

ROBERT BROWNING.

TWENTY years ago there was a bright galaxy of poets in the literary firmament. Every season we might count on a new volume from Longfellow, Tennyson, Whittier, or Browning. But in these degenerate days we have little left but *Triolets* and *Rondeaux* of Arthur Dobson or Mr. Lang, or the diluted sweetness of Morris, "the idle singer of an empty day." It will, we think, be admitted that Robert Browning is the most striking personality in recent English literature. In the first place, think of the prodigal genius of the man. Since Shakespeare's day no English poet has written so much—his poetry fills at least thirty 12mo volumes—and no English poetry, we think, in robust strength and virility comes so near Shakespeare's. He has another likeness to Shakespeare, too; he is intensely dramatic. In this respect no other English poet can approach him. Beside his numerous plays, nearly every one of his poems is cast in dramatic form—we do not remember a single one that is not. He almost never speaks in the first person, but always through some one else, into whose personality he projects himself in a marvellous manner. It has been said that his various characters all speak the same jargon, a Browningsese dialect, incomprehensible to any human beings. There never was a greater mistake. No writer that we know of so enters into the spirit of time and place and character as Browning. He will not be the favourite of persons who regard poetry as a sort of intellectual cigar, to be enjoyed without the least mental effort. But all who take the trouble to find out what he does mean will find themselves richly repaid. And what a Shakespearean range of scenes and characters his is. From: Lilith, Adam's first wife, down to Mr. Sludge, the medium, there must be hundreds of sharply discriminated characters, as varied as life itself, who play their parts in London, Paris, Rome, Venice, Florence,

Madrid in Russia, Persia, Egypt, among Druses, Arabs and Syrians, from Boston to Thebes. In number and variety of his creations he is only rivalled by the myriad-minded Shakespeare himself.

In a remarkable degree Browning is the product of his age, and reflects its many-sidedness. While his genius is intensely dramatic, it is not the drama of action, the drama of the stage. The acted play has had its day. It no more influences opinion as in Shakespeare's time; its present function is mere amusement, and amusement at a not very high order at that. The novel of religion, or philosophy, or philanthropy has taken its place. If Shakespeare lived now he would probably write novels, or introspective plays like Browning's. Browning's characters all speak in monologues; even in his plays there is little action. His books are designed for closet study, not for the garish and spectacular stage. Again, so catholic are Browning's sympathies and so subtle is his thought, that his characters are generally a strange mixture of good and evil. He has no incarnation of villainy like Iago, or of avarice like Shylock. His characters are much more complex, and demand analysis. He does not paint with such strong colours, nor with such sharp contrasts of light and shade as Shakespeare, so his pictures do not receive such immediate recognition, nor make such a sudden impression. But their realistic truthfulness becomes the more apparent the longer they are studied.

It has been said that his rhymes are uncouth. On the contrary, they are the most correct and strong in the language, and his blank verse is of the noblest quality. No poet has used such a variety of metres, not even Shelley, and few have such an exhaustless fertility of rhyme. In some of his poems of grotesque irony—and many of them are of that sort—he does use some ingenious rhymes that add greatly to the effect of