

**ESSAYS IN MODERNITY;
CRITICISMS
AND DIALOGUES**

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Essays in modernity; criticisms and dialogues by Francis Adams

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FRANCIS ADAMS

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CRITICISMS AND
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FRANCIS ADAMS



"Im ganzen, guten, schön."—GOETHE,

LONDON AND NEW YORK

JOHN LANE

THE BODLEY HEAD

1899

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TENNYSON

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ESSAYS IN MODERNITY

TENNYSON

THIS attempt to treat a contemporary writer with absolute critical candour will not, it is hoped, be misunderstood. The case is a special one. To the younger generation of us, the position of Tennyson in the realm of English poetry seemed from the first to differ little, if at all, so far as its actuality went, from that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, of Byron and Shelley and Keats. He presented himself to our youthful imagination as an accomplished fact. The only difference lay in a comparative ignorance of his private life, an ignorance which was by no means ambiguous enough to prove a stumbling-block. It is not too much to say that it has cost many of us far more trouble to arrive at anything like an impartial judgment of Shelley than of Tennyson. Shelley was as much a superstition to us as Byron was to our fathers. They both have the passionately personal element in them, and

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nothing obscures the calm and clear view like that. In the other case this element scarcely existed. There is only one standard by which we can attempt to judge any serious writer, and that is by the highest and best which we know of. The judgment we may hold of Lord Tennyson now may be hopelessly irreconcilable with that which we held once, if judgment it could be called, and not the blind acceptance of the enthusiasm of the generation that immediately preceded us. But so is our judgment of Wordsworth and Coleridge, of Byron and Shelley and Keats. Them also we accepted blindly as such or such or such, and it was not until we had turned back upon those guides and companions of our spiritual pilgrimage, after their power of leadership had been tested by the agony of the first hard stages, that we realised how they were to appear to us for the large remainder of the way. That same realisation came at that same period with regard also to others beside the older ones. The names of these others are the foremost names of our time, and we instinctively recognise the fact that all of them, those who went before and those who followed after, form but one company. They do. They form the company of the Age of Transition. They close the epoch. They pass the lamp of life to the New Race. They pause on the threshold of the New

World. Fifty years hence this will be plain to all. To-day it is hidden from many, and from none more perhaps than from the victorious children of Yesterday, to whom we owe all the hope and the trust of To-morrow.

Why, however, should we any longer hesitate to attempt the treatment of the later brood with the same fearless curiosity as the earlier? The parentage is the same: the habitat the same. Both have fought the good fight and won, each in their special manner. The hour has come in which the keen desire to know and express the truth about them all must be satisfied. They interest, they concern us too deeply for us to palter any longer with half views of them. We shall best show our admiration and reverence for what they have done by resolutely striving to see them—not as our fathers saw them—not as they saw or see themselves—but as they really were and are.

I

We too often speak of the poetical movement of the opening of the century as if we did not realise that it consisted of two phases remarkably distinct from one another. The principal writers of the first of these phases survived their successors, and thus helped to confuse the significance of the movement