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PRINCE LUCIFER

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BY

ALFRED AUSTIN 

'Lucifer, Son of the Morning.'  
ISAIAH, CHAP. XIV. V. 12.

EVE. 'Light-Bearer to my darkness!'  
ACT IV. SCENE 5.

SECOND EDITION

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*To The Queen's Most Excellent Majesty*

MADAM,

*On that memorable Midsummer Day, when You received the loving homage of Your faithful People, I had no lyric nor Jubilee ode to lay at Your feet; for the imagination is overwhelmed, rather than stimulated, by the retrospective contemplation of the half century of Your happy Rule. But who can forget that, in a special sense, this year is Yours? And therefore, since I have Your gracious permission, I humbly offer You this poor gift; hoping, if it should escape oblivion, that it may do so by being associated with Your touching virtues, and may be remembered along with worthier fruits of Your resplendent Reign.*

*I am, Madam,*

*Your Majesty's*

*Loyal, loving, and dutiful subject,*

ALFRED AUSTIN.

## PERSONAGES

PRINCE LUCIFER . . . . .	<i>A Self-Exiled Sovereign.</i>
COUNT ABDIEL . . . . .	{ <i>The Voluntary Companion of</i> <i>his Exile.</i>
FATHER GABRIEL . . . . .	<i>A Priest.</i>
ADAM . . . . .	<i>A Gravedigger.</i>
EVE . . . . .	<i>A Shepherdess.</i>
ELSPETH . . . . .	<i>A Village Maiden.</i>

MALE AND FEMALE PEASANTS.

CHORUS—The Matterhorn, The Weisshorn, The Visp-Thal Torrent.

SCENE.

Castle Tourbillon	} Both in a Mountain Valley near the Matterhorn.
The Village Church	

TIME—To-day.

## ON THE END AND LIMITS OF OBJECTIVE POETRY

I HAVE long wished to say something, in the hearing of those whom the subject may happen to interest, on the misconceptions which, in an age so intent on controversy as our own, seem to me not infrequently to vitiate the most able comments on poetry that is strictly objective but at the same time not wholly devoid of ethical colouring and philosophic import; in a word, poetry which aims at representing the struggles, the pathos, and the tragedy, engendered by the active antagonism of rival Creeds, rather than seeks to adjudicate between them. The appearance of the Second Edition of *Prince Lucifer* provides me with the desired opportunity.

So long as a writer confines himself to descriptions of natural scenery or to the portrayal of what may be called the simple and elementary emotions, omitting from the scope of his treatment the mental, moral, and social forces that divide mankind, he is safe against misconception. He describes a scene, or tells a story; and the public are content to note that he has done these things well or ill. But if, haunted by the dark and solemn questions which, like a constant shadow, accompany the journey of the human race, his imagination arrests and embodies these in the personages of an epic or dramatic story; then, no matter how impersonally or objectively he may do so, people in these days at once begin to ask, "What does he mean? what does he believe? in the conflict in which we are all so deeply interested, and which he has elected to describe, to which side does he himself incline?" Should the poem furnish no answer to these inquiries, a certain sense of disappointment ensues. Moralists themselves, first and last of all things, they forget that, in verse at least, the poet is not a moralist, save accidentally and in a very



subordinate degree, but an artist ; and while, perhaps, lavish of praise concerning his imagination, his fancy, or his style, they reproach him with having engaged in a barren polemic, when, in truth, he has engaged in no polemic at all, but has rigidly confined himself to portraying the influence exercised by the divisions of the intellect and the perplexities of the conscience on the plastic creatures of his imagination.

Were it not unbecoming, I think I could show how this controversial spirit, this polemical temper of our time, has affected, for good or ill, the writings and reputation of some of my contemporaries who are eminent by their compositions in verse. But since I am precluded from adopting that course, I shall, perhaps, be pardoned if I fall back upon the only alternative method of illustration open to me, and indicate, with as much brevity and reserve as the case will permit, how the prevailing anxiety to establish some definite conclusion, theological or ethical, and the tacit assumption that everybody is burning with the same desire, has caused even the most competent critics to overlook, in my own compositions, what other-

wise, I think, they could scarcely have failed to observe.

