

## THE NATIVITY OF JESUS IN POETRY

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In all literary endeavor there is scarcely a more thankless task than that of writing about poetry in cold, every-day prose. Poetry has in itself been called a language. It is the language of emotion, of truth and beauty set in the music of verse, and, as is often the case with other languages, ideas can be expressed, thoughts and feelings suggested and pictures painted in it that defy adequate translation. And this is especially true of the poetry of Christmas, for poets ever strive to match in elegance of expression the loftiness and nobility of their subject.

The first Christmas is itself a living and immortal poem, a poem written not in meager human words, but in sublime facts. Its center and soul is truth, even the Eternal Truth comes among us as a little Babe. Its beauty is Jesus, the All-Beautiful, born of an Immaculate Virgin Mother. Its joy is the Joy of Angels, its music not of earth, but of heaven: of heavenly choirs singing to the Lord of glory on the hills of Bethlehem. Naturally, poets were not slow to recognize this inexhaustible beauty of Christmas. They saw in the humble yet glorious birth of our divine Saviour a subject worthy of the purest strains their hearts could sing and art could mold. And so we find them telling over and over again, with every range of sentiment and from every point of view, the mysteries and the joys of that sacred night.

Volumes have been written and collected on this beautiful subject, and each new Christian poet seems to feel it his duty to lay at the feet of the Master of all song, a hymn or carol in honor of His nativity. But in the narrow limits of this article mention cannot be made even of all the better known poems, much less of all those that deserve to be known. Nor is this account intended to be in any way an appreciation or criticism of the poems considered. It is proposed here merely to recall, or perchance to point out, to the reader some of the beauty of Christmas which poets have found and sung in English verse. And as far as space permits, the poems will be quoted directly, in order that a clearer and more adequate idea may be had of them than could be otherwise conveyed.

The singular glory of the birth of Christ, the fact that He came to us through Mary, a Maiden yet a Mother, has inspired



The Nativity—Correggio



in many an ancient poet hymns of praise and admiration of her who is,

“Fair and fresh as rose on thorn,  
Lily-white, clean with pure virginity.”

The following is one of the most simple and touching of these, and is its own best excuse for being quoted entirely here:

“I sing a Maiden  
That is makeless;<sup>1</sup>  
King of all kings  
To her Son she ches;<sup>2</sup>  
He came also<sup>3</sup> still  
There His mother was,  
As dew in April  
That falleth on the grass.  
He came also still  
To His mother’s bower,  
As dew in April  
That falleth on the flower.  
He came also still  
There His mother lay,  
As dew in April  
That falleth on the spray.  
Mother and maiden  
Was never one but she:  
Well may such a lady  
God’s Mother be.”

There are several beautiful carols by C. G. Rossetti which tell with deep and tender feeling how Our Lord “emptied Himself taking the form of a servant.” The one beginning “In the bleak mid-winter,” pictures our Saviour, whom heaven cannot contain, coming to us satisfied with the utter poverty of a humble stable.

“Enough for Him whom angels worshipped night and day,  
A breast full of milk and a manger of hay.”

Angels may have been there in the lowly room,

“But only His mother in her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped her Beloved with a kiss.”

In another delicate song from the same heart, we find suggested the love which brought the King of Heaven down to earth as a little Baby.

“Lo, new-born Jesus,  
Soft and weak and small,

<sup>1</sup> Matchless.

<sup>2</sup> Chose.

<sup>3</sup> As.

## The Nativity of Jesus in Poetry

Wrapped in baby's bands  
By His mother's hands,  
Lord God of all!"

He is the God of Mary who presses Him to her breast; God of the shepherds who hasten to Him; Lord of the angels and of the star.

"Lo, new-born Jesus,  
Loving great and small,  
Love's free sacrifice,  
Opening arms and eyes  
To one and all!"

In a poem full of love and longing, Phillips Brooks shows us the little town of Bethlehem asleep among the hills under the glory of that Eastern sky, while in her dark streets shines the ever-lasting Light.

"The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in the to-night,  
For Christ is born of Mary."

And while mortals are ignorant of the birth of their Redeemer, the angels keep their watch of loving admiration.

"How silently, how silently  
The wondrous gift is given.  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven.  
\* \* \* \* \*

We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Emmanuel."

Again, other poets have sung the faith and joy of those simple shepherds who with Mary and Joseph were the first to believe in and adore their infant God, and, as St. Luke tells us, "to understand concerning this Child." In the "Fourth Shepherd," Joyce Kilmer imagines a repentant companion of the usual happy three, whose heart is heavy and troubled in spite of the beauty and peace around him. There is rest for man and beast, but bitter tears of regret for the past are his only comfort. He sees two strangers approaching—the man "so old and mild"; the Maid "so frail and pityful and white"—and his generous heart is touched.

