

## THE LITERARY ERA NOVEMBER 1899

### FROM BAD TO VERSE.

*Jephthah and other Mysteries, Lyrical and Dramatic.* By Aleister Crowley.

The decay of the spirit of poetry in England is one of the most depressing of all the sad signs of the times. No doubt great bards are like the best comets, and only flash across our horizon at long, irregular intervals, but the murkiness of the present outlook bears all the stigmata of permanence, and we find an added hopelessness in the complacency with which our literary public accepts its fate. In France there is no great poet nor any promise of his advent, but the very vulgar are forever scanning the skies. The present writer remembers being asked his profession by a French official for some legal formality. Having no very distinct inspiration for an answer, he hesitated, whereupon a string of likely professions were instantly prompted: "Are you an engineer or a lawyer or a contractor or a poet?" To the inquirer there was no sense of incongruity or sly chaff in the final suggestion. Poetry as a profession had been as readily received as electricity or medicine or the perfecting of automobiles. Here on the other hand it would have provoked the utmost derision and found ruthless translation into that final formula, "of no occupation." It is only when we wish to be specially sarcastic that we allude to "the poet Watson" or "the poet Austin" or the poet Davidson." Yet their profession, poorly exercised though it may be, has surely an equal claim to recognition with that of the painter or the mummer.

A few versifiers have developed a certain distinction of form, usually by a slavish imitation of successful writers, but they lack all vestige of a divine afflatus, and often approach perilously near to unconscious parody. The rest are mere producers of grotesque doggerel, which ought never to have been permitted to see the light of print.

The only mystery about Mr. Crowley's effusions is that his friends should not have kindly but firmly restrained him from such an egregious exhibition. That he has friends is to be presumed from the astounding virulence of two sonnets, which he has dedicated "to the author of the phrase: 'I am not a gentleman and I have no friends.'" They are dated "at the hour of

the eclipse, Wednesday, December 28," which suggests that the usual lunar influence was not abated by the sun's interposition. Here are some choice fragments:

"Self-damned, the leprous moisture of thy veins  
Sickens the sunshine . . .  
    . . . go, go thy ways  
To other hells, thou damned of God hereafter  
'Mid men's contempt and hate and pitiless laughter  
    . . . The scroll  
Opens and 'coward, liar, monster' shake  
Those other names of 'goat' and 'swine' and 'snake'  
Wherewith Hell's worms caress thee and control.  
Nay, but alone, intolerably alone,  
    Alone, as here, thy carrion soul shall swelter,  
    Yearning in vain for sleep, or death, or shelter;  
No release possible, no respite known,  
    Self-damned, without a friend thy eternal place  
    Sweats through the painting of thy harlot's face."

"The dedication," we read, "is to Algernon Charles Swinburne," be we presume without permission unless he has been beguiled by Mr. Crowley's fulsome apostrophe:

    "Then rose the splendid song of thee, 'Thou liest.'  
Out of the darkness in the death of hope,  
Thy white star flamed in Europe's horoscope.

The obscene God spat on the universe:  
    The sods of Destiny were spattered on her:  
Then rose thy spirit through the shaken skies:  
'Child of the Dawn, I say to thee arise!'  
Through the ancestral shame and feudal gloom,  
    Through mediaeval blackness rung thy paean:  
Let there be light!—the desecrated tomb.  
    Gaped as thy fury smote the Galilean."

The secret of this frenzied enthusiasm is to be found in some press notices, which suggest, at the end of the volume, that Mr. Crowley's verses have "the very sound of Mr. Swinburne." They are indeed full of sound and of very little else. Neither the individual sentences nor the whole poems possess any intelligible meaning, and their author's sense of proportion may be gauged by a reference to modern Italy as "The eagle of all time . . . eagle and phoenix." The only instructive fact to be

noted is that attacks on God and kings rarely fail to go together—at least among poets who pose as advanced teachers. Carducci had already exemplified this before he followed up his ode to the Devil by another to the Queen of Savoy.