

# BOOKS

**ELIZABETHAN POETRY: A Study in Conventions, Meaning, and Expression**  
by Hallett Smith  
Harvard University Press, 1952

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Ford Foundation Fellow,  
Huntington Library

IF HALLET SMITH were not a member of the faculty of the California Institute of Technology, his book *Elizabethan Poetry* possibly would go unnoticed in *Engineering and Science*. But Hallett Smith is a member of that faculty, and there is the big, important fact. In ordinary comparative terms, it means that a professor of English in a great technical institution easily competes for distinction with the scholars in the graduate schools of letters wherever they may be.

Of more immediate and local concern, where comparison is inept, it means that the California Institute of Technology encourages and promotes the excellence of mind, also where-

ever that may be, and provides brilliant instruction in a many-dimensioned experience—as, for example, the dimension which words in their richest complication give to experience, as well as the dimension given by “number,” employed in all of its imaginative and practical ways. The situation is notable. It is a right cause for pride, and for considerably more.

*Elizabethan Poetry*, as the author notes, is not a history of the poetry of late sixteenth-century England (though it goes a long way towards satisfying our need for such a history), but a “historical study,” attempting to elucidate “the nature of the creative process” working in this period. “To understand the creative process,” he goes on, “you must have before your eyes the things created.” This is unimpeachable doctrine wherever the mind is acting—perhaps more steadily honored by the men of science than by literary scholars, though it is applicable to

the one as to the other, and throughout his book Professor Smith has stuck to the application.

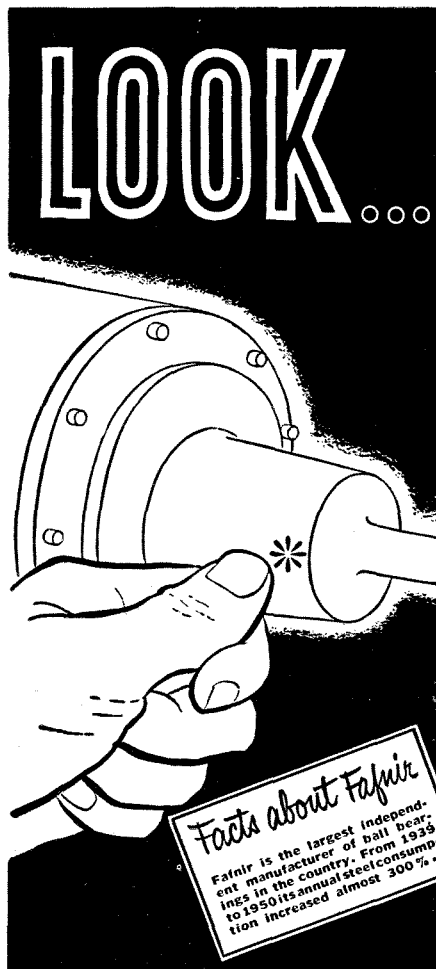
The “things created” in words in late Elizabethan England are not exactly countless, but they are uncountable, and their variety is a function of their multiplicity. In our civilization, it is the period of greatest verbal excitement, comparable only, as Matthew Arnold thought, to the age of Sophocles and Pindar. The ages are different, however, in this one fact, at least: the fifth century B. C. had no printing presses; the Elizabethans were great printers, and they have left Bodleians, British Museums, Folgers, and Huntingtons of testimony to the baffling enormity of their achievement.

## The value of the totality

Yet Professor Smith is neither baffled by this enormity, nor baffling to his readers as he gracefully comments upon literally hundreds of poems (exclusive of the dramatic work), ranging from the brevity of epigram and song to the more than 30,000 lines of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. He paraphrases, analyzes, and relates many particular texts; and he is able to name the value of the totality. In short, he sees both the trees and the forest. Further, he reckons with much of the medieval, classical and continental renaissance literature which prepared the way for the Elizabethan expression; and he takes into critical account the context subsequently accumulating from the scholars who have written in many languages about this period.

Precisely how Professor Smith manages his materials, to get them before us in a way where we can see them for what they are worth and as evidence of the vast creative energy of the period, is, in my judgment, even more noteworthy than his bibliography. He gives us much more than skilful classification of items, though the divisions he uses, of “pastoral,” “Ovidian verse,” “the sonnet,” “satire,” and “heroic poetry,” may seem superficially to be little more than a concession to the customarily recognized generic groupings. The *genres*, after all, do exist and are not to be put by; but it is in the treatment of the constituent poems in a way to show how they exhibit the primary configurations of the sensibility of the Elizabethan Age that he is remarkably important.

As to the “configurations of sensibility”  
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# LOOK...

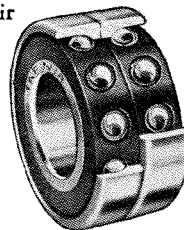
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bility," Professor Smith's handling of the pastoral and the heroic poetries is illustrative. As he demonstrates, fundamentally important polarities of experience, both of the community and of the person, are rendered in these *kinds*; respectively, the mode of human behaving which is associated with poise, or with man and nature and man and woman in agreeable composition—in short, with *otium*, or the life of contentment; and, the other, which respects action, not aimless, but directed and controlled according to the richest sense of what is purposeful.

"Heroic poetry, then," as he puts it, "points to an ideal comparable to that of pastoral with the difference that the desired state must be earned, must follow the achievement of fame and glory through action. The resolution is therefore on a higher level. The guiding and predominating motive was that of Virtue."

Terms like "pastoral" and "heroic" admittedly are quaint to our ears, as quaint, perhaps, as "glory," "virtue," and "contentment"; but the "desired states" to which they are attached are radically human—and persistent, and we reach feebly for their meanings with the current abstractions of economics and psychol-

ogy. What the Elizabethans had were the art structures in which the primary "urges" were endowed with meanings appropriate to them, and embodied with movement and beauty which could carry the meanings into the midst of human experience, as something to be cherished, something exemplary.

It is routine stuff nowadays to call attention to our shortcomings, and if that note is struck, it is mine, not Professor Smith's, for at no time does he glorify the Elizabethans at our expense. He does something much better. In examining the nature of their "creative process," he makes clear that the products of this process were indeed "earned"—through study, practice, and imitation, and, possibly above all, through delight in the "search for vitality" in the art of language.

Although it is no part of the purpose of the book to show us how we may regain what we may have lost, Professor Smith has so well interpreted the creative process as a response to the fundamental human demand that, if we will, we may hope to improve the ordering of our own experience through the appropriation of some part of our large heritage of Elizabethan letters, much as the

Elizabethans themselves took advantage of their own inheritance.

Between the chapters on the pastoral and the heroic, Professor Smith treats the sensuous, Ovidian poetry, the sonnet, and satire. The section on the sonnet more than any other comes to close grips with the texts under discussion, notably some of Shakespeare's best-known sonnets. But throughout the middle ground of the book the reader is kept in connection with a range of literature, not, I should say, so directly symbolic of the larger motions of human behavior as the pastoral and heroic are concerned with, but those reflecting the intimate motions of the individual and of his immediate social and political environment.

While in the laboratories we are studying the responses of rodents and arthropods for whatever illumination of the human situation we may get, we may profitably reckon with the enormous documentation of this same situation, which Professor Smith here reminds us that the arts are always giving. It is good to know that the large provision of the California Institute of Technology includes the humanities "laboratory" where the reckoning is being made under such able direction.

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