

are said of the defective morality of parts of the Old Testament ; but think of such a passage as this, quoted, with seeming approval, from Todd's "Politics and Religion in Ancient Israel"—the subject is the application of the word *kodesh* ("holy") to the harlots of the temples : "These were not loose women whose presence was winked at ; they were part of the regular establishment, sacred to the god, Kodesh. A vast amount of virtuous horror has been expended on this 'frightful' and 'debasing' institution, all of which might very well have been spared. The prostitutes of our Christian streets will afford us ample food for moral reflection, without worrying about these Syrian girls of 3,000 years ago, when sex relations were understood quite differently. The simple fact is that primitive man understood worship as 'rejoicing before his god,' and accordingly enjoyed himself in his own way in the temple courts, with abundance of roast meat and wine, and the society of one of the women of the shrine. If our idea of 'joy in the Lord' is something very different, it is because we stand at the end and he at the beginning of a vast education and development."<sup>1</sup> On this Professor Jordan, while reminding us that there were Canaanitish importations into Hebrew religion, remarks : "The preacher who is to expound this literature and make it interesting to his people must accept the principles of development in this full and hearty fashion," etc.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we may be excused, in closing, for saying, "God forbid !"



## A Preacher's Poet.

BY THE REV. CANON G. S. STREATFEILD, M.A.

YOUNG'S "Night Thoughts" is to-day a tradition, not a poem known and read of all men as it was a century ago. We quote his lines in writing and in conversation without a suspicion of their origin, and are surprised when we learn that

<sup>1</sup> Todd, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> P. 190.

they are part of a great poem which is hardly ever read. Those who, like the present writer, have patiently plodded through so lengthy an "effort of the moral muse," cannot pretend surprise at the complete neglect into which this quondam classic has fallen.<sup>1</sup> Different, indeed, is the taste of the present generation from that which delighted in the poetical works of Dr. Edward Young. Guide, philosopher, and friend, he can never be to us as he was to our grandfathers; nevertheless, those who take the trouble to read his "Night Thoughts" will not waste their time, and will have stored their minds with much that is well worth remembering. Dr. Johnson characterized the poem as containing some of the best as well as some of the worst things in the English language; and the Doctor was probably not far wrong.

It cannot be questioned that the poem is marred and disfigured by obtrusive faults. The spirit which pervades this, the poet's greatest effort, is singularly morose and unsympathetic. He frowns upon the world in every shape and form; he pours contempt upon everything that is not, in the most serious sense, edifying. He even goes so far as to say,

"Laughter, though never censured yet as sin,  
Is half immoral."

And although, in subsequent lines, he modifies this decision, one feels that, personally, he never gets beyond the smile of irony. In the more thoughtful intervals of a somewhat dissipated college life, it is said that he retired, for purposes of reflection and study, to a room artificially lighted, and decorated with skulls and cross-bones. As we read his solemn lines, we often seem to breathe the atmosphere of such a scene, and long for a more cheerful view of life.

Again, no great writer is more open to criticism in respect of taste and style. The poet often rises to the greatness of his

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Young appears to have anticipated the fate of his *magnum opus*, which was to "die unwept":

"I see my fate,  
And headlong leap, like Curtius, down the gulf" ("Night," viii.).

subject, as, in imitation of the star-lit skies which inspired his thoughts, he

“ Voluminously pours his pompous train ”;

but sometimes he mistakes inflation for grandeur and eccentricity for power. The illustrations and similes are often very striking, but sometimes betray an extraordinary lack of taste. What, for example, could be worse than the comparison (in “Night,” vii.) between the Archangel’s trumpet and the bee-keeper’s kettle? And what is the more singular is that this undignified simile had appeared in Young’s poem on “The Last Day” long before it was introduced into the “Night Thoughts.”

Mr. Boswell’s deliberate opinion, almost passionately expressed, was that in the “Night Thoughts” there is “an unrivalled power of pathos,” but the reader of to-day will honestly confess that he does not “feel his nerves shaken and his heart pierced by many passages in this extraordinary work.” We may shrink from saying that the pathos is false, or even artificial, but it is often turgidly demonstrative, and there is too much of the “torch funereal and the nodding plume” for modern ears.

