

**POETS AND POETRY: BEING
ARTICLES REPRINTED FROM
THE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT
OF 'THE TIMES'**

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John Bailey

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BY

JOHN BAILEY

AUTHOR OF 'THE CLAIMS OF FRENCH POETRY'

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TO THE
LIBRARY

P R E F A C E

THE poet Rogers is reported to have had a saying, 'When a new book comes out I read an old one.' If mottoes were any longer in fashion, that remark would do as well as any I could find to put before this little volume. Not that, of course, the essays here collected carry the doctrine of 'the old is better' at all so far as Rogers. Indeed they could not well suggest the ignoring of new books; for it is to new books that they owe their existence. A man who never reads a new author is in danger of making his mind a mere museum of fossils. Or, if that puts it too strongly—for the immortals are after all the immortals, and live exempt from fears of fossil decay—yet the new are necessary interpreters of those among the old who possess genius. For it is the privilege of genius to be inexhaustible. Every generation reads Dante afresh, and for each in turn he is, or may be, new-born. If a man could exclude from his mind all subsequent literature and read Homer or Virgil just as the Alexandrian or Augustan scholars read them, he would simply have sacrificed life to archaeology, and his Homer, still more his Virgil, would be but a small fraction of the full stature of the poet, which it has taken many generations of the human mind and many races of men to see in such completeness as we can see it to-day.

The new then are necessary to the old. But even less than the old can they stand alone. That is true even of original and creative work, which builds on the sands if it forgets that the human mind is a thing of continuous life, for which all new departures must find their root and starting-point in something already accepted. Still more,

of course, is it true of such books as those which give occasion to the articles here reprinted. It is folly to busy ourselves with discovering new facts about the life of Spenser, or elucidating the metrical system of Milton, unless we read the poetry of Milton and Spenser. The best biographer of Shakespeare is one whose books you put aside to take down *King Lear*. The best critic of Shelley is he who makes you go straightway and learn the *Ode to the West Wind* by heart. The very business of the critic is to be for ever superseding himself.

That is the sense in which the remark of Rogers may be applied here. For the judicious reader the new book read once is an excuse for the old book read again and again for the twentieth or perhaps the hundredth time. That at any rate is the common ground taken in the essays here reprinted. They represent an attempt to use the opportunity provided by the columns of a newspaper to re-state some of the great primary positions in literature, and especially in English poetry. The fundamental truths that lie at the root of literary criticism, like those that occupy the same position in morals and politics, are always in danger of finding a mere acquiescence, respectful but indifferent, where they should find a vital and understanding acceptance. That is partly because we change and they do not. We find it troublesome to be always taking our new bearings with regard to the fixed stars of the literary firmament, and though vaguely aware that they are still in their places in the heavens, we forget them and look up to them no more. But that way danger lies. For after all it is by them that we have still to sail, and though a new one is now and then discovered, the old still remain on their thrones, and the map of the poetic heaven remains in its great outlines unchanged. Only we, perhaps, have got round to a new side of it and do not easily make out where we are. It has seemed to me that an occasional writer in a newspaper could

hardly use his opportunities better than in making a modest attempt, for himself and any readers he may have, to look firmly again at some of these fixed stars, the most ancient heavens of literature, and try to see once more, as exactly as individual and newspaper limitations allow, where they and we stand.

All the essays appeared originally in the Literary Supplement of *The Times*, and I have to thank the proprietors of that journal for their kindness in allowing me to reprint them.

Perhaps, as a last word, it may be well to explain here one small point on which misunderstanding might possibly arise. The title 'Johnson without Boswell' is that of one of Sir Walter Raleigh's admirable 'Six Essays on Johnson', published in 1910. My own article with that title appeared in *The Times* of August 16, 1907.

J. B.

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