

## CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE.

STUDIES OF THE GREEK POETS. By John Addington Symonds. New York: Harper & Bros.; Toronto: James Campbell & Son.

IN the closing strain we find the key-note to these delightful essays on the Greek song-sters. "Nature is the first, chief element by which we are enabled to conceive the spirit of the Greeks. The key to their mythology is here. Here is the secret of their sympathies, the well-spring of their deepest thoughts, the primitive potentiality of all they have achieved in art. What is Apollo, but the magic of the sun, whose soul is light? What is Aphrodite, but the love-charm of the sea? What is Pan, but the mystery of nature, the felt and hidden want pervading all? What, again, are those elder, dimly discovered deities, the Titans and the brood of Time, but forces of the world as yet beyond the touch and ken of human sensibilities? But nature, alone cannot inform us what that spirit was. For though the Greeks grew up in scenes which we may visit, they gazed on them with Greek eyes, eyes different from ours, and dwell upon them with Greek minds, minds how unlike our own! Unconsciously, in their long and unsophisticated infancy, the Greeks absorbed and assimilated to their own substance that loveliness which is left for us only to admire. Between them and ourselves—even face to face with mountain sky and sea, unaltered by the lapse of years—flow the rivers of Death and Lethe, and New Birth, and the mists of thirty centuries of human life are woven like a veil. To pierce that veil, to learn even after the most partial fashion, how they transmuted the splendours of the world into æsthetic forms, is a work which involves the further interrogation of their sculpture and their literature."

Mr. Symonds has approached his task with an overflowing love of Greek literature, with a keen appreciation of Greek art, and after a personal intimacy with the scenes amid which Greek literature and art arose. He also applies, to the illustration of his subject, the genius of modern literature, French, Italian, German, and above all our own English. In this last phase of his illustration, Mr. Symond's recent study of Shelley shews his feeling and poetic insight. And here is this newer method of analysis as applied to the *Hero and Leander* of Musæus, and to Marlowe's resetting of the same romance. "Compared with the Greek poem, this *Hero and Leander* of Marlowe is like some radiant double-rose, placed side by side with the wild-briar, whence it sprang by cultivation. The petals have been multiplied, the perfume deepened and intensified, the colours varied in their modulations of a single tint. At the same time something in point of simple form has been sacrificed. The first thing, then, that strikes us in turning from Musæus to Marlowe is that what the Greek poet considered all-important in the presentation of his subject has been dropped or negligently handled by the English poet, while the English poet has been prodigal in places where the Greek displayed his parsimony. On looking further, we discover that the modern poet, in all these differences, aims at effects not realized by ancient art. The life and play and actual pulsation of emotion have to be revealed, both as they exist in the subject of their poems, and as the poet finds them in his own soul. Everything that will contribute to this main achievement is welcomed by the poet, and the rest rejected. All the motives which had an external statuesque significance for the Greek, must palpitate with passion for the