All this, and very much more, might be said in disparagement; but place the defects and excellences of the “Night Thoughts” side by side, and the balance will be found in the poet’s favour. We do not, indeed, go to the poem for original thought, or even the deepest aspects of well-worn truths; but Dr. Young had the power of presenting the ideas of a seriously religious mind in a form which, for compactness, point, and polish, has seldom, if ever, been rivalled. And this very fact goes far to account for the great popularity the poem enjoyed for a couple of generations. Ordinary readers were pleased to see their own thoughts well dressed and neatly turned, and here they found them to perfection.

Take some of Young’s thoughts about *time*, as illustrating his power of expressing brilliantly what anyone might say prosaically, what “oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d.”

Some of the finest things ever said on this subject will be found in this poem. Everyone knows and admires the line,

“Procrastination is the thief of time” (“Night,” i.);

but, to be fully appreciated, it should be read with the lines that follow it.

How the taste is gratified, while the conscience is stirred, by the words,

“The bell strikes *one*. We take no note of time  
But from its loss. To give it then a tongue  
Is wise in man” (“Night,” i.).

How fine, too, are the following lines :

“All men think all men mortal but themselves” (“Night,” i.).

“We push time from us, and then wish him back” (“Night,” ii.).

“Part with it as with money, sparing; pay  
No moment, but in purchase of its worth” (“Night,” ii.).

“Moments seize;  
Heav'n's on their wing” (“Night,” ii.).

How well he puts the hackneyed thought of man's proneness to forget the flight of time :

“To-day is so like yesterday, it cheats” (“Night,” v.).

“Folly sings six, while nature points at twelve” (“Night,” v.).

“And all mankind mistake their time of day;  
E'en age itself. Fresh hopes are hourly sown  
In furrow'd brows. To gentle life's descent  
We shut our eyes, and think it is a plain;  
We take fair days in winter for the spring,” etc. (“Night,” ii.).

Well, too, he says to the nauseated pleasure-seeker,

“A time there is, when, like a thrice-told tale,  
Long-rifed life of sweet can yield no more” (“Night,” iv.).

To the same effect :

“All expedients tire  
To lash the lingering moments into speed,  
And whirl us (happy riddance) from ourselves” (“Night,” ii.).

Admirable, again, is the poet's comparison of days well spent to the Sibylline Books :

“The good man's days to Sibyl's books compare,  
In price still rising, as, in number, less” (“Night,” v.).

All this, it may be said, is commonplace; but it must be admitted that the commonplace is uncommonly well expressed.

The poet is quite at his best when dealing with the follies and passions of a world which, by a somewhat humiliating experience, he had himself learned to despise. Whether Lorenzo, the sceptical pleasure-hunter to whom the poem is addressed, is some individual known to the poet, or whether he typically represents the age of Voltaire and Chesterfield; whether the name was suggested by fancy, or whether Dr. Young looked to the age of the Renaissance for his sample of godless culture, the life of selfish luxury and pagan enjoyment that Lorenzo lives, or is supposed to live, is the target for many shafts, not often, perhaps, winged with humour, but very pitiless and keen.

Listen to the poet as he pours contempt upon the pride of man :

“ What is high station ?

’Tis a proud mendicant ; it boasts, it begs ” (“ Night,” vi.).

Pride, again, he tells us,

“ Like hooded hawk, in darkness soars

From blindness bold ” (“ Night,” vi.).

He draws a vivid picture when he says :

“ The proud run up and down in quest of eyes ” (“ Night,” viii.).

How well he puts a familiar thought in the line,

“ We blush, detected in designs on praise ” (“ Night,” vii.).

The hollowness of all external claims to homage is powerfully exposed in many passages. Take, *e.g.*,

“ Not in the feather, wave it e’er so high,  
By fortune stuck, to mark us from the throng,  
Is glory lodged ” (“ Night,” viii.).

It is Young who tells us that

“ Humble love,

And not proud reason, keeps the door of heaven ” (“ Night,” ix.);

and at the same time reminds us that

“ Earth’s highest station ends in ‘ Here he lies ’ ;  
And ‘ dust to dust ’ concludes her noblest song ” (“ Night,” iv.).

But Lorenzo is as resolute in the pursuit of pleasure as in that of applause; the poet, on his part, is quite as determined in his attack. From the first he gives him fair warning :

“Thy pleasure is the promise of thy pain,” etc. (“Night,” i.).

“Sure as night follows day,  
Death treads in pleasure's footsteps round the world,  
When pleasure treads the paths which reason shuns” (“Night,” v.).

The voluptuary is

“A poor blind merchant buying joys too dear” (“Night,” viii.).

