

AMOS ALCOTT

SONNETS AND
CANZONETS

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A. Bronson Alcott

Sonnets and Canzonets

TO A. BRONSON ALCOTT,

UPON READING HIS OCTOGENARIAN POEMS

The period to which the scholar of two and eighty years belongs, is seldom that of his youngest readers: it is more likely to be the epoch of his own golden youth, when his masters were before his eyes, and his companions were the books and the friends of his heart. Thus the aged Landor could not bring his thoughts down from the grand forms of Greek and Roman literature to which they were early accustomed; he had swerved now and then from that loyalty in middle life, impressed and acted upon as he was by the great political events of the Napoleonic era, – but he returned to the epigram and the idyl in the “white winter of his age,” and the voices of the present and of the future appealed to him in vain. In the old Goethe there was something more prophetic and august; he came nearer to his contemporaries, and prepared the way for a recognition of his greatness by the generation which saw the grave close over him. In this, that strange but loyal disciple of his, the Scotch Carlyle, rendered matchless service to his master; yet he, too, in his unhappy old age, could only at intervals, and by gleams of inspiration, – as at the Edinburgh University Festival, – come into communication with the young spirits about him. To you, dear Friend and Master, belongs the rare good fortune (good genius rather) that has brought you in these late days, into closer fellowship than of yore with the active and forthlooking spirit of the time. In youth and middle life you were in advance of your period, which has only now overtaken you when it must, by the ordinance of Nature, so soon bid you farewell, as you go forward to new prospects, in fairer worlds than ours.

It is this union of youth and age, of the past and the present – yes, and the future also – that I have admired in these artless poems, over which we have spent together so many agreeable hours. Fallen upon an age in literature when the poetic form is everywhere found, but the discerning and inventive spirit of Poesy seems almost lost, I have marked with delight in these octogenarian verses, flowing so naturally from your pen, the very contradiction of this poetic custom of the period. Your want of familiarity with the accustomed movement of verse in our time, brings into more distinct notice the genuine poetical motions of your genius. Having been admitted to the laboratory, and privileged to witness the action and reaction of your thought, as it crystallized into song, I perceived, for the first time, how high sentiment, by which you have from youth been inspired, may become the habitual movement of the mind, at an age when so many, if they live at all in spirit, are but nursing the selfish and distorted fancies of morose singularity. To you the world has been a brotherhood of noble souls, – too few, as we thought, for your companionship, – but which you have enlarged by the admission to one rank of those who have gone, and of us who remain to love you and listen to your oracles. The men and the charming women who recognized your voice when it was that of one crying in the wilderness – “Prepare ye the way of our Lord,” are joined, in your commemorative sonnets, with those who hearken to its later accents, proclaiming the same acceptable year of the Lord.

It is the privilege of poets – immemorial and native to the clan – that they should share the immortality they confer. This right you may vindicate for your own. The honors you pay, in resounding verse, to Channing, to Emerson, to Margaret Fuller, to Hawthorne, Thoreau, and the rest of the company with whom you trod these groves, and honored these altars of the Spirit unnamed, return in their echoes to yourself. They had their special genius, and you yours no less, though it found not the same expression with theirs. We please our love with the thought that, in these sonnets and

canzonets of affection, you have celebrated yourself with them; that the swift insight, the ennobling passion for truth and virtue, the high resolve, the austere self-sacrifice, the gentle submission to a will eternally right, in which these friends, so variously gifted, found a common tie, – all these are yours also, – and may they be ours! The monuments and trophies of genius are perishable, but the soul's impression abides forever, *forma mentis æterna*. To that imperishable, ever-beauteous, self-renouncing, loyal, and steadfast Spirit of the Universe which we learned to worship in our youth, and which has never forsaken our age and bereavement, may these offerings, and all that we are, be consecrated now and forever!

F. B. SANBORN.

Concord, January 1, 1882.