Thirteen years ago I read, and found it so suggestive that I kept, a review which appeared in one of the most serious and able of our weekly organs of opinion. In it there occurred the following passage, which I will ask leave to quote, since it is of great assistance to me in my present purpose :—

“Mr. Austin’s serious poetry somewhat puzzles us. Not only is its workmanship good, but its general conceptions have something large and impressive in them ; yet when we come to examine the execution in detail, the intellectual element in his general conceptions is not worked out, and we find the poems, when finished, to be defective precisely in those points in which we had been led to admire the motive of the poems themselves. Thus, in *Madonna’s Child*, the general conception was certainly a fine one, namely, the tragedy in the utter divorce between the intellect of the day and its deepest and sweetest piety on the subject of religious faith. But the poem hardly illustrated its own subject at all. It gave us, instead, a very pretty picture of a devotee, who took all her religion on trust, and of a youth who, while detesting the narrow and selfish spirit which commercial ideas seem to introduce into modern

life, and longing for a faith which might at once subdue his intellect and task his devotedness, could passionately love all that was lovable in the fair devotee, without finding any rational pretence for sharing her faith. But of his moral or intellectual difficulties in the way of believing either the Roman Catholic or any other religion,—of the points on which his mind was attracted by her faith, barring the one obvious point of the feminine beauty of character it produced, and the points on which he held out against it,—of the grounds, in fact, of the tragic issue of the story, we hardly get a glimpse, so that while we feel the tragedy, we feel that the motive of it is kept quite in the dark. Where we expected a poem on one of the deepest of the moral perplexities of the age, we find only a sad tale, into which that moral perplexity enters as a cause, but not as a constituent thread of the literary subject.<sup>1</sup>

It will scarcely be supposed that, after an interval of thirteen years, self-love can have anything to do with my dissent from the critical canon that underlies this passage. If there be one proposition concerning the scope of poetry which will, I think, on due reflection, be found indisputable, it is that, even if it be well and wise for a poet to describe “the moral or

<sup>1</sup> The *Spectator*, March 14, 1874.

intellectual difficulties in the way of believing the Roman Catholic or any other religion," which I very much doubt, a poet who attempts to do this, in a narrative poem, must inevitably suffer shipwreck, through going to sea in a vessel not fitted to carry such a cargo. I do not affirm that a poem, and a most beautiful poem, may not be written on the deepest moral perplexities, and a poem in which moral perplexity is the constituent thread and staple. But such a poem will be purely reflective. To complain that an epic or dramatic poem uses moral perplexity mainly as an agent and a cause, is to condemn as a fault what, I submit, is essentially a merit, and to ask for the combination of two things that can by no possibility be united. Which of the two one prefers, whether one would rather read a reflective and semi-argumentative poem on moral perplexities, or a poem which exhibits the influence of these perplexities on the lives of men and women and the fortunes of mankind, is a matter of personal taste; and I have little doubt that, in the present age, the preference of most persons is for the former. But surely there

can be no doubt as to which is the better art, which is more consonant with the highest aim and loftiest purpose of poetry.

The same radical misconception as to the true end and proper limits of Objective Poetry, as I understand them, was shown in some of the most appreciative comments on *The Human Tragedy*, of which *Madonna's Child* is only a portion ; and now, once again, I note the same phenomenon in the somewhat embarrassed attitude of many who have publicly commented on *Prince Lucifer*. Once more I read of the "not very positive teaching of this curious poem," and the avowal that "we admire the poetry very much more than we admire the moral and spiritual drift." Now whether or not any positive teaching can be extracted from *Prince Lucifer*, no moral nor spiritual drift was intended by the author, in the sense in which those words are used in the sentence cited. That moral and spiritual perplexities enter into it, and enter largely, is, no doubt, true ; and they are the perplexities not of this age alone, but of all ages, in a word the permanent perplexities of mankind. But they enter

into it as forces, and, so to speak, demons of the drama, acting on and through its human personages. Thus they are exhibited not in controversial but in practical conflict; and it perforce follows that, from that conflict, it is not a controversial but a practical conclusion that ensues.

Accordingly, *Prince Lucifer*, it seems to me, has a very definite dramatic conclusion, in the practical collapse of the Prince's theories when confronted with the Nature of Things and the immutable character of the human heart. Prince Lucifer believes himself to be a Light-Bearer. So does Father Gabriel. So, for that matter, does Count Abdiel. But, in sooth, who does not? If I were asked to say in prose whether I thought Prince Lucifer or Father Gabriel to be the true Light-Bearer, I might, perhaps, endeavour to reply to the best of my own poor light. But far from feeling tempted to entertain that question in the poem itself, I was absolutely precluded by my art from doing so. Human beings who recognise theological sanctions and the intrinsic sanctity of marriage, are, in *Prince Lucifer*, brought into contact and conflict with human

beings who do not ; and they work out their respective destinies dramatically, in other words according to the laws of human nature as observed by experience. Briefly, *Prince Lucifer* is an imaginative representation, by a particular instance, of certain universal, indisputable, and immutable facts.

