

THE MANCHESTER GUARDIAN
circa 1899

Review of *Songs of the Spirit*

We shall be sorry if anyone who cares much for verse in itself, who is curious of new tendencies in contemporary poetry, and values the articulate expression of an individuality, should miss a little book of unusual quality, called "Songs of the Spirit," by Aleister Crowley (Kegan Paul and Co., 8vo., pp. 109, 3s. 6d.). We have read it with admiration for its intense spirituality, as well as for its technical superiorities, and with sympathy for its spontaneous reflection of certain moods—byways of poetry, no doubt, that Mr. Crowley pursues almost without variation except in the movement of his rhythms, now swift as desire and now slow as remorse, with an utterance at once mysterious and vivid. Visions of temptation and of beatitude, wavering aspirations to serenity and knowledge, hymns and rhapsodies of a devout mysticity, emotional descriptions illustrating that saying of Amiel's, 'Les paysages sont des états d'âme'—such are the contents of this volume, in which we are sure of having heard an impressive and an original voice dominating diverse echoes that we hesitate whether to ascribe to literary influences or to coincidence of temperament. For there are things that suggest the names of Goethe and of Baudelaire; others such as "The Quest" and that strange "Philosopher's Progress" which begins

That which is highest as the deep
Is fixed, the depth as that above;
Death's face is as the face of Sleep;
And Lust is likest Lust,

share at least Blake's impenetrable simplicity of form, and their symbolism is, like his, curiously seductive, even where it seems turned to obscurantism; elsewhere Mr. Swinburne is (if only superficially) recalled; and "Vespers" is by no means unworthy of Rossetti. Similar preoccupations, again, direct the muse of Mr. Francis Thompson; but the verse of "Songs of the Spirit"—essentially intimate, introspective if you like—is also free from obvious artifice and eccentricity, it is fiery and clear-measured

and easy of phrasing. We venture to quote from a poem dated "Amsterdam" some lines exemplifying Mr. Crowley's talent:

Let me pass out beyond the city gate,
Where I may wander by the water still,
And see the faint few stars immaculate
Watch their own beauty in its depth, and chill
Their own desire within its icy stream.
Let me move on with vacant eyes, as one
Lost in the labyrinth of some ill dream,
Move and move on, and never see the sun
Lap all the mist with orange and red gold,
Throw some lank windmill into iron shade,
And stir the chill canal with manifold
Lays of clear morning; never grow afraid
When he dips down beyond the far flat land,
Know never more the day and night apart,
Know not where frost has laid his iron hand,
Save only that it fastens on my heart;
Save only that it grips with icy fire
These veins no fire of hell could satiate;
Save only that it quenches this desire.
Let me pass out beyond the city gate.

We should like to give other examples, but we can only name some of those pieces that seem to us most remarkable. Such are "An Ill Dream," of which the glowing imagery seizes and holds fast the vagueness of shifting impressions; a "Farewell of Paracelsus to Aprile," containing some fine lyric flights; "The Initiation," and "Succubus," a record of fearful obsessions in a metre which, in spite of a few unaccountable lapses, we think extremely effective.