

ARTICLE VII.

ITALIAN POETRY OF OUR TIME.

BY THE REVEREND JAMES LINDSAY, D.D.

SOMETHING is done to make contemporary poets in Germany and France known to the English-speaking world: why should the poetical literature of Italy to-day be treated as a negligible quantity? One has but to mention such names as Carducci, Chiarini, D'Annunzio, Fogazzaro, Graf, Mazzoni, Negri, and Pascoli,—to name no others,—to see the injustice of such a procedure. Genius has hardly ever been without a home in Italy, and has certainly a residence in the poetic spirit there to-day. The day of Monti, with verse of boundless flow, is long past; long silent is the muse of Alfieri and Foscolo; spent long ago the mighty genius of Leopardi, wasted on lyrics of lamentation and despair; hushed, also, the noble, modest, and gifted Manzoni; gone are the bright and hopeful Aleardi, Tommaseo, and many another beside.

For the Italy of the nineteenth century had not only a brilliant array of philosophers, historians, and novelists, but, passing from "the great massy strength of abstraction," had a rich supply of poets, also, memorable for their power and originality in dealing with the objectively real. Certain it is that Italian poetry does not in our time lack in originality and even grandeur; its capital defect is, not to be sufficiently focused and centered in mighty poems and great personalities. That poetry has followed the instinct of genius, doing "what it must," but at times caring overmuch for perfection of form and finish.

At the head of Italian poets of this time stands Carducci, than whom Europe has perhaps no more powerful poetic genius in this time. The so-called "pagan" or "barbaric" movement, headed by Carducci, was something inevitable—the result of life overleaping the bounds of old and outworn paths. A vital thing was the new literary Revival or *Risorgimento*, and three decades have passed since Carducci voiced its spirit of revolt in his classic "Hymn to Satan," with its famous apostrophe—

" Salute, O Satana,
O ribellione,
O forza vindice
Della ragione"!

That is to say, "Hail to thee, O Satan! O rebellion! O avenging force of reason"! The satan so invoked is no spirit of evil, but simply the unquenchable spirit of progress. Thus he says:—

" To thee, of all being,
Principle immense,
Matter and spirit,
Reason and sense."

It was the revolt of the Neo-Classical school against the churchly Christianity then current and the obscurantism of the priesthood. Strength, vigor, dignity, resonance, and classic beauty are the marks of Carducci's verse. Not only are strength and beauty within this poet's sanctuary, but the beauty is as modern as it is antique. He has wrestled with the deep problems of life; he has found for them large and eloquent utterance; he has cared for more than impeccable form. He has brought a creative spirit and high ideals to bear upon his poetic work. It is he who has said:—

" Or destruggiam. Dei secoli
Lo strato è sul pensiero :
O pochi e forti, all' opera,
Chè nei profondi è il vero."

Which we may thus render :—

“Destroy we must. Of the ages
The highway by Thought is made:
O ye few and strong, to the work,
For Truth in the deeps is laid.”

The “cold bath of erudition” which Carducci was to give the literature of his time was thus no lifeless thing, but a broadening of spirit, a widening of horizon, and a perfecting of form, in midst of life that should be altogether real. Carducci is, in fact, the great exponent of the Hellenic reaction in Italy, wherein Hellenic objectivity is seen reasserting itself. His example recalls that of Goethe, who, in his “Hermann und Dorothea,” is at once more Greek than usual and more German than ever. The Hellenic spirit of Carducci finally vents itself in passages like that beginning “Addio, Semitico Nume,” in the poem “In Una Chiesa Gotica,” which runs thus in Sewall’s fine version :—

“Farewell, Semitic God; the mistress Death
May still continue in thy solemn rites,
O far-off King of spirits, whose dim shrines
Shut out the sun.

“Crucified Martyr! Man thou crucifiest:
The very air thou darkenest with thy gloom.
Outside, the heavens shine, the fields are laughing
And flash with love.

“The eyes of Lydia—O Lydia! I would see thee
Among the chorus of white shining virgins
That dance around the altar of Apollo
In the rosy twilight.

“Gleaming as Parian marble among the laurels,
Flinging the sweet anemones from thy hand,
Joy from thine eyes, and from thy lips the song
Of a Bacchante!”

Carducci voices the same Hellenic spirit in passages of the “Levia Gravia” also, that just given being taken from “Odi Barbare.” It will be well to glance at Carducci’s relation to the Sonnet (*Il Sonetto*). His lyrical genius has

put new dash and vigor into the Italian sonnet—always so much more rich in buoyant tunefulness than sonnets in English. What Carducci thinks of the sonnet may be seen in this powerful rendering by Dr. Garnett:—

“Brief strain with much in little rife ; whose tone,
As worlds untrodden rose upon his thought,
Dante touched lightly; that Petrarca sought,
Flower among flowers by gliding waters grown ;
That from trump epical of Tasso blown
Pealed through his prison ; that wert gravely fraught
With voice austere by him who marble fought
To free the spirit he divined in stone:—

“To Æschylus new-born by Avon’s shore
Thou camest harbinger of Art, to be
A hidden cell for hidden sorrow’s store;
On thee smiled Milton and Camoens ; thee,
His rout of lines unleashing with a roar,
Bavius blasphemous ; the dearer thence to me.”

