

ART. III.—MRS. BARRETT BROWNING.¹

ENGLAND has had many great poets who have enriched the language with "thoughts that breathe, and words that burn"—stars differing from one another in glory—but only one great poetess. This is asserted even with the full remembrance of Joanna Baillie and Mrs. Hemans, Miss Landon and Mrs. Norton, and such sweet songstresses of a later day as Jean Ingelow, and Christina Rossetti. Each of these ladies possesses a true and delicate accomplishment of verse, and is the author of some beautiful lyrics, which give much pleasure and receive well-deserved admiration. Sweet and graceful as are many of their poems, yet they are not suggestive of the highest poetical power; the more fastidious taste of this critical age looks for deeper thought and more intellectual aim. Though Mrs. Norton was called by a Quarterly Reviewer "the Byron of our modern poetesses," and though she wrote out of the depths of a sad and passionate heart, yet Mrs. Browning excels not only her, but all the sisterhood in power and pathos, and in thoughtful, earnest work. She is, what none of the others were, the equal of our best poets in high aspirations, noble aims, and fulfilled purposes. Always sincere and reverent, her art was a part of her life. A woman of fine genius and varied accomplishments, she brought all her powers, natural and acquired, to illustrate the thoughts to which she wished to give "a local habitation and a name." A scholar of rare acquirements, she found one of her greatest pleasures in the study of Greek poetry and philosophy; and with a love that was with her a passion she read Homer, the tragedians, and also the poets of a later age, especially Theocritus. She was one, moreover, who "learnt in suffering what she taught in song," as we gather from verse that is often profoundly sad; and this is not surprising, as we are told that a great part of her early life was spent in ill-health, and the retirement of a sick-room. Many of the most beautiful efforts of her muse bear evidence of her having passed through the furnace-fires of sorrow. Some fine lines taken from "Aurora Leigh," her greatest work, show that her art was conceived and born in the throes and travail of pain.

Act

Sets action on the top of suffering;
 The artist's part is both to be and do,
 Transfixing with a special central power
 The flat experience of the common man,

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetical Works. Twelfth Edition.—
 In five volumes. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 15, Waterloo Place.

And turning outward with a sudden wrench,
 Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing
 He feels the inmost : never felt the less
 Because he sings it. Does a torch less burn
 For burning next reflectors of cold steel,
 That he should be the colder for his place
 'Twixt two incessant fires—his personal life
 And that intense refraction which burns back
 Perpetually against him from the round
 Of crystal conscience he was born into,
 If artist-born ? O sorrowful great gift
 Conferred on poets, of a twofold life,
 When one life has been found enough for pain.

Miss Mitford, who was very intimate with Mrs. Browning in her early years, has some delightful allusions to her friend scattered through her letters ; and we learn from her much that is interesting not only about the private life, but the personal appearance of the youthful poetess. It is thus she writes in one of her letters : " A sweet young woman whom we called for in Gloucester Place went with us—a Miss Barrett—who reads Greek as I do French, and has published some translations from Æschylus, and some most striking poems. She is a delightful young creature, shy, and timid, and modest. Nothing but her desire to see me got her out at all ; but now she is coming to us to-morrow night also." Again : " My first acquaintance with Elizabeth Barrett commenced about fifteen years ago. She was certainly one of the most interesting persons that I had ever seen. Everybody who then saw her said the same, so that it is not merely the impression of my partiality or my enthusiasm. Of a slight delicate figure, with a shower of dark curls falling on either side of a most expressive face, large tender eyes, richly fringed by dark eyelashes, a smile like a sunbeam, and such a look of youthfulness that I had some difficulty in persuading a friend in whose carriage we went together to Chiswick that the translator of the ' Prometheus ' of Æschylus, and the authoress of the ' Essay on Mind,' was old enough to be introduced into company—in technical language, was ' out.' "

Miss Barrett, having broken a bloodvessel on the lungs, was ordered to spend some time at Torquay. To this Miss Mitford refers in the following letter :

I should like you to see a volume of poems called " The Seraphim," by Miss Barrett, one of the most wonderful things, or rather *the* most wonderful, ever written by woman. She herself is, I fear, going rapidly to a better world. Dr. Chambers has ordered her to Torquay, as the best chance of saving her life ; but I fear she is one of those who are too

sweet and gracious, as well as too wise and lovely to be long spared to earth. Next to my father, she is the creature whom I best love; and if it were not for my duty to him, I should go to Torquay to be near her. Her sweetness of character is even beyond her genius.

Here an event full of sorrow occurred which had an injurious and permanent effect on Miss Barrett's health, and painfully affected her imagination. Her brother, with two friends, were drowned one summer's day, their boat having gone down in crossing the bar, apparently without cause, and within sight of the house where she lived. "I told you," writes Miss Mitford, "of the death of her favourite brother, who, giving up every other object to reside with her at Torquay, went out in a sailing boat, which sank in sight of the house, the body not being recovered. Of course this terrible catastrophe not merely threw her back in point of health—for some months she was on the very verge of the grave—but gave her a horror of the place, so that, reviving a little this summer, she insisted upon returning home to Wimpole Street, accomplished the journey by stages of twenty-five miles a day, in one of the *invalides* carriages, where the bed is drawn out like a drawer from a table—one of her reasons for wishing to get to town being the desire to be within reach of me."

