

VARIETIES OF VERSE.

"They are a school to win
The fair French daughter to learn English in;
And, graced with her song,
To make the language sweet upon her tongue."

BEN JONSON'S, *Underwoods*.

It is curious to note that the only fixed and rigid form of verse which we English-speaking people have been willing to adopt permanently is the sonnet; and even in the construction of that we at times take strange liberties—licenses, rather, to make a purist in metrical forms stand aghast. It is almost equally curious to note that the first impetus toward the introduction of new forms comes to us from France, a country where, until within the last half-century, verse has been as prim and precise, as empty and as soulless, as metrical prose by any possibility may be. But under the inspiration of the romantic revival which marked the dying days and final downfall of the elder branch of the house of Bourbon, and especially under the influence of the extraordinary vigour and vitality of Victor Hugo's earlier verse and prose, the fresh young blood of France began to course through more poetic channels, inventing new forms to vent its new-found feeling, and filling old forms again with the current of new life. The young poets went back to the verses of the troubadours and trouvères, and to the metrical forms of the fourteenth century; and, indeed, they went wherever they hoped to find a form or a suggestion of style suitable and worthy of modern reproduction and resuscitation; the stranger, the odder, the more exotic, the better. The *virelai*, the *rondeau*, the *rondelet*, were brought again into favour. The English ballad, with its wealth of suggestiveness and lyric possibility, was fit indeed to the minds of young writers fresh from the first reading of "Notre-Dame de Paris." Hugo called one collection of his poems "Odes et Ballades"—though, as a critic objected, it contained neither odes nor ballades—for the French *ballade* is radically different from the English ballad, and it was the English lyric which Hugo had in mind, not the French form of verse. In spite of the tendency toward the Gothic, none of the involved metres of the German Minnesingers were, as far as we can find on record, at any time imitated. But English legends and lyrics, and fashions of all kinds, found frequent copyists, even to the verge of affectation—M. Auguste Maquet, the collaborator of Dumas, called himself for a while Augustus McKeat, and Théophile Gautier became for a season Philothée O'Neddy! These eccentricities slowly passed away, and the good they had clouded remained. French poetry to-day is more like poetry and less like Pope than it has been for several centuries. Hugo's example has been followed—nay, even improved, for "the master," as his followers affectionately call him, is, like other great geniuses, often careless, and the art of Théophile Gautier, and of Baudelaire, and of Théodore de Banville, is above all things finished, and polished, and perfect.

And to-day the inspiration which the French poets caught from their study of the early forms of French verse is beginning to be transmitted across the Channel to England, and we now and then see an English *rondeau* or *villanelle*; and the sight is ever welcome. English *vers de société*—and here it may first be noted that the work of the French poets seems likely in England only to affect that small and refined class of literary work, dainty, and delicate, and delightful, as an antique cameo, which we have to call by the French name *vers de société*, solely because we have no English equivalent for it—English *vers de société*, which drooped for a while between the death of Præd and the coming of Mr. Locker, has been cursed by too great adherence to the eight-lined stanza in which Præd excelled, and which he probably derived from Prior. Mr. Locker, long the leader of the modern English school of *vers de société*, followed too closely in the footsteps of Prior—although he borrowed one beautiful metre from "The Last Leaf" of Dr. Holmes. Mr. Austin Dobson, who in finish, and polish, and point, in all the externals of verse, is running Mr. Locker hard, and in the essentials, the poetry within the verse, the precious ointment behind the delicate tracery of the jar, is perhaps running ahead of him—Mr. Dobson, seeking fresh fields and pastures new, has taken up the study of the revived French forms, and, in his recent volume, "Proverbs in Porcelain," presents us with what are probably the first specimens in English of the *pantoum*, of the *rondelet*, and of the *ballade*.

Of all the forms he tries, Mr. Dobson seems most pleased with the *rondeau*, for he gives us not one specimen, but half a dozen; from which it would appear that the form is one which lends itself readily to the exigencies of the English language, and one, therefore, which we may hope to see generally adopted, and second only to the sonnet, than which it is perhaps a little more difficult. The word *rondeau* has been applied inaccurately in English to any poem in which the first words of the stanza were repeated at the end. The one specimen of this sort which all may remember, is Leigh Hunt's brief and beautiful—

"Jenny kissed me when we met,
Jumping from the chair she sat in;
Time, you thief, who love to get
Sweets upon your list, put that in—
Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
Say that health and wealth have missed me,
Say I'm growing old; but add—
Jenny kissed me!"

