



MR. DOBSON'S LIBRARY.

THE POETRY OF AUSTIN DOBSON.

The qualities of Mr. Austin Dobson's work are known, for, by an accident which sometimes comes to surprise even the most disinterested of workers, his work is popular. Many have even paid him the compliment, from their own point of view, of ranking him, as a poet, with those amiable, intelligent, often scholarly persons, such as Mr. Locker-Lampson, who have made facile verses about books and wines on the afternoons when they were at leisure. He has written, it is true, a good deal of *vers de société*, some of which he frankly acknowledges on the head-lines; and to distinguish between light verse, which is poetry, and *vers de société*, which is what it calls itself, will certainly not be easy for the casual reader, especially as Mr. Dobson is continually bridging the distance with flying *pontons*. It is reassuring to think that he is probably best known by his least valuable work, by what is sentimental in it, or merely amusing. But, in a certain sense, he is genuinely popular for many genuine qualities of his art, only these qualities mean something much more, something often different, to the careful student of his poetry. Who, then, does not know

than any verse of our time; well-bred verse which dresses in quite the most severe French taste, wears no rouge except with fancy dress, and can sing with as fresh a voice as if it were not singing in a drawing-room? His eighteenth-century muse passes easily from England to France, and it is not fanciful to note the partly French origin of this after all so English writer coming into evidence in a score of little ways, ways as minute as the preference for single and double rhymes intermingled, after the manner of French masculine and feminine rhyming. The scholarship turned courtly (as of some abbé who writes madrigals for the Marquise), the ease of fastidious wit, the fancy brought back from her far voyages, and at home, by preference, in a garden; all these, these unique qualities, it is impossible not to see in the poems of Mr. Dobson. He paints, of course, *genre* pictures, brings the whole apparatus of the connoisseur daintily into verse, writes in imitation of Pope, of Prior, and with a worthy flattery in the action; renders Horace in triolets, and Holbein in a *chant royal*. His wit and significance in the use of proper names, allusions, the French language; his wit and delicacy in rhyme, the rare discretion of his epithets, are all evident, and not likely to

"The song where not one of the graces
Tight-laces";
the verse which trips on daintier feet



*Ever truly yours,
Austin Dobson*

be overlooked. And when he chooses to be entirely serious, as in perhaps his finest poem, "The Sick Man and the Birds," how natural it seems to him, after all his evasions, to speak, as it is most natural to the poet to speak, directly!

Most of his poetry is an evasion; and it becomes, in its very frivolity, poetry, because it is an evasion. In its indirect, smiling, deliberate way of dealing with life, choosing those hours of carnival, when for our allotted time we put on masks, and coloured dresses, and dance a measure or two with strangers, it is an escape, an escape from life felt to be about to become overpowering. Do we not,

among ourselves, avoid the expression of a deeply felt emotion, in order that we may not intensify the emotion itself by giving it words? This light poetry, seeming to be occupied so largely with the things that matter least to us in the world, is human in a most closely human way; and by its very evasion it confesses the power and oppression of those deep emotions which it is like us in trying to escape.

The quality which I find, even in those which seem least likely to occasion it of these transparent *Proverbs in Porcelain*, these lilting old French forms, these trotting ballads of the time of the Georges, is the quality of pathos. It is that pathos of things fugitive, flowers, beauty, the bloom on any fruit, sunshine in winter. It is what touches us, what we feel, without our quite realising the paradox of its appeal to us, not only in the frail, rose-leaf art of Watteau (where it is no doubt part of the intention), but in the certainly unintended suggestion of those eighteenth-century fans painted with gallant devices, those seventeenth-century gavottes written for courtly measures; and is there not perhaps something of the same reason for the melancholy so strangely islanded in the heart of whirling gaiety of the German dance-rhythms of to-day? In the Capito-

line Museum at Rome, in a room filled with busts of the emperors, there is one bust, that of Julia, the daughter of Titus, which has for me precisely the charm and pathos of those fragile things to which this kind of art gives something of the consecration of time. The little fashionable head, so small, eager, curled so elaborately for its life of one fashionable day, and seeming to be so little at home in the unexpected, perpetuating coldness of marble; what has such as this to do with the dignity of death?

"But where is the Pompadour, too?"

asks Mr. Dobson:

"This was the Pompadour's Fan!"

And it is because he has apprehended so deeply the carnival hours of life, with all that they have of the very unconsciousness of flight; because he has shown us youth, fashion, careless joy, in their unconcern of to-morrow, when youth will be one step further into the shadow it casts before it, and fashion will retire before other plumes, and careless joy sadden at a mere change of the wind; it is because he has these "artless, ageless things to say," with so vivid, and so reluctant, a sense of what can be said lightly, daintily, with sufficient sincerity, during that bright hour's "indefinite reprieve," that he is a poet, where most writers of light verse (to whom the moment is seen but from the moment's point of view) are but rhymers for drawing-rooms. Writing as he does of the matters, and apparently in the tone, which are sufficient for the day to most worldly-wise people, his point of view is never that of the worldly-wise gentleman of the clubs, who is often to be found admiring him for what he thinks is a similarity of tastes. It is always the point of view of the poet, and of a poet to whom no sensation comes without its delicate *arrière-pensée* of wisdom.

