II

Arthur Symons's "The Romantic Movement in English Poetry"*

Since it became known that Mr. Symons was suffering from a malady that threatened to end his career it has become suddenly plain that he has done such work as to entitle him to a place of assured eminence among recent English critics. An early reputation for brilliant promise is not easily lived down, and Mr. Symons suffered too long under the patronising imputation that he might some day do something of permanent worth. Reviewing his entire work, it is now easy to see that he has made his own original and valuable contribution to English criticism. It is true that both his merits and his defects have been of a sort to hinder complete acceptance. Although he has written of the seven arts, he is not at his best in dealing with principles and theories, and it is perhaps no great loss that he has never produced the new synthesis of the arts which he once promised. But he has a peculiar sensitiveness to poetry in the concrete; he belongs, one now sees, to the line of those critics, like Lamb and Palgrave, whose appreciation is a touchstone of what is

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good in poetry. Luckily, the proportions in his latest book are twenty pages of introduction, in which he theorises with indifferent success, to more than three hundred of illuminating concrete criticism. Being the least academic of critics, he has dared to adopt a plan hallowed by long use in the classroom—that of the handbook or manual, each poet being treated separately, in a longer or shorter article, arranged chronologically. Some of them, to be sure, receive short shrift in half a dozen sentences; to others, like Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, are devoted many pages of admirable criticism. The limits of the scheme are set with a cool highhandedness of which no pedagogue would ever be guilty; the romantic poets, for the purposes of this volume, are those who were born before 1800 and lived into the nineteenth century. Apparently he has gathered them all in. "My plan allows me no choice between good or bad writers in verse; I give each his due consideration, his due space, of a few lines or of many pages." There is a piquant contrast in the pedantic thoroughness with which Mr. Symons has carried out his artificial scheme, and the originality and force of the matter which he has put into it.

Naturally the most important criticism is to be found in the longer essays; not always, however, the most amusing comment. Mr. Symons has caught in his dragnet some queer fishes. He recalls to memory many a respectable versifier, now half or wholly forgotten, who cut a large figure in the literary annals of his day. Here, for instance, is Dr. Erasmus Darwin, wholly unconscious that he was to go down to fame as the grandfather of Charles Darwin. His *Loves of the Plants* is still known by its curious title, but never read. Mr. Symons quotes some choice effusions of the worthy scientist's muse. Of a statue of Lot's wife in the salt-mines at Cracow he observes how

> Cold dews condense upon her pearly breast,
> And the big tear rolls lucid down her vest.

Beside such lines as these he places a couplet from the famous *Anti-Jacobin* parody, *Loves of the Triangles,* and leaves the reader to judge which is the more absurd:

> The obedient Pulley strong Mechanics ply,
> And wanton Optics roll the melting eye.

In browsing among these forgotten poets he recovers what he calls a "splendid tune" in these nonsense verses by John O'Keeffe:

> Amo, amas,
> I love a lass,
> As cedar tall and slender;
> Sweet cowslip's face
> Is her nominative case,
> And she's of the feminine gender.
> Horum quorum,
> Sunt divorum.
> Harum, scarum, Divo;
> Tag rag, merry derry, periwig and hatband,
> Hic, hoc, harum, genitivo.

"There, if you like, is nonsense; but how convincing to the ear!" exclaims the critic. Equally convincing he finds the extravagant rhymes of Richard Harris Barham, of whom he says: "Not Butler nor Byron nor Browning, the three best makers of comic rhyme, has ever shown so supreme an inventiveness in the art." In witness whereof he quotes the following:

> There's Setebos, storming because Mephistopheles
> Gave him the lie,
> Said he'd "blacken his eye,"
> And dashed in his face a whole cup of hot
> coffee-lees.

Nor is all of the humour in these pages quoted. Here is his complete commentary on one erstwhile noted poet to whom his scheme requires him to give heed: "Sir Egerton Brydges, who must be respected for the editions printed at his Lee Priory Press, in an 'Invocation to Poetry,' which he wrote at the age of twenty, but, twenty years afterward, still put at the beginning of his poems, represents himself as calling that 'wild maid' to go with him into the woods ('and let not coy excuse thy steps retard') and then falling asleep in her company, and dreaming of 'fame immortal.' The episode seems characteristic; Sir Egerton Brydges always fell asleep when he found himself in the company of Poetry."

Ward Clark.