The title-poem in Sherrington’s *The Assaying of Brabantius* (1925) is a substantial piece taking up about three-sevenths of the volume. A third of the remaining poems ascertainably belong to the period of the First World War, but this visionary allegory with a quasi-mediaeval setting offers itself as a relatively early work. Its theme of the sinner redeemed by the innocent love for a boy (yet compelled to give him up) belongs more obviously to the Victorian or Edwardian poetic landscape.

Brabantius is a hedonist, who has ignored all appeals from his family. His selfish nature is represented by a ‘varlet janitor’ who keeps the real world at bay, and the paternal love which restores him to human feeling by a poor orphan whom he sees praying to the Virgin in the snow, and whom he adopts and educates. This process of repudiating the baser instincts and acquiring nobility through altruism seems as arbitrary as the psychic events in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The guilt is as severely felt, and the exoneration as uncalled-for:

And lest the new day risen anon, cramming with broad lit detail, stress life’s compass of charged bitterness yet more, I shut my eyelids down and, like a stone, on the hill’s crown stirred not, and recked not the hours pass.

To noise of cropping of short grass by ewes that vanward from the flock climb pasturing by beck and rock returned to me at length the day O’erhead the mist had packed away burnt to blue air… (p. 27)

Truth to feeling will not always produce the fine or appropriate image, but here it has certainly done so. The mist clears Brabantius’s head for him, and we feel the process as an equally clear sequence of symbols (‘like a stone’—‘burnt to blue air’). Such sudden purity of description gives the poem its continued interest, perhaps in despite of its insistently outdated language.

What is it in a poem’s style that makes it ring true? The late-Victorian work of this kind that has truly survived, even of the most doughty mediaevalists, is that which has miraculously thrown off the fustian for once (Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’) or at least kept it mostly at bay (Morris’s ‘A Garden by the Sea’, where it is only at the very end that the poet finally succumbs and seeks the unforgotten face ‘once reft from me/Anigh the murmuring of the sea’). The word-hoard from which words like ‘reft’ and ‘anigh’ are so lightly lifted is palpable throughout ‘The Assaying of...
Brabantius’ (‘agone’, ‘erst’, ‘plaint’, ‘meseemed’, ‘assoiled’, ‘elsewise’, ‘boon crew’, ‘up driven’, ‘behoves’, ‘sudden-wise’, ‘enow’, ‘uprist’ and so on) so that Sherrington seems to be enacting not only the painful sacrifice of his symbolic subject but also a submerged subtext which is something to do with a determination not to sacrifice one jot of verbal allusion to this heroic world. And why not? It is because this world is not merely the appropriate one of sottish hedonism, swooning penance or pastoral teaching, necessary background to the heroic resolve at its centre. It is the world of poetry itself as he perceives it to be, a stylistic accumulation of evocative verbal residues, drenched with pageant feudalism, setting the narrative at a distance, like a tapestry. He is a contemporary of someone like Francis Thompson in this respect, but often more extreme.

In general, of course, this is merely the heritage of Spenser and Milton as bequeathed to Keats and transmitted to Tennyson. All examples of it should be traceable. That ‘uprist’, for example, which Sherrington uses of the first day of many that Brabantius will have to endure without his foster-son, is borrowed, quite appropriately, from Coleridge’s ballad (‘Nor dim nor red, like God’s own head,/The glorious Sun uprist’) where similarly the dawning of a new day brings only an enervating becalming of the soul. ‘Uprist’ is an archaising Spenserianism just as surely as Keats’s famous ‘darlink’ or ‘forlorn’, introduced for particular reasons of pastiche in the 18th century, but taken more seriously and picturesquely by the Romantic Poets. Keats is the key here. He is the Strong Poet of Sherrington’s early allegiance, quoted more than any other in Man on his Nature, and the subject of the second longest poem in his collection.

‘At Keats’s Grave’ is a traditional lament of the waste of genius. So, remembering ‘Lycidas’, Sherrington brings out his boldest Miltonic word-order:

what then though the gods slew young,
in their wisdom strange, supernal,
thee; thy brows by their wreaths hung
stays still embleming youth vernal
over lips like theirs eternal. (p. 33)

The metrical template for the poem is trochaic tetrameter catalectic, although you might not guess it from this stanza, towards the end of which the poet struggles to express a tricky thought (what is divine eternity compared to the apotheosis of spring?).