"This tragedy," says Miss Mitford, "nearly killed Elizabeth Barrett. The house that she occupied at Torquay stood at the bottom of the cliffs, almost close to the sea; and she told me herself that during the whole winter the sound of the waves rang in her ears like the moans of one dying." For four or five years afterwards she lived in a darkened room, seeing only her own family, and her most intimate friends, reading all books that came in her way, translating *Æschylus*, and writing some of those poems which have given her a place among the true and gifted poets of all time. In one of her beautiful "Sonnets from the Portuguese" (xxvi.), she alludes to the time when she was living the life of a hermitess, shut out from the outer world, and thus throws open to us the doors of her sick-room:

I lived with visions for my company,
 Instead of men and women, years ago,
 And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know
 A sweeter music than they played to me.

The state of her health naturally told on the imaginative powers of the young poetess, and influenced alike her tone of thought and choice of subject. Her early life of seclusion accounts for the want of sunshine in many of her poems, and the absence of cheerfulness, and also, perhaps, for the mystical music of some, and for the undertone of sadness that underlies the music of others. Her creative fancy often controlling,

instead of being controlled by, the strength of her intellect, she failed at times in subordinating her imagination to the service of her genius; and more than one poem fails of the fullest inspiration because it is lacking in that simplicity which is the charm of the greatest verse. Her friend Miss Mitford acknowledges all this in one of her interesting letters :

I like best those poems, "The Island," "The Deserted Garden," that on her own pet name, and "The Sea Mew," which combine more of simplicity and cheerfulness, and less of the mystical and the far-reaching. As a composition, she has done nothing half so fine as "The Romaunt of the Page;" and if she be spared to the world, and should, as she probably will, treat of such subjects as afford room for passion and action, you will see her passing all women, and most men, as a narrative or dramatic poet. After all, she is, in her modesty, her sweetness, and her affectionate warmth of heart, by far more wonderful than her writings, extraordinary as *they* are. Were not Mr. and Mrs. A. much struck by the preface to "The Seraphim"? It is an astonishing piece of writing.

Miss Barrett's father was the proprietor of considerable estates in Jamaica, and of Hope End, in Herefordshire, where her childhood was passed, within sight of the Malvern Hills, and amid scenes of a beauty peculiarly English; pleasant meadows and green lanes, leafy woods and rich orchards and gardens, which in the early summer are one sheet of fragrant blossom. It was such scenery as the poetess has reproduced in many of the exquisite passages which may be found in "Aurora-Leigh." The Malvern Hills had not only these happy memories for the poetess, but also associations very attractive to a mind like hers. It is thus she writes in her criticism of a volume called "The Book of the Poets," writing in prose as rhythmical and sonorous as her verses, of the early poets of England, and their tuneful achievements. "Genius was thrust onward to a new slope of the world. And soon, when simpler minstrels had sat there long enough to tune the ear of the time—when Layamon and his successors had hummed long enough, like wild bees, upon the lips of our infant poetry predestined to eloquence—then Robert Langlande, the monk, walking for cloister 'by a wode's syde,' on the Malvern Hills, took counsel with his holy 'Plowman,' and sang of other visions than their highest ridge can show. While we write, the woods upon those beautiful hills are obsolete even as Langlande's verses: scarcely a shrub grows upon the hills! But it is well for the thinkers of England to remember reverently, while taking thought of her poetry, they stand among the gorse—that if we may boast now of more honoured localities, of Shakespeare's 'rocky Avon,' and Spenser's 'soft-streaming Thames,' and Wordsworth's 'Rydal Mere,' still our first holy poet-ground is there."

Miss Barrett very early began to write verses, and published a volume in her seventeenth year. These in after-life she would have willingly allowed to die and be forgotten, but Mr. Herne Shepherd, without any sanction from those to whom the fame of the poetess was dear, nay, to their great displeasure, reissued them on his own responsibility. They are in no sense remarkable, and there is little in them prophetic of the imaginative power and the intellectual greatness which distinguish the poems of her maturer years. The first volume, which contained work in which she confidently appealed to the judgment of the public, was called "The Seraphim, and other Poems;" and it was welcomed, not only for its own intrinsic worth and beauty, but as affording proof that another great poet had arisen of whom England might be proud. "The Seraphim," which Miss Barrett calls in a letter to Miss Mitford "rather a dramatic lyric than a lyrical drama," describes the victory of Christ over evil as consummated by the one all-sufficient sacrifice on the cross. Two Seraphs hover aloof from the rest of the angelic host during the Passion on Calvary, and converse together on that Divine Love which is "stronger than death," and which "many waters cannot quench." It abounds in passages as profound in thought as they are striking in expression, and is full of a pathetic tenderness. Its conspicuous fault is a lack of simplicity in the conception of the poem, and in the language in which it is clothed. There is an over-elaboration of imagery and a straining after originality of expression, which is gained at the expense of that clearness and simplicity which are so charming in themselves and are so essential to beauty. In an age which has produced no great religious poem, it would be but scanty praise to say that "The Seraphim," and its companion poem, "The Drama of Exile," though at times obscure in thought and extravagant in diction, are for sustained thought and fervour superior to any religious poetry since Milton.

A passage or two from "The Seraphim" will be sufficient to prove its general power and beauty. Take this description of the two dying robbers, the one penitent, the other hardened to the last:

<i>Zerah.</i>	For one
Is as a man who sinned, and still	
Doth wear the wicked will—	
The hard malign life-energy,	
Tossed outward, in the parting soul's disdain,	
On brow and lip that cannot change again.	
<i>Ador.</i> And one——	
<i>Zerah.</i>	Has also sinned.
And yet (O marvel!) doth the spirit-wind	
Blow white those waters?—Death upon his face	

Is rather shine than shade—
 A tender shine by looks belovèd made.
 He seemeth dying in a quiet place,
 And less by iron wounds in hands and feet
 Than heart-broke by new joy too sudden and sweet.

Is not this very beautiful? We seem to see "the shine" on the face of the robber who is at peace now with God and man, and who is so apart, so beyond the tumult and the angry cries that surge and swell round the cross, that he seems to be "dying in a quiet place."

