

Poems and Songs

by

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Introduction: Björnson As A Lyric Poet	3
Part I	9
Part II	26
Part III	42
Part IV	76
Part V	100
Part VI	130
NOTES	145

Introduction: Björnson As A Lyric Poet

I lived far more than e'er I sang;
Thought, ire, and mirth unceasing rang
 Around me, where I gusted;
To be where loud life's battles call
For me was well-nigh more than all
 My pen on page arrested.

What's true and strong has growing-room,
And will perhaps eternal bloom,
 Without black ink's salvation,
And he will be, who least it planned,
But in life's surging dared to stand,
The best bard for his nation.

A life seventy-seven years long and but two hundred pages of lyrical production, more than half of which was written in about a dozen years! The seeming disproportion is explained by the lines just quoted from the poem *_Good Cheer_*, with which Björnson concluded the first edition of his *_Poems and Songs_*. Alongside of these stanzas, in which the cause of his popularity and powerful influence is also unconsciously revealed, may well be placed the following one from *_The Poet_*, which discloses to us the larger conception of the mission that Björnson himself in all his work and life, no less than in his lyrics, so finely fulfilled:

The poet does the prophet's deeds;
In times of need with new life pregnant,
When strife and suffering are regnant,
His faith with light ideal leads.
The past its heroes round him posts,
He rallies now the present's hosts,
 The future opes
 Before his eyes,
 Its pictured hopes
 He prophesies.
Ever his people's forces vernal
The poet frees, --by right eternal.

"The best bard for his nation" is he who "does the prophet's deeds," who "rallies now the present's hosts," and "frees, --by right eternal." Poet and prophet Björnson was, but more than

all else the leader of the Norwegian people, "where loud life's battles call," through conflict unto liberation and growth. It has been said that twice in the nineteenth century the national soul of Norway embodied itself in individual men,--during the first half in Henrik Wergeland and during the second half in Björnstjerne Björnson. True as this is of the former, it is still more true of the latter, for the history of Norway shows that the soul of its people expresses itself best through will and action. Björnson throughout all his life willed and wrought so much for his country, that he could give relatively little time and power to lyrical self-expression.

But Björnson strikingly represented the past of Norway as well as his contemporary age. He was a modern blending of the heroic chieftain and the gifted skald of ancient times. He was the first leader of his country in a period when the battles of the spirit on the fields of politics and economics, ethics, and esthetics were the only form of conflict,--a leader evoking, developing, and guiding the powers of his nation into fuller and higher life. In his many-sidedness Björnson was also in his time the first skald of his people, almost equally endowed with genius as a narrative, a dramatic, and a lyric poet; with talents scarcely less remarkable as an orator, a theater-director, a journalistic tribune of the people (his newspaper articles amounted, roughly estimated, to ten thousand book-pages), a letter-writer, and a conversationalist.

If, furthermore, we take into account also Björnson's labors and achievements in the domain of action more narrowly considered, it is no wonder that his *Poems and Songs* make only a small volume. Examining the book more closely, we find that three-quarters of its pages were written before the year 1875, so that the lyrical output, here published, of the thirty-four years thereafter amounts to but fifty pages. From the year 1874 on in Björnson's life the chieftain supplanted the skald, so far as lyrical utterance was concerned. He was leading his nation in thought and action on the fields of theology and religion, of politics, economics, and social reform; he was tireless in making speeches, in writing letters and newspaper articles; his poetic genius flowed out copiously in the dramatic and epic channels of his numerous modern plays, novels, and stories.

That soon after 1874 Björnson passed through a crisis in his personal thought and inner life was probably, in view of the sufficient explanation suggested above, without influence in lessening his production of short poems. This crisis was in his religious beliefs. His father was a clergyman in the Lutheran State Church, and from his home in western Norway Björnson brought with him to Christiania in 1850 fervent Christian faith of the older orthodox sort. Here his somewhat somber religion was soon made brighter and more tender by the adoption of Grundtvig's teachings, and until past mid-life he remained a sincere Christian in the fullest sense, as is repeatedly shown in his lyrics. But in the years just before 1877 study of modern science and philosophy, of the history of the Church and dogma, led him to become an evolutionist, an agnostic theist. Nevertheless, he ever practiced the Christian art of life, as he tried to realize his ideals of truth, justice, and love of humanity. This large and simple Christian art of life, in distinction from the dogmas of the Church, he early sung in lines which sound no less true to the keynote of his later years:

Love thy neighbor, to Christ be leal!
Crush him never with iron-heel,
 Though in the dust he's lying!
All the living responsive await
Love with power to recreate,
 Needing alone the trying.

