

RECREATIONS OF A PRODUCTIVE SCHOLAR

EDITORIAL BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

ANYTHING that Professor Lounsbury writes is certain to be interesting. Any collection by him of the writings of others is also certain to be interesting. Probably when Mr. Lounsbury is doing what he himself is willing to accept as work, it is both so profound and so erudite that we laymen can do little but admire it from a distance. Fortunately, however, he is also willing to do what he regards as play, such as a *Life of Fenimore Cooper*, or a study of English adapted to the needs of those who are not scholars; and all of his writing of this lighter kind adds markedly to the sum of enjoyment of laymen who are fond of reading.

The two volumes before me illustrate the good that can be done by people of cultivation who at our different universities provide the means needed to foster productive scholarship—for, unfortunately, productive scholarship in this country is apt to be unremunerative. The slender volume on the early literary career of Robert Browning¹ is based on four lectures delivered at the University of Virginia under the terms of the Barbour-Page Foundation, a foundation due to the wisdom and generosity of Mrs. Thomas Nelson Page. The "*Yale Book of American Verse*"² is published by the Yale University Press under the auspices of the Elizabethan Club of Yale University, a club founded by Mr. Alexander Cochran. It is the kind of club the possession of which every real university in the country must envy Yale.

¹The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning. By Thomas R. Lounsbury. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.
²Yale Book of American Verse. Collected by Thomas R. Lounsbury. Yale University Press, New Haven.

This study of Browning particularly appeals to any man who, although devoted to Browning, yet does not care for the pieces that some of the Browning clubs especially delight in. Browning's great poems, those which will last as long as English literature lasts, are given their full meed of praise by Professor Lounsbury. The other poems, those which especially excite the interest of the average Browning Society, are treated very amusingly, and on the whole very justly. Professor Lounsbury insists that these "poems" will not permanently last, because they are essentially formless, and therefore not poetry at all, and indeed not literature. He holds that the attraction such poems exercise on certain people is the attraction of the unintelligible. Mr. Lounsbury's writings are always full of delicious touches, and he is sometimes at his best in this little volume, as, for instance, where he says, "In fact, commentaries on Browning generally bear a close resemblance to fog-horns. They proclaim the existence of fog, but they do not disperse it." One of his main contentions is that fundamentally the interest in those poems of Browning which are both very long and very obscure does not differ in kind from that displayed in guessing the answers to riddles, or, to use a more dignified comparison, from that employed in the solution of difficult mathematical problems.

I think, however, that for the admiration of these rather obscure philosophical poems of Browning there is a reason upon which Mr. Lounsbury has not touched. He says truly that the men who admire Browning are very apt to be men not especially drawn to

writers in whom lofty speculations have found their fitting counterpart in clearness and beauty of expression; and he instances Wordsworth and Tennyson as poets to be enjoyed only by men and women who have a certain degree of fondness for literature as literature. Now, I think it is true of Browning (as it is true of Walt Whitman) that many of the people who labor longest and hardest to master his meaning are entirely mistaken in thinking that they enjoy him as a poet. But I do not think that Mr. Lounsbury's explanation that they prize him only as a puzzle fully accounts for the enjoyment of many of these men, or the profit they derive from their study. The fact is that Browning does represent very deep thought, very real philosophy—mixed, of course, with much thought that is not deep at all but only obscure, and much would-be philosophy that has no meaning whatsoever. In an instance that came to my own knowledge, a class of college boys in a course of literature, after carefully studying Browning for a couple of months, and after then taking up Tennyson, unanimously abandoned Tennyson and insisted on returning to the study of Browning. These hard-working, intelligent boys were not all of them merely interested in puzzles. They were not all of them blind to poetry as such. They did care to a certain extent for form, but primarily they were interested in the great problems of life, they were interested in great and noble thoughts. Doubtless many of them rather enjoyed having to dig out the thought from involved language. But probably a greater number felt a larger enjoyment in finding lofty thought expressed in language which was even more lofty than obscure.

It is true that as a poet Browning is formless. But the poets who are great philosophers are few in number, and great philosophers who have any gift of expression whatever or any sense of form, or whose writings so much as approach the outer hem of literature, are even fewer in number. Browning the philosopher is not more deep than many other philosophers, and in form and expression he is inferior to many poets. But he is a philosopher, and he has form and expression. The philosophy he writes is literature, even though hardly in the highest sense poetic literature. Therefore he appeals to men who are primarily interested in his writings as philosophy, but who do derive a certain pleasure from form or expression;

who, without being conscious of it, do ^{UNWITTINGLY} have the writings they read resemble literature. These men are given by Browning something that no other poet and no other philosopher can give them; and I do not think that these men receive full justice at Mr. Lounsbury's hands. Moreover, as compared to Tennyson or Longfellow, or any other of the more conventional poets—and I am extremely fond of these conventional poets—there is far more in Browning, even in Browning's simpler and more understandable and formal poems, that gives expression to certain deep and complex emotions. There are many poets whom we habitually read far more often than Browning, and who minister better to our more primitive needs and emotions. There are very few whose lines come so naturally to us in certain great crises of the soul which are also crises of the intellect.

"The Yale Book of American Verse" is an excellent anthology, and the preface is one of the best things about it. In this preface Mr. Lounsbury quite unconsciously shows why he appeals to so many men to whom a college professor who is nothing more than a college professor does not readily appeal. He mentions that on the march to Gettysburg he picked up a torn piece of newspaper containing certain verses which have always remained in his mind, and which he includes in this collection of verse. This is the only hint in Professor Lounsbury's writings that he fought in the Civil War. A Professor of English Literature in a great university who in his youth fought at Gettysburg must necessarily have something in him that speaks not only to scholars but to men.

This anthology includes hymns as well as secular poems. The collection is good in itself, as I have already said, and, moreover, to all real lovers of anthologies it will also seem good because each of them will take much satisfaction in wondering why certain of his or her favorite poems have been left out, and why certain other poems have been put in. I suppose every man who cares for poetry at all at times wishes that he could compile an anthology for his own purposes. I certainly so feel. I would like to compile two anthologies, one of hymns and one of those poems which our ancestors designated quite ruthlessly as "profane," in opposition to sacred. I should not expect any one else to read either of my collections. I should not wish the edition to consist of more than

one copy. But I would like, purely for my own use, to own that copy! In the anthology of hymns, for instance, besides all the great hymns, from Bernard of Morlais to Cowper and Wesley and Bishop Heber, I would like to put in some hymns as to which I know nothing except that I like them. Every Christmas Eve in our own church at Oyster Bay, for instance, the children sing a hymn beginning "It's Christmas Eve on the River, it's Christmas Eve on the Bay." Of course the hymn has come to us from somewhere else, but I do not know from where; and the average native of our village firmly believes that it is indigenous to our own soil—which it cannot be, unless it deals in hyperbole, for the nearest approach to a river in our neighborhood is the village pond.

As for the "profane" anthology, I think I should like to make one consisting of several

volumes. Even Mr. Lounsbury's volume of American verse, though it contains some specimens of verse I would not have included, omits others which I certainly should put in. And then, think of the many, many volumes that would be needed to include the English poems, and the French poems, and the German poems from the Bard of the Dimbovitza, and all the other poems which no human being could make up his mind to see any anthology leave out! I fear that a perfect anthology of the kind that fills my dreams would be as large as the various rather dismal series of volumes which contain, as we are told, "the world's best literature"—and doubtless would be as unsatisfactory.

Meanwhile, as all this represents an unattainable dream, we have reason to be glad that Mr. Lounsbury's particular anthology has been published.