Hath cared to look upon thy face.

The divinity here described is not the infant but the more mature form of the god of Love, Eros (from whose name is derived the adjective "erotic," used in such terms as "erotic poetry"). This Eros was represented as a beautiful naked boy about twelve or thirteen years old. Several statues of him are among the most beautiful works of Greek art. It is one of these statues that the poet refers to. And you must understand his poem, first of all, as treating of physical love, physical passion, as distinguished from love which belongs rather to the mind and heart and which is alone real and enduring. There is always a certain amount of delusion in physical attraction, in mere bodily beauty; but about the deeper love, which is perfect friendship between the sexes, there is no delusion, and it only grows with time. Now the god Eros represented only the power of physical passion, the charm of youth. Looking at the face of the beautiful statue, the poet is startled by something which has been from ancient times noticed by all critics of Greek art, but which appears to him strange in another way — there is no expression in that face. It is

beautiful, but it is also impersonal. So the faces of all the Greek gods were impersonal; they represented ideals, not realities. They were moved neither by deep love nor by deep hate—not at least in the conception of the artist and sculptor. They were above humanity, above affection, therefore above pity. Here it is worth while to remark the contrast between the highest Eastern ideals in sculpture and the highest Western ideals. In the art of the Far East the Buddha is also impersonal; he smiles, but the smile is of infinite pity, compassion, tenderness. He represents a supreme ideal of virtue. Nevertheless he is, though impersonal, warmly human for this very reason. The more beautiful Greek divinity smiles deliciously, but there is no tenderness, no compassion, no affection in that smile. It is not human; it is superhuman. Looking at the features of a Greek Aphrodite, an Eros, a Dionysus, you feel that they could smile with the same beautiful smile at the destruction of the world. What does the smile mean? You are charmed by it, yet it is mysterious, almost awful. It represents nothing but supreme content, supreme happiness —not happiness in the spiritual sense of rest, but happiness of perfect youth and innocence of pain. That is why there is something terrible about it to the modern thinker. It is without sympathy; it is only joy.

Now you will see the poem in its inner meaning. Let us paraphrase it:

"Why is there no expression in that divinely beautiful face of thine, O fair god, who art for ever worshipped by the race of men, for ever ruling the hearts of its youth without pity, without compassion! Thou who art the perfect image of the loveliness of youth, and the symbol of some eternal and universal law, so fair, so lovely that only the great Greek sculptor Pheidias could represent thee in pure marble, thou white as that marble itself, before time had faded the fresh colour with which thy statue had been painted! Truly thou art as one of his gods in the pride of thy nakedness — which becomes thee more than any robe,

being itself luminous, a light of stars. But why is there no expression in thy face?

"It must be that thy body represents thy mind. Yet thy mind is not reflected in thy face like the mind of man. There I see only the beautiful old pagan smile, the smile of the years before the Religion of Sorrow came into this world. And that smile of thine shows neither love nor hate nor shame, but power incalculable and the innocence of sensuous pleasure.

"Thou king of joy, of what dost thou think? For thy face no-wise betrays thy thought. Truly I believe thou dost not think of anything which troubles the minds of sorrowing men; thou thinkest of nothing. Thou art joy, not thought. And I imagine that thou wouldst prefer not to be seen by men, to come to them in darkness only, or invisibly, as thou didst to Psyche in other years. But thou canst not remain invisible, since thy body is made of light, and for ever makes a great shining about thee. For uncounted time thou hast moved the hearts of millions of men and of women; all have known thy presence, felt thy power. But none, even of those who most longed for thee, has ever desired to look into thy beautiful face, because it is not the face of humanity but of divinity, and because there is in it nothing of human love."

There is a good deal to think about in this poem, but to feel the beauty of it you ought to have before your eyes, when studying it, a good engraving of the statue. However, even without any illustration you will easily perceive the moral of the thought in it, that beauty and youth alone do not signify affection, nor even anything dear to the inner nature of man.

Now I shall turn to another part of the poet's work. Here is a little verse about a grown man looking at the picture of himself when he was a little child. I think that it is a very charming sonnet, and it will give you something to think about.