Are then the readers of *Prince Lucifer* to conclude that, because it is strictly an objective poem, and because it seeks to solve no moral problem and to settle no spiritual controversy, therefore it is merely a story in dramatic and lyrical verse, and bears within it no portion of the burden of the solemn and insoluble mystery that is the silent companion of all lofty and lonely souls? I should indeed be doing a grievous wrong both to my own constant contemplations, and to the high seriousness which, if I may say so, alike impels and controls whatever energy of imagination inspires my more presumptuous adventures in the domain of verse, if I did not admit, with a frankness that I trust has in it no sin of arrogance, that in conceiving *Prince Lucifer* I hoped to have conceived a philosophic poem of no mean kind, how-

ever inferior in degree it might finally prove through feebleness of execution. If I am asked what is the inner spirit of the work that could ever encourage its parent to claim for it this high distinction, I am forced to reply that I should be at a loss, even if I could subdue my repugnance, to expose in the crude and coarse garment of prose what came to me, and I have offered to others, in the ethereal texture of verse. But since the question has been propounded, perhaps the nearest approach to a definite reply will be found in the following extract from a private letter, which I trust I shall be pardoned for producing here, since it illustrates, better than anything else I could say, what I conceive to be the true scope, the essential purpose, and the proper limits, of Objective Poetry, when dealing with philosophic themes :—

“ I have read the notices of *Prince Lucifer* to which you have called my attention, and have received many private communications concerning it ; and I find, as I expected, that though the writers express themselves very generously as to the literary qualities of the work, they one and all, unless exception be made of a very penetrating paper in the *Saturday Review*, and of a letter



exhibiting surprising insight from Professor Dowden, are somewhat puzzled as to its meaning. Their very failure to perceive that the choice of the names *Lucifer*, *Eve*, *Abdiel*, *Gabriel*, was neither arbitrary nor fantastic, but is a key at every one's disposal for the unlocking of the poem, shows that, notwithstanding the sympathetic manner in which they have written of it, they still stand outside its inner signification. The reason of this I believe to be that they have looked for something which is not there, and hence overlook something which they would otherwise discern. They expected the author to arbitrate between Agnosticism and Revealed Religion, between Free Love and Marriage, since these figure so prominently in the poem, and he has not done so. The story apparently has interested them; but perceiving there is something more in it than a mere story, yet not discerning what that something is, they not unnaturally regard it as surplusage and are disposed to rebuke the author for introducing it. As the easiest solution of the matter, they conclude he had no intention, after all, save to narrate a story in verse. Some, indeed, falling back upon the oldest expedient of perplexed criticism, have laboured to solve the riddle, by seeking for a likeness to *Prince Lucifer* in previous poems, with or without a philosophic import; but, finding the likeness to be dim and distant indeed, they give up the search with the good-natured remark that, in all probability, the

author's imagination has been disporting itself for its own amusement, and that *Prince Lucifer* is a poetical fantasy.

"You know how wrong and beside the mark this conclusion is, and that, over and beyond a love-story in poetic garb and dramatic form, there is exhibited the endless conflict between Pagan ideals and Christian practice, between Positivism and Theology, between unfettered romantic Love and the Marriage bond, in the persons of Prince Lucifer, Eve, Elspeth, Count Abdiel, and Father Gabriel; a conflict not of to-day more than of yesterday or of to-morrow, though in the present age, as in certain previous ones, the conflict is waged with unusual keenness. In that conflict Prince Lucifer is practically worsted. He not only forfeits his throne, but is compelled to acknowledge, in action, that his theories are such stuff as dreams are made of. Surrender them he does not, but he ceases to press them. When Eve says to him—

. . . . . I have awoke your dream,  
The dream that was to you reality,  
And you have nothing now but my poor love,  
Which seems so little, severed from your dream ;

what is Lucifer's reply ?

. . . . . Pray, pray on,  
And on love's neutral territory, dear,  
Let conflict be suspended.

“ Thus, advancing beyond the solution offered in *The Human Tragedy*, where Godfrid and Olympia are united only in death, *Prince Lucifer* seems to carry one step farther the practical aid poetry has so often lent to moral and spiritual perplexity. Nor do I doubt that you have perceived it was the intention of the author to leave his readers to infer that the Kingdom converted to Lucifer's theories at the very moment Eve finds them crumbling beneath her, would infallibly end by repeating her experience, and reverting to its pristine beliefs ; and, furthermore, that when the hope of redress in another life for the inequalities and hardships of this perishes in the heart of the multitude, humility and patience, those crowning virtues of the simple, infallibly become extinct. Not to discern this fact is to be insensible to the most imminent menace of our age, and not to have cast the horoscope of the yet more terrible time that is coming.

“ Such, it seems to me, if somewhat crudely stated, as must perforce be the case when stated in prose, is the central meaning of the poem, whose title and the name of whose characters are an essential and integral part of its design. Indeed, would it be extravagant to find in *Prince Lucifer* intermittent gleams and reflections, as it were, of the first Lucifer and the first Eve known to human story, and of every Eve and every Lucifer that have lived since, down to the great Lucifer