

# **ROBERT BRIDGES; A CRITICAL STUDY**

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Robert Bridges; a critical study by F. E. Brett Young

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**F. E. BRETT YOUNG**

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# ROBERT BRIDGES

A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

F. (E.) BRETT YOUNG

*Francis*

LONDON

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## NOTE

I HAVE thought it better, in this estimate of a living poet, to exclude biographical details altogether; and indeed they would have been out of place in a book which is nothing more than an attempt to explain to my own satisfaction the peculiar excellences which have made the work of Robert Bridges so great a personal joy, and to examine my belief in its significance for the future of English poetry.

I have to thank Dr. Bridges for his generous permission to quote not only many passages from his own works, but also the sonnet of his friend, the late Mr. Gerard Hopkins, on page 143. Except in the case of the Plays, the text from which quotations have been made is that of the Oxford Edition of Collected Poems.

F. E. B. Y.

LLANTHONY,  
*July, 1914.*

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## I

### PRELIMINARIES

THE vitality of any art-form is seen in the willingness of the artist to be engrossed in the complex and the intense, and it is in this spirit that he must approach the expression of beauty, which is the main business of art and also happens to be a great deal of the business of life. As soon as beauty engages more than a certain part of the attention, or offers more than one aspect to the same perception, its expression becomes art. One might almost say that to voice a single aspect of beauty is common speech, to voice two at once is art. But in the higher forms of art we look for more than this. It may express the intensity with which beauty is realized; and this the poets call Joy. It may recognize the indestructible kinship of all beauty, and give expression to the underlying unity, whether it be real or imaginary; and this is generally called Vision. Sometimes it reconciles things which have seemed distant or opposed; and

## ROBERT BRIDGES

when this is achieved in literature it is called the note of Ecstasy. The three functions keep a certain sequence. The ecstasy of one artist is handed down as the vision of those who come after him, and in the end may be taken into the general consciousness of beauty. The ecstatic artist comes rarely; he is an adventurer in art; he generally starves or dies young, for the world has naturally no use for him.

It is not joy, nor even ecstasy, but vision that distinguishes the golden ages of art. We know them by the number of worshippers that throng the temple. They are periods marked by an extraordinary flowering of song, when every little singer is inspired, as if in spite of himself, to utter the authentic accents of genius. They are times when it is not necessary for a man to be an artist by stealth. There is breadth, and grandeur, and a certain unmistakable sanity about the art of these ages. It springs from the joy of some obscure half-realized discovery. By some means all things have fallen naturally into the sphere of art; art has become easy.

The age of Wordsworth was the last of these great fruiting-times of English literature. It was less astonishing than the Elizabethan age, for it took a less soaring flight from the

## PRELIMINARIES

level that came before it. But the later achievement includes the earlier. The poetic method of Shakespeare was taken for granted by Shelley at a time when the technique of the Elizabethans had already been absorbed and half forgotten. This age had all the features of a great period of literature. It was restless, but confident; it was lacking in several qualities of which the present age has enough—humour, notably,—but it had a confident tread in places where we can venture only timidly or not at all. The age of the great Romantics gave way to an empty clamour of tongues. It merged in the Victorian compromise—an admirable phrase which covers the whole field of literature to the work of Rossetti, of the æsthetics, of Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne. “The sunset of the great revolutionary poets,” Mr. Chesterton calls it; and as a type of it he presents to us Lord Macaulay. It was an age when politics and literature were confused to the damning of both, and to the loss of vision, joy and beauty. It stops short of Bridges.

He is one of these isolated poets whom it is difficult to classify unless it be with the isolated poets of other ages. Time has a freakish way of mixing up her great men. The first historian to analyse the dynamics of