

IS VERSE IN DANGER?

WE are passing through a period obviously unfavorable to the development of the art of poetry. A little while ago there was an outburst of popular appreciation of living verse, but this is now replaced, for the moment, by an almost ostentatious indifference. These alternations of curiosity and disdain deceive no one who looks at the history of literature with an eye which is at all philosophical. It is easy to say, as is commonly said, that they depend on the merit of the poetry which is being produced. But this is not always, or even often, the case. About twenty years ago a ferment of interest and enthusiasm was called forth, all over the English-speaking world, by the early writings of Mr. Swinburne and by those of the late Mr. Rossetti. This was deserved by the merit of those productions; but the disdain which, twenty years earlier, the verse of Mr. Robert Browning and Mr. Matthew Arnold had met with, cannot be so accounted for. It is wiser to admit that sons never look at life with their fathers' eyes, and that taste is subject to incessant and almost regular fluctuations. At the present moment, though men should sing with the voice of angels, the barbarian public would not listen, and a new Milton would probably be less warmly welcomed in 1890 than a Pomfret was two centuries ago or a Bowles was in 1790. Literary history shows that a demand for poetry does not always lead to a supply, and that a supply does not always command a market. He who doubts this fact may compare the success of Herrick with that of Erasmus Darwin.

The only reason for precluding a speculation on the future of the art of poetry with these remarks, is to clear the ground of any arguments based on the merely momentary condition of things. The eagerness or coldness of the public, the fertility or exhaustion of the poets, at this particular juncture, are elements of no real importance. If poetry is to continue to be one of the living arts of humanity, it does not matter an iota whether

poetry is looked upon with contempt by the members of a single generation. If poetry is declining, and, as a matter of fact, is now moribund, the immense vogue of Tennyson at a slightly earlier period will take its place among the insignificant phenomena of a momentary reaction. The problem is a more serious one. It is this: Is poetry, in its very essence, an archaic and rudimentary form of expression, still galvanized into motion, indeed, by antiquarianism, but really obsolete and therefore to be cultivated only at the risk of affectation and insincerity; or is it an art capable of incessant renovation—a living organism which grows, on the whole, with the expansion of modern life? In other words, is the art of verse one which, like music or painting, delights and consoles us with a species of expression which can never be superseded, because it is in danger of no direct rivalry from a similar species; or was poetry merely the undeveloped, though in itself the extremely beautiful, infancy of a type which is now adult, and which has relinquished its charming puerilities for a mode of expression infinitely wider and of more practical utility? Sculptors, singers, painters must always exist; but need we have poets any longer, since the world has discovered how to say all it wants to say in prose? Will any one who has anything of importance to communicate be likely in the future to express it through the medium of metrical language?

These questions are not to be dismissed with a smile. A large number of thoughtful persons at the present time are, undoubtedly, disposed to answer them in the affirmative, although a certain decency forbids them openly to say so. Plenty of clever people secretly regard the Muse as a distinguished old lady, of good family, who has been a beauty and a wit in her day, but who really rules only by sufferance in these years of her decline. They whisper that she is sinking into second childhood, that she repeats herself when she converses, and that she has exchanged her early liberal tastes for a love of what is puerile, ingenious, and "finikin." A great Parisian critic has just told us that each poet is read only by the other poets, and he gives as the reason that the art of verse has become so refined and so elaborate that it passes over the heads of the multitude. But

may it not be that this refinement is only a decrepitude—the amusement of an old age that has sunk to the playing of more and more helplessly ingenious games of patience? That is what those hint who, more insidious by far than the open enemies of literature, suggest that poetry has had its reign, its fascinating and imperial tyranny, and that it must now make way for the democracy of prose.

Probably there would have been no need to face this question, either in this generation or for many generations to come, if it had not been for a single circumstance. The great enemies of the poets of the present are the poets of the past, and the antiquarian spirit of the nineteenth century has made the cessation of the publication of fresh verse a possibility. The intellectual condition of our times differs from that of all preceding ages in no other point so much as in its attitude toward the writings of the dead. In those periods of renovation which have refreshed the literatures of the world, the tendency has always been to study some one class of deceased writers with affection. In English history, we have seen the romantic poets of Italy, the dramatists of Spain, the Latin satirists, and the German ballad-mongers, exercise, at successive moments, a vivid influence on English writers. But this study was mainly limited to those writers themselves, and did not extend to the circle of their readers; while even with the writers it never absorbed at a single moment the whole range of poetry. We may take one instance. Pope was the disciple of Horace and of the French Jesuits, of Dryden and of the conceit-creating school of Donne. But he was able to use Boileau and Crashaw so freely because he addressed a public that had never met with the first and had forgotten the second; and when he passed outside this narrow circle he was practically without a rival. To the class whom he addressed, Shakespeare and Milton were phantoms, Chaucer and Spenser not so much as names. The only doubt was whether Alexander Pope was man enough to arrest attention by the intrinsic merits of his poetry. If his verse was admitted to be good, his public were not distracted by a preference for other verse which they had known for a longer time.

