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MR. SWINBURNE'S POEMS.

THE praise of Venus has been often sung, but never in any existing verse of high order with the unhesitating frankness and untempered fervor which distinguish Mr. Swinburne's last volume of poems.* Disdaining apology or subterfuge, he lifts up his voice, and with unfaltering tongue and unambiguous phrase he tells in the rich music of his verse the joys of Aphrodite. Of his capacity and his inclination to treat this theme in this manner every attentive reader of his last two poems "Atalanta in Calydon" and "Chastelard" must be well aware. Both those poems were distinguished by a large simplicity and directness of utterance which showed that the poet had risen far above the plane of timid conventionality; and the latter showed a tendency toward an open recognition of the power of sexual love and an intense, if not an ideal, expression of its working. The promise of those two dramatic poems in this regard has been amply, but somewhat hastily fulfilled in the present volume, which, as Mr. Swinburne of course expected, is loudly condemned by all that class of critics who are content to "dwell in decencies forever." We have heard of editors who have refused to notice the book even by way of condemnation, lest they should thus contribute to its notoriety. A weak, unwise, shortsighted policy. Poets of Mr. Swinburne's grade are not to be crushed by condemnation or extinguished by neglect; least of all when they find their inspiration in a passion which has stirred and swayed the world ever since it became the habitation of two sexes. If they do wrong, if they soil their plumes by too close a contact with unmitigated human nature, let them be convicted and condemned; but let us not fondly suppose, when one of them gives voice to the delight of men in the beauty of women and of women in the manliness of men that we can stop the world's ears by pretending that *we* don't hear him. No, Mr. Swinburne's book, like all books that, whether good or bad, are bold and able and high-toned, must be taken up and discussed and its place in literature decided by the general judgment of men, aided through, not controlled by, the decisions of criticism. The very fact that a large edition of the book was bought up here in three or four days, and that it is the subject of conversation among cultivated and thoughtful people should of itself show critics that it is not to be ignored. We have called these poems high-toned; and this epithet against which some of Mr. Swinburne's censors would most loudly protest, is the one of all at our command which we regard as most particularly expressive of their distinctive character. Their subject we have stated in plain terms; and they present that subject unveiled, simply, without mitigation, as bare of concealment as a naked, un-fig-leaved statue. Yet, in the very essence of their thought they are high-toned. They are filled full of the utterance of that joy

* "Laus Veneris, and other Poems and Ballads." By Algernon Charles Swinburne. Author's Edition. New York: Carleton. London: Moxon & Co.

which to gross souls is gross, but which to all others is mysteriously no less imaginative than sensuous; but there is in them not one passage that is vulgar, or coarse, or even immodest. There is in Pope's "Rape of the Lock," a poem which is within the reach of any girl who desires to read it, a line of more immodesty than could be made of all Charles Swinburne's poems concentrated within the same compass. And by calling Mr. Swinburne's lyrics high-toned we do not mean merely that they are the product of genius. They are that indeed; but so is "Don Juan," a poem open to objection of the same kind as those which are urged against "Laus Veneris;" but "Don Juan," work of genius although it be, is as low in tone, as light and as frivolous as "Laus Veneris" is high and impressive and serious. "Don Juan" was written to furnish amusement by the prurient treatment of forbidden subjects; "Laus Veneris" is the presentation in the naked ideal of an overpowering passion. It is not immodest but, like other things that are also not immodest, under certain circumstances it is indecent. The line above alluded to in the "Rape of the Lock" is immodest and under all circumstances indecent, because it belittles, and degrades, and treats with gross familiarity, and sets up for jeers and laughter one of the most masterful of human passions, and one which more than any other sways, through soul and sense, the whole being of every perfect human creature. Mr. Swinburne writes with no such motive. He shows us the figure of Love stripped bare, but never grovelling. Yet, as we have said, his book is, or rather it becomes indecent under certain circumstances. The man who would read in mixed society, at this day, or read to a young woman, or, for that matter, to an old one, such a poem as Mr. Swinburne's sonnet, "Love and Sleep" would commit an act so indecent as to merit the immediate ejection from the house, which he would probably receive. But so would he be indecent if he offered the woman a caress, which, under other circumstances, she would both desire and expect. So would he be if he read many passages in the "Song of Solomon," which are in every respect as plain-spoken and as fervid as anything that Mr. Swinburne has written, and certain others in the fourth and the eighth books of "Paradise Lost." And yet, the woman who cannot read any of these herself without harm, is already long past mental contamination. The question is plainly this, Is sexual love in itself impure? or is it in itself entirely without moral character, and under certain circumstances as rightful as it is joyful, and under others criminal, and in the end full of bitterness? Will men who have wives and mothers, and women who hope to be wives and mothers decide for the former? And if it is not impure, filling, as it does, so large a place and having so important a function in man's life, shall it be excluded from the domain of art, of high art? No, but let it be draped, is the reply that will come from some quarters. Surely, let it be draped, except he comes who shows that he has the right to lift its veil. He will show his right by the way in which he exercises it. We do not go about unclothed. We do not put *any* undraped picture upon our walls, because there are few painters who have the right to paint nude figures for pure-minded people. But when one of those who have the right paints such a picture, then it hangs before our eyes and we see that it is naked, and are not ashamed. What genius and high mental tone are in art love as well as in real life—so our poet says:

