A Thesis.

Two of our later American poets.

Edward Rowlands Sill.

Edith M. Thomas.

Within recent years, there have appeared in newspapers, magazines, and books, various statements to the effect that all poetry, and especially American poetry, is rapidly deteriorating.

As our older galaxy of poets is passing away with the process of time, our eyes anxiously scan the horizon for a new group, and some of us express disappointment that we do not now see such brilliant lights. Emerson and Longfellow are no longer of this life; Lowell, Whittier, and Holmes have done their best work, and these five have as yet found no equals in the poetic field.

It is not for me to discuss the reason for this lack of poetic fire. Enough has already been said upon the subject and I could only repeat. Suffice it to say, however, that when a great poet does appear, he will have as hard work to secure recognition as any of his legitimate predecessors have had in the past.

But in our search for the constellations, we must not forget the lesser lights. It was the poetic idea of the great apostle, when he said, "One star differeth from another star in glory". Even though many of our songsters are but slightly known, they surely have a right to some praise. Their general character
does much to influence the people, perhaps as much as those poets who are more favored with eulogy.

Poetry has begun to be of a more finished manner in these years, and we rightfully demand it to be so. This former wilderness has already with wonderful confidence put on all the airs of a grown up civilization. America yields in no particular to Europe in any thing that accompanies an advanced stage of physical and mental refinement. And poetry most conform to the fashion, as every other thing must do. No violation of metre or rhyme is endured, no youthful outburst of doubtful value can find a place in the great volume of daily poetry. No crudity in any way gets our approval when we can have all we need of finished work.

Of the many modest subjects in the realm of poesy, I have chosen two to analyze, not because they promise ever to be called great, nor because they are different from the crowd of their fellows. I have chosen them for the sole reason that they seem to me to fairly represent the prevailing feeling and style among the poetical fraternity today.

The first subject for examination, Edward Rowland Sill, was a New England man, educated at Yale and Harvard. He then went to California to engage in business, afterward returning to New York, where he engaged in literary work, at the same time holding an editorial position on the New York Evening Mail. Afterward, his
peculiar genius set him to teaching, for which reason he went to Ohio and later to California, for which place his earlier residence had given him a strong liking.

Again returning to the east, he devoted his time mainly to literary work, writing for the most part anonymously. He died in the early part of 1887, at the age of 45.

His poems, which were, for the most part, originally printed in the Atlantic Monthly, have never been collected into a volume, partly because of his becoming modesty and because they were published under so many pseudonyms that they could not all be found. Some of his best and later writings have been published this year by Mess. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

All of the poems in the collection are short, as he never attempted any extended work. No ballads or sonnets grace his work, and no narrative poems appear in the volume. Nearly all of those presented bear an imprint of sobriety of mind. I quote some of the titles at random, "Morning", "Home", "Peace", "Reverie", "The Invisible", "Tranquillity", "Faith", "Life", "Wiegenlied", "The Links of Chance", "Quem Metui Moritura".

The brooding over the unknowable which marks many poets, is often revealed in Sill's work, yet he takes a wholesome view of his ignorance. He lives with love for life, and hope for existance
after death. What an inspiration in these few lines,—

"Forenoon and afternoon and night,—Forenoon and afternoon and night,—Forenoon and—what! The empty song repeats itself. No more? Yea, that is life: make this forenoon sublime. This afternoon a psalm, this night a prayer, and time is conquered, and thy crown is won".

We think of Longfellow and his grand Psalm of Life when we hear this short poem of Sill. How strange that poetry is filled with these solemn strains, yet how inevitable!

The seer-mind of the poet, filled with a sense of the value of life, must pour forth injunctions to groveling humanity, and raise them to an appreciation of their ephemeral existence.

Thus we find, in nearly every one of Sill's poems, such fervent utterances. I quote some of them,—

"Life stands, with a twilight world around;
Faith turned serenely to the steadfast sky
Still answering the heart that sweeps the ground
Sobbing in fear and tossing restlessly
Hush, hush! The dawn breaks o'er the Eastern sea,
'Tis but thine own dim shadow troubling thee".

Again he sings,—

"Life is game the soul can play
With fewer pieces than men say".
"I would be glad to be and do,
And glad of all good men that live,
For they are woof of nature too".

"I would not die; I long
To live to see my days
But once again and bloom".

"The world-heart yearns, but we stand dull and dazed".

Some of his touches are those of a master. His love for out-door life gives him power to catch a tingling epithet to apply "This little hour of life, this lean today", sounds almost Shakespearean.

"So thou art there before me suddenly,
With shade as of a summer cloud did pass
And spray of fountains whispering to the grass", he says in "The Venus of Milo, a praise of pure love over earthly desire, typified in the Venus De Medici and the Venus of Milo.

Here is a rare description,

"Far up the hill-farm, where the breeze
dips its wing in the billowy grain,
Waves go chasing from the plain
On softly undulating seas,
or yonder where the poppies burn,
Race up the slope in harmless flame".