Charming and frequently vivid though the descriptive tribute of ‘At Keats’s Grave’ may be, it is as nothing compared with Sherrington’s electrifying rebuke on the same subject in Man on his Nature, when he writes of the millions who die from malaria or tuberculosis: ‘For what? To feed a thing not much unlike an amoeba of the pond, a protozoan parasite. Can we by any flight of fancy conceive that this speck of organized slime embodies a grain of pleasure? The mere suggestion, even if unwittingly, rings like a callous levity when heard against the groan of a tortured population.’ Sherrington quite properly goes on to arraign ‘the scheme of Nature’ rather than ‘the gods’ when he introduces the particular case of Keats as victim of the tubercle bacillus: ‘Keats had, in vain, nursed his younger brother attacked by that same venomous speck, and was in turn infected himself. The story is one of inexorable tragedy . . . . Fate in Greek tragedy was inexorable by divine nature. But here it is inexorable by mere chemistry? It is for man as critic and censor to interfere’ (p. 272).

He might have added ‘for man as critic and censor and poet to interfere.’ Such interference may be thought to restore our sense of self-importance by impugning the natural order of things for a sublime indifference to our fate. Actually, as the moving last words of Man on his Nature indicate, it merely accentuates our loneliness in the universe: ‘We have, because human, an inalienable prerogative of responsibility which we cannot evade, no, not as once was thought, even upon the stars. We can share it only with each other’ (p. 294).

Of all kinds of scientist, Sherrington was one of those who was brought up sharply against the old problem of man’s illusion of independence from his body. We are not self-sufficient (‘We may suppose that if they hear it, the stars smile’, p. 30) and we don’t quite know, after all, where our minds are located. Is a god interested in us? The brain fits the motor mechanism ‘much as a key fits its lock’ (The Brain and its Mechanism, 1933). Who turns the key? The world does. The brain is a wonder in itself, but only to us who think with it, and we have come to regard our top-heavy human head as a feature of biological beauty. This perhaps is a clue to the best part of our poetic ‘interference’, which is to find beauty in our circumstances and purpose, even in the having existed at all, even if only like Keats for 25 years. Does God think us beautiful? Does he think the tubercle bacillus beautiful? To Nature all lives are without worth. It is a puzzle.

Questions of this sort prompted in poets a slow detachment from a belief in God: Keats and Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Whitman, Hardy, Wallace Stevens. One might expect the foremost neurophysiologist of his age to have written a poetry that was attuned to this tradition, such as it is. Not that he should have written a poetry of science any more than Stevens should have written a poetry of insurance law, but that (for someone born in 1857) he might at least have seemed closer to Hardy than to the Rhymers’ Club. And he left Magdalen too early to hold any sort of dialogue with Gilbert Ryle (Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy from 1945 to 1968), who finally disposed of the ghost-in-the-machine distinction between mind and brain in The Concept of Mind (1949).

The shorter poems in The Assaying of Brabantius carry themselves with the assurance of an expert lyrical concentration. Among them there are choriambic and
anaepestic tercets with internal rhyme (a fine verbal music in this original form), simple quatrains, longer assemblages of quatrains with judicious half-lines, and densely-packed Petrarchan sonnets. Whatever in the poems that is archaic seems so with the bounding confidence that such a manner will catch the eternal essence of a considered feeling, regardless of realities.

In ‘Now in the cloister few the feet that roam’, Magdalen’s bells are shown to have rung for heroes before and are now listening for fresh exploits to celebrate, ‘catching afar the filial bugles blow’ (p. 66). This odd notion of what you might have actually heard at the Front in 1916 is nonetheless well-prepared for by the very personification of the ‘stately tower’ in the first place, the sons of the college making a matching antique music. Moreover, being the last line of a sonnet, it has its own bugle tone (all the five sonnets are successes, by the way, building to memorable conclusions). A poem of 1915 takes another distinctly Housmanish subject, the idea of the beloved young soldier filling a grave that the poet himself would rather lie in, having lost him, and gives it the full ambiguous Metaphysical treatment (‘Thy’ here refers to the poet’s heart):

Thy choice had been for thee the gods had willed
the steep descent and flowerless pit;

yet, since the task wherefore Love’s lip was stilled,
bides thine to do, that Love find guerdon fit,
go, crown thy days with it. (p. 58)

This compensation for the guilt of sending the young to the Front claims that we must all face pain with duty, and all die in the end. Sherrington blurs the religious message that a capitalized ‘Love’ might suggest with another phrase from Keats (‘guerdon fit’ from ‘The Cap and Bells’) that takes the Christian reward into the world of fairy-tale where ‘Love’s lip’ would find its appropriately amorous meaning.

Ambiguities aside, the variety of these shorter pieces (teaching a country urchin who is likely now to have enlisted; contrasting an overdressed London beauty with an English rose who ‘leaned me a brow Troy had reburned to kiss’; contrasting the ‘Green’ of Kent and the ‘Black’ of Manchester and wondering if such moral and social discrepancy is mirrored anywhere else in the universe; and so on) bespeaks a wider range than the slimness and tenor of the collection might at first suggest. And there are further poems in the second edition of the volume, and some uncollected work, that confirm this range. Sherrington sculpted and refined an art that was reticent but not diffident, guarded but honest, contrived but eloquent, and fully a product of his times.