

PESSIMISM ON THE STAGE.

HAMLET.

FROM Schlegel's Commentaries to Professor Dowden's, J. Feis's, and George Macdonald's recent studies, what multitudes of explanations and analyses have been given of the tragedy of "Hamlet"! It has been said that a fresh one is published almost yearly. I hope, therefore, I shall not be considered presumptuous in attempting a little sketch in which I shall endeavour to explain Hamlet's character from a sociological standpoint. I know this will be by no means an easy task; I recollect reading in a book of Mr. Frank Marshall's, who had devoted fourteen years to the study of "Hamlet," that he had found out how little he knew about it.

I was studying "Hamlet" at the time of the "Coup d'Etat" of 1852. This event dismayed me. Before the year 1848 I looked forward with confidence to a general disarmament, to peaceful progress, and to the coming triumph of liberty in the world; and, a little later, when Lamartine addressed words of affection and friendship, in the name of Republican France, to all other nations, he seemed to me to be realizing the Utopia of poets and prophets. A new era was commencing; as Beranger writes:—

"La paix descendait sur la terre
Semant de l'or, des fleurs et des épis ;"

and the swords would be turned into ploughshares. Democracy would become established without violence or bloodshed, as the result of a regular and apparently irresistible movement. The sovereignty of the people seemed to be assured, and St. Simon's programme of the moral, intellectual, and material amelioration of the masses appeared likely to be set on foot. But alas! these bright dreams were visionary! The days of June partly marred their

splendour, and soon afterwards, on a dark winter's night, an adventurer, armed only with the power borrowed from the memory of an odious despot, drives out the people's representatives, shoots those who resist, stifles liberty, and reinstates absolute and autocratic government. This unexpected triumph of evil was a great blow to me, and a cause of deep anguish.

I could not help questioning whether justice was to be found at all in the world. I said to myself: A perverse man rules supreme. The just and the true friends of the people and of liberty are exiled and imprisoned. How can God permit such violation of His equitable laws?

In reading "Hamlet" I found the expression of similar sentiments. It seemed to me that his mind was troubled by sight of the triumph of evil over good, by the distressing enigma ever meeting us in human societies where, as in Nature, happiness is not reserved to the deserving, and trouble to sinners. I found Louis Napoleon marching to the Tuileries, through the pools of blood of December, in Hamlet's imprecation, when speaking to his mother of his father's assassin, her husband, he says:—

"A murderer and a villain,
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A cutpurse of the Empire and the Rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket!"—Act iii. sc. 4.

Under the empire of these feelings of indignation and despair I thought I attained a better conception of Shakespeare's drama.

Hamlet is an accomplished prince, to whom all the pleasures of life are apparently reserved. He is young and handsome, and a throne awaits him. He is a philosopher and a poet, and well versed in sword-craft. He has studied at the Wittenberg University, and his thoughtful and reflective mind penetrates to the depths of the great problem of human life. As becomes his age, the young philosopher loves a maiden whose charm and whose very name are poetry personified. As Ophelia says, he has a noble mind:—

"The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword:
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observ'd of all observers."—Act iii. sc. 1.

When the ghost of his father appears to him and reveals the abominable crime committed by his uncle, his mother's husband, the usurper of the throne, the spectacle of triumphant and unpunished crime so overwhelms him that his mental faculties are in danger. Suffering not only affects Hamlet, like most men, in his sentiments,

but it completely upsets his metaphysical theories, and attacks his reason.

"Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records ;
All saws of books, all forms, all pleasures past,
That youth and observation copied there ;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter ; yes, by heaven !
Oh ! most pernicious woman !
Oh, villain, villain, smiling, damned villain !
My tables, meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain ;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark."—Act i. sc. 5.

