

AUSTIN DOBSON.

As MR. LANG told us in his sympathetic paper on M. Théodore de Banville, some literary reputations are like the fairies in that they cannot cross running water. Others again are rather like the misty genii of the Arabian Nights, which loom highest when seen from afar. Poe, for example, is more appreciated in England than at home; and Cooper is given a more lofty rank by French than by American critics. In much the same manner we note that Carlyle gained the ear of an American audience when he was not listened to with attention in Great Britain; and the scattered verses of Præd were collected together for American admirers long before the appearance of an English edition. And so it is, I think, with Mr. Austin Dobson, whose position as a leader in one division of English poetry was recognized more immediately and more unhesitatingly in these United States than in his native Great Britain. To Mr. Dobson, the young school of American writers of familiar verse—to use Cowper's admirable phrase—look up as to a master; and his poems are read and pondered and imitated by not a few of the more promising of our younger poets.

Mr. Austin Dobson was born at Plymouth, January 18, 1840. He comes of a family of civil engineers, and it was as an engineer that his grandfather, toward the end of the last century, went to France, where he settled and married a French lady. Among the earliest recollections of Mr. Dobson's father was his arrival in Paris on one side of the Seine as the Russians arrived on the other. This must have been in 1814. But the French boy had long become an English man when the poet was born. At the age of eight or nine Austin Dobson was taken by his parents—so his friend Mr. Gosse tells us—"to Holyhead, in the Island of Anglesea; he was educated at Beaumaris, at Coventry, and finally at Strasburg, whence he returned, at the age of sixteen, with the intention of becoming a civil engineer." But in December, 1856, he accepted an appointment in the civil service, where he has remained ever since. Thus he has been able to act on the advice of Coleridge, often urged again by Dr. Holmes, to the effect "that a literary man should have another calling." Dr. Holmes adds the sly suggestion that he should confine himself to it; and this is what—for nearly ten years—Mr. Dobson did. He dabbled a little in art, having, like Théophile Gautier, the

early ambition of becoming a painter. He learned to draw a little on wood. He wrote a little, mostly in prose. In fact, there are only four poems in the first edition of "Vignettes in Rhyme" which were written before 1868. It was in this year that "St. Paul's" magazine was started by Anthony Trollope, an editor at once sympathetic and severe; he appreciated good work, and was unsparing in the kindly criticism which might make it better. In "St. Paul's," therefore, between March, 1868, and March, 1874, appeared nearly twoscore of Mr. Dobson's pieces, including some of his very best: "Tu Quoque," "A Dialogue from Plato," "Une Marquise," "An Autumn Idyll," "Dorothy," "A Gentleman of the Old School," "Avice"—with its hazardous bird-like effect, French in a way and in exquisite taste,—and the subtle and pathetic "Drama of the Doctor's Window." In October, 1873, there was published the first edition of "Vignettes in Rhyme," and the poet received for the first time that general recognition which denies itself to the writer of verses scattered here and there, throughout magazines and newspapers. "Vignettes in Rhyme" passed into its third edition; and less than four years after its appearance Mr. Dobson made a second collection of his verses, published in May, 1877, as "Proverbs in Porcelain." From these two volumes the author made a selection, adding a few poems written since the appearance of the second book, and thus prepared the collective American volume, called "Vignettes in Rhyme," issued by Henry Holt & Co. in 1880, with a graceful and alluring introduction by Mr. Stedman. "Old-World Idylls," published in London in the fall of 1883, is based on this American selection of 1880. It is to be followed some day by "At the Sign of the Lyre," which is to include the poems written during the past four or five years. Unfortunately we shall not have Mr. Dobson's complete poems even then, for his own fastidious taste has excluded poems which the less exacting reader had learned to like,— "Ad Rosam," for instance, and others not a few which the admirers of fine humorous verse will not willingly let die. Let us hope that there will be vouchsafed to us, in due time, a volume in which we may treasure Mr. Dobson's "Complete Poetical Works." Akin to the fastidiousness which rejects certain poems altogether—and quite as annoying to many—is the fastidiousness with which the poet is continually going over his

verses with a file, polishing until they shine again, smoothing an asperity here, and there rubbing out a blot. This is always a dangerous pastime, and the poet is rarely well advised who attempts it, as all students of Tennyson will bear witness. If the poet is athirst for perfection, he may lay his poems by for the Horatian space of seven years, but when they are once printed and published, he had best keep his hands off them. Of course the most of Mr. Dobson's alterations are unexceptionable improvements, yet there are a few that we reject with abhorrence.

