PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS,

AND

'TENNYSON,'

BY THE PRESIDENT, S. H. BUTCHER

October 27, 1909 (*the Tennyson Centenary*)

I

Since the British Academy was founded seven years ago, two distinguished Presidents have occupied this chair; and you have now done me the honour—the surprising honour as it still is to me—of electing me as their successor in office. Over the birth of the Academy Lord Reay presided. When our history comes to be written and our records consulted, it will be seen how much we owe both abroad and at home to his counsel, and how potent was his influence in determining the direction of our earliest efforts. He has, if I may so say, the freedom of the republic of learning in almost every European country, and, moreover, he can speak to every man in his own language. We looked on him as our ambassador accredited to all the learned bodies of the Continent and as welcomed by all. He was followed by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, whose tenure of office was to our deep regret cut short by illness. He too was a kind of international personage. His learning and distinction as a scholar, together with his official position as Director of the British Museum, marked him out as exceptionally fitted to discharge the duties of President. His organizing mind has left its impress in many memorable ways on the British Museum, and, had health permitted, we counted confidently on his rendering similar service to the British Academy. Now that he is recovering from the strain of overwork we shall hope again for his invaluable aid. By singular good fortune—let me add in passing—our connexion with the British Museum is not severed by Sir Edward's retirement. The new Director, Dr. Kenyon, a Fellow of the Academy, is a scholar and palaeographer who is known all over Europe. In the name of the Academy I would offer him our congratulations.

Of myself I shall say nothing in entering on office than this, that I have no international position, and do not even possess any facilities for international speech; indeed, I find a difficulty in making

myself understood in one language, and that my own. Having, however, spent most of my life as a teacher and student, I may be regarded as a sort of working-man's representative in one department of scholarship. I can only promise you my whole-hearted service and devotion to your interests.

My first duty now is to offer the welcome of the Academy to the new Fellows, whose names I enumerate in alphabetical order:—Professor Hume Browne; Lord Justice Kennedy; Professor C. S. Kenny; Dr. Hastings Rashdall; Dr. J. E. Sandys; Mr. Cuthbert H. Turner. Next let me mention the names of our newly elected Corresponding Fellows, who have gratefully accepted our invitation:—Mr. H. C. Lea of Philadelphia, whose obituary notice, however, we read with deep regret in the *Times* of October 26th; Dr. F. Liebermann of Berlin; Don Marcelino Menendez y Pelayo of Madrid; His Excellency M. Louis Renault of Paris; Professor E. Sievers of Leipzig; The Prince of Teano of Rome. I regret also to have to record the death of another of our Corresponding Fellows, M. Georges Picot of Paris.

II

Had the occasion been appropriate, I should have wished to speak to-day about the general functions of the British Academy and to submit some suggestions as to its future work. But we are met for a special commemorative purpose, and I am unwilling to take up more than a brief portion of your time. I propose, therefore, to touch slightly on a special topic, the relation of the British Academy to Literature. The question has been asked, Does the Academy exist for the encouragement of Letters or of Learning or of both? By the terms of our Charter its objects are 'the promotion of the study of the moral and political sciences, including history, philosophy, law, politics and economics, archaeology and philology'. In carrying out these objects, one of our primary interests is to take part in great international enterprises, which need the sanction and co-operation of learned bodies in different lands, enterprises which can only be carried out by State aid, hitherto denied to us, or by private munificence. Yet large and even world-wide as are our functions, we are still limited in our scope. Pure literature as such does not find a place here. The idea of forming an Academy on the model of the French Academy was rejected, not without deliberation. The decision, I imagine, was a wise one. Even in France, with its peculiar literary tradition, the attempt to pronounce judgement on living authors has been found a perilous task. Eminent merit, it is true, has seldom

