

undoubtedly one of the six greatest masters in sonnet music in the English tongue, and who wrote on every subject he could subordinate to this form of verse, "except"—as Mr. John Dennis pointed out—"the one to which this branch of the poetical art has been usually dedicated,"—has written a fine, perhaps the finest, defence of the sonnet, which we now quote, in spite of its being known by everyone :—

THE SONNET.

Scorn not the sonnet; Critic, you have frowned  
Mindless of its just honours: with this key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody  
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;  
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;  
With it Camoens soothed an exile's grief;  
The sonnet glittered, a gay myrtle leaf  
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned  
His visionary brow; a glow-worm lamp  
It cheered mild Spenser, called from fairy-land  
To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp  
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand  
The Thing became a trumpet, whence he blew  
Soul-animating strains—alas, how few!

It certainly cannot be said of the illustrious writer of the above sonnet that his "soul-animating strains" were too few. Indeed, some critics think they were too many, and opened the sacred door wide open to the tread of the vulgar scribbler. Certainly the "Ecclesiastical" and "Duddon" series do not add to the lustre of sonnet-literature, in spite of their value as Wordsworthian poems; for the sonnet-proper is not the proper vehicle for purely scene-descriptions or philosophical disquisitions. Wordsworth, however, has offered the following polite apology for having allowed his great mind and soul to indulge in the pastime of sonnet-writing, and, I think that critic but a long-eared pedant who would deny existence to any of Wordsworth's four hundred sonnets because they did not agree with the ten or twenty absolutely essential rules. If poets did not die first, critics could not live after, and how many a volume of laboured criticism would not be given readily in exchange for that one of the oldest of our sonnets by Sir Philip Sidney—over three hundred years old, but as bright and untarnished as ever—ending with the significant line,

"Do they call virtue there ungratefulness?"

The critical voice is often raised over the finest of our poets' songs as a lively breeze blows over a field of flowers. It can carry away as much of the fragrance as it pleases to perfume itself with; but it can neither produce as sweet an odour itself, nor succeed in stealing the secret of its production.

Wordsworth's sonnet is as follows :—

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;  
And hermits are contented with their cells;  
And students with their pensive citadels;  
Maid at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,  
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom  
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,  
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells;  
In truth the prison unto which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is; and hence for me  
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound  
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;  
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)  
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

If "'twas pastime to be bound within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground," for Wordsworth, it was owing to his sharing the nature which Hamlet mentioned when he said, "O God! I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space."

In one of the "Melancholy Hours," poor Kirke White developed a few ideas concerning the sonnet; but his nature was not altogether cast in the form of a living epitaph, and his critical remarks appear to be continually interrupted by the irksome cough of the consumptive. "There is no species of poetry," he says, "which is better adapted to the taste of a melancholy man than the sonnet. While its brevity precludes the possibility of its becoming tiresome, and its full and expected close accords well with his dejected, and, perhaps, somewhat languid, tone of mind, its elegiac delicacy and querimonious plaintiveness come in pleasing consonance with his feelings."

It is unfortunate that Henry Kirke White wrote several fourteen-line poems under the impression that they were sonnets, and would, probably, have continued producing quatorzains and calling them sonnets, had not his friend, Mr. Capel Loft (who knew as much as anyone of his time about the subject), corrected him in the following appropriate lines :—

Ye, whose aspirings court the muse of lays,  
"Severest of those orders which belong,  
Distinct and separate, to Delphic song,"  
Why shun the sonnet's undulating maze?  
And why its name, boast of Petrarchan days,  
Assume, its rules disown'd? Whom from the throng  
The muse selects, their ear the charm obeys  
Of its full harmony: they fear to wrong  
The Sonnet, by adorning with a name  
Of that distinguish'd import, lays, though sweet,  
Yet not in magic texture taught to meet  
Of that so varied and peculiar frame.  
Oh! think; to vindicate its genuine praise  
Those it befits, whose lyre a favouring impulse sways.

It cannot be said that Mr. Capel Loft has maintained "the continuous sonority throughout, from the first phrase to the last," and no one can consider this a very happy example to have set to a young poet. Henry Kirke White replied of course, "to the foregoing elegant admonition," in the following "recantatory" sonnet :—

Let the sublimer muse, who, wrapt in night,  
Rides on the raven pennons of the storm,  
Or, o'er the field with purple havoc warm,  
Lashes her steeds, and sings along the fight;  
Let her, whom more ferocious strains delight,  
Disdain the plaintive Sonnet's little form,

And scorn to its wild cadence to conform  
The impetuous tenor of her hardy flight.  
But me, far lowest of the sylvan train,  
Who wake the wood-nymphs from the forest-shade  
With wildest song:—Me, much behoves thy aid  
Of mingled melody to grace my strain,  
And give it power to please, as soft it flows  
Through the smooth murmurs of thy frequent close.

