

**POETICAL WORKS OF  
LIONEL JOHNSON.  
[LONDON-1915]**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649756636

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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LIONEL JOHNSON



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

LONDON: ELKIN MATHEWS  
CORK STREET MCMXV

J23

J67

1915

## PREFACE

A TRADITIONALIST of traditionalists, his poems are criticism for the most part. One might almost say they are literary criticism in verse, for that is the impression which they leave, if one have laid them by for long enough to have an impression of the book as a whole, and not a confusion, not the many little contradictory impressions of individual poems. I am accustomed to meeting his friends, and his friends, with the sole exception of Mr. Yeats, seem to regard him as a prose writer who inadvertently strayed into verse. His language is formal. It has an old-fashioned kind of precision that is very different from the sort of precision now sought, yet, in the dozen places where this stately and meticulous speech is moved by unwonted passion, Lionel Johnson has left poems as beautiful as any in English; as in the poem:

Fair face gone from sight  
Fair lips hushed in death  
Now their glad breath  
Breathes not upon our air  
Music, that saith  
Love only, and things fair.

Or in the poem to O'Leary:

From Howth to Achil, the glad noise  
Rings: and the heirs of glory fall.

Or in the poem to Oliver Georges Destrée:

In Merioneth, over the sad moor  
Drives the rain, the cold wind blows;  
Past the ruinous church door,  
The poor procession without music goes.

The curlew cries  
Over her laid down beside  
Death's lonely people:

“ I think I have been chosen to write this Preface largely because I am known to hold theories which some people think new, and which several people know to be hostile to much that hitherto has been accepted as “ classic ” in English poetry; that is to say, I reverence Dante and Villon and Catullus; for Milton and Victorianism and for the softness of the “ nineties ” I have different degrees of antipathy or even contempt. Mr. Elkin Mathews wanted, I think, some definite proof that Lionel Johnson was still respected by a generation, or, if you will, by a clique, of younger poets who scoff at most things of his time. Now Lionel Johnson cannot be shown to be in accord with our present doctrines and ambitions. His language is a bookish dialect, or rather it is not a dialect, it is a curial speech, and our aim is natural speech, the language as spoken. We desire the words of poetry to follow the natural order. We would write nothing that we might not say actually in life—under emotion. Johnson's verse is full of inversions,



but no one has written purer Imagisme than he has, in the line

Clear lie the fields, and fade into blue air.

It has a beauty like the Chinese.

Having held out for a uniform standard of appreciation, having insisted that one should weigh Theocritus and one's neighbour in one balance I cannot, for the sake even of courtesy, cast that standard aside. I do not, however, contradict it when I say that the natural speech of one decade is not the natural speech of another. In 1590 it was the fashion of the court to parley Euphues. Shakespeare's characters use a florid speech to show their good breeding, and "Multitudinous seas incarnadine" probably got as much applause *quia* magniloquent as a witticism of Wilde's *quia* witty. In 1600 people were interested in painted speech. It was vital. It was part of the time. For a later age it is rank affectation. Some say the "nineties" spoke as they wrote. I have heard it said that "A generation of men came down from Oxford resolved to talk as prose had been written." They had, presumably, the conviction that the speech of life and of poetry should be the same. They were quixotic. They loved the speech of books and proposed to make daily speech copy it.

Men of the renaissance had done something like this. They wrote excellent Latin, but daily speech did not follow it. Lorenzo Valla wrote invectively as Johnson might have written elegiacly, "linguam latinam magnum sacramentum est." And, indeed, Johnson

wrote Latin, as beautifully as Flaminus, so far did his reverence lead him.

Defecit inter tenebris cor triste.

He would have been content always writing Latin, I think, but failing that, he set himself the task of bringing into English all that he could of the fineness of Latinity. He wrote an English that had grown out of Latin. He, at his worst, approached the Miltonian quagmire; the old error of supposing that an uninflected language can be written according to rules of order fit for an inflected speech and for that only.

Yet, because he is never florid, one remembers his work, or one thinks of his work in one's memory as if it were speech in unruffled order. One does this in spite of his inversion, in spite of the few treasured archaisms, in spite of his "spelling it *chaunted*."

One thinks that he had read and admired Gautier, or that at least, he had derived similar ambitions from some traditional source. One thinks that his poems are in short hard sentences. The reality is that they are full of definite statement. For better or worse they are doctrinal and nearly always dogmatic. He had the blessed habit of knowing his own mind, and this was rare among writers of his decade.

The "nineties" have chiefly gone out because of their muzziness, because of a softness derived, I think, not from books but from impressionist painting. They riot with half decayed fruit.

The impression of Lionel Johnson's verse is that

of small slabs of ivory, firmly combined and contrived. There is a constant feeling of neatness, a sense of inherited order. Above all he respected his art.

From the Elizabethans to Swinburne, through all that vast hiatus, English poetry had been the bear-garden of doctrinaires. It had been the "vehicle" of opinion. For Swinburne it was at least the art of musical wording. For Johnson it was the art of good writing. The last is a rare thing in England.

I think we respect Johnson to-day, in part for his hardness, in part for his hatred of amateurishness. His sense of criticism is to be gathered from his own prose, though I think it is never more clear than in the notes sent to Katharine Tynan and printed by her after his death ("Dublin Review," October 1907). He had a tradition that the printed page should be courteous, but here we find only his judgement stark naked. The list is as follows:

#### WATSON

An almost unfailing dignity of *external* manner; and always an *attempt* at an *internal* gravity and greatness, which sometimes succeeds, but most often when he is reflecting and commenting, not imagining. An understudy, as actors say, of the great men, Arnold, Wordsworth, etc., capable of deceiving you for a time by his airs of being the true master instead of a very serious and accomplished substitute. At his best he impresses by his frequent stateliness and purity of phrase, his freedom from positively bad work, and his sincere *desire* to be lofty and impassioned and fine. He will tell you, in felicitous phrases and with a grand air, that Duty is difficult and divine: and the poem will be just