Or, again, Carducci’s mind as to the sonnet may be gathered from these lines (the rendering is my own):—

“Dante the sonnet raised to heights divine
Diffusing it through azure air and gold;
Petrarch a murmur’ing stream whose waters shine
Made of the numbers that the heart’s grief told.

“Mantuan nectar and the Venusine,
By favour won from Tibur’s muse of old,
Torquato brought; his dart adamantine
’Gainst slaves and tyrants flung Alfieri bold.

“Like nightingale did Ugo sing his lays
Beneath Ionian cypress and the bloom
Of fair acanthus fed by kindly rays.

“And I, the last, both joy and sorrow bring,
With perfume, wrath, and art, as thro’ my days
Its power I call, and to the tombs do sing.”

Among other things, it should be noted how difficult a form of poetry is the sonnet by its essential nature. The Italian sonnet is peculiarly so to English-speaking people, because it is so different, both in form and spirit, from our notions of poetry. The Italian sonnet has, for well-nigh

six centuries, been the recognized form of poetry for any sort of disconnected utterance, whether idea, conceit, witticism, analogy, simile, or graceful saying. In Italian sonnets the thought is dominant: we have to regard its intellectual character rather than seek some lyrical form. And it does not come quite easily and naturally for us to do so. Among the finest pieces of the "Odi Barbare" of Carducci must be reckoned "To the Statue of Victory," "In the Square of San Petronio," "Ruit Hora," "On Monte Mario," and "Snowfall."

There is no finer Carduccian, among Italian poets of our time, than Professor Guido Mazzoni, with elegance, power, and vigor all his own. Let this rendering of "Night" by Mr. Greene suffice as a specimen:—

"Now Night spreads out her starry veil anew
To comfort all the fields with heat consumed;
O'er dusky hills around, now re-illumed,
Rises heaven's glittering dome of deepest blue.

"Perpetual harmony sounds deep and low
As of a wedding song, where through the sky
The silent stars take their refulgent way;
And through the heart of man the current slow
Of ancient memory runs, as with a sigh
He calls to mind his youth's departed day.
Wherefore such deep complaint? Shall anger sway
This fragile form so swiftly withering?
Life bringeth forth in everlasting spring
Upon the eternal stem flowers ever new."

D'Annunzio has sung with brilliant power in his Swinburnian verse, though he moves not so much in the realm of the ideal as Carducci, nor quite attains his matchless strength. D'Annunzio is a figure of very great literary interest, with splendid potentiality of achievement. Greene's rendering of the following sonnet must serve as example of D'Annunzio's power:—

“Beneath the white full-moon the murmuring seas
 Send songs of love across the pine-tree glade ;
 The moonlight fluttering through the dome-topped trees
 Fills with weird life the vast and secret shade ;
 A fresh salt perfume on the Illyrian breeze
 From seaweeds on the rocks is hither swayed,
 While my sad heart, worn out and ill at ease,
 A wild poetic longing doth invade.

“But now more joyous still the love songs flow
 O'er waves of silver sea; from pine to pine
 A sweet name echoes in the winds that blow,

“And hovering through yon spaces diamantine,
 A phantom fair with silent flight and slow
 Smiles on me from its great-orbed eyes divine.”

Indeed, the creations of D'Annunzio have been acknowledged to be magnificent, and it is to be hoped that the poet may not lack the binding power or concentration of qualities for achievements still, beyond all he has yet realized.

Fogazzaro is famed for his nature studies, in which natural beauties are faithfully mirrored by his refined muse. Very fine is the piece styled “Evening,” and that on “In St. Mark's at Venice” shows how he cleaves to faith in the ideal. Graf has a muse of somber cast, his original power being deeply tinged with northern sadness. His poetical work entitled “Medusa” has taken well, with its sad visions of “the fall of worlds in ruined space,” “Death a crownèd queen,” “the perished Faith,” and “the God that is no more.” The muse of Ada Negri is strenuous and of great poetic promise; her wondrous force and fire have been generally admitted. Rapisardi and Stecchetti are among the other poets of Italy to-day; though by no means wanting in power, they lack in depth and calmness.

Enough has been said of Italian poetry of our time to show how that poetry has been shaking off the trammels of conventionalism. When the standard of classical revolt

shall need be no longer lifted against Romanticism, Italian originality and power will be found more free from the disharmony and lack of serenity and balance that have so often obtained since the days of Leopardi, with thought as bitter as his style was sweet. Italy has not yet, it is true, given birth to poet so striking as Burns in dialect, or so strong as Shakespeare in tragedy. This latter statement is made without any lack of appreciation for what was done for Italian tragedy by Alfieri, Monti, Niccolini, and Manzoni.

But the poetic advances of Italy have been so great that there is no saying what yet may be. The land of Dante and Ariosto is a land of great potentialities, and lacks not life and vivid thought, any more than perfect style. When the violence of literary insurrection shall have passed, genius will break forth in new forms of development. And among these developments one can think of none for which there is more abundant scope than for that poetry to become more deeply infused with Christian spirit. We are not so enamored of their "paganism" as not to think the poets of that land would, so far from losing, most surely gain in power, were they more suffused with the spirit of religious faith that breathes in the work of a Dante, a Tasso, or even the noble-minded Manzoni, by whom no line was written which, dying, he could wish to blot.