

Catholic doctrine into touch with the most vigorous and earnest thought of to-day, and Christian theology—too often supposed to have had its day—would take a fresh lease of life, and be seen to be both God's revelation of truth and also the highest and best explanation of the universe that man's mind is capable of.



The Moral Attitude of Spenser and Milton.

By MARY BRADFORD WHITING.

AMONGST that large class of persons who pass judgment upon writers without having read their works, the idea is frequently met with that a sharp line of demarcation divides the moral attitude of Spenser and Milton—that, to put it briefly, the first is the poet of worldliness, the second of other-worldliness.

How far does a study of their poems bear out this opinion, and especially of those two poems which are so often compared, and even more often contrasted, the "Faerie Queene" and "Paradise Lost"?

It is quite true that these two great poets did not look at life from the same standpoint, nor couch their interpretation of it in the same terms; but though the "stern, God-fearing spirit of Judah" of which Heine writes, is so persistently present in the one, we are not therefore justified in assuming its absence from the other.

So far as the actual circumstances of their lives go, there is a strong resemblance between the two men. They were both born in London—Edmund Spenser in the year 1552, John Milton in the year 1608; both were of gentle, though not of noble birth; both were educated at London schools—Spenser at Merchant Taylors', Milton at St. Paul's; both went to Cambridge—Spenser to Pembroke, Milton to Christ's—and neither of them seem to have met with much appreciation from the University authorities; both wrote some charming and well-

received youthful poems; both entered political life—Spenser as Secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton in Ireland, and Milton as Secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs in London; both wrote a long poetical work which they looked upon as the crowning achievement of their lives, and both died with their prosperity clouded—Spenser, at the age of forty-seven, having escaped to London with his family, after his property had been destroyed and his house burnt by the Irish rebels, Milton at the age of sixty-six, blind, a martyr to gout, and saddened by domestic dissensions.

Here, however, the resemblance ceases, and to discover why Spenser's poems breathe the spirit of "L'Allegro," and Milton's the spirit of "Il Penseroso," we must first of all consider the differing times in which they lived.

The age of Spenser, the Elizabethan Age, was one of freedom and vigour: its profusion and its vitality showed itself in religion, in politics, in adventure, and in literature; its joyous activity seemed inexhaustible—as the lame man restored to health leapt and shouted, so the genius of the English nation, aroused from its long lethargy, poured itself out in a thousand forms of extravagant energy. This spirit of life found almost its first awakening, as far as poetry is concerned, in the breast of Spenser; his struggle with the classical trammels that the hide-bound scholar, Gabriel Harvey, tried to throw around his genius is typical of the struggle by which the Renaissance was ushered into the world. All the Nine Muses, whose charms his friend so eloquently urged upon him, could not close his ears to the voice of Nature.

Spenser, indeed, embodies the spirit of his age in every particular. It was an age of religion, and his avowed aim was to inculcate Christian virtue; it was an age of loyalty, and his poetry is instinct with that passionate and personal devotion to his Sovereign that formed such a powerful factor in the England of his day; it was an age of patriotism, when, bound no longer by the fetters of priestly oppression, men might develop their national feeling without restraint, and Spenser yearns over

England as the land of peace and order—a land where the false Duessa was overthrown, and where men might in safety worship Una and Fidessa ; it was an age of adventure, when men would spend their whole patrimony in fitting out a ship to sail the high seas in search of glory, and Spenser satisfies the universal craving to the full in those marvellous tales of battles, of dragons, of knights, of wonders and discoveries, which yet seemed scarcely more marvellous than the tales of the returned voyagers. And, above and beyond all this, it was the time of Youth. That golden period through which we all pass as children was then shared by a whole nation ; that impulse of life and joy which stirs in our hearts when the rapture of earth is renewed by the returning spring was then the characteristic not of a season, but of an age. And this glowing youth was the perpetual environment of Spenser's spirit ; the glory of the earth had, for him, never passed away ; each common sight was still irradiated with heavenly hues. His childlike nature did not "look before and after"; it rested content in trust in God and love of man, and in the joy of life which no toil could diminish and no trouble quench.

