

OCCASIONAL NOTES OF THE QUARTER.

Tennyson as a Psychologist.

That Tennyson touched the finest chords in our nature none will dispute. But there are poets who have done this without being what the lamented Laureate* unquestionably was—a psychologist. “In Memoriam” is full of psychology as well as feeling. He went deep down into the springs of human thought and action. “Lucretius” is psychological if any poem in the language is.

It was our purpose to analyze Tennyson’s works from our standpoint and to show how much true metaphysics can be found, if looked for, in the marvellous products of his grand brain, with which he has enriched our literature for ever. On glancing back, however, at the old volumes of our Journal, we found an article by its first Editor which appears to us to present Tennyson as a psychologist in so admirable a manner that we decide upon reproducing it. The article, which consists chiefly of a review of “Maud,” is besides historically interesting, if for no other reason than that it marks the time when the term “psychological” was supplanting that of “metaphysical.”

It is seldom, indeed, that a physician finds occasion to review a work so far removed from the dominion of scientific literature as a poem. Prose, and that of the driest sort, is the bone upon which the medical critic is for ever destined to whet his fangs; and from poetry he is so debarred by the custom and opinion of his profession, that he dare scarcely make use of a line or two for the purposes of illustration or ornament, except under fear of meeting the reproach of flippant absurdity. Yet physicians have been poets, and good ones too; and poets the true artists of mankind have, in all ages, been our best instructors in many of the secret springs of human action, and of the maddening emotions of the soul.

Not to speak of classic writers, in what pages can we find the phenomena of insanity portrayed with more vivid truthfulness than in those of Shakespere. There is more real mental science to be learned from the teaching of this demigod of poets than in all the metaphysical rubbish which was ever delivered from professional chairs. The study of mind in its irregular developments

* Died at Aldworth House, Surrey, Oct. 6, 1892; buried in Westminster Abbey, Oct. 12th.

appears to have as great a charm for the great English poet of the present day as it had for that prince of song. The writings of Tennyson are peculiarly metaphysical, or, to use the new term, psychological. His "Two Voices" and "Palace of Art" display wonderful psychological insight, and his new poem is neither more nor less than the autobiography of a madman. The critics have found great fault with Mr. Tennyson for choosing so disagreeable a hero, and have designated the wild poetry, wonderfully true to nature, in which the inner life of this morbid mind is depicted, as spasmodic and unpleasant. With purely literary criticism we have nothing to do; but the subject which Mr. Tennyson has chosen is one of peculiar interest to ourselves and our readers. It is the history of a madman depicted by the hand of a master, and we shall attempt to give an analysis of it, so far as it comes within our domain as mental pathologists. Let others criticize the beauties of the poetry or the irregularities and novelties of the metre; the point of view we take is, the powerfully and faithfully drawn mental history.

True to psychological probabilities, the author represents his hero as the scion of an unsound stock. His father committed suicide, or at least was strongly suspected to have done so, by precipitating himself from a rock.

"I remember the time, for the roots of my hair were stirr'd
By a shuffled step, by a dead weight trail'd, by a whisper'd fright,
And my pulses closed their gates with a shock on my heart as I heard
The shrill-edged shriek of a mother divide the shuddering night."

The father of his future mistress, Maud, is pointed at as the cause of this ruin of his house, and the death of his own parent.

The hero grows up a morbid misanthrope, hating himself and all mankind; he snarls and sneers at everything, but most of all at himself. The whole race of man seems to him too base to live, or at least to continue; the earth is a "sterile promontory," the heavens a "pestilent congregation of vapours."

He is introduced to us full of morbid emotion, a constant mental sufferer, a true example of Guislain's theory of the psychopathic origin of insanity. The utmost extent of his hopes is a philosopher's life of passionless peace, far from the clamour of the slanderous world,

"Where each man walks with his head in a cloud of poisonous flies."

But most of all he would "flee from the cruel madness of love;" he is not destined to escape this peril. Maud, the daughter of the "lean grey headed old wolf," who had ruined his father, returns with her brother to the hall, preceded by the report of her singular beauty. Maud had been his playmate in the days of childhood, and he retains in his memory an impression that their fathers had affianced them.

He sees her, and finds his peace in little danger from her beauty, which is faultless; but with a "cold and clear cut face," "she has neither savour nor salt."

But the cold and clear face haunts him by day and by night.

He meets her on the moorland, and at church, and in the village street. The tender poison steals into his veins, but he resists and strives earnestly to think ill of her. He felt from the first "my dreams are bad, she may bring me a curse."

He suspects her of pride, then of falsehood, and of the baseness of endeavouring to gain his favour for the political purposes of her brother.

As the hopes of love open to him, he sees a prospect of joy in the world, which had hitherto presented to him so dark and dreary an aspect.

But if Maud prove all that she seems to be, it were different.

