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Joaquin Miller on Joaquin Miller

The Whitaker & Ray Co., San Francisco, successors to the late and deeply unlamented Bancroft Company, have published "The Complete Poetical Works of Joaquin Miller." This title is a little misleading; the book does not contain all, nor nearly all the works, more or less poetical that Mr. Miller has acknowledged as his very own, but only such as he seems to care for now; and many of these have been abbreviated and otherwise revised with an unsparing hand. Nor are the book's contents altogether poetical; besides the Preface and Appendix there are prose notes to many of the longer poems, making altogether a considerably body of matter mostly biographical, largely irrelevant, sometimes false and frequently silly. The book would have been better without it. In truth, Mr. Miller cannot be trusted to write prose, nor to write of himself, which means about the same thing; for the moment he unfixes his eyes from the summit of Parnassus the charms of his own picturesque personality lure him from the path of truth into the confusing byways conducting into the Land That is Not—whereof he is king, parliament and people. He may be described as the St. Simeon Stylites of Literature, perched atop of his capital I, and occasionally removing his rapt regard from his own toes to burst into song of the outlying universe.

In the prose parts of Mr. Miller's book the reader will catch a new note—that of Penitence. It is, however, the penitence which finds expression in denial of sin. A weaker manifestation of this feeling since led him to "hurl back the allegation" that he had stolen a horse, affirming that it was a mule; he is now willing to forget the mule. Seriously, it is rather late for him to complain (page 67) of the "fearfully coarse insults and falsehoods" that pursued him, "simply because" he had "at such cost" glorified his mountain environment. The insults and falsehoods may be granted—what writer of distinction escapes them? But the provocation is insufficiently stated. Indubitably they had their origin in his own affectations—in his identification of himself with his heroes—in his weakness for incredible sad untrue narratives of his personal adventures and travels—in the transparent cloud of mystery with which he has always loved to envelope a really commonplace early life. Even now in his age, when from a failing memory of his famous arrow wound he sometimes limp with the wrong leg, he is obviously reluctant (page 30) to surrender his lifelong claim to the laurels of the bandit Joaquin Murietta, and altogether indisposed to forego his new and remarkable pretensions to classical education! As to his claim to fellowship and companionship with the distinguished men of two worlds, it is the breath of his nostrils and the soul of his heart; he affirms it with a diligence that is proof against fatigue, an irrelevance which, like death, hath all seasons for its own. If sometimes he errs as to the true titles of his illustrious, and now mostly deceased, intimates (as in the instance of the French Prince Imperial, whom he calls "Prince Napoleon"), the fault is perhaps not entirely his; like the man who bewailed his marriage to a widow these great

personages were possibly guilty of “contributory negligence.” They should have been thoughtful enough to “define their positions” to the slack attention of that careless Western observer.

All this may seem out of place and ungracious; and if these remarks were intended as grave criticism of “poetical works” it certainly would be. But such is not the case. Mr. Miller has chosen to “mix with his sacred flame the flame profane” of a monstrous and insistent personal vanity to which everything is fuel, and the turbid light of it invites objection. It is hardly too much to say that every line of the prose in this book is both needless and foolish.

In nothing is Mr. Miller more foolish than in his convictions about his art—which to him is not an art, but merely the spontaneous utterance of a born singer’s intrained emotions. As an example of the insupportable stuff that a really great poet can write when, destitute of intellectual training, he abandons the domain of feeling for that of thought take this from the conclusion of his Preface—an instruction to poets:

“Finally, use the briefest little bits of baby Saxon words at hand. The world is waiting for ideas, not words…we have not time for words. A man who uses a great big sounding word when a short one will do is to that extent a robber of time. A jewel that depends greatly on its setting is not a great jewel. When the Messiah of American literature comes he will come singing, so far as may be, in words of a single syllable.”

Mr. Miller himself is not a master of condensation; prolixity is his “upsetting sin,” as in “The Sea of Fire,” where he requires no fewer than one hundred and fifteen lines to relate the landing of a ship in fair weather with nothing to prevent; but in this prose passage he has managed to pack a remarkable number of schoolboy errors into a very small space. Many words of one syllable are strong and sweet, but a number of them together are feeble, dull, unmelodious. In poetry, especially, they are to be avoided. Some red idiot of the wild has written an entire poem in monosyllables, and every few years it makes the circuit of the newspapers as a glittering example of what can be done in that way. I have no doubt that it has had much to do with the genesis of Mr. Miller’s theory—and no doubt, either, that if he had happened to write it himself he would have incontinently chucked it into the cuspidor where it belongs. A line of verse in monosyllables is painful, two are insupportable and three would make a boy strike his father.