Far different was the age of Milton. That springtide glow of the Elizabethans was soon to be overcast ; faith, hope, and charity, were silenced in the clamours of religious strife ; the flame of loyalty was extinguished in the blood that flowed from a royal victim ; patriotism was stifled in the cry of factions, and love and peace forgotten in a land where a man's foes were those of his own household. It was an age when, to most men, religion was no longer a faith, but a party cry, and though we cannot doubt for a moment that Milton's religion was a true and inherent part of his being, yet in remembering that he was a Christian, he never forgot that he was a Puritan. It was an age of conflict, when loyalty strove blindly against the forces that threatened to overwhelm them, and Milton, in his great epic, sings of that strife in heaven which, before time was, laid the foundation of succeeding generations of strife upon earth. It was an age of stern and sorrowful manhood ; the dreams of youth

were rudely shattered, old ties were severed, and songs of hope and love seemed like idle tales; the past, with its broken promises, the future, with its stormy outlook—these were the heritage of man now that the golden gates had been shut behind him: the world was all before him where to choose, but the Garden of Eden was closed to him for ever. It was thus that Milton sang:

Fallen on evil days and evil tongues
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round
And solitude,

yet with the noble purpose, amidst the evil and the darkness and the dangers, to assert that eternal Providence was still ruling over all, and, though surrounded by corruption, to preserve

An upright heart and pure.

Purpose and self-restraint were the two keynotes of Milton's life. From his earliest years he believed himself set apart by a special destiny; he began his own training at the age of twelve, and continued it up to the time of his death; his seclusion at Horton, his studies, his travels, his self-discipline, were all parts of a great plan; he dreamt of immortality, and because of this ever-present vision, he determined to make his own life a great poem by devout prayer, by industrious and select reading, by steady observation and insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs. His life was one of calm and sustained effort without fluctuation, not roused to elation by success nor driven to despair by failure; his sorrows made him stern, but they also made him strong; he was not insensible to joy, but joy had no power to move him from his purpose.

The life of Spenser was moulded on entirely different lines; far from priding himself on his mental detachment, he was full of generous enthusiasms; the attitude of Milton towards Cromwell, Fairfax, or Sir Henry Vane, was one of calm and statesmanlike appreciation of their virtues and achievements; but Spenser not only admired Lord Grey, Sir Philip Sidney, and Sir Walter Raleigh, he loved them with all the ardour of his warm heart. And yet, though he was devoid of that conscious striving after order and virtue which Milton shared with the

great philosophers of old, Spenser's conduct bore the strictest scrutiny, and his work was undertaken with a definite moral aim. He is not always feeling his spiritual pulse to discover his state, but trusts himself instinctively to the love and faith and hope which he feels divinely planted in his heart; he does not toil nor spin, yet he is clothed in a robe of innocence and beauty. His purpose is noble, and it is ever in view, but he can afford to linger awhile by the way and revel in the softness of the grass and the sweetness of the flowers. Milton, on the other hand, never allows us to forget his purpose for a moment; with him for our guide, we never slumber in a bower of bliss. Adam and Eve may be

Imparadised in one another's arms,

but his readers, like the angels, must be ever awake and on the watch for the coming foe.

This difference in the nature of the two men is clearly shown by the contrast between Milton's development as compared with the stationary character of Spenser's mind. Milton had his season of youth, joyous and glowing, though refined and reticent. The poet of "Arcades," of "L'Allegro," or of "May Morning," had known what it was to feel

Mirth and youth and warm desire,

but with him it was only a passing season. In "Comus" and "Lycidas" a deeper note is struck: it was not a time to make merry when ruin was hovering over the country; broken vows and perjured faith drove thoughtful men to Puritanism as to a refuge, and shut the gates on pleasure. The poems of his later years are the utterances of a man who has found life bitter and its problems hard to read, but yet is not cast down, because he has faith in something more enduring and that fadeth not away.