Crime smiling and remorseless—this is what disturbs and confuses all his notions of justice. Agony, doubt, and despair take hold on Hamlet, and he is haunted by the idea of suicide. His faith in the universal order of things is attacked more severely than his love for his father. Henceforth, buried in the bitterest reflections, he must commence a fresh existence. Good-by, dear studies ; good-by, pleasure ; good-by, love ; good-by, Ophelia. He bursts all the bands which bind him to life, and buries himself completely in his one dominant thought ; and how admirably Shakespeare describes the effect of this on the young prince :—

"*Ophelia*.—My lord, as I was sewing in my chamber,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd ;
No hat upon his head ; his stockings foul'd,
Ungarter'd, and down-gyred to his ankle ;
Pale as his shirt ; his knees knocking each other ;
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loos'd out of hell
To speak of horrors,—he comes before me.

* * * *

He took me by the wrist, and held me hard ;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm ;
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face
As he would draw it. Long stay'd he so ;
At last,—a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound,
That it did seem to shelter all his bulk,
And end his being."—Act ii. sc. 1.

He very soon reaches a despairing state of pessimism. In his sight the most beautiful aspects of Nature are darkened by evil. All is going wrong :—

"I have of late lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises ; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory ; this most excellent canopy, the air,

look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire,—why it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilential congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor woman either.”—
Act ii. sc. 2.

One of the most eloquent singers of modern pessimism, Madame Ackermann, designates man as “that summary of all miseries,” and uses terms so bitter that Hamlet would not have disowned them. The poetess thus addresses Nature:—

“Où, je souffre, et c'est toi, Mère, qui m'extermine,
Tantôt frappant mes flancs, tantôt blessant mon cœur.
Mon être tout entier, par toutes ses racines,
Plonge sans fond dans la douleur.
J'offre sous la ciel un lugubre spectacle,
Ne naissant, ne vivant, que pour agoniser.
L'abîme s'ouvre ici, là se dresse l'obstacle;
Ou m'engloutir, ou me briser.
Mais jusque sous le coup du desastre suprême,
Moi, l'homme, je t'accuse à la face des cieux.
Créatrice, en plein front reçois donc l'anathème
De cet atôme audacieux.
* * * * *
Qu'envahissant les cieux, l'immobilité morne
Sous un voile funèbre éteigne tout flambeau,
Puisque d'un univers magnifique et sans borne
Tu n'as su faire qu'un tombeau.”

In Leopardi we find the same state of absolute and complete despair, but there it is resigned and without revolt. In Hamlet's case it is more thrilling from the fact of its being more human, more life-like, more varied in its expression.

It has always been a subject of astonishment that Hamlet was so long before avenging the death of his father. The reason for this is apparent. The creed of the philosopher, who believed in the triumph of the good and the punishment of the wicked, has received a more severe shock than the filial affection of the son. These general thoughts and reflections trouble him and weigh on his mind far more than the mere personal desire for revenge. Will the death of the murderer re-establish an order of justice in society? “The world's a goodly prison, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one of the worst” (act ii. sc. 2). “To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand” (act ii. sc. 2). “How very stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world” (act i. sc. 2). “Oh, cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right” (act i. sc. 5). “For in the fatness of these pury times, virtue itself of vice must pardon

beg" (act iii. sc. 4). Does not this last quotation resume the whole moral situation under the Second Empire in France? How well Hamlet paints the perversity which has invaded everything when he says to Ophelia, "If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry,—be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny." "To a nunnery, and quickly too." "What should such fellows as I do, crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery." "Why shouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me" (act iii. sc. 1).

Here Shakespeare expresses exactly the sentiments of the early Christians, of the millennarians, and of the ascetic school. The corruptions of the world by which they were surrounded filled them with horror. They longed for the kingdom of God, for justice to reign universally, and for the perfect happiness of the faithful; but how is this to be established? By the end of the world—that is to say, by a cosmic revolution, when fire from heaven is to descend and purify all things. As these eschatological hopes failed to be realized, and the world continued as perverted as heretofore, but one course was left open to those persons who longed for purity and holiness, to flee to the desert and cry out with Hamlet, "To a nunnery, to a nunnery." This was the feeling which peopled the Thebaides in the first centuries after Christ, and later on, the convents and monasteries, especially as the year 1,000 approached, which was considered to be the date of the long-expected end of the world.