He still however suspects and resists, a raven ever croaking at his side, "keep watch and ward, keep watch and ward." Last of all he torments himself that her sweet and tender tone comes from her pitying womanhood, for his forlorn and unhappy condition.

As usual, the catastrophe of downright love is precipitated by jealousy, jealousy of a young coal-mine lord, whose suit is favoured by the Assyrian bull. He feels that this rival is rich enough to buy anything.

At length brighter prospects open, as he feels that the sweet girl truly loves him.

The sweet poetry which attends the avowal is not psychological, and we must therefore pass it over. Yet even in the happiness of first love his mind displays its unsound tendencies. A white curtain drawn at night makes a horror creep over him, prickle his skin, and catch his breath, because it suggests the sleep of death.

This extreme and unreasonable sensitiveness to painful impressions is often, indeed, the warning sign of mental disease.

The consciousness of an evil fate hangs over him like a pall, and excites some alarm in his mind for the happiness of his mistress. In spite of that which ought to have made him supremely happy, he continues to torture himself.

He feels that the love of this most lovely girl may rescue him from the dark path of despair in which his mind was progressing.

The love scenes are exquisitely drawn, and produce a most happy change in the misanthrope's mind and feeling. He is no longer splenetic, personal, base; his blood flows gently, sweetly on.

His present happiness enables him to look into the future: the very stars seem brighter and closer to him, since he had "climbed nearer out of lonely hell:" he feels himself perfectly blest.

The woe quickly comes. The haughty brother finds the lovers together; heaps upon her disgraceful terms, and strikes him in the face; for which, according to the Christless code that must have life for a blow, the "Assyrian Bull" is quickly called to account, and shot in a duel. Maud breaks upon the scene, "a ghastly wraith, uttering a cry, a cry for a brother's blood." When sense returns he exclaims,

"Is she gone? my pulses beat—
What was it? a lying trick of the brain?
Yet I thought I saw her stand,
A shadow there at my feet."

This spectral appearance formed the foundation of subsequent hallucination; he fled to Britany, "sick of a nameless fear."

"Plagued with a flitting to and fro,
A disease, a hard mechanic ghost
That never came from on high
Nor ever arose from below,
But only moves with the moving eye,
Flying along the land and the main—
Why should it look like Maud?
Am I to be overawed
By what I cannot but know
Is a juggle born of the brain?"

Notwithstanding his hallucination, he nourishes his love, he hears her songs and sees her beauteous form, hallucination mixes with memory, he dreams of Maud and happiness, but is awakened by the hallucination of her cry, and finds as usual the ghastly wraith by his bed-side.

"In the shuddering dawn, behold
Without knowledge, without pity
By the curtains of my bed
That abiding phantom cold.
"Get thee hence, nor come again,
Mix not memory with doubt,
Pass, thou deathlike type of pain,
Pass and cease to move about,
'Tis the blot upon the brain
That will show itself without."

The shadow flits and fleets before him wherever he passes; through the hubbub of the market, through the streets and squares of the wide sounding city he steals, a wasted frame; but no where, and in no manner, can he get rid of his ghastly companion.

The twenty-fifth division of the poem is indeed an interesting one to the alienist reader. The sufferer has passed from hallucination to actual delusion, fancying himself dead and buried in a shallow grave.

The dead men chattering around are the other inmates of a

lunatic asylum, in which there is no secrecy, but idiot gabble and babble, where everything comes to be known.

“ See, there is one of us sobbing,
 No limit to his distress ;
 And another, a lord of all things, praying
 To his own great self, as I guess ;
 And another, a statesman there, betraying
 His party-secret, fool, to the press ;
 And yonder a vile physician, blabbing
 The case of his patient—all for what ?
 To tickle the maggot born in an empty head,
 And wheedle a world that loves him not,
 For it is but a world of the dead.”

The coal-mine lord finds him out, and pays him a visit, which is not agreeable. The hallucination of his mistress's form still haunts him, but now the last spark of love is gone.

This mixed state of reason and of delusion, and of wild emotion, partly the natural sequence of the latter, partly arising from agonizing memories, is depicted with terrible reality. At last his mood changes,

“ My life has crept so long on a broken wing
 Thro' cells of madness, haunts of horror and fear,
 That I come to be grateful at last for a little thing.”

The immediate cause of the change is attributed to a dream, in which his mistress speaks to him of the hope arising from the coming wars. It was but a dream, but it yielded a dear delight. New hopes banish the old delusions, and he finds mental restoration in the activity of thought and feeling aroused by the transition from peace to war.

He becomes sane, and enters heart and soul into the excitement of battle against what he calls the dreary phantom of the North, but which happily for him is no phantom.

