

A Noisy Noise Annoys an Oyster

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I was sitting upon the terrace of the Café de la Paix one summer evening some years ago before the war, when my attention was attracted to a procession of young exquisites. It was not an ordinary procession. It appeared to partake of the nature of an advertisement. All the members of the party were apparently male. At least they were dressed in the extreme masculine fashion. They were apparently from the stage of some theatre, for they were painted and powdered excessively. Their gait was mincing; each carried an elegant cane held to the face rather like a lorgnette, and each held in the other hand a copy of the first volume of Mr. Alfred Noyes. The Café de la Paix must have been very full that evening; at least they shortly re-emerged, followed by some rapid remarks from the maitre d'hôtel.

The second time I heard of Mr. Noyes was in London. I had been slumming, and had dug down to the office of the *New Age*, where I discovered an individual bearing the savory name of Oliver Onions. This gentleman proved to be full of Mr. Noyes, and informed me that it was the boast of that individual that he had made a living out of poetry ever since he left Oxford. "Interesting indeed," said I, "whose poetry?" I was then reminded that Mr. Noyes was himself a poet, and indeed, on investigation, it appears that this Mr. Noyes is the most determined poet that ever lived. It seems that he set the career of Tennyson before him from the very start. He intended to become Poet Laureate, and nothing should stop him. I do not think anything will stop him.

The evidence of his campaign is to be seen in his career. The very fact of seizing upon the canons of Ox-

ford is evidence. But as soon as he left Oxford he perceived that he must pick up with the bigger traditions of popularity. He therefore took the big English traditions: the sea, and King Arthur, and the May-Queen, and tied them up with Swinburne and Kipling. One can see traces of the style of all of these. Here is a passage of so-called blank verse of the most wooden Tennysonian model:

“So six days passed, and on the seventh returned
The courier, with a message of the Queen
Summoning Drake to court, bidding him bring
Also such curious trifles of his voyage
As might amuse her, also rest well content his life
In Gloriana's hands were safe: so Drake
Laughingly landed with his war-bronzed crew
Amid the wide-eyed throng on Plymouth beach.”

Here is a purely Kiplingesque stanza:

“If you try and lay there, sir, with your face turned
wonder,
Up to twenty million miles of stars that roll like one,
Right across to God knows where, and you just
huddle under
Like a little beetle with no business of his own,
There you'd hear, like growing grass, a funny, silent
sound, sir,
Mixed with curious crackles in a steady undertone,
Just the sound of twenty billion stars a-going round,
sir,
Yus, and you beneath 'em like a wise, old ant, alone,
Ant upon a stone,
Waving of his antlers, on the Sussex downs, alone.”

Here is a stanza which reads like a parody of Swinburne:

“Whether the walls that I know, or the unknown fugitive faces,
 Faces like those that I loved, faces that
 haunt, and waylay,
Faces so like and unlike in the dim unforgettable places,
 Startling the heart into sickness that aches
 with the sweet of the May.”

Whenever anybody makes a hit, Alfred Noyes must be on the spot with another poem exactly like it. No sooner does Herbert Trench score a success with "Apollo and the Seaman," than Mr. Noyes obliges with "Bacchus and the Pirates." No sooner does Henry Newbolt produce "Admirals All," than up jumps Jack-in-the-box with "Forty Singing Seamen," and a lot of stuff in the same key. Here are a couple of stanzas:

“He stretched out his dead cold face,
And he sailed in the grand old way!
The fishes had taken an eye and his arm,
But he swept Trafalgar's Bay.
Nelson — was Francis Drake!
O, what matters the uniform.
Or the patch on your eye or your pinned-up sleeve,
If your soul's like a North Sea storm?”

Francis Thompson starts religious poems, introducing little bits of Latin hymns. Noyes does not lose a minute, he goes and does the same:

“Here, not set in a realm apart,
 East and West are one Nowell!
Holy Land is in our Heart!
 North and South one Gloria!
Death is a birth, birth is a death,
 Love is all, O sing Nowell!
And London one with Nazareth —
 And all the world a Gloria!”

But there is not too much of the Latin hymn. Mr. Noyes is a very orthodox Protestant. He knows well enough that the Archbishop of Canterbury must be consulted when Robert Bridges dies. To him Catholics are scarcely human:

"Now, provost-marshal,
Begin with you two friars, in whose faces
Chined like singed swine, and eyed with the spent
coals
Of filthy living, sweats the glory of Spain.
Strip off their leprous rags
And twist their ropes around their throats and hang
them
High over the Spanish camp for all to see.
At dawn I'll choose two more."

To Mr. Noyes Queen Elizabeth is a maiden saint,
and Rome the one great enemy:

"This letter, stolen by a trusty spy,
Out of the inmost chamber of the Pope
Sixtus himself, here is your murder planned:
Blame not your Ministers who with such haste
Plucked out this viper, Mary, from your breast!"

"Rome, Rome, and Rome again,
And always Rome,' she muttered; 'even here
In England hath she thousands yet. She hath struck
Her curse out with pontific fingers at me,
Cursed me down and away to the bottomless pit.' "

Every prejudice of middle-class England, every snobbery, every baseness, is seized upon by Mr. Noyes as the basis of his unique art. In bold, wooden phraseology, tricked out with every tinsel appanage of the poet-aster, England's latest Alfred belches forth the banality of an utterly mediocre mind from that coarse, brutal,

mouth, which makes it so difficult to support the contemplation of his photographs. It is superfluous to say that there is not an idea in the whole of his voluminous writings. Even from the brief passages quoted above it will be evident that commonplace has reached its climax.

I am asked why I should notice Mr. Noyes at all. It is because I am concerned for the fair fame of England. I remember the writings of one William Shakespeare. There is one thing in Shakespeare which no man can forgive: it is his foul attack upon the memory of Joan of Arc, the culmination of his shame as a political toady. Shakespeare's greatness is altogether marred by his willingness to blacken people like Richard III, who was unpopular with the dynasty in power — to praise tyrants like Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth, because he was paid for it, or thought it the best way to popularity. Now I am glad enough to compare Alfred Noyes to Shakespeare, but only on this ground. As previously observed, Noyes has always been a toady of the English bourgeoisie. He has set the seal upon himself by his abominable asperations upon the memories of those saints and martyrs of my own holy isle, whose tragic figures — may one venture to say! — have added a new lustre to the greatest of the festivals of the Christian church.