Another passage must be given from the same poem: it is the description of the moment when, amidst the darkness that shrouded the cross from the sixth to the ninth hour, the cry of the "forsaken" Son went up direct to God:

Ador. The pathos hath the day undone :
 The death-look of His eyes
 Hath overcome the sun,
 And made it sicken in its narrow skies—
 Is it to death ?

Zerah. *He* dieth. Through the dark,
 He still, He only, is discernible—
 The naked hands and feet, transfixèd stark,
 The countenance of patient anguish white,
 Do make, themselves, a light
 More dreadful than the glooms which round them dwell,
 And therein do they shine.

There are passages of equal beauty in "The Drama of Exile," though its want of simplicity in the language, the demand which it makes on the attention, and the elaborate machinery of the story, if we may so speak, has no doubt interfered with its popularity. It repels rather than attracts the reader who only reads for pleasure, and prefers thought that lies on the surface to the labour of digging patiently for the rich gold that lies underneath. It is, however, a poem full of tenderness, and throughout the heart of the woman is heard audibly beating in responsive chime to the melody of the verse. An extract or two is all that our space will permit.

Adam and his wife flee from the fiery terror of the Cherubim's sword, and Eve, heartstricken and weary, sinks down, and appeals to her husband to strike her dead, that, the curse exhausting itself in her, he may be happy once more.

Eve. O Adam, Adam ! by that name of Eve—
 Thine Eve, thy life—which suits me little now,
 Seeing that I confess myself thy death
 And thine undoer, as the snake was mine—
 I do adjure thee, put me straight away,
 Together with my name !

To this Adam replies :

My beloved,

Mine Eve and life—I have no other name
 For thee or for the sun than what ye are,
 My blessed life and light ! If we have fallen,
 It is that we have sinned—we : God is just ;
 And since His curse doth comprehend us both,
 It must be that His balance holds the weights
 Of first and last sin on a level. What !
 Shall I who had not virtue to stand straight
 Among the hills of Eden, here assume
 To mend the justice of the perfect God,
 By piling up a curse upon His curse,
 Against thee—thee——

Eve. For so, perchance, thy God
 Might take thee into grace for scorning me ;
 Thy wrath against the sinner giving proof
 Of inward abrogation of the sin !
 And so, the blessed angels might come down
 And walk with thee as erst.

Some of the words of Christ inspiring hope into the bosom of the fallen, and filling them even in prospect of their exile with a new gladness, are as full of poetry as of Scriptural truth :

Adam. Thy speech is of the Heavenlies ; yet, O Christ,
 Awfully human are Thy voice and face !

Eve. My nature overcomes me from Thine eyes.

Christ. Then, in the noon of time shall one from heaven,
 An angel fresh from looking upon God,
 Descend before a woman, blessing her
 With perfect benediction of pure love,
 For all the world in all its elements ;
 For all the creatures of earth, air, and sea ;
 For all men in the body and in the soul,
 Unto all ends of glory and sanctity.

Eve. O pale, pathetic Christ, I worship Thee !
 I thank Thee for that woman.

Christ. For, at last,
 I, wrapping round Me your humanity,
 Which, being sustained, shall neither break nor burn
 Beneath the fire of Godhead, will tread earth,
 And ransom you and it, and set strong peace
 Betwixt you and its creatures. With My pangs
 I will confront your sins ; and since your sins
 Have sunken to all Nature's heart from yours,
 The tears of My clean soul shall follow them,
 And set a holy passion to work clear
 Absolute consecration. In My brow
 Of kingly whiteness, shall be crowned anew
 Your discrowned human nature. Look on Me !

As I shall be uplifted on a cross
 In darkness of eclipse, and anguish dread,
 So shall I lift up in My pierced hands,
 Not into dark, but light—not unto death,
 But life—beyond the reach of guilt and grief,
 The whole creation. Henceforth in My Name
 Take courage, O thou woman—man, take hope!
 Your graves shall be as smooth as Eden's sward,
 Beneath the steps of your prospective thoughts;
 And, one step past them, a new Eden-gate
 Shall open on a hinge of harmony,
 And let you through to mercy.

Some of the lyrics introduced into "The Drama of Exile," and put into the lips of "the spirits of the harmless earth," have a pathetic charm and beauty, and a silvery cadence of sweetness which lingers on the ear; but for these we must send the reader to the poem itself.

In 1839 Miss Barrett published "The Romaunt of the Page," a poem cast in the mould of the old ballads. It is the story of a woman's unrequited, self-sacrificing love. In 1844 followed two volumes of poems, containing much that is very beautiful and thrilling—much to touch the heart, as well as to take captive the imagination. In these we find the graceful little poem, "The Romance of the Swan's Nest," the first of her poems which the present writer had read, and which set him on the quest for more treasures from the same pen; the grim ballad, "The Romaunt of Margaret;" the vivid ghostly fantasy, "The Lay of the Brown Rosary;" and the impassioned and tender (and may it not be called sacred?) poem of Isobel's child. A mother watches by the side of her child, hoping against hope, and praying that the young life may be spared:

Motionless she sate;
 Her hair had fallen by its weight
 On each side of her smile, and lay
 Very blackly on her arm
 Where the baby nestled warm;
 Pale as baby carved in stone,
 Seen by glimpses of the moon
 Up a dark cathedral aisle:
 But, through the storm, no moonbeam fell
 Upon the child of Isobel—
 Perhaps you saw it by the ray
 Alone of her still smile.

The mother's prayer, wrung out of the agony of a loving heart, how beautiful it is!

"Dear Lord, dear Lord!"

