

OUR BIOGRAPHICAL BUREAU.

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us
Foot-prints on the sands of time."

Some Lyric Poets, and Their Critics.

Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel.
("Romeo and Juliet" act iii. Sc. 3.)

THE poet and the critic have been at variance from time immemorial, yet I doubt if any modern poetical work has been subjected to so much mistaken criticism as the imaginative and impassioned style of poetry of which Shelley and Swinburne are perhaps the most notable representatives. It has at all times been a common complaint against such writers that they subordinate the true and natural to the unreal and mystical, and that their poetry is consequently of only secondary value. As a typical instance of this kind of criticism, I will quote the opinion of Sir Henry Taylor, as given in the Preface to "Philip van Artevelde."

Speaking of Shelley and his followers, whom he calls the "fantastic school," he says:—

"Much beauty, exceeding splendor of diction and imagery, cannot but be perceived in his poetry, as well as exquisite charms of versification; and a reader of an apprehensive fancy will doubtless be entranced while he reads; but when he shall have closed the volume, and considered within himself what it has added to his stock of permanent impressions, of recurring thoughts, of pregnant recollections, he will probably find his stores in this kind no more enriched by having read Mr. Shelley's poems than by having gazed on so many gorgeously colored clouds in an evening sky."

Again, in another passage, he finds fault with "the new poets," of whom Byron and Shelley were the chief, on the ground that they did not attempt to "thread the mazes of life in all its classes and under all its circumstances, common as well as romantic;" and he comes to the conclusion that such poetry, "though it may be excellent of its kind, will not long be reputed to be poetry of the highest order. It may move the feelings and charm the fancy, but failing to satisfy the understanding it will not take permanent possession of the strongholds of fame."

This criticism undoubtedly expresses the views of a large class of critics and readers. And in a certain limited sense it is an undisputed fact that Shelley, like others of the "new poets," did not study life under all its circumstances, as Shakespeare or Goethe studied it. But when Sir Henry Taylor and those who think with him proceed to assert that such poetry is therefore a failure, or at any rate worthy only of partial and limited approval, they are arriving at a most unjust and unwarrantable conclusion. For lyric poetry is valuable not as a philosophic study of every phase and condition of life, but as an expression of certain spiritual emotions which are none the less real because they are not universal. Poetry is a many-sided art; and it is absurd to lay down a strict rule and define that as the only poetry, or as the only noble poetry, which takes a purely dispassionate and philosophical view of life. All this must ever be a matter of individual opinion; and therefore those who attempt to judge lyric poetry by the alien standard of practical utility or philosophic precision must stand condemned of being naturally incapable of comprehending the very essence of the lyrical spirit. Their criticism may be perfectly true in its merely negative assertions, while all the time it entirely fails to understand the object and motive power of the poetry it assails.

In short, there is a natural deficiency in the minds of some critics, however acute they may be in other respects. In applying the ordinary rules of literary criticism to the ethereal subtleties of the lyric poetry, they are engaged in a hopeless task of beating the air. They grasp the impalpable, and complain that it is light and unsubstantial; they stare at the invisible, and pronounce it mystic and obscure; they

listen diligently for the inaudible, and are mightily offended because they hear nothing. They accordingly pronounce certain styles of poetry to be unreal, shallow, meaningless; and never for a moment suspect that they themselves are in fault, owing to their own inherent inability to appreciate certain delicate emotions. When a disciple of the common-sense school finds himself, as Sir Henry Taylor says, in no way enriched by reading Shelley's poems, we are inevitably reminded of Peter Bell and his very disparaging opinion as to the utility of wild-flowers:—

A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

But, before we go farther, it may be well here to inquire what is this hidden charm in the spirit of lyrical poetry, so vague and unreal to some, yet so true and ever-present to others. We can scarcely hope to define it successfully, for it is well-nigh undefinable; we can only appeal to the intuitive perception of those who have felt it, and who can bear witness what a reality it has been to them. It is the charm of expressing by language something far more than what is conveyed by the mere meaning or the mere sound; the power of evoking an echo from the spiritual world, such as music can often give us, or the clash of distant bells. It is the miracle of kindling by words that divine sympathy with the inarticulate voice of the elements, which we feel in the presence of the wind, the sea, the mountains. It is that communion with the spirit of nature of which Shelley writes, as none other could have written:

Fair are others; none behold thee;
But thy voice sounds low and tender
Like the fairest, for it folds thee
From the sight, that liquid splendor;
And all feel, yet see thee never,—
As I feel now, lost forever!

Such sympathy is demonic, heaven-sent, unattainable by human diligence or philosophic speculation; those who feel it will never fail to comprehend it, and those who have once felt it will value it above all mortal possessions. It is of such as these that Swinburne speaks:

For these have the toil and the guerdon
That the wind has eternally; these
Have part in the boon and the burden
Of the sleepless unsatisfied breeze,
That finds not, but seeking rejoices
That possession can work him no wrong:
And the voice at the heart of their voice is
The sense of his song.

For the wind's is their doom and their blessing;
To desire, and have always above
A possession beyond their possessing,
A love beyond reach of their love.
Green earth has her sons and her daughters,
And these have their guerdons; but we
Are the wind's and the sun's and the water's.
Elect of the sea.

While speaking on this subject I could hardly have quoted from a more appropriate source than from the writings of the poet who, next to Shelley, has been endowed with the largest share of lyric inspiration; and who has certainly been not less misconstrued and misunderstood than was his great predecessor. Critics are never weary of harping on the so-called aberrations and extravagances of Mr. Swinburne's genius; and our ordinary reading public, with its usual complacent self-confidence, fondly imagines his poetry to be nothing but a mass of crude and unintelligible jargon. Yet those who have an ear for the subtler under-tones of lyric melody know well that in all Mr. Swinburne's poetry, in spite of obvious mannerism and minor blemishes, there is an intense reality of sublime spiritual feeling, which alone is sufficient to mark him as one of our greatest poets. If we compare his writings with those of his chief contemporaries, we shall find that although he may be inferior to them in many respects, and especially in those points on which our orthodox critics mostly insist, yet he has one poetical quality which is peculiarly and eminently his own. He does not possess Mr. Browning's great dramatic insight and wide scope of intellectual vision, nor Mr. Tennyson's serene philosophical composure