

MR. WATTS AT THE GROSVENOR GALLERY.



FREDERICK WATTS, R. A.

ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON FROM A PHOTOGRAPH FROM LIFE BY HOLLYER.

THE recent exhibition of Mr. Watts's pictures, at the Grosvenor Gallery, in London, has given the lovers of contemporary art an opportunity such as is rarely to be obtained for passing in review the works of a great living artist. It is hardly necessary to say that so complete a collection of any man's works forms an ordeal for the painter of a very trying kind. But Mr. Watts may fairly be said to have stood the test. His pictures are remarkable, from first to last, for unity of aim and persistent nobility of sentiment. There is indeed a marked contrast of style between his earlier and later works, and a strange uneven-

ness of attainment even in those of one epoch ; but a strong idiosyncrasy asserts itself throughout. Influenced as he was, at the outset of his career, by the preraphaelite movement, he never gave himself up to its extravagances, and he speedily worked out a style of his own. All painters of genius employ different methods of presenting their thoughts at different epochs of their lives, and Mr. Watts is no exception to the rule ; but his changes of manner have been comparatively slight, and we are unable to trace in his work such various phases of æsthetic thought as were illustrated in the collection of Mr. Millais' works the year before. The delicacy and minuteness of Mr. Watts's earlier pictures gave way to greater breadth of effect and rapidity of execution ; his coloring, at first somewhat crude, became less brilliant but richer, more harmonious and subdued, while a greater depth of feeling, a somber grandeur or melancholy, sometimes almost "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," has taken the place of the sunnier light-heartedness of youth. From the first, Mr. Watts's mind has shown a bent toward the tragic side of art, toward the abstract and ideal, and much musing on these thoughts has produced an unmistakable effect. But this effect has been gradually, not suddenly produced, and however much the later work may differ from the earlier, there has been no revolution in Mr. Watts's mind, but a similar tendency is visible throughout.

Mr. Watts's genius, like that of Mr. Browning, is not one that readily appeals to the popular appreciation. His work, at least his most characteristic work, is too full of thought to impress the crowd of sight-seers who troop through a picture gallery, led by fashion and curiosity rather than by love of art. His poetical conceptions are generally of too abstract and ideal a nature to be grasped at first sight. They are too deeply felt to arouse sympathy in the masses. To one who does not study them they will appear all but unmeaning, while only considerable attention will unveil their full significance. This is why Mr. Watts is not and cannot, in these days, be a really popular painter. The fashion of the age prescribes for art bounds which it cannot pass without forfeiting its universality. It is no longer the business of art to teach but to amuse ; and if Orcagna or Michael Angelo were to live and paint again, it is doubtful whether he would not die in penury. We admire these masters of old days, because our instructors have dinned their greatness into our ears till we are fain to believe ; but if the statue of Moses were to appear for the first time in next year's Academy, we should be told that his horns were ridiculous, and his

beard half a yard too long. And so it is with Mr. Watts. Those who wish to be amused go away unsatisfied, and laugh at the power they cannot feel. Moreover, it must be confessed that Mr. Watts sometimes fails to make his meaning clear, and that now and then his want of humor lays him open to those who have a keen sense of the ridiculous. A painter who constantly strains his power to the utmost, who delights in facing difficulties and in scaling heights, will sometimes come dangerously near the abyss which awaits the sublime. But such a man is rather to be judged by his successes ; and even where he fails, there is often more to be learned than in the triumphs of a weaker mind.

If Mr. Matthew Arnold is right in claiming for Wordsworth the first place among English poets by virtue of the purity and dignity of his moral ideas, we may surely award to Mr. Watts a somewhat similar praise. If Mr. Ruskin is right in demanding that Art shall be conscious of its moral power, and that a painting shall be finally judged by the poetical and moral grandeur of the truths that it conveys, then surely we may find in Mr. Watts's work one at least of the essential conditions of all that is noble and valuable in art. It is a mere truism to say that poetry and painting set before themselves dissimilar aims ; but it is equally true that painting, like poetry, has its moral influence and its moral responsibility. The moral ideas which attract Mr. Arnold in Wordsworth are not to be confused with sermons, nor should we expect to find sermons in Mr. Watts. But a high rank is to be given to his painting, as it is to be given to the best English poetry, on account of the elevated and poetical spirit in which it treats the highest problems of the human mind. These characteristics of Mr. Watts's genius have naturally led him to devote himself mainly to two departments of pictorial art—portraits and ideals. All great painters of ideal subjects have paid considerable attention to portraiture, and Mr. Watts is no exception to the rule. Like Antæus, the portrait-painter touches mother earth whenever he paints a human face, and comes back refreshed and enriched with a new experience. The lack of such recreation, as in the truest sense it may be called, leads, as in Mr. Burne-Jones, to a monotony of form and expression and a want of humanity, for which no amount of esoteric beauty and no intensity of poetical feeling can atone. The greatest painter of ideal landscape, Turner, constantly refreshed his imagination by an intimate and faithful study of nature. So, too, the painter who attempts the expression of poetical ideas or ideal emotions, by means of the human