* * * * *

Thou, Who didst not erst deny

The mother-joy to Mary mild,
 Blessed in the blessed child,
 Which hearkened in meek babyhood
 Her cradle-hymn, albeit used
 To all that music interfused.
 In breasts of angels high and good ;
 Oh, take not, Lord, my babe away—
 Oh, take not to Thy songful heaven
 The pretty baby Thou has given ;
 Or ere that I have seen him play
 Around his father's knees, and known
 That *he* knew how my love hath gone
 From all the world to him.

The prayer seems to be answered. The infant sleeps, and the happy mother begins to question her darling as to its wishes for the future. As if it lay in her power to grant its desires, she asks what it will have.

“ Wilt thou lean all day and lose
 Thy spirit with the river, seen
 Intermittently between
 The winding beechen alleys ? ”

Again, she asks :

“ Or, baby, wilt thou think it fitter
 To be eloquent and wise ?
 One upon whose lips the air
 Turns to solemn verities,
 For men to breathe anew, and win
 A deeper-seated life within ? ”

The babe awakes. “ The moonshine on its face,” and something in its looks sends a thrill of fear through the mother's heart. It speaks :

“ O mother, mother, loose thy prayer !
 Christ's Name hath made it strong !
 It bindeth me, it holdeth me
 With its most loving cruelty,
 From floating my new soul along
 The happy heavenly air !
 * * * *

Is your wisdom very wise,
 Mother, on the narrow earth ?
 Very happy, very worth
 That I should stay to learn ?
 * * * *

Mother, albeit this be so,
 Loose thy prayer, and let me go
 Where that bright chief angel stands
 Apart from all his brother bands,

Too glad for smiling.

* * * * *
 He the teacher is for me—
 He can teach what I would know—
 Mother, mother, let me go !

The baby dies.

The nurse awakes in the morning sun,
 And starts to see beside her bed
 The lady, with a grandeur spread,
 Like pathos, o'er her face : as one
 God-satisfied and earth-undone :
 The babe upon her arm was dead !
 And the nurse could utter forth no cry—
 She was awed by the calm in the mother's eye.

"Wake, nurse !" the lady said ;
 "We are waking—he and I—
 I on earth, and he in sky !
 And thou must help me to o'erlay
 With garment white this little clay
 Which needs no more our lullaby.

"I changed the cruel prayer I made,
 And bowed my meekened face and prayed
 That God would do His will ! and thus
 He did it, nurse : He parted *us*.
 And His sun shows victorious
 The dead calm face : and *I* am calm :
 And Heaven is hearkening a new psalm.

"This earthly noise is too anear,
 Too loud, and will not let me hear
 The little harp. My death will soon
 Make silence."

And a sense of tune,
 A satisfied love, meanwhile,
 Which nothing earthly could despoil,
 Sang on within her soul.

Oh you,
 Earth's tender and impassioned few,
 Take courage to entrust your love
 To Him so Named, who guards above
 Its ends, and shall fulfil ;
 Breaking the narrow prayers that may
 Befit your narrow hearts, away
 In His broad, loving will.

In these volumes were also such eloquent poems and full of such lofty purpose as "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," and "The Cry of the Children," which must have roused men to take up the cause of the little ones, overwrought, even unto death, in our factories. The voice of the

woman, uttered in indignant song, and springing from a heart which felt the anguish of the children, reached no doubt many consciences, on which the words of the then Lord Ashley, urgent as they were, might have fallen in vain. Miss Barrett did her part in stirring up the nation to a sense of justice—in undoing the heavy burdens, and letting the oppressed go free :

Do ye hear the Children weeping, O my brothers ?
 Ere the sorrow comes with years,
 They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
 And *that* cannot stop their tears.
 The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
 The young birds are chirping in the nest,
 The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
 The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
 But the young, young Children, O my brothers,
 They are weeping bitterly !
 They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
 In the country of the free.

“Bertha in the Lane,” a poem full of the most touching pathos, is the story of man’s inconstancy, and woman’s constancy and self-abnegation. The speaker in the poem is a loving woman who has been forsaken by her betrothed for a younger sister whom he had not seen when his vows were pledged to the elder; and hiding away her grief, she cares only for Bertha’s happiness, and dies of a broken heart. What the struggle to give up all that made life sweet for her sister’s happiness cost her, is told in an appeal to the dead mother, who when dying

Said with accents undefiled,
 “ Child, be mother to this child !”

’Tis thus she speaks :

“ Mother, mother, up in heaven,
 Stand up on the jasper sea,
 And be witness I have given
 All the gifts required of me—
 Hope that blessed me, bliss that crowned,
 Love that left me with a wound,
 Life itself, that turneth round !”

In the last verse, as the end draws nigh, and “The hosannas nearer roll,” her thoughts turn to Him whose love was complete in sacrifice :

“ Jesus, Victim, comprehending
 Love’s divine self-abnegation,
 Cleanse my love in its self-spending,
 And absorb the poor libation !
 Wind my thread of life up higher,
 Up through angels’ hands of fire !
 I aspire while I expire.”

The whole poem is beautiful, and to our mind greatly superior in tenderness, interest, and pathos, to Tennyson's poem of "The Sisters," which is very similar in subject.

