The "Waning" Classics.*

If Mr. Albert Mordell had come ten years earlier with his book on "Dante and Other Waning Classics," we might have praised him for having the courage of his conviction; we might have wondered at his audacity in trying to displace a mountain range with the push of his single shoulder. But opinion has moved rapidly of late. It is now pretty well understood that every new Novelist or Dramatist of the Dismal is superior to Shakespeare; and that all the Illuminati of Irregular Verse are better poets than Milton. The real heroes of criticism are those who cover the retreat of the disgraced classics.

Why cannot the modernists live and let live? Do they think that by eating their grandfathers they will acquire all their virtue and reputation? It was not always so. Literature presents the spectacle of a long procession of great writers holding by each others' robes, and, incidentally, with their hands in each others' pockets. Virgil pays Homer the flattery of continuous imitation. To Dante, Virgil is the highest type of human reason. Milton bows to "blind Thamyris and blind Mæonides." Even the leaders of a rival school, the earlier rationalists and realists, were true to their forbears. Voltaire held by the Greek tragedians. Pope and Dr. Johnson edited Shakespeare and praised him nobly. The great writers of the last century,—Goethe, Hugo, Scott, Tennyson,—prostrated themselves before their predecessors. Thackeray wanted to black Shakespeare's boots. In general, every one who has become an idol has been an idolater.

It is mainly the ideas of the writers whom Mr. Mordell attacks, their views of life, the cosmogonies and religious ideals which they embody, which he thinks effete, foolish, unfit for contemporary consumption. We do not believe that any great thought or speculation which has entered the world can die. It may be driven aside, and compelled to lead a subterranean existence for a time; but it almost certainly comes back or up. There must always be changes of opinion, revolutions. But the business of a revolution is to revolve, and it generally finds itself back in the same place. Take the ideal of feudalism, which Mr. Mordell thinks particularly obsolete. Two years ago it did seem to be comfortably buried. But it has pushed aside "the ponderous and marble jaws wherein we saw it quietly inurned," and has made a great struggle for existence. We all hope that it will be driven back into the tomb; but of its present vitality there cannot be a doubt. It is the same with religious ideas, Catholic or Protestant. The booming of the cannon seems to have deepened the notes of the church bells all over Europe. And occultism, supernaturalism! If a flood of books on such subjects is any indication, these dreams or illusions of man are coming back with a rush. It is quite possible that some of us may live to see witches burned again on Boston Common.

Even, however, if ideas can be permanently pushed aside, execution, the projection of great figures, the painting of wonderful scenes, the mighty or mysterious use of language, must retain their hold on the human mind. If we have no other use for the great writers of the past, we must go to them to learn how to write. With the possible exception of à Kempis, all those on Mr. Mordell's catalogue of incorrigibles were great executants. He allows Dante two great episodes and a few minor passages, and dismisses the rest of his poem as useless lumber. Well, Alfred de Musset said the same thing, and Landor and Leigh Hunt turned from the Florentine in sheer disgust. Such antipathies must always occur. But by the great and continually increasing voice of criticism, Dante is hailed as the man who has said more profound things, painted more vivid pictures, than any one else has ever done in an equal space. To object to the horror, the painfulness, of many of these pictures seems illogical in a writer who thinks so well of the work of Zola and Dostoieffsky. These later tragedians placed their infernos on the earth, whereas Dante concentrated his in a region of their own. Their effect on our feelings, we should think, would be the same in either case. Milton is another poet who condenses human experience and vision. There is probably more picture and music to the page in him than in any one since. Mr. Mordell objects to the figures of Sin and Death. To us they seem almost unparalleled in imaginative vigor. Even in the long later stretches of "Paradise Lost," which because of a lack of interesting

* Dante and Other Waning Classics. By Albert Mordell. Philadelphia: Acropolis Publishing Co.

matter are tiresome, there is always the high level of diction, the movement of a great tide of verse. Mr. Mordell does not find any message of importance in Pascal's "Thoughts." They do not pretend to be a system,—they are only scattered sparks, many of which, however, have kept alight to the present day. The great Pascal is the Pascal of the "Provincial Letters," who ought to appeal to Mr. Mordell because he was a liberalizer, a revolutionist, a miniature Luther. Indeed, he dealt a deadlier blow to Jesuitism than Luther did to Catholicism. Is Bunyan negligible? Is the man who stamped a number of images or visions,—the Slough of Despond, the Giant Pape in his Cave, Vanity Fair, the Delectable Mountains,—so firmly on the mind of his race that literature and art have been incessantly repeating them ever since,—is such a writer a nobody? We do not believe it. And St. Augustine! The Catholic Church is largely founded upon him, and the Catholic Church is surely a present verity. Besides, the very germ of all modern philosophy, Descartes's "I think, therefore I am," is in St. Augustine. This alone would make him important.

Mr. Mordell has the real reading which makes a full mind; he has a trenchant style and a lawyer-like expertness in putting his case. It is unpleasant to have to differ so totally from him. But what would he have? If, like Prospero, we must bury the Book of the Magic of the Past, and accept the modernists at their own valuation, what guarantee have we that to-morrow there will not be a crop of neo-modernists who will declare the others antiquated. If we regard what is taking place in art to-day, this is exactly what will happen. Novelists will be as soon out of date as newspapers, and poets will hardly outlast the full moon that inspires them. Permanence of fame, what we are accustomed to call literary immortality, will be a jest. We presume the modernists are out for permanent fame. Criticism ought to, and mainly does, concern itself with contemporary production; but it ought also to hold fast by what it knows to be abiding.

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