

LITERARY AND MUNICIPAL PROBLEMS IN ENGLAND.

As the throng which gathered to the funeral of our great poet melted slowly away from the Abbey, the same thought was borne in upon many of us—Have we then no poet left in England? The passing away of a great figure which for two generations has filled the mind and speech of men is always wont to leave this impression of a void. Forty years ago, when Wellington was laid beside Nelson in St. Paul's, Tennyson groaned out: "The last great Englishman is low." And as we left the Laureate alone with his peers in Poets' Corner, there rose to a hundred lips the murmur: "The last English poet is gone!" It was a natural feeling, an unthinking impulse; perhaps a blind mistake.

It is inevitable that we should seek at times like this to compare, to judge, to anticipate the verdict of our posterity. But the impulse should be resisted: it is futile and worse than useless. We are far too near to judge Tennyson truly or even to decide if he has left a successor. The permanent place of a poet depends on his one or two, three or four, grandest bursts, and his inferior work is forgotten. So too the poetry which startles and delights its immediate generation is almost always much weaker than the poetry which mellows like wine as generations succeed. It needed for Dante five entire centuries before his real greatness was admitted; it needed two centuries for Shakespeare.

It would be strange if English poetry were to close its glorious roll with the name of Tennyson. For three hundred years now our race has never failed to find a fine poet "to stand before the Lord." Shakespeare had done immortal things while Spenser still lived. Ben Jonson survived until the early lyrics of Milton. Dryden was in full career when "Paradise Lost" was published, and when Dryden died Pope was already "lispering in numbers." Pope survived till Gray was a poet and Cowper a youth; and with Burns, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley, the list comes down to the poet whom we have just buried. In these three centuries, from the "Faery Queen" until to-day, the only gap is for the ten years which separate the "Rape of the Lock" from the death of Dryden. But at Spenser's

death, who really knew what Shakespeare was, and at that of Byron and Shelley, who thought of Tennyson as their successor?

They who were present at the burial in the Abbey had opened to them, as in a vision, some glimpse down into the depths of the poetry, the persistence, and solemnity of English life—into that deep under-current which flows far below our gross and common every-day life. What a flood of memories from ancient history, what a halo of heroism, art, and devotion, consecrate that spot! A church built in the age of the Crusades, with foundations and memorials, tombs and crypts, that go back to the Saxon kings, in the history of which Agincourt, the Civil Wars, the Reformation, and the Commonwealth are mere episodes, and wherein even three centuries of a long succession of poets form but the later chapters—such a building seems to hold the very heart of the English people. Statesmen, artists, churchmen, poets, men of science and men of business, all schools, creeds, and interests, came together; sect, party, and rivalry ceased to divide men—all were Englishmen come to do honor to their poet. There was no parade, no eloquence, nothing of unusual show; no trumpets, helmet, or plume, no “guard of honor” or officials in uniform or robes; there was no concourse of elaborate music or feats of epideictic oratory. It was the daily service of the Abbey choir, the ordinary burial, with no feature of it uncommon, except the flag upon the coffin. Not a word was spoken outside the Prayer-Book; nothing was done which is not done every day when honored men are buried. Merely this—that the vast cathedral and the square in which it stands were filled with silent and eager masses, that around the coffin were gathered men of every type of activity and thought which England holds, that the whole English-speaking race was represented and was deeply stirred.

In the whole world there is nothing left which in continuity and poetry of association can be put beside a burial in our Abbey. It is doubtful if anything recorded in history ever matched it altogether in the volume and beauty of its impressiveness, or ever before so mysteriously blended the sense of antiquity with the sense of life. For there is nothing artificial, nothing of mere antiquarianism, in the Englishman's love for the Abbey and its sacred dust. The common seaman in Nelson's fleets felt it; the American citizen feels it more intensely often than the Londoner; they feel it in their hearts at home in Africa and in Australasia; to the whole English-speaking people the associations of the Abbey are both profoundly historic and vividly modern. The Abbey suggests to us all three things in equal force:

the Past, Poetry, Living Work. That is the true strength of England, which to the German is a metaphysical enigma and to the Frenchman seems an amazing paradox—that below our eternal money-grabbing and vulgar routine there is a sense among us that the Past and the Future are really one, and that we must be the link between the two. That makes the most material and most conventional of European nations at bottom the most capable of great poetry.