"Lady Geraldine's Courtship" is another remarkable poem, full of splendid passion and dramatic power, and the reader is swept along on the flowing current of thought, sentiment, and music (for all are here) to the happy end of the story. It is a tale in which a rarely-endowed and high-born lady gives herself, trampling on the world's scorn, to the lowly-born poet, who, conscious of his riches in all moral and mental worth, aspires to her hand. It is well, perhaps, to remember when reading it, that we are moving in the region of poetry and not of prose, of romance and not reality. How such a courtship and such a marriage would answer in the life of realities and not of dreams, or tend to happiness, we cannot say; but there is not a thought of inconsistency as we read; and we rejoice when Bertram, after what he supposed to be a love scorned and a suit rejected, received at last the assurance of a love that is returned, and the gift of a heart that has long been his own. Fain would we quote some of the stanzas of this poem, which are as strong as they are melodious, and especially of the verses of the wonderfully beautiful conclusion with its flowing cadences, musical as "the rippling of the river" heard by the poet in his waking trance; but we must send the reader to the poem itself. We have always admired the subtlety of the authoress, who weds the noble lady to the humble poet, in placing Bertram alone, so far as regards relations in the world. There is nothing from without to bring a jar into this musical life. Is not this indicated in the first stanza of the poem, where Bertram says to the friend to whom he is writing, and after he thinks that Lady Geraldine has rejected his love:

"I am humbled who was humble! Friend, I bow my head before you,
You should lead me to my peasants; but their faces are too still?"¹

"The Rhyme of the Duchess May" is a very remarkable ballad, which none but a true poet could have written, and is a striking proof of the genius of this noble-hearted and tender-hearted woman. The ballad is the story of a wife's devotion—of a love that triumphs over death, and which becomes sublime through the very strength of its passion. The Duchess May, an heiress, has been betrothed, when a child, to Lord Leigh, the churl, her guardian's son; but when she reaches womanhood, she refuses to fulfil the contract, and bestows

¹ Miss Mitford tells us in her "Recollections of a Literary Life," that "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" was "written (to meet the double exigency of completing the uniformity of the original two volumes, and of catching the vessel that was to carry the proofs to America) in the incredible space of twelve hours."

her hand where her heart is already given, on Sir Guy of Linteged. The marriage is solemnized, and the bridal train rides off at midnight through storm and rain, pursued by the Leighs, and makes for the Castle of Linteged. How picturesque are the following lines, and how there rise up through them the fearlessness and confiding love of the lady :

And the bridegroom led the flight on his red-roan steed of might,—

Toll slowly.

And the bride lay on his arm, still, as if she feared no harm,
Smiling out into the night.

The Castle is reached in safety, and for three months their life glides on in unbroken happiness; but then Lord Leigh comes and storms the fortress where they made their home, and after besieging it for a fortnight, is on the point of taking it. The Castle can hold out no longer. Lord Leigh swears to wed the Duchess May, though he can only reach the marriage altar across the body of her husband. The lady laughs his proud menaces to scorn, and bidding her bower-women attire her in gorgeous robes, she looks down from the wall, and unaware of her peril, defies his boasting.

“It is three months gone to-day since I gave mine hand away,—

Toll slowly.

Bring the gold, and bring the gem, we will keep bride-state in them,
While we keep the foe at bay.

On your arms I loose mine hair; comb it smooth and crown it fair,—

Toll slowly.

I would look in purple pall from this lattice down the wall,
And throw scorn to one that's there.”

Sir Guy, seeing there is no hope, resolves to sacrifice his own life that wife, and sister, and followers may be safe, for he hopes that the Duchess May will soon forget her sorrow, and that his foes, conciliated by his death, will “soothe the fair widowed bride, whose sin was love for him.”

“She will weep her woman's tears, she will pray her woman's prayers,—

Toll slowly.

But her heart is young in pain, and her hopes will spring again
By the suntime of her years.”

Resolving nobly that no more lives shall be lost for him—
“life-blood falls too heavily”—and that his friends shall pass out free, and shall bear with them his memory, he binds his men by a solemn oath not to strike that night one blow, either for vengeance or for right. Then

“One last boon, young Ralph and Clare! faithful hearts to do and dare!—

Toll slowly.

Bring that steed up from his stall, which she kissed before you all;
Guide him up the turret-stair.”

His faithful men bring the horse, and goad him up the turret-stair; and as they do so the lady comes out of her bower-chamber, and ask what they do. They answer :

“ Get thee back, sweet Duchess May ! hope is gone like yesterday,—
Toll slowly.

One half-hour completes the breach, and thy lord grows wild of speech ;
Get thee in, sweet lady, and pray.”

When she hears his stern resolve,

Low she dropt her head and lower, till her hair coiled on the floor,—
Toll slowly.

And tear after tear you heard fall distinct as any word
Which you might be listening for.

Her tears fall no more. Her mind is made up. Her husband's fate shall be hers too.

Then the good steed's rein she took, and his neck did kiss and stroke,—
Toll slowly.

Soft he neighed to answer her, and then followed up the stair
For the love of her sweet look.

On the east tower, high'st of all, there, where never a hoof did fall,—
Toll slowly.

Out they swept, a vision steady, noble steed and lovely lady,
Calm as if in bower or stall.

Down she knelt at her lord's knee, and she looked up silently,—
Toll slowly.

And he kissed her twice and thrice, for that look within her eyes
Which he could not bear to see.

He prays her to leave the strife, and mounting the horse, he would fain urge it over the battlements alone ; but she clings to him with a clasp like death, and will not be parted, though twice or thrice he wrenches her small hands in twain. As the breach is made in the walls, and the foemen pour through the crash of window and door, and the shouts of “ Leigh and Leigh ! ” and the shrieks of “ Kill ! ” and “ Flee ! ” are heard clear in the general roar

Straight as if the Holy Name had upbreathed her like a flame,—
Toll slowly.

She upsprang, she rose upright, in his selle she sat in sight,
By her love she overcame.

Then there follow these grand verses, with the terrible picture of the horse. And I know of nothing more wonderfully real in the range of poetry than the whole description, which thrills us as we read.

