

The New Century's Goddess

Hans Christian Anderson

The New Century's Goddess - whom our great-grandchildren or perhaps a still later generation will know, but we shall not - when and how does she reveal herself? What does she look like? What is the theme of her song? Whose heartstrings will she touch? To what heights will she lift her century?

Why so many questions, in a busy day like ours, when poetry is very nearly superfluous, when it is agreed that the many "immortal" productions of today's poets will, in the future, perhaps exist only in the form of charcoal tracings on a prison wall, seen and read only by a few curiosity seekers?

Poesy is required to serve in the ranks - at least to accept the challenge in party wars, whether it be blood or ink that flows.

But this is only one-sided talk, many will say; poesy has not been entirely forgotten in our time.

No, there are still people who, when they are not busy, are conscious of a desire for poetry, and no sooner do they feel that spiritual rumbling in their respective nobler parts than they promptly go to a bookstore and buy four shillings' worth of poetry of the most approved styles. Others take much pleasure from whatever they can get at a bargain; they are contented with reading the scrap that is on the grocer's wrapping paper; it is much cheaper, and in our busy time we must take notice of that. There is demand for whatever is supplied, and that is enough! The poetry of the future, as well as the poetry of music, is reckoned with the Don Quixotiana; to speak of it is much like speaking of a voyage of discovery to Uranus.

Time is too short and precious for the mere plays of fantasy, and, to speak seriously for once, what is *poetry*? These resonant outpourings of feeling and thought, they are only the offspring of nervous vibrations. Enthusiasm, joy, pain, all the movements of the organism, the wise men tell us, are but nerve vibrations. Each of us is but a string instrument.

But who touches the strings? Who causes them to vibrate into sound? The Spirit, the unseen Heavenly Spirit, who echoes in them *His* emotion, *His feelings*; and these are understood by other string instruments, which respond in melting harmonies or clashing dissonances. So it was, and so it will be, in mankind's mighty onward march in the consciousness of freedom.

Each century, each thousand years, one might even say, has its chief expression in its poetry. Born in the passing era, it comes forth and reigns in the new, succeeding era.

Thus she is already born, this Goddess of the New Century, amid the roar of today's machinery. We send her our greetings! May she hear this, or sometime read it, perhaps among the charcoal tracings we just mentioned.

The rocker of her cradle extended from the farthest point reached by the foot of man on polar voyages, as far as the living eye can gaze into the jet depth of the polar sky. We would never hear the rocking for the clatter of engines, the screams of locomotives, the thunder of quarry blasts, and the bursting of the Spirit's old bonds.

She is born in the vast factory of the present, where steam sets in action its power, and where Master Bloodless and his crew toil night and day.

She bears the womanly heart of love, the vestal's flame, and the furnace of passion. Hers is the lightning ray of intellect, in all its endless, shifting, prismatic hues of the ages.

Fantasy' s vast, swanfeathered tunic is her strength and pride; science wove it; the "elemental forces" gave it power of wing.

On her father' s side, she is a child of the people, sound in sense and heart, with an earnest eye, and with humor on her lips. Her mother is the highborn, academy-trained emigrant' s daughter, with gilded rococo reminiscences. The Goddess of the New Century has in her the blood and soul of both.

Upon her cradle were laid splendid birthday gifts. Plentiful as bonbons, the occult riddles of nature, with their solutions, are strewn there. The diver' s bell gives mystic souvenirs from the deep. The map of the heavens, that high-hung Pacific Ocean with its countless isles, each a world in itself, is embroidered on the cradle cloth. The sun paints her pictures; photography has given her toys to play with.

The nurse has sung to her of Eivind Skalde-spiller and Firdausi, of the minnesingers, and what Heine, bold as a boy, sang from his poetic soul. Much, far too much, has the nurse told her; she knows the Edda, the old great-grandmother' s frightful tales, where horrors sweep the air with bloody wings. The whole of the Oriental *Thousand and One Nights* she heard in the quarter part of an hour.

The Goddess of the New Century is still a child, but she has sprung forth from her cradle and is governed by will, though she still doesn't know what she wants.

She is still at play in her vast nursery packed with treasures of art and the rococo. Greek tragedy and Roman comedy are carved there in marble. The folk songs of the nations cover the walls like withered vines; a kiss from her, and they blossom forth with freshness and sweet vapor. The mighty tones and thoughts of Beethoven, Mozart, Glück, and the other great masters surround her with eternal chords. On her bookshelves are many laid to rest who in their day were immortal; and there is yet room for many another whose name we hear clicking from the telegraph of immortality but who dies with the telegram.

She has read an awful lot, far too much, for is she not born in our time? And all too much must again be forgotten; but the Goddess will know how to forget.

