

CHAPTER XVI

EVOLUTIONAL THOUGHT IN THE VICTORIAN POETS

.....They say,
The solid earth whereon we tread
In tracts of fluent heat began,
 And grew to seeming-random forms,
 The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
Till at the last arose the man ;—
Who throve and branch'd from clime to clime,
 The herald of a higher race,
 And of himself in higher place,
If so he type this work of time
Within himself, from more to more ;
 Or, crown'd with attributes of woe
 Like glories, move his course, and show
That life is not as idle ore,
But iron dug from central gloom,
 And heated hot with burning fears,
 And dipt in baths of hissing tears,
And batter'd with the shocks of doom
To shape and use. Arise and fly
 The reeling Faun, the sensual feast ;
 Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die.

(In Memoriam, cxvii.)

This is Tennyson's most famous utterance upon the subject of this essay ; and the last lines of it have been repeatedly quoted not only by the celebrated essayists of our own time, but also by the great leaders of science more

than once. It represents very fairly, within a great space, the general idea of evolution as material and moral progress. I think you remember in "The Princess" the statement of the same fact is given in the imaginary lecture of Lady Psyche. Fragments of the same idea will be found in many other poems by Tennyson. But the above is much the most important, and please to observe how guarded it is. The poet is very careful to say that this is believed by others: he does not venture to declare that he believes it himself. In the second poem entitled "Locksley Hall" Tennyson would seem even less inclined to give his sanction to the new theories than he was in the time of his youth and the prematurity of his intellectual strength. He does not deny;—and yet he doubts.

“Forward, backward, backward, forward, in the immeasurable sea,
Sway’d by vaster ebbs and flows than can be known to you or me.

All the suns—are these but symbols of innumerable man,
Man or Mind that sees a shadow of the planner or the plan?

Is there evil but on earth? or pain in every peopled sphere?
Well be grateful for the sounding watch-word ‘Evolution’ here,

Evolution ever climbing after some ideal good,
And Reversion ever dragging Evolution in the mud.

(Locksley Hall Sixty Years After. ll. 193—200)

Powerfully influenced as he was by the Science of his time, Tennyson’s natural tendencies were religious and moral rather than scientific. And, besides, the new knowledge came to him rather late,—not in the time of his student life, but in the time of his maturity as a master of verse. Everything of importance in the foundation of the new philosophy was laid down between the years of 1855 and 1870. And there were even then several suggestions of the new thinking which much shocked men of deeply religious feeling. It is very interesting to observe to what

degrees the Victorian poets were affected by these changes in scientific teaching. But before we go any further let us glance at those difficulties which must have presented themselves even to minds quite as liberal as the mind of Tennyson.

The fundamental position to consider is the position of science in regard to the question "What is Matter?" On this subject the only definite answer can be that we know nothing of matter except as a combination of forces. The evolutionist Wallace—who in his old age has unfortunately taken to spiritualism—boldly proclaimed at an early day that matter was mind. This, being a probable statement, need not be discussed here;—it is worth remarking only, because of its likeness to Eastern theories on the same subject. There is, however, one aspect of the question latterly treated by science which is extremely interesting. It is the theory that all kinds of matter are but different combinations of one original substance,—in other words that all the elements have been formed and differentiated out of some primordial undifferentiated element. Evolutional chemistry cannot be fully discussed here; but it is just now of the most astonishing interest; and although the evolutional matter cannot yet be fully established as a fact, scientific men are inclined to think that it will be eventually accepted just as the Nebular Hypothesis has been accepted. Remember, however, that this does not touch the mystery of atoms, further than so far as it suggests combination. What the atom is? No scientific man can tell; and many scientific men are inclined to believe that what we think of as atom does not exist. The force or forces we are aware of; but of the ultimate nature of the atom we do not know anything at all. In one of the systems of Indian philosophy there is a theory that reminds us of this suggestion of modern chemistry. The theory that atoms combine in a kind of arithmetical progression—two atoms of four, four of eight, eight of sixteen ultimates, etc. No poet has yet touched this question in England, for it is comparatively new.

Next to the mystery of matter naturally comes the mystery of life. Evolutional theories upon this subject are also of rather late date, — being due to discoveries of comparatively recent times. I am not speaking of the large conceptions of Herbert Spencer, who as early as the middle of the century, declared mind and matter to be only different passing manifestations of one reality. I mean theories about how life begins. In the first period of the new science it was only accepted as probability, that, when upon the surface of a cooling planet certain chemical combinations occur, then the very simplest form of living substance makes its appearance; and that from this simplest form all other forms have gradually been evolved. To-day this is generally believed, but much more definite facts have been brought to bear upon the theory. We cannot positively say that matter is dead to-day; we cannot speak of “dead matter.” The living rises out of the apparently not living. Therefore the apparently not living cannot be lifeless. The very latest chemical researches have amazed the men who made them. They acknowledge that it is impossible to draw the line between life and matter. Vast things are suggested by this mystery. But it has not yet appealed to the poets. The astronomical part of evolution has been accepted everywhere; and with it the general explanation of the law of development. When I say everywhere, I only mean in the scientific circles of all countries. The older religious sects reject the entire system; and the more liberal religious sects accept it only more or less partially. This part of the evolutional philosophy has principally affected the poets. There are only a few poetical thinkers of the age who have not been influenced by it to a marked degree in their writings. Even the theory of moral development—that man’s conscience has been gradually evolved like everything else—has been very earnestly favoured by the poets — principally this theory seems to afford a strong incentive effort. But there are certain reservations. These reservations are especially noticeable in the field of psychology.

