WARD'S ENGLISH POETS.*

There is infinite satisfaction in a work like this, compact of the richest poetry and the best criticism. The aim of the compilers has been to supply an anthology which may adequately represent the vast and varied field of English poetry. It is not pretended that all the masterpieces of the poets are included, nor are the

*THE ENGLISH POETS. Selections, with Critical Introductions by various writers, and a General Introduction by Matthew Arnold. Edited by Thomas Humphrey Ward, M.A. London and New York: Macmillan & Co.

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names of all writers who have place in the history of English poetry represented. "The design has been to collect as many of the best and most characteristic of their writings as should fairly represent the great poets, and at the same time to omit no one who is, poetically, considerable." The writings of living poets, and the drama properly so called, are not included, as this would extend the number of volumes threefold. Productions, however, like "Comus" and "The Gentle Shepherd," as well as songs from the dramatists, have not been omitted. The space allotted to the different authors has been fairly distributed, and where an author is represented by only one or two pieces these will be found invariably to be the most expressive of his genius. It is difficult to see how a better, more judicious, impartial, and characteristic selection of British poetry could be made than the one under consideration. There has certainly been brought to this delicate task an amount of knowledge, exquisite taste, and highly trained literary sagacity, that is as honorable to modern scholarship as it is admirable and instructive.

The biographical and critical introductions which preface the respective selections were written by those whose studies and sympathies specially qualified them for the several tasks assigned to them. It is not too much to say that the work in each case is a model of compact, lucid, and forceful statement, giving in the briefest compass compatible with clearness what should be stated as a fair delineation of the author's life and writings. These notices have a vivacity of style, a searching insight, a candor and independence, which mark them as first-class productions of their kind. Space does not allow us to fortify these remarks by quotations.

A notable feature of the work is the General Introduction by Matthew Arnold. To say that it is highly satisfactory does not fully express our view of it. We doubt whether there is, in equal limits, in the English language a treatise on poetry as wise, as profound, as rich in truth, as this. That Mr. Arnold is, by natural gift and mental and moral equipment, competent to do justice to his subject, needs no affirmation here. This is a field in which he is master, where he speaks as one having authority by right of his own knowledge and inspiration. He is a poet himself, of fine genius and splendid accomplishment, whose admirers are among the most cultivated readers and lovers of English verse. He has that spiritual breadth, that clearness of vision, that powerful intellectual fibre, that intense love of beauty and truth, and that noble scorn of all hollowness and pretence, that peculiarly fit him for the most accurate, thorough, and discriminating criticism. And here, in the compass of some thirty pages, he has given his estimate of poetry —its province, uses, and destiny. As simple reading, for graceful lucidity and directness and force of style, it is entirely charming; but regarded on the higher ground of profound, comprehensive, and independent criticism, it is simply superb. This Introduction can stand as a permanent monograph of what is vital, enduring, and nourishing in poetry. Such a vindication of the divine art, such an untangling of its real elements from what is merely meretricious and pretentious in verse, is in the highest sense useful and gratifying to all who appreciate the sublime utility of the most inspiring literature. The principles set forth in this Introduction, besides their usefulness to the general reader, which is their chief aim, have a direct application to all who participate in the production or publication of verse. The fault of a good deal of American and perhaps English poetry that has appeared, even through highly respectable channels, during the last fifteen or twenty years, is its lack of matter and substance, its dependence for effects on mere verbal dexterity, its want of profound seriousness. There has grown up what may be called a "school" with these characteristics, whose verse, while commendable enough in diction and movement, is lamentably deficient in the higher qualities of poetry. It has to be confessed that this is not a poetry-reading generation. It is doubtful whether even those who keep fairly informed in current literature have much acquaintance with the English classics or any high standard in their minds of poetic excellence. Editors of prominent magazines, in catering to what has seemed to them a popular demand, have encouraged the production of a kind of decorative poetry—verse without deep sincerity, without a passion for nature, without substance and lofty motive, whose chief merit is its tasteful coloring, its portrayal of unfamiliar situations, its curious conceits and graceful movement. None of our older poets are open to these strictures, with the exception of Poe, and his

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strange genius redeems somewhat his affectations and unreality. We think we see some indications that this decorative school is on the wane. Such a work as this is a good antidote to its influence. It is true that there may be real poetry which has but few of the elements that mark the highest. The danger, however, is that the lower qualities may be preferred to the higher, because they are superficially more attractive. A keen poetic sense will appreciate whatever is truly poetic of any school or age, but its admiration will be graduated according to the real merit of the production. The cultivation of this sense or faculty to its noblest capacity of discovery and enjoyment, is its own great reward. That is a poor compliment to poetry which prefers, for instance, Will Carleton's ballads to Lowell's, and Edgar Fawcett to Bryant. The great thing is to have the sense of truth and beauty so strong, the standard of excellence in our minds so correct, that while always preferring the best poetry we shall detect at once what is good from whatever quarter it comes. It is to this attainment that Matthew Arnold invites us in the study of the noble collection before us. These volumes will not be superfluous in any library, however richly furnished; while nothing can supply their place in homes of culture and refinement.

HORATIO N. POWERS.

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