

***ALICE  
MEYNELL***



***THE FLOWER  
OF THE MIND***

**Alice Meynell**

# **The Flower of the Mind**

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# INTRODUCTION

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PARTIAL collections of English poems, decided by a common subject or bounded by narrow dates and periods of literary history, are made at very short intervals, and the makers are safe from the reproach of proposing their own personal taste as a guide for the reading of others. But a general Anthology gathered from the whole of English literature—the whole from Chaucer to Wordsworth—by a gatherer intent upon nothing except the quality of poetry, is a more rare enterprise. It is hardly to be made without tempting the suspicion—nay, hardly without seeming to hazard the confession—of some measure of self-confidence. Nor can even the desire to enter upon that labour be a frequent one—the desire of the heart of one for whom poetry is veritably ‘the complementary life’ to set up a pale for inclusion and exclusion, to add honours, to multiply homage, to cherish, to restore, to protest, to proclaim, to depose; and to gain the consent of a multitude of readers to all those acts. Many years, then—some part of a century—may easily pass between the publication of one general anthology and the making of another.

The enterprise would be a sorry one if it were really arbitrary, and if an anthologist should give effect to passionate preferences without authority. An anthology that shall have any value must be made on the responsibility of one but on the authority of many. There is no caprice; the mind of the maker has been formed for decision by the wisdom of many instructors. It is the very study of criticism,



and the grateful and profitable study, that gives the justification to work done upon the strongest personal impulse, and done, finally, in the mental solitude that cannot be escaped at the last. In another order, moral education would be best crowned if it proved to have quick and profound control over the first impulses; its finished work would be to set the soul in a state of law, delivered from the delays of self-distrust; not action only, but the desires would be in an old security, and a wish would come to light already justified. This would be the second—if it were not the only—liberty. Even so an intellectual education might assuredly confer freedom upon first and solitary thoughts, and confidence and composure upon the sallies of impetuous courage. In a word, it should make a studious anthologist quite sure about genius. And all who have bestowed, or helped in bestowing, the liberating education have given their student the authority to be free. Personal and singular the choice in such a book must be, not without right.

Claiming and disclaiming so much, the gatherers may follow one another to harvest, and glean in the same fields in different seasons, for the repetition of the work can never be altogether a repetition. The general consent of criticism does not stand still; and moreover, a mere accident has until now left a poet of genius of the past here and there to neglect or obscurity. This is not very likely to befall again; the time has come when there is little or nothing left to discover or rediscover in the sixteenth century or the seventeenth; we know that there does not lurk another Crashaw contemned, or another Henry Vaughan

disregarded, or another George Herbert misplaced. There is now something like finality of knowledge at least; and therefore not a little error in the past is ready to be repaired. This is the result of time. Of the slow actions and reactions of critical taste there might be something to say, but nothing important. No loyal anthologist perhaps will consent to acknowledge these tides; he will hardly do his work well unless he believe it to be stable and perfect; nor, by the way, will he judge worthily in the name of others unless he be resolved to judge intrepidly for himself.

Inasmuch as even the best of all poems are the best upon innumerable degrees, the size of most anthologies has gone far to decide what degrees are to be gathered in and what left without. The best might make a very small volume, and be indeed the best, or a very large volume, and be still indeed the best. But my labour has been to do somewhat differently—to gather nothing that did not overpass a certain boundary-line of genius. Gray's *Elegy*, for instance, would rightly be placed at the head of everything below that mark. It is, in fact, so near to the work of genius as to be most directly, closely, and immediately rebuked by genius; it meets genius at close quarters and almost deserves that Shakespeare himself should defeat it. Mediocrity said its own true word in the *Elegy*:

‘Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.’

But greatness had said its own word also in a sonnet:

‘The summer flower is to the summer sweet  
Though to itself it only live and die.’

The reproof here is too sure; not always does it touch so quick, but it is not seldom manifest, and it makes exclusion a simple task. Inclusion, on the other hand, cannot be so completely fulfilled. The impossibility of taking in poems of great length, however purely lyrical, is a mechanical barrier, even on the plan of the present volume; in the case of Spenser's *Prothalamion*, the unmanageably autobiographical and local passage makes it inappropriate; some exquisite things of Landor's are lyrics in blank verse, and the necessary rule against blank verse shuts them out. No extracts have been made from any poem, but in a very few instances a stanza or a passage has been dropped out. No poem has been put in for the sake of a single perfectly fine passage; it would be too much to say that no poem has been put in for the sake of two splendid passages or so. The Scottish ballad poetry is represented by examples that are to my mind finer than anything left out; still, it is but represented; and as the song of this multitude of unknown poets overflows by its quantity a collection of lyrics of genius, so does severally the song of Wordsworth, Crashaw, and Shelley. It has been necessary, in considering traditional songs of evidently mingled authorship, to reject some one invaluable stanza or burden—the original and ancient surviving matter of a spoilt song—because it was necessary to reject the sequel that has cumbered it since some sentimentalist took it for his own. An example, which makes the heart ache, is that burden of keen and remote poetry:

'O the broom, the bonnie, bonnie broom,  
The broom of Cowdenknowes!'