And her head was on his breast, where she smiled as one at rest,—
Toll slowly.

“ Ring,” she cried, “ O vesper bell, in the beech-wood's old chapelle !
But the passing-bell rings best.”

They have caught out at the rein, which Sir Guy threw loose—in vain,—
Toll slowly.
 For the horse in stark despair, with his front hoofs poised in air,
 On the last verge, rears amain.
 Now he hangs, he rocks between—and his nostrils curl in !—
Toll slowly.
 Now he shivers head and hoof—and the flakes of foam fall off,
 And his face grows fierce and thin !
 And a look of human woe from his staring eyes did go,—
Toll slowly.
 And a sharp cry uttered he, in a foretold agony
 Of the headlong death below,
 And “Ring, ring, thou passing-bell,” still she cried, “i’ the old chapelle!”—
Toll slowly.
 Then back-toppling, crashing back—a dead-weight flung out to wrack,
 Horse and riders overfell.

The “Dead Pan” is a fine Christian poem, in which in lyric mood the singer triumphs in the passing away of the creed of Paganism, and the establishment of the religion of Jesus in its stead. It is an eloquent and musical revolt against Schiller’s lament for the old faiths of the heathen world, called “Götter Griechenlands.” Mrs. Browning’s poem is founded on a well-known tradition, mentioned in a treatise of Plutarch (*De Oraculorum Defectu*), according to which, at the hour of the Saviour’s agony, a cry of “Great Pan is dead !” swept across the waves in the hearing of certain mariners, and the oracles ceased. “It is in all veneration,” she says, “to the memory of the deathless Schiller, that I oppose a doctrine still more dishonouring to poetry than to Christianity. “The Dead Pan” is a noble lyric, marred, perhaps, by some false rhymes which would be fatal to a poem where the thought was less fine, and where you were not so swept along by a grandeur of conception, that leaves little or no time for criticism on musical defects. Mr. Horne, in a correspondence between himself and Mrs. Browning, maintains that the fact was, “whether the poetess intended it or not, that she was introducing a system of rhyming the first syllable, and leaving the rest to a question of euphonious quantity.” We have no space for quotation, but must just find room for two exquisite stanzas :

O ye vain false gods of Hellas,
 Ye are silent evermore !
 And I dash down this old chalice
 Whence libations ran of yore.
 See ! the wine crawls in the dust
 Wormlike—as your glories must !
 Since Pan is dead.

Truth is fair : should we forego it ?
 Can we sigh right for a wrong ?
 God Himself is the best Poet,
 And the Real is His song.
 Sing His truth out fair and full,
 And secure His beautiful.
 Let Pan be dead !

There are many other poems which we can only mention in passing, and which would have made a poetic reputation for any writer, but which, in Mrs. Browning's case, may be reckoned among her minor songs. Some of these, too, are very generally known. Need I recall "Cowper's Grave," "The Sleep," "The Deserted Garden," "The Lost Bower," and "Crowned and Buried"?

In 1846 Miss Barrett married Robert Browning, one of the great poets of this century, and a poet whom his many ardent admirers regard as the great intellectual teacher of the age. There is no doubt of Mr. Browning's power or tenderness, or his sympathy with the doubts and struggles of the age in which his lot is cast. Though too careless of popularity (a very rare fault), he hinders it in a measure by a method too often unmusical and rough. Still, with him, as often in the case of his wife, the beauty of the thoughts triumphs over the ruggedness of the measure. It was to him that the celebrated "Portuguese Sonnets" were addressed, and which, three-and-forty in number, appeared at the end of the second volume of Mrs. Browning's poems in the edition of 1853. They are love-sonnets, and thrill with passion. Though written before marriage, and while a lover worthy of her heart and hand was wooing her, these sonnets, we understand, were only known to exist, and were seen for the first time by, the happy man to whom they were addressed two or three years after Miss Barrett had become Mrs. Browning. When they were seen and read, it was thought, and properly thought, that such beauty and power should not be kept from the world at large, and they were printed at the urgent entreaty of one who had acquired a right to make his voice heard in the matter. All lovers of true poetry must be grateful for the influence which broke through the reticence, and gave these poems to the world. It would be pleasant to enrich the pages of *THE CHURCHMAN* with some of these beautiful and tender sonnets; but it is better that "the silver iterance" of the whole be read consecutively, and not broken, as they follow one another in a perfect sequence of thought and connection. So, instead of detaching one or two of these pearls from the string, we refer the reader to the sonnets themselves, which may be read again and again, and always with fresh pleasure.

Some of Mrs. Browning's sonnets may stand beside any in the language, and need not fear comparison with those of Milton and Wordsworth. She adopts the sonnet not merely to express the sentiment of love, for which it was chiefly employed by our early poets, but for great purposes in other directions. We give the reader three sonnets of great beauty, and interpenetrated with the spirit of Christianity :

CONSOLATION.

All are not taken ; there are left behind
Living Belovèds, tender looks to bring,
And make the daylight still a happy thing,
And tender voices to make soft the wind.
But if it were not so—if I could find
No love in all the world for comforting,
Nor any path but hollowly did ring,
Where "dust to dust" the love from life disjoined,
And if, before those sepulchres unmoving,
I stood alone (as some forsaken lamb
Goes bleating up the moors in weary dearth),
Crying "Where are ye, O my loved and loving?"
I know a Voice would sound, "Daughter, I AM.
Can I suffice for HEAVEN, and not for Earth?"

SUBSTITUTION.

