

TENNYSON

Mr. Morton Luce has written a short study of Tennyson which has considerable cultivation and suggestiveness, which will be sufficient to serve as a notebook for Tennyson's admirers, but scarcely sufficient, perhaps, to serve as a pamphlet against his opponents. If a critic has, as he ought to have, any of the functions anciently attributed to a prophet, it ought not to be difficult for him to prophesy that Tennyson will pass through a period of facile condemnation and neglect before we arrive at the true appreciation of his work. The same thing has happened to the most vigorous of essayists, Macaulay, and the most vigorous of romancers, Dickens, because we live in a time when mere vigour is considered a vulgar thing. The same idle and frigid reaction will almost certainly discredit the stateliness and care of Tennyson, as it has discredited the recklessness and inventiveness of Dickens. It is only necessary to remember that no action can be discredited by a reaction.

The attempts which have been made to discredit the poetical position of Tennyson are in the main dictated by an entire misunderstanding of the nature of poetry. When critics like Matthew Arnold, for example, suggest that his poetry is deficient in elaborate thought, they only prove, as Matthew Arnold proved, that they themselves could never be great poets. It is no valid accusation against a poet that the sentiment he expresses is commonplace. Poetry is always commonplace; it is vulgar in the noblest sense of that noble word. Unless a man can make the same kind of ringing appeal to absolute and admitted sentiments that is made by a popular orator, he has lost touch with emotional literature. Unless he is to some extent a demagogue, he cannot be a poet. A man who expresses in poetry new and strange and undiscovered emotions is not a poet; he is a brain specialist. Tennyson can never be discredited before any serious tribunal of criticism because the sentiments and thoughts to which he dedicates himself are those sentiments and thoughts which occur to anyone. These are the peculiar province of poetry; poetry, like religion, is always a democratic thing, even if it pretends the contrary. The faults of Tennyson, so far as they existed, were not half so much in the common character of his sentiments as in the arrogant perfection of his workmanship. He was not by any means so wrong in his faults as he was in his perfections.

Men are very much too ready to speak of men's work being ordinary, when we consider that, properly considered, every man is extraordinary. The average man is a tribal fable, like the Man-Wolf or the Wise Man of the Stoics. In every man's heart there is a revolution; how much more in every poet's? The supreme business of criticism is to discover that part of a man's work which is his and to

ignore that part which belongs to others. Why should any critic of poetry spend time and attention on that part of a man's work which is unpoetical? Why should any man be interested in aspects which are uninteresting? The business of a critic is to discover the importance of men and not their crimes. It is true that the Greek word critic carries with it the meaning of a judge, and up to this point of history judges have had to do with the valuation of men's sins, and not with the valuation of their virtues.

Tennyson's work, disencumbered of all that uninteresting accretion which he had inherited or copied, resolves itself, like that of any other man of genius, into those things which he really inaugurated. Underneath all his exterior of polished and polite rectitude there was in him a genuine fire of novelty; only that, like all the able men of his period, he disguised revolution under the name of evolution. He is only a very shallow critic who cannot see an eternal rebel in the heart of the Conservative.

Tennyson had certain absolutely personal ideas, as much his own as the ideas of Browning or Meredith, though they were fewer in number. One of these, for example, was the fact that he was the first of all poets (and perhaps the last) to attempt to treat poetically that vast and monstrous vision of fact which science had recently revealed to mankind. Scientific discoveries seem commonly fables as fantastic in the ears of poets as poems in the ears of men of science. The poet is always a Ptolemaist; for him the sun still rises and the earth stands still. Tennyson really worked the essence of modern science into his poetical constitution, so that its appalling birds and frightful flowers were really part of his literary imagery. To him blind and brutal monsters, the products of the wild babyhood of the Universe, were as the daisies and the nightingales were to Keats; he absolutely realised the great literary paradox mentioned in the Book of Job: "He saw Behemoth, and he played with him as with a bird."

Instances of this would not be difficult to find. But the tests of poetry are those instances in which this outrageous scientific phraseology becomes natural and unconscious. Tennyson wrote one of his own exquisite lyrics describing the exultation of a lover on the evening before his bridal day. This would be an occasion, if ever there was one, for falling back on those ancient and assured falsehoods of the domed heaven and the flat earth in which generations of poets have made us feel at home. We can imagine the poet in such a lyric saluting the setting sun and prophesying the sun's resurrection. There is something extraordinarily typical of Tennyson's scientific faith in the fact that this, one of the most sentimental and elemental of his poems, opens with the two lines:

"Move eastward, happy earth, and leave Yon orange sunset waning slow."

Rivers had often been commanded to flow by poets, and flowers to blossom in their season, and both were doubtless grateful for the permission. But the terrestrial globe of science has only twice, so far as we know, been encouraged in poetry to continue its course, one instance being that of this poem, and the other the incomparable "Address to the Terrestrial Globe" in the "Bab Ballads."

There was, again, another poetic element entirely peculiar to Tennyson, which his critics have, in many cases, ridiculously confused with a fault. This was the fact that Tennyson stood alone among modern poets in the attempt to give a poetic character to the conception of Liberal Conservatism, of splendid compromise. The carping critics who have abused Tennyson for this do not see that it was far more daring and original for a poet to defend conventionality than to defend a cart-load of revolutions. His really sound and essential conception of Liberty,

"Turning to scorn with lips divine The falsehood of extremes,"

is as good a definition of Liberalism as has been uttered in poetry in the Liberal century. Moderation is not a compromise; moderation is a passion; the passion of great judges. That Tennyson felt that lyrical enthusiasm could be devoted to established customs, to indefensible and ineradicable national constitutions, to the dignity of time and the empire of unutterable common sense, all this did not make him a tamer poet, but an infinitely more original one. Any poetaster can describe a thunderstorm; it requires a poet to describe the ancient and quiet sky.

I cannot, indeed, fall in with Mr. Morton Luce in his somewhat frigid and patrician theory of poetry. "Dialect," he says, "mostly falls below the dignity of art." I cannot feel myself that art has any dignity higher than the indwelling and divine dignity of human nature. Great poets like Burns were far more undignified when they clothed their thoughts in what Mr. Morton Luce calls "the seemly raiment of cultured speech" than when they clothed them in the headlong and flexible patois in which they thought and prayed and quarrelled and made love. If Tennyson failed (which I do not admit) in such poems as "The Northern Farmer," it was not because he used too much of the spirit of the dialect, but because he used too little.

Tennyson belonged undoubtedly to a period from which we are divided; the period in which men had queer ideas of the antagonism of science and religion; the period in which the Missing Link was really missing. But his hold upon the old realities of existence never wavered; he was the apostle of the sanctity of laws, of the sanctity of customs; above all, like every poet, he was the apostle of the sanctity of words.