

THE TWO GREAT VICTORIAN POETS

I.

TENNYSON.

It was merely the accident of his hour, the call of his age, which made Tennyson a philosophic poet. He was naturally not only a pure lover of beauty, but a pure lover of beauty in a much more peculiar and distinguished sense even than a man like Keats, or a man like Robert Bridges. He gave us scenes of Nature that cannot easily be surpassed, but he chose them like a landscape painter rather than like a religious poet. Above all, he exhibited his abstract love of the beautiful in one most personal and characteristic fact. He was never so successful or so triumphant as when he was describing not Nature, but art. He could describe a statue as Shelley could describe a cloud. He was at his very best in describing buildings, in their blending of aspiration and exactitude. He found to perfection the harmony between the rhythmic recurrences of poetry and the rhythmic recurrences of architecture. His description, for example, of the Palace of Art is a thing entirely victorious and unique. The whole edifice, as described, rises as lightly as a lyric, it is full of the surge of the hunger for beauty; and yet a man might almost build upon the description as upon the plans of an architect or the instructions of a speculative builder. Such a lover of beauty was Tennyson, a lover of beauty most especially where it is most to be found, in the works of man. He loved beauty in its completeness, as we find it in art, not in its more glorious incompleteness as we find it in Nature. There is, perhaps, more loveliness in Nature than in art, but there are not so many lovely things. The loveliness is broken to pieces and scattered; the almond tree in blossom will have a mob of nameless insects at its root, and the most perfect cell in the great forest-house is likely enough to smell like a sewer. Tennyson loved beauty more in its collected form in art, poetry and sculpture; like his own *Lady of Shalott*, it was his office to look rather at the mirror than at the object. He was an artist, as it were, at two removes: he was a splendid imitator of the splendid imitations. It is true that his natural history was ex-

quisitely exact, but natural history and natural religion are things that can be, under certain circumstances, more unnatural than anything in the world. In reading Tennyson's natural descriptions we never seem to be in physical contact with the earth. We learn nothing of the coarse good-temper and rank energy of life. We see the whole scene accurately, but we see it through glass. In Tennyson's works we see Nature indeed, and hear Nature, but we do not smell it.

But this poet of beauty and a certain magnificent idleness lived at a time when all men had to wrestle and decide. It is not easy for any person who lives in our time, when the dust has settled and the spiritual perspective has been restored, to realise what the entrance of the idea of evolution meant for the men of those days. To us it is a discovery of another link in a chain which, however far we follow it, still stretches back into a divine mystery. To many of the men of that time it would appear from their writings that it was the heart-breaking and desolating discovery of the end and origin of the chain. To them had happened the most black and hopeless catastrophe conceivable to human nature; they had found a logical explanation of all things. To them it seemed that an ape had suddenly risen to gigantic stature and destroyed the seven heavens. It is difficult, no doubt, for us in somewhat subtler days to understand how anybody could suppose that the origin of species had anything to do with the origin of being. To us it appears that to tell a man who asks who made his mind that evolution made it, is like telling a man who asks who rolled a cab-wheel over his leg that revolution rolled it. To state the process is scarcely to state the agent. But the position of those who regarded the opening of the *Descent of Man* as the opening of one of the seals of the last days is a great deal sounder than people have generally allowed. It has been constantly supposed that they were angry with Darwinism because it appeared to do something or other to the Book of Genesis; but this was a pretext or a fancy. They fundamentally rebelled against Darwinism, not because they had a fear that it would affect Scripture, but because they

had a fear, not altogether unreasonable or ill-founded, that it would affect morality. Man had been engaged, through innumerable ages, in a struggle with sin. The evil within him was as strong as he could cope with—it was as powerful as a cannonade and as enchanting as a song. But in this struggle he had always had Nature on his side. He might be polluted and agonised, but the flowers were innocent and the hills were strong. All the armoury of life, the spears of the pine wood and the batteries of the lightning went into battle beside him. Tennyson lived in the hour when, to all mortal appearance, the whole of the physical world deserted to the devil. The universe, governed by violence and death, left man to fight alone, with a handful of myths and memories. Men had now to wander in polluted fields and lift up their eyes to abominable hills. They had to arm themselves against the cruelty of flowers and the crimes of the grass. The first honour, surely, is to those who did not faint in the face of that confounding cosmic betrayal; to those who sought and found a new vantage ground for the army of Virtue. Of these was Tennyson, and it is surely the more to his honour, since he was the idle lover of beauty who has been portrayed. He felt that the time called him to be an interpreter. Perhaps he might even have been something more of a poet if he had not sought to be something more than a poet. He might have written a more perfect Arthurian epic if his heart had been as much buried in pre-historic sepulchres as the heart of Mr. W. B. Yeats. He might have made more of such poems as "The Golden Year" if his mind had been as clean of metaphysics and as full of a poetic rusticity as the mind of William Morris. He might have been a greater poet if he had been less a man of his dubious and rambling age. But there are some things that are greater than greatness; there are some things that no man with blood in his body would sell for the throne of Dante, and one of them is to fire the feeblest shot in a war that really awaits decision, or carry the meanest musket in an army that is really marching by. Tennyson may even have forfeited immortality; but he and the men of his age were more than immortal; they were alive.

