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JOHN BANISTER TABB

[1845—1909*]

WILLIAM HAND BROWNE

WHEN the American colonists had severed the ties that held them in political subservience to the mother country, and, after about a quarter of a century of indecision, addressed themselves to producing a distinctly American literature, one would have expected this to be characterized by rude vigor, defiance of tradition, and almost lawless impatience of restraint. On the contrary, the bent of this literature, and especially of such poetry as deserves the name, was distinguished by a striving for finish and refinement. Throughout the Nineteenth Century the passion for perfection of form and expression is noticeable in all our poets; but it is perhaps most conspicuous, and we may almost say hereditary, in those of the South, even where differing as much in other respects as do Timrod, Hayne, and Lanier. This perfection within self-imposed limitations, no Southern poet has more nearly attained than the poet-priest, John B. Tabb.

John Banister Tabb was born March 22, 1845, on the old family homestead, "The Forest" (since destroyed by fire) in Amelia County, Virginia.

In his early boyhood a keen interest in literature, especially poetry, was awakened in him, the first impulse coming from a friend of the family, Colonel Frank G. Ruffin, who one morning read to him from Wordsworth and Hood. That single reading was like a revelation to him, and the impression never faded. Somewhat later, his brother, William Barksdale, (an alumnus of the University of Virginia) led him to Tennyson and Poe.

Young Tabb was passionately fond of music, and in this he received encouragement and instruction from a friend, Mrs. Judith C. Blair, of Lexington, Virginia, with whom also music was a passion. Though there was no kinship between them, he always called her "Aunt Judith" as a sign of affection. This lady also took a warm and sympathetic interest in the youth's early attempts in literature.

He had always suffered from a weakness of the eyes, and in his twelfth year consulted an oculist, who found in them an imperfection which science could not remedy.

Young Tabb's early days glided peacefully on at his country home

*Father Tabb, as he was lovingly known by all, without regard to creed, died at St. Charles College on November 19, 1909.

until the outbreak of the Civil War convulsed the South and broke up social conditions which have no counterpart in history, which never can return, and which not many now can understand—the life of the Southern planter.

Young Tabb's defective sight disqualified him for the army, but he entered the Confederate service as captain's clerk on the C.S. Steamer *Robert E. Lee*. In June, 1864, having passed the blockading fleet more than twenty times, always in danger, and sometimes under fire, he was captured off Beaufort, North Carolina, by the U.S. Steamer *Keystone State*, and sent a prisoner to Point Lookout, Maryland. It was in this period of captivity that he made the acquaintance of a fellow-prisoner, Sidney Lanier, being first attracted by the music of his flute. Congenial tastes and feelings drew together these two poet-souls, and a friendship grew up between them which never was broken until Lanier's death.

Released in 1865, young Tabb found himself in the hard circumstances with which most Southerners had to contend. Even where the lands had not been confiscated, nor homes ravaged, the whole system of society had been broken up; there was no labor to work the plantations, and the infamous "Reconstruction" government with ingenious malignity pursued a systematic policy of frustrating all attempts of the people to better their condition. The problem, how to live, became a most serious one.

Young Tabb was especially handicapped by the trouble with his eyes; but something had to be done. He pursued the study of music for more than a year, but later took up the calling of a teacher, for which, as his later life has shown, he was admirably qualified. Gradually he became convinced that his true vocation was the Church, and he entered upon studies preparatory to taking orders in the Episcopal Church; but these studies led him to the path which had been followed by Newman, and in 1872 he was received into the Catholic fold. After two years' study at St. Charles College, Maryland, he was appointed teacher of English in that institution, a position which he still holds. In 1884 he received priest's orders.

His sight has now failed entirely, but the loss nowise abates the sunny cheerfulness of his spirit.

Father Tabb's poems are all short, few extending beyond the limits of the sonnet, while many are still briefer, a favorite form being the quatrain. Many poets, when they seize a thought, are apt to expand and develop it, as a musician develops a theme; Tabb condenses it, many of his poems consisting of a single simile or metaphor expressed in perfect phrase. Critics have aptly called them "cameos"—the most delicate art in the smallest compass. Rounded and complete they are like dew-drops on the jewel-weed, each per-

fect, and each distinct. In their tenderness and simplicity they remind one of Simonides or Meleager; but the faith of the Christian gives a depth which the pagan could not attain. For the Greek poet there was nothing beyond—no symbolism of a life beyond the veil. Tender memories remained, but the threads of sympathy broke off at the grave.