She doesn't think of her song, which will flourish in thousands of years to come, beside the legends of Moses and Bidpai's golden fable about the craft and luck of the fox. She doesn't think of her mission or of her melodious future; she is still playing, while the struggles of nations shake the air and sound figures of pen and cannon rush to and fro - runes of mystic reading.

She wears a Garibaldi hat, and when she reads her Shakespeare she stops for a moment to think; he can still be played when I am grown! Calderón rests in the tomb of his works, beneath the tablet of his glory. The Goddess is cosmopolitan, for she has bound together Holberg with Molière, Plautus, and Aristophanes; but most she reads her Molière.

She is free from the turbulence that drives the goats of the Alps, but still her soul yearns for the salt of life, as the goats pant for the mountain salt. There is calm in her heart as in the ancient Hebrew songs the voice of the nomad drifts over green pastures beneath starry skies; and yet in song her heart swells mightier than the heart of the inspired warrior from the Thessalonian mountains in the old days of Greece.

How goes it with her Christendom? She has learned the ins and outs of philosophy; the elements broke one of her milk teeth, but a new one grew. While yet in the cradle she ate of the fruit of knowledge and grew wise, so that Immortality flashed forth before her as mankind' s happiest thought.

When begins the New Age of Poesy? When will the Goddess be known? When will she be heard?

On a wonderful spring morning she will come on the locomotive dragon, thundering over

bridges and through dark tunnels; or on the back of the puffing dolphin across the calm but surging sea; or high in the air, carried by Montgolfier's bird, *Roc*, *descending* in the land where first her God-given voice shall greet the race of man. When? Will she come from the newfound land of Columbus, the land of freedom, where the native is hunted and the African is a beast of burden, the land from where we heard *The Song of Hiawatha*? Or from the antipodes, that golden nugget in the southern sea, the land of opposites, where our nighttime is their daytime, and where the black swans sing in mossy forests? Or maybe from the land where Memnon's pillar rings but we never understood the song of the Sphinx in the desert from the isle of the coalpit, where, since the age of the great Elizabeth, Shakespeare has reigned? Or from Tycho Brahe's home, where he wasn't wanted; or from California's fairyland, where the redwood holds high its crown as king of the earth's forests?

When shall the star be lit, the star on the brow of the Goddess, the flower on whose petals is inscribed the century's ideal of beauty in form, color, and fragrance?

"What is the Goddess' new platform?" inquires the skillful politician of the day. "What does she stand for?"

Better ask what she does not stand for!

She will not appear as a ghost of bygone times! She will not fashion her dramas from the discarded splendor of the stage, nor cover the lack of dramatic architecture with the dazzling colors of lyric drapery! Her flight forth among us will be as from the car of Thespis to the marble arena. She will not shatter normal human speech to fragments, to be clinked together for an artificial music box with tones from troubadour tournaments. Nor will she separate patrician Verse and plain plebeian Prose - twins are they in voice, quality, and power! Nor will she carve from the saga blocks of Iceland and ancient gods, for they are dead; no sympathy or fellowship awaits them in our day! Nor will she command her generation to occupy their thoughts with the fabric of a French novel; nor will she dull them with the chloroform of everyday history! She will bring the elixir of life; her song, whether in verse or prose, will be brief, clear, and rich. The nations' heartbeats are but letters in the endless alphabet of mankind's growth; she grasps each letter with equal lovingness, and ranges all in words, and weaves her words into rhythms for her Age's Hymn.

And when shall the hour come?

It will be long to us who are still here; brief to those who have flown ahead.

The Chinese Wall will soon fall. The railways of Europe open old Asia's tightly sealed culture archives, and the opposing streams of human culture meet, mayhap with a thunderous crash. The oldsters of our days will tremble at that sound and hear in it a judgment, the fall of ancient gods, forgetting that times and peoples must pass from the earth, and only a tiny image, sealed in a word casket, remain of each, floating like a lotus flower on the stream of eternity, and telling us that all were flesh of our flesh, dressed in different attire. The Jewish image shines radiant from the Bible; the Greek from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; and ours? Ask it of the coming Goddess, at judgment time, when the new heaven is lifted to light and sight at the judgment day.

All the power of steam and all the pressure of modern times were levers! Master Bloodless and his busy crew, who seem the all-powerful rulers of our day, are but its servants, black slaves to adorn the festive hall, open its treasures, set its tables, for the great feast day when the Goddess, a child of innocence, a maid of inspiration, a matron of calm wisdom, shall lift on high the wonderful Lamp of Poetry, that rich, full human heart flaming with the fire of God.

Greetings, you Goddess of Poetry's coming age! May our salutation be heard as is heard the worm's hymn of thanksgiving - the worm that is cut to pieces beneath the plow, while a new springtime is dawning and the plowman draws his furrow among us worms,

crushing us, that your blessings may be bestowed upon the coming generation.
Greetings, you Goddess of the New Century!