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REVIEWS.

Aurora Leigh. By Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Chapman and Hall.

THE critic who shall undertake to gauge the merits of this poem, to estimate how much it adds to the sum of the world's wealth of written thought and beauty, and to assign its rank among the master-works of genius, will have no easy task. It is one, at least, on which we shall not attempt to enter. We are still too much dazzled by the splendour in which we have been wrapped by the genius of the poet, too much swayed by the emotions which she has excited, to look back upon her work with the cold eye and tranquil judgment of the critic. In the presence of so much power we can only be silent, and admire, and surrender ourselves wholly for the time to the influence of the noble soul that floods our own with its exuberant riches, and stirs it through all its deeps with the voice of inspiration.

'Aurora Leigh' is no poem to be taken up for pastime, or to amuse a languid hour. Mrs. Browning calls it "the most mature of her works, and the one into which her highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered;" and those who know the weight of thought and the depth of feeling with which her previous works are charged, will readily conceive that in so calling it, she bids them to a feast, to which they must come with the loins of their mind girt up. They will find in it materials for the exercise of all their faculties of eye, and ear, and soul. Into it Mrs. Browning has thrown the whole strength of her most noble nature; and she has now attained to such a mastery of expression, that she is able to make palpable to others the subtlest as well as the deepest emotions of her heart, the finest perceptions of her eye, the farthest sweep of her imaginative intellect. All the powers which were indicated in her former works seem to us to be displayed in the present poem in perfection. She wields the lightnings of her genius with Jove-like freedom. Throughout a poem of great length, and with but little help from the slender vein of incident which runs through it, there is no languor, no flagging of the pulse. Everywhere there is power, everywhere variety, everywhere the ground is strewn with the gems which drop from the singer's garment as she passes on her way. And as the poem advances and her spirit kindles, the pure white flame of inspiration is felt to take possession of her spirit, and you are swept along as though you were listening to the voice of an Isaiah. In no poem of our time, indeed, is this God-given quality of inspiration more conspicuous than the present. It is there as surely as in the Hebrew prophets, in the grandest periods of Milton or Jeremy Taylor,—that something greater than prophet or poet or preacher,—that voice which speaks like a revelation from heaven, that "utterance of the gods" which is the attribute of the greatest poets. We feel it vibrate along the nerves; as we read we hear the reverberations of its organ tones, long after the first grand cadences have struck upon the ears.

We shall not spoil the interest of 'Aurora Leigh' for the reader by attempting any analysis of the story. To all we say, go, read for yourselves. It is not a "poem" for the multitude, and those who alone will

reap much from it must bring not a little to its perusal. The unthoughtful and the very young will, in all likelihood, turn away from it disappointed; those to whom it speaks at all will take it at once to their hearts, and keep it there for ever. Such attraction, therefore, as may lie in the incidents of the poem, and to our minds this is by no means a strong part of the book, ought not to be forestalled for readers of this class, and we shall therefore confine ourselves to such extracts as can be detached from the context with the least injury to their beauty.

On the question, how far the life of the present age is a fit subject for poetic treatment, Mrs. Browning pronounces as follows:—

"The critics say that Epics have died out
With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods—
I'll not believe it. I could never dream,
As Payne Knight did, (the mythic mountaineer,
Who travelled higher than he was born to live,
And showed sometimes the goitre in his throat,
Discouraging of an image seen through fog.)
That Homer's heroes measured twelve feet high.
They were but men!—his Helen's hair turned grey
Like any plain Miss Smith's, who wears a front;
And Hector's infant blubbered at a plume
As yours last Friday at a turkey-cock.
All men are possible heroes: every age,
Heroic in proportions, double-faced,
Looks backward and before, expects a morn
And claims an epus.

Every age,
Appears to souls who live in it, (ask Carlyle)
Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours!
The thinkers scout it, and the poets abound,
Who scorn to touch it with a finger tip:
A pewter age,—mixed metal, silver-washed;
An age of scum, spooned off the richer part;
An age of patches for old gaberdimies;
An age of mere transition, meaning nought,
Except that what succeeds must shame it quite,
If God please. That's wrong thinking, to my mind,
And wrong thoughts make poor poems.

Through being held too close, is ill-discerned
By those who have not lived past it. We'll suppose
Mount Athos carved, as Persian Xerxes schemed,
To some colossal statue of a man;
The peasants, gathering brushwood in his ear,
Had guessed as little of any human form
Up there, as would a flock of browsing goats.
They'd have, in fact, to travel ten miles off
Or ere the giant image broke on them,
Full human profile, nose and chin distinct,
Mouth, muttering rhythms of silence up the sky,
And fed at evening with the blood of suns;
Grand torso,—band, that flung perpetually
The largesse of a silver river down
To all the country pastures. 'Tis even thus
With times we live in,—evermore too great
To be apprehended near.

