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Edw. A. Alderman
Patron
Editor-in-Chief

WASHINGTON ALLSTON

[1779—1849]

LUDWIG LEWISOHN

WASHINGTON ALLSTON, one of the most considerable writers of verse in the Southern literature of the early nineteenth century, was born at Charleston in 1779 of a well-known Carolinian family. Having graduated at Harvard College he returned for a brief period to Charleston and sold his property in order to go abroad to study the art in which he was, in the eyes of the contemporary world, to gain his chief distinction. For three years he studied at the Royal Academy, which was then under the Presidency of another American, Benjamin West, who became a close friend of Allston. During the next four years he lived in Rome, where he had the good fortune to gain the lasting friendship of Coleridge. In 1809 Allston returned to America, but in 1811 he was again in London, where he remained during seven years and where he brought out in 1813 his only volume of verse, 'The Sylphs of the Seasons and Other Poems.' In 1818 he settled at Boston and devoted himself to his art, although his poetic voice never remained long silent. In 1830 he married the daughter of Richard Henry Dana and removed to Cambridgeport. In 1841 he published his romance, 'Monaldi,' which had been composed twenty years previous. He died in 1849, having been the friend of many great men, of Coleridge and Wordsworth and Lamb and of the chief literary men of America. His personality seems to have been gentle and winning; his character of that remarkable purity which is to be met with so frequently in the early history of American letters and on the origin of which the philosophic historian of our literature will, some day, profitably speculate. Allston, at all events, received his *testimonium probitatis* from that man of his time who was, from the point of view of character, most worthy and competent to write it, namely Southey. The latter wrote in his "Vision of Judgment":

" he who, returning
Rich in praise to his native shores, hath left a remembrance
Long to be honoured and loved on the banks of Thames and Tiber:
So may America, prizing in time the worth she possesses,
Give to that hand free scope and boast hereafter of Allston."

Before proceeding to discuss Allston's verse, a few words, and a few only, may be given to his prose. This consists of the 'Lectures on Art' posthumously published by Dana, the romance 'Monaldi' and one brief specimen of what, in its day, was held to belong to the then undefined *genre* of the short-story, "The Hypochondriac." None of this prose, it may be confessed at once, is in any degree memorable. Perhaps we are as platitudinous to-day as were the men of the early nineteenth century; at all events we are freer from complicated preconceptions. Hence to say of Allston's 'Lectures' that they strive to interpret art in the light of ethical and religious platitudes, is merely to say that he was of his time and under the domination of its conventions of thought—conventions from which not even a Ruskin could liberate himself entirely. Of Allston's prose fiction a similar criticism must be made. He wrote in the age of pseudo-Gothic, pseudo-philosophical romance, quite amorphous and as far removed as is conceivable from any conscientious imitation of life. When we approach his poetry there is an altogether different story to tell. Poetry, as Arnold said long ago, is the one thing that, in the long run, has a chance of not being altogether vanity. The reason for this is not far to seek. Poetry alone is comparatively free of trammels of mode and usage and may express the essential emotions of man with almost equal freedom in any age. It was not given to Allston, of course, even here, to write for all time, but certainly to produce a small body of work which has more than a merely historic value and interest.

This body of poetic work is very unequal in accomplishment. It would be rather absurd to-day to repeat the saying of Allston's brother-in-law, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., that his work gives him a place among the chief poets of his country. It was not at all absurd, though even then it was slightly extravagant, in the year 1850, when the remark was made. It is fair to say then that Allston is a true minor poet of that Southern and hence American literature which, as it recedes in the distance, is slowly but surely coming to assume its true proportions. We need to apply the historical estimate because Allston's verse, to be frank, is not intrinsically very attractive to-day. But in the days when Longfellow was a great poet Washington Allston was not a very small one. His chief defect was shared in a greater or less degree by nearly all of his American contemporaries. Like them he lacked a firm grasp on the essential principles of poetic art. His verse is nearly always smooth, it is sometimes sweet. For all that, Allston never really knew what poetic form is. Here a problem arises again for a hypothetical historian of American literature. How was it possible for Washington Allston, a man of genuine cultivation, of prolonged

artistic training heroic couplets a sonnet? S matter of fact volve, I suspe the earlier li more detailed "The Sylp single volume have been a of those fata severe artist American poe fancy and in painter than

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artistic training and the friend of Wordsworth, to write seven smooth heroic couplets and in all good faith to believe that he had written a sonnet? Superficially this question may appear trivial. As a matter of fact, it goes deep. A satisfactory answer to it would involve, I suspect, the solution of a good many problems in regard to the earlier literature of America. But Allston's verse deserves a more detailed consideration.