A man that sees by chance his picture, made
As once a child he was, handling some toy,
Will gaze to find his spirit within the boy,
Yet hath no secret with the soul pourtray'd:
He cannot think the simple thought which play'd
Upon those features then so frank and coy;
'Tis his, yet oh! not his: and o'er the joy
His fatherly pity bends in tears dismay'd.

There is indeed no topic which Robert Bridges has treated more exquisitely and touchingly than certain phases of childhood, the poetry of childhood, the purity of childhood, the pathos of childhood. I do not think that any one except Patmore, and Patmore only in one poem, "The Toys," has even approached him. Take this little poem for example, on the death of a little boy. It is the father who is speaking.

ON A DEAD CHILD

Perfect little body, without fault or stain on thee,
With promise of strength and manhood full and fair!
Though cold and stark and bare,
The bloom and the charm of life doth awhile remain on thee.

Thy mother's treasure wert thou; — alas! no longer
To visit her heart with wondrous joy; to be
Thy father's pride;—ah, he
Must gather his faith together, and his strength make stronger.

To me, as I move thee now in the last duty,
Dost thou with a turn or gesture anon respond;
Startling my fancy fond
With a chance attitude of the head, a freak of beauty.

Thy hand clasps, as 'twas wont, my finger, and holds it:
But the grasp is the clasp of Death, heartbreaking and stiff;
Yet feels my hand as if
'Twas still thy' will, thy pleasure and trust that enfolds it.

So I lay thee there, thy sunken eyelids closing,—
Go lie thou there in thy coffin, thy last little bed!—
Propping thy wise, sad head,
Thy firm, pale hands across thy chest disposing.

So quiet! doth the change content thee? — Death,
whither hath he taken thee?
To a world, do I think, that rights the disaster of
this?
The vision of which I miss,
Who weep for the body, and wish but to warm thee
and awaken thee?

Ah! little at best can all our hopes avail us
To lift this sorrow, or cheer us, when in the dark,
Unwilling, alone we embark,
And the things we have seen and have known and
have heard of, fail us.

You will see the exquisiteness of this more fully after a little explanation. The father is performing the last duty to his little dead son: washing the body with his own hands, closing the eyes, and placing the little corpse in the coffin, rather than trust this work to any less loving hands. The Western coffin, you must know, is long, and the body is placed in it lying at full length as upon a bed, with a little pillow to support the head. Then the hands are closed upon the heart in the attitude of prayer. The poem describes more than the feelings of a father, during these tender offices. As he turns the little body to wash it, the small head changes its position now and then, and the motion is so much like the pretty motions made by that little head during life, that it is very difficult to believe there is now no life there. In all modern English poetry there is nothing more touching than the lines:

Startling my fancy fond
With a chance attitude of the head, a freak of beauty.

The word "freak" is incomparably beautiful in this line, for it has a sense of playfulness; it means often a childish

fancy or whim or pretty mischievous action. The turning of the dead head seems so like the motion of the living head in play. Then as the hands were washed by the father, the relaxed muscles caused the opened fingers to close upon the father's finger, just as in other days when the two walked about together, the little boy's hands were too small to hold the great hands of the father, and therefore clasped one finger only. Then observe the very effective use of two most simple adjectives to picture the face of the dead child—"wise" and "sad." Have you ever seen the face of a dead child? If you have, you will remember how its calmness gives one the suggestion of strange knowledge; the wise smile little, and fond fancy for thousands of years has looked into the faces of the unsmiling dead in search of some expression of supreme knowledge. Also there is an expression of sadness in the face of death, even in the faces of children asleep, although relaxation of muscles is the real explanation of the fact. All these fancies are very powerfully presented in the first five verses.

In the last two verses the sincerity of grief uniquely shows itself. "Where do you think the little life has gone?" the father asks. "Do you want me to say that I think it has gone to a happier world than this, to what you call Heaven? Ah, I must tell you the truth. I do not know; I doubt, I fear. When a grief like this comes to us, all our religious imaginations and hopes can serve us little."

You must read that over and over again to know the beauty of it. Here is another piece of very touching poetry about a boy, perhaps about the same boy who afterward died. It will require some explanation, for it is much deeper in a way than the previous piece. It is called "Pater Filio," meaning "the father to the son."