How far this is from the real form of the *rondeau* can readily be seen by comparing it with this imitation by Mr. Dobson of a French *rondeau* of Voiture's:

"YOU BID ME TRY."

"You bid me try, blue eyes, to write
A *rondeau*. What!—forthwith?—to-night?
Reflect. Some skill I have, 'tis true;
But thirteen lines—and rhymed on two—
Refrain, as well. Ah, hapless plight!"

Still, there are five lines—ranged aright.
These gallic bonds, I feared, would fright
My easy Muse. They did till you—
You bid me try!

"This makes them nine. The port's in sight;
'Tis all because your eyes are bright!
Now, just a pair to end with 'oo'—
When maids command, what can't we do?
Behold! the *rondeau*—tasteful, light—
You bid me try!"

The idea of this *rondeau* of Voiture's, letting the *rondeau* turn upon the difficulty of making a *rondeau* at all, is due to Lope de Vega, who used it in a play. The Spanish sonnet has been imitated in French, in Italian, and in English; and, by way of comparison, an English version, by Edwards, the author of "Canons of Criticism," which is given by Lord Holland, in his "Life of Lope de Vega," may as well be copied here:

"Capricious Wray a sonnet needs must have;
I ne'er was so put to't before—a sonnet,
Why, fourteen verses must be spent upon it.
'Tis good, however, I've conquered the first stave.
Yet I shall ne'er find rhymes enough by half,
Said I, and found myself in the midst of the second:
If twice four verses were but fairly reckoned,
I should turn back on the hardest part and laugh.
Thus far with good success I think I've scribbled,
And of twice seven lines have clear got o'er ten.
Courage! Another'll finish the first triplet.
Thanks to the Muse, my work begins to shorten.
There's thirteen lines got through dribble by dribble.
'Tis done! Count how you will, I warrant there's fourteen."

The halting metre and wretched rhymes of this liberal sonnet make us wonder whether the canons of the worthy Edwards's criticism were quite as good weapons as those our modern critics fight with.

And here—although it is purely a digression—space must be found for another sonnet, a literary curiosity without parallel: for it is all in lines of but one word each—a sonnet, in short, of but fourteen words. It is by a modern Frenchman, M. J. de Ressaiguiet, and here it is:

"Fort
Belle,
Elle
Dort."

"Prêle
Sort;
Quelle
Mort!"

"Rose
Close;
La

"Brise
L'a
Prise."

To return to our sheep, here are some of Mr. Dobson's most lightsome and frolicsome lambkins. They are triolets, or little verses wherein the first line appears three times—whence the name—and the second line closes the stanza:

"ROSE-LEAVES."

"Sans peser—sans rester."

"These are leaves of my rose,
Pink petals I treasure:
There is more than one knows
In these leaves of my rose;
Oh, the joys! Oh, the woes!
They are quite beyond measure.
These are leaves of my rose—
Pink petals I treasure."

"A KISS."

"Rose kissed me to-day.
Will she kiss me to-morrow?
Let it be as it may,
Rose kissed me to-day.
But the pleasure gives way
To a savor of sorrow—
Rose kissed me to-day:
Will she kiss me to-morrow?"

"URCUES EXIT."

I intended an ode,
And it turned into triolets.
It began à la mode—
I intended an ode.
But Rose crossed the road
With a bunch of fresh violets;
I intended an ode,
And it turned into triolets."

Notice how skillfully the recurring words are sought to be varied in meaning; how a different colour and tone is given to the same phrase, to the greater variety of the whole poem. Upon similar principles of recurring lines are founded the *villanelle* and the *rondelet*—Mr. Dobson has as yet given us no *virelai*, a lack he will doubtless in time supply. Here is a *rondelet*—not far distant in form from the *rondeau*, but neither as full nor as capable of containing thought:

"Too hard it is to sing
In these untuneful times,
When only coin can ring,
And no one cares for rhymes!"

"Alas for him who climbs
To Aganippe's spring:
Too hard it is to sing
In these untuneful times!"

"His kindred clip his wing;
His feet the critic lines;
If fame her laurel bring,
Old age his forehead rimes:
Too hard it is to sing
In these untuneful times!"

