

OCCASIONAL NOTES OF THE QUARTER.

Tennyson's Lucretius.

Few, if any, among our poets, past or present, have succeeded so well as Tennyson in the difficult, and, one is almost tempted to think, dangerous art of portraying the psychological features of a mind trembling on or passing the verge of madness. His short poem "Lucretius," published in *Macmillan's Magazine* of May last, is an admirable study in psychology; in it he displays, with great subtilty and entire truth to nature, the horrible tumult which goes on in the mind of a man whose reason is failing, and who feels that it is failing—the terrifying sense of will mysteriously and brutishly enslaved, as though some vile spirit had taken possession of it; the hateful, but uncontrollable irruption into the mind of distressing or disgusting thoughts and riotous imaginations; the horror, anguish, and despair caused thereby; and, finally, the desperate determination to end all by an act of suicide. Beyond all measure of misery is the misery of a mind thus passing into the riot of madness, and conscious of its approaching doom.

The poem represents a soliloquy of Lucretius, the Roman poet, to whom his wife, finding him cold, and fearing that she has lost his love—because, being occupied with his meditations, he hardly responded to her manifestations of affection—administered a love-potion, brewed by some witch, in order to lead his "errant passion home again."

"And this destroyed him; for the wicked broth
Confused the chemic labour of the blood,
And tickling the brute brain within the man's
Made havoc among those tender cells, and check'd
His power to shape: he loathed himself."

Allowing the poetical license of the baneful witch-brewed broth, the pathology is truly scientific; one of the recognised modes of causation of insanity being by a poison bred in the blood, or introduced into it from without, which makes havoc among the tender cells of the ideational nerve centres. And when the power of controlling the thoughts and shaping the imaginations is lost by reason of some mysterious

physical change in the inmost chambers of mental function, then the brute passions which lie deep in the nature of man—not dead, but dormant—often burst forth in a painful and repulsive manner. The sense of helplessness and mental distress produced in the sufferer is extreme: his dreams by night have a terrible reality, and in the day the evil desires and thoughts which beset him, in spite of every effort of the will, lead to paroxysms of convulsive anguish. Thus Lucretius is tortured:—

“Ye holy Gods, what dreams!
For thrice I wakened after dreams.”

The first dream, determined by the storm in the night, follows the current of his habitual philosophical meditations; he sees the bonds of nature crack, and the flaring atom-streams of her myriad universe fly and clash together again, “and make another and another frame of things for ever—”

“That was mine, my dream, I knew it—
Of and belonging to me, as the dog
With inward yelp and restless forefoot plies
His functions of the woodland; but the next!
I thought that all the blood by Scylla shed,
Came driving rain-like down again on earth,
And where it dash'd the reddening meadow, sprang
No dragon warriors from Cadmean teeth—
For these I thought my dream would show to me—
But girls, Hetairai, curious in their art,
Hired animalisms, vile as those that made
The mulberry-faced Dictator's orgies worse
Than aught they fable of the quiet Gods.
And hands they mixt, and yell'd and round me drove,
In narrowing circles, till I yelled again
Half-suffocated, and sprang up, and saw—
Was it the first beam of my latest day?”

Scrupulously careful not to pass the bounds of a decorous propriety in his narration of the hideous dream, Mr. Tennyson has scarcely conveyed to his readers an adequately gross representation of its loathsome character, and of the horror which it was calculated to produce. If the picture had been touched with something of the sensuality, without the sympathy, of a Swinburnian imagination, it might have been less acceptable to the critics, but it would have been truer artistically, and would have made more plain—what is not so plain now—why the tortured poet yell'd half-suffocated, and sprang up to meet the first beam of his last day.

After relating his dreams, Lucretius goes on in calmer mood to question whether he is thus sorely persecuted by horrible sensual images through the vengeance of Venus, whom he had dethroned in his philosophical system, using her popular name merely "to shadow forth the all-generating powers and genial heat of nature." Thence he passes by a natural transition to characteristic reflections on the nature of the gods:—

"The Gods! the Gods!
If all be atoms, how then should the Gods
Being atomic not be dissoluble,
Not follow the great law!"

This subject he meant to have treated.

"Meant? I meant?
I have forgotten what I meant: my mind
Stumbles, and all my faculties are lamed."

The sun, "another of our gods"—Apollo, Delios, Hyperion, "what you will"—rises, and the train of his thoughts is now drawn by the unconscious attraction of his own sufferings to the pain, the misery, the sorrows and diseases which this god daily looks upon with an eternal calm. Wherefore need a man, holding that the gods are careless, care greatly for them? Why not at once "plunge, being troubled, wholly out of sight, and sink."

