Original Poetry.

[illegible] IN HEAVEN.

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COWLEY'S LIFE AND POETRY.

(From a Correspondent).

It is an error of the present day, and indeed a very predominant one, that the more learned works of our earlier authors (I allude particularly to the poets) are, generally speaking, neglected for the more dangerous and enervating productions of later times. Tasso, Byron, Bayley, and Smith, now smile in superfine foolscap on our shelves, while the cobwebbed copies of the bards of earlier years are almost exclusively confined to the library of the bookworm and the antiquary.

We meet a friend over "a pint of port," and poetry, as a matter of course, occurs during the ordinary and pleasant enough chit-chat. George Smith, for instance, in the course of our conversation, is casually mentioned. Friend imagines, no doubt, he knows him: he has read him: Fancy also whispers. Fathom friend, every one he knows reading—not to dwell on the most absolute signification of the word—at all about him. A casual review, a brief biography, a short extract, or more probably, perhaps, the milk and water system of an educational drill, have informed him who the above-mentioned George Withers was, when he flourished, what his works; and that is all.

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

Friend has also very probably beheld a musty and dusty likeness of sound old George, and he is fully competent to describe the proportions of his countenance (!) and the cut of his beard to a T. All very good; but venture a little farther in the current, friend downs, or a friendly plank, in the shape of John Keats or Alexander Smith, bears him again to dry land.

To remedy this state of matters is practically impossible. Thousands do not possess the means of procuring the rare old works to which I allude. Reviews, &c., without number have been written, attempting to modify the evil. I thoroughly believe in the philosophy of repetition; and, inferring that I may in this way do some good, I beg space now and then in your valuable journal for the realisation of my design. In the first place, I propose to glance over in brief the life and writing of the inestimable poet, Cowley.

The offspring of parents pretty well-to-do, honest citizens, and bad subjects of the King, Abraham Cowley first saw the light in the city of London in the reign of the first James, 1618. "The occasion (observes a biographer of his own time) of his first inclination to poetry was his casual lightning on *Spenser's Fairy Queen* when he was but just able to read. That, indeed, is a poem fitter for the examination of men than the consideration of a child. But in him it met with a fancy whose strength was not to be judged by the number of his years." Certain it is that in his fifteenth year he published a book of Sacred Odes, containing, amongst other effusions, "The Tragical Historie of Pyramus and Thisbe," penned in his twelfth year. Everybody knows Ovid's exquisite version of the tale, which was evidently the model of our young aspirant. All are acquainted with the story: our own sweet Shakspere has pointed upon it the whole wealth of his humour. I must give a few extracts from this poem, a wonderful production for one in such early youth. As with the "Bard of Love," the lovers meet, converse, and adore—all by the aid of the veritable cranny.

"per illud

Murmure blandîtiæ minimo transire solebant."

Cowley thus introduces his hero and heroine:—

"Where Babylon's high wall erected was
By wedlyr Ninus wife, a warlyke Joh'd—
One Thisbe liv'd in, Pyramus the fair
In th' other: Earth ne'er brought such a pair;
The very senseless walls themselves combined,
And grew in one, just like their master's mind.

"Thisbe all other women did exceed,
The fame of Love less love to her than she;
And Pyramus, more sweet than tongue can tell—
Nature grew proud in framing them so well;
Yet Venus, envying they so fair should be,
Bids her son Cupid show his cruelty.

"The all-subduing god his bow doth bend,
Whets and prepares his utmost remorseless dart,
Which (as, unseen, into their hearts did send,
And so was Love the cause of both their smart)
But could he see, he had not wrought their smart,
For pity, sure, would have o'ercome his heart."

And thus describes the means and method of their intercourse:—

"For age had cracked the wall which did them part;
This the unanimate couple soon did spy,
And here their inward sorrows did impart,
Unlading the sad burthen of their heart:
Though Love be blind, this showa he can descry
A way to lessen his own misery.

"Oft to the friendly cranny of their moan,
And feel themselves with the celestial air
Of odoriferous breath—no other sport
They could enjoy, yet thinks that sport a short,
And wish that it again renewed were,
To suck each other's breath in more and more.

At length the desires of that atrocious young scoundrel Cupid has fanned to flame, becoming too fervent to be resisted, the enthusiastic Pyramus exclaims:—

"Dear love, how long shall we
Like fairest flowers, not gathered in their prime,
Waste precious youth, and let advantage flee,
Till we bewail at last our cruelty
Upon ourselves; for beauty, though it shine
Like day, will quickly find an evening time.

"Therefore, sweet Thisbe, let us meet this night
At Ninus' tomb, without the city wall,
Under the mulberry-tree, with berries white
Abounding, there I'enjoy our wish's delight;
For mounting Love, step after step, doth fall,
And longed for, yet untasted joy, kills all."

The maiden, as may be anticipated, without much further pressing, consents. Love has conquered her shyness, and she comes to the appointed tryst. She finds not Pyramus, who has the ill-luck to be beyond his time. The lion—a more ferocious customer than Bruin, by the by—appears and the boy-poet says very beautifully:—

"With haste she let her loose mantle fall,
Which, when the enraged lion did espy,
With bloody teeth he tore in pieces small,
While Thisbe ran and lookt not back at all
For, could the senseless beast her fora decry,
It had not done her such an injury.

Thisbe lies concealed in the adjoining cave. The lion departs, and presently arrives Pyramus, who, seeing in the sand the imprint of the animal's paw, and not for distant the fragments of the robe of his beloved—

"Just like a marble statue did he stand,"

seized with horror and consternation. Then, awakening to a true sense of his unhappy situation, he exclaims in tears:—

"Receive my crimson blood as a due debt
Unto thy current love, to which 'tis paid;
I gladly will meet thee in the gloomy shade
Of cool Elysium, where we being met,
Shall taste those joys that here we could not get."

And plunges "his fatal sword" into his heart. So runs on the poem, a literary curiosity, to the conclusion, when "both in one grave were laid," and Chaucer performed the last duties to the lovers. I have remarked this composition more as an earnest of what was to be accomplished than as a perfect literary production by a boy of twelve.

Presently the poet migrated to Trinity College, and there greatly distinguished himself by the brilliancy of his wit and the versatility of his classical attainments. At this period he penned some portion of his "Davideis," a long and unfinished epic, having for its subject the life and troubles of the poet-king, together with numerous minor pieces. The "Davideis," as a whole, I do not particularly admire. On the outbreak of the civil war, however, Oxford became the chief resort of the royal party, to whom his heart constantly adhered, and thither accordingly Cowley repaired. There he was happy in the acquaintance and esteem of many eminent men, but not only did he prosecute intensely the ordinary routine of classical study, but engaged himself in the service of King Charles with unparalleled ardour. He was appointed secretary to the Lord of St Albans, who proved his faithful friend. In 1646 he attended Queen Henrietta in her flight to Paris, which circumstance the latter of the above-mentioned