figure, will become narrow and vapid unless he invigorates his genius by frequent draughts from the living, thinking, suffering humanity around him. Mr. Watts is one of those painters whose two-edged activity manifests the mutual helpfulness of portrait and ideal. The varied experience of the portrait-painter supplies the material whence ideas arise, and the concentrated study which is essential to successful portraiture gives a firm hold on natural truth. On the other hand, the process of abstraction, the effort to rise above detail, which is implied in the expression of the ideal, strengthens and enlarges the mind, and enables the portrait-painter to detect at once, beneath what is trivial or conventional, the essential characteristics of the man. In Mr. Watts, we have a portrait-painter of remarkable fidelity and comprehension and a painter of ideal subjects, distinguished at once by truth and vigor of drawing and by breadth and originality of conception. His greatness in the one branch is not to be separated from his greatness in the other.

Mr. Watts's portraits vary, however, to an unusual degree in excellence. Faithful and intelligent they always are; sympathetic they not infrequently are not. Broadly speaking, his portraits of men are superior to his portraits of women, while his portraits of children are sometimes little better than failures. His genius is of a thoughtful and somber, even melancholy kind, and expands fully only when it meets its like. Thought, action, experience, the masculine characteristics in fine, are more to his taste than feminine grace, elegance, or vivacity. For what is essential in the beauty of childhood he seems to have little sympathy. A painter of his power will always produce what is worth examination; but a comparison of the best of his children with almost any child of Reynolds, Gainsborough, or Millais, will show how far he stands, in this respect, below those painters who have made the portraiture of children a distinctive excellence of English art.

Mr. Watts's earlier portraits are characterized by great care and minuteness, and a pre-raphaelite attention to detail; but they are comparatively ineffective, and their color is sometimes very unpleasing. The differences of style and treatment that manifest themselves in this period show that Mr. Watts did not for some years fix upon the treatment most suitable to his mind. His great time as a portrait-painter extends about from the year 1860 to 1875. Within this period fall almost all the best of his works in this line. It would be hard, indeed, to point out a portrait of this generation more admirable in every respect than that of John Stuart Mill,