Mr. Aldrich has said that Mr. Dobson "has the grace of Suckling and the finish of Herrick, and is easily master of both in metrical art." The beauty of his poetry is due in great measure to its lyric lightness. He has many lines and many whole poems which sing themselves into the memory, and cannot be thrust thence. Who that made acquaintance with the "Ladies of St. James's" in "Harper's Magazine" a year or two ago can forget "Phyllida, my Phyllida?" And who cannot call up before him *Autonoë* and *Rosina* and *Rose* and the other "damosels, blithe as the belted bees," whom the poet has set before us with so much breezy freshness? To know them is to love them, and to love the poet who has sung them into being. Next to the airy grace and the flowing and unfailing humor which inform all Mr. Dobson's poems, perhaps the quality which most deserves to be singled out is their frank and hearty wholesomeness. There is nothing sickly about them, or morbid, or perverse, as there is about so much contemporary British verse. Mr. Dobson is entirely free from the besetting sin of those minor poets who sing only in a minor key. He has no trace of affectation, and no taint of sentimentality. He is simple and sincere. His delicacy is manly, and not effeminate. There is a courtly dignity about all his work; and there is nowhere a hint of bad taste. Mr. Locker once spoke to me of the "Unfinished Song," and said that "the spirit is so beautiful"; and of a truth the spirit of all Mr. Dobson's work is beautiful. There is unfailling elevation. Mr. Dobson, in Joubert's phrase, never forgets that the lyre is a winged instrument. Here is a lyric, not one of his best known, and not in the style he most frequently attempts; but it is lifted out of commonplace, though the subject is hackneyed and worn; it soars, and sings as it soars, like the lark:

A SONG OF THE FOUR SEASONS.

When Spring comes laughing
By vale and hill,
By wind-flower walking
And daffodil,—

Sing stars of morning,
Sing morning skies,
Sing blue of speedwell,
And my Love's eyes.

When comes the Summer,
Full-leaved and strong,
And gay birds gossip
The orchard long,—
Sing hid, sweet honey
That no bee sips;
Sing red, red roses,
And my Love's lips.

When Autumn scatters
The leaves again,
And piled sheaves bury
The broad-wheeled wain,—
Sing flutes of harvest
Where men rejoice;
Sing rounds of reapers,
And my Love's voice.

But when comes Winter
With hail and storm,
And red fire roaring
And ingle warm,—
Sing first sad going
Of friends that part;
Then sing glad meeting,
And my Love's heart.

And with all this elevation and lyric lightness there is no lack of true pathos and genuine feeling for the lowly and the hopeless. More than once has Mr. Dobson expressed his sympathy for the striving, and especially for those strugglers who are handicapped in the race, and who eat their hearts in silent revolt against hard circumstances.

"Ah, Reader, ere you turn the page,
I leave you this for moral:—
Remember those who tread life's stage
With weary feet and scantest wage,
And ne'er a leaf for laurel."

The best of Mr. Dobson's poems result from a happy mingling of a broad and genial humanity with an extraordinarily fine artistic instinct. Just as Chopin declared that there were paintings at the sight of which he heard music, so it may be said that there are poems the hearing of which calls up a whole gallery of pictures. Side by side with the purely lyric pieces are as many more as purely pictorial. "The Curé's Progress," for example, is it not a like masterpiece of *genre*? And the ballade "On a Fan, that Belonged to the Marquise de Pompadour," with its wonderful movement and spirit, and its apt suggestion of the courtiers and courtesans "thronging the *Ceil-de-Bauf* through," is it not a perfect picture of

"The little great, the infinite small thing
That ruled the hour when Louis Quinze was king?"

This is a Fragonard, as the other is a Meissonnier. It is not that the pathetic "Story of

Rosina" has for its hero François Boucher, or that other poems abound in references to Watteau and Vanloo and Hogarth; it is not even that these references are never at random, and always reveal an exact knowledge and a nice appreciation; it is rather that Mr. Dobson is a painter at heart, in a degree far from common even in these days of so-called "word-painting." He excels in the art of calling up a scene before you by a few motions of his magic pen; and, once evoked, the scene abides with you always. Mr. E. A. Abbey told me that once in a nook of rural England he happened suddenly on a sun-dial, and that lines from Mr. Dobson's poem with that title rose to his lips at once, and he felt as though nature had illustrated the poet.

This delightful effect is produced by no abuse of the customary devices of "word-painting," and by no squandering of "local color." On the contrary, Mr. Dobson is sober in his details, and rarely wastes time in description. He hits off a scene in a few happy strokes; there is no piling of a Pelion of adjectives on an Ossa of epithets. The picture is painted with the utmost economy of stroke. Mr. Dobson's method is like that of the etchers who work in the bath; his hand needs to be both swift and sure. Thus there is always a perfect unity of tone; there is always a shutting out of everything which is not essential to the picture. Consider the ballad of the Armada and the "Ballad of Beau Brocade,"—a great favorite with Dr. Holmes, by the way,—and see if one is not as truly seventeenth century in thought and feeling as the other is eighteenth century, while both are thoroughly and robustly English. How captivatingly Chinese are the verses about the "little blue mandarin"!