This remained true until about a generation ago. The great

romantic poets of the beginning of this century found the didactic and rhetorical verse-writers of the eighteenth century in possession of the field, but they found no one else there. Their action was of the nature of a revolt—a revolution so successful that it became constitutional. All that Wordsworth and Keats had to do was to prove their immediate predecessors to be unworthy of public attention, and when once they had persuaded the reading world that what they had to offer was more pleasing than what Young and Churchill and Darwin had offered, the revolution was complete. But, in order to draw attention to the merits of the proposed change, the romantic poets of the Georgian age pointed to the work of the writers of the Elizabethan age, whom they claimed as their natural predecessors—the old stock cast out at the Restoration and now reinstated. The public had entirely forgotten the works of these writers, except to some extent those of the dramatists, and it became necessary to reprint them. A whole galaxy of poetic stars was revealed when the cloud of prejudice was blown away, and a class of dangerous rivals to the modern poet was introduced.

The activity of the dead is now paramount, and threatens to paralyze original writing altogether. The revival of the old poets who were in direct sympathy with Keats and Wordsworth has extended far beyond the limits which those who inaugurated it desired to lay down. Every poetic writer of any age precedent to our own has now a chance of popularity, often a very much better chance than he possessed during his own lifetime. Scarcely a poet, from Chaucer downward, remains inedited. The imitative lyricist who, in a paroxysm of inspiration, wrote one good sonnet under the sway of James I., but was never recognized as a poet even by his friends, rejoices now in a portly quarto, and lives for the first time. The order of nature is reversed, and those who were only ghosts in the seventeenth century come back to us clothed in literary vitality.

In this great throng of resuscitated souls, all of whom have forfeited their copyright, how is the modern poet to exist? He has no longer to compete—as “his great forefathers did, from Homer down to Ben”—with the leading spirits of his own generation, but with the picked genius of the world. He writes an

epic; Mr. Besant and the Society of Authors oblige him to "retain his rights," to "publish at a royalty," and to keep the rules of the game. But Milton has no rights and demands no royalty. The new poet composes lyrics and publishes them in a volume. They are sincere and ingenious; but why should the reader buy that volume, when he can get the best of Shelley and Coleridge, of Gray and Marvell, in a cheaper form in "The Golden Treasury"? At every turn the thronging company of the ghosts impedes and disheartens the modern writer, and it is no wonder if the new Orpheus throws down his lyre in despair when the road to his desire is held by such an invincible army of specters. In the golden age of the Renaissance an enthusiast is said to have offered up a manuscript by Martial every year, as a burnt sacrifice to Catullus, an author whom he distinctly preferred. The modern poet, if he were not afraid of popular censure, might make a yearly holocaust of editions of the British classics, in honor of the Genius of Poetry. There are many enemies of the art abroad, but among them all the most powerful and insidious are those of its own household. The poets of to-day might contrive to fish the *murex* up, and to eat turtle, if it were not for the intolerable rivalry of "souls of poets dead and gone."

On the whole, however, it is highly unlikely that the antiquarian passion of our age will last. Already it gives signs of wearing out, and it will probably be succeeded by a spirit of unreasonable intolerance of the past. Intellectual invention will not allow itself to be pinioned forever by these soft and universal cords of tradition, each as slight as gossamer in itself, but overwhelming in the immense mass. As for the old poets, young verse-writers may note with glee that they are being caught in the butterfly net of education, where they will soon find the attractive feathers rubbed off their wings. One by one they pass into text books and are lost. Chaucer is done for, and so is Milton; Goldsmith is annotated, Scott is prepared for "local examinations," and even Byron, the loose, the ungrammatical, is edited as a school book. The noble army of extension lecturers will scarcely pause in their onward march. We shall see Wordsworth captured, Shelley boiled down for the use of babes, and Keats elaborately annotated, with his blunders in classical mythology ex-

posed. The schoolmaster is the only friend the poet of the future dares to look to, for he alone has the power to destroy the loveliness and mystery which are the charm of the old poets. Even a second-rate verse-writer may hope to live by the side of an Elizabethan poet edited for the Clarendon Press.

