

THE PHYSICIAN POET LAUREATE-ROBERT SEYMOUR BRIDGES

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*Abstract: Born in Kent, England, Robert Seymour Bridges (1844-1930) came from a wealthy family of eight children. After his father's death, his mother remarried a priest and the whole family moved to Rochdale. In the new family, Robert would come into contact with religion, which provided him with spiritual support and determined him to be guided by ecumenical principles. Robert received a comprehensive education at Eton College (1854-1863). Here, Bridges came into contact with a circle of writers and made friendships that would last a lifetime. He later attended Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Initially, he was employed as a house doctor to Patrick Black (1813 - 1879). When presenting his resignation from this, he also offers an elegiac poem in the Etonian manner, *Carmen elegiacum*, which he published in 1877. Written in Latin, the poem was conceived in the little free time that Bridges had. The fine connection between medicine and art is reaffirmed by Bridges who reminds the reader that the patron god of the arts, music and prophecy, Apollo, is the same one who patronizes medicine. In fact, Bridges declared himself against the use of Latin terminology in anatomy schools and in 1922 signed a preface under the title *The Language of Anatomy and fought for the use of modern English.**

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After studying medicine, Robert worked at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London from 1869. In 1879, he was appointed senior physician at the Great Northern Hospital (1876–1885) where he managed to eradicate an outbreak of smallpox. Following lung problems, in 1885, Bridges retired from medical practice and devoted himself to writing. However, as early as 1873, Bridges had begun writing literature. A year before retiring from the medical profession, in 1884, Bridges married Mary Monica Waterhouse. After giving up medicine, Bridges retired to Manor House Yattendon in Berkshire. In 1900, Bridges became a member of the Royal College of Physicians in London and in 1913 he was appointed Poet Laureate. Between 1882 and 1904, Bridges devoted himself entirely to literature. Most of the poems that made him famous were written during this period. At the same time, Bridges also wrote eight plays and two masques in verse.

Bridges's special sensitivity to human suffering may be another reason for his departure from the medical profession. He could never detach himself from the suffering of those he treated, and this tormented him. However, Bridges did not break ties with his former colleagues. He maintained a long correspondence with his friend, the physician Samuel Gee (1839 - 1911). In the late 19th century, when Bridges decided to give up the medical profession, English society was undergoing a revolution in thought. It was the era in which the transition was made from religion to scientific foundations, from medical professionals who had an education of great artistic refinement to those who focused on rational values. Bridges had deep religious values and a great capacity for empathy. These characteristics were relegated to the background in the new reform of medical thought. It is likely that this aspect, along with his own failing health and the death of one of his brothers, were the factors that led him to make the big career shift.

Although he published several long poems and poetic dramas, the real recognition of his literary value came with the publication of the collected verses in *Shorter Poems* published in 1873, 1879, and 1880, valuable for their stunning nature descriptions. *New Verse* (1925) contains experiments with a meter based on syllables rather than accents. This is a method that

Bridges called “neo-Miltonian syllabics.” His friendship with W. J. Stone led Bridges to try writing verse in English using classical quantitative meters. He translated parts of the Aeneid and wrote two long discursive epistles and a series of verses. The best example of this lyrical technique and of Bridges's system of relating to the Divine is the poem *Johannes Milton, senex*. In this poem, Bridges relates to a Creator who asks of him only love, not quantifiable evidence of devotion. The poet's trust in God goes, according to the religious dictum, to the point of unquestioning acceptance. The Creator's purpose is not to punish us but, through His love, to save our souls. Bridges, despite his own suffering, has the capacity to accept the human condition and not question suffering:

Since I believe in God the Father Almighty,
 Man's Maker and Judge, Overruler of Fortune,
 'Twere strange should I praise anything and refuse Him praise,
 Should love the creature forgetting the Creator,
 Nor unto Him in suffering and sorrow turn me:
 Nay how could I withdraw from His embracing?

But since that I have seen not, and cannot know Him,
 Nor in my earthly temple apprehend rightly
 His wisdom and the heav'nly purpose eternal;
 Therefore will I be bound to no studied system
 Nor argument, nor with delusion enslave me,
 Nor seek to please Him in any foolish invention,
 Which my spirit within me, that loveth beauty
 And hateth evil, hath reprov'd as unworthy:
 But I cherish my freedom in loving service,
 Gratefully adoring for delight beyond asking
 Or thinking, and in hours of anguish and darkness
 Confiding always on His excellent greatness.

