

**ETHICS AND AESTHETICS
OF MODERN POETRY,
PP.1-236**

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Ethics and Aesthetics of Modern Poetry, pp.1-236 by J. B. Selkirk

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J. B. SELKIRK

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OF
MODERN POETRY

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BY
J. B. SELKIRK, *professor*

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Inscribed
TO
THE MEMORY
OF
HARRY BUCHAM BROWN

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
I. SCEPTICISM AND MODERN POETRY	1
II. MODERN CREEDS AND MODERN POETRY	29
III. MYSTICISM AND MODERN POETRY	65
✓ IV. THE CONFLICT OF ART AND MORALS IN MODERN POETRY	117
V. THE CORRELATION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND POETI- CAL INSTINCTS	155
✓ VI. CULTURE AND MODERN POETRY	201

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J. B. S.

SCEPTICISM AND MODERN POETRY

SCEPTICISM AND MODERN POETRY.

THERE are doubts and doubts. Not so many, perhaps, as is generally supposed, of those 'honest' ones in which there lives—according to Tennyson—'more faith than half the creeds.' It has, in fact, become the fashion in certain quarters to over-compassionate the doubter, to accredit him with a greater depth, and even with a more thorough conscientiousness, than the man convinced. But with every desire to find the reasonableness of such a view, we have entirely failed to discover why the holding of a creed should imply a smaller share either of intelligence or honesty than the holding of a doubt. Credulity has its negative side as well as its positive one, and there is as much room to slip on the one side as on the other. Clough—himself the most conscientious of poetical sceptics—admits, that if on the one hand 'hopes are dupes,' on the other, 'fears may be liars ;' and, in short, there is no good reason, other things being equal, for supposing that the man who rejects evidence may not

be quite as great a fool as the man who accepts it. Creeds, no doubt, are easily adopted. We in a sense fall heirs to them. They lie about us from our very infancy, and as soon as we are able to think, they are recommended to us by those whom we very naturally respect. In this way, it is not to be denied that we are apt to creep into them with only too little enquiry. But on the other hand, are the great majority of doubts not only equally weak at the root and held with infinitely more self-complacency, not to say conceit? Search faith for its foundations, and in too many cases we dare say they will be found loose and flimsy enough: but subject doubt to a like scrutiny—strip it of all the mystical generalities it seeks to clothe itself in, and the pensive poetical sadness it so frequently affects—and in all but the rare exceptions, you will find that it is neither more nor less than our old friend Sir Oracle in a new disguise. The philosophy that questions everything with a regretfully necessitous air, and a sorrowful shake of the head, passes with too many for originality, and even profundity, until the trick is found out. That there are honest doubts, however, and honest doubters, we do not mean to question—godly doubters even—doubters of the order of ‘that white soul,’ as a living poet so beautifully says of Socrates—