The nothingness of human life was the dominant idea of Middle-age Christian asceticism. The art of this period often depicted the horrible realities of death and the grave, in the most striking and powerful manner; for instance, the death's head in the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, on the Piazza del Popolo at Rome, says to the living: *Hodie mihi cras tibi*. At the Campo Santo at Pisa, Orcagna's frescoes show us brilliant cavalcades of ladies and gentlemen, whose horses suddenly stop, startled at the sight of putrefying corpses! Hamlet's dark thoughts call up similar imageries:—

"The King.—Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet.—At supper.

King.—At supper! Where?

Hamlet.—Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table: that's the end."—Act iv. sc. 3.

Longfellow's "Grave," from the Anglo-Saxon, dwells on the same morbid idea:—

“Doorless is that house,
 And dark it is within;
 There thou art fast detained,
 And Death has the key.
 Loathsome is that earth-house,
 And grim within to dwell.
 There thou shalt dwell,
 And worms shall divide thee.”

At the cemetery, Hamlet is interested in handling the skulls dug up by the grave-diggers and in indulging in reflections as to the persons to whom they belonged—“Alas! poor Yorick;” and, addressing the skull of a courtier, he says—“This might be my lord such-a-one . . . and now my lady worms” (act v. sc. 1). In what admirable language he depicts the nothingness of man: “Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole?”

“Imperial Cæsar, dead and turned to clay,
 Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:
 Oh that the earth, which kept the world in awe,
 Should patch a wall to expel the winter’s flaw!”—Act v. sc. 1.

In Holy Writ, Ecclesiastes offers another type of pessimism. He also bears witness that this world is given up to evil; but, instead of despairing about it until his mind wanders, he draws the conclusion that he had best take life as it is and rejoice, while it lasts, as there is no to-morrow. “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” (Ecclesiastes viii. 14, 15). Hamlet, also, is in a state of despair, but he would disdain to take refuge in epicurism, which he considers degrading: “What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? A beast; no more” (act iv. sc. 5).

Occasionally he reproaches himself for not having revenged the death of his father. This thought takes possession of him when he sees the army of Fortinbras marching to battle and death, without motive, while he does not act, though he have “cause, and will, and strength, and means, to do’t” (act iv. sc. 5). But his horror of iniquity, his disgust of the world tempt him rather to suicide than to ideas of vengeance. His pessimism and his despair might be called impersonal:—

“Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
 Or, that the Everlasting had not fix’d
 His canon ’gainst self-slaughter.”—Act i. sc. 2.

And again after his interview with Polonius:—

“*Polonius.* My honourable lord, I will most humbly take my leave of you.
Hamlet. You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life.”—Act ii. sc. 2.

Thus, almost decided to have done with life, hanging, as it were, at the verge of the abyss, he pronounces the famous monologue, “To be, or not to be,” so full of bitter meaning and pessimist views:—

“By a sleep to say we end
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to,—tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wish’d.
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
 The pangs of despis’d love, the law’s delay,
 The insolence of office, and the spurns
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of.”—Act iii. sc. 1.

It has been questioned whether Hamlet had really lost his reason, or whether he acted madness to be able the better to prepare his vengeance. Neither of these suppositions is correct, in my opinion. The words of the king, his uncle, are, I think, a true indication as to the state of mind of the disconsolate philosopher:—

“What he spake, though it lack’d form a little,
 Was not like madness. There’s something in his soul
 O’er which his melancholy sits on brood.”—Act iii. sc. 2.

This problem which so disturbs Hamlet’s reason is none other than the one which troubled Job. How is it, if God be just, that the wicked triumph, while the righteous suffer? As Renan explains, the old-world theory that each one here below is treated according to his merits was all very well in patriarchal times, when nobility, virtue, and riches went generally hand-in-hand. In the extreme simplicity of a wandering existence, the only really miserable ones were those who deserved such a lot, by refusing to work or otherwise grossly misconducting themselves! But as soon as the Shemites became acquainted with the resources of trade and commerce, the accumulation of capital, and the monopolization of the soil, the whole state of