Father Tabb, like Wordsworth, is a poet of nature, but he does not lose himself in the vision. Lovely in themselves, to him the aspects of nature are far more lovely as symbols. To him, as to Berkeley, nature is a language in which God speaks to man, the poet being the interpreter. And the nature which is ever present in his memory is that of his native Virginia—its gentle hills, wide expanses, and “smooth-sliding” streams; its trees and flowers and birds. Who that has ever heard the unforgettable call of the killdeer at twilight, or the liquid fluting of the wood-robin, will not feel his heart swell as the poet brings them back to memory? So intimate are they that one doubts whether any reader can feel the full beauty of these nature-touches who does not know the land that inspired them.

But, beautiful as is the symbol, it is not the symbol, but the suggested thought, that is the poem. For instance:

Where limpid waters lie between,
There only heaven to heaven is seen:
Where flows the tide of human tears,
There only heart to heart appears.

Often the thought suggests the symbol, as in this quatrain on a babe dying in winter:

Niva, Child of Innocence,
Dust to dust *we* go;
Thou, when winter wooed thee hence,
Wentest snow to snow.

But we shall fall short in our judgment if we look upon the poet merely as one who seizes a delicate or tender fancy and embodies it in a stanza. Detached as these poems seem, under them lies a profound unity—a philosophy felt, not formulated. When St. Francis addressed not birds and beasts alone but inanimate things as his brothers and sisters, he did not mean merely that they were creatures of the same Creator. And to Father Tabb (as it seems to me) the lark and the golden-rod are not merely objects perceived by the senses, but, like ourselves, they live and have their being in God.

The more purely devotional poems, dealing with the mysterious and sacred things of his faith, are not within the province of merely literary criticism. But, as we might expect, it is the tenderer and

more human aspect of things divine that appeals to him most strongly: the Holy Babe as the type of infant innocence and His Mother as the type of motherhood. Many of these poems treat of children and childhood, and always with an ineffable tenderness and almost reverence, as if some light from the manger at Bethlehem shone about each baby head.

Poetry of this kind demands a very refined technique, and that of Father Tabb, within his self-imposed limitations, seems absolutely perfect. He attempts no innovations or audacities; his measures and rhythms are simple and familiar. The phrase is always the right phrase, which cannot be bettered; the diction pure, direct, and noble.

The poet Herrick, whose best work in delicacy and felicity of phrase is not unlike Father Tabb's, was also threatened with loss of sight, and cheerfully alludes to his failing vision:

"I begin to wane in sight—
Shortly I shall bid good-night;
Then no gazing more about,
When the tapers all are out."

Father Tabb bears his privations with equal serenity, but with graver thought, as shown by the quatrain called "A Prayer in Darkness":

"The day is nearer unto night
Than to another day;
If closer to Thee, Lord of Light,
Let me in darkness stay."

I think the following pieces are fairly representative; but selection has been like culling a posy from a patch of wood-violets; those we leave always seem bluer than those we have taken.

Wm. Hand Browne

SLUMBER-SONG

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Sleep! the spirits that attend
On thy waking hours are fled.
Heaven thou canst not now offend
Till thy slumber-plumes are shed;
Consciousness alone doth lend
Life its pain, and Death its dread;
Innocence and Peace befriend
All the sleeping and the dead.

AGAINST THE SKY

See, where the foliage fronts the sky,
How many a meaning we descry
That else had never to the eye
A signal shown!

So we, on life's horizon-line,
To watchers waiting for a sign,
Perchance interpret Love's design,
To us unknown.

ASLEEP

Nay, wake him not!
Unfelt our presence near,
Nor falls a whisper on his dreaming ear:
He sees but Sleep's celestial visions clear,
All else forgot.

And who shall say
That, in life's waking dream,
There be not ever near us those we deem
(As now our faces to the Sleeper seem)
Far, far away?

SOUTHERN LITERATURE

ALTER IDEM

'Tis what thou wast—*not* what thou art,
Which I no longer know—
That made thee sovereign of my heart,
And serves to keep thee so;

And couldst thou, coming to the throne,
Thy Self, *unaltered*, see,
Thou mightst the occupant disown,
And scout his sovereignty.

