

THE NEWDIGATE

PRIZE POEM

1935



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CANTERBURY

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THE NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM, 1935

BY

ALLAN W. PLOWMAN (O.E.)

THE QUEEN'S COLLEGE

BASIL BLACKWELL · OXFORD

MD · CCCC · XXXV

CANTERBURY

O GOD, if there Thou be,
O God, if Thou canst see
the modern pilgrim woo (apparently profaning)
vanished figure vainly, vanished face
of innocence, when innocence its race
hath ended, pilgrim bear without complaining
brilliant offspring from the winsome brain,
bearing undreamt pain, because out-pacing
dimly-dimpling image (rippling, chasing
ever over conscious-edge)—then deign
to be no jealous God that he should find
no prayer except in rhyme,
no faith except in mind.

Prometheus mocks the vulture Time,
for freedom shall he see,
his Herculean beauty sets him free.

Not freedom such as pilgrims knew who knelt
before the ancient Canterbury God:
not beauty such as pilgrims felt
as pleasantly they trod
the pleasant road from London town,
by Sidenbourne and Broughton-under-Blee,

and down
Bob-up-and-down,
and up
Bob-up-and-down,
to where St. Thomas kept his blessed state—

but freedom such as comforts one who knocked
eager upon cathedral gate,
and found within for loneliness no home,
none for the mind misunderstanding mocked.
For, laughed at, you may laugh at seriousness,
your irony express :
and though the saints have lost their conjurer's power
and miracles are out of fashion, yet
the modern pilgrim thinks at least to get
aesthetic pleasure from Bell-Harry tower.

In such idyllic irony content
did Gavin wander o'er the paths of Kent
in company with Geoffrey. Being near
to Canterbury, argued with his friend
what Canterbury means, and what it meant.
Geoffrey and Gavin both were second year
at Christ Church (well-played, Islip !) therefore knew
philosophy of Canterbury Quad ;
but Geoffrey, unlike Gavin, never grew
in knowledge of the Oxford name for God.

In sanctity of modal harmony
Geoffrey worshipped feudal swallow
sailing in chaucerian sky,
cuckoo calling from the hollow
when the springtime (say) was by—
bird of ear more than of eye,
thrill-toned thrush, retiring wren,
all the birds that always fly
from the poetaster's pen.
Worshipped. Sometimes wondered how
Nature taught the Lesbian cow
Sapphic tricks—not yet could find
flaws in Canterbury chimes,
crosses, errors underlined.
But Gavin was a poet, wept in maniac rhymes,
a consciousness complete with furniture,
yet not a furnished room :
steel-tubing, brilliant, lacking unity
of dusted victorian horsehair gloom :
never libelled brain in *patresnostri*.
never labelled reason as diseaseful,
never prayed in mythical cathedral—
(futile, faithless, leave your prayers unsaid,
sing a song of snakebites before you go to bed :
when vipers sting you dead
no saint shall you be made).
He longed to be some unimagined metaphor,

to ovum as a fiery sperm to come,
conceive the perfect image
before his mind be dumb :
with song to check the planets as they move,
to swirl them into patterns for his love,
to melt with singing centuries of ice,
with laughter dwarf the thunderbolts that burst,
to turn his temporal hell to a paradise,
outdo eternity—what might suffice
to satiate insatiable thirst ?
outdo eternity—see sneering tomb,
sensation bound by flesh and flesh by time ?
His words were fluttering leaves,
floating from agonised trees
in lyrical heaps of leaves like these,
or nearly these . . .

Then learned Geoffrey told the ancient tale
(romantic erudition !)
of Roman Durovernum,
Cantwaraburgh, the town o' the men of Kent
(o rare pedantradition !)
recited names of those, so innocent,
whose hand to worthless gems desirous went :

King Lucius and Saxon Ethelbert,
Augustine, Odo, Conrad and St. Anselm,

William the English, and he, William of Sens,
Roger, Bishop of York, Folliot, Jocelyn . . .

Roger, Bishop of York, Folliot, Jocelyn
visited Henry at Bur. A dazed beast
in Henry stirred, of a sudden blazed :
“ Curse on you all ! curse on your cowardly ways !
Will no-one rid me of this low-born priest ? ”

Randolph de Broc at Saltwood was full with hate
for Becket. There four knights swore to fulfil
what they considered to be their sovereign's will.
Messengers rode to stay their haste—too late.

Archbishop Becket knew of the danger near.
But Canterbury sang with welcoming song.
“ My people, not to this, to God's city we belong.
Who sees that city's gates may cast out fear.

De Broc be overthrown, as thus I fling
this candle to the ground below !
May Christ curse all who sow
discord between me and the King ! ”

In the banquet-hall of his palace Becket dined,
and drinking more wine than usual, said :
“ Who has much blood to shed,
he needs must drink much wine.”

Then Henry's knights burst in with furious words—
the exiled bishops absolved or he to die !
“ No sword about my head can terrify
me from obedience to the Pope my Lord ! ”

The knights ran back to the down-arching sycamore
for swords and coats of mail, in murderous madness.
“ My friends, turn not my church into a fortress.
Let in my monks, nor close the cloister door.”

Into the chapel of St. Benedict trod
the knights with clashing, accusing cry.
“ You call for the traitor Becket ? Here am I,
no traitor, but Archbishop and priest of God.”

The dimness slithered around him. Then
he felt on his breast the axe-blade of Fitzurse.
“ For Church I willingly die. Be warned, I curse
in God Almighty's name who touch my men ! ”

In sacreligious fear they tried to bear
the martyr away, who flung De Tracy down :
“ Thou profligate wretch, Fitzurse !