Spenser, on the contrary, undergoes no change: his sense of beauty and delight intensifies rather than diminishes as he passes on his way; he attempts no solution of the world problem; the mystery of existence does not weigh upon his spirit; his poetry, from the "Shepherd's Calendar" to the "Hymns of

Love and Beauty," is one rising strain of pure melodic fervour, and it is in those times of weariness, when even the strongest and bravest must pause and rest, that he soothes us with his music. Is there one among earth's toilers and fighters who could not put his heart to rest with the description of the "House of Sleep"?

And more to lull him with its slumber soft,
 A trickling stream from high rock tumbling down,
 And ever drizzling rain upon the loft
 Mix'd with a murmuring wind, much like the sound
 Of swarming bees, did cast him in a swoond.
 No other noise, no people's troublous cries
 That still are wont to annoy the walléd town,
 Might there be heard, but careless Quiet lies
 Wrapt in eternal silence, far from enemies.

Or is there any mind so dull that it cannot rejoice in his glowing picture of the sunrise?

At last the golden orientall gate
 Of greatest heaven 'gan to open fayre,
 And Phœbus, fresh as bridegroom to his mate,
 Came dancing forth shaking his dewie hayre,
 And hurl'd his glist'ring beams thro' gloomy ayre.

The language employed by the two poets is typical of the difference in their natures. The old Anglo-Saxon tongue was dear to Spenser; he loved homely ways of speech and simple cadences of sound. Milton, on the other hand, seized with delight on those stately Latin phrases that mingle such stiffness with the dignity of his verse. Spenser could never have written such lines as

The inviolable saints
 In cubic phalanx firm advanced entire,
 Invulnerable, impenetrably arm'd,

or

His quadrature from thy orbicular world.

Yet we must not forget the reverse side of the shield: Spenser was a silver-tongued singer of melodies, but Milton was, as Tennyson says,

A mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies.

There is at times a grandeur in his poetry to which Spenser never rises—a towering majesty in its thought and conception

that fills us with awe. Such passages are his description of Satan, care sitting on his faded cheek, his face entrenched with deep scars of thunder; or of the King of Glory coming forth in state to create new worlds.

But in one thing the "Faerie Queene" and "Paradise Lost" are alike: they were each designed for instruction as well as enjoyment, and, strange as it may seem, the "Faerie Queene" is in some respects the most truly religious poem of the two. The self-restraint which Milton practised so persistently was not all gain; he was incapable of that absorption in another which made Spenser the ideal lover for all time; he was devoid of that passionate loyalty which made Spenser such an ardent servant of his Queen; he was determined to live only by the light of pure reason, and thus he was wanting in that deep devotion and fine reverence which are so strongly marked in Spenser. His treatment of Divine subjects, if our ears had not been so long accustomed to it, would shock us with its boldness; even his purpose has something irreverent about it. To

Justify the ways of God to men

is not a task for any human being; if God's ways need justification, He is surely capable of justifying them without the aid of a creature.

Spenser's aim is a humbler one. He does not set himself forth as the champion and interpreter of the Almighty; his mission is to teach men how they may develop the Divine element implanted in them, and live faithfully and purely in the sight of their Maker. Such a purpose was new in Spenser's day; religious poems there had been, and secular poems, but the infusion of the spirit of religion into a poem of earthly love and chivalry was an idea so novel, so daring in its conception, that it may well command admiration. His own account of it has been preserved by his friend Ludovick Briskett, who says that, in response to a question of his, Spenser told him that he had undertaken a work "which is in heroical verse under title of a Faerie Queene to represent all the moral virtues, assigning

to every virtue a Knight to be the patron and defender of the same, in whose actions and feates of arms and chivalry the operations of that virtue, whereof he is the protector, are to be expressed, and the vices and unruly appetites that oppose themselves against the same, to be beaten down and overcome."

This intention was never fully carried out, for of the twelve books into which the allegory was divided, Spenser only left six, with the fragment of a seventh; but as each book is perfect in itself, this does not detract from the beauty of the poem. The first book narrates the adventures of the Red Cross Knight, who embodies the spirit of Holiness, and the opening stanzas strike the keynote of the whole work, revealing alike its poetic charm and its moral purpose.

A gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe woundes did remaine
The cruell markes of many a bloody field;e
Yet armes till that time never did he wield.
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
Full jolly knight he seemed, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt.

And on his brest a bloodie cross he bore,
The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,
And dead, as living, ever Him adored:
Upon his shield the like was also scored,
For soveraine hope which in His help he had.
Right faithfull true he was in deede and word,
But of his cheere did seeme too solemne sad;
Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.

Upon a great adventure he was bond,
That greatest Gloriana to him gave,
(That greatest Glorious Queene of Faery lond)
To winne him worshippe, and her grace to have,
Which of all earthly thinges he most did crave:
And ever as he rode his hart did earne
To prove his puissance in battell brave
Upon his foe, and his new force to learne,
Upon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne.

The allegory is not always easy to follow, from the fact that the characters often represent more than one idea: Gloriana, for

instance, personifies Glory in general, but in some parts of the poem personifies Queen Elizabeth, while Queen Elizabeth also appears under the names of Cynthia and Britomartis; but readers who are willing to exercise a little patience can find no real difficulty in understanding it, while those who care simply for the poetry will find the underlying moral truths no hindrance to their enjoyment. The description of Una and the lion, for example, loses none of its enchantment from the fact that it is intended to be a picture of Truth subduing Wrong:

One day, nigh wearie of the yrkesome way,
 From her unhastie beast she did alight;
 And on the grasse her dainty limbs did lay
 In secrete shadow, far from all men's sight:
 From her fayre head her fillet she undight,
 And lay'd her stole aside. Her angel's face,
 As the great eye of heaven, shynéd bright,
 And made a sunshine in the shady place;
 Did never mortall eye behold such heavenly grace.

It fortunéd, out of the thickest wood.
 A ramping lyon rushéd suddeinly,
 Hunting full greedy after salvage blood.
 Soone as the roall virgin he did spy,
 With gaping mouth at her ran greedily,
 To have at once devourd her tender corse:
 But to the prey when as he drew more ny,
 His bloody rage aswagéd with remorse,
 And with the sight amazd, forgat his furious forse.

It is clear, then, that Spenser, no less than Milton, had a distinct moral purpose in his work, and it is very striking to notice that the attitude of the two men towards spiritual things never deviated: that which they severally believed at the outset of life they believed at its close. Milton, as we have seen, passed through a process of development, but his stern acquiescence in Divine law, and his uncomplaining acceptance of human suffering remained with him to the end, strengthened rather than diminished by the trials of his own lot, while Spenser's childlike trust in God and love of his fellow-men were unshaken by the storms that swept across his sky.

The last utterances of the two poets prove this beyond dispute.

Milton, in his blindness and dependence, chose to write of
Samson Agonistes, captive and afflicted,

Made older than his age through eyesight lost.

Yet, conquering in his weakness, and unfaltering in the presence
of Death—

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast ; no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise or blame ; nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

Spenser, flying for his life in poverty and distress, his fair
home destroyed, his little newborn child lost in the flames,
comforts his heart with the thought that chance and change
do not really rule men's lives ; they are themselves subject to
rule, and shall one day fade away and be no more in the
continuing City, where the bliss of the home-gathered is
unchanged and unchangeable.

I well consider all that ye have said,
And find that all things stedfastnesse do hate
And changed be ; yet, being rightly wayd
They are not changed from their first estate ;
But by their change their being do dilate,
And turning to themselves at length againe
Do worke their owne perfection so by fate :
Then over them Change doth not rule and raigne,
But they raigne over Change and do their state maintaine.

* * * * *

Then gin I thinke on that which Nature sayd
Of that same time when no more Change shall be,
But stedfast rest of all things, firmly stayd
Upon the pillars of Eternity,
That is contrayr to Mutabilitie ;
For all that moveth doth in Change delight ;
But thence-forth all shall rest eternally
With Him who is the God of Sabaoth hight :
O ! that great Sabaoth's God, grant me that Sabaoth's sight !