And here is the *villanelle*, somewhat longer, but differing only a little in its use of principles almost identical:

"WHEN I SAW YOU LAST, ROSE!"

(VILLANELLE.)

"When I saw you last, Rose,
You were only so high—
How fast the time goes!"

"Like a bud ere it blows,
You just peeped at the sky,
When I saw you last, Rose!"

"Now your petals unclosed,
Now your May-time is nigh—
How fast the time goes!"

"You would prattle your woes,
All the wherefore and why,
When I saw you last, Rose!"

"Now you leave me to prose,
And you seldom reply—
How fast the time goes!"

"And a life—how it grows!
You were scarcely so shy,
When I saw you last, Rose!"

"In your bosom it shows,
There is a guest on the sly—
(How fast the time goes!)"

"Is it Cupid? Who knows!
Yet you used not to sigh,
When I saw you last, Rose—
How fast the time goes!"

Again, akin to these in form, in the use of the "refrain," in the limitation of the rhyme, is the *ballade*—and of this Mr. Dobson's specimen is really a fine piece of verse-making: it contains a thought, wrought out well in the three obligatory stanzas, and brought out finally in the *envoi*. Here is the *ballade*:

"THE PRODIGALS."

"Princes! and you most valorous
Nobles and barons of all degree!
Hearken awhile to the prayer of us—
Beggars that come from the over-seas:
Nothing we ask of gold or fees;
Hurry us not with the hounds, we pray!
Lo! for the surcoat's hem we seize—
Give us, ah! give us but yesterday!"

"Dames most delicate, amorous—
Damosels blithe as the belted bees!
Hearken awhile to the prayer of us—
Beggars that come from the over-seas:
Nothing we ask of the things that please;
Weary are we, and worn, and gray!
Lo! for we clutch and clasp your knees—
Give us, ah! give us but yesterday!"

"Damosels, dames, be piteous!
(But the dames rode fast by the roadway-trees.)
Hear us, O knights magnanimous!
(But the knights pricked on in their panoplies.)
Nothing they gat, or of hope or ease,
But only to beat on the breast and say,
'Life we drank to the dregs and lees—
Give us, ah! give us but yesterday!'"

"ENVOI."

"Youth, take heed to the prayer of these:
Many there be by the dusty way—
Many that cry to the rocks and seas,
'Give us, ah! give us but yesterday!'"

The *chant-royal*, of which the first English specimen is given in Mr. Goosse's "Pica for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse," which appeared in the *Corahill Magazine* last July, is a sort of elongated *ballade*; it has five stanzas of eleven lines each, and an *envoi* of five lines, all ending with the refrain, and all running on the same limited choice of rhymes. Another specimen, by Mr. John Payne, will be found in Mr. Davenport Adam's new volume of "Latter-day Lyrics," which also contains a note by Mr. Dobson, describing all these French metres.

Not content with merely French forms of verse, the French poets have even adopted one Malayan form, the *pantoum*, first brought to their attention in the notes to Hugo's "Orientales," and afterward employed to advantage by Théophile Gautier and Théodore de Banville. It is not at first sight encouraging; it consists of a series of four-lined stanzas, the second and fourth lines of each stanza reappearing as the first and third of the next stanza, and so on *ad infinitum*, the first and third lines of the first stanza appearing again in the final one. Mr. Dobson's *pantoum* is a little long, so only beginning and end are here given:

"IN TOWN."

"The bluefly sang in the pane."—TENNYSON.

"June in the zenith is torrid
(There is that woman again!)
Here, with the sun on one's forehead,
Thought gets dry in the brain."

"There is that woman again:
'Strawberries, fourpence a pottle!'
Thought gets dry in the brain;
Ink gets dry in the bottle."

"Strawberries! fourpence a pottle!
Oh, for the green of a lane,
Ink gets dry in the bottle:
'Buzz' goes a fly in the pane!"

"Some muslin-clad Mabel or May
To dash one with eau de Cologne:
Bluebottle's off and away,
And why should I stay here alone?"

"To dash one with eau de Cologne
All over one's talented forehead!
And why should I stay here alone?
June in the zenith is torrid!"

