

THE LYRICAL POEMS OF MATTHEW ARNOLD.



One desiring to treat briefly and simply the lyrics of Matthew Arnold, it might at first seem advisable to leave altogether out of consideration the author's position in relation to religion and the progress of humanity. But on taking a closer view, it is quite apparent that to treat merely from an æsthetic standpoint the work of almost any one of our nineteenth century poets, without reference to the influence upon him of that

Longing to enquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us—to know
Whence our lives come and where they go,

would be to gain only a complete misconception of his genius and works.

It is this spirit of unrest, of doubt, of inquiry into those things, which men in earlier times accepted or rejected unconditionally and as a whole, that forms the background on which all of our later authors have depicted their conceptions, brighter or darker, of fair promise of a happy time when men shall more clearly understand the great problems of life, or, on the other hand, of the deepening gloom into which the wreck of human life and happiness seems to them to be driving.

It is to this latter despairing class of poets that Matthew Arnold belongs. To him

Most men in a brazen prison live
Where, in the sun's hot eye,
With heads bent o'er their toil they languidly
Their lives to some unmeaning task-work give,
Dreaming of nought beyond their prison wall.
And the rest a few
Escape their prison and depart
On the wide ocean of life anew,

not knowing that there prevail on that sea "trade winds that cross it from eternity," so that soon

Sternier comes the roar
Of sea and wind, and through the deepening gloom,
Fainter and fainter wreck and helmsman loom,
And he, too, disappears, and comes no more.

As has been ably said by a critic, writing in the *Edinburgh Review* for October, 1888: "Examined as a reflection of his mind and character, and taken as a whole, these poems appear as a heap of shifting fragments, trembling opinions and crumbling creeds." Thus warned not to expect here the warmth and enthusiasm found only in those poets who have discovered for themselves some master-truth, and make it their mission to proclaim it to the world, let us turn to find what excellences we may in the narrow and negative sphere thus remaining.

The volume entitled "Early Poems" contains little that is particularly striking in manner, or in matter. Two short poems, however—"Requiscat" and "A Memory Picture"—are light and graceful, with sufficient undertone of pathos to make them very attractive. The latter is an exquisite study in quiet, delicate tones:—

Paint that lilac kerchief bound
Her soft face, her hair, around
Tied under the archest chin
Mockery ever ambushed in;
Let the fluttering fringes streak
All her pale, sweet rounded cheek,
Ere the parting hour go by,
Quick thy tablets memory!

The rest of the lyrics contained in this volume are deeply steeped in nineteenth century pessimism of the despairing not of the reckless type. In the "Forsaken Merman," however, one of the narrative poems contained in this volume, Arnold has succeeded in forgetting himself very largely, and has produced a poem infinitely more touching and human, and even more melodious than the "Merman" and "Mermaid" of Tennyson.

In the second volume we find greater freedom of expression, as well as greater intensity of feeling. Still, over all warm sentiment the frost of despair is settled; it is sparkling and beautiful, but, alas, it withers everything it touches. We see traces of this in "Dover Beach." The beauty and pathos with which the author has here expressed his views concerning religion and progress will probably cause the poem to long retain its present popularity. It opens sweetly and softly, but soon a note of sadness creeps in, which grows and swells, more passionate and despairing, until the whole ends in a discord, powerless to again resolve itself into harmony. As he stands listening to the sound of the waves and tide, he finds

In the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear,
And naked shingles of the world,

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

A love of Nature, instilled into Arnold's mind by Wordsworth, is the only influence that has power to give calm to this "vainly throbbing heart." In a very beautiful poem, entitled "The Youth of Nature," we find the expression of his indebtedness to his teacher. There, too, is exemplified the thought, so constantly present in the author's mind, of the transitoriness of human life compared with the unchangeableness of Nature. Hence, of course, it is Nature in her grander aspects alone that appeals to Arnold. We feel that it would be unnatural to expect from him any poem like Wordsworth's "Daisy," "To the Lesser Celandine," or "Daffodils." In reading the works of the two men, even most superficially, one at once observes the difference in their spirits—the one looking at Nature as "the Life-garment which Deity wears," the teacher of solemn truths; the other regarding it as an anodyne to quiet those "questionings of invisible things" which are disturbing him.

If, then, the work of the poet, as of the dramatist, be, in fairly pleasing measures, to show the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure, to depict faithfully phases of contemporary thought, then Arnold may be counted as a successful poet. But if the poet's mission be, as Wordsworth has defined it, "To console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think and to feel, and therefore to be more actively and securely virtuous"—then, surely, few have more signally failed.

LAURA L. JONES.

The regular Y.M.C.A. meeting next Thursday will be led by J. McNicol. Next Sunday (March 8) at 9.30 in the morning, there will be a meeting in the Y.M.C.A. Hall, addressed by Dr. Potts, Secretary of the Education Department of the Methodist Church in Canada.

Alexander Winchell, LL.D., Professor of Geology and Paleontology in the University of Michigan, died at Ann Arbor after an illness of several weeks. He was sixty-six years of age, and was one of the most celebrated geologists in America. He was at one time Chancellor of the Syracuse University, and has filled chairs in that and the Vanderbilt University.