AN ESSAY

THE SONNET AND THE CANZONET

“Scorn not the sonnet,” said Wordsworth, and then gave us at least fifty noble reasons why we should not, – for so many at least of his innumerable sonnets are above languor and indifference, and all of them above contempt. Milton was more self-restrained than Wordsworth, and wrote fewer sonnets, every one of which is a treasure, either for beauty of verse, nobility of thought, happy portraiture of persons, or quaint and savage humor, – like that on “Tetrachordon,” and the elongated sonnet in which he denounces the Presbyterians, and tells them to their face, “New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large.” Shakespeare unlocked his heart with sonnets in another key than Milton’s, – less conformed to the model of the Italian sonnet, but more in keeping with English verse, of which Shakespeare had the entire range. His sonnets are but quatrains following each other by threes, with a resounding couplet binding them together in one sheaf, and his example has made this form of the sonnet legitimate for all who write English verse, – no matter what the studious or the pedantic may say. Surrey also, who first used the sonnet in English, wrote it in this free manner of Shakespeare, as well as in the somewhat stricter form that Sidney employed, and it is only of late years that they have tried to shut us up to one definite and unchanging sequence and interplay of rhyme. Mr. Alcott in these new sonnets, the ripe fruit of an aged tree, has used the freedom that nature gave him, and years allow: he has written with little uniformity in the order and number of his rhymes, but with much regard to the spirit of the sonnet as a high form of verse. I fancy that Dante (who may be called the father of the sonnet, though not the first to write it) chose this graceful and courteous verse, because it is so well suited to themes of love and friendship. When he would express sorrow or anger, or light and jesting humor, he had recourse to the canzonet, the *terza rima*, or what he called the ballad, – something quite unlike what we know by that name. Mr. Alcott has followed in the same general course; his sonnets are one thing, his canzonets another: though the difference in feeling, which prompts him to use one form rather than the other, cannot always be definitely expressed. It is felt rather than seen, and seen rather by the effect of the finished poem than by the light of any rule or formal definition.

Definiteness, in fact, must not be looked for in these poems; nor is it the characteristic of the highest poetry in any language. Verse may be powerful and suggestive, or even clear in the sense of producing a distinct impression on the mind, without being definite, and responding to all the claims of analysis. I take it that few readers will fail to see the central thought, or the vivid portraiture in each of these sonnets and canzonets; but fewer still will be able to explain precisely, even to their own minds, what each suggestive phrase and period includes and excludes in its meaning. For this fine vagueness of utterance, the sonnet has always given poets a fair field, and our present author has not gone beyond his due privilege in this respect, though he has availed himself of it more frequently than many would have done. The mottoes and citations accompanying each sonnet may help the reader to a meaning that does not at once flash in his eyes. But he must not expect to conquer these verses at a single reading. The thought of years, the labor of months, has been given to the writing of them; and the reader ought not to complain if he take as much time to comprehend them as the author took to write them. They are worth the pains of reading many times over, and even of learning them by heart, for which their compendious form well fits them.

It may be complained that these sonnets lack variety. This is indeed a fault into which sonneteers often fall, – our best collection of American sonnets hitherto – those of Jones Very – being open to this censure. It will be found, perhaps, that the sameness of rhyme and thought is often but an

appearance, – the delicate shade of meaning being expressed, in a vocabulary of no large extent, by a rare process of combining and collocating words. Certain phrases recur, too, because the thought necessarily recurs, – as when the oratory of Phillips and of Parker, as of others, is characterized by the general term, *eloquence*. In the poverty of our language, there is no other term to use, while the qualifying words and their connection sufficiently distinguish between one person and another. The critical are referred to Homer, who never fails to repeat the same word, or the same verse, when it comes in his way to do so.

But to return to the sonnet itself. Landor, to whom as to Thoreau, Milton was the greatest English poet, thought that the blind Puritan had made good his offence against the Psalms of David, by the sonnet on the slaughtered saints of Piedmont. “Milton,” he says, “was never half so wicked a regicide as when he lifted up his hand and smote King David. He has atoned for it, however, by composing a magnificent psalm of his own, in the form of a sonnet. There are others in Milton comparable to it, but none elsewhere.” And then the wilful critic goes on to say, putting his words into the mouth of Porson: “In the poems of Shakespeare, which are printed as sonnets, there is sometimes a singular strength and intensity of thought, with little of that imagination which was afterward to raise him highest in the universe of poetry. Even the interest we take in the private life of this miraculous man, cannot keep the volume in our hands long together. We acknowledge great power, but we experience great weariness. Were I a poet, I would much rather have written the ‘Allegro,’ or the ‘Penseroso’ than all those.” Monstrous as this comment seems to us, there is a certain truth in it, the sonnet in large quantities always producing weariness; for which reason, as I suppose, Dante interspersed his love sonnets in the “Vita Nuova” and the “Convito,” with canzonets and ballads. His commentaries – often of a singular eloquence – also serve as a relief to the formal verse, as his melodious Tuscan lines do to the formality of his poetical metaphysics. A person, says Landor, “lately tried to persuade me that he is never so highly poetical, as when he is deeply metaphysical. He then quoted fourteen German poets of the first order, and expressed his compassion for Æschylus and Homer.” Dante’s metaphysics were of a higher cast, and so interfused with love and fair ladies, that they only weary us with a certain perplexity as to where are the limits of courtship and of logic. Mr. Alcott also is quaintly metaphysical in Dante’s fashion; like the sad old Florentine, but with a more cheerful spirit, he addresses himself

“To every captive soul and gentle heart,”
(A ciascun alma presa e gentil core,)

and would fain inquire of those who go on a pilgrimage of Love (O voi che per la via d’Amor passate) and of the fair ladies who have learned love at first hand (Donne che avete intelletto d’amore.) His doctrine is that of the wise man whom Dante quotes and approves in the “Vita Nuova,” —

“One and the same are love and the gentle heart.”
(Amor e’ l cor gentil sono una cosa.)

