

GEORGE ELIOT AS AN ARTIST.

George Eliot was an artist in the highest sense ; her works possess the qualities of true works of art. There is in them a constant recognition of the universal. The poet of nature embodies in his verses the spirit of nature as it were, so that they become luminous, and produce in the reader the same feelings which true communion with nature itself would have called forth. And if the poet of human life is to produce real and lasting work, he must body forth something of universal human interest. George Eliot possesses this quality in an eminent degree. Her works do not deal with the brief questions of the passing hour, with morbid, sentimental feelings, having no deep root in human nature. She has turned her gaze "from that grosser, narrower light by which men behold mere—ly the petty scene around them, to that far-stretching, lasting light, which spreads over centuries of thought, and over the light of nations, and makes clear to us the minds of the immortals who have reaped the great harvest, and left us to glean in their furrows." The questions with which she deals are of eternal interest, and press for ever on men's spirits. This involves a profound insight into human life ; and, tried by this test, George Eliot's works stand on a very high level. They reach into that region, above which such forms as those of Homer and Shakspeare alone are seen. George Eliot saw into the very heart and soul of life. What subtle analyses of character has she drawn ! Her works abound with pictures of the very inmost thoughts, feelings, and spiritual experiences of men and women. Her characters think aloud ; the processes of the growth and decay of their spiritual natures are laid bare ; with what sometimes terrible truthfulness are the soul's most secret struggles rendered visible.

The true artist is in sympathy with his subject ; and George Eliot was full of genuine love for humanity as such. She overflowed in sympathy. Nature even was embraced within it,—her constant, sympathetic references to natural scenery lending an additional charm to her works. Round the common people especially her interest gathered, and her affectionate regard for them alone rendered possible those wonderful delineations in her earlier works. Her figures are, therefore, not merely life-like but alive. They are not mere skeletons of men and women. The bones have been covered with flesh, and the whole infused with streams of fresh, warm life. Real men and women are met with in her pages. Hence they teach as life itself teaches, with this difference only : their inner heart is laid bare, and the reader is permitted to look into their very souls. A microscope, as it were, is put into his hands, through which the mysterious struggles of the human spirit are discernible, conveying by their bare exhibition both warning and instruction. Take *Romola* for example. As a work of art it is the highest specimen of the author's genius. *Adam Bede* may be almost perfect in its way, but there is as much difference between it and *Romola*, as between a picture of the simplest scene and the more complex work of a Michael Angelo. Florence, and the great European life-currents then coursing through it, as well as the deeper struggles of individual souls in contact with those everlasting problems which human life presents, are all reflected in this polished mirror.

George Eliot taught a profound philosophy of life, all the

more so that it was through artistic forms. To her the universal shone always through the particular. She had a vivid sense of the eternal laws and principles that govern human life. She saw and gave magnificent expression to the truth that there is a moral harvest, a process of reaping and sowing, going on. Actions are like living seeds cast into the soil. They spring up, mature, and become centres of living energy for ever. Man's life is controlled by laws as inexorable in their operation as those which regulate the physical world. George Eliot had thus a grand conception of human life as a whole. The idea of Humanity, to her no mere abstract term but a living reality, received a splendid setting in her works. Human life was a vast organism rearing itself in the world, spreading its leaves and branches throughout the centuries. Men were related to each other as the members of any other organism, differing from them only in their consciousness of that relationship. Her law of life was, therefore, simple, but sublime. Self-sacrifice, the giving up of purely selfish and personal aims for the larger life in which all the good and great have shared, was the beginning and the end of life to her. "It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We can only have the highest happiness by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves ; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything, because our souls see it is good." It is the vivid recognition of this that makes George Eliot one of the greatest teachers of the century. She teaches as life teaches ; her figures, while alive, being also transparent. And, according as they follow or reject this law of life, they grow into fulness and splendour of manhood and womanhood, or wither, shrivel up, and perish, as the chaff driven before the wind. George Eliot does not go outside of life to find a motive-power to action of the highest kind. The grand theory she held supplied one of the strongest, which thoughtful minds in every age have recognised. Work ! realise this true life, live in this wider life, so that from you something may proceed that will be built up into the structure of humanity itself ! On the development of George Eliot's religious ideas an interesting chapter might be written. Her works throughout are infused with a genuinely religious spirit, though, intellectually, she differed widely from conventional ideas. She lived in the purest atmosphere and under the constant influence of the most exalted thoughts. And there can be no reasonable doubt that her works contain "the highest ideals of Christian life and character and the purest exposition of Christian ethics." She also had a gospel for her age ; no new gospel it is true, but something better. It set forth, in imperishable forms of art, old, yet eternal elements and principles of human nature and life, which belong not to this or that individual or age, but to all time, and possess enduring interest to men as men. George Eliot has joined the company of the mighty dead who still live in the thoughts, feelings, and lives of their successors. But she has left an enduring record of her life, and must continue to be a fountain of inspiration towards the right and the true and the good throughout many generations.