

DR. WILKINSON'S EPICS.

BY PROFESSOR HENRY C. VEDDER, D. D.,

CROZIER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

Courage, of a rare kind and degree, is required in these days for such an undertaking as the composition of an epic. In these days, one says, in which the classics are admired and praised, but not read, unless they are put up in some predigested or capsuled form, warranted pleasant to take—in these days when serious literature is a drug in the market, when the “best sellers” are works (?) of fiction, and even this must be merely amusing and make the least possible demand on the reader’s thought. But to compose three epics is a task from which any courage might well recoil, unless sustained by consciousness of a mission. Milton’s design in writing “Paradise Lost” was not merely to fulfil a long-cherished hope that he “might perhaps leave something so written to after times as that they should not willingly let it die,” but that he might

assert eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men.

It does not require much reading between the lines to discover that the author of these epics has a similar high aim, that he is both poet and preacher, that his hope and purpose are to give more vividness and reality to the fundamental truths of the Bible, and to make its great men live again before us.

The first fruit of this purpose was a daring choice of subject. Critics tell us that the laws of epic poetry demand choice of a “great” hero and a “great” action. May we pause just a minute over that? There are no “laws” of any form of literature, save rules that critics have deduced from their own ideas of what a given form

should be, and rules made by induction from the actual instances of a form among the works that the world has accepted as good literature. There is no appeal from this general decision; everybody is wiser than anybody. A work that has been acclaimed as great by successive generations is great; the reader who cannot see greatness in it thereby convicts, not the world of error, but himself of defective vision. In the matter of epics, a little reflection will convince anyone that of those acknowledged to be great by the verdict of generations, scarcely one has a great hero, or celebrates a really "great" action, and perhaps not one can be said to possess both characteristics, unless it be "Paradise Regained." If we accept the critics' canon, therefore, it becomes a serious question whether a great epic has ever been written.

But Dr. Wilkinson comes pretty close to qualifying with each of his epics, and in the "Epic of Moses" beyond question meets both demands. He has chosen as his heroes the greatest man of the old dispensation and the greatest man of the new, each indisputably of heroic stature; and he has as themes the deliverance of a nation from bondage, the most marvelous conversion of all history, and the closing scenes in the life of the greatest of the apostles. At first sight, the "Epic of Paul" may appear to have a theme less worthy of the epithet "great" than the other two poems, but after the reader has finished the book he will be little inclined to urge that objection. In this choice of themes we are again taught that religious issues are the greatest of human concerns, that a great work of literature may appropriately deal with other things than "battle, murder and sudden death." Considering theme only, the "Epic of Moses" ranks in a much higher class of literature than the *Iliad*. That will seem shocking heresy to the classicist, but one must risk being thought an even greater heretic in literature than in theology.

May we pause again to consider what a stupendous task (the adjective is really not too strong) the poet set for himself when he undertook the composition of these epics? Milton's two great poems contain something over thirteen thousand lines; Browning's "The Ring and the Book" over twenty thousand; but these three fall little short of forty thousand! To say of a poet only that he is industrious would surely be to damn him with faint praise, but labor so prodigious is quite as surely something that ought to be considered. For, if the poet is born, poetry is made. If his thought is in some sense inspired, his words are laboriously sought, and do not fall into the orderly files of verse without much discipline. And besides, the most careless reader can hardly fail to perceive that arduous study preceded composition. The author first mastered the sources and the literature relating to Moses and Paul, including a careful study of the physical geography of the scenes of his stories, and of Biblical archæology, before he set pen to paper. This does not mean that the poems smell of the lamp, that they are made a vehicle for the display of erudition; it does mean that every detail of the action accurately corresponds to what is known of the men and scenes on which the epics touch—that the air of verisimilitude is everywhere successfully maintained.