Of the French pictures I have already spoken, but inadequately, since I omitted to cite the "Proverbs in Porcelain," which I should ascribe to a French poet, if I knew any Frenchman who could have accomplished so winning a commingling of banter and of grace, of high breeding and of playfulness. How Roman are the various Horatian lyrics, and, above all, how Greek is "Autonoë"! "'Autonoë,'" as a friend writes me, "is the most purely beautiful of all Mr. Dobson's work. It does not touch the heart, but it rests the spirit. Most so-called 'classicism' shows us only the white temple, the clear high sky, the outward beauty of form and color. This gives us the warm air of spring and the life that pulses in a girl's veins like the soft swelling of sap in a young tree. This is the same feeling that raises 'As You Like It' above all pastoral poetry. Our nineteenth century sensibilities are so played on by the troubles, the

sorrows, the little vital needs and anxieties of the world around us, that sometimes it does us good to get out into the woods and fields of another world entirely, if only the atmosphere is not chilled and rarified by the lack of the breath of humanity. There are times when the 'Drama of the Doctor's Window' would excite us, but when 'Autonoë' would rest us—and not with a mere selfish intellectual rest."

About eight years ago, early in 1876, Mr. Dobson began to turn his attention to what are generally known as the French forms of verse, although they are not all of them French. Oddly enough, it happens that the introduction, at Mr. Dobson's hands, of these French forms into English literature is due—indirectly at least—to an American. In criticising Mr. Dobson's earlier verses in "Victorian Poets," Mr. Stedman amiably admonished him that "such a poet, to hold the hearts he has won, not only must maintain his quality, but strive to vary his style." This warning from the American critic, this particular Victorian poet, perhaps having some inner monitions of his own, took to heart, and he began at once to cast about for some new thing. His first find was the "Odes Funambulesques" of M. Théodore de Banville, the reviver of the triolet, the rondeau, and the ballade. Here was a new thing—a truly new thing, since it was avowedly an old thing. Mr. Dobson had written a set of triolets already, in 1874; it was in May, 1876, that he published the first original ballade ever written in English, the firm and vigorous "Prodigals," slightly irregular in its repetition of rhymes, but none the less a most honorable beginning. Almost at the same time he attempted also the rondeau and the rondel. A year later, in May, 1877, he published his second volume of verse, "Proverbs in Porcelain," and this, followed almost immediately by Mr. Gosse's easy and learned "Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse," in the "Cornhill Magazine" of July, 1877, drew general attention to the new weapons with which the poet's armory had been enriched. It would be idle to maintain that they have met with universal acceptance. Mr. Stedman, when introducing the author to the American public, confesses that he is not certain whether to thank Mr. Dobson or to condole with him on the bringing into fashion of the ballade and the rondeau and its fellows. Perhaps this was partly due to the sudden rush of versifiers who wreaked themselves on these forms, and did their little best to bring them into disrepute. Perhaps it was due to a wider dislike of metrical limitations and of all that tempts the poet to expend any of his strength otherwise

than on the straightforward delivery of his message.

Yet rhyme itself, as M. Edmond Schérer tells us, "is a very curious thing, and it is a very complex pleasure which it gives. We do not like to confess how great in every art is the share of difficulty vanquished, and yet it is difficulty vanquished which gives the impression of surprise, and it is surprise which gives interest; it is the unexpected which gives us the sense of the writer's power." The testimony of Sidney Lanier—an untiring student of his art and its science—is to the same effect: "It is only cleverness and small talent which is afraid of its spontaneity; the genius, the great artist, is forever ravenous after new forms, after technic; he will follow you to the ends of the earth, if you will enlarge his artistic science, if you will give him a fresh form." Finally, the fact remains that great poets—Dante, Milton, Wordsworth—have not scorned the sonnet's scanty plot of ground; and the sonnet is as rigid and quite as difficult, if you play the game fairly, as either the ballade or the rondeau. The rondeau and rondel, have they not a charm of their own when handled by a genuine poet? And the ballade,—that little three-act comedy in rhyme with its epigram-epilogue of an envoy,—has it not both variety and dignity?