> Behold my Venus, my soul's body, lies
> With my love laid upon her garment-wise.

This is the key note of his song. To a woman who loves, the love of the

man she loves is as a garment. A modest woman never lays aside her modesty; but as to shame, one of the greatest of moralists tells us that that may be taken off and put on like her petticoat. It is from this moral plane, and through this moral medium that Mr. Swinburne contemplates his subject. We have said that his lyrics, under certain circumstances, would be indecent: more, to many people, they will be blasphemous. Take this passage as an example curiously framed to elicit both those epithets:

> Lo she was thus when her clear limbs enticed
> All lips that now grow sad with kissing Christ,
> Stained with the blood fallen from the feet of God,
> The feet and hands where at our souls were priced.
>
> Alas, Lord, surely thou art great and fair.
> But lo her wonderfully woven hair!
> And thou didst heal us with thy piteous kiss;
> But see now, Lord; her mouth is lovelier.
>
> She is right fair; what hath she done to thee?
> Nay, fair Lord Christ, lift up thine eyes and see;
> Had now thy mother such a lip—like this?
> Thou knowest how sweet a thing it is to me.

Could the ingenuity of genius, taxed for the sole purpose, contrive to bring together within twelve lines anything more shocking to the ascetic religionist than this? Let every man who can see in this passage only blasphemy and impurity, let every man who measures a woman's innocence by her physiological ignorance and her bodily torpidity, exclude this book from his house and the houses of all those in whom he takes an interest, as he would keep poison from his table; for it swells to bursting with such venom. There will be others who, perceiving at once the dramatic spirit through the lyric form of these poems, will find in them neither blasphemy nor the intention of blasphemy, and who, breathing the same moral atmosphere as the poet, will find in his song impurity neither of word nor thought. To all such readers they will not only be harmless, but full of deep and strong delight. Their beauty, and the joy they give, is heroic, and will consume small souls. It is like the beauty of the poet's "Dolores," to whom he says·

> Thou wert fair in the fearless old fashion,
> And thy limbs are as melodies yet.

His whole book is an expression of beauty and of passion in this fearless old fashion: naked, free and strong. Naked not for the sake of nakedness, but for the sake of freedom, strength and beauty. In this as in the dramatic motive of these lyrics, and also in his way of not beginning at the beginning, but, as it were, in the middle, and implying what has gone before, Mr. Swinburne is very like the greatest dramatic poet the world has seen for two centuries—Robert Browning. A failure to perceive the purely dramatic character of almost all the erotic poems in this volume must lead to a very erroneous and unjust judgment of the poet. Thus, in "Before Dawn" the supposed speaker says, that amid the fierce joys to which he has abandoned himself, he is ready,

> To say of shame—what is it?
> Of virtue—we can miss it;
> Of sin—we can but kiss it
> And it's no longer sin.