society became completely transformed. Scoundrels and villains lived in comfort and plenty, tyrants were rewarded, and brigands borne with honours to the grave, while the deserving were but too often despoiled and reduced to beg their bread. Job, the primitive wanderer, faithful to the customs of his fathers, complained bitterly of this cruel injustice introduced by a complicated civilization, of which he could understand neither the aim nor the extent. "The cry of the poor, hitherto unknown—for the poor existed only in the inferior races, scarcely worthy of the name of men—began to make itself heard, and spoke in accents full of passion and eloquence." The sight of the existing social iniquities, of men's miseries, of that inexplicable injustice of death which strikes indiscriminately the just and the unjust; in a word, the spectacle of society and of Nature as they are, filled Job with despair. Like Hamlet, life and the world were most distasteful to him. "If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me, I would despise my life. There is one thing, therefore, I said it, He destroyeth the perfect and the wicked. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked" (Job ix. 20, 21, 22, 24). "My soul is weary of my life" (x. 7). "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power? How oft is the candle of the wicked put out! and how oft cometh their destruction upon them!" (Job xxi. 7, 17, 18). For the Christian, the solution of this agonizing enigma is to be found in the life to come, when all will be as it should be, and when each will receive reward or punishment according to his deserts, but the primitive Shemite possessed but a very vague idea of any such future existence; we read, therefore, that amends are made to Job in this world; that he again becomes rich and powerful, and lives in peace and comfort to a good old age. "After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, even four generations" (Job xlii. 16).

In Shakespeare, on the contrary, Hamlet and Ophelia die as miserably as the King and Queen. Implacable destiny smites alike the innocent and the guilty, and our feelings of justice are unsatisfied.

The debate between pessimism and optimism, so eloquently commenced by Job, and continued in Greece, between Heraclitus and Democritus, is again reopened by Voltaire and Rousseau, in two celebrated writings, which are well worth re-perusal. Voltaire, deeply moved by the terrible disasters resulting from the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, writes some verses which are a sort of indictment of Nature and Providence, showing how wretched is man's condition.—

"Éléments, animaux, humains, tout est en guerre;
Il le faut avouer, le mal est sur la terre."

And of man he says :

"Il rampe, il souffre, il meurt; tout ce qui naît expire.
De la destruction la nature est l'empire."

"Ainsi du monde entier tous les membres gémissent ;
 Nés tous pour les tourments, l'un par l'autre ils périssent ;
 Et vous composerez, dans ce chaos fatal,
 Des malheurs de chaque être un bonheur général !
 Leibnitz ne m'apprend point par quels nœuds invisibles,
 Dans le mieux ordonné des univers possibles,
 Un désordre éternel, un chaos de malheurs,
 Mêlé à nos vains plaisirs de réelles douleurs,
 Ni pourquoi l'innocent, ainsi que le coupable,
 Subit également ce mal inévitable.
 Je ne conçois pas plus comment tout serait bien :
 Je suis comme un docteur ; hélas ! je ne sais rien."

Voltaire further illustrates the same idea in his well-known novel, "Candide."

On August 17, 1756, Rousseau replied to Voltaire justifying optimism. His letter is a little vague and declamatory ; but it contains an excellent maxim and a touching passage which I will quote. The maxim is borrowed from Cato, and is as follows: *Nec me vivisse penitet, quoniam ita vixi ut frustra me natum non existem*—"I do not regret to have lived, because I have so lived as to be persuaded that my life has not been in vain." The passage is as follows:—

"Rassasié de gloire et désabusé des vaines grandeurs, vous vivez libre au sein de l'abondance ; bien sûr de votre immortalité, vous philosophez paisiblement sur la nature de l'âme et si le corps ou le cœur souffre. Vous avez Tronchin pour medecin et pour ami. Vous ne trouvez pourtant que mal sur la terre. Et moi, homme obscur, pauvre et tourmenté d'un mal sans remède, je médite avec plaisir dans ma retraite et trouve que tout est bien. D'où viennent ces contradictions apparentes ? Vous l'avez vous-même expliqué : vous jouissez, moi, j'espère et l'espérance embellit tout."