(*Johannes Milton, senex*)

In 1902, Bridges moved to Switzerland for a while because his wife and daughter's health had deteriorated. Returning to England, Bridges would live until his death in 1930 at Chilswell House. The First World War was a particularly difficult time for the doctor-poet. His son, Edward, was wounded and faced with the fear of losing his son, Bridges found solace in writing. In 1915 he edited a volume of prose and poetry entitled *The Spirit of Man*.

Born and raised in the height of the Victorian era, Bridges did not write literature in line with the model of his era but fell into the classical trend, in the manner of the 18th century. Some exegetes have placed him in an illustrious lineage “If the blank verse contains suggestions of Milton and the longer narrative and sonnets of Spenser, it is no less obvious that the models for many of the lyrics are to be found in the Elizabethan and Jacobean songwriters.”¹

The Testament of Beauty is considered his masterpiece. Begun in 1924, on Christmas Day, the poem initially had 14 lines. But in 1926, faced with the tragedy of his daughter's death, Bridges resumed writing this philosophical poem. Written in six-foot free meter, this poem is a corollary of what the doctor believed to be the essence of life and the human soul. The central idea of the poem is that, despite appearances, reason brings man to the path of destruction. Although reason was given to man by the Creator to help him, the human being values it too much and forgets the essence of life-love. On the other hand, animals, devoid of reason and

¹ Louis Wardlaw Miles, *The Poetry of Robert Bridges*, *The Sewanee Review*, Apr., 1915, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Apr., 1915), p. 133

whom we regard as inferior, keep this connection alive with what created us all. Animals, in their simplicity, bring permanent praise by living in communion with nature—the temple of God:

“Man’s Reason is in such deep insolvency to sense,
that tho’ she guide his highest flight heav’nward, and teach him
dignity morals manners and human comfort,
she can delicatly and dangerously bedizen
the rioting joys that fringe the sad pathways of Hell.
Not without alliance of the animal senses
hath she any miracle: Lov’st thou in the blithe hour
of April dawns—nay marvelest thou not—to hear
the ravishing music that the small birdës make
in garden or woodland, rapturously heralding
the break of day; when the first lark on high hath warn’d
the vigilant robin already of the sun’s approach,
and he on slender pipe calleth the nesting tribes
to awake and fill and thrill their myriad-warbling throats
praising life’s God, untill the blisful revel grow
in wild profusion unfeign’d to such a hymn as man
hath never in temple or grove pour’d to the Lord of heav’n?”

(The Testament of Beauty)

The simple beauty of nature is a hymn to the creator and man, through excessive lucidity, only destroys the fine canvas of this great work. The volume was published just six months before the poet's death and can be considered a poetic testament of the one who dedicated his life to artistic beauty, man and God.

For Bridges, love for the human being, nature, family and the creator represented the central axis of his existence. The questions that stir his soul, fear, doubt and worries only strengthen his faith and love. Faced in his personal life with extreme situations - the loss of his father, the need to change his career, personal illness, the loss of his daughter and the fear of losing his son on the battlefield, Bridges turned to God in all these moments of crossroads. Love, as a form of worship of the Creator can never be enough.

Like the legendary Job, Bridges is stirred by volcanic energy and frenzy but manages to overcome his fears and rehabilitate himself through love. Found on the border of the transient human condition, Bridges is in the balance. In such moments, the burdened soul feverishly seeks answers and the British doctor finds solace in faith and love. All the hardships that the human being has to face, the existential crisis and death are the foundation on which we can build our irreducible dignity. The contorted human soul, ground by doubts as by a disease, in despair, can only turn its gaze vertically, towards God. Any other attempt to elude suffering can only harm the human spirit or those around it. Basically, the human spirit is faced with a disease, the spiritual one, which it must eradicate. Facing the condition of mortal being begins with acceptance. The moment this intervenes, the human being can detach himself from the mundane and discover an unalterable, awake interlocutor.

Free will, one of the gifts that the Creator has given us, often only complicates this choice. Love, strength of character and hope are the only ones, according to Bridges, that can bring peace to the soul thirsting for answers. Reason, as we saw in *The Testament of Beauty*, is not always enough. The soul's confrontation with the elements that haunt cannot be won with logical reasoning because the transcendental can only be accessed with the spirit. Bridges, a refined classical poet, only alludes to all this. The poet does not offer answers but leaves his

reader to make deductions. And this delicate gesture can only be appreciated by those souls who have had to face their own ghosts.