When some belovèd voice that was to you
Both sound and sweetness, faileth suddenly,
And silence against which you dare not cry,
Aches round you like a strong disease and new—
What hope ? what help ? what music will undo
That silence to your sense ? Not friendship's sigh,
Not reason's subtle count. Not melody
Of viols, nor of pipes that Faunus blew.
Not songs of poets, nor of nightingales,
Whose hearts leap upward through the cypress trees
To the clear moon ! nor yet the spheric laws
Self-chanted—nor the angels' sweet "All hails,"
Met in the smile of God. Nay, none of these.
Speak THOU, availing Christ !—and fill this pause.

COMFORT.

Speak low to me, my Saviour, low and sweet
From out the hallelujahs sweet and low,
Lest I should fear and fall, and miss Thee so
Who art not missed by any that entreat.
Speak to me as to Mary at Thy feet !
And if no precious gems my hands bestow,
Let my tears drop like amber, while I go
In search of Thy divinest voice complete
In humanest affection—thus, in sooth,
To lose the sense of losing. As a child,

Whose song-bird seeks the wood for evermore,
 Is sung to in its stead by mother's mouth,
 Till, sinking on her breast, love reconciled,
 He sleeps the faster that he wept before.

We should also like to transfer to these pages three other remarkable sonnets—"The Two Sayings," "The Look," and "The Meaning of the Look"—on the subject of Peter's denial of our Lord, but our space will not permit us to do so.

Mrs. Browning's marriage, bringing with it new happiness, new hopes, and new duties, was the source of new strength to both body and mind, and in that maturity of power which she had now reached, she gave to the world poems which it will not willingly let die. Miss Mitford thus writes of the poetess shortly after her marriage with one in all respects so worthy of her friend :

Gradually her health improved ; about four years ago she married Mr. Browning, and immediately accompanied him to Pisa. They then settled at Florence ; and this summer I have had the exquisite pleasure of seeing her once more in London with a lovely boy at her knee, almost as well as ever, and telling tales of Italian rambles, of losing herself in chestnut forests, and scrambling on mule-back up the sources of extinct volcanoes. May heaven continue to her such health and such happiness !

Her residence in Italy gave to Mrs. Browning's poetry a fresh vigour and a new inspiration, for she entered with sympathy into the great hopes of that nation, and she yearned as much as one of themselves for their independence, and unity, and freedom. It was no doubt her love for Italy and the Italians that gave her such enthusiasm for Napoleon III., for she looked on him as the deliverer who should emancipate the people from their bondage, and make that beautiful country free. The Emperor of France became idealized in her imagination, and when he crossed the Alps to strike the first decisive blow in behalf of Italy, she hailed him as one who should introduce a new era for that land, and give it a place once more in the broad life of nations. Her aspirations for Italy, her sympathy with its struggles for unity, her scorn for the Pope and the Papacy, are eloquently expressed in her poems, "Casa Guidi Windows," "Poems before Congress," "Napoleon III. in Italy," and "A View across the Roman Campagna." She has celebrated some of the most heroic and touching incidents of the war in the poem, "The First Recruit," and "Mother and Poet." In what burning and eloquent words she rebukes the party who resisted the interference of England in the cause of Italy's freedom, on the plea of the sacredness of peace!

What! your peace admits
 Of outside anguish while it keeps at home?
 I loathe to take its name upon my tongue.

'Tis nowise peace ; 'tis treason, stiff with doom,—
'Tis gagged despair, and inarticulate wrong,—
Annihilated Poland, stifled Rome,
Dazed Naples, Hungary fainting 'neath the thong,
And Austria wearing a smooth olive-leaf
On her brute forehead, while her hoofs outpress
The life from these Italian souls, in brief.
O Lord of Peace, who art Lord of Righteousness,
Constrain the anguished worlds from sin and grief,
Pierce them with conscience, purge them with redress,
And give us peace which is no counterfeit !

Italy has shown herself not ungrateful to the memory of the poetess, and has placed an inscription over the door of the house in which she lived at Florence.

We must pass by many other of this gifted lady's poems, but one extract from a letter from Mr. Ruskin to Miss Mitford will show the opinion of this great critic and poet on their merit :

I have had one other feast, however, this Sunday morning, in your dear friend's poems—Elizabeth Browning. I have not had my eyes so often wet for these five years. I had no conception of her powers before. I can't tell you how wonderful I think them ; I have been reading "The Valediction," and "The Year's Spinning," and "The Reed," and "The Dead Pan," and "Dead Baby at Florence," and the "Caterina to Camoens," and all for the first time ! I only knew her mystical things—*younger, I suppose—before.*

Mr. Ruskin has called "Aurora Leigh" "the greatest poem which this century has produced in any language ;" and though many will dissent from this criticism, yet all, we think, will agree that it contains passages as beautiful as any other poem which the century has produced. In dedicating it to her "dearest cousin and friend, John Kenyon," she describes it as "the most mature of her works, and the one in which she has expressed her highest convictions upon life and art." It is a novel in verse, a story in nine books ; and the whole forms a very striking poem. It treats largely, as Tennyson's poem of "The Princess" does, with the position of women in the world. The plot is not very probable, and some incidents in the tale, especially those connected with Marian Erle, are very painful. It is, however, a wonderful poem, and was written, we have heard, amid interruptions from her child at play, or at work about the room, and at a word from the boy the book would be put aside. It is full of beautiful passages, descriptive and otherwise, and contains many delicious descriptions of scenery, many lovely thoughts and rhythmic cadences, that flash like jewels in the verse, set there "like apples of gold in pictures of silver." Alas ! our extracts must necessarily be few. Here is one descriptive of the pastoral beauty of England.