For the Malayan pantoum, as for the Franco-Italian sestina, with their enervating and exasperating monotony, there is really nothing to be said. And perhaps there is no need to say much for the tiny triolet, effective as it may be for occasional epigram, or for the elaborate and stately chant-royal, which is a feat of skill, no more and no less; that Mr. Dobson and Mr. Gosse have done it as well as they have, suggests only the pertinent query as to whether it was well worth doing. Perhaps no more must be said in favor of the dainty little villanelle—a form which exists under the greatest disadvantage since the first and typical specimen, the ever fresh and graceful "J'ai perdu ma tourterelle" of Passerat remains to this day unsurpassable and unapproached. But the rondeau and rondel carry no such weight, and in the hands of a master of meters they are capable of being filled with a simple beauty most enjoyable. What could be more delicate, more pensive, more charming, than Mr. Dobson's rondel, "The Wanderer"?

THE WANDERER.

(Rondel.)

Love comes back to his vacant dwelling,—
The old, old Love that we knew of yore!
We see him stand by the open door,
With his great eyes sad, and his bosom swelling.

He makes as though in our arms repelling,
He fain would lie as he lay before;—
Love comes back to his vacant dwelling,—
The old, old Love that we knew of yore!

Ah, who shall help us from over-telling
That sweet forgotten, forbidden lore!
E'en as we doubt in our heart once more,
With a rush of tears to our eyelids welling,
Love comes back to his vacant dwelling.

The ballade, however, is by far the best of all these poems. I hold it second to the sonnet alone, and for some purposes superior even to the sonnet. It is fair to say that it is the only one of the French poems which in France itself has held its own against the Italian sonnet. The instrument used by Clément Marot, by Villon,—that "voice out of the slums of Paris," as Mr. Matthew Arnold called him,—by La Fontaine, and in later times by Albert Glatigny and Théodore de Banville, is surely worthy of honor. In Villon's hands it has dignity and depth, in Glatigny's it has pathos, and in Marot's, in Mr. Dobson's, and in Mr. Lang's it has playfulness and gayety. I believe Mr. Dobson himself likes the "Ballade of Imitation" better than any of his other ballades, while I confess my own preference for the "Ballade of Prose and Rhyme," the only *ballade à double refrain* worthy to be set alongside Clément Marot's "Frère Lubin." It is almost too familiar to quote here at length, and yet it must be quoted perforce, for nohow else can I get the testimony of my best witness fully before the jury:

THE BALLAD OF PROSE AND RHYME.

(Ballade à Double Refrain.)

When the ways are heavy with mire and rut,
In November fogs, in December snows,
When the North Wind howls, and the doors are shut,—
There is place and enough for the pains of prose;
But whenever a scent from the whitethorn blows,
And the jasmine-stars at the casement climb,
And a Rosalind-face at the lattice shows,
Then hey!—for the ripple of laughing rhyme!

When the brain gets dry as an empty nut,
When the reason stands on its square toes,
When the mind (like a beard) has a "formal cut,"—
There is place and enough for the pains of prose;
But whenever the May-blood stirs and glows,
And the young year draws to the "golden prime"
And Sir Romeo sticks in his ear a rose,—
Then hey!—for the ripple of laughing rhyme!

In a theme where the thoughts have a pedant-strut,
In a changing quarrel of "Ayes" and "Noes,"
In a starched procession of "If" and "But,"—
There is place and enough for the pains of prose;
But whenever a soft glance softer grows
And the light hours dance to the trysting-time,
And the secret is told "that no one knows,"—
Then hey!—for the ripple of laughing rhyme!

ENVOY.

In the work-a-day world,—for its needs and woes,
There is place and enough for the pains of prose;
But whenever the May-bells clash and chime,
Then hey! — for the ripple of laughing rhyme!

It seems to me that in these poems Mr. Dobson proves that the rondel at its best and the ballade at its finest belong to the poetry of feeling, and not to the poetry of ingenuity. It seems to me, also, that the poet has been helped by his restrictions. Here are cases where a faith in these forms is justified by works. We may ask, fairly enough, whether either of these poems would be as good in any other shape. From the compression enforced by the rules, they have gained in compactness, and therefore in swiftness. They are, in Miltonic phrase, "woven close, both matter, form, and style."

It is to Mr. Dobson primarily and to his fellow-workers that the credit is due of acclimatizing these exotic meters in English literature. It is not that he was absolutely the earliest to write them in English — excepting only the ballade, of which the "Prodigals" was the first. Chaucer wrote roundels, the elder Wyatt rondeaus, and Patrick Carey, about 1651, was guilty of devotional triolets! But England was not then ready for the conquest, and the forms crossed the Channel, like the Norseman, just to set foot on land and then away again. Even in France they had faded out of sight. Molière speaks slightly of ballades as old-fashioned. Only in our own times, since M. de Banville set the example has the true form been understood. Wyatt's rondeaus were printed as though they were defective sonnets. Both Longfellow and Bryant translated Clément Marot's "Frère Lubin," and neither of them knew it was a *ballade à double refrain*. Nor is Rossetti's noble rendering of Villon's famous "Ballade of Dead Ladies" accurately formal. Mr. Lang, in his "Ballads and Lyrics of Old France" (1872), was plainly on the right track, but he failed then to reach the goal. At last the time was ripe; Mr. Dobson came and set the example.