Tennyson had not a special talent for

being a philosophic poet, but he had a special vocation for being a philosophic poet. This may seem a contradiction, but it is only because all the Latin or Greek words we use tend endlessly to lose their meaning. A vocation is supposed to mean merely a taste or faculty, just as economy is held to mean merely the act of saving. Economy means the management of a house or community. If a man starves his best horse, or causes his best workman to strike for more pay, he is not merely unwise, he is uneconomical. So it is with a vocation. If this country were suddenly invaded by some huge alien and conquering population, we should all be called to become soldiers. We should not think in that time that we were sacrificing our unfinished work on Cattle-Feeding or our hobby of fret-work, our brilliant career at the bar, or our taste for painting in water-colours. We should all have a call to arms. We should, however, by no means agree that we all had a vocation for arms. Yet a vocation is only the Latin for a call.

In a celebrated passage in *Maud*, Tennyson praised the moral effects of war, and declared that some great conflict might call out the greatness even of the pacific swindlers and sweaters whom he saw around him in the commercial age. He dreamed, he said, that if

. . . The battle-bolt sang from the three-decker out on the foam,
Many a smooth-faced, snub-nosed rogue would leap from his counter or till,
And strike, were it but with his cheating yardwand, home.

Tennyson lived in the time of a conflict more crucial and frightful than any European struggle, the conflict between the apparent artificiality of morals and the apparent immorality of science. A ship more symbolic and menacing than any foreign three-decker hove in sight in that time—the great, gory pirate-ship of Nature, challenging all the civilisations of the world. And his supreme honour is this, that he behaved like his own imaginary snub-nosed rogue. His honour is that in that hour he despised the flowers and embroideries of Keats as the counter-jumper might despise his tapes and cottons. He was by nature a hedonistic and pastoral poet, but he leapt from

his poetic counter and till and struck, were it but with his gimcrack mandolin, home.

Tennyson's influence on poetry may, for a time, be modified. This is the fate of every man who throws himself into his own age, catches the echo of its temporary phrases, is kept busy in battling with its temporary delusions. There are many men whom history has for a time forgotten to whom it owes more than it could count. But if Tennyson is extinguished, it will be with the most glorious extinction. There are two ways in which a man may vanish—through being thoroughly conquered or through being thoroughly the Conqueror. In the main the great Broad Church philosophy which Tennyson uttered has been adopted by every one. This will make against his fame. For a man may vanish as Chaos vanished in the face of creation, or he may vanish as God vanished in filling all things with that created life.

G. K. Chesterton.

II.

ROBERT BROWNING.*

A party of tourists cannot travel by a more comfortable funicular railway than this to the summit of Parnassus, there to enjoy liberal prospects while they picnic and the Muses attend. Genial, affluent, sensitive, discriminating, youthful and mature, sometimes eloquent, Mr. Stopford Brooke straightens out the tangles of Browning, and, what is better, does not find the chief joy of Browning's poetry in the tangles. The pleasure of reading such a volume lies largely in testing our own feeling for this and for that as we go along. Have we felt the meaning and the music as broadly or as finely as the critic? No? Then an upward stretch; a pull of his friendly hand, and we may see things from where he sees them. Or has he by misadventure failed to find the fortunate point of observation? Then it is exhilarating to assert our independence, and, like Bottom in the ass-head, walk up and down, singing to our own tune and showing that we are not afraid. Thus both ways we may get satisfaction—out of our acknowledged

*The Poetry of Robert Browning. By Stopford A. Brooke. Isbister and Company.

inferiority and out of some imagined superior insight.

Mr. Brooke begins by contrasting the genius of Browning with that of Tennyson, and setting forth the causes that delayed so long the popularity of the former. Browning was a psychological analyst before psychological analysis became the mode; in shorter poems he was an impressionist before impressionism was discovered; he felt more deeply than others the clash and complexity of modern life, and, by an original theory which the public could not at once accept, he resolved the dissonance into a harmony, while yet he saved himself from the monotony of a theorist by the vast variety of his subjects and by a certain youthful freshness of temper; he was a historical critic in verse, as in his poems which revive the Renaissance period before historical criticism was fully understood or appreciated; he broke away from conventions in a conventional age, thus anticipating a movement of the later years of his century; though English in certain qualities of his mind, he took little interest in English thought or English social questions; he was rather cosmopolitan than patriotic. Perhaps we may add that the poetry of a great poet being a discipline of the feelings and the imagination, and the public having, for sufficient reasons, accepted the tutelage of Tennyson, it was needful that the training of the accepted master should be complete before a second master could be widely received. We can hear many singers with pleasure if they do not dominate our senses and our fancy and our thought; but the service of a master is exacting, and for the time is exclusive of a different service.

Mr. Brooke passes to Browning's treatment of nature. Tennyson humanises nature; the natural world with Browning (speaking generally) is, like humanity, one manifestation of the creative joy of God, but it is a manifestation independent of man. Earth and sea are "giant creatures who are not ourselves; Titans who live with one another and not with us;" man is the culmination to which nature tends, "its seal, its close, but not it." Nature, in Browning's poetry, may, indeed, be "unsympathetic wholly, mocking and playing with us like a faun." Browning's method of presenting landscape is studied by the critic, his extraordinary