*Thematic Guide to British Poetry* – Ruth Glancy

Introduction

Over the centuries, the British Isles has contributed a remarkable catalog of inventions and discoveries to human progress, but perhaps its most highly valued and enduring gift has been seven centuries of poetry. As the years roll on and the legacy of poems grows, how can we hope to find our way through such a vast wealth of verse, much of it as fresh, relevant, and compelling as it was when it was first composed? The purpose of this book is to offer a guide to students, teachers, librarians, and general readers who are interested in reading and studying poetry

from the point of view of its subject matter, the essential question of what it is “about.”

Collections of poetry are often referred to as “treasuries,” “garlands,” or “gardens,” attesting to the intrinsic value of a literary form that illuminates human activity in surprising and often unforgettable ways.

When we speak of a poem having a “theme,” we are referring to a poem that brings a particular human perspective to the subject matter. A poet can write an objective description of an event such as a wedding, or a natural creature such as a nightingale, but unless the poem expresses—overtly or subtly—the poet’s attitude to the subject, the poem does not have a theme. Compare, for example, John Clare’s poem “Mouse’s Nest” (1835) with Robert Burns’s poem “To a Mouse” (1785). Although both poems are included in this survey in the Nature section, only Burns’s poem has a “theme” that can be readily identified. Both poets describe the overturning of a mouse’s nest and the small creature’s discomfort.

But while Clare’s poem is simply descriptive of the nest and its owner (he finds the mother mouse “grotesque” and alien from him, thus hinting at the theme of man’s relationship to nature), Burns goes further in pondering this relationship. His exposing of the nest with his plow is an example of “man’s dominion,” trampling thoughtlessly over the neat, well-ordered lives of our fellow creatures. The central theme of the poem is thus a modern one: man’s responsibility to the created world. But Burns provides another theme as well, one that could place the poem among those that deal with fate, or ambition, or even regret. The sudden loss of the mouse’s home reminds him that people, too, often find their “best laid plans” swept away by chance. (John Steinbeck found the title for his novel Of Mice and Men [1937] in Burns’s poem, attesting to the universality of the theme.) Finally, Burns introduces the theme of regret and loss when he envies the little mouse its inability to grieve over its lost home or fear for future losses, as we do. Clare’s poem is “about” a mouse’s nest, but Burns’s poem is “about” the joys and sorrows that a consciousness of time and chance brings to human creatures. Of course, most poems express their theme less explicitly than does Burns’s “To a Mouse.” Poetic devices such as irony, tone, diction, rhythm, and rhyme are all employed by good poets to convey their particular view of human experience. Discovering a poem’s theme thus requires the reader to listen carefully to the poet’s unique voice.

Many poems have several themes. Are Shakespeare’s sonnets about love, or death, or time? Often they comment profoundly on all three, and readers will often disagree about which theme the poet intended to be uppermost. Gerard Manley Hopkins’s fine lyric “Pied Beauty” (1877) is a devotional poem reminding us to praise God for the beauties of the created world. The careful depiction of that world makes it also a “nature” poem, but in this survey the poem is discussed under “Beauty,” because while many poems are hymns of praise to the natural world, few poems draw our attention so memorably to the startling beauty of odd, irregular, even commonplace details: the colors on a trout’s side, the patchwork-quilt effect of fields, the irregular markings on a cow’s back. We think of poems about beauty as usually being hymns of praise to beautiful women (and therefore they are also often love poems), but the relationship between the beautiful object and the one who finds it beautiful can be explored in a variety of ways through poetry. This survey is thus not intended to be prescriptive; rather, it is intended to place the major poems in English literature into groups so that they may be usefully compared with others on that topic. Poems that lend themselves to other interpretations are cross-referenced to other themes in the survey.

Twenty-nine themes, arranged alphabetically, have been selected as being representative of the major concerns of British poets over seven centuries. Some themes, such as love, death, and nature, have remained universally popular with poets (these themes have been subdivided in an attempt to bring some order to the vast number of poems available). Others, such as the active and contemplative lives, seem to be less relevant today. Within each section, the poems are usually discussed chronologically so that readers can trace the development and decline of

interest in themes over the centuries. Often this development is linked to historical events—wars, religious upheaval, the Industrial Revolution—or to more gradual changes in human outlook and experience. Attitudes to marriage, for example, as dramatized in the poetry, have altered radically from Chaucer’s time to our own, but marriage is still of keen interest to poets.

Because of the huge number of excellent British poems, many of the discussions are very brief. The intention is not to provide a detailed analysis but rather to draw the reader’s attention to the poems that have added fresh insights and striking expression to that theme. Teachers are encouraged to use the survey as a source for essay or study topics that require students to compare poems on the same theme. Or themes maybe usefully compared; poems about the active and contemplative lives are often similar to those about innocence and experience, which in turn relate to poems about old age.

An index at the end of the Guide makes it easy to find all discussions of a poet, so the book may also be used for the study of individual poets or periods. Not included are the many poems written as tributes to other poets, the enormous number of such tributes making such a topic unmanageable.

Following each theme, the reader will find a list of the poems discussed in that section, arranged in order of the discussion, with a listing of some of the anthologies in which each poem can be found. Abbreviations for the anthologies correspond to those used in the Columbia Granger’s Index to Poetry in Anthologies (11th ed., Columbia University Press).

Many of the poems discussed in this survey are readily available in any standard collection of poetry (and there are literally hundreds of poetry anthologies; readers are advised to consult Granger’s Index for complete listings of books in which the poems can be found). Other poems are harder to find, but they have been included either because they contribute usefully to that particular theme, or because they have been overlooked by many anthologists and deserve to be better known. These poems can be found in editions of the collected works of a particular poet, rather than in large anthologies.

In an appendix at the end of the Guide, readers will find biographical sketches of the poets, briefly outlining their lives and literary interests. While short, these summaries will help students to place the poets in their time and milieu. Following that section, a bibliography carefully selected for students lists helpful critical studies of poetry to broaden the necessarily limited discussion of individual poems included here. In general, this survey concentrates on the poems’ expression of a theme rather than on technical matters of versification and poetic language, always

recognizing, however, that the two are interdependent in a good poem. As the eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope wisely said, “The sound must seem an echo to the sense.” In this brief survey, matters of “sound” must give way to the discussion of “sense.” Although the poet Edward Thomas is quite correct in saying that the best poetry cannot be paraphrased, many of the poems surveyed receive just such a cursory description.

The intention of this book is to provide a path for readers into the abundant world of British poetry in all its variety and richness. On

discovering these poems for themselves, readers will both enrich their own lives immeasurably and help to keep alive a literary tradition that has for seven centuries colored and altered our conception of the universe and our place in it as poets and readers.