And of a beautiful woman it is said elsewhere,

> All her body was more virtuous
> Than souls of women fashioned otherwise.

These passages cause sentence to be pronounced upon him in various quarters for the crime of asserting that delight purges sin of wrong and that beauty makes vice virtue. But the poet is not preaching, he is painting. And the spirit, if not the very thought of both these passages is expressed by Browning in one of his finest poems, "Pippa Passes." Lucca's wife Ottima is with her paramour Sebald, to whom she says,

> Sebald, as we lay
> Rising and falling only with our pants
> Who said, Let death come now—'tis right to die!
> Right to be punished—naught completes such bliss
> But woe?
> . . . Bind it [her hair] thrice about my brow
> Crown me your queen, your spirit's arbitress,
> Magnificent in sin.

True, Browning makes the voice of Pippa singing "God is in his heaven" rouse Sebald from his guilty trance, to loathe his paramour. But so Swinburne closes his poem thus:

> Lest all who love and choose him
> See Love and so refuse him;
> For all who find him lose him,
> But all have found him fair.

Whoever will read this scene of Browning's—poet without reproach—will find in it an expression of delight in physical beauty and of abandonment to passion which it would almost seem that Mr. Swinburne had imitated and not surpassed. And in Browning's "Dramatic Lyrics" and in his "Men and Women" are other passages that glow with all the amorous fire that burns in Mr. Swinburne's pages. There is this great difference, however, among others, between the poets, that Browning has not published a volume devoted to the celebration of sexual love and fleshly beauty. But that Mr. Swinburne has done so is at once his sin and his salvation, as a poet writing for the general public. Whoever takes up this volume knows beforehand exactly the entertainment to which he is bidden; no reader finds himself *betrayed* into reading erotic poetry. For one of the poems in this book we can, however, find no excuse, even in its marvellous beauty, because its subject is without the pale of nature. True, it is purely dramatic; but why the poet should choose such a subject as that incomprehensible, monstrous passion known as "Sapphic love," and name his poem by the Greek word "Anactoria," i. e., sovereignty, we cannot conjecture. Had he exhausted nature and the love of man and woman for each other? Yet, in this poem, as we have already intimated, are some of the finest passages that he has written, some of the very finest in all modern poetry. We do not refer only or chiefly to such exquisite expressions of love as,

> The fervent under lid, and that above
> Lifted with laughter or abashed with love,
> Thine amorous girdle, *full of thee* and fair,
> And leavings of the lilies in thine hair.

The poem passes beyond these limits, and deals not reverentially with sub-

jects higher and vaster than mere human passion. In a passage of this kind are the following lines, of strange power and awful beauty :

> For who shall change with prayers and thanksgivings
> The mystery of the cruelty of things?
> Or say what God above all gods and years
> With offering and blood and sacrifice of tears,
> With lamentation from strange lands, from graves
> Where the snake pastures, from scarred mouths of slaves,
> From prison, and from plunging prows of ships
> Through flame-like foam of the sea's closing lips—
> With thwarting of strange signs, and wind-blown hair
> Of comets, desolating the dim air,
> When darkness is made fast with seals and bars
> And fierce reluctance of disastrous stars,
> Eclipse, and sound of shaken hills, and wings
> Darkening, and blind inexplicable things—
> With sorrow of laboring moons, and altering light
> And travail of the planets of the night,
> And weeping of the weary Pleiad's seven,
> Feeds the mute, melancholy lust of heaven