In order firmly to become convinced that Shakespeare intended to paint in Hamlet a man in despair about the iniquities of the world, and not merely a son avenging the death of his father, one need but study in ancient drama a precisely similar subject, but where mere vengeance is depicted as it was understood in primitive ages. Egisthus has killed Agamemnon with the assistance of Clytemnestra, whom he has married. They are reigning in Argos, happy and powerful, like the King and Gertrude in Denmark, when Orestes is urged by the oracle of Apollo to avenge the death of his father. This drama has been treated by the three great tragic writers. In Æschylus and Sophocles the thirst for revenge stifles every other feeling ; in Euripides, pity has a voice also in the heart of the avenger. In Æschylus, Orestes, after having slain Egisthus, advances towards his mother, and, addressing Pylades, says:—

"Dare I to shrink and spare ? Speak, Pylades.
Pylad. Where then would fall the heat at Delphi, given yet unfulfilled ?

Where then thine oath sworn true?
 Choose thou the hate of all men, not of gods.
Orest. Thou dost prevail; I hold thy counsel good. (*To Clytemnestra.*)
 Follow; I will slay thee at his side,
 With him whom in his life thou loved'st more
 Than Agamemnon. Sleep the sleep of death,
 Be that thy doom,
 For hate when love, and love where hate was due!"

Clytemnestra implores his clemency, but he is inflexible, and exclaims, as he drives her out before him—

"My father's fate ordains this doom for thee."

In Sophocles' "Electra" the vengeance is no less summary, but at least we do not see on the stage a mother slain by her own son, in spite of her prayers and supplications. Electra shows forth, with even more savage energy than Orestes, that it was the general opinion in ancient Greece that to slay the guilty is a sacred duty. Electra, like Judith, is the instrument of justice, and this is why the Greeks admire her when she is planning her mother's assassination. "Let us perish if needs be," she says to her sister, "but we will avenge our father's death." As at the present day, in Corsica, or among the Albanians, vengeance was considered in the time of Sophocles as the most glorious of duties. The words of the chorus in "Electra" are—

"Justice straight shall come,
 Thy sovereign seer, by whom I see,
 Crowned with the might of a righteous deed—
 Shall come, my child, and make no tarrying;
 So is my heart grown strong
 Since this fair dream made
 Music in mine ears."

Electra is ready to die, when she has assured her vengeance; she says to her sister—

"Bethink thee too what honourable report
 For thee and me, consenting thou shalt win,
 Who countryman or stranger seeing us,
 Shall not with such like praises honour us:
 Behold ye these two sisters, O my friends,
 Who wrought deliverance for their father's home,
 Who against foes firm-planted in their pride
 Drew swords the foremost, sparing not their lives:
 These ye should love, these twain should all revere:
 Yea, in all feasts and high solemnities
 These women, brave as men, let all men praise."

* * * * *
 Thus speaks a daughter "worthy of her noble blood."

In Sophocles, Orestes hesitates no more than in Æschylus' "Chœphores." He enters the palace for the purpose of killing his mother, and on his passage bows to the tutelary deities who guard the entrance. As he smites Clytemnestra, Electra calls out, "Strike harder still." Her conduct reminds one of Charlotte Corday; she might also be called "l'ange de l'assassinat," as says Lamartine.

In Euripides, as in Hamlet, two feelings struggle for the mastery: the thirst for vengeance is fought against by filial affection. One feels that a fresh phase of civilization is entered upon. New sentiments have sprung into life. Æschylus' Orestes represents man in barbarous ages, dominated by one single thought. There is no inward conflict whatever; he hurries on to action, unhesitatingly and without any deliberation. Professor Lombroso, in his curious work entitled "L'Uomo delinquente," explains that criminals by instinct and nature act in the same way, and they are wholly different from those who may be called "chance" criminals. The first may be likened to the tiger killing its prey, without the smallest spark of pity or remorse, whereas the moral and cultivated man is agitated by conflicting feelings. His passions and instincts are frequently at variance with his principles and belief. His heart, in which the brute survives, would often lead him to commit acts which his ideas of duty forbid. When about to act, he feels himself urged to continue and at the same time to draw back—there is a struggle. Here, then, the scene changes, and the strife is no longer, as at Æschylus' time, depicted as abroad in the world, against tangible obstacles, men or things, but it is transferred to the hearts and minds of individuals. This difference is very clearly perceptible in the "Electra" of Euripides. In Æschylus and Sophocles Orestes kills his mother unhesitatingly. In Euripides he endeavours to escape from the performance of a duty which horrifies him. He even goes so far as to doubt the word of the oracle who commanded him to accomplish the vengeance. Clytemnestra appears on her chariot, in all the pomp of royalty, surrounded by her Trojan slaves. Electra and Orestes are lying in wait to destroy her:—