"Good people, since the tavern door  
Is shut to you, come here instead.  
See, I have cleansed my stable floor,  
And piled fresh hay to make a bed."

As the night grows late the sky becomes far more beautiful than he had ever seen it before. The heavens seem to shed light everywhere, and the song of the angels echoes softly around.

“At dawn beside my drowsy flock  
What winged music have I heard!  
But now the clouds with singing rock,  
As if the sky were turning bird.”

He sees the stable shining against the sky and his three old companions hastening to the door, where angels kneel and pray. He feels that he cannot, yet he must go with them.

“Lord, who am I that I should know—  
Lord, God be merciful to me.

O Whiteness whiter than the fleece  
Of new-washed sheep on April sod;  
O Breath of Life—O Prince of Peace,  
O Lamb of God, O Lamb of God!”

Edmond Bolton has left a beautiful description of the music which the shepherds heard when those heavenly choirs began their glad chant of praise on that holy night. The poem is called the “Shepherds Song,” and begins:

“Sweet music, sweeter far  
Than any song is sweet—  
Sweet music, heavenly rare,  
Mine ears, O peers, doth greet.”

He calls upon his flock to listen, and tells them that it is not he who makes music for them to shorten the winter’s night:

“But voices most divine  
Make blissful harmony;  
Voices that seem to shine,  
For what else clears the sky?”

But still it is not from the brilliant eastern stars that the light comes forth. Rather it is because “the heavens have come down on earth to live.” And the song goes up to heaven:

“Glory to glory’s King,  
And peace all men among.”

Then the angel tells his joyful tidings:

“For lo, the world’s great Shepherd now is born  
A blessed Babe, an Infant full of power:  
After long night uprisen is the morn,  
Renouncing Beth’em in the Saviour.

Sprung is the perfect day,  
 By prophets seen afar:  
 Sprung is the mirthful May  
 Which winter cannot mar."

There is a "Shepherds Hymn," by Richard Crashaw, which is such a simple, delicately beautiful out-pouring of souls full of faith and love that its length alone prevents quoting it completely here. The hymn begins with the chorus of shepherds singing this joyful call:

"Come, we shepherds, whose blest sight  
 Hath met Love's noon in nature's night;  
 Come, lift we up our loftier song,  
 And wake the sun that lies too long."

Long before the dawn of day,

"—we found out heaven's fairer Eye,  
 And kissed the cradle of our King."

One of the shepherds then describes the wondrous sight:

"Gloomy night embraced the place  
 Where the noble Infant lay.  
 The Babe looked up and showed His face:  
 In spite of darkness it was day.  
 It was Thy day, Sweet, and did rise  
 Not from the East, but from Thine eyes."

They wonder that a "cold and not too cleanly manger" is all the world offers to its King, and yet they know that He himself has chosen it. They see the seraphim standing by, and with glowing feathers from their wings covering Him to keep Him warm.

"For well they now can spare their wings,  
 Since Heaven itself lies here below."

But the Babe has not long to wait for sweet repose, and soon they see Him asleep on His Mother's breast.

"Sweet choice, said we; no way but so  
 Not to lie cold, yet sleep in snow."

The poem ends with a full chorus of welcome to the Infant King, expressing their deep admiration and tender love:

"Welcome, all wonders in one night,  
 Eternity shut in a span,  
 Summer in winter, day in night,  
 Heaven in earth, and God in man.  
 Great Little One! Whose all-embracing birth  
 Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth."

They, whose flock is their only wealth, long to offer Him some little gift. And so they promise the first flowers of May to Him :

“To Thee, dread Lamb, Whose love must keep  
The shepherds more than they the sheep.”

Each promises to bring a little lamb and some doves, for this is all they have,

“Till burnt at last in fire of Thy bright eyes,  
Ourselves become our own best sacrifice.”

Robert Southwell has left a peculiar and remarkably impressive poem for Christmas called the “Burning Babe.” In it he tells how he stood shivering in the cold of a winter’s night and suddenly felt a heat burst upon him that set even his heart aglow. As he looked up to see whence it came,

“A pretty Babe all burning bright did in the air appear.”  
The Babe was crying because none came to Him to warm their hearts or feel His fire, and He explained,

“My faultless breast the furnace is, the fuel, wounding thorns ;  
Love is the fire and sighs the smoke, the ashes shame and scorns ;  
The fuel Justice layeth on, and Mercy blows the coals ;  
The metal in this furnace wrought are men’s defiled souls ;  
For which as now on fire I am, to work them to their good ;  
So will I melt into a bath, to wash them in my blood.  
With this he vanished out of sight and swiftly shrunk away ;  
And straight I called into mind that it was Christmas Day.”