"Past earthquake—ay, and gout and stone, that break
Body toward death, and palsy, death in life,
And wretched age—and worst disease of all,
These prodigies of myriad nakednesses,
And twisted shapes of lust, unspeakable,
Abominable, strangers at my hearth
Not welcome, harpies miring every dish,
And blasting the long quiet of my breast
With animal heat and dire insanity."

"Can he not fling this horror off again?" he asks, as nature regains her calm, and smiles "balmier and nobler" after the ravages of a storm? No; for even while he questions, Orestes-like, he is pursued by the furies of animal heat and dire insanity.

"For look! what is it? there? yon arbutus
Totters; a noiseless riot underneath
Strikes through the wood, sets all the tops quivering—
The mountain quickens into Nymph and Faun;
And here an Oread, and this way she runs
Before the rest—A satyr, a satyr, see—

Follows; but him I proved impossible ;
 Twy-natured is no nature : yet he draws
 Nearer and nearer, and I can scan him now
 Beastlier than any phantom of his kind
 That ever butted his rough brother-brute
 For lust or lusty blood or provender :
 I hate, abhor, spit, sicken at him ; and she
 Loathes him as well ; such a precipitate heel,
 Fledged as it were with Mercury's ankle-wing,
 Whirls her to me : but will she fling herself
 Shameless upon me ? Catch her, goat-foot : nay,
 Hide, hide them, million-myrtled wilderness,
 And cavern-shadowing laurels, hide ! do I wish—
 What ?—that the bush were leafless ? or to whelm
 All of them in one massacre ?”

The degradation is too great to be endured, and there is, at the best, so little bliss or nobleness within our little life as to make it not worth while to endure. Some unseen monster has laid “his vast and filthy hands upon my will, wrenching it backwards into his.”

“Why should I, beastlike as I find myself,
 Not manlike end myself ?”

He resolves to let Great Nature

“That is the tomb and womb of all,”

“Take, and forcing far apart
 Those blind beginnings that have made me man,
 Dash them anew together at her will
 Through all her cycles—into man once more,
 Or beast, or bird, or fish, or opulent flower.”

Still he has the assurance that his golden work, in which he told a truth, will stand until the cosmic order everywhere “cracks all to pieces,” and man, with “all his hopes and hates, his homes and fanes,” vanishes, “atom and void, into the unseen for ever.” An invocation of the “passionless bride, divine Tranquillity,” and then—

“Thus—thus: the soul flies out and dies in the air.”

With that he drove the knife into his side :
 She heard him raging, heard him fall ; ran in,
 Beat breast, tore hair, cried out upon herself,
 As having fall'd in duty to him, shriek'd
 That she but meant to win him back, fell on him,
 Clasp'd, kissed him, wailed : he answer'd, “‘Care not thou !
 What matters ? All is over : fare thee well.’”

Our quotations have been made with the aim of illustrating the psychology of the piece, not of displaying its poetical

merits ; indeed, to us it seems that its merits are not so much poetical as psychological. There can be no question that it is an exceedingly neat and most carefully finished piece of art ; but whether it is really, from a poetical point of view, the highest art, or not rather wonderful artifice, must be left to the determination of those who feel themselves competent to decide what is and what is not true poetry. Already a great deal has been written concerning it, in vague, eulogistic fashion ; but amidst the general and indiscriminating admiration we can scarcely call to mind an instance of true critical appreciation, or even of clear recognition of its meaning. Whatever else it may be, it is certainly a most subtle psychological representation ; the character of Lucretius's philosophical speculations is admirably preserved in the fragments of his reflections, and the invasion of his madness, its distressing features, the alternations of comparative calm in its course, and its termination in suicide are displayed with equal truth to nature. The style and imagery, though finished with an almost excessive care, and the treatment of the subject, chaste and simple as it is, hardly seem to rise to the height of the matter ; suggesting nothing which is not explicitly and indeed elaborately expressed, they yield no range of activity to the reader's imagination, but rather constrain the intelligence to occupy itself with the details of the art. There is no background of the unconscious ; all is conscious elaboration — deliberate, artistic execution. Then, again, we cannot help a feeling that the description of the shrieking, breast-beating, hair-tearing of the repentant wife detract somewhat from the beauty of the piece, and should have been left to the reader's imagination. Doubtless this picture is very real—real almost to commonplace ; but is it not the aim of high art to be, not a copy, but an idealization of nature ?

State Medicine.

A memorial presented to the Duke of Marlborough, Lord President of the Council, by a deputation representing a Joint Committee of the British Medical and Social Science Associations, deserves an attention which we fear it is not likely to get from a government, all the energies of which are required to preserve its own "frail and feverish being." The memorial set forth the evils which result from the present ineffective mode of conducting medico-legal inquiries ; from the im-