

THE BIRMINGHAM GAZETTE

circa 1899

Review of Jephthah and Other Mysteries

Mr Crowley has paced the literary stage before, not without success, though it were not much more than the success of expectation. He was hailed as a promising young man, and a follower of Swinburne. It is true that young men usually follow somebody or something; but this does not imply depreciation. It is also true that some critics appear to expect an absolutely impossible originality, and that they forget Emerson's dictum that the greatest genius is the most indebted man. Nobody borrowed more than the Bard of Avon; yet he has been held to have achieved a tolerable reputation. Poor Brahms declared that the most exasperating people in the universe were those who listened to a new composition only with the view of noting whence the composer had derived his ideas, and who, at the conclusion, nodded to each other and whispered, 'Beethoven,' or 'Mendelssohn,' or 'old Sebastian Bach.' Perhaps the poet who has the name of Swinburne flung at him feels something of this, though Mr Crowley has dedicated his book to that distinguished singer. To our mind, whatever may be said of the earlier effort, 'Songs of the Spirit,' the present book is not distinctly Swinburnian. There is no need to compare the writer with any other, but if we had to elect we should declare for Milton; that is, Milton plus two centuries. We make no comparisons; rather does Mr. Crowley appear to be in style a strong eclectic, with a due measure of the unique which represents an unfettered, unsophisticated self. He can hardly be called a minor poet; with him it is neck or nothing. He is very much in earnest, and sufficiently unorthodox even for this faithless age. Not a particularly sweet singer, but strenuous, and with a wonderful mastery of certain technical forms. He has been praised for the perfection of his rhythm, but he is not always perfect; there are lines that require slight management on the part of the reader, because they do not quite read themselves. But these are rare, and the swing of the lyrics is everywhere admirable. The chiefest fault is obscurity. To get the meaning you have to pause, and corrugate the brow, which would not matter much if you were sure that you had the thought at last, and that it was worth waiting for. It should be said that 'The Dedi-

cation' is a poem expressive of admiration of Swinburne, and that the title-work is only one of many that the book contains. 'Jephthah' is, of course, a tragedy. 'The Five Kisses' comprises a series of lyrics of impassioned character, skillful technique, and real poetic frenzy, though they may, perhaps, 'prove nothing,' and puzzle the mere utilitarian. 'A Sonnet of Blasphemy' may be given as an average specimen of our poet's verse and sentiments:—

Exalted over earth, from hell arisen,
There sits a woman, ruddy with flame
Of men's blood spilt, and her uncleanly shame,
And the thrice-venomous vomit of her prison.

She sits as one long dead; infernal calm,
Chill hatred, wrap her in their poisonous cold.
She careth not, but doth disdainly hold
Three scourges for man's soul, that know no balm.

They know not any cure. The first is Life,
A well of poison. Sowing dust and dung
Over men's hearts, the second scourge, above
All evil deeds, is Lying, from whose tongue
Drops envy, wed with Hatred to sow Strife.

These twain are bitter. But the last is Love.

There are many poems the titles of which we need not give. Nearly all seem to indicate that Mr Crowley is still in the thick of his passions; the ferment is discernable to all who have passed that way. But there is good wine there; he must be reckoned with. If he progresses his will become a great name. If he has arrived at his limits we shall hear no more of him. But from the power and earnestness of the book before us we are inclined to favour his chances in the future. He has shown at least the foot of Hercules.