been denied admission into the French Academy; on the other hand, many mediocrities have been enrolled among the Immortals. This result is what we might expect. The tests of literary excellence are impalpable compared with those of eminent discovery in science. Literary fashion is a fleeting thing, and nowhere is it more unsafe than in literature to forestall the verdict of posterity. Literature, moreover, like religion and politics, is a subject on which every one fancies he has an equal right with all others to pass judgement; and, as a consequence, the pressure of outside opinion, in support of some ephemeral claim, has not unfrequently proved irresistible within the French Academy itself. Our Academy, for better or worse, is exempt from these attendant dangers, though the relief so obtained is not purchased without cost. Adverse critics may point to the apparent paradox of an Academy such as ours not being able to open its doors to George Meredith. Are you, they may say, a body of erudite pedants and nothing more? Possibly so; but not by any inherent necessity derived from our Charter. One or two considerations may be urged as showing that the divorce between Literature and Learning is not, or at least need not be, complete. In the first place, the man of learning who happens to have the gift of style ought not on that account to fall under the suspicion of being merely a *littérateur*. In our own day less than ever is learning the possession of any single class or confined to professional bodies, nor is the language of the learned a hardened dialect which is cut off from the speech and thought of the people. British learning throughout its history and in all departments has maintained an alliance with literature, and the British Academy, without lowering its aim or assuming alien functions, may, if I mistake not, help to forge new links in that honourable alliance. Next it may be pleaded as a mitigating fact, that literary criticism, based on historical or linguistic study or exhibiting philosophic thought, presents credentials which already find acceptance with the Academy; and between such criticism and literature proper no sharp dividing line can be drawn. Still the main position remains unaffected, that the highest order of literature, the literature of the imagination, cannot be ranged under the head of learning. Learning, moreover, can be organized; genius cannot be organized. Must the exclusion, therefore, of genius be absolute? Personally I think not. May not the Academy avail itself of the power conferred by the Charter to create Honorary Fellowships, and thereby bring in imaginative literature, whether it takes the form of drama, poetry, or fiction, and so ennoble Learning by association with Genius?

But whatever delicate questions may arise in defining the boundaries

between learning and literature and doing justice to the claims of the living, the Academy has felt itself to be within its proper sphere in commemorating great writers who are dead. Last year it organized the Milton Tercentenary Celebration ; this year on the death of George Meredith it arranged for a memorial service in the Abbey, and paid a tribute which we believe was grateful to many friends of literature. To-day at the opening meeting of the session we propose to celebrate another centenary, and the task of preparing an address on Tennyson has been entrusted to Professor Henry Jones.

III

A hundred years have passed since Tennyson's birth, seventeen years since his death. It is too soon to attempt to fix his permanent place among English poets, but it is not too soon to feel assured that much that he has written is of imperishable worth. Will you bear with me if I offer some brief introductory remarks, not by way of critical estimate, but in loving appreciation of the poet and the man ? And let me say at once how deeply all who care for Tennyson are indebted to the illuminating Memoir and Annotated Edition published by his son.

Tennyson's poetic career is in some respects unique in English literature. He fell upon a time when fiction, science, and sociology were displacing poetry. He succeeded in conquering the poetic indifference of his age. For nearly sixty years he held a listening and eager audience, including not only fastidious hearers but also the larger public. Probably no English poet except Shakespeare has exercised such a commanding sway over both learned and unlearned. He unsealed the eyes of his contemporaries and revealed to them again the significance of beauty. To the English people, and indeed the English-speaking race, he was not merely the gracious and entrancing singer, but also the seer who divined their inmost thoughts and interpreted them in melodious forms of verse.

At the outset of his poetic life, Arthur Hallam notes the 'strange earnestness of his worship of beauty'. Like Milton, he was studious of perfection. Like Milton, too, he had in a supreme degree the poet's double endowment of an exquisite ear for the music of verse and an unerring eye for the images of nature. Like Milton, he acquired a mastery of phrase which has enriched the capacities of our English speech ; and not Milton himself drew from the purely English elements in the language more finely modulated tones. No poet since Milton has been more deeply imbued with classical literature, and the perfection of form which he sought fell at once

