

## TWO PAIRS OF MODERN POETS.

BY ONE WHO KNOWS THEM.



SOMETIMES much is gained by comparison. Even in the highest region of literature this is so. We only attain a more vivid sense of the artistic instinct and finish of Tennyson when we contrast it with the vigour and rush of thought in Browning, which will

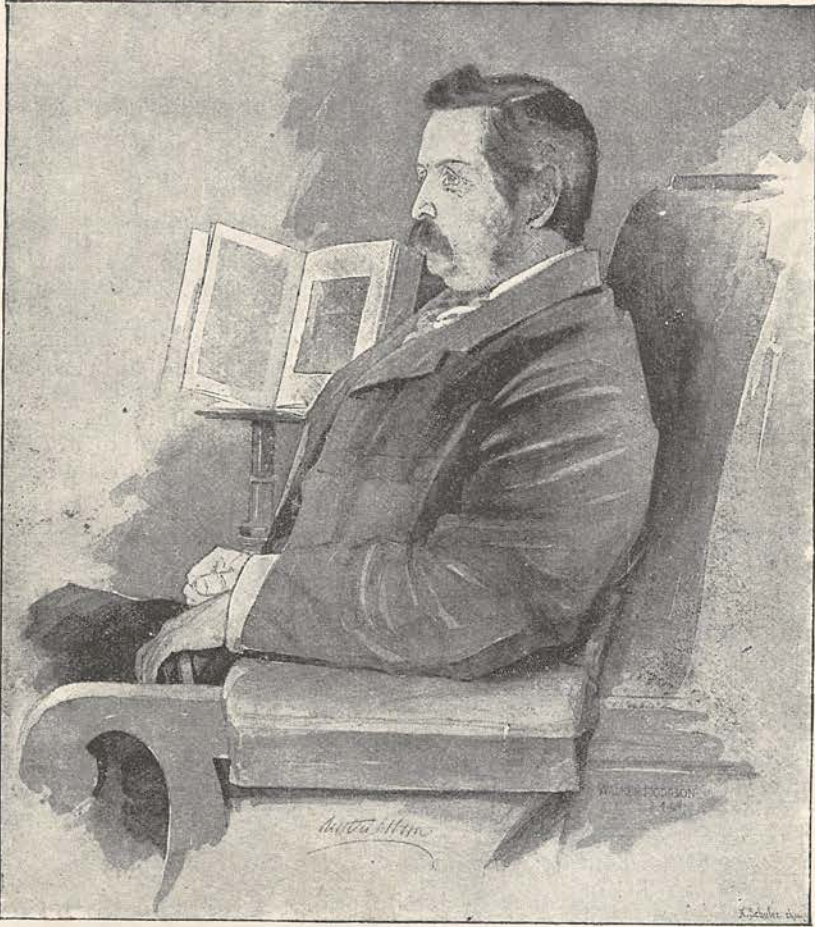
not allow him to pause on points of form. The idyllic repose, grace and fragrancy of finish in the one are only emphasised when we turn to the other, with his intensity, ardour as of a wrestler, and keen feeling for the present. The one, by aid of the present, would transport us into a dim past, with an atmosphere as of dream; the other, by aid of a dim past made real to us, would illuminate or electrify the prosaic present. This only suggests how the fact of comparison or contrast may aid us in our appreciations, and extend the field at once of our curiosities and of our enjoyments. We have now in our eye two pairs of living poets—each of whom has won reputation in his or her own particular way, but who present or suggest many points of comparison or contrast. We shall have this in view as we write of them, and try to bring out their main characteristics.

We have in our hand a letter written by the author of "Songs of Two Worlds," to an editor now deceased, in reference to a review of that first book, and the circumstances connected with that letter led us very carefully to look out for and to read everything from the same pen as it appeared. Mr. Lewis Morris has essayed several styles—the simple lyric of to-day, the realistic ballad of life, the classical idyll, the dramatic monologue, the tragedy, the epigram, and the moral and reflective poem. With regard to the first, if he sometimes a little lacks concentration, he is always apt and musical, and is occasionally very felicitous. In the second,

perhaps, there are to be found samples of his finest work, as in "Children of the Street," and "The Organ Boy," which is truly original and fine. In the classical idyll as represented by the "Epic of Hades," which deals with some of the Greek myths in a purely modern spirit, and aims at bringing out their broader human meanings, he has done some fine work, passages of his blank verse there being very tender and touching. It will be remembered, perhaps, that Mr. John Bright confessed he had been deeply impressed by much in the book, and often made public reference to it. No doubt he felt its modern and human side more than



*Lewis Morris*



AUSTIN DOBSON.

anything else, and there is much in it to justify his high opinion. Here is a little touch on Persephone—

Time calls, and Change  
Commands both men and gods, and speeds us on  
We know not whither; but the old earth smiles  
Spring after spring, and the seed bursts again  
Out of its prison mould, and the dead lives  
Renew themselves, and rise aloft and soar,  
And are transformed, clothing themselves with  
change,  
Till the last change be done.

