

that in consequence of anything that is now passing in the Turkish Empire a general European war should ensue. That seems to me one of those hypotheses which are so remote, that it is scarcely worth while to speculate upon them. I do not see the quarter from which the war is to come."

France did not want war (he went on to say), nor Italy, nor Germany. "There remain only ourselves, and Austria, and Russia." England was out of the question. Austria was paralysed by her "dual system" and "great diversity of races;" and therefore, said Lord Derby, "you may be quite sure that, if it is only in the interest of her own security. . . . the Austrian Government will not desire to break the peace." But Russia?—"If any one thing is certain in this world, it is certain that the Emperor of Russia, upon whose personal will and disposition more turns than upon that of any other man, is a sincere lover of peace. There are other reasons, such as the condition of Russian finance, the difficulties—perhaps greater than we are aware of here—of Russian administration, the enormous cost of the late Asiatic conquests, and various other causes which I need not go into, which make an aggressive policy one at the present time utterly unsuited to the policy of the Russian Empire."

Yet at the very time that Lord Derby was uttering those pacific assurances he was, according to Mr. Wemyss Reid, "convinced that the three Empires" (the Czar being the ringleader of the triumvirate) "really wanted war," and consequently, "that war must come." Mr. Reid denounces with just severity the scandalous personal attacks of which Lord Derby was for some time the target. But I doubt whether any of the attacks made on Lord Derby by his avowed assailants conveyed so damaging an imputation as that which is implied, though unwittingly, in the defence volunteered on his behalf by his professed admirer.—I am, Sir, &c., MALCOLM MACCOLL.

MR. BROWNING'S DRAMATIC IDYLS.

[TO THE EDITOR OF THE "SPECTATOR."]

SIR,—Will you allow a reader who warmly sympathises with your general view of Mr. Browning's last book to record a protest against a disparaging mention of what will surely appear to many its finest poem? "The picture of Martin Relph's remorse for his cowardice," you say, "or other motive only half understood by himself, is too vague and unfinished to be interesting." To my mind, it is just this vagueness, or at least this oscillation of memory between two views of the past, which gives the picture its force and truth. Nothing, I should say, could more vividly express remorse than the hunger with which, while another view of his conduct is possible, Martin Relph clutches at the humiliation of the coward. He has been one of a crowd of villagers called together to witness the execution of a farmer's daughter for having, it is supposed, given treasonable information to some Jacobites in the last century; a crowd roughly commanded to keep silence on pain of death by the commander of the firing party, ready, in his panic fear, to discover and suppress an opening riot in any sudden cry. That under such circumstances Martin Relph does keep silence when he sees the girl's lover flying breathless towards the place of execution with the reprieve, and lets the bullet which strikes her kill both, is, he longs to think, as he reviews that moment through the vista of long years, the result of a coward's tremor, lasting just the moment during which action was possible. But the revealing power—possibly the exaggerating influence—of memory discovers to him a lack not only of courage, but of desire, to restore the woman he loved to the embrace of another; he wished, perhaps (for in remembering that moment of terror and confusion, he cannot distinguish incapacity from will), rather to see her dead, than restored to life by one to whom he was in desire, though till that moment in dim and half-conscious desire, a rival.

The sketch which I have endeavoured to describe seems to me open to criticism. For my part, I should have preferred a different costume for the principal figure; the emotions depicted in his person, it seems to me, belong to that class from which those who have to earn their bread are, for good and for evil, to a considerable extent protected. But I am surprised that any one should consider the dramatic statement of a moral problem which must, I should think, touch a powerful chord in the heart of many average human beings, as lacking in interest. The main function of dramatic poetry is surely the representation of ordinary emotions in extraordinary circumstances. To be shown what we have all felt, or could have all felt, as it is

emphasised and explained by a sudden crisis which thrusts emotion into the world of action, is a chief portion of the moral teaching which such poetry has to bestow. It is not exceptional character which is the material of tragedy. It is ordinary character, in exceptional circumstance. The most common-place men and women have known moments of possible heroism or possible crime. It is not only "mute, inglorious Miltons" whose mortal remains rest in unvisited graves; innocent Macbeths, highly respectable Othellos, are laid by their side; and lives which present to the world an aspect of unblemished dullness have had their own memories—for they may easily be lost—of mighty but transitory impulse, flashing harmlessly on unflammable surroundings, and finding no outlet. Most rarely does it happen that such memories include more than the hidden history of a human spirit. But the dramatic sketch I speak of commemorates one of those rare moments when the world of feeling opens into the world of events, and a man's own desires are revealed to him by his own actions. The jealousy thus made manifest is indeed of the commonest type, for while it is as rare that this passion should be predominant as that it should be wholly absent, that it should mingle in subtle disguise with the most dissimilar motives—that under the Ithuriel's spear of recollection the seeming cowardice, or indolence, or irresolution which has palsied tongue or hand at the moment of action, should start up as a deadlier thing—this, I should think, must be a part of the experience of almost all but the best or worst of mankind. And so far as Mr. Browning's description of this state of mind leaves the reader in doubt as to the true proportion of infirmity to crime, so far, I should say, it is a truer picture of a mind under the dominion of remorse. I believe that the first impression of any one who comes in contact with remorse is almost always a sense of disproportion between cause and effect. We may be free from any partiality for the penitent,—we may think that, taking his life as a whole, he even underrated what was due of regret and compunction, still we should find, I believe generally, that in his bitterest self-reproach there is something that looks to us irrational, overstrained, perhaps almost insane. No human judgment can disentangle misfortune from guilt. Confusion abides where evil has been, and the guilty impulse must be contemplated through a mist that blurs its outline and expands its proportions. This is to me the lesson of this fine poem,—one of the finest dramatic fragments, I think, which we owe to one who has given us so many. I hope you will add this attempt to set it forth to your own otherwise sympathetic estimate.—I am, Sir, &c.,

J. W.

[We should have said that Mr. Browning's sketch leaves the reader not only in doubt as to the *proportion*, in this case, of infirmity to crime, but as to the very existence of a criminal impulse in anything but the morbid imagination of a brooding mind. And if our correspondent's conception of the motive of the sketch is the right one,—which in all probability it is,—surely this is a very grave defect.—Ed. *Spectator*.]

THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND.—RETURNS OF COMMUNICANTS.

[TO THE EDITOR OF THE "SPECTATOR."]

SIR,—I observe in your interesting and otherwise fair article on "The Scottish Churches and their Assemblies," the following sentence, on the subject of the recent return of communicants in the Church of Scotland,—"The return, it is clear, is stuffed full of exaggerations." It was only to be expected that the more extreme and violent Dissenters would make such a charge, when it was found that the return proved so inconsistent with the statements which they have been so long making with regard to the strength of the Established Church; but I regret that a paper so fair in its spirit and so broad in its sympathies as the *Spectator*, should have lent the sanction of its name and great influence to such a statement. Here and there, there may possibly be a slight, unintentional exaggeration, but when it is remembered that these returns were made by the parish ministers of Scotland, men whose truth and honour are surely above suspicion, on the authority of the official roll of communicants which the "Kirk Session" of each parish is required to keep, and carefully to revise and correct annually, I think they may be held as giving, on the whole, a correct statement of the proportion of the population that is in connection with the National Church. I am certain that most fair-minded and moderate Dissenters accept them as such. There is a letter