But poets should
Exert a double vision; should have eyes
To see near things as comprehensively
As if afar they took their point of sight,
And distant things, as intimately deep,
As if they touched them. Let us strive for this.
I do distrust the poet who discerns
No character or glory in his times,
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle court,
Oh not to sing of lizards or of toads
Alive! the ditch there!—'twere excusable;
But of some black chief, half knight half sheep-lifter,
Some bauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,
As dead as must be, for the greater part,
The poems made on their chivalric bones.
And that's no wonder; death inherits death."

Mrs. Browning has proved her faith in the views thus expressed, and so far demonstrated their truth in the present poem, which deals wholly with the present time, and is steeped in its passions, and grapples with the great social questions by which it is agitated. She speaks, therefore, with authority in what follows upon the same subject:—

"Nay, if there's room for poets in the world,
A little overgrown, (I think there is)
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knight at Roncesvalles.
To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce,
Cry out for togas and the picturesque,
Is fatal,—foolish too. King Arthur's self
Was commonplace to Lady Guenever:
And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat
As Regent Street to poets.

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song,
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say,
'Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked,
That bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets ours beating. This is living art,
Which thus presents, and thus records true life."

These are words for our young poets to ponder over, and, each in his own way, to work out the principle they contain. Many, we fear, will try to echo the Delphic strains of the muse, who discourses thus eloquently. We shall have 'Aurora Leighs' diluted in every imaginable medium by the weaker sort. But those who make their works the voice of their inner life, like Mrs. Browning, may take courage by her example, and set their music to the themes which lie round the feet of every one of us, instead of wasting their fire on galvanising the *simulacra* of the past.

We feel it is sorry work to attempt to give an idea of the power which is expended with such lavish profusion throughout this poem, by mere extracts. Of all that is best in it these can furnish no idea, any more than from the fragment of a pillar you can estimate the beauty or the symmetry of a cathedral. We shall therefore merely cull at random a few specimens, which may indicate the diversity of excellence which the reader may expect. Here is a picture, as perfect in force of outline and in richness of colouring as anything in Tennyson, and all aglow with delicate tenderness peculiar to its author:—

"She threw her bonnet off,
Then sighing, as 'twere sighing the last time,
Approached the bed, and drew a shawl away:
You could not peel a fruit you fear to bruise
More calmly and more carefully than so,—
Nor would you find within a rosier flushed
Pomegranate.

There he lay, upon his back,
The yearling creature, warm and moist with life,
To the bottom of his dimples,—to the ends
Of the lovely tumbled curls about his face;
For since he had been covered overmuch
To keep him from the light-glare, both his cheeks
Were hot and scarlet as the first live rose
The Shepherd's heart-blood ebbed away into,
The faster for his love. And love was here
As instant! in the pretty baby mouth,
Shut close as if for dreaming that it sucked;
The little naked feet drawn up the way
Of nestled birdlings; everything so soft
And tender—to the little holdfast hands,
Which, closing on a finger into sleep,
Had kept the mould of 't.

While we stood there dumb,
The light upon his eyelids pricked them wide,
And staring out at us with all their blue,
As half perplexed between the angelhood
He had been away to visit in his sleep,
And our most mortal presence,—gradually
He saw his mother's face, accepting it
In change for heaven itself, with such a smile
As might have well been learnt there—never moved,
But smiled on, in a drowse of ecstasy,
So happy (half with her and half with heaven)
He could not have the trouble to be stirred,
But smiled and lay there. Like a rose, I said:
As red and still indeed as any rose,
That blows in all the silence of its leaves,
Content, in blowing, to fulfil its life."

There is a Titianesque glow in the following portrait, a fullness of life, which warms the chamber of one's fancy, even as his pictures strike a heat across a room:—

"How lovely one I love not looked-to-night
She's very pretty, Lady Waldemar.
Her maid must use both hands to twist that coil
Of tresses, then be careful lest the rich
Bronze rounds should slip:—she missed, though, a
grey hair,
A single one,—I saw it; otherwise
The woman looked immortal. How they told,
Those alabaster shoulders and bare breasts,
On which the pearls, drowned out of sight in milk,
Were lost, excepting for the ruby clasp!
They split the amaranth velvet bodice down
To the waist, or nearly, with the audacious press
Of full-breathed beauty. If the heart within
Were half as white!—but, if it were, perhaps
The breast were closer covered, and the sight
Less respectable, by half, too."