So let us not despair of one day finding a poet worthy to carry on the torch. It is plain that no one is yet acknowledged as the real equal of Tennyson. But we may have such a one among us even now. Although for three centuries the succession of English poets has never failed, there have been some brief periods when the most discerning eye must have failed to recognize the man. When Dryden died there must have been searchings of heart until the star of Pope rose above the horizon. And when Byron died young, like Keats and Shelley before him, and Coleridge, the poet, had long subsided into interminable monologues, neither Campbell, nor Scott, nor Southey, nor even Wordsworth, could be said to hold the poetic field. Wordsworth's, indeed, is a very striking case. His general reputation as a poet was hardly established till more than forty years after his first poems were published, and he was more than seventy before he received any public honor. And it may well be that we are all blind now, and that a new Tennyson, another Shelley or Milton, is in our midst, did we only know it. There is an element of hope perhaps in numbers. The English-speaking race is to-day quite three times as numerous as it was at the death of Byron, twelve times as numerous as it was at the death of Dryden, and those who can and who do write verses may be forty or fifty times as many. So the field is vastly larger.

But, alas! in poetry numbers count for much less than in presidential elections and other practical affairs. Indeed, in poetry, numbers and genius seem almost to stand in inverse ratios. When Shakespeare produced his plays, there were certainly not half a million persons living who could write English; and when the "Iliad" was first chanted at a festival, there was no man living who could write his name. There are now at least sixty millions who can write our language, and of these some millions, we may be sure, in public or in secret, compose lines that they fondly believe to be verse. What! not one prime poet in some million of versifiers? We do not see him

yet. Neither Tennyson, Hugo, Heine, nor Longfellow has left any recognized equal and successor.

The strange part of it is that there never was an age when so great a quantity of very excellent verse was produced as in our own. There can be no doubt about it. We have to-day scores of elegant poets and hundreds of volumes of really graceful verse. Of educated men and women, at least one in three could turn out a passable lyric or so, far better than the stuff published as poetry in the age of Pope, or Jonson, or Southey. There are not so many true poets, perhaps, as there were in the lifetime of Spenser and of Shakespeare. But it may be truly said that at no period in the long history of English poetry has it been so free from affectation, mannerism, false taste, and conventional commonplace. Since verse began there has never been *so high, so pure a level of third-rate verse*. There are a dozen writers whose exquisite technique makes that of Dryden or Byron look quite careless and that of Pope monotonous, and there are at least a hundred writers who far surpass the imitators of Dryden, Pope, or Byron.

That perhaps is the ominous side of our high poetic standard. If out of such a mass of graceful verse we find no really great poetry, it would look as if there were something amiss. Can it be that we all think too much of this graceful form that so many can reach? Is it that we are all, writers and readers alike, under the glamour of a style which is not the less a "fashion" by being subtly harmonious and severely subdued? As the poet said, "all can raise the flower now, for all have got the seed." Poetry is raised too much now from another's seed, from a single seed, from what is indeed a highly specialized seed. And poetry mayhap has begun to suffer from the maladies which follow upon "breeding in-and-in": rickety bones, transparent and etiolated skins, exquisitely refined impotence. Neither readers nor writers intend it or even know it, but we are all looking for echoes of the "Idylls" or "In Memoriam": it becomes our test and standard; the poet is afraid to let himself go, lest he be thought Byronic and impatient of the "slow mechanic exercise" which not only sootheth pain but produces poetry. No age that ever fell under the spell of a style knew it at the time. Their contemporaries could not hear the eternal jingle in the papistic couplet when Pope's imitators produced volumes. People who listened to songs "in the manner of Tom Moore" were deaf to the doggerel of the words. Dryden in his day was the ruin of the poetasters who tried to catch his swing. So was Pope the ruin of his followers: they caught his

measured cadence; they could not catch his wit, his sparkle, and his sense. Dr. Johnson latinized the English language for a whole generation. And perhaps the perfections of Tennyson's art are among the causes that we have no perfect poetry.

