

On the Cockney School of Poetry Vol. V

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Freeditorial 

OUR TALK SHALL BE OF KEATS,
THE MUSES' SON OF PROMISE, AND WHAT FEATS
HE YET MAY DO, &c.
CORNELIUS WEBB.

THE two greatest egotists of the present day are *absque omni dubio*, Mr Wordsworth, and Mr Leigh Hunt. It is strange that one of the best and wisest of poets and men, should in any respect bear resemblance to such a thing as the Examiner. But there are reasons for every thing, and we shall try to account for the phenomenon.

Mr Wordsworth is a man of high original genius, whose reputation in the general ear lags far, very far behind its merits. The world knows little or nothing about Mr Wordsworth. What can fine ladies understand about Ruth? or fine gentlemen about Michael? Who, that wears black silk breeches or a crimson sattin petticoat, cares a farthing about the gray headed pedlar with his substantial coat of Galashiels cloth, or for Lacy Fell with her "little gray cloak?" One might as well imagine a Geraldine sighing in solitude over a leading article of the sulky Scotsman, or feeding her midnight dreams with dim shadows of the Ettrick Shepherd and his top-boots.

"These are things that may not be,

There is a rule in destiny."

Mr Wordsworth may perhaps look very long before he finds fit audience; when he does find them, there is no question they must be "few."

His words are all of the *φωναίτα σуетοίτι* kind; and even Mr Jeffrey, with all his cleverness, has, for these ten years, been railing at the contents of a book shut—to whose cipher he has no key.

It is no great wonder that a mind such as Mr Wordsworth's, finding that its productions were not tasted as they should be, should have gathered itself all into itself. His genius came down to us like a beautiful unknown bird of heaven, wheeling around us, and courting us in its innocence, with colours we had never seen before, and wild sweet melodies to which our ears were strangers. But we repelled the visitor, and he has taken him to the air above us, where he finds serene joy in the consciousness of his soaring,

“And singeth sweetly to the cloud he cleaves.”

It is no wonder that he should have learned almost to forget the existence of those who rejected him; and that egotism is pardonable in him, which would infallibly expose any other man of his genius to the just derision even of his inferiors. The egotism or *nosism* of the other luminaries of the Lake School, is at times extravagant enough, and amusing enough withal, but these also are men of great genius, and though not in the same degree, they are sharers in the excuse which we have already made for Mr Wordsworth.

The egotism of the Cockneys is a far more inexplicable affair. None of them are men of genius—none of them are men of solitary meditative habits;—they are lecturers of the Surrey Institution, and editors of Sunday papers, and so forth. They have all abundance of admirers in the same low order of society to which they themselves originally belong, and to which alone they have all their lives addressed themselves. Why then do they perpetually chatter about themselves? Why is it that they seem to think the world has no right to hear one single word about any other persons than Hunt, the Cockney Homer, Hazlitt, the Cockney Aristotle, and Haydon, the Cockney Raphael? These are all very eminent men in their own eyes, and in the eyes of the staring and listening groupes whom it is their ambition to astonish. Mr Hazlitt cannot look round him at the Surrey, without resting his smart eye on the idiot admiring grin of several dozens of aspiring apprentices and critical clerks. Mr Hunt cannot be at home at Hampstead, without having his Johnny Keatses and his Corny Webbs to cram sonnets into his waistcoat pockets, and crown his majestic brows with

“The wreath that Dante wore ! ! !”

Mr Haydon enjoys every day the satisfaction of sitting before one of the cartoons of Raphael, with his own greasy hair combed loosely over his collar, after the manner of Raphael—hatted among his hatless disciples—a very God among the Landseers. What would these men have? Are they still unsatisfied

with flattery, still like the three daughters of the horse-leech, “crying, *Give! give! give!*” There is absolutely no pleasing of some people.

The most amusing of the Cockney egotists is certainly our friend Leigh. There is an air of innocent unsuspecting self-adulation about him, which is enough to make one sorry to break upon the train of his sweet fancies. He sits at Hampstead with his pen in his hand, from year’s end to year’s end, and we venture to assert, that he never yet published a single Number of the Examinerpaper—a single sonnet or song—of which one half at least was not, in some shape or other, dedicated to himself.

“HUNT est quodcunque vides—quodcunque movetur.”

We are sick of the *personalities* of this man—of his vituperative personalities concerning others, and his commendatory personalities concerning himself. The only thing he has not yet done is to give the public an engraving of his “face divine,” and upon what principle he has so long neglected this obvious piece of civility, we profess ourselves much at a loss to imagine—

What a large book his *Confessions* will make when he publishes them, as he has so long promised to do! There is no need of a Jemmy Boswell in Cockaigne. The truth is, that the whole of the Great Cockney’s writings are only episodes and detached fragments of a “*voyage autour de ma chambre*.” But we beg pardon of the Chevalier Ximenes, who was a wit, a poet, and a gentleman, for making use of the name of one of the most exquisite of books, to illustrate the character of one of the most vulgar of scribblers.

