

For the REVIEW.]

Notes on English.

Of the queries received since the last notes were written, the first that came to hand are these :

1. "The dim red morn had died, her journey done,
And with dead lips smiled at the twilight plain,
Half fallen across the threshold of the sun,
Never to rise again."

I can find no satisfactory explanation of these lines. Can you give me one?

2. Is Tennyson's poem, "The Lady of Shalott," an allegory? If so, what is the meaning of it?

3. Do you advise setting poetry to be learned by heart, as a task, for a class of girls between twelve and eighteen years of age?

That "dim red morn" passage has had an interrogation mark standing by it in the margin of my Tennyson for a good many years. The mark is there still.

The general meaning of the passage, as a whole, seems to be obvious enough, especially to a careless reader. But after two or three such readers have exchanged their views on the subject, it will probably be found that they have not all hit upon just the same time of the morning. If they search the context for further light they may only find themselves less confident than they were before, that they have got even the general meaning.

But I have a suspicion that what bothers my correspondent most is not the general meaning, but the difficulty of getting a clear and coherent idea of the details of the phenomenon described and their correspondence with the details of the imagery used in describing them.

I am sorry that I can help no one over this difficulty, as I have not yet got over it myself. Of course you can lay the blame of the thing on the poet, if you like, and charge him with obscurity and confusion; but the better you know your Tennyson the less inclined you will feel to do this. One of the dead master's pre-eminent merits as a poetic artist was the combination of truth and felicity in his descriptions of natural phenomena. A splendid instance of this occurs a few lines above the "dim red morn" passage—how true it is to fact you can see by looking towards the south-east on the first clear morning about an hour or so before sunrise. How happy is the poetical embellishment of the fact you will perhaps appreciate better after you have crept back into bed. And this very passage that is now troubling us may be, for anything I know to the contrary, just as splendid an instance to any reader who is as familiar as the poet was with the various appearances of earth and sky in the early morning hours. All that I can say about it is that I am not familiar enough with

the appearances here described to enable me to offer to any one what I would call a "satisfactory explanation of the lines."

Perhaps there are among the readers of the REVIEW some who combine a love of Tennyson with habitual early-rising. If so, and if any of them have succeeded in working out from their morning observations a solution of the difficulty felt in connection with this passage, I hope they will be kind enough to share their good fortune with the rest of us.

I came near forgetting the annotators. There are only two "Edited with Notes" editions within my reach that contain the "Dream." One is Rolfe's. Never a word from him on this passage. His readers are presumed to be so ignorant as not to know who the "Fair Women" were, but they are supposed to be wise enough to understand these lines. The other edition is that of Rowe and Webb. They give this note :

"In the 'unblissful clime' of his dream, the morning light, dim and red (as when seen through a mist), had faded away almost as soon as it appeared, and only sent a few chill and cheerless gleams across the glimmering plain beneath. The morn is represented as having half-fallen, never again to rise, as she stepped across the eastern horizon, the threshold of the sun — thus figuring the incomplete and ineffectual day-break."

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The Lady of Shalott an allegory? Surely not. The little bit of weird old-world story that is embedded in the poem may be an allegory, or may be capable of having an allegorical meaning forced upon it, but to me the allegorical possibilities of the story are of infinitely little interest as compared with the purely artistic beauties of the poem. It strikes me as one of many of the earlier poems of Tennyson in which the subject, the matter, the thought, seem to have counted for very little with him, and his whole endeavor seems to have been to produce perfect workmanship. Instead of an allegory, I should prefer to call it a picture, or a sort of poetic counterpart of the Songs Without Words, or rather a combination of both these, for I really don't know whether I think its picturesque or its musical qualities the more exquisite.

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Setting poetry to be learned by heart as a task—*poetry as a task*—no, I don't advise any one to do that; unless, indeed, the poetry is of the kind referred to in the following lines on one of the perpetrators of "Metrical Versions":

"King David never would acquit
A criminal like thee,
Against his psalms who would commit
Such wicked poetree."