In the dramatic monologue as in "Gwen," there is power of realising character within a certain range and undoubted gift of description, with gleams of imaginative insight; but others, like Browning and Mrs. Augusta Webster, have shown such pre-eminence in this direction, that Mr. Morris can hardly be said to stand in the first rank; nor does he as a dramatic writer, though he has produced a tragedy—"Gycia"—with powerful situations and fine passages.

Mr. Morris's real destination, however, is, in our idea, that of the reflective lyricist. Of late he has written much in this line, and always with refinement, his thoughtfulness, and power of apt illustration recalling to our minds sometimes Wordsworth and sometimes Longfellow. Here is a specimen—

*Faith without Sight.*

No angel comes to us to tell  
Glad news of our beloved dead,  
Nor at the old familiar board  
They sit among us, breaking bread.  
Three days we wait before the tomb,  
Nay, life-long years, and yet no more  
For all our passionate tears, we find  
The stone rolled backward from the door.  
Yet are they risen as He is risen?  
For no eternal loss we grieve.  
Blessed are they who ask no sign,  
And, never having seen, believe.

Mr. Austin Dobson has only, to our minds, one point of contact with Mr. Lewis Morris,

and that is in his power of restoring by humanising the old Greek legends. Recently a writer in an important educational magazine, treating of "Literary London," said that Mr. Dobson had "never risen above the level of society verse." There he was far wrong. One poem of Mr. Dobson's would suffice to prove this, were there no other.

It is "The Prayer of the Swine to Circe." The legend is that certain of the hapless followers of Ulysses were by Circe's spells transformed into swine, while yet in feelings they remained partially human. Here is one stanza of exquisite grace in form and fine imagination—

"For us not now—for us, alas! no more,  
The old green glamour of the glancing sea;  
For us not now, the laughter of the oar,—  
The strong-ribb'd keel wherein our comrades be;  
Not now, at even, any more shall we,  
By low-browed banks, and reedy river places,  
Watch the beast hurry and the wild fowl flee;  
Or steering shoreward, in  
the upland spaces,  
Have sight of curling  
smoke and fair-skinned  
foreign faces."

Indeed, whole sections of Mr. Dobson's poems are classical and serious. "The Death of Procris," "The Dying of Taneguy du Bois," "Before Sedan," "The Little Musician," "My Landlady," "To a Greek Girl," "the Mosque of the Caliphs," "A Song of Four Seasons," "The Sick Man and the Birds," "A Case of Cameos," and "The Dance of Death," in which the gravest of subjects is treated in the most trying of forms—the Chant Royal—the most difficult of all the French forms. Might not this have formed a text for all the articles recently written on the death of Alexander III., the Czar of All the Russians?

"He is the despots' Despot.  
All must bide  
Later or soon the message  
of his might,  
Princes and potentates  
their heads must hide,  
Touched by the awful  
sigil of his right;

*Beside the Kaiser he at eve doth wait,  
And pours a potion in his cup of state;  
The stately queen his bidding must obey;  
No keen-eyed cardinal shall him dismay."*

He has made the exacting French ballade serve him for the hearty, patriotic English lay, as in "The Loyal Ballade of the Armada," and made it carry a burden as of a great moral sermon, as in "The Prodigals." Many good critics, indeed, have felt it a cause of great regret that, owing to certain considerations, Mr. Dobson has not done more in this direction.

But even what gives the special note of elevation and distinction and permanent worth to the very airy, dainty, fragrant work of Mr. Dobson's, which must be classed under Society Verses, is the fact that he never fails even in his lightest mood to interject true poems—fresh images, new thoughts, often beautiful exceedingly. These lighter



JEAN INGELOW.



pieces of his differ from those of most other writers of such verse, just because he constantly interjects touches of truest poetry. Like the fly in amber, his deepest thoughts are often caught in the airier texture of his society verse. Look at this picture of "Incognita"—the lovely young girl with whom he figures himself as travelling in the train, and beguiling the way with delightful chit-chat, till she, wearied out, lies down to rest.

"Till at last in her corner peeping,  
From a nest of rugs and furs,  
With the white shut eyelids sleeping  
On those dangerous looks of hers.

*She seemed like a snowdrop breaking,  
Not wholly alive nor dead,  
But with one blind impulse making  
To the scents of the Spring coverlet.*

And I watched in the lamp-light's swerving  
The shade of the down-dropt lid,  
And the lip-lines' delicate curving,  
Where a slumbering smile lay hid."

Or, again, this from "A Revolutionary Relic"—so graceful, dainty, playful, that this grave passage gains treble effect coming where it does—

"Did they marry midst the smother,  
Shame and slaughter of it all?  
Did she wander like that other  
Woeful, wistful wife and mother—  
Round and round his prison wall.

*Wander, wail'ng as the plover  
Waileth, wheeleth desolate,  
Heedless of the hawk above her,  
While as yet the rushes cover,  
Wan'ng fast, her wounded ma'e,*

Wander till his love's eyes met hers,  
Fixed and wide in their despair?  
Did he burst his prison-fetters,  
Did he write sweet yearning letters—  
'*À Lucile—en Angleterre?*'

Letters where the reader reading  
Halts him with a sudden stop,  
For he feels a man's heart bleeding,  
Draining out its pain exceeding—  
Half a life at every drop.