But precisely because these epics are poetry, they are much more than accurate. Accuracy is, after all, hardly more than a negative virtue. It is sometimes dispensable; at any rate poets have often dispensed with it. Few take the pains of Scott to visit scenes note-book in hand, and write down what they observe, even to the shrubs and wild-flowers; more often, like Longfellow, they write without ever seeing what they profess to describe. And "Evangeline" loses little, if any, of its pastoral charm after one visits Acadia and learns that "the murmuring pines and the hemlocks" are willows, few and far between. Not accuracy but imagination is

the poet's great endowment, the gift of seeing things more vividly than other men, and of so representing them that they become realities to us. The poet transmutes fact into life. This is the great service done for us in these poems, the transcendent achievement of the poet, that he has taken Paul and Moses out of the limbo of dead "historical characters" and made of them flesh-and-blood men, who walk and talk before us as they once lived among the men of their time. Paul and Moses lose none of their dignity or sacredness, and gain much in humanness, by this treatment. If the epics had no other value than as a commentary on the Scriptures, they would still possess incomparable worth. But this is the least of their claims upon us: they give us the very matter and substance itself of Scripture, in a form so life-like and convincing, that to many a reader the Bible will henceforth be a new book with a new message. It is a great gift that God has bestowed upon the poet, akin to His own creative power, that enables him to prophesy thus upon the dry bones and make them live.

But this is not the sole value of these poems; may one venture so far as to say it is not their chief value? For all this might have been done by an eloquent preacher, and in prose. This is poetry. Like all poetry, it has a value above mere utility, because it belongs in the realm of art, not in the realm of fact. We demand of literature first of all that it satisfy our craving for the beautiful; that it may also be useful is quite a secondary matter. And poetry, or what professes to be such, may be never so wise and instructive and ethically sound and spiritually true, but if it is not beautiful it is not really poetry. These epics, tried by this test, must be pronounced great poetry; they so completely satisfy the æsthetic demands of readers whose appreciation of literature has been disciplined by the study of the world's best.

The construction of the poems, though perhaps the last thing to be fully appreciated by a reader, will not

fail to impress him so soon as he begins to reflect on what he has read. In each case the poet has told a story, a great story, and told it surpassingly well. It is a story with a plot, skilfully contrived and developed. The framework of the plot is furnished by Scripture, which is everywhere scrupulously followed, but the author also gives free reign to his fancy and invention, careful only to respect the limitations of the probable and the possible. He therefore invents nothing supernatural, but makes full use of the supernatural element in the Bible stories. He might have pleaded the example of Milton for the invention of supernatural details, but in eschewing them he has shown praiseworthy restraint.

It is in this field of invention that the poet has reached some of his happiest results. Feeling bound, as he properly did, to adhere closely to the letter of Scripture in the case of Moses and Paul, his muse was hampered by this necessity. When Pegasus runs on all fours, instead of soaring on the wing, he is not so very unlike any ordinary steed. And to translate into poetry Paul's epistles and Moses' speeches is, one suspects, an impossible task—the result of such an experiment will not be poetry, but the rhythm of verse substituted for the rhythm of prose. But when he is free to create, not compelled to transcribe, the poet shines.

A noteworthy feat is the character of Shimmei, the evil genius of Saul. He irresistibly suggests comparison with two like characters famous in poetic literature. In Satan, Milton attempted to depict a fallen angel. He has failed, as any poet must, because he has given us not angel but man. And, as an inseparable part of the failure, there is an unreality and vagueness in the character, that the poet might have escaped if he had attempted only to depict a man. But Shimmei is pure human, the vilest sort of man conceivable, but indubitably man. And therefore he is the more real, solid character. Moreover, as has often been pointed out, Milton has made

Satan so far the hero of his poem—has, unwittingly perhaps, so depicted him—that the reader is more inclined to sympathize and admire than condemn. “Paradise Lost” probably never did a reader ethical harm, but it is nevertheless an ethical mistake. That can never be said of the “Epic of Saul”—we admire the creator of Shimmei, but Shimmei himself never.