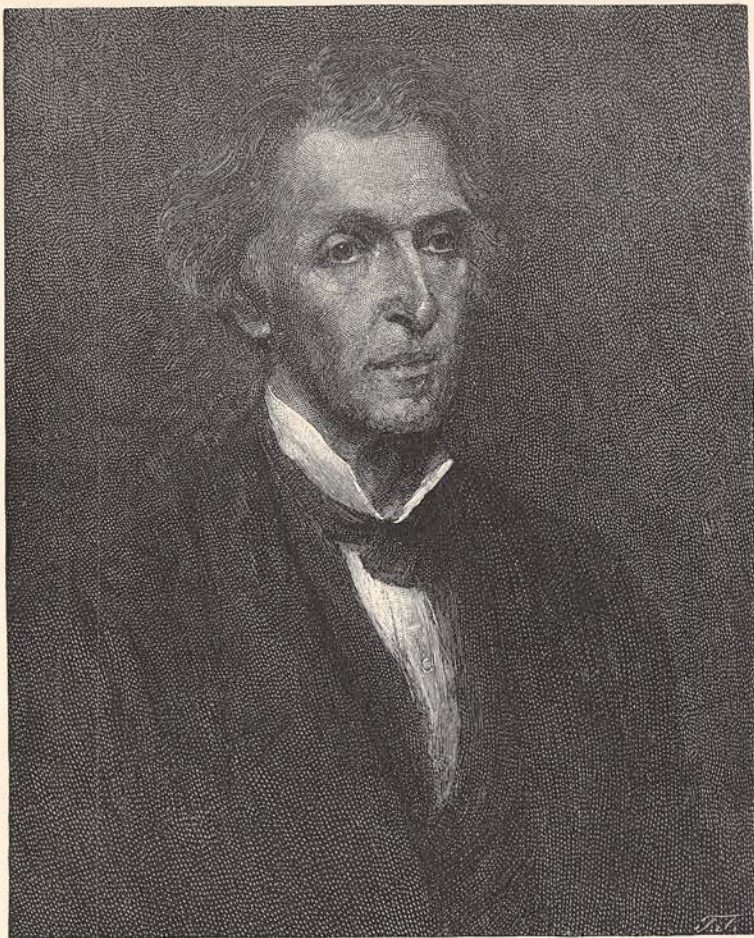
so wonderfully reproduced by M. Rajon. The keen and subtle intellect of the philosopher is apparent in the clear-cut features, the deep-set eyes, the absorbed and concentrated gaze, the fine, curved nose, the straight, thin-lipped, passionless mouth. It is not a face to inspire enthusiasm, for it is too intellectual, too far above the failings and weaknesses of ordinary humanity; but it infuses profound respect, and admiration of a distant kind, as of a man who combined the highest moral courage with the rarest mental gifts. Technically, too, the picture is worthy of its subject: it is a perfect piece of work, highly finished, subdued and harmonious in color. It is fortunate indeed that Mill, who never sat for another portrait, fell into Mr. Watts's hands. Equally striking in another line is the portrait of Lord Lawrence. In Mill we have the man of thought: here we have the man of action. Mill was a creator of ideas, Lord Lawrence was a leader of men. Command is written on every feature of the face; the heavy brow, the massive chin, the broad straight nose, the fiery eye, the direct and searching gaze; while the pose of the head and the strong thick neck betray a physical power fit for a man of herculean energy and indomitable will. The portrait of the late Sir Anthony Panizzi, librarian of the British Museum, exemplifies most clearly Mr. Watts's insight into character, and his fearless love of truth. He has not flattered his subject in the least, and to many observers there would have been nothing remarkable in the plain heavy face, poring over an old book. But Mr. Watts has seen, and enables us to see, in those unattractive features, all the grandeur of concentrated thought and patient labor which make what was valuable in the man.

It would be tedious, did space permit, to go through Mr. Watts's portraits in detail, but we may remark the extraordinary number of great men whose features he has handed down to posterity. To be in the Grosvenor Gallery, last winter, was to be in the presence of much that is or has been most remarkable in this generation in science, in philosophy, in politics, in poetry, in art. Mr. Watts's subjects do not indeed, as we have already remarked, all fare equally well at his hands. Lawyers and politicians are, perhaps, the least successful. On the other hand, with what breadth of sympathy and keenness of insight has Mr. Watts depicted the thoughtful and spiritual features of Dr. Martineau; the scientific ardor of Mr. Spottiswoode; the religious benevolence of Lord Shaftesbury; the critical, almost fretful acuteness of Mr. Leslie Stephen! In one part of the room there hung a group of poets. What intensity of feeling and depth



MRS. PERCY WYNDHAM.

ENGRAVED BY MISS C. A. POWELL, FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY HOLLYER OF THE PAINTING BY FREDERICK WATTS, R. A.



REV. JAMES MARTINEAU, D. D.

ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON, AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH BY HOLLYER OF THE PAINTING BY FREDERICK WATTS, R. A.

of meditation are visible in the towering brow and down-drawn eyes of the Laureate! what robust and manly vigor, as of one of his own Norse heroes, in the open features of Mr. Morris! what power of thought and dignity of character in the massive profile of Mr. Browning! There, too, was a group of painters: Sir Frederick Leighton, whose Grecian beauty of feature and luxuriant hair seem to indicate the peculiarities of his genius; Mr. Calderon, whose face recalls the melancholy knight of *La Mancha*; the sad and secluded fancy of Mr. Burne-Jones; the artistic power and poetical enthusiasm of Mr. Watts himself.

