POLITICAL POETRY.

In this interesting book the author is continually inclined to talk more about politics than about poetry. That may be because he is more interested in politics; but there is also another reason. It would be difficult to make a book worth reading about English political verse if it were all literary criticism. For English political verse has always been sporadic and seldom of great merit. Since for many centuries England has excelled both in poetry and in politics, one would expect her to excel in political verse. Yet, though many of our great poets have written it now and again, they have seldom owed much of their fame to it. Indeed, Byron and Dryden alone of them all perhaps would suffer seriously in reputation if their political poems were lost; and they, for all their greatness, are among the most prosaic of our great poets. This fact may help us to understand why the others have not excelled in political verse. It is, in its nature, near to prose, and their genius has been too poetical for it.

Take, for instance, the signal example of Milton. He was about as much interested in politics as in poetry; indeed, he could not keep political ideas out of his poetry; and it owes much of its interest and reality to those ideas. Yet he was always too poetical for any kind of controversy. Poetic habits clung to him when he wished to reason; and he would dispute as if he had no need to prove his case, but wrote only to express his righteous indignation that any one could have the folly and wickedness to disagree with him. One might, perhaps, expect this indignation to be effective in political verse, if too imperious for prose controversy. But when Milton wrote poetry he could not, or would not, lower himself to the political plane. There is experience of politics in the great debate of the devils in the second book of "Paradise Lost." Their speeches are evidently studied from life, like the figures on the roof of the Sistine Chapel. But, like those figures, they are purged of all accident and particularity, so that they may not be incongruous with the epic theme. Whatever satire is implied in them is universal. No real person is attacked; and an attack upon real persons is the essence of political verse. But even when Milton in his poetry deals with real events or evils, he shows the same generalizing tendency. We can scarcely call the sonnet on "The late Massacre in Piemont" political verse. There is no topical sharpness in it, none of those allusions that please the malice of partisans; and it is probably as moving now as when it was written. The sonnet "On the new Forces of Conscience under the Long Parliament" is more topical. But here the topical allusions are rather lumbering—

Dare ye for this adjure the civil sword
To force our consciences that Christ set free,
And ride us with a classic hierarchy,
Taught ye by mere A. S. and Rutherford?

* "Political Satire in English Poetry." By C. W. Previte-Orton. (Cambridge University Press. 3s. 6d. net.)

The style is not nimble and prosaic enough for the sense of this last line. But Milton's most famous and characteristic political verse is in "Lycidas." Politics were so much in his mind that he could not keep them out of a poem in which there seems to be no place for them. Yet, whatever incongruity of sense there may be in the political passage, there is none of execution. It is natural to Milton to attack his enemies in such lofty and general terms that the attack makes no discord in his pastoral music but only gives it a graver and deeper sound. He does not sacrifice the poetry, but he does sacrifice the politics. For political verse, if it is to draw blood, must have some of the particularity of prose in it, since it is concerned with particular and prosaic things and people. The grand style is not suited to it; for that leaves out just the facts that are most needed to identify the object of attack.

Milton's contemporary and friend, Marvell, understood this. When indignation set him writing political verse he was determined that it should be effective at all costs. Indeed, he sacrificed poetry to politics; and it has often been wondered that so exquisite an artist should have been content so often to write doggerel. Like Milton, he was a poet too poetical to put his highest powers into political verses. The nearest approach he makes to a fusion of politics and poetry is in his great Horatian Ode; and that is almost as lofty and general in style as anything of Milton's. In his later political satires he usually throws over poetry altogether, or rather, perhaps, it deserts him. It was anger, not inspiration, that set him writing political verses; and he was too sincere and practical to pretend to an inspiration he did not possess. No doubt, too, he was influenced by the common English notion that rough versification was proper to satire, a notion which is supposed to have been produced by the roughness of Roman satire, but which could never have been so prevalent if satire had not been considered an inferior kind of poetry. We may be sure that if Marvell's genius had been naturally satirical he would have written his satires as well as he could. No doubt he regarded them as a kind of journalism, not as serious works of art; and he wrote them in verse only because he thought a jingle would stick in men's minds better than prose. No political poem of his is more effective than his Dialogue between two horses, and that is written like a rough and degenerate ballad. But no doubt men remembered and repeated some of its verses, as, for instance, those on the Duke of York —

With the Turk in his head, and the Pope in his heart,
Father Patrick's disciples will make England smart.
If e'er he be King, I know Britain's doom,
We must all to a stake, or be converts to Rome.
Ah, Tudor! ah, Tudor! we have had Stuarts enough;
None ever reigned like old Bess in the ruff.

These two examples of Milton and Marvell are enough to show why it is difficult for English poets to write political verse, and why in our more poetical ages they have so seldom attempted it. Butler was a writer of the age of Milton and Marvell; but he was not a poet. He could throw the whole of his genius into satire. To him it was the serious business of his life. But even he is more talked of than read nowadays, because his wit lacks the nimbleness and lucidity of an age of prose. Mr. Previté-Orton says well of "Hudibras" that "all the excellence of its form and manner was old and belonged to an age that was passing away. Its learning is the scholasticism of the middle ages; its wit reminds

us of *Golias;* its jogging metre of a twelfth-century romance." In fact, the chief defect of "Hudibras" is that it is a little childish, and keeps the manners of a time when political verse was not considered a serious form of art. Butler no doubt was writing his very best, but he has not the air of doing so. He still keeps to the old doggerel convention. That only disappeared from political verse as soon as all poetry became more prosaic. Then it was possible for Dryden to write at the height of his inspiration and yet with the particularity and neatness needed for topical satire. The more rational and less emotional kinds of literature had so risen in dignity that it was possible for a man of genius to exercise all his powers in them and with entire seriousness. If we compare Dryden's famous description of Shaftesbury with any character description of Butler's we are immediately struck by the rise in dignity. Butler has the manner still of a schoolboy making lampoons upon his master. Dryden is a serious man writing philosophically of another man. And he, when he wishes to make a prose statement, can make it simply and without any cumbrous ornaments of fancy. He can be as particular as he chooses without straining at wit all the while.