II

The quantity, then, of Björnson's short poems is small. Their intrinsic worth is great. Their influence in Norway has been broad and deep, they are known and loved by all. If lyrical means only melodious, "singable," they possess high poetic value and distinction. In a unique degree they have inspired composers of music to pour out their strains. When a Scandinavian reads Björnson's poems, his ears ring with the familiar melodies into which they have almost sung themselves.

Here is not the place for technical analysis of the external poetic forms. A cursory inspection will show that Björnson's are wonderfully varied, and that the same form is seldom, if ever, precisely duplicated. In rhythm and alliteration, rhyme sequence and the grouping of lines into stanzas, the form in each case seems to be determined by the content, naturally, spontaneously. Yet for one who has intimately studied these verses until his mind and heart vibrate responsively, the words of all have an undefinable melody of their own, as it were, one dominant melody, distinctly Björnsonian. This unity in variety, spontaneous and characteristic, is not found in the earlier poems not included in this volume. So far as is known, Björnson's first printed poem appeared in a newspaper in 1852. It and other youthful rhymes of that time extant in manuscript, and still others as late as 1854, are interesting by reason of their contrast with his later manner; the verse-form has nothing personal, the melodies are those of older poets. It is in the lyrics of *_Synnöve Solbakken_*, written in 1857 or just before, that Björnson for the first time sings in his own forms his own melody.

Style and diction are the determining factors in the poetic form of lyric verse, along with the perhaps indistinguishable and undefinable quality of melodiousness. Of Björnson's style or manner in the larger sense it must be said that it is not subjectively lyrical. He is not disposed to introspective dwelling on his own emotions and to profuse self-expression without a conscious purpose. In general he must have some definite objective end in view, some occasion to celebrate for others, some "cause" to champion, the mood of another person or of other persons, real or fictitious, to reproduce synthetically in a combination of thoughts, feelings, similes, and sounds. In his verses words do not breed words, nor figures beget figures unto lyric breadth and vagueness. When Björnson was moved to make a poem, he was so filled with the end, the occasion, the cause, the mood to be reproduced, that he was impatient of any but the most significant words and left much to suggestion. Often the words seem to be in one another's way, and they are not related with grammatical precision. Thus in the original more than in the translation of the poem *_Norway, Norway!_* the first strophe of which is:

Norway, Norway,
Rising in blue from the sea's gray and green,
Islands around like fledglings tender,
Fjord-tongues with slender
Tapering tips in the silence seen.
Rivers, valleys,
Mate among mountains, wood-ridge and slope
Wandering follow. Where the wastes lighten,
Lake and plain brighten,
Hallow a temple of peace and hope.
Norway, Norway,
Houses and huts, not castles grand,
Gentle or hard,
Thee we guard, thee we guard,
Thee, our future's fair land.

Such abrupt brevity of expression, not uncommon among Norwegian peasants, was no doubt natural to Björnson, but was confirmed by the influence of the Old Norse sagas and skaldic poetry. The latter may also have increased his use of alliteration, masterly not only in the direct imitation of the old form, as in *„Bergliot“*, but also in the enrichment of the music of his rhymed verse in modern forms. Conciseness of style in thought and word permitted no lyrical elaboration of figures or descriptions; it restricted the poet to brief hints of the ways his spirit would go, and along which he wished to guide that of the hearer or reader. Herein is the source of much of the power of Björnson's patriotic songs and poems of public agitation. Those who read or hear or sing them are made to think, or at least to feel, the unwritten poetry between the lines. Scarcely less notable is this paucity in the expression of wealth of thought and feeling in the memorial and other more individual poems.