It was doubtless again due to Mr. Stedman's warning that, although there is no work which when well done secures a welcome as instant as *vers de société*, there is also "none from which the world so lightly turns upon the arrival of a new favorite with a different note," — it was this wise warning which led Mr. Dobson to vary his style, not only with the revival of the French forms, but also with fables and with a slight attempt at the drama — in so far as the dainty and delicate "Proverbs in Porcelain" are substantial enough to be called dramatic. Like John Gay and like

Mr. John G. Saxe, Mr. Dobson took to rhyming fables after making a mark by more characteristic verse. And Mr. Dobson's fables, good as they are, and pertinent and brightsome as they needs must be since he wrote them, are like Gay's and Mr. Saxe's in that they are not their author's best work. The fault plainly is in the fable form, if Mr. Dobson's fables are not as entertaining as his other poems; at any rate, I am free to confess that I like his other work better. I have to confess, also, with great doubt and diffidence, that the half-dozen little dialogues called "Proverbs in Porcelain," airy and exquisite as they are, are less favorites with me than they are with critics whose taste I cannot but think finer than mine — Mr. Aldrich, for instance, and Mr. Stedman. I am inclined to believe I like them less because they assume a dramatic form without warrant. The essence of the drama is action, and in these beautiful and witty playlets there is but the ghost of an action. I doubt not that I am unfair to these dialogues, and that my attitude toward them is that of the dramatic critic rather than that of the critic of poetry pure and simple. But that is their own fault for assuming a virtue they have not. To counterbalance this harsh treatment of the "Proverbs in Porcelain," I must declare that I find more pleasure in "A Virtuoso" than do most of Mr. Dobson's admirers, and for the same reason. I find in "A Virtuoso" all the condensed compactness of the best stage dialogue, where a phrase has to be stripped to run for its life. To be read quickly by the fireside, "A Virtuoso" may seem forced; but to be acted or recited, it is just right. I see in this cold and cutting poem, masterly in its synthesis of selfish symptoms, a regard for theatrical perspective, and a selection and a heightening of effect in accordance with the needs of the stage, which I confess I fail to find in the seemingly more dramatic "Proverbs in Porcelain." Most people, however, liking Mr. Dobson mainly for playful tenderness and tender playfulness, dislike the marble hardness of "A Virtuoso," just as they are annoyed by the tone of "A Love-letter," one of the poet's cleverest pieces. If Mr. Dobson yielded to the likes and dislikes of his admirers he would soon sink into sentimentality, and he would never dare to write as funny as he can. There are readers who are shocked and pained when they discover the non-existence of "Dorothy" — although Mr. Browning is not one of these.

After all, this is perhaps the highest compliment that readers can pay the writer, when they enter so heartily into his creations that they revolt against any trick he may play

upon them. And in these days of haste without rest, it ill becomes us to fling the first stone at an author who is enamored of elusive perfection and who is willing to spare no pains to give us his best and only his best. He may be thankful that he is not as infertile on the one hand as Waller, who was "the greater part of a summer correcting *ten* lines for Her Grace of York's copy of Tasso," or as reckless on the other hand as Martial, who disdained to elaborate.

"Turpe est difficile habere nugas
Et stultus labor est ineptiarum."

Not infrequently do we find Mr. Frederick Locker and Mr. Dobson classed together as though their work was fundamentally of the same kind. The present writer has to plead guilty to the charge of inadvertently and inaccurately linking the two names in critical discussion. The likeness is accidental rather than essential, and the hasty conjunction is due, perhaps, more to the fact that they are friends, and that they both write what has to be called *vers de société*, than to any real likeness between their works. The fact is, the more clearly we define, and the more precisely we limit the phrase *vers de société*, the more exactly do we find the best and most characteristic of Mr. Locker's poems agreeing with the definition and lying at ease within the limitation: while the best and most characteristic of Mr. Dobson's poems would be left outside. In his criticism of Praed's work prefixed to the selection from his poems in the fourth volume of Ward's "English Poets," Mr. Dobson declares that "as a writer of 'society verse' in its exacter sense, Praed was justly acknowledged to be supreme," and then he adds, "We say 'exacter sense,' because it has of late become the fashion to apply this vague term in the vaguest way possible so as to include almost all verse but the highest and the lowest. This is manifestly a mistake. Society verse as Praed understood it, and as we understand it in Praed, treats almost exclusively of the *votum, timor, ira, voluptas* (and especially the *voluptas*) of that charmed circle of uncertain limits known conventionally as 'good society'—those latter-day Athenians, who, in town and country, spend their time in telling or hearing some new thing, and whose graver and deeper impulses are subordinated to a code of artificial manners." Of these it is indisputable that Mr. Locker is, as Praed was, the laureate-elect, and that "the narrow world in which they move is the main haunt and region of his song." Mr. Locker writes as one to the manner born, and nowhere reveals the touch of the parvenu which betrayed Praed now