Sense with keenest edge unusèd,
  Yet unsteel'd by scathing fire;
Lovely feet as yet unbruisèd
  On the ways of dark desire;

Sweetest hope that lookest smiling
O'er the wilderness defiling!

Why such beauty, to be blighted
  By the swarm of foul destruction?
Why such innocence delighted,
  When sin stalks to thy seduction?
All the litanies e'er chaunted
Shall not keep thy faith undaunted.

. . . . . .

Me too once unthinking Nature,
  —Whence Love's timeless mockery took me,—
Fashion'd so divine a creature,
  Yea, and like a beast forsook me.
I forgave, but tell the measure
Of her crime in thee, my treasure.

The father is suffering the great pain of fathers when he speaks thus, the pain of fearing for the future of his child; and the mystery of things oppresses him, as it oppresses everybody who knows what it is to be afraid for the sake of another. He wonders at the beautiful fresh senses of the boy, "yet unsteel'd by scathing fire"—that is, not yet hardened by experience of pain. He admires the beauty of the little feet tottering happily about; but in the same moment dark thoughts come to him, for he remembers how blood-stained those little feet must yet become on the ways of the world, in the streets of cities, in the struggle of life. And he delights in the smile of the child, full of hope that knows nothing of the great foul wilderness of the world, in which envy and malice and passions of many kinds make it difficult to remain either good or hopeful. And he asks, "Why should a child be made so beautiful, only to lose that beauty at a later day, through sickness and grief and pain of a thousand kinds? Why should a child come into the world so charmingly innocent and joyful, only to lose that innocence and happiness later on through the encountering of passion and temptation? Why

should a child believe so deeply in the gods and in human nature? Later on, no matter how much he grieves, the time will come when that faith in the powers unseen must be sadly warped."

And lastly the father remembers his own childhood, thinking, "I too was once a divine little creature like that. Love, the eternal illusion, brought me into the world, and Nature made me as innocent and trustful as this little boy. Later on, however, the same Nature abandoned me, like the animal that forsakes her young as soon as they grow a little strong. I forgave Nature for that abandonment," the father says, turning to the child, "but it is only when I look at you, my treasure, that I understand how much I lost with the vanishing of my own childhood."

Nobody in the whole range of English literature has written anything more tender than that. It is out of the poet's heart.

One would expect, on reading delicacies of this kind, that the poet would express himself not less beautifully than tenderly in regard to woman. As a matter of fact, he certainly ranks next to Rossetti as a love poet, even in point of workmanship. I am also inclined to think, and I believe that critics will later recognize this, that his feeling in regard to the deeper and nobler qualities of love can only be compared to the work of Browning in the same direction. It has not Browning's force, nor the occasional sturdiness that approaches roughness. It is altogether softer and finer, and it has none of Browning's eccentricities. A collection of sonnets, sixty-nine in number, entitled "The Growth of Love" may very well be compared with Rossetti's sonnet-sequence, "The House of Life." But it is altogether unlike Rossetti's work; it deals with thought more than sensation, and with joy more than sorrow. But before we give an example of these, let me quote a little fancy of a very simple kind, that gives the character of Robert Bridges as a love poet quite as well as any long or elaborate poem could do.

Long are the hours the sun is above,
But when evening comes I go home to my love.

I'm away the daylight hours and more,
Yet she comes not down to open the door.

She does not meet me upon the stair,—
She sits in my chamber and waits for me there.

As I enter the room she does not move:
I always walk straight up to my love;

And she lets me take my wonted place
At her side, and gaze in her dear dear face.

There as I sit, from her head thrown back
Her hair falls straight in a shadow black.

Aching and hot as my tired eyes be,
She is all that I wish to see.

And in my wearied and toil-dinned ear,
She says all things that I wish to hear.

Dusky and duskier grows the room,
Yet I see her best in the darker gloom.

When the winter eves are early and cold,
The firelight hours are a dream of gold.

And so I sit here night by night,
In rest and enjoyment of love's delight.

But a knock at the door, a step on the stair
Will startle, alas, my love from her chair.