This remedy may, however, be considered fantastic, and it would scarcely be wise to trust to it. There is, nevertheless, nothing ironical in the statement that an exaggerated attention paid to historical work leaves no time and no appetite for what contemporaries produce. The neglect of poetry is so wide-spread that if the very small residuum of love of verse is expended lavishly on the dead, the living are likely to come off badly indeed. The other arts, which can better defend themselves, are experiencing the same sense of being starved by the old masters. The bulk of the public neither buys books nor invests in pictures nor orders statuary according to its own taste, but according to the fashion; and if the craze is antiquarian, we may produce Raphaels in dozens and Shelleys in shoals; they will have to subsist as the bears and the pelicans do.

Let us abandon ourselves, however, to the vain pleasure of prophesying. Let us suppose, for the humor of it, that what very young gentlemen call "the might of poesy" is sure to reassert itself, that the votaries of modern verse will always form a respectable minimum, and that some alteration in fashion will reduce the tyranny of antiquarianism to decent proportions. Admit that poetry, in whatever lamentable condition it may be at the present time, is eternal in its essence, and must offer the means of expression to certain admirable talents in each generation. What, then, is the form which we may reasonably expect it to take next? This is, surely, a harmless kind of speculation, and the moral certainty of being fooled by the event need not restrain us from indulging in it. We will prophesy, although fully conscious of the wild predictions on the same subject current in England in 1580, 1650, and 1780, and in France in 1775 and 1825. We may be quite sure of one thing, that when the Marlowe or the André Chénier is coming, not a single critic will be expecting him. But in the mean time why show a front less courageous than that of the history-defying Zadkiel?

It is usually said, in hasty generalization, that the poetry of the present age is unique in the extreme refinement of its exterior mechanism. Those who say this are not aware that the great poets whose virile simplicity and robust carelessness of detail they applaud—thus building tombs to prophets whom they have never worshiped—have, almost without exception, been scrupulously attentive to form. No modern writer has been so learned in rhythm as Milton, so faultless in rhyme-arrangement as Spenser. But what is true is that a care for form and a considerable skill in the technical art of verse have been acquired by writers of a lower order, and that this sort of perfection is no longer the hall mark of a great master. We may expect it, therefore, to attract less attention in the future; and although, assuredly, the bastard jargon of Walt Whitman, and kindred returns to sheer barbarism, will not be accepted, technical perfection will more and more be taken as a matter of course, as a portion of the poet's training which shall be as indispensable, and as little worthy of notice, as that a musician should read his notes correctly.

Less effort, therefore, is likely to be made, in the immediate future, to give pleasure by the manner of poetry, and more skill will be expended on the subject matter. By this I do not understand that greater concession will be made than in the past to what may be called the didactic fallacy, the obstinate belief of some critics in the function of poetry as a teacher. The fact is certain that nothing is more obsolete than educational verse, the literary product which deliberately supplies information. We may see another Sappho; it is even conceivable that we might see another Homer; but a new Hesiod, never. Knowledge has grown to be far too complex, exact, and minute to be impressed upon the memory by the artifice of rhyme; and poetry had scarcely passed its infancy before it discovered that to stimulate, to impress, to amuse, were the proper duties of an art which appeals to the emotions, and to the emotions only. The curious attempts, then, which have been made by poets of no mean talent to dedicate their verse to botany, to the Darwinian hypothesis, to the loves of the fossils, and to astronomical science, are not likely to be repeated, and if they should be repeated, they would scarcely at-

tract much popular attention. Nor is the epic, on a large scale—that noble and cumbersome edifice, with all its blank windows and corridors that lead to nothing—a species of poetic architecture which the immediate future can be expected to indulge in.

Leaving the negative for the positive, then, we may fancy that one or two probabilities loom before us. Poetry, if it exist at all, will deal, and probably to a greater degree than ever before, with those more frail and ephemeral shades of emotion which prose scarcely ventures to describe. The existence of a delicately-organized human being is diversified by divisions and revulsions of sensation, ill-defined desires, gleams of intuition, and the whole gamut of spiritual notes descending from exultation to despair, none of which have ever been adequately treated except in the hieratic language of poetry. The most realistic novel, the closest psychological analysis in prose, does no more than skim the surface of the soul; verse has the privilege of descending into its depths. In the future, lyrical poetry will probably grow less trivial and less conventional, at the risk of being less popular. It will interpret what prose dares not suggest. It will penetrate further into the complexity of human sensation, and, untroubled by the necessity of formulating a creed, a theory, or a story, will describe with delicate accuracy, and under a veil of artistic beauty, the amazing, the unfamiliar, and even the portentous phenomena which it encounters.

