MR. STEDMAN'S LATEST BOOK.*

A COURSE of lectures delivered at the Johns Hopkins University has here been given its final touches and set in a permanent form. The first, and, as it turns out to be the deepest impression, received from reading them is that the author has not a doubt of the importance of his subject. In the main Mr. Stedman has done what he set out to do, and his performance compels admiration as a fine piece of literary art cast in a major mold. The critical spirit of the work is noble, broad, humane; its ethics appeal to what is best in us. If we are not quite in sympathy with some of his views, if we cannot accept as authoritative some of his elementary definitions, if his philosophy of poetry seems at times misty, if what he offers as a scientific study strikes us now and again as lacking a basis of substance, we still find ample ground for cordial agreement and admiration all along.

The nomenclature, so far as Mr. Stedman has adopted one in this book, is that of the distinguished English critic, Mr. Theodore Watts, in his celebrated article on poetry in the ninth edition of the "Encyclopædia Britannica," and Mr. Stedman has accepted Mr. Watts's system of classification, if we may call it that. Here is at once the strength and the weakness of the work. Admitting Mr. Watts's premises his conclusions are unavoidable; but we have never been able to recognize poetry as a spirit or abstract entity. Poetry is concrete, a measurable product of verbal art. There is no such thing as a statue in a rock; there is no such thing as an unexpressed poem; there is no such thing as silent music. When a poet sits down to write a poem he does it consciously, intelligently, with purpose and with craft. He makes it out of words and utters it orally or in writing. It is absolute folly to assume that the making of a poem is one whit different in essentials from any other effort toward the expression of a human aspiration, even if that aspiration is but to make a tin bucket. A log hut, no matter how rude, is an example of architecture; the rudest sketch on an Egyptian stone is a picture; the thumping of a tom-tom is music; the absurdest rhythmic efforts of the savage singer is poetry; and if this is not true who is authorized to say where any art or the spirit of it begins? There is no more accuracy of understanding in speaking of an unmade tin bucket than there is in speaking of a poem not yet thought into form of words; it is not a poem until it is a form of words, any more than an oration is an oration before it is given verbal being.

Mr. Stedman keeps himself in hand, and it is a delightful experience to follow him as, step by step, he calmly proceeds. The sense of being in good company is never absent while we read, and the best of an abundant knowledge falls into our consciousness like some doubly distilled dew of a world's literature. Here is scholarship in its welcomest mood, friendly, honest, sympathetic, dignified, healthy. Reference materials are sifted, and a rare economy of profert objects and stock examples is everywhere shown. With a clear conception of his work, as well as of the business of doing it, Mr. Stedman seems never embarrassed by the wealth of his acquirements. His reserve is natural, necessary and easy; by it he is able to give a dense texture to his essays which at the same time are as transparent and mobile as water, scholarly, yet never pedantic.

The moment that he frees himself from the task of defining what poetry is, and of classifying the poets themselves, we can join him with perfect sympathy. His elements of poetry are set forth with the force of truth and beauty. Being a true poet himself, he cannot, and we are glad of it, refrain from giving us a fine thrill as he goes on building his essays, his style often attaining a noble hight of calm and well-ordered eloquence.

Upon the whole this book goes further toward a scientific consideration of the nature and elements of poetry than any other that we have read. Indeed, it breaks the way for what it does not wholly accomplish, and must be recognized as the wedge with which a great opening is begun. From Aristotle down to Sidney Lanier much has been said about the unscientific method of discussing poetry; the scientific method is now fully in the field. Fact instead of fancies, results instead of visions are to be made the bases of discussion. Hysteria of the imagination is to give way to a normal mood of investigation.

