

BOOK REVIEWS.

Milton. By MARK PATTISON. Morley's Series of English Men of Letters. New York : Harper Bros. ; Toronto : James Campbell & Son, 1880.

MILTON'S biographers have many advantages over those who relate the life of Shakespeare which cannot be all attributed to the mere fact that Milton lived at a later date than the great dramatist. Their lives in fact overlapped by a few years, and but for the comparatively early death of the elder poet, he might have heard the preludes to those strains with which the younger man was to carry on the traditions of English poetry in its highest degree. Yet we are driven to speculate about the life of Shakespeare, while the whole scheme of Milton's existence is laid open to us! In one way alone, not to mention others, we can learn much of Milton, and that is from his own writings. Without any affectation, for no man was less conceited than he; without an undue obtrusion of his personality upon his readers, for few great men have been more truly modest; Milton has himself lifted the veil that might have obscured his character, and has let the daylight into the retired chambers of his soul. He has done this in two different ways. From his twenty-third year he was in the habit of occasionally writing sonnets, usually upon some event which touched him nearly. Most of these he could never have meant, at the time he wrote them, to make public; they are too much part of himself, and partake too much of the nature of an exquisite ejaculatory prayer or a noble and ennobling resolve. But the beauty of their framing prevented them from being lost to the public, and we have now, in Milton's own words, what high thoughts and motives were his—what an exaltation he gave to the ideal of a poetic life at a time when the religious world of England looked upon verse as a snare, and when the courtly world of England was doing its best by narrow affectations to degrade the art to its lowest level. What wonderful composure do we find in that sonnet (his

second¹ one), in which he declares himself satisfied, that though his 'inward ripeness' might appear delayed, though friends might deem his life an unprofitable one, yet

'It shall be still in strictest measure even
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Towards which 'Time leads me, and the will of
Heaven.'

The other way in which Milton was led to write about his own life was in defending himself, controversially, from the personal attacks with which his antagonists sought to destroy the effect of his arguments. It would take too long to show how many interesting facts are thus to be collected from the hints strewn broad-cast through the poet's prose works; it is enough to draw attention to them generally, and to point out that the sameness noticeable in many lives of Milton is partly attributable to the stress which all his biographers very properly lay upon this, their common material.

While upon the subject of Milton's prose works, we would remark that Mr. Pattison appears to us to take an unduly severe view of them. It is easy work now for a scholar to sit down and point from amid his hours of lettered leisure to the abuse, none the less truculent for being couched in the best Latin or the most nervous English, with which Cromwell's Latin Secretary overwhelmed his opponents. But Milton's was not a 'cloistered virtue,' it had dared the struggles and the combats of an exceptional epoch, and had come out of the fray, 'not without dust and blood' upon its garments. As to the effect of his polemical works, which Mr. Pattison considers was but small, we fancy the Parliament which voted him its thanks, and would (had he permitted it) voted him a substantial recompense, for his defence of the people of England, was perhaps in a better position to judge of this than we can be. We are too apt to judge the public of the past by the public of to-day. Because the 'Defensio' or the 'Eikonoclastes' would not persuade the England Mr. Pattison lives in, are we to jump to