Such is this remarkable sketch of poetic mental pathology. It must be pronounced wonderfully true to nature. The hereditary tendency, the early and terrible shock to the emotions, caused by the father's suicide, the recluse mode of life, in which morbid feeling and misanthropic opinions are nourished to an extent productive of hallucination even at that early period of the malady ; in which mid-day moans are heard in the wood, and his own sad name is called in corners of the solitary house. All this is most true to the frequent course of events, in that period when insanity is threatening and imminent, but not actually present. Another point touched upon with the singular delicacy of this exquisite poet is the apprehension which the sufferer evidently entertains, that he will become mad. “ What matter if I go mad,” he exclaims, “ if once I have been loved ;” and in another mood he says his mistress' sweet influence may save him from madness or suicide. This knowledge of the impending fate is by no means

uncommon among educated persons who have strong tendencies to mental disease. We believe indeed that it frequently exists even when it is sedulously concealed.

It forms a constant source of most painful reflection, and in this manner it tends to verify its own forewarning voice.

The gradual outbreak of actual madness after the catastrophe of the duel is depicted with so masterly a touch, and in so simple a manner, that any scientific comment from our pen would be superfluous and bad taste. The madhouse canto (page 89) is wonderfully graphic and powerful. The hallucination of his mistress' form; ever present to his eye, "a hard mechanical ghost," is followed by the delusion of his own death and burial under the city pavement. The suffocative agony of sensations in a living grave are portrayed with terrible earnestness of belief; yet the power of attention and of shrewd reasoning is represented to be in great measure retained; the coal-mine lord is recognized in his visit to the asylum, and the misanthropic sarcasm is still keen and intelligent. The common medley of reason and unreason is truthfully given. A less skilful artist would have left this portion of the picture without any light, and would thus have missed the truth.

In the recovery a little poetic license is taken, since it is not probable according to pathological likelihood that he would have dreamt the dream to which it is attributed, until his cure had been considerably advanced. It may, however, be argued that patients who have recovered from insanity very frequently attribute their restoration to causes which have had little enough to do with the result. They are apt to recognize the last step of the change and not the first: so we may with fairness remove the burthen of this apparent inconsistency from the shoulders of the poet to that of the patient. How much of his restoration to mental health we may attribute with scientific probability to the strong emotions caused by the outbreak of the Russian war, it is not quite easy to determine.

This concluding part does not appear to us quite so true to nature as all the former portions of this intensely interesting mental history. There is more of the poet's license in it, which may be attributed to the absorbing interest of that great event, which he rather appears to drag in for the purpose of expressing political opinions. On the whole we are astonished and delighted at the profound knowledge of mental pathology displayed by the great poet of the age. If it were possible to enhance in dignity the study of mental disease, the deep interest which the noblest and purest of minds take in it would be attended with that effect. Let us feel ourselves fellow-students in the most deeply absorbing objects of human interest and research which have occupied the greatest minds of the human race, and we shall be the more likely to strive to be worthy labourers in that noble field.

If any of our readers would desire to have a standard, or rather a foil, by which to appreciate the truthfulness of Mr. Tennyson's poem, we recommend him to compare it with another autobiography of a madman, namely, that of Sir Eustace Grey, by Crabbe. To say nothing of the poetry or the want of poetry in the latter, we venture to affirm that it is highly improbable, if not impossible, for any person in the state of mind in which Sir Eustace is represented to be, to give so clear, connected, and circumstantial an account of himself as that which Crabbe puts into his mouth. It is, in fact, a fancy sketch; but Maud is a photograph.*

J. C. B.

Medico-Legal Aspects of Neill's Case.

The case of Neill, the Lambeth poisoner, recently sentenced to death and executed for a diabolical murder, raised several points of medico-legal interest. (1.) The highly technical character of the chemical evidence which Mr. Justice Hawkins and the jury *ex necessitate rei* accepted from Dr. Stevenson without being able, as the learned judge very frankly admitted, to follow the elaborate tests by which that distinguished expert arrived at his conclusions, has once more brought to the public notice the position of scientific witnesses in the Courts of Law. Dr. Cook, of Bristol, in a notable letter to the "Law Times," has suggested a new solution of the vexed and inveterate problem, How should scientific facts be established in juridical proceedings? Let the tribunals, says Dr. Cook in effect, recognize their own incapacity and *a fortiori* that of jurymen to understand scientific processes, and let a commission of experts be appointed to inquire into and report upon issues referred to it by the judge presiding over the trial of any complicated medico-legal case. This commission would consist of, say, three members. It would have power to call before it the expert witnesses for the prosecution, and, if there were any, for the defence; to examine and cross-examine them; to hear counsel on the matters in dispute, and possibly to see the crucial tests performed before preparing and presenting its report. This scheme, which is partly borrowed from the continental system of preliminary reports, seems to us, however, to lie open to two objections. In the first place it

* "Journal of Mental Science," Vol. ii., 1855-56.