It cannot be said that the portraits of women exhibited in this collection of last winter, beautiful as many of them are, are as successful on the whole as those of the eminent men already noticed. The color of the

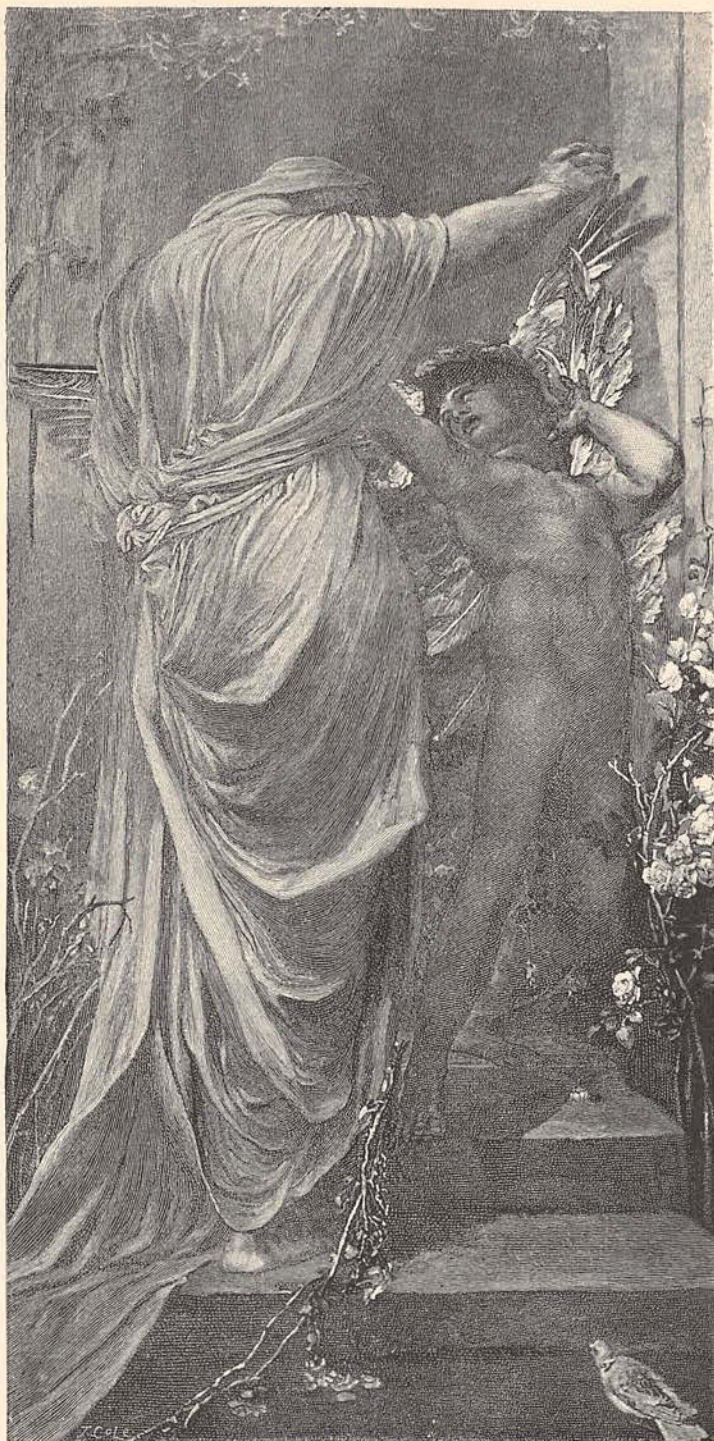
flesh-painting, often unpleasing in Mr. Watts's portraits, is sometimes almost repulsive in his female faces, while in the full-length pictures there is little of that easy grace and elegance which render charming every fold of a woman's robe in the hands of Reynolds or of Gainsborough. At the same time, Mr. Watts's wonderful feeling for beauty of outline shows itself, for instance, in the portrait of Miss Lindsay; while that of Mrs. Percy Wyndham is equally remarkable for dignity and statuesque repose. The latter picture was indeed one of the triumphs of the exhibition. The pose of the figure is easy, yet noble and high-bred; the coloring is rich, subdued, and harmonious; the deep greens and browns, the dull gold sunflowers on the dress, and the laurel-leaves of the background harmonize exquisitely with the dark hair and the sallow complexion of the face.

