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BOOK NOTICE.

DELPHIC DAYS. By D. J. SNIDER. St. Louis, Mo.: 1880.

The canons of criticism require constant extension to keep pace with the constant new forms of the poetic imagination. We ought not to harden them, but struggle to keep them flexible and almost fluid, as it were like water, which at once buoys and surrounds the noble vessel launched upon it. An open, well-endowed, and sympathetic mind is the best criterion, — the best critic of new attempts. There is a certain soul in us, to which poetry, of whatever kind or form, must make its appeal. This has been formulated into many definitions — some as poetical as the best verse — and into *ars poetica* and abstract dogmas. But more than all these, perhaps, we are educated and fitted to read and pronounce upon new poetry by as much old poetry, that has steadfastly held the ear of the world, as we happen to have read. There is not likely to be any verse so strangely new that we do not somewhere hear the echo of the most ancient muse. The lineage of the poets has never lapsed, though often disappearing. Their race is united by ties tender and heroic; and many a merest trifling keepsake as well. They pass on the pæan to beauty, nature, the gods, valor, and virtue; and with it they transmit the flute, the harp, the identical note, the choice phrase, the honeyed word.

All these help us for whom they sing to know the authentic song, and also to detect what new string has been added to the modern lyre. The smooth magazine versicles cannot deceive us. We know their excuse for being, and why they are printed. They have not the poor merit of novelties or reproductions. We do not apply any tests to them; we bespeak them kindly, because written by our friends.

In the heart of the lover of poetry, there is always the prophecy of a new poet. As he knows the elder bards, he is better able to recognize the younger; and he is ever on the alert for a freshly-inspired word. He may make mistakes, but they are those of magnanimity. For there is something to him more engaging, even in the defeated poetical enterprise, than in all other success.

We cannot in the space allowed us give any adequate account of *Delphic Days*, or the grounds of our admiration of the poem as a whole. Having little acquaintance with the author's previous work, and no prejudice, we have read *Delphic Days* with a single mind and freedom to permit it to make its own impression, and have found a new sense of intellectual pleasure. Taking ourselves at our present state of culture, we must ask and answer the question, does this poem give us delight? Does it move us into its own world? Does it, itself, move freely, consciously, and triumphantly in an ideal world of its own creation? We must answer affirmatively to these tests, reserving only a few minor, and, mostly, verbal restrictions.

The demand unconsciously insisted upon to-day, that a man shall be a specialist, and having done one kind of work, shall not venture into new fields, has, on its own merits no weight with us; and, in as far as it pertains to this author, we clearly perceive how happily and well his studies in criticism, and in the literatures of Greece and Rome, may have qualified him, and led up to the power of construction, conception, and even inspiration of this poem. Cahokia need not be astonished because its schoolmaster turns out to be a poet. Already in one of its pedagogues, Europe discovered for it a philosopher. Some wild destiny often intervenes to give a man a name and place for work, *through which only* he is endeavoring to pierce his way, which he uses by necessity as a foundation, but which a blind public calls his topmost stone. We suppose many citizens of Amsterdam died believing Spinoza a maker of spectacle glasses.

We understand the author of Delphic Days spent much time among the scenes he describes, having first equipped himself with the modern Greek tongue. In ancient Greece he was already at home. He has combined and reproduced the two with distinctness and beauty. And he has blended with them the modern, romantic, subjective spirit, so that artistically nothing is absent which belongs to the manner and the matter required for such attempts. There is scarcely in Goethe or Landor a more natural affiliation with the antique than in Delphic Days. Study will go far toward this aptitude—this assumption of remote and ancient life; but also some genuine relationship and sympathy must give the color, the tone, the deep internal oneness, which alone can move the reader into the same realm. As we are so moved in reading Delphic Days, we hesitate not in believing the author to have these accomplishments, and these gifts. All are centered in the artistic ability to reproduce and endow with appropriate form, that image of Greece, ancient and modern, which the susceptible mind bodies forth in many a mood, in the presence of the actual object. The form is elegiac verse, which, in a measure, helps the illusion wrought by the subject itself—the hexameter, whose long flow is deliciously ended in music and sense by the following pentameter line: We could read them forever for nothing but their rhythmical cadence!

We have long believed hexameter to be, for English poetry, the verse of the future. Grand as blank verse is in its higher flight, the moment it descends at all, it becomes little else than essentially prosaic. Hexameter can continue to produce poetical effect through the whole scale. And we believe in it as one means of improving our language, and giving to it more versatility and amplitude for poetical themes. Another argument we must not omit in its favor—every fool can't write it. It is finely varied by the pentameter, as in elegiac, and we shall invent or adopt other variations when it is more freely used.

This poem, as far as we remember, is the largest attempt in our literature in elegiac meter. It is evidently, in its structure, the result of long studies, and perfect familiarity with Latin and German models. It cannot be written or read by counting of syllables, or application of classical, or any strict rules of quantity: *it must be read by accent*; then its music will be apparent. Then it will be seen to be not precisely an imitation of classic elegiac, but a rendering of the general spirit and rhythmical effect of that form of verse. It is peculiarly adapted to subjects where the continuity required is not dramatic nor historical, but an assemblage of incidents, thoughts, and emotions, only loosely bound in some general conception.

What, then, is the manner and the meaning which we must next look for, after

becoming familiar with the measure, once ridding ourselves of all mental resistance toward the author and the book? Here we must leave the reader to answer for himself, just where, possibly, he expects us to tell what we find. We have sufficiently intimated, in a general manner, our own impressions. It seemed more necessary to us to clear the way to a right appreciation, to remove some accidental obstructions, than to employ description and praise; approval will then have some force and sweetness.

It would be a wrong to poetry of this order to attempt to redact it into its literary elements and summarize its contents. It contains too delicate a flower to be so handled.

Its three books, "Delphi," "The Olives," and "Elpinike," are each one divided into numbers of twenty or thirty lines. (We say nothing of the titles of subdivisions because they seem to us to mar, with an unmeaning diminutive, the general form.)

Each numbered division embodies, completes in itself, some little history, outward or interior, some description or scenery, some sentiment or reflection, contrast or likeness of the ancient and modern ages, of the Mississippi and Castalia; and the thread which binds them is the depth, adequacy, and integrity of the poet's mood.

He is drawn to Greece by all that captivates the imagination. At the same time he remains the modern, with the longing soul of the northern man. Greece herself satisfies him momentarily — he longs to transplant her by the banks of his own restless river; but he lays at her feet the reward of his transient happiness, with the prayer that her beauty may at length lead him into the calm of a life devoted to philosophy and poetry.

"Nor can I censure this heart for being the captive of beauty;
Let it sing on in its bonds till it shall sing itself free."

JOHN ALBEE.