The history of the sonnet and the evolution of its structural differences will be referred to later; but among others who have tried to induce new sonnet-forms into the English language was Keats. The attempt he made in this direction was sent to his brother and sister in America in a letter dated May, 1819, wherein the poet says: "I have been endeavouring to discover a better Sonnet-stanza than we have. The legitimate does not suit the language well, from the pronouncing rhymes; the other appears too elegiac, and the couplet at the end of it has seldom a pleasing effect. I do not pretend to have succeeded."

This was wisely fortunate, for even Keats would not have succeeded in pretending that he had added another to the sonnet-forms. He produced a hybrid, and here it is :—

If by dull rhimes our English must be chained,  
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet  
Fettered, in spite of pained loveliness,  
Let us find out, if we must be constrained,  
Sundals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of Poesy;  
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress  
Of every chord, and see what may be gained  
By ear industrious and attention meet;  
Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay-wreath crown;  
So, if we may not let the muse be free,  
She will be bound with garlands of her own.

So that the contemporary sonneteers, who depart from classic forms and thereby excite the wrath of the fastidious critics, are not alone in their violation of established rules.

The greatest modern love-sonnet writer, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, has left us a perfect jewel of a sonnet upon itself, and which forms an introduction to that remarkable sequence, "The House of Life," like which nothing will ever appear again in English Literature :—

A Sonnet is a moment's monument,  
Memorial from the Soul's eternity  
To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,  
Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,  
Of its own arduous fulness reverent:  
Carve it in ivory or in ebony,  
As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see  
Its flowering crest imperish'd and orient.  
A sonnet is a coin; its face reveals  
The soul: its converse, to what Power 'tis due:  
Whether for tribute to the august appeals  
Of Life, or lower in Love's high retinue,  
It serve: or mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,  
In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death.

Recalling Wordsworth's sonnet, already quoted in connection with the above of Dante Rossetti, one instantly remembers a more recent attempt by Mr. Richard Watson Gilder, though now about ten years old or more, in which the American undertakes to answer the question, "What is a sonnet?"

What is a sonnet? 'Tis the pearly shell  
That murmurs of the far-off murmuring sea;  
A precious jewel carved most curiously;  
It is a little picture painted well.  
What is a sonnet? 'Tis the tear that fell  
From a great poet's hidden ecstasy;  
A two-edged sword, a star, a song—ah me!  
Sometimes a heavy-tolling funeral bell.  
This was the flame that shook with Dante's breath;  
The solemn organ whereon Milton played  
And the clear glass where Shakespeare's shadow falls:  
A sea this is—beware who ventureth!  
For like a fjord the narrow floor is laid  
Mid-ocean deep to the sheer mountain walls.

In 1830, Charles Tennyson, a younger brother of the Poet Laureate, published a small volume of verse, entitled "Sonnets and Fugitive Pieces." Archbishop Trench eulogized these sonnets in his Dublin Lectures of 1866, and among them is the following, which evidently refers to the form of verse employed by the gifted young poet :—

THE PROCESS OF COMPOSITION—AN ILLUSTRATION.

Oft in our fancy an uncertain thought  
Hangs colourless, like dew on bents of grass,  
Before the morning o'er the field doth pass:  
But soon it glows and brightens; all unsought  
A sudden glory flashes through the dream,  
Our purpose deepens and our wit grows brave,  
The thronging hints a richer utterance crave,  
And tongues of fire approach the new-won theme:  
A subtler process now begins—a claim  
Is urged for order, a well-balanced scheme  
Of words and numbers, a consistent aim;  
The dew dissolves before the warming beam;  
But that fair thought consolidates its flame,  
And keeps its colour, hardening to a gem.

Charles Tennyson, who afterwards took the name of Turner, wrote a large number of very fine sonnets, only known to a comparatively few students, his own peculiar merit as a poet having been overshadowed by his brother's brighter fame; but those sonnets are remarkable for their purity of style, love of nature, choice diction, and rare fancy. The following is very beautiful, and deals with the subject now under treatment :

THE GOLD-CRESTED WREN—HIS RELATION TO THE SONNET.

When my hand closed upon thee, worn and spent  
With idly dashing on the window-pane,  
Or clinging to the cornice—I, that meant  
At once to free thee, could not but detain;  
I dropt my pen, I left th' unfinished lay,  
To give thee back to freedom; but I took—  
Oh! charm of sweet occasion!—one brief look  
At thy bright eyes and innocent dismay;  
Then forth I sent thee on thy homeward quest,  
My lesson learnt—thy beauty got by heart;  
And if, at times, my sonnet muse would rest  
Short of her topmost skill, her little best,  
The memory of thy delicate gold crest  
Shall plead for one last touch—the crown of Art.