My cause, my crown
I give, St. Denis of France, to thy holy care ! ”

Then cried the murderers : “ Strike ! Ferez ! ”—and one

resistless sword-swing struck him prostrate.
" Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.
I readily die for Thy Church, for Thy blessed Son."

Thus was their deed accomplished, their duty done . . .

In conscious satirical bathos Gavin sang :
" Tom, Tom, the merchant's son,
stole—" but Geoffrey first :—
" This shrine with flaming Truth is crowned.
Take off thy sceptic shoes, for this is holy ground.
Forget thy babble-brain, thy bubble-burst,
thy lyric bone, thy musical despair.
Canst thou, by Beauty taught,
behold this shrine so fair,
this seed of the English bloom of Christ,
this cross where faith anew is sacrificed,
which miracles even in England wrought,
(not superstition kills the creeping dread
of death)—and yet canst curse the " criminal Head "
that thou, alas, art not as other men ?

Man is not merely clever
lives by brain alone :
a something lives for ever
beyond vibrating bone.

Thou foolish Gavin ! leave
thy song unsung, mourn
no more in song, weave
no more in silk, torn
beyond repair : sigh
no more I beg, grieve
no more in rhyme : born
for loveliness, die
in happiness. O thou, whom dead,
immortal death pursued, in vain hadst fled.
Thou lovest as the blessed martyr Thomas,
yet never pray to Him whose name is Love.
Then ' Haste to the Church of Christ, and enter in,
so shall ye find a shriving for your sin.' "

And Gavin answered : " Sweet
muezzin Geoffrey, hear
my song unsung, feet
that trample silk, tread
the secret path, tears
that lave the soul, dead . . .

You say, ' You love as did St. Thomas, yet
pray not to Him whose name is Love '—
I love ? Yes, I have met
with bright and bitter smart, and I have worshipped
witchery of Autumn in the heart, or shaped

the awful gold of falling leaf
in fantasies with smoke from distant fires,
thrilling vibrant evening, filling life
with golden and fantastical desires.

Yes—

Nothing (they told me),
nothing (they said)
half so beautiful
half so good
as the lipped lovesomeness
in the lone wood—

I know it! I know it!
Who more deserves
to feel the red tickle-tang
on the bared nerves
than the young poet,
ere in biology
(learned decrepitude)
all his love-aptitude
turn intellectual,
shadowy (told me, Nothing, they said)
flicker away, away—

But even so,
is sexual love your love divine?
the broken hymen broken bread?
or Henry's bed St. Thomas' shrine?

I love, as did St. Thomas?—Who am I?
Go ask the sun, who knows that when he dies
(as Science says he must), then all mankind,
gasping fish-like to cynical, shrivelled skies,
must wither also, why he sheds below
his crimson life to lengthen human days,
nor fosters in himself his rays,
since men must perish, whether or no
he makes his sacrifice—and you may find
to that an answer ere you may
to this:—why, being I,
I know not who I am, nor what, nor why.
In dreams at times I see for half a flash
the splendid truth of my identity,
before the lightning snaps, and leaves an ash
of insignificant nonentity.

St. Thomas, blessed martyr?—I can be
a martyr if I like. Say I'm a Moslem
opium-dozed, who hates his wife, for she
is ugly, filthy, stinking—and they say
that if I die
straightway I fly
into a clean and lovely houri's bed
in heaven. For thee, O Allah! lo, I die!
Amuck! amuck! quick kill me, strike my head,
ere I strike yours! . . . A blessed martyr? Nay,
no martyr, but a selfish madman I.

Or like St. Thomas pray?—

'Come pass the passing day
with something more substantial than a prayer.
Prayer never yet prevented sinful birth
when once the maid conceived; but wine repairs
the terror-broken conscience. Let them swear
by gloomy Christ who will,
for we shall swear by Bacchus, god of mirth!
Come, comrades, pass the wine, and drink your fill!' . . .
These, I agree, are childish words:
no Dionysian I—not yet can bear
threnodial burden of your 'Lord of Lords.'

To Him whose name is Love?—

Designless, wasteful, deathful, Life evolves,
diseased in body and devoid of mind,
to bafflement unjust, to suffering blind,
the Devil dead and nothing else that solves
the problem why we are, why world revolves,
why, if there be a Purpose, none can find
a just and loving Godhead who designed
such apathy and hate. And man resolves
alone to pity man's unhappy lot:
murderous, yet behind whose murderous mask
a glory shines: not Eden-fallen, not
undamned, by chance a God.

And so I ask,

if this be His divine, perfecting plan,
why God should seem less merciful than Man."

Thus Gavin ended. Then—
Sudden a flash, blinding,
knowledge, a knowing, finding,
fairest cathedral in this fairest isle !
shrieking of meteors in the excessive night,
innocence childlike dazzling as God's sight,
Promethean beauty born of the child's smile,
where Canterbury's purging splendour cries
"Hosanna !" to the splendour of the skies ;
metaphor unimagined, the sudden flame,
burning away of doubt, the bright shame,
kneeling on dust and ashes, the scorched pride,
searing vision of Truth, of Christ's bride,
Henry penitent kneeling, the monk's lash,
cloisters scourging, horse-hair, the bells' clash,
Gavin penitent feeling the sweet blood,
evening, martyrdom, glory, the One God . . .

God of holy Canterbury,
God of Gavin, hear my prayer :
pity my complexity,
suffer me to come to Thee.

Amen.

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