He is no pessimist, as may be seen from the quotations I have given.
The world is good enough for him, he says, and everywhere he sings of improvement, of doing good, and of hope. Of such teachers we can not have enough.

Edith M. Thomas, one of the most promising of the younger poets, has been before the public only a few years, the most of her first work being found in the Atlantic Monthly, though now her writings are in all the standard magazines. Her rise to an established place was rapid, but it was by no sudden leap that she gained her reputation. None of her poems are of any considerable length, most of them being on light subjects. They have been published in two small attractive volumes, by Houghton, Mifflin and Company, to whom she and many other poets owe their entrance into the literary world. Her style is fresh and varied, with some touches of her own.

I notice much use of obsolete and rare words which gives a quaint air to the poetry. "Frere", "pleached", "rack", (usage in Hamlet), "ken", "Ween", "trow", and dozens of other words mostly found in the classical poets, show her wide acquaintance with the best verses. Her verse is occasionally almost startling in its novelty. For instance,—

"I saw a city builded in the fire,

Entire;

Walled with live ember, that none violates

Its gates".
Another form of verse is below,

"O Day! what triumph and what song
To thee belong?
What voice along the sentient wire,
Like a wild running fire,
Bears the all-hail and heartning of the land
To him who takes the new command".

Here is a jolly rollicking metre,

"'Tis a night of the witches,
Of goblins and witches!
See how they hover,
Starting out of their niches
Among the black trees!
The moon is ill at ease,
Lest the mob should have spied her,
And hastens to cover
Her face in a cloud,
Or diaphanous shroud
Too sleazy to hide her!"

The reading of this poem, "Diablerie", makes you feel the dim uneasiness of a half-clouded night, a sighing wind, rustling leaves, and the gibbous moon behind you. Only one short example of blank verse could I find in the two volumes, and that was in the speeches
of Janus in "The New Years Mask". The common measure holds in the most of her work, with the frequent changes I have noticed. Rhyme and rhythm are almost perfect and for this she is to be admired. With Austin Dobson, I say, "I fling my cap for polish and for Pope".

The excuse made by admirers of those poets whose verses are marred by faults of composition that we must overlook these and rather see the moral ideas set forth, is too flimsy. The ability of poetry to please is largely lost with poor mechanical execution. The "pressure of ideas" said to prevent careful attention to detail ought to be absent in the revision that all poetry should have.

Sonnets are a large part of her published poems, and with no exception, they are of an excellent order. Some are specially noteworthy, and make a fine addition to this scanty store of poetical composition. She has no fixed rule for rhyming the last six lines, using two or three rhymes in about the same proportion.

In description she does not often excell though at times her essays in this line are not contemptible. She has many striking epithets, nearly every stanza having some new figurative beauty. In her lyrics, she sings of present beauties, not to the exclusion of mythological fancies. All through, her execution shows her to be a poet of culture, read in the history and songs of the past, and imbued with much of their classic spirit, yet we may not characterize her as one clinging to the traditions of the classic period,
for her topics and illustrations are timely.

I do not claim for her a rank among the great poets, for although her poems are exquisite in form and full of beauties, she has no long poem to draw the public attention, and her short poems do not appeal to the general taste because of their meditative character.

With lovers of poetical beauty by itself, she will hold a high place, and when the sonnet has gained the recognition due to its poetical value, her name will stand still higher, for in this line of composition she has no superior in this country and few can equal her in both quantity and quality of work.

In this necessarily short sketch of these two poets, I think I have found enough to justify some sort of an opinion on the general tenor of thought and feeling in recent poetry.

We have seen nothing gloomy in the outbursts of these two hearts. Both take a rosy view of life and seem to think that human goodness has strength to overcome human badness. They say that life is a cheerful pilgrimage though often the traveler is beset by storms and thieves.

Poetry is our glimpse into a people's character. If the poetry be corrupt, the people are much more so, if elevated, the people, though below, are following the upward leadership of the poet. Now it seems to me that our glimpse afforded by two repre-
sentative singers is enough to make us hopeful for the future of our commonwealth. They see light; why should we fear clouds? They sing blithely, and if we can not do so, let us at least not croak.

In style of work, they seem to signify a closer adherence to the canons of good taste and correctness of composition. We have had enough botch-work of genius, and are ready for the reign of order.

Criticism is a deceptive glass to use, even for one acquainted with its peculiarities. We are too apt to take something for seen that is not in sight. We often get the wrong end and underrate instead of seeing in true proportion. How indeed, can we fully appreciate and truly understand poetry when we probably do not feel or think as the poet. Probably I have been thus misled in my attempts at criticism, yet if we are to judge of poetry by the secret pleasure in reading it, the pleasure that can not be explained, that comes partly from the easy movement of syllables, the vivid pictures and catching phrases, partly from the harmony of thought and expression, and in great part from a secret spring of sympathy,—if we are to judge thus, I should be justified, from personal experience and enjoyment, in giving these two poets still higher praise than I have seen fit to give them. And is any standard more reliable than the one I have just indicated?

Grant Fredericks '78