If a stranger comes she will not stay:
At the first alarm she is off and away.

And he wonders, my guest, usurping her throne,
That I sit so much by myself alone.

You feel the mystery of the thing beginning at the second stanza, but not until you get to the sixth stanza do

you begin to perceive it. This is not a living woman, but a ghost. The whole poetry of the composition is here. What does the poet mean? He has not told us anywhere, and it is better that he should not have told us, because we can imagine so many things, so many different circumstances, which the poem would equally well illustrate. Were this the fancy of a young man, we might say that the phantom love means the ideal wife, the unknown bride of the future, the beautiful dream that every young man makes for himself about a perfectly happy home. Again, we might suppose that the spirit bride is not really related at all to love in the common sense, but figures or symbolizes only the devotion of the poet to poetry, in which case the spirit bride is art. But the poet is not a young man; he is an old country doctor, coming home late every night from visiting his patients, tired, weary, but with plenty of work to do in his private study. Who, then, may be the shadowy woman with the long black hair always waiting for him alone? Perhaps art, perhaps a memory, most likely the memory of a dead wife, and we may even imagine, the mother of the little boy about whose death the poet has so beautifully written elsewhere. I do not pretend to explain; I do not want to explain; I am only anxious to show you that this composition fulfils one of the finest conditions of poetry, by its suggestiveness. It leaves many questions to be answered in fancy, and all of them are beautiful.

Let me now take a little piece about the singing of the nightingale. I think you remember that I read to you, and commented upon Keats's poem about the nightingale. That is the greatest English poem, the most perfect, the most unapproachable of poems upon the nightingale. And after that, only a very, very skilful poet dare write seriously about the nightingale, for his work, if at all imperfect, must suffer terribly by comparison with the verses of Keats. But Robert Bridges has actually come very near to the height of Keats in a three stanza poem upon the same subject. The treatment of the theme is curiously different. The poem

of Keats represents supreme delight, the delight which is so great that it becomes sad. The poem of Bridges is slightly dark. The mystery of the bird song is the fact that he chiefly considers; and he considers it in a way that leaves you thinking a long time after the reading of the verses. The suggestions of the composition, however, can best be considered after we have read the verses.

NIGHTINGALES

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,
And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom
Ye learn your song:
Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,
Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air
Bloom the year long!

Nay, barren are those mountains and spent the streams:
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,
A throe of the heart,
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,
For all our art.

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,
As night is withdrawn
From these sweet-springing meads and bursting boughs of May,
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day
Welcome the dawn.

Other poets, following the popular notion that birds are happy when they sing, often speak of the nightingale as an especially happy bird because of the extraordinary sweetness of its song. The Greek poets thought otherwise; to them it seemed that the song of the bird was the cry of infinite sorrow and regret, and one of the most horrible of all the

Greek myths is the story of Philomela, transformed into a nightingale. Matthew Arnold, you may remember, takes the Greek view. So in a way does Robert Bridges, but there are other suggestions in his verse, purely human. Paraphrased, the meaning is this (a man speaks first):

"When I listen to your song, I feel sure that the country from which you come must be very beautiful; and very sweet the warbling music of the stream, whose sound may have taught you how to sing. O how much I wish that I could go to your wonderful world, your tropical world, where summer never dies, and where flowers are all the year in bloom." But the birds answer: "You are in error. Desolate is the country from which we come; and in that country the mountains are naked and barren, and the rivers are dried up. If we sing, it is because of the pain that we feel in our hearts, the pain of great desire for happier things. But that which we desire without knowing it by sight, that which we hope for in vain, these are more beautiful than any song of ours can express. Skilful we are, but not skilful enough to utter all that we feel. At night we sing, trying to speak our secret of pain to men; but when all the other birds awake and salute the sun with happy song, while all the flowers open their leaves to the light, then we do not sing, but dream on in silence and shadow."

Is there not in this beautiful verse the suggestion of the condition of the soul in the artist and the poet, in those whose works are beautiful or seem beautiful, not because of joy, but because of pain — the pain of larger knowledge and deeper perception? I think it is particularly this that makes the superior beauty of the stanzas. You soon find yourself thinking, not about the nightingale, but about the human heart and the human soul.