The other character with whom comparison is suggested is the Mephistopheles of Goethe, an even greater ethical mistake than Milton's Satan, and hardly an unwitting mistake. One cannot avoid the conclusion that Goethe intended to make Mephistopheles an engaging character. Shimmei is intellectually stronger, psychologically truer, and ethically more consistent than Mephistopheles. He is no romantic and fascinating sinner, but diabolism in the flesh—a thing to make one shudder and recoil, not secretly admire. One cannot take sufficient space to justify these judgments by argument or citation; each reader will test them for himself, and accept or reject as he finds them justified or not.

Saul himself, or Paul, is the chief personality of the two epics bearing these names, and the interest of Shimmei is largely as a foil to him. Here we have, of course, not a creation but an interpretation. The character is a great feat in psychological study, equal to anything that Browning ever did, and perhaps that is underpraise. Some have found a difficulty in accepting this character, on account of the words of Paul before the Sanhedrin, “I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.” This is thought to exclude the struggle between good and bad in Saul before his conversion, his wilful refusal to see the truth, his yielding to the evil incitements of Shimmei. But Paul's declaration must not be taken to mean that he believed his conduct blameless, only that he had always been a sincere worshiper and servant of God. He himself tells us elsewhere that he had persuaded himself that he was doing God service in per-

secuting Christians. The man is no psychological monster who is represented to us as having the desire of serving self subtly interwoven with the desire of serving God. It is a common experience to be actuated by a double motive, the two so inextricably blended that our consciousness no longer distinguishes between them. Not infrequently consciousness fails to report that there are two motives and we seem to ourselves to be actuated by one only and that the highest, only to discover later that self was continually present and often supreme. Saul is another proof, if another were needed, that sincerity is no criterion of truth.

Shakespeare's women have long been accepted as the greatest in literature. But it is not exaggeration to say that the loveliest of them do not surpass the Ruth and Rachel of "The Epic of Saul." As intellectual as Portia, as womanly as Cordelia, as immaculate as Imogen, they are unsurpassed examples of noble womanhood. Hardly, if any, inferior to these two is the Mahlah of "The Epic of Moses," and the story of her love for Pharimoh brightens the otherwise sombre story, told as it is with an exquisite simplicity that suggests the Biblical idyll of Ruth.

In poems as long as these, there must be great variety of incident and scene to hold the reader's interest. That has been true of all long poems. And yet, just so far as poets have conformed to this necessity, and therefore have succeeded in holding interest to the end, some have found fault with them, as if this great merit were in reality a defect. In Macaulay's journal, for example, is an entry in which he says, in substance, that if Milton had continued the sublime tone of the first four books of "Paradise Lost" throughout the poem, it would have been the greatest ever written. But the implied reproach is unjust; it betrays lack of thought, or, perhaps it would be better to say, lack of poetic insight. If maintaining that tone through twelve books had been possible to

Milton's powers, it would have been an impossible tax on his readers. Monotone becomes tiresome, maddening, no matter how beautiful the tone. We are capable of experiencing intense emotion, whether of pleasure or pain, only for a time strictly limited. The sandy lowlands of the coast and the lofty tablelands of the far West are alike flat, monotonous and uninteresting. Sentiment at any level, and especially at a lofty level, cannot be indefinitely maintained by any poet, and if maintained it would in the end tire and disgust. There must be valley and wooded hill and winding river in landscape to charm perpetually, and the same principle holds in poetry. Consequently, variety is the indispensable element of beauty in long poems. Macaulay, incomparable writer of prose, but almost destitute of poetic taste, did not comprehend this principle, but Milton understood it thoroughly and followed it. Tennyson, also a great poet, understood and has taught many of us that the sublime passages of the great epic, where

the deepdomed empyrean
Rings to the roar of an angel onset,

yield in beauty to those quieter episodes that seemed to Macaulay so inferior:

Me rather all that bowery loveliness,
The brooks of Eden mazily murmuring,
And bloom profuse and cedar arches
Charm.

