

CATHOLICITY IN MODERN POETRY.

R. P. Carton in the Irish Monthly.

It would, indeed, be strange if the Catholic Church whose vocation it has ever been to battle with scepticism and to overcome it—a Church whose glory it has ever been to purify European literature from the taint of paganism and unbelief; a Church which has rescued Art from being the slave of licentiousness and made it the handmaid of its devotions; a Church which for nigh nineteen centuries, while changeless in its teachings, has been ever ready to supply each new want and to meet each new emergency with the fitting weapons; it would, I say, be strange if that Church could not in these days have found amongst her children some at all events strong and brave and gifted enough to carry on the same high mission, to show that the poet might be united with the Catholic, and that poetry gained a new power and a fitting application to the wants of the age which heard it, when a Catholic's faith kept its wonderings in check, and a Catholic's hopes gave it its best inspirations. And as might have been expected from the history of the Church's workings in the past, so has it been in the present. There has arisen for the first time in the history of English literature a school of Catholic poets whose poems are truly and essentially Catholic. In no way else could the mixture of irreligion and paganism I have spoken of have been met and counteracted; and so in the midst of the infidel and doubting band who are claimed as the poets of the age are Catholic poets giving to the world Catholic poems which in strength and beauty and imaginative power and graceful fancy can rival the best productions of their better known contemporaries.

If I was asked to give an example of what I meant when I spoke a moment ago of a Catholic poem by a Catholic poet, I would name "The Dream of Gerontius" as the most perfect specimen I know of. Its subjects are of deep, universal and appalling interest. Death, Judgment, Punishment after death, and in the end immortal happiness, are the themes that are dealt with. These themes are not new to poetry. Dante, himself a Catholic, in the Thirteenth Century, has given us his visions of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and given them in a poem which the world admits to be a masterpiece. But it was Virgil who conducted the great Florentine to Hell, and it was by Beatrice, his boyish love, that he was shown the path to Heaven. The Hell of Dante is the classic Tartarus with Acheron and Charon and the ferry boat complete, and it is Minos who condemns the lost souls of sinful men to punishments whose types are the vulture of Prometheus and the wheel of Ixion. Far different is the treatment of the same themes in the poem we are now considering. Gerontius is not allowed to enter into the world to come save through the same dark gate we must all one day traverse. The judgment to which he is called is the judgment we are taught of in our Catechism; his guide to the Judgment Seat is the Angel whose protecting influences have been around him from his cradle to his death-bed; the cleansing fires through which he passes to happiness is the Purgatory of our faith, and the Judge who pronounces his sentence is no mythical Minos, "grinning with ghastly features," but is the Eternal Judge of the living and the dead. The poem opens round the bed on which Gerontius lies dying. Every aid that the Church can give to her dying children is with him in his last hour. A priest and his assistants recite the last offices, and loving friends are round him who obey with

sad but willing fervour the touching request,

"So pray for me, my friends, who have not strength to pray."

As the prayers cease, he takes up the strain, and spends his final moments in making a profession of faith, and this act of resignation:

And I take with joy whatever
Now besets me, pain or fear,
And with a strong will I sever
All the ties which bind me here.

With these words on his lips he dies, but to wake immediately to another life.

I hear no more the busy beat of time,
No, nor my fluttering breath, nor struggling pulse;
Nor does one moment differ from the next.
I had a dream; yes—some one softly said
"He's gone;" and then a sigh went round the room.
And then I surely heard a priestly voice
Cry *subviva*, and they knelt in prayer.

Then he feels that some one, as it were, holds him "within his ample palm" and bears him forward. Presently he hears a "heart-subduing melody." It is the Guardian Angel who sings rejoicingly the ending of his task:

My work is done,
My task is o'er,
And so I come,
Taking it home,
For the crown is won.
Alleluia!
For evermore.

When the Angel had ceased his song, the disembodied soul addresses him, and is by him instructed and prepared for the judgment to which it is being carried. This part of the poem, especially the colloquy between the soul and the Angel, is, in my opinion, the most interesting of all. I do not know whether to admire most its delicate suggestiveness, its graceful but subdued imagery, its idealized scholasticism, and, if I may venture to say so, its accurate theology. The passage is much too long for quotation. The journey heavenward goes on. Close on the Judgment Court the demons gather:

Hungry and wild, to claim their property,
And gather souls for hell.

And they chant a mocking strain of grim humour and wild power. After passing through various choirs of evangelicals, all singing appropriate hymns, the soul, still guided by its Guardian Angel, enters the house of Judgment.

The smallest portion of this edifice,
Cornice or frieze, or balustrade or stair,
The very pavement is made up of life—
Of holy, blessed, and immortal beings,
Who hymn their Maker's praise continually.

The Angel then finally prepares the soul to meet its Judge and they gain

The stairs,
Which rise towards the Presence-Chamber: there
A band of mighty angels keep the way
On either side, and hymn the Incarnate God.

The lintels of the Presence-Chamber vibrate and echo back the strain; and the threshold, as they traverse it,

Utters aloud its glad responsive chant.

The Angel then announces that the Judgment is at hand, and amidst the prayerful pleadings of the Angel of the Agony, the soul of Gerontius goes before its Judge. No attempt is made to describe in words the awful meeting. It is well told to the imagination in the utterances of the soul after the Judgment is over, and the responsive action of the Angel.

Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be,
And there in hope the lone night watches keep.
Told out for me,
There, motionless and happy in my pain,
Lone, not forlorn—
There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,
Until the morn.
There will I sing, and soothe my stricken breast,
Which ne'er can cease
To throb, and pine, and languish, till possess
Of its Sole Peace.
There will I sing my absent Lord and Love—
Take me away,
That sooner I may rise, and go above,
And see Him in the truth of everlasting day.

And the Angel takes it away, and consigns it as a precious charge to the Angels of Purgatory until the day when he "shall reclaim it for the courts of light."

Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul,
In my most loving arms I now enfold thee,
And, o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
I police thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.
And carefully I dip thee in the lake,
And then, without a sob or a resistance,
Dost through the flood thy rapid passage take.
Sinking deep, deeper, into the dim distance,
Angels, to whom the willing task is given,
Shall tend, and nurse, and hush thee, as thou liest;
And Masses on the earth, and prayers in heaven,
Shall aid thee at the throne of the Most Highest.
Farewell, but not forever! I brother dear,
Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow.
Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
And I will come and wake thee on the morrow.

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There are many others of Cardinal Newman's poems from which we are certain to carry away some lesson worthy of remembrance. Particularly worthy of notice are, "Our Future," "The Progress of Unbelief," "The Two Worlds," "The Elements," the sonnet, "Substance and Shadow," and the now world famous hymn, "The Pillar of the Cloud," generally known by its opening words, "Lead, Kindly Light." Let us part from the great Oratorian with one quotation more, which strikes, as it were, the key-note of all his verse, and which conveys a lesson that in these days cannot be taught too persistently:

Dim is the philosophic flame,
His thoughts severe unfed;
Book-lore, ne'er served when trial came,
Nor gifts when faith was dead.

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