MATTHEW ARNOLD AS A POET.

THE poetry of Matthew Arnold differs from the poetry of all the later English poets in several important particulars, and this differentiation, while it closed against him the doors of contemporary popularity, opened before him the shining portal of permanent fame. When he is at his best, his poetry is so good—not merely in the kind that it illustrates, but in every kind—so luminous, so lovely, so noble, that one cannot but regret there is not more of it. There is nothing that he might not have done, we think, if only he could have devoted his life to poetry, instead of being devoted by it to the *res augusta domi*. If he could have followed his bent, unhindered by the necessities of bread-winning, he might have stood abreast with Tennyson and Browning, instead of behind them, as he did, after gaining his first poetic triumphs.

Arnold did not rush into verse lightly, for he was twenty-six when his first volume, "The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems," was published. Nor boldly, for he concealed his identity under the signature of "A." Precisely what this collection contained, and by what qualities it was characterized, it is not easy to determine, since the chronological order of Arnold's verse has been disturbed by its arrangement under different classes in the later editions; but judging from the leading poem it was distinguished by a classical spirit which had been absent from English poetry since the days of Milton, and which could be thoroughly appreciated only by those who were imbued with classical scholarship in its purest form. This spirit is supposed by most unlettered readers to be dominant in the poetry of Keats, but scholars know better; for "Endymion," though a charming poem of a careless Elizabethan sort, is not Greek, except, perhaps, in the Hymn to Pan. Nor is the art of "Hyperion" Greek, but Gothic, though Gothic of the severest order. The only living poets from whom Arnold could have learned anything classical were Landor and Tennyson, with whose "Hellenica" and "Ænone" he was no doubt

familiar, though there is no trace of any such familiarity in his verse. The inspiration of "The Strayed Reveller" was drawn from no modern source, from no trickling rills in the gardens of English poetry—but from the fresh springs and lucent fountains of old Greek song. The chief excellence of this poem, apart from the classical feeling which was the motive of its composition, is a curious suggestiveness wherein everything is seen as in a mirror, and nothing is reproduced as in a painting, a power of conveying picturesque impressions without description, and of conveying only what is most essential in these, the subtle hints of color and the delicate touches of light and shade which authenticate nature in its translation into art. If we may judge from his practice, "word-painting," that brilliant but meretricious mannerism of so much recent verse, was Arnold's abomination. The visions of antique life which come and go before the dazed eyes of the strayed reveller, drunken with the magic wine of Circe, have no parallel in English poetry, unless it be in the shifting groups on the glorious Grecian Urn, which Keats has celebrated in his deathless Ode. Both are classic, but with the difference that separates sculpture from painting, the chisel of Phidias from the pencil of Apelles. "The Strayed Reveller" is in a pure but not in a high style of Greek, and being at most but a lyrical venture therein. It was an experiment, in that the form into which it was molded suggested rhyme, which was avoided in accordance, of course, with the laws of classical verse, to which Arnold was committed, and which he was determined to maintain here at all hazards. The question of unrhymed measures in English poetry, outside of its crowning glory, blank verse, is too large a one to be entered upon in these pages. But one thing is certain, and that is that no poet, great or small, has ever yet succeeded in so writing them as to make them satisfactory to English ears, and so naturalizing them in the language. Arnold would not admit this fact, then or later, and his violation of it has diminished the charm of some of his most exquisite poems.

Arnold's next volume, "Empedocles on Etna," was wrought under classical influences which necessitated a darker conception and a larger handling than "The Strayed Reveller." The Sicilian Greek whom he chose for his hero belonged to the same class of unhappy mortals as Hamlet, Faust and Manfred, of whom he was the poetic forerunner. A philosopher whose philosophy had

forsaken him, a worshiper of gods concerning whose existence he was skeptical, sick of himself, whom he pitied not, and of mankind, whom he pitied much, discontented, despairing, desperate, oppressed, maddened, overwhelmed with his intolerable burden, the insoluble riddle of the world, the impenetrable mystery of life and death,—such was the hero of this soul's tragedy of Arnold's. Nothing in earlier English poetry with which we are acquainted could have suggested the form of "Empedocles on Etna," which is rather romantic than classical, consisting of a framework of blank verse, interspersed with rhymed passages, and consisting of what may be called a lyrical interlude which Empedocles is supposed to speak in the highest skirts of the woody region of Etna, while he accompanies himself in a solemn manner on his harp. We have here the first specimen of Arnold's blank verse, which is noticeable for precision as well as ease; fluent, yet compact, melodious and harmonious, but without the individuality it was soon to attain. It is tentative, not distinctive. The lyric upon which so much depends, in that it is meant to disclose and declare, to embody and express, the whirl and stress of the spiritual agonies which are sweeping the wretched philosopher to destruction, chasing each other through his darkened mind like the shadows of a rack of thunder clouds,—this long-drawn lyric, which occupies some eighteen or twenty pages, is confused and ineffective. It measured the limitation of Arnold, who was not a lyrical poet, in the sense that Coleridge and Shelley were, and Byron in the Thyrza poems. His ear failed to detect their illusive secrets of melody.

But there are graver defects in this poem than are implied in technical deficiencies or a faulty structure. There is the fatal defect which inheres in the personality of Empedocles himself, and in the situation in which he is placed,—'one of those situations in which the suffering finds no vent in action, in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance, in which there is everthing to be endured, nothing to be done.' "In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also." Speedily condemned by Arnold himself, for the reasons just stated, "Empedocles on Etna" was excluded from his next collection of verse.