These modern epics meet this test successfully. They are not lacking in lofty passages, in sublimity, pathos, humor, in so much of the dramatic element as is consistent with the epic form; but there are other passages that are quiet narrative. The thrilling episodes, of which there are plenty, alternate with those that are by comparison tame and commonplace; the heroic gives place to the homely. But while the poet must do this if he is

to succeed at all, he can also take care that the various parts of his narrative shall all be poetic, each in its different degree and style. This the author has done with marked success.

There could not be well anything but an air of largeness, of nobility, of great issues and high thoughts, in poems springing from such themes. And accordingly, these are the qualities that first impress the reader and linger longest with him. Perhaps one could speak no higher praise of them than the simple truth; that after reading one turns with fresh zest to the Scriptures and studies the characters of Paul and Moses with new interest and deeper insight.

Macaulay used to say, so his biographer tells us, "When I praise an author, I like to give a sample of his wares." It is a good example, that one gladly follows. Here is a sample of descriptive poetry:

The third day dawned and all the sky was blue,
And brilliant with a clearness most intense—
Save where on the stern brow of Sinai hung
A cloud, strange cloud, of deepest, densest dark.
The brilliance of the clearness of the blue
In every other quarter of the heaven
Made seem deeper the darkness of that cloud.
Presently from the bosom of that cloud
Mutterings of thunder, tongues of lightning flame,
With peals as from a trumpet, peal on peal,
Exceeding loud, and ever louder blown!
The people in the camp beheld with fear;
They hearkening were with panic pangs convulsed.
"Moses," 2-161.

What could be finer of its kind than this description of the storm that preceded Paul's shipwreck?

And blustering from the north, Euraquilo
Beat down with all his wings upon the sea,
Which under that rough brooding writhed in foam
To whirlpool ready to engulf the ship.
No momentary tempest swift as wild;

But blast of winter wanting never breath
 Poured from all quarters of the sky at once
 And caught the vessel like a plaything up
 Hurling it hither and thither athwart the deep . . .
 The dismal daylight dawned, and wind and wave,
 Gnashing white teeth of foam, all round the ship
 Howled like wild beasts defeated of their prey . . .
 Thus they bestead, the heavens above them lowered
 Day after day that neither sun nor stars
 One instant flickered in the firmament;
 The blotted darkness made one dreadful night
 Of day and night confounded in the gloom.
 Hope now went out, last light to leave the sky,
 Outburning sun and moon and star all quenched
 Before her in that drowning drench of dark—
 Hope too went out, touched by the hand of death.

“Paul,” 365-367.

Unless, indeed, it be this companion-piece from Saul:

At that last word from Saul, like answer, came
 A deep-mouthed boom of thunder from the west,
 After a sword of lightning sudden drawn
 Then sheathed within the scabbard of the cloud,
 Which now, spread wide, had blotted out the sun.
 A vagrant breath of tempest shook the trees,
 And the scared birds flew homeward to their nests . . .
 The thunder and the lightning and the hail
 Falling in power, the pomp of moving clouds,
 The sound of torrent and of cataract,
 The multitudinous orchestra of winds—
 Trumpet and pipe, resounding cymbal loud,
 Timbrel and harp, sackbut and psaltery . . .
 All this wild gesture of the elements
 And deep convulsion of the frame of things,
 Appaling only erst, interpreted
 By interjections such from Saul of phrase
 Inspired, seemed from confusion and turmoil
 Transposed and harmonized to an august
 Service and symphony of prayer and praise
 And solemn liturgy of the universe.

“Saul,” 361-368.

One regrets to abbreviate this splendid passage—
 “splendid” is the word, no less—which fills several

pages of the poem; but this taste should whet many appetites for the whole.