But it is easy to see that Mr. Stedman, like Mr. Watts, has not quite succeeded in assuming the scientific spirit exclusive of everything belonging to the old visionary view of poetry. He has a lingering respect for the divine afflatus, and his conscience twits him whenever he sets about questioning the poets concerning inspiration and the secrets of poetical distillation and precipitation. He "shivers and shakes" at thought of placing the invention of a new poem on the same ground with the invention of a sewing-machine; but he must do this before he can attain to the merciless and unrespecting mood of the scientist. Shall we say that we like his book all the better on account of this reluctance about going away at once and forever from the glorious chaos of the old theories and dreams? We gave up demigods years ago; shall we now give up the divinities of poetry?

The student of literature will find Mr. Stedman's book a valuable one, a mine indeed of information reduced to system and forceful thought, strikingly expressed. Its value is not confined to what it imparts touching poetry; the analysis of art is as broad as the higher human aspirations. Many singularly lucid and penetrating rays of criticism are cast into the fields of artistic production bordering on the flowery domain of song, but not belonging to it. The whole history of poetry from Job to Tennyson has its essentials cast into these pages; and, when we regard it comprehensively, it is almost startling to note into how small a vial these precious extracts can be filtered.

Mr. Stedman, after an interesting prefatory essay, sets out to discuss "Oracles old and new," and is soon attempting to get rid of fog and mist so as to gain a clear scientific view of his subject. He aims to draw a strong line between the body of poetry and the soul of it, and in working at this he reviews the theories advanced by poets, critics and philosophers touching the nature and elements of the poet's art. Next he asks the question: "What is Poetry?" and proceeds to answer it, mainly, however, with illustrations from the poets. Here comes in our objection. From the opening pages on to the end we feel that American poets, American critics and American poetry are slighted by him in his allusions, his quotations and his considerations. Browning, Meredith and Ibsen are the first names mentioned: Mr. Andrew Lang receives kind head-patting, so does Edmund Gosse; Christina Rossetti is praised without stint; Austin Dobson gets mention twice; many other minor, and some all but insignificant, foreign critics and versifiers have their names and their achievements pleasantly exhibited; but when a living American is mentioned it is either a great and old one (like Holmes, for instance), or else it is some one of whom nobody ever thinks twice. This is painfully apparent all the way through the book, and to a thoughtless reader it will appear to be evidence of a contempt for contemporary American critics and contemporary American poets and poetry; nor will it be very plain to the profoundest mind why Mr. Stedman should prefer the Langs, the Dobsons, the Miss Rossettis, the Gosses, the Merediths, and the rest of those exceedingly minor English poets and critics, not to mention those of other tongues, to our own poets and critics of at least equal merit. We should have expected that in addressing a typical American audience Mr. Stedman would have done himself the honor of honoring living American artists and critics wherever their genius or their work could serve his purpose as well as alien subjects could do.

We present our objections bluntly; but our admiration of the great preponderance of good in Mr. Stedman's book is hearty and must appear so. If, in attempting to be cosmopolitan, Mr. Stedman has made singularly conspicuous this trace of provincial doubt touching his own neighborhood's standing with the rest of the world, he has not made his book a provincial one on the whole. It is cast to a model of large lines. The student will climb toward noble conceptions while he reads it. No recent criticism in any language, has taken higher ground, or maintained any ground, with so even, so rich, and so powerful energy. Take this book as an appendix and a finishing chapter to Mr. Stedman's monumental works on the "Victorian Poets," and on "Poets of America," and it will show how admirably our critic has accomplished the task he set for himself; the three books stand for the highest and broadest achievement of American literary criticism. They are never dry, never dull, never twinkling on the verge of insincerity; they are rich, ripe fruit of honesty and earnestness.

Mr. Stedman is probably at his best when he comes to discuss "Imagination." Learning here gives way to the exhibition of comprehensive understanding. Creative imagination is here handled by creative imagination, and the reader is shown how it is the original and initial force by which all great achievements in politics, war, religion, morals and art are attained. This essay by itself is enough to make the book a permanent contribution to higher literature.

*THE NATURE AND ELEMENTS OF POETRY. By EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. $1.50.)