

CHAPTER IX

NOTE ON O'SHAUGHNESSY

A VERY interesting poet in whom a fresh interest is now being taken was Arthur O'Shaughnessy. Contemporary with Morris, and much in sympathy with the school of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, O'Shaughnessy was born in 1844, and died, comparatively young, in 1881. He was all his life an official of the British Museum—at first in the great Library, and afterwards in the Department of Natural History. He married a sister of the blind poet, Philip Bourke Marston. As this is the second time that we have occasion to mention the name of Marston, I must make a few remarks about him—not as a poet, because he was not a remarkable poet, but as a personality. Marston, as a child, was very beautiful; and his god-mother, Mrs. Craik (author of “John Halifax, Gentleman”) wrote about the little boy a very charming poem, which thousands and thousands of English people know by heart. It begins with the lines—

Look at me with thy large brown eyes,
Philip, my King!

The good authoress little imagined, when writing those gentle verses, that the “large brown eyes” were shortly by an accident to become for ever blind. Blind as he was, Marston did compose some very tolerable poetry; but it is not important enough to consider in these lectures.

O'Shaughnessy, Marston's brother-in-law, was in many ways a very extraordinary poet. Everything about him is extraordinary—the unfamiliar forms of his verse, the unfamiliar forms of his language, and the decidedly splendid surprises of fancy with which he occasionally delights us.

Sometimes the verse halts; sometimes it betrays too much the powerful influence of that matchless master of adjectives, Swinburne. Sometimes the conception is almost unpardonably vague. But with all his faults, O'Shaughnessy has certainly added something to the treasure-house of Victorian poetry — though he wrote very little. Four small volumes, which might easily be packed into a single one of no very great dimension, comprise his bequest to literature. These are "Music and Moonlight," "An Epic of Women," "Lays of France," and "Songs of a Worker." The last two are translations only and not translations of a very remarkable sort. "Music and Moonlight" and "An Epic of Women" represent original work. There is a weird, unique quality in this poetry which chiefly gives its value. Otherwise we must say of the author that he always seems to be upon the verge of saying something wonderful without saying that. He is a poetical Emerson in a certain sense — his value being the value of suggestion rather than of definite statement. In his poem entitled "The Song of Palms" we read the lines —

Lo! the soul shall grow immense,
Looking on strange hues intense;

and you feel as if your soul was really growing immense (at all events, your expectation grows immense) while reading this extraordinary verse. But the expectation soon shrinks up again — you never get to the immensities any more than O'Shaughnessy ever got to the real country of palms. Nevertheless there is a charm even in this disappointment; and it is strange how the poet often realizes what he has never seen:

Mighty, luminous and calm
Is the country of the palm,
Crowned with sunset and sunrise,
Under blue unbroken skies,
Waving from green zone to zone,

Over wonders of its own ;
Trackless, untraversed, unknown,
Changeless through the centuries.

The character of the disappointment, also, is mild. Such pieces as "Azure Islands," "The Disease of the Soul," "Song of the Holy Spirit," and "Greater Memory" really contain some very dainty surprises. From the last named I shall quote two stanzas on the subject of the sense of pre-existence in love :—

It was knowledge of all that had been
In the thought, in the soul unseen ;
'Twas the word which the lips could not say
To redeem and recover the past ;
It was more than was taken away
Which the heart got back at the last.

The passion that lost its spell,
The rose that died where it fell,
The look that was looked in vain,
The prayer that seemed lost evermore,
They were found in the heart again,
With all that the heart would restore.

Sometimes, but rarely, we find a note of poignant realism, as in the piece, "To a Young Murderess" — which is a cry of passion betraying with delicate art that which is not delicate,—the brutality and hunger of desire. I should like you to remember also that O'Shaughnessy deserves some attention on account of his many attempts at new forms in poetry — attempts in which he has been often very successful.