Björnson's diction corresponds to the quality of style thus briefly characterized. The modern Norwegian language has no considerable, highly developed special vocabulary for poetic use. From the diction of prose the poet must quarry and carve the verbal material for his verse. It sometimes seems, indeed, as if it were hard for Björnson to find the right block and fit it, nicely cut, into his line. In describing his diction critics have used the figures of hewing and of hammer-strokes, but then have said that it is not so much laborious effort we hear as the natural falling into place of words heavy with thought and feeling. Here it is that translation must so often come short of faithful reproduction. The choice of words in relation to rhythm and euphony is a mystery difficult to interpret even in the poet's own language. If we try to analyze the verse of great poets, we frequently find, beyond what is evidently the product of conscious design, effects of suggestion and sound which could not be calculated and designed. The verbal material seems hardly to be amenable to the poet's control, but rather to be chosen, shaped, and placed involuntarily by the thought and the mood. *„The Ocean“* is a good example of the distinctive power and beauty of Björnson's diction.

Such, then, in melody, rhythm, style, and diction is the form of Björnson's verse: compact, reticent, suggestive, without elaborate verbal ornamentation, strong with "the long-vibrating power of the deeply felt, but half-expressed." It challenges and stimulates the soul of the hearer or reader to an intense activity of appropriation, which brings a fine reward.

III

What, now, is the content that finds expression in this form? As we turn the pages from the beginning, we first meet lyrics that may be called personal, not utterances of Björnson's individual self, but taken from his early tales and the drama *_Halte Hulda_*, with strains of love, of religious faith, of dread of nature, and of joy in it, of youthful longing; then after two patriotic choral songs and a second group of similar personal poems from *_A Happy Boy_* follow one on a patriotic subject with historical allusions, a memorial poem on J. L. Heiberg, and one descriptive, indeed, of the ocean, but filled with the human feelings and longings it arouses; then come a lyric personal to Björnson, and one that is not. As we progress, we pass through a similar succession of descriptive, personal, or memorial poems, some of religious faith, historical ballads, lyrical romances, patriotic and festival choral songs, poems in celebration of individual men and women, living or dead, and towards the end poems, like the *_Psalms_*, of deep philosophic thought suffused with emotion.

Now these subjects may be gathered into a small number of groups: love, religious faith and thought, moods personal to the poet, patriotism,--love of country, striving for its welfare, pride in Norway's history, and joy in the beauty and grandeur of its scenery. The occasional songs and poems in celebration of great personalities, --whether they were of high station and renown, or lowly and unfamed, --or for festivals, earnest or jovial, are nearly all conceived in the spirit of patriotism,--love of Norway, its historic past, its present, its future. They may be social songs memorial or political poems, ballads or lyrical romances,--all are inspired by and inspire love of country.

Not very many of Björnson's lyrics have love as their subject. From his tales, novels, and dramas we know that his understanding of love was comprehensive and subtle, yet this volume contains but few of the love-lyrics of strong emotion, which Björnson must have felt, if not written. He was a man of will and action with altruistic ideals; sexual love could not be the whole nor the center of life for him.

Nor are the purely religious poems numerous, although Christian faith is at once the ground and the atmosphere of his lyrics in the earlier period, and some of the latest are expressions of a broad and deep philosophy of life. "Love thy neighbor!" and "Light, Love, Life" in deeds were characteristic of Björnson, rather than the utterance of passive meditations of a theoretic nature on God and man's relation to Him.

Björnson's unflinching bent towards activity in behalf of others could not favor either the lyric outpouring of other purely personal moods. Such purely personal poems are then also relatively rare. Some of them, however, are most beautiful and deeply moving. Generally he frees himself in an epic or dramatic way from subjective introspection; he projects his feeling into another personality or sends it forth in choral song in terms of "we" and "our." The moods he does

express more directly for himself are vague youthful longing for the great and the instant, joyous trustfulness even in adversity and under criticism, love of parents, wife, family, and friends, faith in the future and in the power of the good to prevail.

By far the largest number of the *Poems and Songs* have as their subject patriotism in the broadest sense, a theme at once simple and complex. It is in them that the skald and chieftain so typically blend in one. Of this group the influence has been widest and deepest. In his oration at the unveiling of the statue of Wergeland in Christiania, Björnson spoke of him and of Norway's constitution as growing up together; with reference to this it has been maintained that we have still greater right to say that Björnson and Norway's full freedom and independence grew up together. The truth of the statement is very largely due to Björnson's patriotic poems. Through them the poet-prophet interpreted for his nation the historic past and the evolving present, and forecast the future. Simplifying the meaning of life, he accomplished the mission which he himself made the ideal of *The Poet*, and became for his own people the liberalizing teacher and molder, leading them to freedom in thought and action, in social and political life. Of this large and seemingly complex group of patriotic lyrics,--whether they be on its history, or on contemporaneous events and deeds of individuals with political significance; or on men, both known and unknown to fame, who had made and were making Norway great; or on historical, political, and other national festivals; or on the country, its land and sea and fjords and forests and fields and cities, in aspects more genial or more stern, --whether they be poems of the individual or social and choral songs, manorial poems or ballads or lyrical romances, or descriptions of Norway's scenery,--the unifying simple theme is Norway to be loved and labored for.