Orest. What shall we do? Our mother shall we kill?

Elect. On seeing her, hath pity seiz'd thy heart?

Orest. She bore me, bred me. Her how shall I slay?

Elect. As she thy noble father slew and mine.

Orest. Oh, Phœbus, wild and rash the charge thou gav'st!

Elect. Who then are sage, if Phœbus be unwise?

Orest. The charge to kill my mother: impious deed!

Elect. What guilt were thine t' avenge thy father's death?

Orest. Now pure, my mother's murderer I should fly.

Elect. Will vengeance for thy father be a crime?

Orest. But I shall suffer for my mother's blood.

Elect. To whom thy father's vengeance then assign?

Orest. Like to the god, perchance, some demon spoke.

Elect. What, from the sacred tripod! Vain surmise.
Orest. Ne'er can my reason deem this answer just.
Elect. Sink not, unmann'd, to weak and timorous thoughts.
Orest. For her, then, shall I spread the fatal net?
Elect. In which her husband caught by thee was slain.
Orest. The house I enter. Dreadful the intent;
 Dreadful shall be my deeds. If such your will,
 Ye heavenly Powers, so let it be; to me
 A bitter, yet a pleasing task assign'd."

In Euripides, Orestes hesitates an instant, but ends by killing his mother; in Shakespeare, Hamlet, who has also a father's death to revenge, shudders at the idea of parricide, and finishes even by forgiving:—

"Soft! now to my mother.
 Oh! heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
 The soul of hero enter this firm bosom;
 Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
 I will speak daggers to her, but
 Use none."—Act iii. sc. 2.

He then reminds her of her crime, with so much violence that the guilty woman is overcome at the thought of her sin and asks her son's pardon. At this moment the ghost of the murdered monarch appears, not, as Agamemnon in the tragedy of Æschylus, to urge the son to slay his mother; on the contrary, to plead for her; he says to his son, "Oh step between her and her fighting soul" (act iii. sc. 4). Hamlet obeys this injunction and at once urges his mother to repent, asks pardon of her for his bitter reproaches, and concludes by these words, in which the merciful spirit of modern days is admirably reflected:—

"Once more, good night:
 And when you are desirous to be blessed,
 I'll blessing beg of you!"—Act iii. sc. 4.

What delicacy is here expressed! What depth of filial feeling! What confidence in the power of repentance to change the heart! What a contrast with the bloodthirsty cry of Electra, in Sophocles, "Strike yet again, double your blows!" The spirit of heroic times was a spirit of violence and vengeance, and the key-note of antique drama was terror. The spirit of modern times is the Christian spirit, which is made up of tenderness and pardon. The divine words, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," were not pronounced in vain. The spirit of the Gospel has penetrated our civilization even to our theatre, and places our stage far above that of antique times, where primitive ferocity and barbarity held their sway.

Hamlet is essentially misanthropic ; he says " man delights not me, no, nor woman neither ;" but how different from the " Misanthrope " depicted by Molière ! The latter is chafed by mere social conventions, by insincere protestations of friendship, by exaggerations of politeness, by false praises, by women's coquetry, and men's deceit—in a word, by the whole routine and method of society ; whereas Hamlet's thorough disappointment in all things strikes deeper ; he sees the bitter realities of human life, and himself feels the touch of treason and crime ; he realizes the nothingness of all things, and the absence of all justice here below. To the famous question, Is life worth living ? he replies with the most bitter conviction, No, a thousand times, no. After receiving his death-wound he says to Horatio :—

" If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world
Draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story."—Act v. sc. 2.