It would be interesting to add more sonnets upon "The Sonnet," but time will not permit of further research. Should any readers of THE WEEK know of any others worthy to be recorded, it might not be uninteresting to lovers of the sonnet to hear of them. SAREPTA.

GAOL-BIRD JOE.

HE was such a mite of a creature that no one noticed him huddled up in the arching doorway, or if they did catch a glimpse of something in there they had not time to pause and ascertain what it was. That is where philanthropists are wrong; they blame the rest of the world for heartlessness, whereas it is merely lack of time they suffer from. It takes so much time to take care of oneself. And besides every door and archway in London has its nightly tenant or tenants—he was only one of the many. A hardened lot, all of them—hardened in every way. The cold that would have frozen other children—the children, for instance, of the passers-by this winter morning—they could not feel; the wind that penetrated like a sharp knife, even through fur-lined coats and woollen mufflers, was as a summer breeze to them. Like the eels, "they were used to it." And he was five years old, and so was a well-hardened specimen. So he lay, or sat, or crouched—it is hard to describe the particular attitude—as far back in his chosen doorway as possible, and presently a low whimper of pain came from between the hitherto silent lips. The crowd passing at the moment looked about them for the source of the faint cry; that is to say, looked about them as they hurried on, but this naturally did not bring to them the information they sought. One among the number, passing on with the rest, turned presently and retraced his steps to where the cry had appeared to issue from.

He was not what one would call, judging by appearances, "a respectable member of society." He was not "well-dressed;" in fact he was very badly dressed, or hardly dressed at all. He had a shirt and the remains of a pair of trousers, and the still more slender remains of an old overcoat. He was tall, lank and evil-looking, and looking at his face, one could easily trace the qualities from the exercise of which he had gained his soubriquet of "Gaol-bird Joe." He was "wanted" on a recent charge of housebreaking in a town not far away—in fact he had been wanted ever since he was seven years old on one charge or another, but, like the proverbial snake, he had managed to wriggle out from between the eager hands of the law, until he had attained his present age, sixteen. How long he would continue to maintain his liberty and his mode of gaining a livelihood was a matter of speculation to many who had become familiar with his name through a perusal of the crimes column of the daily newspapers, was even a matter of speculation to himself sometimes. He had got into the habit of making his way among his fellow-beings in the manner called slinking. His eyes had a watchful, furtive look from beneath his shock of jet-black, uncombed hair, and the sight of a policeman made him suddenly remember business down some street or alley near at hand. He was not a prepossessing person, and the little bundle in the doorway shrank back a little further as the head, with its battered felt covering, appeared at the entrance. For a moment or two the restless eyes, beneath their overhanging brows, gazed at the pitiful little bundle before them without speaking. If the said little bundle had been reared in an atmosphere of fairy tales, he most probably would have jumped at once to the conclusion that the apparition before him was a veritable ogre come at last to eat him up or carry him away to his castle to devour at leisure, but such intellectual privileges having been denied him, as well as most other things, he took our ill-favoured friend for nothing more than he was, except that his fears magnified his size and translated the look in the restless eyes into an intention to do him some bodily injury. When at last a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder and a rough voice asked him what he was doing there? he uttered a low cry of fear and looked up helplessly into the face above him.

"You needn't be skeered, younker," was the response to the cry and look. "I ain't a-goin' to hurt ye. What's yer name?"

There was no reply to this and the frightened eyes never wavered in their fascinated gaze into the rough face so near them. "Well, I can't afford to waste a whole mornin' over a baby as 'asn't any tongue in 'is 'ead," was the consequent exclamation, and Gaol-bird Joe, straightening himself up, thrust his hands into his pockets and walked off. Half an hour later the black head passed the doorway again and, quite accidentally, the restless eyes, just because they were restless I suppose, cast a sidelong glance within. A few forward steps, a moment's hesitation, and then the uncouth figure that had so frightened it before, was standing by the little huddling figure and critically surveying it.

"So you're 'ere yet, younker!" was the first exclamation. "well now, if I was you and 'ad a 'ome to go ter, I'd go ter it. I never stays away from my lugsurious apartments long in this kind o' weather. [Here a grim laugh as a token of appreciation of the merit of his joke.] Tell me where I kin take yer to, baby, as a kind o' set-off to my other wirtues. Where's yer 'ome?" This last in a more business-like tone. For a moment the blue eyes before him gazed into his with the same frightened look, then a change came over them, and with a sadness that took away Joe's breath for the moment, two little arms were thrown around his neck, whilst a pitiful voice, amidst its sobs,