But we must not pause longer in this department of Mr. Watts's work. Nor need we linger over the few examples of animal and landscape painting exhibited in the recent collection. It is not as a painter of animals or landscape that Mr. Watts has sought to be remembered, nor is it even on his portraits that his highest fame will ultimately rest. His greatest power, that which is most original and peculiar in his genius, shows itself in his ideal and poetical compositions. It is the poetry of human life that possesses for him the highest attraction. He uses inanimate nature solely as an aid or accompaniment to the central theme. It is this all-pervading human interest, this direct expression of humanity, added to the purity and loftiness of his sentiments, that justifies us in calling Mr. Watts's pictures poetical in the highest sense. Poetical no one who examines them with the slightest attention will deny them to be, for they express in a visible form the human emotions with which poetry has to deal. The absence from the recent collection of his works of what are called *genre* pictures is no less striking than the frequency of the tragic element. Whatever else may be said of his painting, the most adverse critic will hardly find in it anything vulgar or even trivial, scarcely anything that is commonplace. It may, however, be objected that his pictures, when viewed together, produce a gloomy or depressing effect. Their pervading gloom is oppressive to a public that wishes to be amused, to take refuge for a moment in some sunny clime or some gay scene from the murkiness and insipidity of daily life. But it should be observed that the general characteristic of Mr. Watts's work is rather seriousness than sadness. The melancholy of his pictures, where it occurs, is not mere empty or languid joylessness. It is rather the melancholy that seems inseparable from higher poetic feeling. It is the melancholy of those who sympathize with suffering, or who are occupied with the insoluble but absorbing problems which human life at every turn presents to the thoughtful and sympathetic mind. There is much, too, in Mr. Watts's work that is anything but gloomy or sad. If there is anguish in the "Paolo and Francesca," or a tale of woe to be read in the crouching figure "Under a Dry Arch," there is the joy of supreme beauty in the "Daphne," sunny peace in the "Arcadia," devotion and lofty hope in the "Galahad," trust and chivalry in "Una and the Red Cross Knight," brotherly affection and generosity in the "Meeting of Jacob and Esau." Any one who regards these works attentively will be rather elevated and consoled than saddened or depressed by their

contemplation. For one thing, at least, is never lacking in them that is sadly lacking in the world at large, and that is the energy of a noble thought.

It is not, indeed, always that Mr. Watts has succeeded in bringing his thought to the birth, or in giving it adequate expression. Greek poetry, for instance, is but inadequately symbolized by the recumbent figure which Mr. Watts, in one of his pictures, intends to represent it. The subject is too vast to be treated in such a way. It is, in truth, just as impossible for one figure, however pregnant with significance, to express what we mean by Greek poetry as for one man to have written the Iliad, the Pythian Odes, and the Antigone. Sometimes, again, Mr. Watts's ideas are too subtle or complicated to lend themselves properly to pictorial expression. In ideal pictures clearness and simplicity are indispensable to effect, and if the subject has to be explained at length in the catalogue, it is clear that the painter has transcended the limits of pictorial art. This is not, indeed, a common fault with Mr. Watts, for generally his pictures explain themselves; but now and then there is considerable obscurity. We may, however, safely leave fault-finding to others. It is a more pleasing task to turn to those triumphs which we can fully and heartily admire. Mr. Watts has not drawn very much from the aspects of social life around him; but where he has done so, he has handled it in the spirit of Hood or Mr. Browning, with deep sympathy for the woes of suffering humanity. The two pictures entitled "Found Drowned" might serve as illustrations of Hood's famous poem on "The Bridge of Sighs," while "The Needlewoman" breathes all the pathos of the "Song of the Shirt." The sadness of these and other pictures of the same kind shows that Mr. Watts possesses one, at least, of the essentials of a great poet—the comprehension of what is meant by pain.

Very remarkable, as illustrating another phase of his poetic mind, is the group of subjects taken from the Bible. There was not a single picture of the kind ordinarily called religious in the recent collection, but Mr. Watts has treated the Bible as a store-house of poetic imagery, as affording abundant material for lofty pictorial treatment. His subjects are taken almost exclusively from the Old Testament; and when he turns to the New, it is from the moral or poetical portions, from the Parables or the Apocalypse, that he prefers to draw his inspiration. His diploma picture, "The Death of Abel," is a very impressive composition. The dead body of the murdered man lies at his brother's feet; the fire from heaven mingles with the flames of the



LOVE AND DEATH.