"The Sylphs of the Seasons," which gave its title to Allston's single volume of verse, is a smooth and readable poem which would have been a very great deal better, had it not been written in one of those fatally facile metres which dispense with the necessity of severe artistic self-restraint and were the bane of nearly every American poet of that time. The poem shows a gently constructive fancy and its pleasantest touches come rather from Allston the painter than from Allston the poet.

"The walls with jetty darkness teemed
While down them crystal columns streamed,
And each a mountain torrent seemed
High flashing through the night."

"The Two Painters," which comes next in length to "The Sylphs of the Seasons," is a far more interesting and meritorious piece of work. It is the satirical story of two rascally and unskilful painters who are judged in the infernal regions by Leonardo da Vinci, to whom Minos has temporarily relegated his power. The poem lacks neither satirical nor imaginative energy and bears a curious resemblance to a brilliant piece of work by the recent German poet Ludwig Fulda. The poem is even fuller of fine pictorial touches than "The Sylphs of the Seasons." The description of the flight of Mercury is a good example.

"He, at the word,
High-bounding wings his airy flight,
So swift his form eludes the sight;
Nor aught is seen his course to mark,
Save when athwart the regions dark
His brazen helm is spied afar,
Bright trailing like a falling star."

"The Angel and the Nightingale," Allston's third poem of any length, is perhaps even better than either of the two preceding ones. It is written in a variation of the Spenserian stanza and the gentle verses undulate along pleasantly and not without sweetness. The description of the birds of the air coming from the farthest isles of the sea to do homage to the nightingale and her powers of song

is very nearly the best thing that Allston ever wrote and will be quoted at the end of this article. And yet even in these lines, which represent Allston very fairly, his artistic helplessness and his uncertainty of touch are apparent. For instance, he spoils a line that might have been genuinely impressive,

"The mountain-pines stand sentry over time,"

by the disturbing assonance of "pines" and "time"; the syntax here, too, is awkward enough to puzzle a professed grammarian. So that one receives a little shock of surprise at meeting two lines such as,

"Flash on the eagle in his downward flight
Bending his conquered majesty to song,"

which ring out without a single dissonance. But the man who could write those two lines and not a few others equal to them had poetic talent which should not be underrated.

Allston's briefer poems are not nearly so interesting as the three which have been discussed. One exception alone must be made to this statement in favor of his short ode, "America to Great Britain." This poem has never lacked praise and appreciation, and justly not. The sentiment was one which naturally shook Allston with a stronger emotion than was habitual to him, and under the stress of this emotion he achieved a rhythmical effect that is pregnant, sonorous, and original. The fifth line of each stanza, if read with a marked caesural pause after the proper syllable, is a noble metrical invention uniting the effects of high ardor and tense restraint. But this poem stands alone. As a rule when he leaves the prop and guidance of a complicated poetic form and essays light, lyric metres, his verse becomes insipid. So soon, however, as he casts his thoughts into the mould of a severe and difficult form, his verses become stronger, richer and more imaginative. Many such occur in his so-called sonnets, although these never come within measurable distance of that legitimate sonnet-form which the consent of ages and the practice of great poets have consecrated. But even this faulty form strengthens and purifies his poetic power. Into it are cast the firmest and most dignified lines he ever wrote, which may be quoted at once:

ON MICHAEL ANGELO

"Tis not to honour thee by verse of mine
I bear a record of thy wondrous power;
Thou stand'st alone, and needest not to shine
With borrowed lustre; for the light is thine
Which no man giveth; and, though comets lower