Perhaps some hand will gather all such precious fragments as these together one day, freed from what is alien in the work of the restorer. It is inexplicable that a generation resolved to forbid the restoration of ancient buildings should approve the eighteenth century restoration of ancient poems; nay, the architectural 'restorer' is immeasurably the more respectful. In order to give us again the ancient fragments, it is happily not necessary to break up the composite songs which, since the time of Burns, have gained a national love. Let them be, but let the old verses be also; and let them have, for those who desire it, the solitariness of their state of ruin. Even in the cases—and they are not few—where Burns is proved to have given beauty and music to the ancient fragment itself, his work upon the old stanza is immeasurably finer than his work in his own new stanzas following, and it would be less than impiety to part the two.

I have obeyed a profound conviction which I have reason to hope will be more commended in the future than perhaps it can be now, in leaving aside a multitude of composite songs—anachronisms, and worse than mere anachronisms, as I think them to be, for they patch wild feeling with sentiment of the sentimentalist. There are some exceptions. The one fine stanza of a song which both Sir Walter Scott and Burns restored is given with the restorations of both, those restorations being severally beautiful; and the burden, 'Hame, hame, hame,' is printed with the Jacobite song that carries it; this song seems so mingled and various in date and origin that no apology is needed for placing it amongst the bundle of Scottish ballads of days before the Jacobites.

*Sir Patrick Spens* is treated here as an ancient song. It is to be noted that the modern, or comparatively modern, additions to old songs full of quantitative metre—‘Hame, hame, hame,’ is one of these—full of long notes, rests, and interlinear pauses, are almost always written in anapæsts. The later writer has slipped away from the fine, various, and subtle metre of the older. Assuredly the popularity of the metre which, for want of a term suiting the English rules of verse, must be called anapæstic, has done more than any other thing to vulgarise the national sense of rhythm and to silence the finer rhythms. Anapæsts came quite suddenly into English poetry and brought coarseness, glibness, volubility, dapper and fatuous effects. A master may use it well, but as a popular measure it has been disastrous. I would be bound to find the modern stanzas in an old song by this very habit of anapæsts and this very misunderstanding of the long words and interlinear pauses of the older stanzas. This, for instance, is the old metre:

‘Hame, hame, hame! O hame fain wad I be!’

and this the lamentable anapæstic line (from the same song):

‘Yet the sun through the mirk seems to promise to me—.’

It has been difficult to refuse myself the delight of including *A Divine Love* of Carew, but it seemed too bold to leave out four stanzas of a poem of seven, and the last four are of the poorest argument. This passage at least shall speak for the first three:

‘Thou didst appear  
A glorious mystery, so dark, so clear,

As Nature did intend  
All should confess, but none might comprehend.'

From *Christ's Victory in Heaven* of Giles Fletcher (out of reach for its length) it is a happiness to extract here at least the passage upon 'Justice,' who looks 'as the eagle that hath so oft compared Her eye with heaven's';

from Marlowe's poem, also unmanageable, that in which Love ran to the priestess

'And laid his childish head upon her breast';  
with that which tells how Night,  
'deep-drenched in misty Acheron,  
Heaved up her head, and half the world upon  
Breathed darkness forth';

from Robert Greene two lines of a lovely passage:

'Cupid abroad was lated in the night,  
His wings were wet with ranging in the rain';

from Ben Jonson's *Hue and Cry* (not throughout fine) the stanza:

'Beauties, have ye seen a toy,  
Called Love, a little boy,  
Almost naked, wanton, blind;  
Cruel now, and then as kind?  
If he be amongst ye, say;  
He is Venus' run-away';

from Francis Davison:

'Her angry eyes are great with tears';

from George Wither:

'I can go rest  
On her sweet breast

That is the pride of Cynthia's train';

from Cowley:

'Return, return, gay planet of mine east'!

The poems in which these are cannot make part of the volume, but the citation of the fragments is a relieving act of love.

At the very beginning, Skelton's song to 'Mistress Margery Wentworth' had almost taken a place; but its charm is hardly fine enough. If it is necessary to answer the inevitable question in regard to Byron, let me say that in another Anthology, a secondary Anthology, the one in which Gray's *Elegy* would have an honourable place, some more of Byron's lyrics would certainly be found; and except this there is no apology. If the last stanza of the 'Dying Gladiator' passage, or the last stanza on the cascade rainbow at Terni,

'Love watching madness with unalterable mien,'

had been separate poems instead of parts of *Childe Harold*, they would have been amongst the poems that are here collected in no spirit of arrogance, or of caprice, of diffidence or doubt.

The volume closes some time before the middle of the century and the death of Wordsworth.

A. M

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