These are the advantages of a prosaic age; and we may regret that the second of our great prosaic poets, Pope, was not more interested in politics and less in his private blood-feuds. If the "Dunciad" had had a political theme, how much more worthy would that theme have been of the execution! But Pope was not much interested in politics, and, as Mr. Previté-Orton remarks, the prosaic poetry tended more and more to generalization, losing the qualities which justified its existence. Yet we can see from Pope's "Imitation of Horace's Epistle to Augustus" what he might have done. No one ever attacked a ruler with more refined malice; but even in this case the malice was caused probably more by the King's indifference to poetry than by his political sins—

But verse, alas! your Majesty disdains;
And I'm not used to panegyric strains:
The zeal of fools offends at any time,
But most of all the zeal of fools in rhyme.
Besides, a fate attends on all I write,
That when I aim at praise they say I bite.

There is far less political passion in this than in the verses of Gray upon the first Lord Holland. Gray was more of a recluse even than Pope; but on this one occasion he succeeded in producing one of the loftiest and yet most pointed political poems in the language. Much political verse was written in the long period of unrest that began with the revolt of the American Colonies and ended with the Reform Bill, but not much of it is read now for its own sake. Churchill and the authors of the "Rolliad" are not disinterested enough for the impartiality of posterity. Churchill seems to abuse because that is the line of least resistance for him. Verses make his indignation rather than indignation his verses. The "Rolliad" is journalism and full of the gossip of journalism. "Peter Pindar" is still amusing because he does not pretend to be anything else. There is no righteous indignation about him. He makes fun of George III. as undergraduates make fun of dons. The whole point of the joke is that it is directed against a person in authority.

There is far more principle in the *Anti-Jacobin* and something Aristophanic in "The Needy Knife-Grinder," with its combination of parody, high spirits, and idea; but after all, only one political poem of that great age of political strife is a masterpiece of English literature, and that is "The Vision of

Judgment." If Milton's Satan had chosen to write political verse he might have written that. It is all rebellion against the gods and bitter contempt of their parasites, but it is ennobled by the sense, implied rather than expressed, that there is something in the universe worth rebelling for, something which the author would find if he could, and if it were not obscured from him by the vapors of his own mind, though not by its fears. There is the same spirit in "The Vision of Judgment" that afterwards made Byron fight for Greece. It is loftier, however reckless, than anything Dryden ever wrote, because the author of it was a man of action whose very words seem to be deeds. "The Age of Bronze," again, though it is much less read, deserves the praise which is here given to it. It is too long and it rambles; it contains outworn rhetoric suggested by the heroic couplet which was then an outworn metre; but the theme is one worthy of fierce indignation and often worthily treated. What could be better than these lines on the Holy Alliance?—

An earthly trinity! which wears the shape
Of heaven's, as man is mimicked by the ape.
A pious unity! in purpose one—
To melt three fools to a Napoleon.
Why, Egypt's gods were rational to these;
Their dogs and oxen knew their own degrees,
And, quiet in their kennel or their shed,
Cared little, so that they were duly fed;
But these, more hungry, must have something more—
The power to bark and bite, to toss and gore.

Or this description of the Tsar Alexander I?—

A Calmuck beauty with a Cossack wit,
And generous spirit, when 'tis not frost-bit;
Now half dissolving to a liberal thaw,
But hardened back when'er the morning's raw.

Here the attack is upon both an individual and a type; and it remains interesting because it hits the type in the individual.

Shelley was as great a master of rhetoric as Byron, but he, like Milton, was too poetic to be a good political satirist. Bryon never wrote two political lines as imaginative as these of Shelley's upon Napoleon:—

Whose grasp had left the giant world so weak,
That every pigmy kicked it as it lay.

But most of Shelley's political verse seems to be the work of a man whose eye is not on the object. In "The Mask of Anarchy" he is like a philosopher on the platform, speaking from a sense of duty, not because he enjoys it. He is eloquent and lofty, but he does not keep our attention. So it is with most of our modern poets when they write political verses. One feels that they are patriotic volunteers rather clumsy with their weapons, doing their duty but with no joy. One does not like to say—

Not here, O Apollo,
Are haunts fit for thee,

for the right and wrong of politics is a most momentous matter, and one feels that the highest poetic imagination ought to be able to see angels and devils at war in it. But the poet seldom has enough experience to see the issues clearly, or, if he is passionate, to weight his passion with knowledge. We have specialized too much to be able, like the Hebrews, to combine the prophet with the poet and the politician. Or perhaps political questions do not press so hard upon us that they must be the chief subject in all our minds. At any rate, they are not one of the chief subjects of our poetry.

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