Take, again, the following sketch of a beauty

of another sort, so true, that every one will be able to connect it with some type of the velvet-cushioned class to which she belongs:—

"His wife is gracious, with her glossy braids,
And even voice, and gorgeous eyeballs, calm
As her other jewels. If she's somewhat cold,
Who wonders, when her blood has stood so long
In the ducal reservoir she calls her line
By no means arrogantly? She's not proud;
Not prouder than the swan is of the lake
He has always swam in,—'tis her element,
And so she takes it with a natural grace,
Ignoring tadpoles. She just knows, perhaps,
There *are* men, move on without outsiders,
Which isn't her fault. Ah, to watch her face,
When good Lord Herne expounds his theories
Of social justice and equality—
'Tis curious, what a tender, tolerant bend
Her necklace; for she loves him, likes his talk,
'Such clever talk—that dear, odd Algonron!
She listens on, exactly as if he talked
Some Scandinavian myth of Lemures,
Too pretty to dispute, and too absurd."

Mrs. Browning is great in description. You have the thing described, and all its finest suggestions with it. Who among our writers could conjure up such a vision of the Greek Drama as that presented in the following lines?—

"Dies no more
The sacrificial goat, for Bacchus slain,—
His filmed eyes fluttered by the whirling white
Of choral vestures,—troubled in his blood,
While tragic voices that clanged keen as swords,
Leapt high together with the altar flame,
And made the blue air wink. The waxen mask,
Which set the grand still mask of Themis' son
Upon the puckered visage of a player;—
The buskin which he rose upon and moved,
As some tall ship, first conscious of the wind,
Sweeps slowly past the piers; the mouthpiece where
The mere man's voice with all its breaths and breaks
Went sheathed in brass, and clashed on even heights
Its phrased thunders;—these things are no more,
Which once where."

Like Turner, who could turn to beauty the funnel and smoke even of a steamboat, or any other most seemingly unpromising object, Mrs. Browning lights up with the radiance of her genius the things which to most people are least suggestive of the poetical. As an example of her power in this way, take the following passage from a description of a railway journey from Paris to Marseilles:—

"We shot through tunnels, like a lightning wedge
By great Thor hammers driven through the rocks,
Which, quivering through the intestine blackness, splits,
And lets it in at once; the train swept in
Athrob with effort, trembling with resolve,
The fierce denouncing whistle wailing on
And dying off smothered in the shuddering dark,
While we, self-awed, drew troubled breath, oppressed
As other Titans, underneath the pile
And nightmare of the mountains. Out, at last,
To catch the dawn afloat upon the land."

Let no one after this attempt to describe the passage of a tunnel. The thing is done for once and for ever.

Again, the whole Wolfian controversy about Homer is summed up in the following lines, which put in a sentence the whole pith of Professor Blackie's admirable argument in the article 'Homer' of the new 'Encyclopedia Britannica.' How the Professor will delight in capping his prelections with the opinion of a Hellenist as enthusiastic and as learned as himself.

"The kissing Judas, Wolff,
Who builds us such a royal book as this
To honour a chief poet, folio-built,
And writes above, 'The House of Nobody.'
Who floats in cream, as rich as any sucked
From Juno's breasts, the broad Homeric lines,
And, while with their spondaic prodigious mouths
They lap the lucent margins as babe-gods,
Proclaims them bastards. Wolff's an atheist;
And if the Iliad fell out, as he says,
By mere fortuitous concourse of old songs,
We'll guess as much, too, for the universe."

Wherever we turn, so much invites our hand that we are bewildered what to choose. One other extract, and we have done.

"There's nothing great
Nor small, I said a poet of our day,
And truly 't reiterate, . . . nothing's small!
No lily-muffled hum of a summer bee,

But finds some coupling with the spinning stars;
No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere;
No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim;
Ay—glancing on my own thin, veined wrist,—
In such a little tremour of the blood
The whole strong clamour of a vehement soul
Doth utter itself distinct. Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more, from the first similitude."

Here we have a great truth embodied in the most striking form, but in such passages the book abounds. If our extracts should send any one to its pages, whom they might otherwise have escaped, that is all we can hope for or desire. As we feel deeply grateful to this the greatest of all poetesses, ancient or modern, for this new revelation of her genius, so do we earnestly desire that this, the greatest of her works, should be known to all whose ears are open to "the deep poetic voice" which makes articulate the mysteries and the aspirations of all thoughtful souls.

Art and Nature at Home and Abroad. By George W. Thornbury. 2 vols. Hurst and Blackett.

THESE are two qualities in this work which will strike all readers forcibly—bounding animal spirits, and intense egotism. If the reader be very tolerant and good-natured, the youthful vivacity and headlong wilfulness which enable Mr. Thornbury, or rather impel him, to "rush in" where more experienced writers would "fear to tread," will ultimately carry the day. If, on the contrary, the reader be critical, and allow his common sense to sit in judgment on these scampering pages, there will be no mercy for the author.