But then the thrushes sang,
 And shook my pulses and the elms' new leaves,—
 And then I turned and held my finger up
 And bade him mark that, howsoe'er the world
 Went ill, as he related certainly
 The thrushes still sang in it. At which word
 His brow would soften, and he bore with me
 In melancholy patience, not unkind,
 While, breaking into voluble ecstasy,
 I flattered all the beauteous country round,
 As poets use . . . the skies, the clouds, the fields,
 The happy violets hiding from the roads
 The primroses run down to, carrying gold—
 The tangled hedgerows, where the cows push out
 Impatient horns and tolerant churning mouths,
 'Twixt dripping ash-boughs,—hedgerows all alive
 With birds and gnats and large white butterflies
 Which look as if the May-flower had caught life
 And palpitated forth upon the wind,—
 Hills, vales, woods netted in a silver mist,
 Farms, granges, doubled up among the hills,
 And cattle grazing in the watered vales,
 And cottage chimneys smoking from the woods,
 And cottage gardens smelling everywhere,
 Confused with smell of orchards. "See," I said,
 "And see! is God not with us on the earth?
 And shall we put Him down by aught we do?
 Who says there's nothing for the poor and vile
 Save poverty and wickedness? behold!"
 And ankle-deep in English grass I leaped,
 And clapped my hands, and called all very fair.

But one more, striking in its contrast, as in their outward
 aspects are England and Italy:

I felt the wind soft from the land of souls;
 The old miraculous mountains heaved in sight,
 One straining past another along the shore,
 The way of grand dull Odyssean ghosts
 Athirst to drink the cool blue wine of seas
 And stare on voyagers. Peak pushing peak
 They stood: I watched beyond that Tyrian belt
 Of intense sea betwixt them and the ship,
 Down all their sides the misty olive woods
 Dissolving in the weak congenial moon,
 And still disclosing some brown convent tower
 That seems as if it grew from some brown rock,—
 Or many a little lighted village, dropt
 Like a fallen star, upon so high a point,
 You wonder what can keep it in its place
 From sliding headlong with the waterfalls
 Which drop and powder all the myrtle groves
 With sprays of silver. Thus my Italy
 Was stealing on us.

Mrs. Browning died in 1861, in the fulness of her powers, and too soon for the perfect maturity of her rich, if sometimes unchastened, genius; and her death brought sorrow into many a home where the woman, though personally unknown, was loved because of the pleasure she had given, and of the noble thoughts she had expressed in melodious and eloquent verse. The author of the present paper owes her a deep debt of gratitude for many an hour calmed and brightened by her noble and tender and elevating poems, which are always read by him with a new pleasure, and with a sense of fresh strength and refreshment. Would that he could weave a chaplet more worthy to be laid on her honoured grave!

In 1862 Mrs. Browning's "Last Poems" were published posthumously; and some of these equal, perhaps excel, anything she has written. The volume was inscribed "To 'Grateful Florence'; to the Municipality, her Representative; and to Tommaseo, its Spokesman, most gratefully."

Among these "Last Poems" we find poems of such beauty and passion, such tenderness and force, such emotion, and such depth of feeling, as "Bianca among the Nightingales;" "My Heart and I;" "Where's Agnes?" "The Forced Recruit;" "Parting Lovers;" "A Musical Instrument;" and that perfect Christian hymn, "De Profundis."

This paper may well be brought to a close by a few stanzas from the last-named poem; and if it has made any acquainted with a great, a striking, an original poetess—if, indeed, there be any to whom the lady whom we "delight to honour" is unknown—then its purpose is fulfilled. There are some poems in her volumes which no one can read without feeling the stronger and the better for the perusal, and what praise can be higher than this?

He reigns above, He reigns alone;
Systems burn out, and leave His throne:
Fair mists of seraphs melt and fall
Around Him, changeless amid all,—
Ancient of Days, whose days go on.

He reigns below, He reigns alone,
And having life in love foregone
Beneath the crown of sovran thorns,
He reigns the jealous God. Who mourns
Or rules with Him, while days go on?

By anguish which made pale the sun,
I hear Him charge His saints that none
Among His creatures anywhere
Blaspheme against Him with despair,
However darkly days go on.

Take from my head the thorn-wreath brown!
 No mortal grief deserves that crown.
 O supreme Love, chief misery,
 The sharp regalia are for THEE
 Whose days eternally go on.

For us, whatever's undergone,
 Thou knowest, willest what is done.
 Grief may be joy misunderstood;
 Only the Good discerns the good.
 I trust Thee while my days go on.

Whatever's lost, it first was won:
 We will not struggle nor impugn.
 Perhaps the cup was broken here,
 That Heaven's new wine might show more clear.
 I praise Thee while my days go on.

I praise Thee while my days go on;
 I love Thee while my days go on:
 Through dark and dearth, through fire and frost,
 With emptied arms, and treasure lost,
 I thank Thee while my days go on.

And having in Thy life-depth thrown
 Being and suffering (which are one),
 As a child drops his pebble small
 Down some deep well, and hears it fall
 Smiling—so I. THY DAYS GO ON.

CHARLES D. BELL, D.D.



ART. IV.—MEANING OF THE WORD “OBLATIONS” IN OUR BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER.

A REPLY TO CANON SIMMONS.

IN a criticism of a paper on “Alms and Oblations,” which was printed in *THE CHURCHMAN* at the beginning of last year, Canon Simmons remarked, a few months afterwards,¹ that while we have often voted together in Convocation at York, we have sometimes voted against one another, but always with mutual goodwill and regard. This is quite true: and it is pleasant to be sure that no difference of opinion regarding the subject now under consideration, or any other subject, is likely to disturb this feeling. If such an impossible thing were to happen, it would be my fault, not his.

¹ See *THE CHURCHMAN* for January and June, 1882. Each paper was afterwards reprinted and published separately with corrections (Elliot Stock, 62, Paternoster Row).