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REVIEWS.

A POET MYSTIC.

"Ambergris: A Selection from the Poems of Aleister Crowley."
Elkin Mathews. 3s. 6d. net.

Mr. Aleister Crowley has some considerable fame of an esoteric kind; but he is far too good a poet for a coterie to possess, and this selection from his poems, even though it be "small and unrepresentative" (as the author's preface asserts), is a very welcome publication. The poems printed in "Ambergris" are, at any rate, sufficient to show anyone who has the true, unquenchable thirst for poetry that Mr. Crowley's song is something remarkable, both for its inner and its outer music—its spacious and, at times, magnificent imagery, its subtle use of verbal suggestion, and its ringing metre and unusually fine stanza-construction. The last-named is possibly the most potent element in the beauty of Mr. Crowley's poetry; it certainly makes the stanzaic poems hold his occasionally violent and extravagant diction better than the other poems, since torrents of words must flow through moulds of rigorous form or risk wasting half their strength. There is no mistaking the prosodic skill in these stanzas from a Chorus:—

"In the ways of the North and the South,
Whence the dark and the dayspring are drawn,
We pass with the song of the mouth
Of the notable Lord of the Dawn.
Unto Ra, the desire of the East, let the clamouring of
singing proclaim
The fire of his name!"

"In the ways of the depth and the height,
Where the multitude stars are at ease,
This is music and terrible night,
And the violent song of the seas.
Unto Mou, the most powerful Lord of the South, let out

worship declare
Him Lord of the Air!"

And, for another and contrasted sample of his stanza-construction, the first verse of a descriptive poem of "Hong Kong Harbor" will show his use of a quieter music:—

"Over a sea like stained glass
At sunset like a chrysopeas:—
Our smooth-oared vessel over-rides
Crimson and green and purple tides.
Between the rocky isles we pass,
And greener islets gay with grass;
Between the over-arching sides
Our pinnacle glides."

But the finest stanza-form in "Ambergris" is the long elaborate one used for the admirable "Invocation of Hecate," in every way perhaps the most remarkable poem here given, from which we shall have to quote when we come to consider the intellectual qualities of Mr. Crowley's verse. It should be mentioned, however, while we are still on this matter, that Mr. Crowley can also work his own music into stanza-forms that have long ago been brought to famous perfection, as Sapphics and the Rubaiyat-verse—a much more difficult task, on the whole, than the invention of new forms. His Omar quatrain follows Swinburne's "Laus Veneris" rather than FitzGerald, the stanzas being linked in couples by rhyme in the third line; and the Sapphics betray the same modifying influence. The Swinburnesque energy, too, of the anapest choric stanzas quoted above is pretty obvious; and, indeed, it may be said that the spirit of Swinburne has helped to compose a good deal of the passionate, clangorous poetry in "Ambergris," working sometimes at the phrasing as well as at the metre.

But Swinburne has not had much to do with the content of Mr. Crowley's poetry. Resemblances to Shelley may be traced in some of his matter; but really the thought, and the emotion of thought, which support this poetry, are entirely and intensely Mr. Crowley's own. And these, as a rule, are the main things in poetry. By that, of course, we are far from meaning that the value of a poet is measurable by the value to the world of the "message" which fills him. What we do mean, however, is that the worth of a poet depends on the value of his own "message" to himself—provided, of course, that he is genuinely a poet,

one who can make music of his thought. Here is a verse, the music of which is enough by itself to prove Mr. Crowley a poet:—

“The sun looks over the memorial hills,
The trampling of his horses heard as wind;
He leaps and turns, and all his fragrance fills
The shade and silence; all the rocks and rills
Ring with the triumph of his steed behind.”

A very casual glance at “Ambergris” will convince anyone with understanding eyes that Mr. Crowley is as passionately possessed by his theme as any poet ever has been. This should ensure a constant achievement of notable poetry. But, as a fact, it does not. The achievement varies immensely, from a vague outpouring of syllables to clean-cut, pregnant phrases, and a precise splendor of imagery. Sometimes Mr. Crowley's failure comes from a desire to strain language beyond its capabilities, which leads him further to use all possible and impossible forms of speech. For instance, he will write these daring and excellent lines:—

“For, know! The moon is not the moon until
She hath the knowledge to fulfil
Her music, till she know herself the moon.”

And then he follows them up with this, which is, to be plain, simply bungling:—

“The stone unhewn.
Foursquare, the sphere of human hands immune.
Was not yet chosen for the corner-piece
And keystone of the Royal Arch of Sex;
Unsolved the ultimate x.”

