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Concerning One Beslubbered

If Mr. Alfred Austin, poet Laureate, has given to the world a coronation poem, as in duty bound, I have not seen it. It is to be expected, and expectation is the foundation upon which are reared some of the fairest fabrics that dazzle and delight, if nothing that is expected ever came to pass what a singularly beautiful world this beautiful world would be! It is not true that only the unexpected occurs; it is only true that nothing but the expected occurs as it ought, and that not often. But Mr. William Watson's coronation ode has been flung to the battle and the breeze. Let us salute it in silence.

As to Mr. Austin, he is prepared, doubtless, for what he will get. The wits of the press on this side of the sea will have something to say of the matter. If they said nothing they would be sick. True, they know nothing of poetry. Not one in a thousand of them, and hardly one in five hundred of their readers, can be made to apprehend the difference between the indefinable spirit that pulses through the lines of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and the peasant sentiments of a "dialect poem" by James Whitcomb Riley or Sam Walter Foss—I think his name is that. Gentlemen who write of Mr. Austin in the American newspapers are of two classes, the ignorant and the presumptuous, and all belong to both. There are competent critics of poetry in tis country, but it is Mr. Austin's luck not to have drawn their attention.

Mr. Austin is not a great poet, but he is a poet. The head and front of his offending seems to be that he is a lesser poet than his predecessor—his immediate predecessor, for his austerest critic will hardly affirm his inferiority to the illustrious Nahum Tate. Nor is Mr. Austin the equal, by much, or Mr. Swinburne, who as poet laureate was impossible—or at least highly improbable. If he had been offered the honor Mr. Swinburne would very likely have knocked off the Prime Minister's hat and jumped upon it. He is of a singularly facetious turn of mind, is Mr. Swinburne, and has to be approached with caution.

Below Swinburne the differences in mental stature among British poets are inconsiderable; none is much taller than another, though Henly only could have written the great lines beginning:

Out of the dark that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

And he is not likely to do anything like that again; on that proposition.

You, your existence might put to the hazard, and turn of a wager.

I wonder how many of the merry gentlemen who find a pleasure in making mouths at Mr. Austin “for what he does, and doesn’t do,” has ever read, or, reading, has understood his sonnet on

LOVE’S BLINDNESS

Now do I know that Love is blind, for I
Can see no beauty on this beauteous earth,
No life, no light, no hopefulness, no mirth,
Pleasure nor purpose, when thou art not nigh.
Thy absence exiles sunshine from the sky.
Seres spring’s maturity, checks summer’s birth.
Leaves linnet’s pipe as sad as plover’s cry,
And makes me in abundance find but death.
But when thy feet flutter the dark, and thou
With orient eyes dawnest on my distress,
Suddenly sings a bird on every bough,
The heavens expand, the earth grows less and less,
The ground is buoyant as the ether now,
And all looks lovely in thy loveliness.

The influence of Shakespeare is altogether too apparent in this, and it has as many faults as lines; but it is admirable work nonetheless. To a poet only come such conceptions as “orient eyes” and feet that “flutter the dark.”

Here is another sonnet in which the thought, quite as natural, is less obvious. In some of his best work Austin runs rather to love (a great fault, madam), and this is called

LOVE’S WISDOM

Now on the summit of Love’s topmost peak
Kiss we and part; no further can we go;
And better death than we from high to low
Should dwindle, and decline from strong to weak.
We have found all, there is no more to seek;
All we have proved, no more is there to know;
And time can only tutor us to eke
Out rapture’s warmth with customer’s afterglow,
We cannot keep at such a height as this;
For even straining souls like ours inhale
But once in life so rarefied a bliss.
What is we lingered till love’s breath should fail!
Heaven of my earth! One more celestial kiss,
Then down by separate pathways to the vale.

Will the merry Pikes of the lower Mississippi littoral and the gambling whalebackers of the Duluth hinterland be pleased to say what is laughable in all this—excepting their solemn conviction of its absurdity?

Washington, June 23, 1902.