THE DEPARTED

They cannot wholly pass away,
How far soe'er above;
Nor we, the lingerers, wholly stay
Apart from those we love:
For spirits in eternity,
As shadows in the sun,
Reach backward into Time, as we,
Like lifted clouds, reach on.

SUSPENSE

Breathless as the blue above thee
Where a pausing vapor lies;
Here, the hearts on earth that love thee,
There, the souls in Paradise—
Host for host expectant of thee!
Who shall win the prize?

MY SECRET

'T is not what I am fain to hide,
That doth in deepest darkness dwell,
But what my tongue hath often tried,
Alas, in vain, to tell.

THE SNOW-BIRD

When snow, like silence visible,
Hath hushed the summer bird,
Thy voice, a never-frozen rill
Of melody, is heard.

But when from winter's lethargy
The buds begin to blow,
Thy voice is mute, and suddenly
Thou vanishest like snow.

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS

'Tis Christmas night! Again—
But not from heaven to earth—
Rings forth the old refrain
“A Saviour's Birth!”

Nay, listen: 'tis below!
A song that soars above,
From human hearts aglow
With heavenly love!

INTIMATIONS

I knew the flowers had dreamed of you,
And hailed the morning with regret;
For all their faces with the dew
Of vanished joy were wet.

I knew the winds had passed your way,
Though not a sound the truth betrayed;
About their pinions all the day
A summer fragrance stayed.

And so, awaking or asleep,
A memory of lost delight
By day the sightless breezes keep

EASTER FLOWERS

We are His witnesses; out of the dim,
Dank region of Death we have risen with Him.
Back from our sepulchre rolleth the stone,
And Spring, the bright Angel, sits smiling thereon.

We are His witnesses. See, where we lay
The snow that late bound us is folded away;
And April, fair Magdalen, weeping anon,
Stands flooded with light of the new-risen Sun!

CHARITY

If but the world would give to Love
The crumbs that from its table fall,
'T were bounty large enough for all
The famishing to feed thereof.

And Love, that still the laurel wins
Of Sacrifice, would lovelier grow,
And round the world a mantle throw
To hide its multitude of sins.

GRIEF-SONG

New grief, new tears;—
Brief the reign of sorrow;
Clouds that gather with the night
Scatter on the morrow.

Old grief, old tears;—
Come and gone together;
Not a fleck upon the sky
Telling whence or whither.

Old grief, new tears;—
Deep to deep is calling:
Life is but a passing cloud
Whence the rain is falling.

IN ABSENCE

All that thou art not, makes not up the sum
Of what thou art, beloved, unto me:
All other voices, wanting thine, are dumb;
All vision, in thine absence, vacancy.

MY STAR

Since that the dewdrop holds the star
The long night through,
Perchance the satellite afar
Reflects the dew.

And while thine image in my heart
Doth steadfast shine;
There haply, in thy heaven apart
Thou keepest mine.

ENSHRINED

Come quickly in and close the door,
For none hath entered here before,
The secret chamber set apart
Within the cloister of the heart.

Tread softly! 'T is the Holy Place
Where memory meets face to face
A sacred sorrow, felt of yore,
But sleeping now forevermore.

It cannot die; for nought of pain,
Its fleeting vesture, doth remain:
Behold upon the shrouded eye
The seal of immortality!

Love would not wake it, nor efface
Of anguish one abiding trace,
Since e'en the calm of heaven were less,
Untouched of human tenderness.

SOUTHERN LITERATURE

EVOLUTION

Out of the dusk a shadow,
Then, a spark;
Out of the cloud a silence,
Then, a lark;
Out of the heart a rapture,
Then, a pain;
Out of the dead, cold ashes,
Life again.

LOVE'S HYBLA

My thoughts fly to thee, as the bees
To find their favorite flower;
Then home, with honeyed memories
Of many a fragrant hour:

For with thee is the place apart
Where sunshine ever dwells,
The Hybla, whence my hoarding heart
Would fill its wintry cells.

KILLDEE

Killdee! Killdee! far o'er the lea
At twilight comes the cry.
Killdee! a marsh-mate answereth
Across the shallow sky.

Killdee! Killdee! thrills over me
A rhapsody of light,
As star to star gives utterance
Between the day and night.

Killdee! Killdee! O Memory,
The twin birds, Joy and Pain,
Like shadows parted by the sun,
At twilight meet again!