Ben Jonson once said that he would willingly have destroyed much of his work to have written the “Burning Babe.” Nevertheless his own gifted pen did not let the beauty of Christmas pass unsung, and in his “Hymn on the Nativity of My Saviour” —beginning :

“I sing the birth was born to-night,  
The Author both of life and light,”

—he expressed a deep sense of gratitude that has made it deservedly popular. The Son of God comes to bring salvation to us all :

“He whom the whole world cannot take,  
The Word, which heaven and earth did make.”

is now laid in a manger. The Father’s will is the Son’s: the Father willed it and the Word was made flesh.

“What comfort by Him do we win,  
Who made Himself the price of sin,  
To make us heirs of glory !



To see this Babe all innocence  
A martyr born in our defence,  
Can man forget the story?"

Giles Fletcher, too, has left us a poem just brimming over with joy and thanksgiving. It is called by the opening line, "Who can forget—never to be forgot." He speaks of the time when angels came from heaven, and the stars of heaven looked down to see another sun at mid-night rise on earth. God who created man now Himself becomes like a mortal man. He is a little Babe and cannot speak, yet with His word He had before created the world. His mother bears Him in her arms, but He,

"With one hand the vaults of heaven could shake;  
See how small room my infant Lord doth take,  
Whom all the world is not enough to hold!  
Who of His years or of His age hath told?  
Never such age so young, never a child so old."

Yet He is scarcely born before a cruel tyrant seeks His life—a few days old and already banished:

"Not able yet to go and forced to fly."

But still there were some who believed in Him and loved Him:

"The angels carolled loud their song of peace,  
The curs'ed oracles were stricken dumb;  
To see their Shepherd the poor shepherds press;  
To see their King the kingly sophies<sup>1</sup> come.  
And them to guide unto his Master's home,  
A star comes dancing up the Orient,  
That springs for joy over the strawy tent,  
Where gold to make their Prince a crown they all present."

He is a Prince indeed, but far different is the pomp and glory of His coming from that of earthly princes. As Joyce Kilmer expressed it:

"The kings of the earth are men of might,  
\* \* \* \* \*  
But the King of heaven who made them all,  
Is fair and gentle and very small;  
He lies in the straw by the oxen's stall—  
Let them think of Him to-day."

And Robert Southwell in his "New Prince, New Pomp" describes with tender love and sympathy the humble birth of the "Pilgrim." But do not despise Him, he begs, for lying there so miserably poor.

<sup>1</sup> Wise men.

"This stable is a Prince's court  
The crib His chair of state."

Let Christians, then, who can understand something of this divine humility, come to Him with joy,

"And highly praise His humble pomp  
Which He from heaven doth bring."

But Mary and Joseph with the angels and the shepherds are not the only happy adorers sung by poets in their Christmas hymns, for the three great kings from the East have found an equally honored place in song and story. In poems both old and new is sounded the praise of their boundless faith and trust in God that led them from their own homes far into a foreign land, at the uncertain bidding of a strange star which spoke its message only to faithful hearts. Aubrey de Vere has given a remarkable picture of them in a Christmas carol, beginning,

"They leave the land of gems and gold,  
The shining portals of the East;  
For Him, the woman's Seed foretold,  
They leave the revel and the feast."

They cast aside their scepters and their kingly crowns and cross the lonely deserts to kneel before the new-born Babe.

"True kings are those who thus forsake  
Their kingdom for the Eternal King.  
\* \* \* \* \*  
He, He is King and He alone  
Who lifts that infant hand to bless;  
Who makes His mother's knee His throne,  
Yet rules the stary wilderness."

Thus do poets sing of the beauty of that first Christmas. True, here are only a few poems from among the hundreds that have been written, and that deserve to be more widely known than they are today. But they all repeat in love and gratitude the "glad tidings of great joy" that have indeed been so "to all the people," and they touch our hearts with their tenderness and simple pathos, and quicken our devotion to the infant Saviour. They bring the first Christmas closer to us, and when the happy feast comes around each year, they make us see it not only in the light of a commemoration, but more as a fact, present and glorious.

But not only does poetry tell us of the birth of our Redeemer, for indeed all nature bears the same message to those

who will listen and understand. This is the idea which Phillips Brooks expresses when he sings that "Christmas Once is Christmas Still." Only once the sky broke its silence and filled the earth with song. Glory shone through the mid-night air, and angels spoke in human tongue. But even now "the silent sky is full of speech." The winds, the moon, the stars—all tell the Christmas story. Forest, field and hill are vocal with His name.

"Shall we not listen while they sing  
 This latest Christmas morn,  
 And music hear in everything,  
 And faithful hearts in tribute bring  
 To the great song which greets the King  
 Who comes when Christ is born?

\* \* \* \* \*

O angels sweet and splendid,  
 Throng in our hearts, and sing  
 The wonders which attend  
 The coming of the King;  
 Till we, too, boldly pressing  
 Where once the angel trod,  
 Climb Bethlehem—Hill of Blessing,  
 And find the Son of God."

—Bro. Humbert Kane, O. P.