This may be frightfully impious, even when put into the mouth of the heathen Sappho; but it is not, therefore, one whit less grand. Has there lived more than one other poet who could think such thoughts and use language with such supreme mastery? We do not remember in all poetical literature a passage which expresses with such sustained power the vague terror and mysterious woe of the whole universe. It is in his daring use of language and his ability to justify his daring that half Mr. Swinburne's power resides. In the above passage this power is very striking. The very phrase "disastrous stars," against which the etymological criticism might be brought that it is tautological—"disastrous" having come to mean fraught with calamity because it first meant ill-starred—is yet evidence of the poet's rightful consciousness of a power which places him above all such pedagogic considerations in his choice of words. A scholar himself, he can yet leave his scholarship out of sight and out of mind, while yet with the trained skill of an intellectual athlete he does feats of language which to mere scholars would be impossible. He is the master, not the servant of words, and uses them for the service that they can do to-day, not for that which they could do in days gone by. Yet that he can use them thus, as if he had been born four hundred years ago, he shows in "The Masque of Queen Bersabe" and "St. Dorothy." And the name of the latter poem reminds us to mention it as one that for its spirit might have been written by a saintly nun. It is a poetic exaltation of the legend of the Christian virgin who died in Rome by the axe rather than enter the service of Venus, as that service was in the decadence of the Empire. There are other poems of like spirit in the volume. Such are "Itylus," one of the sweetest and tenderest, as well as most musical lyric poems in the language, "A Lamentation" and "Amina Anceps;" and although such as these are rare, those are frequent which tell terribly of the woes that wrongful love may bring. There is not a sadder, more remorseful poem to be read than "The Triumph of Time." But magazines have limits, and we must stay our hand. Mr. Swinburne's poems are not without faults, but these are trifling indeed compared with the strange, fresh beauty of the pages that they spot. One blemish of frequent occur-

rence we have noticed—the more because it should not have appeared in the work of a poet who is so fertile of fancy, so rich in language, and who has such a remarkable gift of rhyme. The kisses that, whether implied or named must needs be plentifully scattered over the pages of an erotic poet, are too often used for sound as well as sense by Mr. Swinburne—who ought to be above making "kiss" rhyme to "bliss"—and, moreover, are incessantly represented as stings or wounds. The lips that give and take them are described as flecked with blood and very often with salt foam; so often, indeed, that it provokes the thought that Mr. Swinburne gets his lovers into a very sad pickle. This blemish is one symptom of the general evil of these poems—that they are overwrought and have too little of the repose which is a necessary condition of all high art. The turbulence is grand, the passion is real as well as fervid; but we do not like to live in a tempest. We cannot refrain from remarking that Mr. Swinburne has the high distinction of being the first poet since Shakespeare who has written lines that Shakespeare might have written. We do not mean to liken him to Shakespeare; and we refer not to his thoughts but to his turn of phrase, which is sometimes like Shakespeare's in his sonnets. We can only quote as example these lines from the beautiful poem upon the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis:

> Where between sleep and life some brief space is
> With love like gold bound round about the head,
> Sex to sweet sex with lips and limbs is wed,
> Turning the fruitful feud of hers and his
> *To the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss.*

That last line Mr. Swinburne might have recovered from some lost sonnet of Shakespeare's; so might he this whole passage.

> *To what strange end hath some strange god made fair*
> *The double blossom of two fruitless flowers?*
> Hid love in all the folds of all thy hair
> *Fed thee on Summers,* watered thee with showers
> Given all the gold that all the seasons wear
> *To thee that art a thing of barren hours?*

But wide as are the bounds of our admiration, our expression of it must be compressed within narrow limits. Let no one misunderstand us. These poems are of the flesh fleshly. They are not of the kind that "will not bring a blush to the cheek of innocence," and they should be shunned and execrated by all people who believe that a blush of awakened consciousness is the first warning of the flight of purity. Nor would those who do not so believe, and who think that these dramatic lyrics have their place in poetry, and that no mean one, be pleased to see any friend, young or old, male or female, choose them for frequent perusal. They are not written *virginibus puerisque.* Yet the spirit that animates them is not that of Aretino; the pictures that they present do not bring up those that Giulio Romano drew. The men and women who speak through them are such as Raphael painted after he had touched the lips of the Fornarina. Let every man avert his eyes who believes that there is sin in passion or pollution in beauty.

RICHARD GRANT WHITE.