Evolutional psychology—the theory of the development of mind out of the simplest forms of sensation—is particularly Spencer's; and it is particularly the cause of the opposition that has been made to his teaching, and of the reaction that has been latterly created against it. Even the theory of the growth and development of religion might have been forgiven him by the liberal churches; but the theory that the human mind itself has been evolved by infinite degrees out of a speck of colourless matter no bigger than the point of a pin, could not be easily forgiven. It is quite true that he has pointed out how the mystery remains, even granting this theory; for nothing can explain sentiency, which is the basis, so far as we can know, of all thought. From that point of view there could be nothing very irreligious in the system,—were it not for one thing, namely, that the system strikes especially at the western idea of the individual human soul. What is to become of the idea of an immortal personality within each man, if we are to believe that every mind has grown up slowly out of one ultimate mystery? And further more, Mr. Spencer has been accused of teaching doctrines resembling those of eastern philosophy. He has taught that there is such a thing as organic memory, and that individuality remains under the influence of all the past existence out of which he came. This looks like a scientific confirmation of the doctrines of Metempsychosis, of Preexistence,—of Karma,—and of a great many things that Christianity holds in horror. What is going to become of the belief in free will, if such a doctrine is to be accepted? These are questions that the churches have been asking; and they will certainly continue to resist the teaching of evolutional psychology until they have no more strength to fight against it. I cannot imagine that this system will have much chance of being taught in the University for a long time to come. It is too subversive to all the doctrines upon which the Christian religion has been based.

Nevertheless a few bold minds have found their way to

reconcile the new psychology with earnest faith. They have made for themselves sort of a half Christian Pantheism, or I might say Mysticism. They are willing to regard the inner nature of man as part of the infinite, passing through forms of millions of kinds to reach superior zones of being. The question is how far will the Churches recognize such men as Christian? Very probably if asked about the matter, they would not be recognized at all. Not to be recognized as a Christian in Western society is rather unfortunate for a young man — unfortunate for any man who cannot make himself quite independent of conventions. But there are curious indulgences. If you keep to the upper regions of thought in your poetry — to those loftier intellectual zones that are too cold for common minds to reach; then what you say will probably pass — without criticism. The poet is saved like eagle or condor by flying miles above the region of common minds. George Meredith has done this. He, and he alone, is the one great poet of the evolutionary philosophy even in the domain of the new psychology. But he is quite safe: for the majority of readers cannot understand him and the theologians will not quarrel with published utterances that cannot reach the mass of the people. Indeed many theologians have persisted in regarding Meredith as really a Christian Mystic;—they have been reading meanings in him which he never expressed. As I have lectured several times upon his poems I need not quote from him in this connection—you will remember how deeply he has gone into the teachings of New Thought.

These two poets Tennyson and Meredith have chiefly shown the new influence. Rossetti, a singular exception, never pays any attention whatever to the scientific discoveries of his time. You will find much mystical beauty in his thoughts, but not even the shadow of an evolutionary conviction. You will find, however, some indications of the new studies scattered through the longer poems of Browning. I might cite, for example, that passage in “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” where the bishop explains, or attempts

to explain, the origin of virtue, of modesty, according to the evolutionary hypothesis. Elsewhere Browning has made many suggestions, but never, in such sort as to show personal sympathy with the deeper facts of the new philosophy. As for the minor poets, we could not expect to find much of importance in this direction; and, as for the purely evolutionary poets—especially those women like Mathilde Blind and Constance Naden, who have attempted to put the Spencerian philosophy into verse, I can only say that they are verse makers, not real poets. The fact is that in literature the influence of the new philosophy becomes important only when the giants take it up: and it is rather to be regretted that small verse makers should attempt anything in a new direction unless they can manage to be supremely original—which is not so easy.

Briefly summarizing, the evidence indicates, we find, that the profounder aspects of the new philosophy—those of its teachings or suggestions relating to the nature of mind, the destiny of mankind, and the mystery of life in itself—have been fully expressed by only one English poet of the period. Many have been tinted by the new ideas; but scarcely any have been dyed through and through with the new intellectual colour. I do not think that this is surprising; for the science of which I speak has not yet had time to create wide-spread intellectual changes in literary life. But I may mention that Prof. Dowden has predicted that the poetry of the next century will very probably be poetry quite as expressive of the new ideas as is the poetry of Mr. Meredith in our own day.