

HUMAN PROGRESS.

As Viewed by Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Browning.

ANY school-boy asked to characterize the nineteenth-century would declare it to be the age of progress. But if it were further queried, what constitutes progress and what are the best means of promoting it, the deepest philosophers would be found to hesitate and differ widely in their replies.

It will be of interest, therefore, to ascertain what are the views that find most favor in our time, and these will be found most clearly exposed in the writings of the leading poets, since it has been truly said that the poets are the best historians. Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Browning are the two leading singers of our days, and it is proposed to sum up and estimate the value of their theories of human progress and of the method to be pursued in attaining it. To fix a standard whereby to do this, a few ideas will be premised as to what is here accepted as the true notion of human progress.

Man is a composite being made up of a body and a soul and in his soul are two leading faculties, the intellect and the will. Hence the necessity of a three-fold cultivation—physical, intellectual and moral. Progress, then, may be defined the harmonious development of all the faculties of man, a physical development to be attained by a thorough knowledge and observance of the laws of hygiene and of the means of preventing disease, an intellectual development to be evidenced by a firmer grasp of truth and by a widening of its horizon, as well as by an increased power of conceiving and expressing lofty ideals of beauty, and finally a moral development to be marked by a world-wide observance of the code laid down by the Divine Law-giver in the gospel. Truth being universal, this idea of progress includes a knowledge of nature's laws and their application to promote material prosperity as well as the establishment throughout the world of free and relatively perfect political institutions.

How do Mr. Tennyson's views compare with this standard. Excluding the idea of physical development as hardly constituting a theme for modern poetry, there remains to be examined his notions on intellectual and moral progress, these being accepted as embracing likewise material and political development. Mr. Tennyson makes progress consist in a gradual evolution of the powers of the race, an evolution ever subject to one universal law and leading up to the millenium, to the time "Of those that eye to eye shall look on knowledge; under whose command is earth and earth's. And in whose hand is nature like a book." This applies particularly to intellectual progress. Its essence, according to him, is knowledge and therefore truth. So far he is with us, but he stops short of the true good. The intellect must be content with a knowledge of nature and of the general laws that govern her; into the clearer, brighter light of the spiritual world it must not dare enter, for there it is out of its sphere of action and can only wander about in hopeless bewilderment. Its highest conception must be that of law.

And as the will follows the intellect, Mr. Tennyson in thus bounding the range of mental development within the narrow limits of nature likewise cripples man's capability for moral perfection, and is logically forced to set a correspondingly low standard of moral development. Not that the great laureate who wears "the white flower of a blameless life" has in his writings sinned against morality in its technical sense. Few English poets have been more moral than he in their works. But by the exclusion of the spiritual element in life, Mr. Tennyson is forced to make morality consist chiefly in the universal presence of a spirit of concord and brotherly love, producing in time a higher society in which "the war-drum throbs no longer and the battle flags are furled, in the parliament of man, the federation of the world."

True, he would have men

" Arise and fly
The reeling faun, the sensuous feast,
Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die."