The volumes embrace a perfect olio of subjects, from travelling sketches to criticisms on art, manners, and character, outlines of history, scraps of romance, and fragments of speculation; the poetry of London, and the wretchedness of London; a library in Rome, and Cromwell in Long Acre; old ballads, and notes for a novel; Hogarth, Froissart, Queen Elizabeth, Teniers;—all occupying separate chapters without the slightest connexion with each other, and all thrown off with an air of swinging confidence and sparkling audacity, which you at last begin rather to like, as you would the romps of a bright, bold child, who has succeeded in fairly teasing you out of an ill-humour.

Mr. Thornbury's genius may be encyclopedic—if we may venture upon the expression; but his knowledge unfortunately is not. His ambition is considerably in advance of his resources; and, although we do not exactly advise him to submit his next work to a seven years' revision, we strongly recommend him to keep it long enough to have its historical and antiquarian details corrected by some competent friend. His single chapter on 'Elizabethanisms' alone contains so many mistakes, as to suggest the suspicion that he writes upon such matters altogether at random; and, indeed, wherever he has occasion to refer to facts his inaccuracy is conspicuous. He seems to have galloped through a great number of books, and to have absorbed a multitude of small particulars concerning dress, manners, customs, and the like, but to have got them so chaotically into his memory, that when he wants to make use of any of them, he is almost sure to fall into an anachronism, or a mistake of some kind. Luckily, however, his present venture is tolerably free from these dangerous subjects, and rests its attrac-

tions chiefly on his animal spirits, which never flag. His versatile essays have the merit of being extremely brisk and lively; and, whatever objections may be urged against them on other grounds, they certainly cannot be charged with the worst of all literary sins—dulness.

As a specimen of his high poetical style, here is a passage from a chapter entitled 'The Poetry of London':—

"Do you know a city, reader, with miles, thousands of miles, of streets,—with houses, huge blocks of brute matter, pierced with holes, no more as far as regards any hidden laws of beauty, yet at twilight toning down into grandeur, and at midnight massing into mountains of black marble, with a monotonous splendour of repetition, worthy of Hades, and not to be matched this side of purgatory? For buttresses of shadow, and rank and file of colossal darkness veiling life, is there anything to equal London? It may be ruin, it may be dead empire, but there it is, eluding the eye, mocking the sense, and filling the brain with a repetition which is incontestably sublime."

This is rather in Ercles' vein; but it is suggestive, and increases in its peculiar kind of power as the picture grows under the artist's hands. The closing sentence is characteristic:—

"There are materials for a dozen epics in the poetry of London, but I shall not write them, for they would not sell."

The difficulty is not about writing a dozen epics—that is nothing to Mr. Thornbury. He is restrained from writing them merely because they would not sell. This pleasant, or unpleasant, impudence pervades the whole book, and makes it agreeable, or disagreeable, just as you happen to take it, or to relish the vivacity of the author.

In the following extract Mr. Thornbury is shown in another aspect, drawing comparisons of national character between the English and French:—

"English politeness is patronising; French politeness is flattering. The Englishman is proud, trying in his politeness to assert a superiority; the Frenchman, vain and indifferent to sincerity, is content if he can procure your approbation. The Saxon, satisfied in his self-approval, is indifferent to your opinion; his nature is less gregarious than the Celt; he cares little about the opinion of a casual ambiguous stranger. The Gaul, pining for society, makes it his anxious study to acquire the approbation of others. In the Parisian skull, love of approbation being large, leads the owner to love distinction, whether in the camp or in the ball-room. In the London skull, self-esteem being developed, induces John Bull to scowl at a mob, smile at tradesmen, and join the opposition."

These contrasts are neither profound nor just; but their smartness and flippancy will find admirers.

In our next extract we will give Mr. Thornbury an opportunity of appearing as an artist—the character for which, above all others, he possesses the best and truest qualifications. He is here describing a scene upon which he is looking out from a Swiss chalet:—

"Below me are miles of Alp-roses, streaming down the hills in red seas, beyond rise soft blue peaks that seem of heaven, and not of earth. At my feet the bees swarm round the sticky pine cones. Above are the ribbed glaciers, endowed with a terrible cold life, to crush and kill. In their bosoms are dead hunters and frozen travellers, and their broad veins are azure in the sun. Here the fleet torrents ramp and roar to break from their crystal prison, while the herdsman blows his horn to scare the lammergeyer from his flocks. Home of Tell, thy lakes are clear and blue as the eyes of my Dorothy, and thy snows are white as her