

ROMANTICISM AT LARGE.

BY JOHN FREEMAN.

IT was my good luck to hear Mr. Abercrombie deliver two of the three lectures which make up the present volume,* and it is not easy to forget the constant impressiveness, or the occasional vehemence, with which he recommended his theory of Romanticism. His eloquence caught the audience at a disadvantage; you could not question, you wished not to demur, you yielded wisely and gladly to his "masculine persuasive force." Damnable heresies, cunning sophistications, assertions the most hazardous, arguments the most insincere, might have been poured into unprotesting minds; but on reading the lectures quietly now it is apparent that the lecturer did not abuse his audience. The reader, pondering over Mr. Abercrombie's brilliant and energetic phrases, can see what it was that impressed him as a listener, and know that there was neither perversity nor prejudice in the elaboration of a simple main argument.

That argument cannot be stated briefly or without an introduction. Mr. Abercrombie remarks that the term Romanticism is so variously used by various writers, and applied so capaciously and so capriciously, that a definition is necessary. "One poet is romantic because he falls in love; another romantic because he sees a ghost; another romantic because he hears a cuckoo; another romantic because he is reconciled to the Church. The word may be intelligible in all these cases, but not very useful, unless we can see that all these senses somehow converge and give us common ground." He finds Mr. Pearsall Smith's analysis of the origin of "romantic" lucid enough; it was first used to mark certain qualities of landscape capable of suggesting the setting or mood of mediæval romances. From this statement of the origin of the phrase Mr. Abercrombie proceeds to his inquiry concerning the nature of the thing, and he affirms what we have all noticed at one time or another—that the Romantic movement of a century or so ago did not mark the beginning of romanticism, but its examination and deliberate activity. Reading Collins, for example, or Blake or Smart, everyone has cried out that here was an anticipation of romanticism—speaking negligently but not quite wrongly. You may go back through the eighteenth century, and then through the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries, and so mark the romantic character in poetry and drama. And farther back still, "far from being a modern affair, romanticism moves in a rhythm that seems to include in its process the whole record of literature"—so it is that the great names of Greek and Latin writers are inscribed in the author's list of romantics.

From this Mr. Abercrombie goes on necessarily to reject the assumed antithesis of romantic and classic. Romanticism is one of the elements of art; classicism is not an element but a *mode of combining the elements*; and the true antithesis is between romantic and realistic. Both elements are necessary

to what he terms the health of art, and both are present in classicism; though it is true that perfect health, the perfect balance of elements, is perhaps as rare in art as in men.

So then we approach Mr. Abercrombie's own definition of romanticism; and its first expression seems trivial. "The romantic feeling for nature is practically commensurate with the feeling for *views*." It is distance that makes the romantic, as that chief of romantic novelists knew—Scott, whose journal contains a striking reference to the magic of distance in the portrayal of brave and sad subjects alike. But there is more than this—the romantic tendency is a tendency away from actuality; and again, the habit of mind which has acquired the name of Romanticism is the habit that withdraws from outer things and turns in upon itself—withdrawal from outer to inner experience. The definition involves the author in difficulties which he has space to meet only in very general terms. For instance the romantic feeling of "The Ancient Mariner" lies far less in a feeling for views (or any other form of nature) than in the psychological attitude of the poet and the peculiar psychological activity of the Mariner; and the argument needs to be pressed to this consideration. And again, it involves him in the assertion that the fairies in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" are not romantic, because they are not remote but sharp and specific, and have a reality peculiar to themselves. I think there is a catch here from which our author has not disengaged himself in his argument, more especially since this contention against the romantic might extend to "The Ancient Mariner," which he admits to be romantic. Mr. Yeats's fairies, it seems, are more romantic than Shakespeare's—this surely is to discredit romanticism!

Mr. Abercrombie's next step is to look for a poet who makes romanticism, as he defines it, serve as a theory of being—a philosophical poet with romantic inclinations. He does not choose Wordsworth, for he denies him the term romantic; he goes back to a Greek, to Empedocles who wrote before poetry and



A Tudor Street—Worcester.

From "England in Tudor Times." By L. F. Salzman (Batsford).