Those who know any thing about the writings of Mr Hunt cannot have forgotten that very long essay of his in the Round Table, entitled “A Day by the Fireside.” They must still remember with accuracy the description of Mr Hunt poking the fire, and his wife pouring out the tea with her fingers, “having a touch of Sir Peter Lely about them.” They must recollect his narrative of his own reflections upon the “swirly” smoke, as it ascends with its “brief lambency, or darts out with a spiral thinness, and a sulphureous and continued puffing as from a reed!” But we prefer illustrating our present discussion by a few extracts from a later publication. It is well known that Mr Hunt’s forte is commonly supposed to lie in his theatrical criticisms; therefore, to shew our fairness, we shall begin with the following.

“One of those venal prints, called a daily paper, lately had the audacity to state, that the new comedy rehearsing at Covent-Garden Theatre was a posthumous piece of the late Mr A—. A new comedy from that pen was a refreshing event; and though we were suffering much from a pain in our tooth, which, by the way, we have not yet got entirely rid of (though we think it our

duty to such of our readers as live at a distance from the Examiner-office to announce, that it is at present hardly any thing to speak of), we prepared ourselves, with becoming alacrity, to attend its first representation. As the author was said to be dead, we made up our mind to something above mediocrity, for we have long despaired of seeing any thing good, or even amusing, from the living herd of dramatic scribblers, your B—'s, your C—'s, and your D—'s. We felt all our early school-boy play-going propensities rushing upon us, like old friends returned after a long absence, and we received them with a suitable welcome; and as it was then but twelve o'clock, it seemed as if six o'clock would never come: and we were as impatient to hear the musical cry of "Fine fruit, or a bill of the play," warbled by some old cracked piazza throat, of thirty years' service, as we used to be when we were treated to a play once in the Christmas holidays.

"We felt ourselves cosy and comfortable, and *just-the-thingish*; and at our present age, sitting round our fire, with a friend or two after a cheerful dinner, with our feet on our fender, and our chin on our knees (to the great annoyance of our wife's peace, by the way, who thinks that "every one ought to have a smell of the fire"), this, we say, is almost as delightful as it used to be to us when we were a boy to gallop over green fields, and wage a war of extermination on the butter-cups—quite as useful and less expensive than that with which our precious ministers amuse themselves. We have often told our readers that our habits and feelings are domestic, but as want of room hinders our saying more on this subject at present, we shall reserve it for the leading article in our next. We shall only add, that though we do now and then fidget the fire with the poker, in spite of our wife's entreaties to 'let it draw up a bit,' yet we love our little fire-side with all its appendages. And then, to make all as it should be, we have pussy to frisk about us, whom we have lately decorated with a scarlet ribbon—by the way, we wish all ribbons were as well merited and as disinterestedly given—and the singing of the tea-kettle too, which we like a thousand times better than the Italian bravuras of Madame E—, with her thick ankles, and a face that reminds one of a monkey in the measles, though we know what good Italian music is, and can even applaud it on an occasion. Upon the whole, we may say that our little evening circles, in point of good taste and right feeling, might put to the blush some that the Morning Post jocosely calls brilliant and illustrious, and gives a hundred other imposing names to. The sly rogues of managers know well enough that we like our home, and no doubt thought it would be an excellent hoax to kidnap us to the theatre by hook or by crook. We can fancy those bright geniuses, Messrs F—, G—, and H—, sitting down together in the green room, puzzling their brains (we speak of brains here by courtesy) how they might get the Examiner to the first night of their new comedy. "Let's give out that it is by A—," says F—, after an hour's thinking.—"Damned good," says G—. "Excellent, dam'me!"

says H—. Their scheme succeeded to their own surprise, and no doubt, every one else's, for we could hear something like a buzz in the house as we entered.

“As our friends declined taking their afternoon's nap at the new comedy, we went alone. We bought a play-bill at the door, and could not help thinking that if the Attorney-General had bought one, he would have read it carefully through, to see whether there might not be something in it to file an information against, and then have gone home and facetiously talked about the liberty of the press; though, by the way, it is notorious that you cannot write a few pages of scurrility and abuse, particularly if you tack P— R— to the end of it, without danger of being hospitably lodged in a certain rural retreat in Horsemonger-lane, enlivened by what are archly 'ycleped *arcades* and *views* of the Surrey hills. For our own part, we are sure our readers will do us the justice to acknowledge that we did all we could to get in there; but as we found we did not like it, and then did all we could to get out again, we shall not readily be friends with a certain great Personage, who insisted on our staying there the full term of our sentence: and though on certain concessions we may *forgive* him, he must not expect there can ever exist between us a “How-d'ye-do-George-my-boy” sort of familiarity.”