Perfection of form is often, nay, is usually, a snare to its own generation. Raffaele ruined "the school of Raffaele," and so did Guido ruin the school of Guido. Intense attention to form, especially to a form which is capable of a high degree of imitation, too often leads to insipidity. How common now in the scholastic world is the art of elegant Latin verse! Our schools and colleges can show thousands of "copies" of faultless elegiacs and sonorous hexameters, with fewer flaws than you might pick in Statius and Claudian. But how dull, how lifeless, how artificial are these prize compositions if we read them as poetry! Faultless, yes; but we wish the author would now and then break loose into a solecism, and but for ten lines forget Ovid and Virgil. Much of our very graceful, very thoughtful, very virginal poetry is little but "exercises" in English verse composition to the tune, not of the "Tristia," but of "In Memoriam."

Now, the exquisite jewelry of Tennyson's method, subtle as it is, is imitable up to a certain point, just as Virgil's hexameter is imitable up to a certain point, and for the same reason. Both are the poetry of intense culture, inspired by the worship of form. I take a stanza typical of this art—a stanza not surpassed in melody by any poetry of this century—a stanza which is wonderfully prophetic of the poet himself and his enduring influence:

"His memory long will live alone
In all our hearts, as mournful light
That broods above the fallen sun
And dwells in heaven half the night."

That is simply perfect: a noble thought, an exquisite simile, a true and splendid analogy between Nature and Man, the simplicity as of marble, and a music which Shelley only has equalled. Yet it is imitable up to a measure: we can analyze the music, we can mark the gliding labials, the pathetic cadence in the "mournful light" and "dwells in heaven," the *largo* in "broods above." It is beautiful, but it is imitable, as Milton and Shakespeare are not imitable. Take Milton's—

"He must not float upon his watery bier
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
Without the meed of some melodious tear."

Or again, "the last infirmity of noble mind," or "laughter holding both his sides," or "thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes." Again, when Shakespeare says "the multitudinous seas incarnadine," or

"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

This is not imitable. Both thought and phrase are incalculable. No other brain could imagine them; once heard they are indelible, unalterable, unapproachable. It is not the music which rivets our attention first, but the thought. The form matches the idea, but the idea transcends the form. Poetic form, we are often told, must be "inevitable." True, most true. But poetic thought also must be incalculable. For this reason the greatest poets who clothed incalculable thought in inevitable perfection of form—Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Æschylus, Homer—never misled their generation into imitation, never founded "a school." We shall have a poet worthy to succeed Tennyson when we no longer have Tennyson on the brain.

It was passing strange that France should lose her greatest writer of prose within a few days of the blow by which England lost her greatest writer in verse. And some friends of both were present at the funeral in the *Panthéon* and in the Abbey. It was an eloquent contrast, suggestive of profound differences in our national idiosyncrasies and condition. The burial of Renan was a great ceremony of state, with military and official pomp, academic and bureaucratic dignity, pageantry, oratory, and public consecration in a civil monument now for the third time wrenched from the Church. The burial of the English poet was a simple and private act of mourning to which a multitude came in spontaneous sympathy. It had no dignity but that which was given it by the place—by the historic Past, by Poetry itself, and by at least the pathos of the old faith. France has broken with her Past, with the old religion, and she has no continuous poetic traditions. France is deliberately pushing forth on the ocean to find a New World. Nor has any of this generation done more to stimulate this movement than Ernest Renan. The founders of New Worlds cannot look to robe themselves in all the poetry and solemnities of the Old Worlds, but they may bear within them the Life and the Future.