The fault of such lapses does not really lie in any aberration of poetic power. It is merely that Mr. Crowley is endeavoring to sing what is unsingable. This is the penalty that mysticism must always pay, sooner or later; and mysticism is Mr. Crowley's theme. Precisely what species of mysticism he professes, or rather, for all mysticisms are fundamentally the same, into what shape of metaphors and symbols Mr. Crowley has fashioned his mysticism, we need not stop to determine. Its importance to him is immense; it is the hinge of his whole

thought. To us, its importance is simply that it carries him often into excellent poetry. The main intellectual passions which move him will be familiar to all who have studied writers tinged or impregnated with mystical and transcendental thought:—

“For secret symbols on my brow,
And secret thoughts within,
Compel eternity to Now,
Draw the Infinite within.
Light is extended. I and Thou
Are as they had not been.”

“The Palace of the World” and “The Rosicrucian” are two poems in which the fundamental yearnings of mysticism find expression which is simple and intelligible as well as vehement and beautiful. As for the details of Mr. Crowley’s creed, they are exceedingly eclectic, not to say conglomerate. The Buddhistic flavor, for instance, in this striking verse is unmistakable:—

“Still on the mystic Tree of Life
My soul is crucified;
Still strikes the sacrificial knife
Where lurks some serpent-eyes
Fear, passion, or man’s deadly wife
Desire, the suicide.”

For his mystical calendar, Egypt supplies him with a troop of deities, Ra and Roum and Mou, no longer “brutish gods of the Nile,” but “notable lords” and “most powerful lords”; Greece supplies him with Orpheus; “and many more too long.” In general. As long as Mr. Crowley’s poetry is working through his mythological machinery, it is, though somewhat baffling to the mind unlearned in strange faiths, at a high pitch of excellence; because it is constrained and the thought kept ordered. There is also much other systematic symbolism, which does the same office; the spirits and virtues of precious stones, for example:—

“Lapis-lazuli for love
And ruby for enormous force.

But mysticism is seldom content with symbolic or other restriction, though some kind of restriction of thought is absolutely essential to poetry. There are vague doctrines in Mr. Crowley’s mind which are probably quite irreducible even by way of

suggestion, to terms which originate in sensuous and reasonable experience; and a determination to express these super-subtle thought too often results in nothing but an incondite mass of language. But sometimes, as in an extraordinary poem called "The Reaper," Mr. Crowley surprisingly succeeds in snaring, as it were, into a haze of poetry some of those unappointed fires of the soul which have as yet found no place in the recognized thoughts and emotions of man, of which few are even conscious—those fires which are, ultimately, the life of all mysticism. No doubt, however, there will be those who will strongly prefer the poems in "Ambergris" in which verbal beauty is unvexed by philosophy, such as the descriptive poems, or the address of Orpheus to his regained Eurydice, which ends with this fine stanza:—

"The green-hearted hours
The winds shall waft roses from uttermost Ind.
Our nuptial dowers shall be birds in our bowers,
Our couches the delicate heaps of the wind,
Where the lily-bloom showers all its light, and the powers
Of earth in our twinning are wedded and twinned."

Nevertheless, we must look for Mr. Crowley's best work in those poems wherein he is really supported, not merely inflated, by his creed, whatever the creed may be. Then he is kept safe from lapses into triviality and bombast, to both of which faults he is certainly liable. Perhaps the most remarkable instance of the support given him by his mysticism is in the exceedingly fine "Invocation of Hecate," already mentioned. This is something more than an exercise in literary magic, like Horace's or Ben Johnson's, admirable as poetry though the Canidia Epode and the Masque of Queens are. But Mr. Crowley's "invocation" seems earnest with belief; not necessarily, of course, with a belief in Hecate herself, but in some power, in the mind or in the spiritual universe, which the dreaded name of Hecate dimly shadows forth. This is the second stanza of the poem:—

"Here where the band of Ocean breaks the road
Black-trodden, deeply-stooping, to the abyss,
I shall salute thee with the nameless kiss
Pronounced toward the uttermost abode
Of thy supreme desire.
I shall illumine the fire

Whence thy wild stryges shall obey the lyre,
Whence thy Lemurs shall gather and spring round,
Girdling me in the sad funereal ground
With faces turned back,
My face averted! I shall consummate
The awful act of worship, O renowned
Fear upon earth, and fear in hell, and black
Fear in the sky beyond Fate!"

Enough has been said to show that Mr. Aleister Crowley's "Ambergris" is a volume containing notable poetry. Mr. Crowley's output has been considerable, and a small book of selections from it can only give a glimpse of his power. Possibly "Ambergris" may arouse sufficient interest in his writing to warrant the publication of his collected works at a price which will not dismay those who are not yet (in Mr. Crowley's own phrase) "free from gold's illusion."