ENGRAVED BY T. COLE, AFTER THE PHOTOGRAPH BY HOLLYER OF THE PAINTING BY FREDERICK WATTS, R. A.

altar; the ministers of divine vengeance descend upon the slayer's head; he clasps his hands to his face and flees from the hideous sight to wander an outcast in the world. Equally striking is Mr. Watts's conception of "Esau." The gaunt, uncouth being stands solitary, wrapped in his rugged mantle, in the midst of the desert that is his home. With downcast eyes and melancholy pose, he meditates sadly on the birthright bargained away and the blessing lost for ever. We feel a strange sympathy for him, as for Ishmael and others of the supplanted, a sympathy akin to that aroused by Browning's "Saul." A striking and highly poetical conception is that entitled "Watchman, what of the Night?" A white face, pale and weary with anxious waiting and suspense, looks out into the darkness. "Watchman, will the night soon pass?" The drawn lips repeat the question; but the answer—"The night is departing, the day is at hand"—has not yet come. The grandeur of thought, nobility of expression, and originality of treatment manifested in this series of Biblical and allegorical pictures, remind us of Michael Angelo more than of any other painter.

Mr. Watts's intense feeling for physical beauty shows itself in a remarkable series of studies of the female form. As we should expect from the character of his genius, the beauty that attracts him is of a severe and classic kind. We find in his women no trace of the fleshy robustness of Rubens, or the voluptuous undulations of Tintoret. In place of these qualities, we have beauty of a graver and purer type, statuesque in character, depending for its attractiveness on outline and molding rather than on richness and color. But a fair exterior is not the only, nor even the primary, object which Mr. Watts has in view. Physical beauty, however worthy of admiration in itself, is chiefly valued by him as heightening the effect of the poetical ideas which the picture is intended to convey. The lovely shoulders and swelling bosom of "Pygmalion's Wife," in all their marble coldness, at once account for the sculptor's love, and help us to imagine the intensity of that kiss that could warm so stony a being into life. The drooping form and hanging limbs of the "Psyche," with their slight and girlish grace, are full of pathetic sadness, touching resignation, and self-reproach. Her sister's jealousy has gained its end; poisoned by the breath of suspicion, love has fled, and the girl awakes to find herself alone. One feather from his wing has fallen to the floor, and as she gazes down upon it the truth begins to dawn on her that she has lost the god. But of all this group of pictures, the "Daphne,"

preëminent in physical beauty and poetic thought, is most characteristic of Mr. Watts's mind. The figure of the nymph, shaded but not hidden by the laurel boughs, is resplendent with combined beauty, purity, and grace. The rich warm flesh-tints, as of limbs that have basked in a southern sun, harmonize with the dark green leaves behind. Faint and weary with her flight, the girl leans against the tree, into which the indistinct outlines of her form seem to be already melting away. It is hard to say where the human life ends and the vegetable life begins. The nature-worship of the Greek religion could hardly be rendered visible in a purer and more poetical form than this.

We have reserved till now a group of pictures, in which, more than in any others, Mr. Watts's poetical genius is displayed. Each is in itself a lyric poem, in which form, color, and expression stir the sympathies and the emotions with the force of rhythmical and harmonious words. Of this group we will select four, with which to conclude our review. Some objection may be taken, in the "Orpheus and Eurydice," to the violence of the action and the treatment of the female figure. But no one can fail to appreciate the agony of Orpheus, or the awful suddenness of the blow that leaves him again bereaved. He has hardly time to turn and gaze upon her whom the power of his song has recovered from the shades, when the retribution falls upon him. In the very instant in which he breaks the divine command, the dread verdict is fulfilled. The lyre falls from his hand, the lily from hers; but before they have touched the ground, almost before he can catch her in his arms, the lifeless head drops back, the limbs hang down, and he holds in his despairing grasp only the corpse of his twice-lost love. A very different note is touched by the figure of "Sir Galahad." The youthful knight, with auburn hair and eager face, stands in an attitude of rapt adoration, as if his yearning spirit had placed the sacred object of his quest before his very eyes. His horse waits patiently behind, his hands are clasped before him, his sword hangs sheathed at his side. Glowing with rich, deep, and harmonious color, the picture breathes throughout the spirit of youthful enthusiasm, the inspiration of a great ideal. It is the Galahad of Tennyson's noble poem. "His strength is as the strength of ten, because his heart is pure." More akin in feeling to the "Orpheus and Eurydice" is the "Paolo and Francesca." No picture in the gallery is animated by a deeper and more tragic pathos than this. Mr. Watts's conception of the subject is doubly interesting when compared with those of M. Doré and of Dela-