Ernest Renan was a consummate master of the French language; and masters of language exercise a power in France which is not known to other nations and which is hardly to be understood in some.

He was a scholar, a man of learning, a subtle and ingenious critic. With his learning, his versatility, his romantic coloring, and his exquisite grace of form, it would have been singular if he had not acquired great influence. It was, of course, the influence of the critic: the solvent, dispersive, indefinite influence of the man of letters who hints his doubts and hesitates his creed. Renan assuredly had no creed, needed none, and was mentally incapable of conceiving himself as having a creed. I knew him personally, and have heard him expound his ideas in conversation and in lectures and also in private interviews. I do not believe that there was left in his mind an infinitesimal residuum of dogma, old or new. As the Cambridge scholar said, when he was asked to define his view as to the Third Person in the Trinity, he "would not deny that there might be a sort of a something" behind all that he knew and all that interested him so keenly. But for himself, his whole activity of brain was absorbed in the romantic side of history, in the lyrical aspect of religion, in the decorative types of philosophy.

Ideas of such mordant potency have seldom been clothed in a mantle of more spiritual religiosity of external hue. One can fancy the terror that he once struck into the tender Catholic spirit who for the first time heard these ghastly doubts issue forth, as it were, from a dreamy patristic hagiology. It was as when the Margaret of "Faust" kneels down in her agony before the image of the Madonna and hears her prayer answered by the strident mockery of Mephistopheles. But the tender Catholic spirit is grown stouter now and is inured to many things. We can see how Renan, so negative himself, so vague, and so allusive, is leading on to a knowledge more systematic than his own, more positive, more definite and real. He has been an influence in his generation, even though he hardly knew whither he was tending himself, and though such ignorance or mistiness appeared to him to be the true philosophic *nirvana* to which the wise only attain.

We are now in the age of mist. We are becoming very "children of the mist"; for the one dogma that seems destined to survive is the duty of being undogmatic. We have all learned to say with the poet, "our little systems have their day"; with the critic we all believe in "the power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness." That is comprehensive, large, suggestive. The definite, perhaps the intelligible, is limited: limitations mean narrowness, hardness, slavery, somewhere. "O friends," cries the popular preacher of to-day, be he layman or cleric, "let our spirits be free, let us seek to know, not to

decide; to analyze, not to believe. Away with the system-mongers and the slaves of any 'doxy.' Let us sip truth from every flower and leave the drones to brood over the honey!" The cultivated mind is becoming incapable of giving final assent to anything definite. It sees something in everything and error only in attempts to give that something a form. Of this philosophy and religion of the Great May-be, Monsieur Ernest Renan is the chief of the apostles; he is Peter and Paul and Doubting Thomas all in one very charming writer of French prose.

In the lull in our political world here in England, the ominous lull which precedes a great storm or a big battle, perhaps the most conspicuous political fact is the pace at which the municipal unity of London is gathering into action. The London County Council is the most composite elective body of which English history can show an example, and it has features which are rare, if not quite unexampled, in the history of municipal bodies. It has roused intense anxieties and bitter antipathies on the one hand, high hopes and a proud consciousness of a great future on the other hand. In its varied composition, in purity, and in thirst after reform, its most angry critics would hardly deny that it is remarkable. No municipal body ever collected such a diversity of interest and experience within one chamber. Even party rage has never ventured to hint a suspicion of jobbery, and this alone is a unique phenomenon, at any rate on our side of the Atlantic. About one-eighth of the Council are members of the Legislature, about a tenth have hereditary titles or are immediately connected with historic families; three ducal houses are represented; it counts two Knights of the Garter, the Foreign Secretary, and several other members of the government, peers, baronets, land-owners, bankers, brokers, merchants, lawyers, manufacturers, dealers of all kinds, and a dozen workmen in different trades.

