

**ENGLISH SONGS,
AND OTHER SMALL
POEMS**

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English Songs, and Other Small Poems by Barry Cornwall

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BARRY CORNWALL

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Procter, Bryan Walker

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BY

BARRY CORNWALL. (pseud.)



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INTRODUCTION.

ENGLAND is singularly barren of Song-writers. There is no English writer of any rank, in my recollection, whose songs form the distinguishing feature of his poetry. The little lyrics which are scattered, like stars, over the surface of our old dramas, are sometimes minute, trifling, and undefined in their object; but they are often eminently fine,—in fact,

the finest things of the kind which our language possesses. There is more inspiration, more air and lyrical quality about them, than in songs of ten times their pretensions. And this, perhaps, arises from the dramatic faculty of the writers; who, being accustomed, in other things, to shape their verse, so as to suit the characters and different purposes of the drama, naturally extend this care to the fashion of the songs themselves. In cases where a writer speaks in his own person, he expends all his egotism upon his lyrics; and requires that a critic should be near to curtail his misdeeds. When he writes as a dramatist, he is, or ought to be, the critic himself. He is not, so to speak, at all implicated in what is going forward in the poem; but deals out the dialogue, like an indifferent by-stander, seeking only to adjust it to the necessities of the actors. He is above the struggle and turmoil of the battle below, and

* Sees, as from a tower, the end of all.*

It is, in fact, this power of forgetting himself, and of imagining and fashioning characters different from

his own, which constitutes the dramatic quality. A man who can set aside his own idiosyncrasy, is half a dramatist.

It may be thought paradoxical to assert that the songs which occur in dramas are more natural than those which proceed from the author in person : yet such is generally the case. If, indeed, a poet wrote purely and seasonably only,—that is to say, if his poetry sprung always from the passion or humour of the moment, the fact might be otherwise. But it may easily be seen, that many rhymes are produced out of season ; and are often nothing more than the result of ingenuity taxed to the uttermost ; or otherwise, are simply the indiscretions of ‘gentlemen at ease,’ who have nothing, or nothing better to do. Now Poetry is not to be thus constrained ; nor is it ever the offspring of ennui or languor. It demands not only the ‘faculty divine, (so called,) but also, that it should be left to its own impulses. The intellectual faculties are, in no one, always in a state of tension, or capable of projecting those thoughts which, in happier moments, are cast forth with perfect ease,—and which, when thrown out by the

Imagination or the Fancy, constitute the charm, and indeed form the essence of poetry.

Much of what I have said applies to verse in general; but it applies more especially to songs and small pieces of verse—those *nugæ canoræ*—which, at the time that they plead their ‘want of pretension,’ take due care, but too often, to justify their professed defects. When a writer commences a poem of serious length, he throws all his strength into it; he selects the happiest hour; he condenses, and amends, and rejects; and, in short, does his best to produce something good. But in a song, or ‘a trifle in verse,’ he feels no responsibility. He professes nothing, and, unfortunately, does little more.

It may be said that a song is necessarily a trifling matter; but, if good, it is a trifle, of at least a different sort. And to make even a trifle perfect or agreeable, should satisfy a moderate ambition. It demands some talent. Where poetry is concerned, it requires even more: for it requires that this talent should be of a peculiar order, and should be exerted at a happy time. I am by no means forward to imagine that these two requisites have at *any* time concurred in

my case. But I hope that I have, in a few instances, so far succeeded, as to allure other writers, (having more leisure than I possess) to direct their powers to this species of verse. It has been too much disdained. Poets have in general preferred exhibiting their tediousness in long compositions, and have neglected the song. But the brevity, which is the 'soul' of song, as well as of wit, is not necessarily allied to insignificance. The battle-songs of Mr. Campbell are a triumphant proof of the contrary. So also are many of the songs and ballads of Sir Walter Scott, Mr. Moore, Mr. Lockhart, Mr. Hogg, my friend Allan Cunningham, and, finally, the charming songs of Burns. To my thinking, the *sentiment* in some of Burns's songs is as fine and as true as anything in Shakspeare himself. I do not speak of his imagination, or of his general power, (both which in the Scottish poet are immeasurably inferior), but of the mere sentiment or feeling—that fine natural eloquence which a warm heart taught him, and which he poured out so profusely in song. There is an earnestness and directness of purpose in Burns, which, if attended to, would, I think,