The acting and actors being dismissed with the usual kind of nonchalance, our Cockney proceeds to a graver part of his theme.

“As to what the author (funny rogue!) may call the plot of his piece, we shall not attempt to give any account of it; we must leave that task to more patient heads than our's, for with all our sagacity we could make nothing of it. For the characters, as the people who walked on and off the stage were called in the play-bill, we must refer our readers to the printer of it, who perhaps can furnish them with ‘further particulars:’ but seriously, if such a set of unmeaning chatterers are to be dignified by the name of characters, we must put our Shakspear and Congreve into the fire. We have already described the texture of the dialogue, that is, we have named the author of the piece, which is at once letting the public into the secret. It contains the usual number of ohs! and ahs! and dam'mes: the serious part made up of insipid no-meanings; and the comic (the only part, of course, which did not excite a laugh) of vulgar, common-place, and worn-out jests, from the renowned Mr Joseph Miller. By the way, the best joke was in the play-bill, where the author facetiously called his piece *a comedy!* We shall dismiss the piece with a word of advice to the author, and we hope we shall profit by it. He usually inflicts on us at least one play a year, and no doubt chuckles at the folly of the town, while he ostentatiously supports his family on the produce of it; but unless he can present us with something like King Lear or the Way of the World, we seriously recommend him to get his bread honestly by making shoes, or, as that requires something of talent—by blacking them.”

We shall conclude with a specimen of the regular Cockney Essay and Sonnet.

“On Sonnet-Writing, and Sonnet-Writers in general.

“Petrarch wrote Sonnets. This, I think, is pretty generally known—I mean among the true lovers of Italian poetry. Of course, I do not here allude to those young ladies and gentlemen who are beginning to learn Italian, as they say, and think Petrarch really a charming man, and know by heart the names of Tasso and Ariosto, and of that wholesale dealer in grand vagaries, Dante. But besides these, several other Italian writers have composed sonnets, though I do not think with the rest of the world that they have brought this species of composition to any thing like perfection.

“Among us, Shakspeare and Milton have made attempts. Milton, by the way, is known to people in general merely as the author of *Paradise Lost*; but his masque, called *Comus*, I think the finest specimen of his poetical powers, faulty as it is in many respects. Some allowance, however, must be made for his youth at the time he wrote it; and indeed I must, in common fairness, admit, that when I composed my *Descent of Liberty*, I had the advantage of being somewhat older.

“When I inform my readers that Shakspeare wrote sonnets, I know they will be inclined to receive the revelation with a bless-my-soul sort of stare, and for any thing I know, discredit it altogether. People, generally speaking, are very ignorant about the great nature-looking-through Bard, though I know they pretend to talk a good deal about him. His sonnets, for instance, are known only to the few whose souls are informed with a pure taste, and whose high aspirings enable them to feel and enjoy all the green leafiness and dewy freshness of his poetry. For my own part, I think well of them; and certainly upon the whole, they are not unworthy of their great author. Yet he has left something to be done in that way.

“Among the moderns we have no great examples. This lack of good sonnet-writers in England is in some sort attributable to the style of versification prevalent among us, and which is totally unfit for the streamy, gurgling-brooky, as it were, flow of the sonnet. Dryden and Pope, I think, were wretched versifiers, though I know this opinion will absolutely horrify all the boarding-school misses, as well as many other well intentioned folks, who like verses which cost them no trouble to read into music. But to come to the point. What our poetry has hitherto wanted, is a looseness and irregularity—a kind of broken, patchy choppiness in the construction of its verse, and an idiomatic how-d’ye-do-pretty-well-thank-ye sort of freedom in its language. This, at length, I have succeeded in giving it, and present my readers with the following sonnet on myself as a specimen. By the way, I intend it only for such readers as have a fine eye for the truth of things—for sweet hearts and

fine understandings—for maids whose very souls peep out at their bosoms, as it were, and who love the moonlight stillness of the Regent’s Park.

“SONNET ON MYSELF.

“I love to walk towards Hampstead saunteringly,
And climb thy grassy eminence, Primrose Hill!
And of the frolicksome breeze, swallow my fill,
And gaze all round and round me. Then I lie
Flatlily on the grass, ruralily,
And sicken to think of the smoke-mantled city,
But pluck a butter-cup, yellow and pretty,
And twirl it, as it were, Italianly.
And then I drink hot milk, fresh from the cow,
Not such as that they sell about the town; and then
I gaze at the sky with high poetic feeling,
And liken it to a gorgeously spangled ceiling;
Then my all-compassing mind tells me—as now,
And as it usually does—that I am foremost of men!” P. 21.

And so “good bye for the present, sweet Master Shallow;” we shall come back to thee anon, as sure as our name is

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