There is still another form of verse which deserves mention here, although Mr. Swinburne is possibly the only English writer who has attempted it. This is the "sestina," a series of six stanzas, each of six lines—generally hendecasyllables—with an "envoi" of three lines. The same six words must end the lines of each stanza, being duly changed in their order, and three of these rhyming words appear again in the "envoi." This form was a great favourite with the Provençal troubadours, and it is also to be found slightly modified in the Italian. Here is Mr. Swinburne's "sestina," which

seems, though it may perhaps be heresy to say so, to have much more sound than sense:

"I saw my soul rest upon a day
As a bird sleeping in the nest of night,
Among soft leaves that give the starlight way,
To touch its wings but not its eyes with light;
So that it knew as one in visions may,
And knew not as men waking of delight."

"This was the measure of my soul's delight;
It has no power of joy to fly by day,
Nor part in the large lordship of the light,
But in a secret, moon-beholden way
Had all its will of dreams and pleasant night,
And all the love and life that sleepers may."

"But such life's triumph as men waking may
It might not have to feed its faint delight
Between the stars by night and sun by day,
Shut up with green leaves and a little light;
Because its way was as a lost star's way,
A world's not wholly known of day or night."

"All loves and dreams and sounds, and gleams of night
Made it all music that such minstrels may,
And all they had they gave it of delight:
But in the full face of the fire of day
What place shall be for any starry light,
What part of heaven in all the wide sun's way?"

"Yet the soul woke not, sleeping by the way,
Watched as a nursing of the large-eyed night,
And sought no strength nor knowledge of the day,
Nor closer touch conclusive of delight,
Nor mightier joy, nor truer than dreamers may,
Nor more of song than they nor more of light."

"For who sleeps once and sees the secret light
Whereby sleep shows the soul a fair way
Between the rise and rest of day and night,
Shall care no more to fare as all men may,
But be his place of pain or of delight,
There shall he dwell, beholding night as day."

"Song, have thy day and take thy fill of light
Before the night be fallen across thy way;
Sing while he may, man hath no long delight."

HEARTH AND HOME.

TRUE REVERENCE FOR GOD.—The reverence for God influences both fear and love—fear to keep Him in our eyes, love to enshrine Him in the heart; fear to avoid what may offend, love to yield to prompt and willing service; fear to regard God as a witness and judge, love to cling to Him as a friend and father; fear to render us watchful and circumspect, love to make us active and resolute; love to keep far from being servile or distrustful, fear to keep far from being forward or secure, and both springing up from one root, a living faith in the infinite and ever-loving God.

THE OLD STORY.—A certain young lady, possessing more than ordinary accomplishments for her class of life—being the daughter of poor but respectable parents—on the death of a wealthy relative, recently, became entitled to eight thousand pounds. When the glad tidings reached the ears of her neighbours, many warm admirers flocked around the hitherto neglected beauty, and there was no end to the overtures of loves. Previous to the turn in fortune's wheel, a young man of humble pretensions had been the young lady's suitor, but the knowledge of her wealth at once placed a formidable barrier in his way, and he contented himself with being a silent worshipper at a distance. Matters ultimately came to a crisis, and in order to test the affection of her devotees, the young lady caused a report to be circulated that her supposed fortune was in reality only a sham, the mistake having occurred through a similarity of name. The intelligence had the effect of causing the visits of the lovers to become less frequent, and finally cease altogether. The humble youth rejoiced in the change, and at once took the opportunity to console the mistress of his heart, who, to the surprise of all, rewarded his sincerity with her hand, and made him the sole master of eight thousand pounds.

CALM THOUGHT.—There is nothing which makes so great a difference between one man and other, as the practice of calm and serious thinking. To those who have been unaccustomed to it, there is required at first an effort; but it is certainly in their own power to repeat this effort if they will, and when they will. It becomes every day easier by perseverance and habit—and the habit so acquired exerts a material influence upon their condition as responsible and immortal beings. In that great process, therefore, in which consists the healthy condition of any man as a moral being, there is a most important step, of which he must be conscious as an exercise of his own mind. You feel that you have here a power, however little you may attend to the exercise of it. You can direct your thoughts to any object you please; you can confide them to objects which are before you at the time, or occurrences which have passed during the day; or you can send them back to events which took place many years ago. You can direct them to persons whom you are in the habit of meeting from day to day, or to those who are separated from you by thousands of miles. You can place before you persons who lived, and events which occurred long before you came into existence, and you can anticipate and realize events which are not likely to occur until you have ceased to exist. Study these wonderful processes of your mind; observe what power you have over them, and what consequences of eternal importance must arise from exercising them aright.

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