and again. In the exact sense of the phrase, Mr. Locker, like Praed, is the poet of society, which Mr. Dobson is not—because, for one thing, we may doubt whether society is of quite so much interest or importance or significance to him as to the author of "London Lyrics." The distinction is evasive, and has to be suggested rather than said; but it is none the less real and vital. It is, perhaps, rather that Mr. Dobson is more a man of letters, while Mr. Locker is more a man of the world. Certainly Mr. Dobson has a more consciously literary style than Mr. Locker, a style less simple and less direct. Henri Monnier would say that Mr. Dobson had more *mots d'auteur*. Admirable as is Mr. Dobson's verse, it has not the condensed clearness nor the incisive vigor of Mr. Locker's. One inclines to the opinion that the author of "London Lyrics" is willing to make more sacrifices for vernacular terseness than the author of "Vignettes in Rhyme." It is not that Mr. Dobson is one of the poets who keep their choicest wares locked in an inner safe guarded by heavy bolts, and to whose wisdom no man may help himself unless he has the mystic letters which unlock the massive doors, but he is not quite willing to be simple to the point of bareness as is Mr. Locker, who wears his heart upon his sleeve. In some things Mr. Locker is like Mr. du Maurier, even in the little Gallic twist, while Mr. Dobson is rather like Mr. Randolph Caldecott or our own Abbey, with the quaint Englishry of whose style Mr. Dobson's has much in common. Yet after saying this, I feel inclined to take it all back, for I recall together "This was the Pompadour's fan" and "This is Gerty's glove"—and here it is Mr. Dobson who is brilliant and French and Mr. Locker who is more simple in sentiment and more English. Yet again it is the worldly minded Mr. Locker who declares that

"The world's as ugly, aye, as sin—
And nearly as delightful!"—

a sentiment wholly foreign to Mr. Dobson's feelings. This suggests that there is a certain town stamp in the appropriately named "London Lyrics" not to be seen in "Vignettes in Rhyme," some of which are vignettes from rural nature. But both books are boons to be thankful for. Both are havens of rest in days of depression; both have a joyousness most tonic and wholesome in these days when the general tone of literature is gray; both preach the gospel of sanity, and both may serve as antiseptics against sentimental decay.

Here occasion serves to say that each of these masters of what Dr. Johnson, while declaring its difficulty, called "easy verse," has

set forth his views of the art of writing *vers de société*. Mr. Locker made his declaration of faith in the admirable preface, all too brief, to the selection of *vers de société* and *vers d'occasion*, which he published in 1867 as "Lyra Elegantiarum." Mr. Dobson, at the request of the present writer, drew up a code for the composition of easy verse, and although this has been printed before, it would be unpardonable not to republish it again. Here, then, are Mr. Dobson's "Twelve Good Rules of Familiar Verse":

- I. Never be vulgar.
- II. Avoid slang and puns.
- III. Avoid inversions.
- IV. Be sparing of long words.
- V. Be colloquial, but not commonplace.
- VI. Choose the lightest and brightest of measures.
- VII. Let the rhymes be frequent, but not forced.
- VIII. Let them be rigorously exact to the ear.
- IX. Be as witty as you like.
- X. Be serious by accident.
- XI. Be pathetic with the greatest discretion.
- XII. Never ask if the writer of these rules has observed them himself.