Here and there on almost every page of Bridges are to be found queer little beauties, little things that reveal the personality of the writer. Can you describe an April sky, and clouds in the sky, and the light and the colour of the day, all in two lines? It is not an easy thing to do;

but there are two lines that seem to do it in a poem, which is the sixth of the Fourth Book:

> On high the hot sun smiles, and banks of cloud uptower
> In bulging heads that crowd for miles the dazzling south.

Notice the phrase "bulging heads." Nothing is so difficult to describe in words, as to form, than ordinary clouds, because the form is indefinite. Yet the great rounding masses do dimly suggest giant heads, not necessarily the heads of persons, much oftener heads of trees. The word "bulging" means not only a swelling outwards but a soft baggy kind of swelling. No other adjective in the English language could better express the roundish form here alluded to. And we know that they are white, simply by the poet's use of the word "dazzling" that completes the picture. But there is more to notice; the poet has called these clouds "banks of cloud," and has spoken of them as crowding the sky for miles. Remember that a bank of cloud always implies masses of cloud joined together below. Now on a beautiful clear day you must have often noticed in the sky that a clear space, straight as any line upon a map, marks off the lower part of the cloud. Between the horizon and this line there is only clear blue; then the clouds, all lined and joined together at the bottom, are all rounded, bulgy at the top. This is what the two lines which I have quoted picture to us.

In the simplest fancies, however, the same truth to Nature is observable, and comes to us in like surprises. Here is a little bit about a new moon shining on the sea at night.

> She lightens on the comb
> Of leaden waves, that roar
> And thrust their hurried foam
> Up on the dusky shore.
>
> Behind the western bars
> The shrouded day retreats,

And unperceived the stars
Steal to their sovran seats.

And whiter grows the foam,
The small moon lightens more;
And as I turn me home,
My shadow walks before.

You feel that this has been seen and felt, that it is not merely the imagination of a man sitting down to manufacture poetry at his desk. I imagine that you have not seen the word "comb" used of wave motion very often, though it is now coming more and more into poetical use. The comb of the wave is its crest, and the term is used just as we use the word comb in speaking of the crest of a cock. But there is also the verb "to comb"; and this refers especially to the curling over of the crest of the wave, just before it breaks, when the appearance of the crest-edge resembles that of wool being pulled through a comb (*kushi*). Thus the word gives us two distinct and picturesque ideas, whether used as noun or as adjective. Notice too the use of "leaden" in relation to the colour of waves where not touched by moonlight; the dull grey could not be better described by any other word. Also observe that as night advances, though the sea becomes dark, the form appears to become whiter and whiter. In a phosphorescent sea the foam lines appear very beautiful in darkness.

I shall quote but one more poem by Robert Bridges, choosing it merely to illustrate how modern things appear to this charming dreamer of old-fashioned dreams. One would think that he could not care much about such matters as machinery, telegraphs, railroads, steamships. But he has written a very fine sonnet about a steamship; and the curious thing is that this poem appears in the middle of a collection of love poems:

The fabled sea-snake, old Leviathan,
Or else what grisly beast of scaly chine
That champ'd the ocean-wrack and swash'd the brine,

Before the new and milder days of man,
Had never rib nor bray nor swindging fan
Like his iron swimmer of the Clyde or Tyne,
Late-born of golden seed to breed a line
Of offspring swifter and more huge of plan.

Straight is her going, for upon the sun
When once she hath look'd, her path and place are plain;
With tireless speed she smiteth one by one
The shuddering seas and foams along the main;
And her eased breath, when her wild race is run,
Roars thro' her nostrils like a hurricane.

While this is true to fact, it is also fine fancy; the only true way in which the practical and mechanical can appeal to the poet is in the sensation of life and power that it produces.

I think we have read together enough of Robert Bridges to excite some interest in such of his poetry as we have not read. But you will have perceived that this poet is in his own way quite different from other poets of the time, and that he cannot appeal to commonplace minds. His poetry is like fine old wine, mild, mellowed wine, that only the delicate palate will be able to appreciate properly.