* "Romanticism." By Lascelles Abercrombie. [6s. (Martin Secker.)]

philosophy had been disentangled. He brings in Blake, whose mysticism is romanticism, and Shelley, who stands for an unmystical phase of the same thing—Shelley's desire being not for another kind of life and another universe of being, but for the perfection of this present imperfect world. Mr. Abercrombie reconciles all three within a formula—they all derive from some mode of reliance on inner experience, as something superior to outer. It is this allusion to a possible superiority that crystallises the question which Mr. Abercrombie might well answer. If the concern with inner experience is indeed higher than the concern with outer, is not romanticism, according to Mr. Abercrombie's interpretation, overwhelmingly superior to realism, and an unromantic writer subordinate to a romantic? Blake is a romantic writer—true! but so is Fletcher; and what formula will embrace securely the authors of "Auguries of Innocence" and "The Faithful Shepherdess"? Does Fletcher rely upon inner experience? His experience is all outer—of the senses. Mr. Abercrombie's definition is already so generous as to take in the greater part of imaginative literature, but it can scarcely cover the *externally romantic* Fletcher or Keats as well as the internally romantic Blake or Patmore. Mr. Abercrombie's answer to objections so obvious cannot but be agile and attractive, and I regret that a fourth lecture did not deal with points such as these, and illuminate for us both the subject and the mind of the poet-lecturer. To

start so many hares, and leave them bounding and unregarded, is a pity when a crowd is waiting to be fed.

The last lecture centres upon the remark that romanticism takes its most obvious though not inevitable form in *egoism*, and of this a chief instance is Nietzsche. In him then is found the exaggeration of an exaggeration, though Mr. Abercrombie sees grandeur in Nietzsche's egoism. The reference is somewhat surprising, and does little to help in the consideration of the final statement of the definition. But our author loves to startle his audience: "Wherever romanticism flourishes, incest is likely to appear; a theme romantic precisely in its impassioned discord with conventional decency." Not less does he startle it with his assertion (which no one will want to rebut hastily) that apart from his youthful work Shakespeare is perfectly the dramatist of classicism—classicism, that health, sanity and balance of elements and activities.

Mr. Abercrombie's book has a quality which his earlier prose has shown less clearly—a quality of ease. His matter is difficult, but he has used it simply, and I do not know of a recent book upon an æsthetic question which provokes so much liveliness of mind and so much satisfaction to the reader. It helps us to do what is so hard—to distinguish between different elements and to mark their influence, in looking backward at things which familiarity so often makes a little dull in our eyes.

ENGLISH PREACHING IN 1350-1450.*

BY MONSIGNOR WILLIAM BARRY, D.D.

I CANNOT copy out the full title of this extraordinary book; the substance or purport of it is indicated in my heading. The man to review it should be Cardinal Gasquet, who by some rousing articles in the *Dublin* many years ago became its occasional cause. Did preaching of the Gospel flourish before the Reformation? Did it not come in with Wycliffe, and cease when the Lollards were put down? These are questions worth answering and they deserve an answer, which in this volume they receive to the full. It is quite readable, I hasten to say, instructive always, often amusing, and a marvel of industry. Dr. Owst, from whom we receive the book, has lived in libraries four solid years, travelled over England for the evidence which is here set out, and accompanies every statement with its due authority. The result is what he calls a "little book" of just upon 370 closely-packed pages, equal to an encyclopædia, but the production of a single mind. At last then we can judge for ourselves how preaching went on in England previous to Lollardy, and at a time when the Mediæval Church flourished, although shaken by the Great Schism of the West, not to dwell upon other calamities, like the Black Death. That century, then, is to be one which saw the full fruit of Mendicant preaching in this country, the revival of our English tongue—an age of mysticism, of simmering revolt and impending reformation.

So far Dr. Owst. While reading him we should keep

open on our table Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," the "Vision of Piers Plowman" and Shakespeare's Henrician dramas. Through such glasses an Englishman to-day can still get a glimpse of times which have sunk below memory into an oblivion fostered by a "long Protestant tradition, which even reckons Paul's Cross and the 'Sermons on the Card' among its triumphant inventions." And if he thinks at all of mediæval preaching, he would expect it to abound in "empty, ridiculous harangues, legendary tales, miracles, horrors, low jests, table-talk, fireside scandal." Let him turn over the table of contents now full in my view, and he will correct his judgment. I like the introductory chapter on "Bishops and Curates" for its vivid account of the plain public speaking which did not spare dumb or dissolute prelates. Thanks indeed to Archbishop Arundell's "Constitution" of 1409, directed against the rising heresies which moved undoubtedly towards anarchism, a policy of silence set in later. It had fateful consequences in the "Mar-Prelate" storm when more than one Archbishop of Canterbury perished and the Puritan became a Presbyterian, utterly rejecting Bishops. We should never forget how mediæval kings and nobles thrust into the sanctuary their own kinsfolk, often illegitimate and constantly scandalous, yet for whose misconduct the Church was made to answer. At all events many a bold "curate" lifted up his voice in stern denunciation of such negligent pastors, until freedom to preach at all was more and more restricted.

* "Preaching in Mediæval England." By G. R. Owst, M.A.(Cantab), Ph.D. 17s. 6d. (Cambridge University Press.)