Letters where love's iteration  
Seems to warble and to rave:  
*Letters where the pent sensation  
Leaps to lyric exultation,  
Like a songbird from a grave?"*

Wit, humour, pathos, thought, graceful phrases, dainty metres, reserve that brings fine suggestions and fragrant as of flower-leaves that have long lain pressed between the pages at favourite passages: these are Mr. Dobson's specialities—familiar to us from the days even before he published books; and read and re-read, often with the commentary of his own letters and remarks of his made to us in days long gone by.

Of Miss Ingelow, too, we recall glimpses in old days. She wrote for serials with which we were then connected, and it was our pleasant duty often to go to see her, both at

Holland Street, Kensington, and in later days farther westward. Refined and expressive her countenance, but it suggested rather the careful managing mistress of a household than the poet; all but the eyes, which would lighten up and mildly glow. We had only to talk with her for a little to see where her absorbing interests lay. She wrote long before she found the ear of the great public. Through many old square small-paged dumpy magazines have we searched—*The Youth's Magazine* among them—to find her earlier efforts both in prose and verse; and some of these, which we think as remarkable in some ways as any, have never been reprinted. She has essayed many styles: idylls, songs, sonnets, ballads, and descriptive pieces, as well as a great variety of prose works, both long novels and short stories. We are inclined to think that her finest poetic work has lain in the lines of the sonnet and the ballad. "High-tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire"—her native county, if we do not err—is perhaps her highest attainment. That line—

"And all the world was in the sea,"

coming where it does, is most effective, highly dramatic, and almost tragic.

"So farre, so fast, the eygre drave  
The heart had hardly time to beat,  
Before a shallow, seething wave  
Sobbed in the grasses at our feet;  
The feet had hardly time to flee,  
Before it brake against the knee,  
And all the world was in the sea."

Picturesque and clear, with healthy imagination and a dislike even of mere sentiment, she is always careful to keep on the lines of common human feeling, with no straining after high thought or ambition at allegorical or symbolical mediums; save, indeed, in "Divided," which, though very powerful, is not artistically satisfying in every respect. Her fine feeling for Nature and her simplicity have enabled her to write some poems connected with children and childhood which will always commend her to the young; and notable amongst these we may name "Echo and the Ferry." Her most notable sonnet is perhaps that on "An Ancient Chess King," which shows forth her thoughtfulness, elevation, and skill in metre—

"Haply some rajah first in ages gone  
Amid his languid ladies fingered thee,  
While a black nightingale, sunswart as he,  
Sang his one wife, love's passionate orison.  
Haply thou mayst have pleased old Prester John  
Among his pastures when full royally  
He sat in tent—grave shepherds at his knee—  
While lamps of balsam winked and glimmered on.

What dost thou here? Thy masters are all dead;  
My heart is full of ruth and yearning pain  
At sight of thee, O king that hast a crown  
Outlasting others, and tells of greatness fled  
Thro' cloud-hung nights of unabated rain,  
And murmur of the dark majestic town.

The late Christina Rossetti stands in contrast with Miss Ingelow in her passionate half-mystic religious fervour, her tendency to allegory, and her vague yearnings after an ideal touched with something of mediæval colour. She is like Miss Ingelow only in her love of childhood and endeavour to translate its conceptions and give them artistic form. There is something so pure, in a sense so detached from actual life, in Christina Rossetti, that she impresses one more especially as the poet—the genius whose dream is with her reality. Over all she touches there is the veil as of something spiritual, which becomes in certain circumstances a kind of refined ghost world, or supernatural sphere. But she never goes so far in this as to become extravagant. Her artistic sense suffices, and her fine love of Nature adds a check. "Goblin Market," her earliest volume, is one of the most delightful books for the young of all ages ever published. The world with her contains much of pain, much of mystery; were it not for Nature, the innocence and joy of childhood, and the sense of childhood seen in our Saviour, the world, for her, were overshadowed. By her faith, she transforms the shadow, the evil, the pain into light, good, joy. Nature's phenomena supply her with abundant symbols; these she seizes with a sure hand, and sweetly sings her song—

"Where shall I find a red rose budding?  
Out in the garden where all things grow—  
But out in my garden a flood was flooding  
And never a red rose began to blow  
Out in a flooding what should be budding?  
All flooding.

"Now in winter and now in sorrow,  
No roses, but only thorns to-day;  
Thorns will put on roses to-morrow,  
Winter and sorrow scudding away.  
No more winter and no more sorrow  
To-morrow."

And, again, in a beautiful little poem headed

JULY.

"Man's life is but a working-day,  
Whose tasks are set aright:  
A time to work, a time to play,  
And then a quiet night.  
And then, please God, a quiet night  
Where palms are green and robes are white,  
A long-drawn breath, a balm for sorrow—  
And all things lovely on the morrow."

Though these are but small pieces, the spirit of Christina Rossetti is fully there.

ALEXANDER H. JAPP.