Molière's " Misanthrope " is a comedy, but Shakespeare is drama in its darkest and most distressing form. The harshness and bitterness of human destiny have never been more eloquently depicted.

As a rule, tragedies merely represent the passions of the human heart, such as love, ambition, revenge, or, at most, some elevated sentiment, such as love of country or of liberty, as in William Tell and in Brutus. In " Faust," Goethe attempted a philosophical drama, but he imperfectly combined the philosophy with the tragic action of the play. The abstract and metaphysical part is faintly outlined, and does not touch our feelings. Marguerite, her love, her misfortune, and remorse, alone move us. Goethe simply added an academical thesis to the human drama, but the former does not sufficiently penetrate his work to produce the desired effect. In " Hamlet," on the contrary, the hard problem of the justice, or rather of the injustice which universally prevails, and the prosperity of evil-doers, is the key to the whole play. This question occupies entirely the heart, thoughts, and imagination of the hero ; it rules all his conduct, and inspires words and reflections which illuminate it to its depths. We understand that the very soul of Shakespeare was in his subject, which must have profoundly moved and afflicted him. Like Brutus, in despair about the cause of liberty and the republic, addressing the phantom which appeared to him on the eve of the battle of Philippi, he also must have asked " What is justice ? "

But let us sum up our preceding conclusions. The sight of this world, where the wicked triumph and the just suffer and perish, is a distressing enigma. The evolutionist argues that this is the price of progress, that if the wicked are the more robust, it is right that they

should get the upper hand, for, in perpetuating the race by natural selection, their progeniture would steadily increase in strength at each succeeding generation, and thus these apparent iniquities would be justified, as Spencer says, by the imposing spectacle of the universal and general transformation and perfecting of the human race; hitherto, however, this theory, which would culminate in the worship of might has not found acceptance in men's consciences. On the contrary, it has been most strenuously opposed. Conscience, indeed, protests strongly against such injustice becoming general; at times it consoles itself, as in the Christian's case, with the hope of a better world; at times, it is sunk in despair, as with the pessimist; or again, like the millennarian of old or the nihilist of to-day, it curses all things and sighs for the destruction of a social order, which is irremediably delivered over to all that is evil. This ceaseless and varied protest against injustice forms the grandest side of humanity. It is the root of every reform operated, and of all progress accomplished. Without this the nations of the world would still be ground down beneath the yoke of the accomplished fact; they would be without an ideal. Men would have ceased to comprehend one of the finest of antique dicta, *Victrix causa Diis placuit, sed victa Catoni*, and would incessantly repeat, as every logical Positivist cannot fail to do, "might is right."

Job is indignant at the sight of the triumph of sin, and his eloquent voice is raised in protestation against even God himself, but, in accordance with the primitive ideas of ancient Israel, he, the just man, is ultimately reinstated and rewarded here below. Hamlet's despair is more absolute and hopeless than Job's; it makes his mind wander, tempts him even to suicide, completely shatters his will, and, reduced to this condition, he forgets his ideas of vengeance. He bewails the loss of justice rather than of his father. He completely abandons himself to a pessimism darker than Schopenhauer's, for he does not resign himself to evil, as to a natural and necessary law. Crime so appals and horrifies him, that he would fain take refuge from it in death, if he only felt sure that it would be the "end of this long calamity called life," utter destruction and oblivion. This, I think, constitutes the profound morality of Shakespeare's drama. What can be more strengthening and edifying than to oppose and cry down injustice? What more demoralizing than tacitly to accept it? When certain laws which are only suitable to natural science are borrowed from biology and applied to social relations, men's moral senses must inevitably become deadened, and the thirst for perfection be destroyed. Generations educated in this school would never effect such revolutions as those of the sixteenth century, or of 1789. They would be perfectly ready to submit to every tyranny, considering it as a decree of Nature!