Mr. Dobson has not confined his labors in prose to the canons of familiar verse. Although it is as a poet that he is most widely known, his prose has qualities of its own. Besides scattering magazine articles, it includes half a dozen apt and alert criticisms in Ward's "English Poets," the final chapter in Mr. Lang's little book on "The Library," and prefaces to a fac-simile reprint of "Robinson Crusoe," and to the selection from Herrick's poems, illustrated by Mr. Abbey with such abundant sympathy and such delightful grace and fancy. More important than these are the volumes in which Mr. Dobson has given us selections from the best of the "Eighteenth Century Essays," and in which he has introduced and annotated the "Fables" of John Gay, and the "Vicar of Wakefield" of Oliver Goldsmith, and the "Barbier de Séville" of Beaumarchais. Still more important are the biographical sketches of his favorite Hogarth, and of Bewick and his pupils, and the life of Henry Fielding in the "English Men of Letters" series. It was to this which Mr. Lowell referred when he unveiled Miss Margaret Thomas's bust of Fielding in the Somersetshire hall. In the course of his speech, as rich and eloquent as only his speeches are, Mr. Lowell said that "Mr. Austin Dobson has done, perhaps, as true a service as one man of letters ever did to another, by reducing what little is known of the life of Fielding from chaos to coherence, by ridding it of fable, by correcting and coördinating dates, by cross-examining tradition till it stammeringly confessed that it had no visible means of subsistence, and has thus enabled us to get some authentic

glimpse of the man as he really was. Lessing gave the title of 'rescues' to the essays in which he strove to rehabilitate such authors as had been, in his judgment, unjustly treated by their contemporaries, and Mr. Dobson's essay deserves to be reckoned in the same category. He has rescued the body of Fielding from beneath the swinish hoofs which were trampling it as once they trampled the Knight of La Mancha, whom Fielding so heartily admired."

It has been well said that the study of practice of verse is the best of trainings for the writing of prose. Mr. Dobson's prose style is firm and precise; it has no taint of the Corinthian luxuriance which Mr. Matthew Arnold has castigated, or of the passionate emphasis which passes for criticism in some quarters. His ideal in prose writing is a style exact and cool and straightforward. Sometimes the reader might like a little more glow. It is not that his prose style is sapless, for it has life; it is rather that it is generally cut-and-dried of malice prepense. He can write prose with more color and more heat when he chooses, as he who will may see in the paragraphs of the preface to Mr. Abbey's Herrick. In general, however, Mr. Dobson forgets that he is a poet when he takes up his pen to write prose, and he remembers only that he is an antiquary and an investigator. In fact, his prose is the prose of a scientific historian; and Mr. Dobson has the scientific virtues,—the passion for exactness, the untiring patience in research, and the unwillingness to set down anything which has not been proved. If we apply De Quincey's classification, we should declare that Mr. Dobson's poetry—like all true poetry—belongs to the literature of power, while his prose belongs to the literature of knowledge.

It is to be remarked, also, that the poet sometimes remembers that he is an antiquary, also. Here Mr. Dobson is not unlike Walter Scott, who was also an antiquary-poet, with a strong love for the past and a gift for making dead figures start to life at his bidding. Much of Mr. Dobson's poetry is like his prose in that it is based on research. His learning in the manners and customs of past times is most minute. Especially rich is his knowledge of the people and of the vocabulary of the eighteenth century. This is the result of indefatigable delving in the records of the past. His acquaintance with the ways and words of the contemporaries of Fielding and of Hogarth is as thorough as Mr. Tennyson's knowledge of botany, for instance; and it is the proof of as much minute observation. Although Mr. Dobson disdains all second-hand information, and likes to verify facts for him-

self, he never lets his learning burden his verse. That runs as freely and as trippingly as though the seeking of the facts on which it might be founded had not been a labor of love, for which no toil was too great. The "Ballad of Beau Brocade" is a strong and simple tale, seemingly calling for no special study; but it does not contain a single word not in actual use at the time of the guide-book where it germinated, and in print in the pages of the "Gentleman's Magazine" of that reign. In like manner, in the noble and virile ballad of the Armada, which the Virgin Queen might have joyed to accept, there is no single word not in Gervase Markham.

Writing always out of the fullness of knowl-

edge, there is nowhere anything amateurish, and there is always a perfect certainty of touch. His work — as Mr. W. C. Brownell has told us — is "as natural an outgrowth as Lamb's." And he is like Lamb in that capacity for taking infinite pains which has been held the true trade-mark of genius. He is like Lamb, again, in that he has resolutely recognized his limitations. Ruler of his own territory, he has carefully refrained from crossing his neighbor's boundaries. Indeed, he is as admirable an instance as one could wish of the exactness of Swift's dictum, "It is an uncontrolled truth that no man ever made an ill figure who understood his own talents, nor a good one who mistook them."

Brander Matthews.