So great a combination of interests bears witness to one of the strongest and most typical points in English life. There is no sulking or withdrawing in English public activity. All orders of men are equally eager to serve the public and contribute their experience. Duke and bricklayer work side by side in the same honest desire to do what they can and to offer what they know. Difference of principle there is, of course, and very divergent aims. But happily, in England, no class is excluded from serving the public and none excludes itself. And whatever the heat of strife may be, no section has found itself ostracized or silenced, nor has any imputed corruption to

its opponents. This is perhaps of all others the most hopeful sign in English public life. Men of wealth, of culture, of social distinction, are well aware that any claims they have must be justified by their own personal competence and by proof of their devotion to the public. They know this to be the price of their very existence as a class and of any consideration they may seek. And they are willing to pay.

A new body with interests so various, charged with working out a municipal life for London with its historic jumble of anomalous accretions, would be a poor thing if it did not show ambition, originality, and reforming zeal. Such a body is not likely to show either the deep wisdom of experience or the soberness of age. It will do things which its best friends think hazardous and say things which make its worst enemies exult. All the same, this development of municipal life in London, with its growing attention to Labor Ideals, is the most truly typical fact in our new political life. And, what is so puzzling to strangers who talk of the British aristocracy in the style of conventional ignorance, no men show more willingness to attend to the Labor Ideal than do men of rank and proved experience in affairs.

In any case, the growth of municipal energy is among the most stirring facts of our age. The claims which are now being matured in the London Council amount to the complete reorganization of the largest city in the world. To fuse a population of five millions, dwelling in portions of four counties and scattered over two hundred square miles, with hundreds of chance-medley local authorities and thousands of local acts—to make them an organic unit, while adjusting to the new body the mediæval corporation of historic London—is no light task. To recast the municipal taxation over this vast area, to throw a substantial part of that taxation on the owners of the soil and not on the occupants of tenements, to do something to make the Labor Ideal a reality, is now the ambition of the New Council. England, we are often assured, is the inveterate home of Feudalism, Privilege, and Routine. It may be so; but she is at last creating for herself municipal governments that genuinely represent the will of the people; wherein all orders of citizens, rich and poor, noble and simple, can meet on equal terms and work together with a will; wherein no suspicion of corruption has cast its shadow, and where, on every single vote and scheme, the interests of the laboring masses are most patiently considered and are advocated with eloquence and effect by genuine and honest leaders of the people.

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FRENCH POLITICAL STABILITY AND ECONOMIC UNREST.

THE French Republic, the third of the name in less than a century, has just completed its twentieth year. It has escaped the dangers of its early childhood; it has passed successfully the trying years of growth and youth; it is now in its majority. Into political life enters a generation that has known no other form of government, that has had no share in the faults and in the lamentable end of the Second Empire. What ideas, what principles predominate among the people at the present hour? What currents of opinion are being formed? What new problems are forcing themselves upon the attention of the statesmen of France, which is so old as a nation and so young as a republic?

I will first call attention to a remarkable revival of public opinion with regard to colonial questions. Some years ago expeditions to remote places (such as Tonquin, Madagascar, etc.) were the cause of impassioned discussion. They occasioned the government the most serious embarrassment. The opposition party violently reproached it for the sacrifices of men and treasure demanded by the countries lately placed under the protection of France. According to this party, these new acquisitions cost much more than they ever brought, and as the sooner a piece of folly is mended the better, there should be no hesitation in evacuating countries that ought never to have been occupied. On this subject the radical and the monarchical press were unanimous.

To-day these arguments are almost never heard. Public opinion is reconciled to colonial enterprises; it would not permit them to be abandoned. It does justice to the clear-sightedness of the statesmen that seized the favorable moment for assuring to France new possessions outside Europe. The change seems due chiefly to the fortunate results obtained by the French protectorate in Tunis. This success, which has been rapid and is constantly growing, has made a great impression. It has given confidence. The people are asking if with equally able administrators the other countries that have recently come under the French protectorate may not also become a source of wealth and of increased power to the mother country.