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The Younger Bards

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THE YOUNGER BARDS

That delightfully whimsical anthologist, Mr. E. V. Lucas, has recently stated that contemporary England has produced but two singers whose verse may be called magical—Walter de la Mare and Ralph Hodgson. Yet there is a nest of singing birds in England before whom Mr. De la Mare and Mr. Hodgson, being wise and accomplished poets, bow humbly. And every year about twenty new voices swell their number. If the essential magic of poetry is to be found anywhere, it is in these unpremeditated verses:

Dark and dreary was the night,
Not any star did gleam,
But over the hills a mysterious light
Came like a fearful dream.

And you could hear the maiden singing
A sweet and old, old song,
And the rafters of the hall were ringing
While she was singing long.

And now there came an ancient knight
A-riding up the hill,
And he would stop and think of the fight
That the maid was singing still.

Donald Turner, being only twelve years old, is wiser than Wordsworth. He has no need to ask self-consciously: "Will no one tell me what she sings?" He knows. He casually tossed off these lines without assistance one day in ten minutes. It was suggested that he should write a poem on the word *Hall*, which is the surname of one of his playmates, and as a recreation from study he produced these quite magical lines.

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His friend, Donald Wakeling, who is also twelve years old, and who has never read Blake, was prompted by the word *Cloudland* to write a poem which no anthologist in the future can afford to overlook:

High up in cloudland,
Ever so high,
You hear the birds whistle,
And the lark his cry.

High up in cloudland,
Ever so high,
You hear the wind howl,
And the old moon sigh.

Who taught this little boy to hear "the old moon sigh?"

These lyrics, chosen as representative rather than exceptional, are the work of small boys in the Perse Grammar School at Cambridge, England. They are the result of systematic encouragement on the part of a teacher who believes that every child is a poet until he outgrows his childhood, and that the only spur needed to produce creative work is the encouragement of the imagination and of a boy's faith in his own creative powers.

Such poems as these, and many more like them, force us to ask ourselves whether the essential magic of poetry is not, after all, identical with the vision of childhood, and if so, whether we are not squandering the larger share of our imaginative inheritance by neglecting childhood's creative powers.

The experience of Mr. H. Caldwell Cook, the teacher of these boys, has been that every boy is a potential poet;

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that if left to his own devices until his poem is finished, it will be a better poem than if he is interrupted; and that no little boy can correct the faults in his poem, but that he can write a new poem in which these faults tend to disappear. The poems which I have quoted have undergone no revision by the master. It is also Mr. Cook's experience that when his boy poets outgrow their childhood the majority lose their poetic faculty. The important minority, however, have found their vocations early, and developed many years sooner than would otherwise have been the case.

Mr. Cook advocates a minimum of technical instruction in prosody, for the best work is done with the simplest rhythms and vocabulary. He encourages the composition of poetry in the spirit of play, and it is his belief, founded on results, that intuition is at least of equal value with tuition.

The best of these poems are the normal play of normal matter-of-fact boys. That their intuitions have no background of experience is the most wonderful fact about their work. Adrian Tuffield, with all the sage wisdom of his twelve years, can feel intuitively what he tells you in the last couplet of *The Skylark*:

He clears his voice with a sip of the dew
That lies on the grass when the day is new;
Then spreads his wings and soars on high,
Till he's naught but a speck in the vast blue sky.

His musical notes come fast and free,
In a strain of sweetest melody;
He pours them out so rich and clear,
That this thrilling song the world may hear.

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To guard the nest his mate must stay,
But her heart is cheered by his roundelay;
When sunset comes with its rosy glow,
He'll leave his heaven for his love below.

And Douglas Simmonds, who claims eleven years, sings disillusionment with consummate artlessness in this *Envoy* which we cannot call a Song of Experience because of the author's tender age.

The sun's last ray has left the sky,
The red has vanish'd fast,
And now to rest the birds skim by—
These are the very last.

The wind moans through the trees all bare
Playing a mournful tune,
And now comes out with icy stare
Night's mistress, Lady Moon.

It is this very foreknowledge of childhood which we have been permitting to slip away. *Edward J. O'Brien,*

To emphasize Mr. O'Brien's conclusions, the editor offers also the following two groups of poems by children. Alice O. Henderson, the daughter of William P. and Alice Corbin Henderson, of Chicago, dictated her imagistic poems, in exactly their present form, between her sixth and eighth years. In the poems of Richard Untermeyer, who is now seven, some of the phrases were transposed, and rhymes added, by his father, Mr. Louis Untermeyer.