I do not say that the whole of his work is of this value which I find typical of it. And, in particular, I do not say that this implicit quality of pathos is not sometimes, to its peril, explicit. Such popular pieces as "The Child Musician," in which the pathos is said instead of seen, drop at once into a different order of work. A direct appeal to the sentiment of tears, a demand on one's sympathy; any of our Adelphi artificers can move us with that, and leave us ashamed of our emotion afterward. A newspaper paragraph will do as much; the sight, in the street, of a woman sobbing in a doorway. That pathos, ethereal and yet enduring as the little life of roses living on in the immortality of the vinaigrette, which I find in whatever is good of Mr. Dobson's work, is entirely a pathos of second thoughts; something which is not in the picture, but without which the picture would not be what it is, a picture of some *fête galante*, seeming to exist for itself, in so fragile a moment's happiness, that it appeals to our pity as irony does, touching the artistic sense in us of the paradox of life.

In Mr. Dobson's work, as I have said, we get, frankly, *vers de société* as well as poetry; and it might be interesting to discriminate between whatever, in his work, belongs to the one or the other order. It is unsafe to neglect so much as a single piece in his collection, for you are never safe from a surprise, and you will find touches of genuine poetry in the most unexpected places. But for the most part he is at his best when he is furthest away from our time; and for an obvious enough reason. It is only past fashions that can appeal to us as being in themselves poetical. When they are of our time they are, in themselves, but so much decoration; they have even a touch of comedy in their nearness to us. That is why Mr. Dobson's poems of the present day, in which he deals with manners as manners, are with difficulty accepted as poetry; and why the verse-writers of "teacup times," who in those times wrote of their teacups, scarcely seem to us poets. While the fan was still between the ringed fingers of the Pompadour, it was but a pretty piece of decoration; it is only now that the

"Chicken-skin, delicate, white,
Painted by Carlo Vanloo,"

becomes stuff for poetry, becoming a symbol of those silken ways by which the fates of nations went, when the fan was of equal weight with the sceptre. But Mr. Dobson, who has the true artist's love of difficulties to conquer, has done that most difficult of things, making poetry out of the ribbons of to-day, and for the wearer of those ribbons. Well, let the "English girl, divine, demure," for whom he has told us he sings, take the pretty compliment, as the probably not more comprehensive Marquise of Molière took the compliments of her "last poet": who should quarrel with the flattering tongue of a dedication? Mr. Dobson knows well enough that he has not written his poems for young ladies, nor for to-day's homage. He has done his day's work for the work's sake, and he has finished perfectly a small, beautiful thing: a miniature, a bust, a coin.

"All passes. Art alone
Enduring stays to us;
The Bust outlasts the throne—
The Coin, Tiberius."

Arthur Symonds.

VERSES READ AT THE DINNER OF THE OMAR KHÁYYÁM CLUB,*

ON THURSDAY, MARCH 25TH, 1897.

“—Medio de fonte leporum
Surgit OMARI aliquid.”

—*Lucretius* (adapted).

“—While we the Feast by Fruit and Wine prolong
A Bard bobs up, and bores us with a Song.”

—*The Apitad*

’Twas Swift who said that people “view
In Homer more than Homer knew.”
I can’t pretend to claim the gift
Of playing Bentley upon Swift;
But I suspect the reading true
Is “Omar more than Omar knew,”
Or why this large assembly met
Lest we this Omar should forget?
(In a parenthesis, I note
Our Rustum † here, without red coat;
Where Sohrab sits I’m not aware,
But that’s Firdausi ‡ in the Chair!)—
I say then that we now are met
Lest we this Omar should forget,
Who, ages back, remote, obscure,
Wrote verses once at Naishápúr,—
Verses which, as I understand,
Were merely copied out by hand,
And now, without etched plates, or aid
Of India paper, or handmade,
Bid fair Parnassus’ top to climb,
And knock the Classics out of time.

Persicos odi—Horace said,
And therefore is no longer read.
Time, who could simply not endure
Slight to the Bard of Naishápúr,
(Time, by the way, was rather late
For one so often up to date!)
Went swiftly to the Roll of Fame
And blotted Q. H. F. his name,
Since when, for every youth or Miss
That knows *Quis multa gracilis*,
There are a hundred who can tell
What Omar thought of Heav’n and Hell:
Who Bahrám was; and where was hid
The sev’n-ring’d Beaker of Jamshyd;—
In short, without a break can quote
Most of what Omar ever wrote.

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† Field-Marshal Rt. Hon. Viscount Wolseley.

‡ Mr. Edmund Gosse.