roche, both of which have been exhibited lately in London. For poetry, purity, and taste, we do not hesitate to give Mr. Watts the palm. M. Doré shows us a vigorous drawing of a handsome, voluptuous woman, whose face is expressive rather of physical than mental pain, with no sign of death about her save a wound whose ghastly truthfulness recalls visions of the morgue. Powerful, no doubt, the picture is; but the conception is vulgar and superficial, and instead of the spiritual Francesca of whom we love to think, we have a materialistic study from the nude. In the picture by Delaroche there were at any rate no faults of taste, but the higher poetry of Mr. Watts's ideal was absent. The composition of the great French painter is full of flowing ease and grace; the lines of Francesca's figure are exquisite; but it is rather of her physical beauty that we are led to think, and we almost forget that she is dead. Turn now to Mr. Watts. It may perhaps be doubted whether Dante's oft-told tale can gain anything by pictorial rendering, whether the attempt to render visible the most touching passage in all literature will not weaken rather than increase the effect of the poet's simple words. But we cannot think that the story loses in Mr. Watts's hands. The two lovers, whose fate we know so well, float onward still clasped in that last embrace, their gray robes projected against a background of lurid smoke and flame. They are dead indeed; death is apparent in the bloodless hue, the drawn features, the eyelids livid and not fully closed, the stiffened limbs. But their death is as Dante conceived it. The body is dead, but the soul lives; it cannot yet free itself of the earthy part, which has to be purged away, and through which it suffers still. There is unutterable sadness in those faces, no longer meeting, but still turned yearningly toward each other. His right hand has loosed its hold in death: her fingers press feebly on his outstretched palm. Her face rests on his shoulder, full of longing but hopeless love: his face bends downward with more resignation, but as deep despair. But with all the pain, there is a sense of rest already in some part won. The earthly passion is gone, the agony of longing abated. But love remains, the spiritual love that shall unite their souls when the sin that murdered them is purged away, and the bitter trial has to be endured no more. Equally if not even more impressive is the picture called "Love and Death." The subject has been long in Mr. Watts's

head, for a smaller study for it was exhibited ten or twelve years ago, while the larger work only appeared about two years ago, and has since then been retouched by the artist. It would be interesting, did space permit, to note in how many points Mr. Watts has improved upon his first idea. We can, however, only deal with the larger picture. Nowhere are the originality of Mr. Watts's imagination and the masculine breadth of his poetry more apparent than here. The agony of despairing love, the resistless march of fate, the impotence of human effort in the face of destiny, are depicted with a grandeur and simplicity more akin to the spirit of Greek tragedy than to anything in modern literature. The huge veiled figure of Death, whose face we cannot and would not see, clad in a robe of ashen gray, presses onward up the steps with a calm force which nothing can withstand. His raiment, loose and flowing, yet discloses the massive bulk and gigantic strength beneath. No grinning Death's-head, no grisly skeleton is here, but a divine being, beautiful if terrible in his overwhelming power. His head is shrouded, and the face looks down, as if in pity for the poor humanity, his prey. His sinewy arm is stretched out over the head of Love, to burst open the door and seize the victim in his home. The climbing rose that Love has planted at the threshold is rudely torn away, and its petals scattered upon the ground. Love himself, nerved with all the energy of despair, stands athwart the path of Death, his right arm pressed against the breast of the figure whose dreadful visage absorbs his gaze. His brilliant wings are dashed against the door-post; his contorted brows and close-pressed lips betray at once his resolution and his pain; the shadow of Death passes over him, darkening the warm flesh-tint, and leaving only a sunny fleck on the brow and knee. For one brief moment he seems to hold his own; but, another second, and we feel that the arm will have given way, and his enemy will have passed beyond him into the room. It is broad daylight: the rays of heaven strike on the cold gray arm of the invading figure, but cannot warm it into color. Life and joy and happiness are awake in the world outside, and the horror of death is deepened by contrast with the light of the sun. Had Mr. Watts never painted any picture but this, he would have won a high place among English painters of this or any other age.

G. W. Prothero.