Other Americans have written sonnets in this ancient faith, – as he, who thus (in that happy season so aptly described by Mr. Alcott, as addressed his own *cor gentil*: —

“Youth’s glad morning when the rising East
Glows golden with assurance of success,
And life itself’s a rare continual feast,
Enjoyed the more if meditated less,”)

addressed his own *cor gentil*: —

“My heart, forthlooking in the purple day,
Tell me what sweetest image thou may'st see,
Fit to be type of thy dear love and thee?
Lo! here where sunshine keeps the wind away,
Grow two young violets, – humble lovers they, —
With drooping face to face, and breath to breath,
They look and kiss and love and laugh at death: —
Yon bluebird singing on the scarlet spray
Of the bloomed maple in the blithe spring air,
While his mate answers from the wood of pines,
And all day long their music ne'er declines;
For love their labor is, and love their care.
'These pass with day and spring;' the true heart saith, —
'Forever thou wilt love, and she be fair.'”

In the same Italian vein, another and better poet, but with less warmth, touches the same theme,

“Thou art like that which is most sweet and fair,
A gentle morning in the youth of spring,
When the few early birds begin to sing
Within the delicate depths of the fine air.
Yet shouldst thou these dear beauties much impair,
Since thou art better than is everything
Which or the woods or skies or green fields bring,
And finer thoughts hast thou than they can wear.
In the proud sweetness of thy grace I see
What lies within, – a pure and steadfast mind,
Which its own mistress is of sanctity,
And to all gentleness hath been refined.
So that thy least breath falleth upon me
As the soft breathing of midsummer wind.”

In the changes of time and the fitful mood of the poet, sadness succeeds to this assured joy, and he sings, —

“The day has past, I never may return;
Twelve circling years have run since first I came
And kindled the pure truth of friendship's flame;
Alone remain these ashes in the urn —
Vainly for light the taper may I turn, —
Thy hand is closed, as for these years, the same,
And for the substance naught is but the name.
No more a hope, no more a ray to burn.
But once more in the pauses of thy joy,
Remember him who sought thee in his youth,
And with the old reliance of the boy
Asked for thy treasures in the guise of truth.”

Here is another voice, chanting in another strain, —

“Thy beauty fades, and with it, too, my love,
For ’twas the selfsame stalk that bore the flower;
Soft fell the rain, and, breaking from above,
The sun looked out upon our nuptial hour;
And I had thought forever by thy side
With bursting buds of hope in youth to dwell;
But one by one Time strewed thy petals wide,
And every hope’s wan look a grief can tell;
For I had thoughtless lived beneath his sway,
Who like a tyrant dealeth with us all, —
Crowning each rose, though rooted in decay,
With charms that shall the spirit’s love enthrall,
And, for a season, turn the soul’s pure eyes
From virtue’s bloom that time and death defies.”

Out of this valley of sadness the spirit rises on bolder wing, as the melancholy mood passes away, —

“Hearts of eternity, hearts of the deep!
Proclaim from land to sea your mighty fate;
How that for you no living comes too late,
How ye cannot in Theban labyrinth creep,
How ye great harvests from small surface reap,
Shout, excellent band, in grand primeval strain,
Like midnight winds that foam along the main, —
And do all things rather than pause to weep.
A human heart knows naught of littleness,
Suspects no man, compares with no one’s ways,
Hath in one hour most glorious length of days,
A recompense, a joy, a loveliness;
Like eaglet keen, shoots into azure far,
And always dwelling nigh is the remotest star.”

Here, as Landor said, “is a sonnet, and the sonnet admits not that approach to the prosaic which is allowable in the ballad.” For this reason Mr. Alcott, who began his poetical autobiography, when he was eighty years old, in a ballad measure, has now passed into the majesty of the sonnet, as he has come to those passages of life which will not admit prosaic treatment. Moderately used, and not worked to death, as Wordsworth employed it, the sonnet is a great uplifter of poesy. It calls to the reader, as the early Christian litanies did to the worshipper, *Sursum corda*, Raise your thoughts! The canzonet lets us down again into the pathetic, the humorous, or the fanciful, — though in this volume the canzonet generally betokens sadness. It may easily become an ode, as in the verses on Garfield: indeed the ode may be considered as an extended canzonet, or the canzonet as a brief ode. It is the sonnet that chiefly concerns us now, and that form of the sonnet which deals with love; since the germ of this book was a romance of love, seeking to express itself in the uplifting strain and tender cadence of successive sonnets; which lead us through green pastures and beside the still waters, and then to the shore of the resounding sea, — itself worthy of a sonnet which I have somewhere heard: —

“Ah mournful Sea! Yet to our eyes he wore

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