“Love not too much. But how,
When thou hast made me such,
And dost thy gifts bestow,
How can I love too much?
Though I must fear to lose,
And drown my joy in care,
With all its thorns I choose
The path of love and prayer.”

(*The Affliction of Richard*)

For Bridges, beautiful things are given by the Creator to make his existence easier. Unfortunately, human beings forget, in their haste, all this. Instead of honoring the gifts received, man, in his naivety and pride, only destroys and carelessly passes by everything that has been offered to him. The poem *I love all beautiful things* is a hymn to those things that we have received but fail to appreciate. Bridges proves to be a poet of a rare empathy. The death of a child brings, through the doctor's poetry, a heartbreaking picture of a deep but dignified pain: “So I lay thee there, thy sunken eyelids closing,—/Go lie thou there in thy coffin, thy last little bed!/ Propping thy wise, sad head,/ Thy firm, pale hands across thy chest disposing.” (*On a Dead Child*) Bridges' meditation on the ephemerality of human existence seems much more understandable when it comes to the death of an innocent child who accepts his passing. This poem is clearly influenced by Bridges' experience in English hospitals until he gave up his profession.

The physician considered poetry as a profession as serious as medicine. He devoted much time to the study of versification and the norms regarding the structure of verses, the number of accents or the length of syllables in a line. All this frenetic and meticulous activity would take shape in the book that Bridges published in 1889 - *Milton's Prosody, with a chapter on Accentual Verse and Notes*. Analyzing *Paradise Lost*, Bridges reaches several conclusions. The first is that each line of Milton's poem has at least ten syllables. A second conclusion of the physician is that Milton used the suppression of the final vowel of a word when the next word also begins with a vowel, in fact a syllabic verse. In the aforementioned work, Bridges identifies six “rules” for stressed verse. In the 1901 edition, Bridges expresses his intentions as early as the Introduction: „To this I now (1901) add an analysis of stress-prosody, and a chapter on the structure of the English accentual hexameter. My intention throughout has been to provide a sound foundation for a grammar of English prosody, on the basis of Milton's practice, which is chosen not as the final model, but as a convenient norma, a middle and fixed point, to which all other practice may be referred for comparison. I believe that little beyond what I have written is necessary for the purpose proposed : if I were tempted to add anything, it would be the examination of Chaucer's prosody, which in his part of the *Romaunt of the Rose* would, compared with the French original, show the origin and rationale of our traditional elisions.”² The color palette plays an important role in Bridges' poetry. The tones used are yellow, gold, green and blue to give depth to the descriptions of nature. The ability to visually reproduce natural landscapes makes Bridges a refined poet who has created immortal paintings of nature with his magical pen. One such poem is *North Wind in October* which displays before the reader's eyes a painting of late autumn in which the leaves change color, in which nature adorns itself as if for a celebration. The lyrical journey that Bridges shares with his readers leads our

² Robert Bridges, *Milton's prosody by Robert Bridges, & Classical metres in English verse by William Johnson Stone*, Oxford, 1901, p. III

steps through a wonderful canvas with a grandeur that the doctor manages to transpose into verse

In the golden glade the chestnuts are fallen all;
From the sered boughs of the oak the acorns fall:
The beech scatters her ruddy fire;
The lime hath stripped to the cold,
And standeth naked above her yellow attire:
The larch thinneth her spire
To lay the ways of the wood with cloth of gold.

Out of the golden-green and white Of the brake the fir-trees stand upright
In the forest of flame, and wave aloft
To the blue of heaven their blue-green tuftings soft.

