

And, oh! when Nature sinks, as oft she may,  
Through long-lived pressure of obscure distress,  
Still to be strenuous for the bright reward,  
Brook the continuance of weak-mindedness,  
And in the soul admit of no decay.

So spake Milton, so spake Wordsworth, of the poet's mission; but not so thought Pope, who declares: "All the advantages I can think of, accruing from a genius for poetry, are the agreeable power of self-amusement, when a man is idle or alone, the privilege of being admitted into the best company, and the freedom of saying as many careless things as other people without being so severely remarked on." As a matter of consequence the man of Twickenham did not prophesy.

Since we have in Canada several persons more or less devoted to the art of verse, and who are now recognised in the English-speaking world for the genuineness of their spirit and the excellence of their work, I have deemed it might not be an uninteresting or unprofitable task to collect the sayings of some of them, and to note what they think of their own vocation. Some things, not within my reach, may be omitted; and others by reason of the narrow limits of this article.

Charles G. D. Roberts, who unites to scholarship and technical skill, sensitiveness, and warmth of feeling, evidently believes in an inspiration of some sort, arguing from his Prelude to "Orion":

Surely I have seen the majesty and wonder,  
Beauty, might and splendor of the soul of song;  
Surely I have felt the spell that lifts asunder  
Soul from body, when lips faint and thought is strong;  
Surely I have heard  
The ample silence stirred  
By intensest music from no throat of bird:—  
Smitten down before thy feet  
From the paths of heaven sweet,  
Lowly I await the song upon my lips conferred.

"To the Spirit of Song", he addresses himself. And what Spirit is that? We suppose it to be the mighty and universal Being invoked by him who sang of Paradise, and by him whose loftiest song was of Immortality,—the creative Spirit who gave the lyrical faculty, and who may be supposed best to inspire it.

Roberts' brother poet, Bliss Carman, seems to have tested the consoling and healing power of Nature, to whom a few give fidelity, and to have followed her in her sweetly subtle ways. He sings:

I see the ancient Mother stand,  
With the old courage of her smile,  
The patience of her sunbrowed hand.

But though beautiful as Ruth, she waits in the fields for them who love her, there are few who come.

. . . Where the wild shy things abide,  
Along the woodside and the wheat,  
Is her abiding, deep withdrawn;  
And there the footing of her feet.

There is no common fame of her  
Upon the corners, yet some word  
Of her most secret heritage  
Her lovers from her lips have heard.

Her daisies sprang where Chaucer went;  
Her darkling nightingales with spring  
Possessed the soul of Keats for song;  
And Shelley heard her skylark sing;

With reverent, clear, uplifted heart,  
Wordsworth beheld her daffodils;  
And he became too great for haste,  
Who watched the warm, green Cumnor hills.

She gave the apples of her eyes  
For the delight of him who knew,  
With all the wisdom of a child,  
"A bank whereon the wild thyme grew .

But the old secret shifts, and waits  
The last interpreter; it fills  
The autumn song no ear hath heard  
Upon the dreaming Ardisio hills.

The poplars babble over it  
When waking winds of dawn go by;  
It fills her rivers like a voice,  
And leads her wanderers till they die.

Archibald Lampman,—who certainly has "eyes made for seeing" that recondite beauty, lurking in unsuspected places, and a cunning hand to depict with an almost scientific certainty, and in accurate detail, that which he sees,—recognises the strange mingling of good and ill in the poets; sees how now, as Whittier has it, they climb up to Heaven's "seven-fold glory", and then sink back to the lowest, among "worms and other creeping things". To give a reverse, and yet true, picture, he should write another sonnet on "The Poets"; but so he paints them:

Half God, half brute, within the self-same shell,  
Changers with every hour from dawn till even,  
Who dream with angels in the gate of heaven,  
And skirt with curious eyes the brinks of hell;  
Children of Pan, whom some, the few, love well,  
But most draw back and know not what to say,  
Poo: shining angels, whom the hoofs betray.

Half brutish, half divine, but all of earth,  
Half way 'twixt hell and heaven, near to man,  
The whole world's tangle gathered in one span,  
Full of this human torture and this mirth:  
Life with its hope and error, toil and bliss,  
Earth-born, earth-reared, ye know it as it is.

Happily, from such a characterisation Mr. Lampman's purity of thought and life may exempt him.

An old divine used to say to such aspirants to the sacred office as he thought might be unbidden, "Never enter the ministry if you can be contented out of it; if you are called all other things will be made uneasy for you." He deemed this vocation the highest, and the most worthy of a noble self-devotion; and he knew that no unconsecrated and mistaken spirit could well support himself under its royal rigors. So would my friend, doubtless, say to the would-be poet, who could get on very well with a more accessible spring than Helicon; and so in substance has he said to the little "Georgie",—speaking in paternal manner. We quote from George Martin:

If Parnassian blooms invite thee  
Up the sacred mount to climb,  
Think, before its lightnings smite thee,  
What the honey-combs of rhyme  
Cost the builders: save a few,  
Weeping willow and the yew,  
Restful Silence, Bride of Time,  
Are the only signs that tell  
Where the baffled singers fell  
Broken-hearted ere their prime.