AN INFLUENCE

I see thee,—heaven's unclouded face
A vacancy around thee made,
Its sunshine a subservient grace
Thy lovelier light to shade.

I feel thee, as the billows feel
A river freshening the brine;
A life's libation poured to heal
The bitterness of mine.

COMPENSATION

How many an acorn falls to die
For one that makes a tree!
How many a heart must pass me by
For one that cleaves to me!

How many a suppliant wave of sound
Must still unheeded roll,
For one low utterance that found
An echo in my soul!

BABY'S DIMPLES

Love goes playing hide-and-seek
'Mid the roses on her cheek,
With a little imp of Laughter,
Who, the while he follows after,
Leaves the footprints that we trace
All about the Kissing-place.

"FOR THE RAIN IT RAINETH EVERY DAY"

Ay, every day the rain doth fall,
And every day doth rise:
'T is thus the heavens incessant call,
And thus the earth replies.

SOUTHERN LITERATURE

NARCISSUS

The god enamoured never knew
The shadow that beguiled his view,
Nor deemed it less divinely true
Than Life and Love.

And so the poet, while he wrought
His image in the tide of thought,
Deemed it a glimpse in darkness caught
Of light above.

CONFIDED

Another lamb, O Lamb of God, behold,
Within this quiet fold,
Among Thy Father's sheep
I lay to sleep!
A heart that never for a night did rest
Beyond its mother's breast.
Lord, keep it close to Thee,
Lest waking, it should bleat and pine for me!

SILENCE

Temple of God, from all eternity
Alone like Him without beginning found;
Of time and space and solitude the bound,
Yet in thyself of all communion free.
Is, then, the temple holier than He
That dwells therein? Must reverence surround
With barriers the portal, lest a sound
Profane it? Nay; behold a mystery!

What was, abides; what is, hath ever been:
The lowliest the loftiest sustains.
A silence, by no breath of utterance stirred—
Virginity in motherhood—remains,
Clear, midst a cloud of all-pervading sin,
The voice of Love's unutterable word.

THE BUBBLE

Why should I stay? Nor seed nor fruit have I.
But, sprung at once to beauty's perfect round,
Nor loss, nor gain, nor change in me is found—
A life—complete in death—complete to die.

DEPRECATATION

From a Manuscript

Low I listen in my grave,
For a silence soon to be,
When—a slow receding wave—
Hushed is Memory.

Now the falling of a tear,
Or the breathing, half-suppressed,
Of a sigh, re-echoed here,
Holds me from my rest.

O ye breakers of the past
From the never-resting deep
On the coast of Silence cast,
Cease, and let me sleep!

BEYOND

From a Manuscript

The River to the Sea,
In language of the Land;
Interpreter would be
Of life beyond the strand,
Of billowy heights that never fall
When winds have gone their way,
Of waving forests dark and tall,
Of flocks and herds and fertile vales,
Of warbling birds and blossom-spray,
That scents the wandering gales.
Alas! 'tis all a mystery!
She doth not understand.

SOUTHERN LITERATURE

IN TOUCH

From a Manuscript

How slight so e'er the motion be,
With palpitating hand,
The gentlest breaker of the sea
Betrays it to the strand.

And, though a vaster mystery
Hath set our souls apart,
Each wafture from eternity
Reveals thee to my heart.

DUSK

From a Manuscript

Alone I am, but lonelier
The Twilight seems to be;
The lengthening shadows leading her
To human sympathy.

No word; but a mysterious clew
To feelings deeper far,
She fashions in the trembling dew,
And in the steadfast star.

MATINS

From a Manuscript

Still sing the Morning Stars remote
With echoes now unheard,
Save in the scintillating note
Of some dawn-wakened bird
Whose heart—a fountain in the light—
Prolongs the limpid strain,
Till, on the border-land of Night,
The stars begin again.

A TRYSTING-PLACE

From a Manuscript

As stars amid the darkness seen,
When flows the deepening dawn between
 To cover them from sight,
O'erleap the spaces of the dark,
And, spark to quickening sister-spark,
 Commingle in the light;

E'en so a solitary way
Do we, Beloved, day by day,
 In weariness and pain,
Climb, desolate, from steep to steep,
Till, in the shadowy vale of Sleep,
 Our spirits blend again.