(*North Wind in October*)

Concerned with finding a more elegant way to express his artistic ideas, Bridges helped found the Pure English Society. This organization brought together important figures in contemporary literature and linguists seeking a way to preserve the purity of the English language. Fitting this physician-turned-poet into a literary movement is a difficult task. On the one hand, his medical training and religious education place him in a purely Victorian lineage, but on the other hand, his philosophical themes on the human condition align him with twentieth-century concerns, and his use of aesthetics to create grandiose images places him in Romanticism. As one critic has explained this phenomenon of translation, Bridges “outlived the Georgians and the major phase of Modernism.”³

Bridges's lyrics do not lack ethereal images, with angels and spirits of nature that emphasize the temporary nature of all things (*Spirits*). Bridges sometimes uses iambic tetrameter to convey speed (*Spring Goeth all in White*). But his poems must be read in the key that the great transformations brought. The transition from the 19th to the 20th century represented a difficult stage not only for the poet but also for all humanity. Frightened by the changes expected at the beginning of the new century, English society seemed prone to melancholy and sadness. And Bridges breathes lyricism in the same rhythm as his peers. And this uncertainty can be felt in many of his poems such as *Melancholia*, *The Evening Darkens Over*, *Noel: Christmas Eve 1913*, *The Hill Pines Were Sighing*, etc.

Bridges also published prose, such as *Collected Essays* (between 1927 and 1936). The themes of these essays were some of the most varied - Shakespeare's plays, free verse, Dante and English literature, English prosody, the musical setting of poetry, principles of hymn singing, psalms notated in the rhythm of speech, etc. Bridges' poetry has been characterized as being of an austere archaism⁴ perhaps precisely because of the mystical intarsia that the poet finally integrated into the filigree-like fabric of his lyrics. Other literary essays were published between 1919 and 1930 in *Tracts of the Society of Pure English*.

Concerned with the fine line between life and death, Bridges wrote numerous poems that reflect his system of thought. *Nimium Fortunatus* is a poem of gratitude to the Creator for the small, everyday happiness in such striking contrast to the hustle and bustle of modern life. The poem concludes that life should be lived with joy, gratitude and acceptance and that every moment of happiness should be earned:

³ Ashley Brown, *Robert Bridges: Against the current*, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (AUTUMN 1986), p. 741

⁴ Louis Wardlaw Miles, *The Poetry of Robert Bridges*, *The Sewanee Review*, Apr., 1915, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Apr., 1915), p. 137

What good have I wrought?
I laugh to have learned
That joy cannot come
Unless it be earned;

For a happier lot
Than God giveth me
It never hath been
Nor ever shall be.

The Yattendon Hymnal (1899) is a collection of hymns compiled by Robert Bridges and H. Ellis Wooldridge for the church at Yattendon, Berkshire. As early as 1894 these hymns were published in four separate parts, and in 1899 were brought together under a single title. This collection attempted to unite the sacred and the profane by using a 16th-century pattern. In 1901, Bridges published a much more extensive work, *A Practical Discourse on Some Principles of Hymn-Singing*, in which the physician acknowledged the need for a radical restructuring of Victorian church hymns: “What is the matter? What is it that is wrong with our hymnody? Even where there is not such rooted disgust as I have implied, there is a growing conviction that some reform is needed in words or music, or both.”⁵

The answer lies in adjusting the melody line so that the message can be conveyed as clearly as possible to the churchgoer “The music must express the words or sense: it should not attract too much attention to itself: it should be dignified: and its reason and use is to heighten religious emotion.”⁶ Bridges even makes a classification of emotions, because they are the foundation for church musical expression. The method that Bridges followed in order to reform church hymns was an unusual one-of writing words to fit the existing music, getting rid of the discrepancies between words and music. The new balance between the two elements - words and music - makes Bridges' hymns much more responsive to modernity. Bridges believes that the culprits for the inadequacy of religious hymns are the Protestant reformers, whose metrical psalms are useless.

Bridges' medical career helped him enormously in building an edifice of emotions that he would expose to readers through his poetry. Without the traumatizing experience during his years of practicing medicine and coming into contact with human suffering, both physical and psychological, Bridges' later career in literature would not have been the same. Medicine helped him crystallize a system of moral values, strengthen his religious beliefs, and desire to be able to heal the human soul for himself and for those around him. Medicine helped him absorb those experiences without which his poetry would not be as sensitive. There are not many who can boast of having learned the amazing ability to transform ugly experiences into artistic beauty. But, Dr. Bridges managed this qualitative leap in both his personal life and his literary one. The first profession, to which he dedicated ten years, represented the skeleton of the philosophy of life that, later, through lyricism, he would polish and improve, bringing it to its true aesthetic value. The medical experience was for the Poet Laureate a ramp on which the great literary talent of the one who was Robert Seymour Bridges soared.

⁵ Robert Bridges, *A Practical Discourse on some Principles of Hymn-Singing*, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1901, pp. 6-7

⁶ *Ibidem*

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