The poet's invention has been praised, and not overpraised, but it must be confessed that the details thus added to the story are sometimes less than entirely satisfying. This is the case where the theme is an incident of miraculous nature. For example, in describing the passage of the Red Sea by the Israelites, not only does the poet adopt the strictest literal interpretation of the text (which of course he has a perfect right to do), but even the poetic version of Ex. 15:8 is accepted as literal fact, and "embroidered" with still more marvelous detail, with this result:

Frightful in truth the hazard looked to them.
A precipice of water on each hand
Seem tremulously firm, and towering high
Above them, overhung their heads with threat
Of falling, held in hesitant suspense.
What, should this beetling cliff of water fall!
What, should its liquid bases underneath,
Insidiously sapped and undermined,
Sink, and let down the superjacent mass
In torrent, slope and swift, about their feet,
Foaming up steep in overwhelming flood!
Refuge appalling from appalling doom!

Similarly, in the story of the conversion of Saul, where the narrative says of his vision on the way to Damascus only that "suddenly there shone round about him a light out of heaven," the poet adds:

Shot through Paul's spirit, as the lightning leaps,
Rapid, one leap, from end to end of heaven.
"This dreadful splendor was not vengeance all,
It had not slain him, he was thinking still!
A grace was in the glory, oh, how fair!"
The features of a Face began to dawn
Upon him in the darkness of that light;
As the sun shineth in his strength, it shone,
An awful Meekness mild with Majesty!

"Saul," 384.

One would not deny that these are all permissible liberties of a poet, but the added details are less convincing than in other cases where the miraculous is not involved.

For the poet's mastery of pathos, the reader may be referred, as to the finest instance, to the last interview between Stephen and Ruth in the "Epic of Saul." The passage is much too long to quote, but a few lines toward the end will show its quality:

Lo, Ruth, this is the last time, for full well
 I know I never shall come back to thee!
 Come thou to me, I charge thee that, and bring
 Our children to their father. Always think
 Hereafter, "He, that last time, charged me that!"
 I think my God in this has heard my prayer,
 And I go hence in comfort of some hope.
 Our children! Oh! My children! God in heaven,
 Have mercy! How a father pitieth
 His children, think of that, and pity me!
 A father lays them on a Father's heart;
 Father, I charge thee, by Thy father's heart,
 Not one be plucked from out His Father's hand!
 Lord Christ, see Thou to this, in session there
 Forever interceding for Thine own!

"Saul," 167-181.

The whole scene should be read, and the discerning reader will agree that it makes the famous parting of Hector and Andromache tame by comparison.

Occasionally the poet strays from his proper theme, and gives us his interpretation of other parts of Scripture, often with happy effect. This is especially the case with certain parts of the Psalms. In some cases, however, some may find his interpretation not without its difficulties, as the following on the imprecatory Psalms:

"Hearken," said Paul. "Those fearful words of curse
Which thou nigh hadst turned to blasphemy,
Daring to lade them with thy personal spite
Against a neighbor man, whom we must love,
Until we know hereafter, which God fend!
That he bides reprobate, self-reprobate—
Those maledictions dire, though David breathed,
Express not human hate, but hate divine,
Revealed in forms of human speech, and, too,
Inspired in whoso can the height attain
To side with God, and passionlessly damn,
As if with highest passion, any found . . .
Fixed in his final choice of evil for good.

"Paul," 138.

As Milton's fallen angels

reason'd high
Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate

so some of the characters of these epics sometimes attack the greatest problems and hold high debate. In one of these discussions, Krishna, disciple of Buddha, argues with Paul and gives the latter occasion to define the Christian idea of Salvation, as distinguished from the Buddhist Nirvana:

Not from desire, but from impure desire,
To cease—that is salvation; and we best
Cease from impure desire when we to flame
The whitest fan desire for all things true,
For all things honorable, and all things just,
For all things pure, and all things lovely, all
Of good report, and worthy human praise,
Passion for these things, being pure passion, burns
The impure passion out; but passion such
Is kindled only at the altar fire
Of the eternal God's white holiness.