Not a single poem is, however, merely descriptive of external nature. Björnson's relation to nature is indeed more intimate than that of any other Norwegian writer of his time, but here also he is epic and dramatic rather than subjectively lyrical. He sees and hears through what is external, and his feeling for and with nature is but a profounder looking into the soul of his nation or the inner life of other human beings. For him Norway's scenery is filled with the glory of the nation's past, the promise of its future, or the needs of the present. The poems that contain nature descriptions are primarily patriotic. In the national hymn *Yes, We Love*, it is the nation, its history and its future, which with the land towers as a whole before his vision; in *Romsdal* the scenery frames the people, their character and life. More personal poems, as *To Molde* or *A Meeting*, are not merely descriptive; in the former childhood's memories and the love of friends fill the scene, while in the latter the freshly and tenderly drawn snow-landscape is but the setting for a vivid picture of a deceased friend.

The contents of this volume befit the verse-form, as if each were made by and for the other. The subjects are simple, large, weighty; the form is compact, strong, suggestive. Björnson is distinctly not subjectively lyrical, but has a place in the first rank "as a choral lyric poet and as an epic lyric poet." (Collin.) Georg Brandes wrote of him many years ago: "In few [fields] has he put forth anything so individual, unforgettable, imperishable, as in the lyric field."

Part I

SYNNOVE'S SONG (FROM SYNNOVE SOLBAKKEN)

Have thanks for all from our childhood's day,
Our play together in woodland roaming.
I thought that play would go on for aye,
Though life should pass to its gloaming.

I thought that play would go on for aye,
From bowers leading of leafy birches
To where the Solbakke houses lay,
And where the red-painted church is.

I sat and waited through evenings long
And scanned the ridge with the spruces yonder;
But darkening mountains made shadows throng,
And you the way did not wander.

I sat and waited with scarce a doubt:
He'll dare the way when the sun's descended.
The light shone fainter, was nearly out,
The day in darkness had ended.

My weary eye is so wont to gaze,
To turn its look it is slow in learning;
No other landmark it seeks, nor strays,
Beneath the brow sorely burning.

They name a place where I help may find,
And fain to Fagerli church would guide me;
But try not thither to move my mind;
He sits there ever beside me.

--But good it is, that full well I know,
Who placed the houses both here and yonder,
Then cut a way through the woods so low
And let my eye on it wander.

But good it is that full well I know,
Who built the church and to pray invited,
And made them meeting in pairs to go
Before the altar united.

THE HARE AND THE FOX
(FROM SYNNOVE SOLBAKKEN)

The fox lay still by the birch-tree's root
In the heather.

The hare was running with nimble foot
O'er the heather.

Was ever brighter a sunshine-day,
Before, behind me, and every way,
O'er the heather!

The fox laughed low by the birch-tree's root
In the heather.

The hare was running with daring foot
O'er the heather.

I am so happy for everything!
Hallo! Why go you with mighty spring
O'er the heather?

The fox lay hid by the birch-tree's root
In the heather.

The hare dashed to him with reckless foot
O'er the heather.

May God have mercy, but this is queer! --
Good gracious, how dare you dance so here
O'er the heather?

NILS FINN
(FROM HALTE HULDA)
(see Note 1)

Now little Nils Finn had away to go;
The skis were too loose at both heel and toe.
--"That's too bad!" rumbled yonder.

Then little Nils Finn in the snow set his feet:
"You ugliest troll, you shall never me cheat!"
--"Hee-ho-ha!" rumbled yonder.

Nils Finn with his staff beat the snow till it blew
"Your trollship, now saw you how hapless it flew?"
--"Hit-li-hu!" rumbled yonder.

Nils Finn pushed one ski farther forward with might;
The other held fast,--he reeled left and right.
--"Pull it up!" rumbled yonder.

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