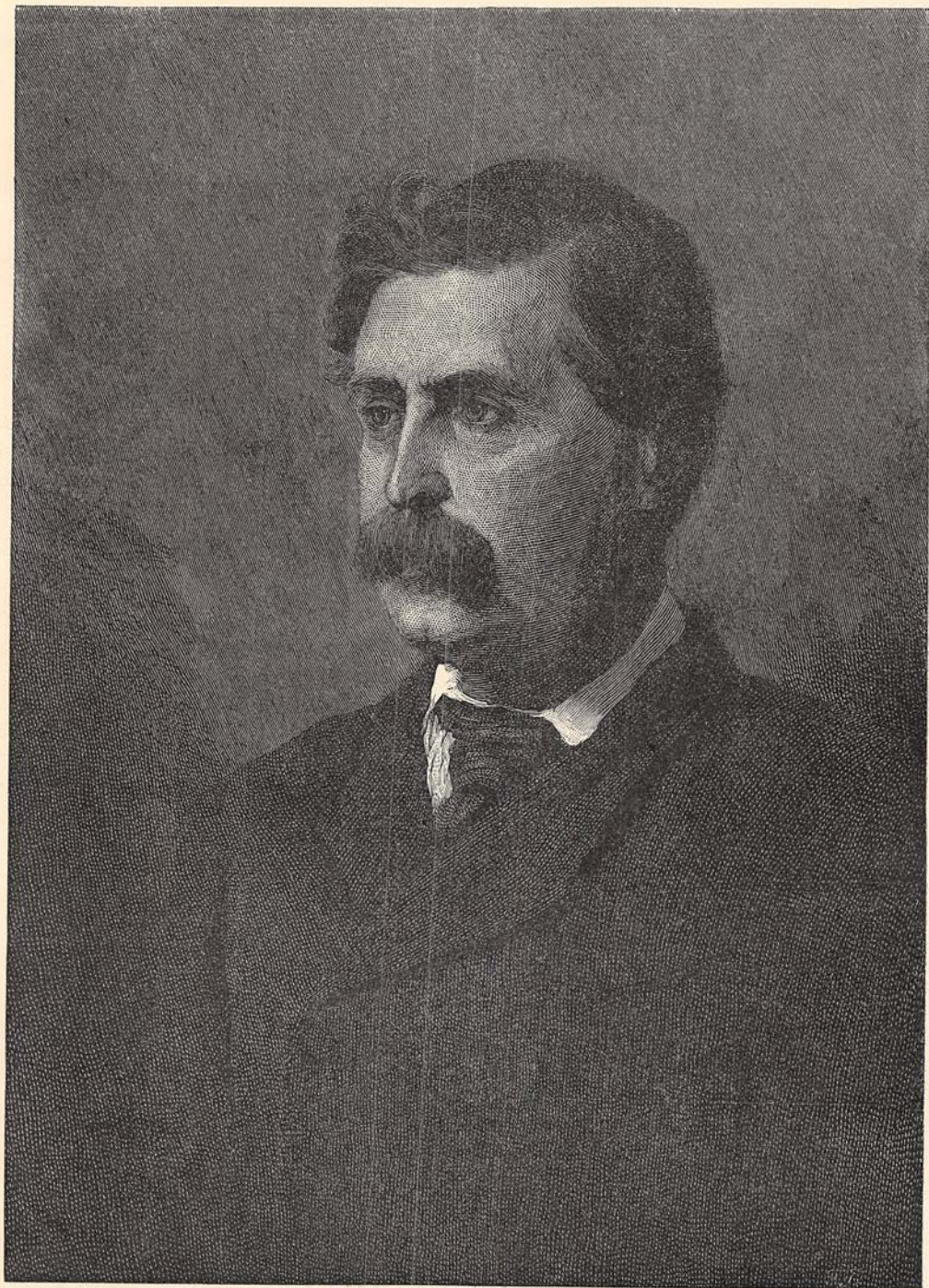
TO THE MODERN CYNICS.

THEY say there is not anything
 To make divine the minstrel's lays,
 And cries that made the whole world ring
 Are silent in these latter days.
 Mere idle thoughts the poet fill,
 The nobler themes are laid aside,
 So babbles emptily the rill
 That once has flowed in fuller tide.
 The world is old, and if we try
 With our hoarse notes from earth to soar,
 We cannot breathe a melody
 That was not better sung before.

What? Judge ye truth grown old less true,
 And him from deeper knowledge barred
 Who laughs that summer skies are blue,
 Or weeps that human hearts are hard?
 Have we no battle-cry to raise,
 No laggard cause to vivify,
 Is there no fear in these dull days
 Lest Love should fail and Art should die?
 For some with unchaste hands and rude
 Crush whatsoever thing is good,
 And some that play a meaner part
 Make Art a parody of Art.

When hate and lust and thirst of gain
 By love and truth are laid to rest,
 When life's twin riddles, joy and pain,
 No longer tear the human breast,
 When these have ceased, and the disgrace
 Of Right hard-pressed at war with Wrong,
 Then shall the singer have no place,
 Or haply find some higher song.

Harold E. Boulton.



*Yours very sincerely,
Austin Dobson*