The poet sees the old man still feeding in memory upon the refuse of the past :

“Fancy still cruises, when poor sense is tired” (“Night,” viii.).

The worshipper of Mammon, like the devotee of pleasure, is hurrying to outer darkness :

“One bustling, and one dancing into death” (“Night,” viii.).

The human conscience is the theme of some of the finest things in the “Night Thoughts”—*e.g.* :

“Is conscience then  
No part of nature? Is she not supreme?  
Thou regicide! O raise her from the dead!” (“Night,” viii.).

Very nobly, and indeed profoundly, is conscience connected with future retribution :

“The keen vibration of bright truth is hell” (“Night,” iv.).

And later on, towards the end of the poem,

“What is hell?  
'Tis nothing but full knowledge of the truth,  
When truth, resisted long, is sworn our foe” (“Night,” ix.).

On the kindred subject of self-contemplation the poet is equally impressive, as when he says :

“Guard well thy thought; our thoughts are heard in heav'n” (“Night,” ii.).

The same warning is conveyed in the familiar quotation,

“And every thought a critic in the skies” (“Night,” vii.).

Further, we are bidden to think upon our past ways :

“'Tis greatly wise to talk with our past hours,  
And ask them what report they bore to heaven” (“Night,” ii.).

Meanwhile, the main purpose with which the poet writes is expressed again and again in such words as the following :

“ Beware

All joys but joys that never can expire ;  
Who builds on less than an immortal base,  
Fond as he seems, condemns his joys to death ” (“ Night,” i.).

“ What pain to quit the world just made their own !  
Their nest so deeply down'd, and built so high !  
Too low they build, who build beneath the stars ” (“ Night,” viii.).

He is near the truth when he says :

“ To know ourselves diseased is half our cure ”;

still nearer when he continues :

“ The curse of curses is our curse to love ” (“ Night,” viii.).

When the poet treats of the great doctrines of redemption, we find alike his characteristic beauties and defects. The faults are glaring enough. Who but Dr. Young would have told us that

“ Loud Ætnas fulminate in love to man ” ? (“ Night,” ix.).

Who else could have written,

“ He weeps ! the falling drop puts out the sun ;  
He sighs ! the sigh earth's deep foundation shakes ” ? (“ Night,” iv.).

The very next moment he gives us the striking and beautiful thought,

“ Touch'd by the Cross we live, or more than die.”

Very finely, too, does he express the central truth of Christianity, and the main thought of his own poem, when he says :

“ Against the Cross death's iron sceptre breaks ” (“ Night,” ix.).

It is in the “ Night Thoughts ” that occur the truly sublime and well-known lines :

“ Talk they of morals ? O Thou bleeding Love !  
Thou Maker of new morals to mankind !  
The grand morality is love of Thee ” (“ Night,” iv.).

The space at our disposal forbids further quotations from the many gems of thought and diction with which the poem

abounds. We close the bulky volume with a sigh of relief—for compression was not the Doctor's forte<sup>1</sup>—but with full recognition of the deep and noble purpose that runs through the whole work. It is no more than truth when the poet cries :

“ My soul flies up and down in thoughts of Thee,  
And finds herself but at the Centre still ” (“ Night,” ix.).

It is from the starry night,<sup>2</sup> as conveying the grandest impression of creative power and glory, that he professes to obtain his inspiration :

“ These thoughts, O Night ! are thine ;  
From thee they came, like lovers' secret sighs,  
While others slept ” (“ Night,” ix.).

To his adoring gaze, as he contemplates the movement and harmony of the heavenly bodies,

“ The circles intricate and mystic maze  
Weave the great cipher of omnipotence ” (“ Night,” ix.).

And as, through nine long “ Nights ” of blank verse, he pursues his theme, we shall admit that the attempt to “ set his harp in concert with the spheres ” was not the failure it would have been in the hands of a weaker man ; and his poem—though at the present day, it must be confessed, a literary anachronism—is not without its message to the conscience, bidding its reader, with great solemnity and force,

“ Seize wisdom ere 'tis torment to be wise.”

<sup>1</sup> The poem consists of nine books, and close upon 10,000 lines. The last Book or Night (“ This final effort of the moral muse ”) runs to 2,500 lines.

<sup>2</sup> Which he describes in a passage of very striking beauty, beginning,

“ O majestic Night ! Nature's great ancestor ” (“ Night,” ix.).