"Paul," 473.

One could pursue this method interminably, were it permissible, with no danger of exhausting the passages that one marks as one reads, to say nothing of the

abounding quotable phrases and single lines eloquent or picturesque. But one must forbear, or risk infringement of the law of copyright.

One other matter, however, of a technical nature, yet intimately related to the reader's enjoyment of the poems, should be mentioned. That is the quality of the verse. Most readers know, and all writers who have experimented with versification, that "blank verse" is apparently the easiest and really the most difficult of all poetic forms. Easy, because one can string together with little effort words that will "scan"; but the hardest of all kinds of composition is to produce blank verse of real merit. Not only so, but there are greatly various types of meritorious blank verse. There is the Tennysonian type, perfect in scansion, mechanically regular, melodious, sweet, and after a time cloying. A single poem, say "Guinevere," seems perfect, but a series of such poems, like the "Idylls of the King" become so tiresome that they can be read only in snatches. Then there is the Miltonic type, rich in harmonies rather than melodious, full of variety, sometimes scanning with difficulty, Wagnerian verse, heroic verse, epic verse. This is obviously the type appropriate to lofty themes and poems of length. These are of the latter type, and the reader does not tire. They bear the severe test of reading aloud, to the mutual enjoyment of reader and audience, and their full beauties disclose themselves only through this method. For the verse needs to be heard, as well as to have the meaning apprehended, for the full effect to be experienced. And this is true only of the nobler types of poetry—the tinkle-tinkle of *vers de société* is appropriate only to silent perusal.

Enough has been said, and sufficient illustrative passages have been quoted, to convince those appreciative of good literature that the author of these epics had equipment for his task other than courage—that he is a poet by nature and a poet by culture. He has given us in

these poems the ripe fruit of a lifetime spent in the study and practice of literature. The critical faculty and the creative are not often found in perfect union; one or the other is likely to prevail and dominate. But here we find the two nicely balanced, so that rigorous self-criticism has perfected the product of the creative faculty. The result is wholly admirable.

Space has been lacking for an examination of the author's other poetic work. It may not be amiss, however, to say briefly that one volume of Dr. Wilkinson's collected work in verse consists of miscellaneous poems. In these he has shown mastery of a great variety of poetic forms, of rhyme as well as rhythm, of verse regular and verse irregular. There are poems occasional, poems didactic, poems patriotic, poems on lofty themes and others on homely, and poems "of imagination all compact"—in short, poems of every kind but jingling trifles. Those who wish for the latest experiments in "ballades" and "chansons" and the like will have to look elsewhere. One who reads this collection for the first time will be impressed by the variety and beauty of its contents, the choice diction, the elevated ethical and spiritual tone, the fine artistry. And with every reading his appreciation of these qualities will grow.

A lifetime devoted to literature with a fidelity so complete, with a standard so high, with perseverance so unflinching, is surely deserving of grateful recognition and highest honor. There is little inducement of the material sort offered by our age to such devotion. The work must be its own chief reward. "Literature" has become so entirely commercialized that not only is there no profit in the production of books of solid worth—profit to the author is, of course, meant—but more and more the author is compelled to publish at his own expense and risk, with the comforting assurance that, if his book is fairly successful, the publisher will reap all the profits, while if it is a commercial failure he must

bear all the loss. This is especially true of poetry, which makes its appeal to the spiritual in man and promises him no help in those "practical" things that so deeply engross the present generation. The more reason why, when work is done like this that we have been considering, those who can appreciate its worth and its significance should not withhold their recognition and tribute. The great singers have always addressed the "fit audience though few." As the evening shades gather around our poet, may he be cheered by the generous, appreciative response to his message of an ever-growing circle of wisely-admiring readers.