The social revolution or evolution which most sensible people are now convinced is imminent, will surely require a species of poetry to accompany its course and to celebrate its triumphs. If we could foresee what form this species will take, we should know all things. But we must believe that it will be democratic, and that to a degree at present unimaginable. The aristocratic tradition is still paramount in all art. Kings, princesses, and the symbols of chivalry are as essential to poetry, as we now conceive it, as roses, stars, or nightingales. The poet may be a pronounced socialist; he may be Mr. William Morris; but the oligarchic imagery pervades his work as completely as if he were a troubadour of the thirteenth century. It is difficult to understand what will be left if this romantic phraseology is destroyed,

but it is still more difficult to believe that it can survive a complete social revolution.

A kind of poetry now scarcely cultivated at all may be expected to occupy the attention of the poets, whether socialism hastens or delays. What the Germans understand by epic verse—that is to say, short and highly-finished studies in narrative—is a class of literature which offers unlimited opportunities. What may be done in this direction is indicated in France by the work of M. Coppée. In England and America we have at present nothing at all like it, the idyllic stories of Mr. Coventry Patmore presenting the closest parallel. The great danger which attends the writing of these narratives in English is the tendency to lose distinction of style, to become humorous in dealing with the grotesque and tame in describing the simple. Blank verse will be wholly eschewed by those who in the future sing the annals of the humble; they will feel that the strictest art and the most exquisite ornament of rhyme and meter will be required for the treatment of such narratives. M. Coppée himself, who records the adventures of seamstresses and engine-drivers, of shipwrecked sailors and retail grocers, with such simplicity and moving pathos, has not his rival in all France for purity of phrase and for exquisite propriety of versification.

The modern interest in the drama, and the ever-growing desire to see literature once more wedded to the stage, will, it can hardly be doubted, lead to a revival of dramatic poetry. This will not, of course, have any relation to the feeble lycean plays of the hour—spectacular romances enshrined in ambling blank verse—but will, in its form and substance alike, offer entertainment to other organs than the eye. Probably the puritanic limitations which have so long cramped the English theater will be removed, and British plays, while remaining civilized and decent, will once more deal with the realities of life and not with its conventions. Neither the funeral baked meats of the romantic English novel, nor the spiced and potted dainties of the French stage, will satisfy our play-goers when once we have strong and sincere playwrights of our own.

In religious verse something, and in philosophical verse much, remains to be done. The wider hope has scarcely found

a singer yet, and the deeper speculation has been very imperfectly and empirically celebrated by our poets. Whether love, the very central fountain of poetic inspiration in the past, can yield many fresh variations, remains to be seen. That passion will, however, in all probability be treated in the future less objectively and with a less obtrusive landscape background. The school which is now expiring has carried description, the consciousness of exterior forms and colors, the drapery and upholstery of nature, to its extreme limit. The next development of poetry is likely to be very bare and direct, unembroidered, perhaps even arid, in character. It will be experimental rather than descriptive, human rather than animal. So at least we vaguely conjecture. But whatever the issue may be, we may be confident that the art will retain that poignant charm over undeveloped minds, and that exquisite fascination, which for so many successive generations have made poetry the wisest and the fairest friend of youth.

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THE REVOLUTION IN MEDICINE.

IN an article entitled "A Possible Revolution in Medicine," published in the FORUM for December, 1888, I wrote as follows:

"The science and practice of medicine and surgery are undergoing a revolution of such magnitude and importance that its limits can hardly be conceived. Looking into the future in the light of recent discoveries, it does not seem impossible that a time may come when the cause of every infectious disease will be known; when all such diseases will be preventable or easily curable; when protection can be afforded against all diseases such as scarlet fever, measles, yellow fever, whooping-cough, etc., in which one attack secures immunity from subsequent contagion; when, in short, no constitutional disease will be incurable and such scourges as epidemics will be unknown."

The reflections embodied in this quotation arose mainly from the discovery of the bacterial cause of consumption by Koch. Far from seeming to me extravagant, the words just quoted failed to express the possibilities as they appeared to my mind; and I believed that the problem of destroying the bacteria or their products without killing the patient would be solved in the near future. The first steps, at least, of its solution are apparent. While the data for an exact appreciation of the cure for consumption proposed by Koch are by no means complete, sufficient facts exist to warrant a discussion of the subject at the present time. The unprofessional reader should understand that Koch, mainly by reason of his discovery of the cause of consumption, has for several years been the most prominent figure in medical science that has been known in our generation. His methods have been models of scientific accuracy, and the authority of his statements is now almost unquestioned. When he announces to the world that he has apparently cured a certain class of cases of one of the most formidable and destructive diseases that afflict the human race, he awakens an interest that is by no means confined to the medical profession. I shall attempt to give the essence of this discovery, so far as it has as yet been made known; but