Arnold's third volume—the first collected edition of his Poems, as the two volumes published by Tennyson twelve years before were the first collected edition of his Poems—consisted, like the collection of the elder poet, of selections from his earlier productions, ballasted and freighted with what he had since written in the shape of verse. That the scope of his intellectual vision had been enlarged, and his powers matured, was evident on every page. Actuated in the beginning by classical impulses, the spirit in his feet had led him into broader realms of song, the mediæval kingdom of womanly affection which builded the Church of Brow, the legendary empire of tumultuous passion of which Tristram and Iseult were the victims, the world of heroic actions where Sohrab and Rustem engaged in that desperate duel, which, end as it might, would break the heart of the victor. Given as a starting point what is known, or imagined, respecting any particular period, classic, romantic, realistic, and what is known, or imagined, respecting the personages who figured therein, in history or legend, the first business of the poet who purposes to exercise his talents upon the facts or fancies thereof, is critical, not poetical. He must discover the spirit of that period and the individuality of its personages, and these once discovered, and mastered, must be kept constantly before him. Before writing "Tristram and Iseult" Arnold had to settle his conviction with regard to the poetic impression it ought to produce, and settle at the same time the method by which this impression should be created. What qualities distinguished the romances of chivalry of which the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table was the most notable example? Tennyson was the first modern poet who sought to solve the Arthurian problem, and in solving it to revive the spirit of chivalrous romance. Beginning with "The Lady of Shallott," continuing with "Morte d'Arthur," and ending with the "Joyes of the King," he has devoted more than half his life to this enchanting subject. That his poetic renderings thereof are beautiful is certain; that they are faithful is not so certain, as the readers of Sir Thomas Malory have long known, and the readers of Arnold and Browning also. He has missed the significance of the old legends which he has summoned from their centuried sleep, and to which he has imparted a life that is not their own, and in missing it he has shown the limitation of his critical and poetical powers. What this significance is is felt

by the readers of Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult," which transport us to another world than our own, remote, unfamiliar, surrounded with alien influences, peopled with visionary shapes, haunted with mysterious shadows, the world of fantasy and dream, glorious with life, and ruinous with death. The difference between Tennyson and Arnold in their treatment of chivalrous subjects is the difference between a well lighted parlor whose walls are hung with choice pictures and the darkened chamber of an old castle whose walls are hung with rude arras.

The critical judgment which directed Arnold in this creation of romantic art directed him in the larger art that created "Sohrab and Rustem." The episode which it embodies is one of the noblest that ever fed the imagination and fixed the soul of a poet. It is one of those great human actions that appeal to the great human affections, to those elemental feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time and place. He selected the most touching situation in the national epic of Firdousi, and recast it in English verse without sacrificing its Persian spirit. He reproduced his original with scholarly as well as poetic fidelity. To those who can read the recital of heroic actions without emotion it is nought; but to those who are capable of being moved with feeling and passion—the pathetic and tragic elements of life—it is the noblest poem in the world. It fulfills the old definition of tragedy, in that it awakens pity and terror, and it fulfills the highest definition of poetry, in that it is admirably planned, orderly in its development, transparently clear and vividly picturesque, manly, majestic, dignified, and, more than all, vital with human interest. Written in the grand style of Homer, there is a distinction in it which no other English narrative poem possesses.

Other influences than those of Persian history and chivalrous story were manifested in this third collection of Arnold's verse, and among them may be mentioned that of Wordsworth, whose manner was marked in "Mycerinus," which was pitched in the same key as "Laodamia," and that of Keats, the manner of whose Odes was marked in "The Scholar Gipsy." The train of thought which runs through "Mycerinus" is one which the contemplation of life forces upon all serious minds. It concerns itself with the insignificance of human actions in the large order of the uni-

verse, and the indifference with which they are regarded by the higher powers, who, superior to man in intelligence, are inferior to man in the sense of justice. It is the old, old riddle of the earth, and it is as insoluble now as when the young Egyptian king brooded over it in the luminous shadow of his palm groves along the mysterious Nile. Whether Arnold would have written "The Scholar Gipsy" if Keats had not written his "Ode to a Nightingale" may be doubted. It is true that he might have written a poem about the poor Oxford scholar, concerning whom Glanvil wrote two hundred years before, but it would not have been the same poem that he did write, so absolute throughout is the inspiration of Keats. In no sense an imitation, for poets like Arnold do not imitate, it is a reproduction of the pastoral element which Keats introduced into English verse—the light, consummate flower of his glorious seed, and as such as distinctive of Arnold as of Keats, who might have bequeathed it to his unborn successor, when on that dark February morning in Rome he closed his wearied eyes in their last slumber. The charm of a poem like "The Scholar Gipsy," or a poem like "Thyrsis," which is a graver rendering of the same general effect, is indescribable—so many and so diverse poetical qualities are interfused therein. Primarily a pastoral, in that it is filled with glimpses of English rural scenery, which, beautiful everywhere, are exquisite in the neighborhood of Oxford, it is more than a pastoral, in that it is flooded with personal feelings, which flow from the loveliness of nature as it steals into the mind of the poet, or from the mind of the poet as it casts the lights and shadows of its moods over this loveliness. "The Scholar Gipsy" is a vision of the perfect landscapes of England; and "Thyrsis," with its sad sincerity and its manly reticence of sorrow, is worthy of the pen that wrote "Adonais," or the greater pen that wrote "Lycidas."

The meditative poetry of Arnold has been variously estimated by those who accept and those who reject meditative poetry. It was the natural, the inevitable outgrowth of one who had known the spiritual unrest of his period, and who, while he was crushed, was wounded by it. It is melancholy, but not misanthropical; not consolatory, perhaps, but certainly not cynical. It is profoundly serious, its morality is of the highest, and one feels in reading it that the poet was greater than his poetry.

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