

And at the dead feet were laid low
Instead of in the master's living hand—
One day too late.—(p. 2.)

This personal devotion to Mazzini, and to the cause which he had at heart, is to the writer a religion and an inspiration, the sense of which has been ever present with her, and of which she is careful the reader also shall be conscious throughout. There is almost at the opening of the poem a passage, written of course before the publication of Mr Mill's autobiography, since the books were nearly simultaneous in their appearance, which is curiously parallel to that in which Mr Mill speaks of the inspiration which his works derived from the intimate sympathy existing between his own mind and that of his wife. So writes Mrs King, that her words, even when unseen by Mazzini, have not therefore been unknown to him:—

I do but write as he inspired it me:
There is no passage but he knew it first;
I know there is no line but must have passed
Some time or other through his brain to mine;
Though not by utterance, by the finer threads
Which we, who live by vision more than speech,
Are conscious of, but cannot frame again.—(p. 2.)

"The Overture," from which these lines are taken, is all that is directly about the "Master;" but it is enough to show how real and sincere is the admiration felt for him, that this is no drapery adopted for poetical purposes, but a part of the writer's very life. Mazzini is the first among

The Sons of Men who are the Sons of God.—(p. 1.)

He is one

Who walked alone with God, and had no Higher
Of humankind to be a help to him.—(p. 3.)

His spirit is to the writer's as is "the Angel of the Sun" to some planet which wanders in space through

Arcs of aphelion, silences of snow.—(p. 8.)

He is the first of those who for Italy

Lived,

And strove, and suffered, and attained their end.—(p. 14.)

After this overture, in which there is much which we would willingly quote, are four poems, devoted to four of the Disciples, Jacopo Ruffini, Ugo Bassi, Agesilao Milano, Baron Giovanni Nicotera. They are of very different length, and of very different merit. The first and the two last are in rhyme; but we do not think the metre of the last satisfactory, or indeed quite suited to the dignity and gravity of the subject. The same cannot be said of the poem given to Agesilao Milano, which is thoroughly good in choice of metre and in versification. Of this, two stanzas may give a fair specimen:—

Mazzini, Master, singer of the sunrise!
Knowest thou me?
I held thy hand once, and the summer lightning
Still of thy smile I see;
Me thou rememberest not amid the heightening
Vision of God, and of God's Will to be.
* * * * *
'Italia, when thou comest to thy kingdom,
Remember me!
Me, who on this thy night of shame and sorrow
Was scourged and slain with thee;
Me, who upon thy resurrection morrow,
Shall stand among thy sons beside thy knee.'

—(pp. 302, 303.)

This however, and the really fine poem, also in rhyme, dedicated to Ruffini, labour under the great disadvantage of being somewhat obscure to those who have not the history of Italy since 1830 within easy call of mind and memory, which can be said but of few in these fast moving days. But the poem of Ugo Bassi, which occupies 266 out of the whole 315 pages, is exposed to no such disadvantage. Here the writer seems in great measure to have followed a life of Bassi written by his friend, Paradisi, soon after Bassi's death in 1849, but only published since Italy became free; although there are details, such as the scourging of Ugo before his death, which are not to be found in Paradisi's narrative.

We cannot attempt to give an outline of the beautiful life and death of the monk, whose heart was full in equal proportion of love to God and love to man, but who loved his country more than his church; who was selected by Mazzini to be, with Gavazzi, chaplain to Garibaldi's force,

and was with Garibaldi in his great retreat from Rome; who, taken at last in the swamps and forests near Comacchio, was shot by the Austrians. Enough to say that the narrative has unflagging interest and is written in admirable blank verse, while the descriptions and episodes within the narrative are for the most part in poetry of a very lofty kind, which rises far above mere verse, and deserves to live.

The following passage is a fair specimen of the general level of the work. There are many more beautiful, and a few which fall below it:—

This winter was the mildest that had been
Within the memory of man at Rome.
The skies were soft and sunny every day,
And the red roses bloomed the winter through.
And ere the spring had well set in this year,
Another rose had blossomed on the earth—
Another crimson in the morning sky,
And the Republic was proclaimed in Rome.
And late one night, in the first days of March,
When beds of violets scented all the air,
And marigolds were in the springing grass,
Came Ugo Bassi home.—(p. 170.)

This extract shows two great charms of the book, the excellence of the local colouring, and the keen enjoyments of nature, which run through every page. Epithets, the temptation and the curse of the unwary versifier, are here cautiously and well chosen, always meaning something; there are lines in this poem which are quite rare in their fitness as descriptions of natural scenes and sounds. Thus:—

There was great silence, and we plainly heard
The oxen chewing hard in the wet grass;—(p. 52.)

and

Where the larks sing, and the wild goats rejoice,
And locusts whiz in the hot summer day.—(p. 42.)

In a word, here is a new poem—a poem to stir pulses which have ceased to beat in response to the ring of mere verse; a poem occupied, as a true poem of these days should be, with present interests and life, full of hope, and progress, and liberty.

Perhaps the only great poet who has ever introduced occasional rhymes into blank verse with good effect is Shakespeare; yet he has merely done so at the ends of speeches, and in his lighter works. There are in this poem sundry rhymes, and sundry endings of somewhat similar sound, which do not quite amount to rhymes, as, for example, on pp. 40, 57, 88, 120, which have an unpleasant effect. These are, it would seem, in most places the result of oversight, and are easily effaced. There are a few unmusical and unscannable lines, as:

It is good for me to be here, and had (p. 92),
which can scarcely be read as a verse at all.

On matters of opinion we should rarely disagree with the writer. As a piece of criticism, however, we should demur to the statement that Byron ever showed that he had "an unutterable thirst for God," which "saved him through the depths of sin." Probably his "sins" have been made more of than they deserved, but he cannot be whitewashed by giving him an Augustinian anguish of soul, and a craving after the divine through all evil, of which there is no evidence.

One other criticism, and we have done. We admit the exceeding difficulty of fitting proper names to verse, which names must yet be introduced in an historical narrative. But even this difficulty should not allow of the very arbitrary scansion of Orsini and Orsini interchanged at will:—

Under the murderous fire Orsini led
His columns.—(p. 163.)

All night
Was spent in preparations. Orsini
Was head of the first column.—(p. 161.)

But the very attention we have given to this poem, in order to see in some cases almost microscopic defects, will serve to prove our sincere admiration. Mrs King is not the first poetess in our day whom the unity of Italy, once hoped only, now achieved, has inspired. We cannot now attempt to compare the two, or weigh each against the other; but we have said enough to show that the torch which dropped from the dead hand of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is held on high and carried forward by one well worthy to bear it.

C. KEGAN PAUL.

"LITERARY." Examiner, 17 Jan. 1874. British Library Newspapers, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BB3201024359/BNCN?u=warwick&sid=bookmark-BNCN&xid=7063e3f5. Accessed 1 Nov. 2021.