Our words of one syllable are commonly Saxon words, that is to say, the words of a primitive people without a wide range of thought, feeling and sentiment. One can express in them only what their inventors had to express; the richer thoughts and higher emotions must clothe themselves in the words of peoples to whom they were known—in the ductile derivatives of the Norman-French, the Greek and the incomparable Latin. It is to the unlearned only that our brief bald Saxon words seem the only natural, graphic and sufficient ones.

We have not time for words, quoth’a! As if poetry were a thing to be devoured along with the breakfast egg of the business man with one eye on the page and the other on the clock. Mr. Miller is justly wroth when a money-grubbing wretch inquires if the planting of olive trees will “pay”; and here he would himself go pruning away the rich exuberances of our noble tongue in the interest of the car-chasers and quick-lunchers who hoard their minutes as a miser his coins.

Begging Mr. Miller’s pardon, thought and emotion in poetry are jewels that depend very much indeed on their setting. If they did not his distinction as a poet would be less than it is by much, for his charm does not inhere in the greatness and sweetness of his thoughts, but in the felicity of their expression—not so much in what he has to say as in how he says it. It is very rarely indeed that he justifies his declaration that he is “of the Kings of Thought,” but his poetry is none the worse for that; for philosophy is one thing and poetry another. The two may

acceptably go together, or remain apart; but certainly the jewel, if present, has an added value if well set. Least of all poets of his rank can Mr. Miller afford to extol matter over manner.

It is commonly said, and doubtless believed, that biography is a great help in the understanding of literature—that one may profitably go to an author's life for light upon his work. This is one of those popular errors which certain low intelligences sedulously promote; for they thrive by writing about writers and find their account in dignifying a vulgar and impudent curiosity regarding an author's personal affairs as an enlightened interest in literature. The truth is that nothing is more false and misleading than biography—except autobiography. When the "subject" is an author it operates to prevent, or rather to postpone, a clear judgment of his work and rank. As a rule there is no relation between the character and the work of a man strong enough and wise enough to write what is worth considering: the apparent relation is almost wholly the work of the biographers, who, knowing little of the character (and who really does know much of the character of another?) base their account of it upon what the find, or think they find, in the work. As to an author's own account of himself, it is like anybody's account of himself---altogether untrustworthy, with an added incredibility from his knowledge of the credulity of his readers, who from a distinguished author will accept anything with the unquestioning faith of a pet pig at the feeding trough.

Among the several reasons why in literary matters the judgment of posterity is better than that of an author's contemporaries, the chief is that posterity knows less about his life and character, and is in a position to consider his work on its merits without prepossession or prejudice, just as if it had fallen down from the clouds, or grown up from the ground without human agency. And that is the way that all must eventually be judged, excepting those few unfortunates whose biographies (or autobiographies) are themselves works of permanent literary vitality. It is not likely that Dr. Johnson will ever be granted the justice of a hearing before his judges without that smirking Boswell being present to darken counsel.

None of the poems in Mr. Miller's book needed any "sidelights" thrown up[on it, biographical or other; a poem that does would better not have been written—it is not literature. These prose commentaries and narratives are not only "impertinent," but as the obvious expression of a deplorable personal vanity, offensive Worst of all, they are largely untrue, as I am in a position to affirm for I have Mr. Miller's true history pigeon-holed, along with that of many another Pacific Coast celebrity. The sooner his prose vagaries are forgotten the better it will be for his reputation as a poet, and he could not very well have better advice than to publish another and final edition of his "Complete Poetical Works" without a line of prose to discredit it. In impugning Mr. Miller's veracity, or, rather, in plainly declaring that he has none, I should be sorry to be understood as attributing a graver moral delinquency than he really has. He cannot, or will not, tell the truth, but never tells a malicious or thrifty falsehood. From his incursions into the realm of romance he returns with clean and empty hands. Excepting for his vanity and inveracity he is an honorable and high-minded man. That he is a poet of high rank is so well understood that I have no intention of reviewing here those of his poems which, by preserving them in this book, he declares to be his own choice from among the much more that he has written and published. Despite his prolixity, his tiresome repetitions, his frequent hyperbole and more frequent unnaturalness; despite, too, the general thinness of his thought, Mr. Miller has, in my judgment, the greatest natural gift of song of any American except Poe. That he lacks the moral sanity and intellectual training to make the most of it is a misfortune that lacks little of the character of a national calamity.