into a classic and mainly a Hellenic mould. We find in him reminiscences or close reproductions not only of Homer and Theocritus, of Virgil and Horace, of Lucretius and Catullus, of Ovid and Persius, but also of Sappho and Alcman, of Pindar and Aeschylus, of Moschus, Callimachus, and Quintus Smyrnaeus, more doubtfully of Simonides and Sophocles. We can follow the tracks of his reading also in Herodotus, Plato, Plutarch, and Livy. His early volumes contain varied strains of classical and romantic legend. In some of the poems we are aware at once of the pervasive atmosphere and enchantment of romance, as in *The Lady of Shalott*, *Mariana*, *Sir Galahad*, and many more. Others—such as *Oenone*, *The Lotos-Eaters*, *Ulysses*, *Tithonus*—what are we to call them, classical or romantic? The thought and the form are chiefly classical, but the poems are shot through with romantic gleams and tinged with modern sentiment. Yet so skilful is the handling that there is no sense of incongruity between the things of the past and the feelings of a later day. The harmony of tone and colour is almost faultless, more so than in the treatment of the longer themes taken from Celtic sources. But while some poems are dominantly classical, others dominantly romantic, Tennyson's genius as a whole is the spirit of romance expressing itself in forms of classical perfection. To the romanticist he may seem classical; to the classicist he is romantic: romantic in his choice of subjects, in his attitude towards Nature, in his profusion of detail, in an ornateness sometimes running to excess; in his moods, too, of reverie or languor and in the slumberous charm that broods over many of his landscapes. Yet he is free from the disordered individualism of the extreme romantic school. Disquietude and unrest are not wanting, but there is no unruly self-assertion; the cry of social revolt is faintly heard, and, when heard, its tones are among the least Tennysonian. Those who demand subtle or curious psychology find him disappointing; his characters are in the Greek manner broadly human, types rather than deviations from the type. That he was capable of expressing intense and poignant feeling is shown by such impassioned utterances as those of *Fatima* and *Maud*; but passion with him is usually restrained. There are critics for whom passion is genuine only if turbid, just as thought is profound only if obscure; and for them Tennyson's reserve—again a Greek quality—seems an almost inhuman calm. His own most deeply felt experiences find their truest expression when passed through the medium of art; they come out tranquillized and transfigured. The sorrow and love of *In Memoriam* —which poem I take to be the supreme effort of his genius—are

merged in large impersonal emotions. The poem, as he himself says, 'is rather the cry of the whole human race than mine.' Tennyson's intense humanity gives rise to a peculiar vein of pathos, and even of melancholy. Side by side there are his 'mighty hopes' for the future and the power and 'passion of the past'—'the voice of days of old and days to be': on the one hand the forward straining intellect, on the other the backward glance, the lingering regret, and 'some divine farewell'. Those haunting and recurrent words, 'the days that are no more', 'for ever and for ever', and the 'vague world whisper' of the 'far-far-away', are charged with a sadness which recalls the pathetic but stoical refrain of 'Nequiquam' in Lucretius.

Throughout Tennyson's long career we can trace the essential oneness of his mind and art, beginning with his early experiments in language and metrical form. By degrees his range of subjects was enlarged; we are amazed at the ever growing variety of theme and treatment and his manifold modes of utterance. In some, as in his lyrics and dramatic monologues, he displays a flawless excellence, in almost all consummate art. But diverse as are the chords he has struck, the voice, the touch, the melody are all his own. In his latest poems we may miss something of the early rapture of his lyric song, but he is still himself and unmistakable; and had he written nothing but the lines *To Virgil* and the *Crossing of the Bar* he would surely take rank among the highest. We think of him primarily as the artist, but the artist and the man in him were never far apart; and as years went on his human sympathies, always strong, were strengthened and broadened, and drew him closer to the common life of humble people. We overhear more of 'the still sad music of humanity'. Towards the close of his life the moral and religious content of the poems becomes fuller with his deepening sense of the grandeur and the pathos of man's existence. Some see in this a weakening of his art, the intrusion into poetry of an alien substance. Yet eliminate this element from art, and how much of the greatest poetry of the world is gone! Now and then, it must be confessed, the ethical aim in Tennyson seems to some of us unduly prominent, but very rarely does the artist lose himself in the teacher or the preacher. He has a message to deliver, but it is not a mere moral lesson: its true appeal is to the imagination; put it into prose and it is no longer his. It lives only in its proper form of imaginative beauty.

Aristotle noted two types of Poet, the εὐφυής, the finely gifted artist, plastic to the Muse's touch, who can assume many characters in turn; and the μανικός, the inspired poet, with a strain of frenzy, who is lifted out of himself in a divine transport. Were we asked to

select three examples of the former type, one from Greece, one from Rome, and one from England, our choice from the ancient world would probably fall on Sophocles and Virgil, and might we not, as a fitting third, add Tennyson to the list? I do not attempt to determine their relative rank, but I do suggest that they all belong to the same family and that already in this centenary year of our poet we can recognize the poetic kinship. Each of the three had in him the inmost heart of poetry, beating with a full humanity and instinct with human tenderness; each remained true to his calling as an artist and pursued throughout life the vision of beauty; and each achieved, in his own individual way, a noble and harmonious beauty of thought and form, of soul and sense.