

of Pitt's ever been quoted as a maxim? Does one passage of Fox appear in even our common books of elocutionary extracts? Are Sheridan's flights remembered except for their ambitious and adventurous badness? Unless one or two showy climaxes of Grattan and Curran, what else of them is extant? How different with Burke. His works are to this hour burning with genius, and swarming with wisdom. You cannot open a page without finding either a profound truth expressed in the shortest and sharpest form, looking up at you like an eye; or a brilliant image flashing across with the speed and splendour of a meteor; or a description, now grotesque, and now gorgeous; or a literary allusion, cooling and sweetening the fervour of the political discussion; or a quotation from the poets, so pointed and pat, that it assumes the rank of an original beauty. Burke's writing is almost unrivalled for its combination and dexterous interchange of excellences. It is by turns statistics, metaphysics, painting, poetry, eloquence, wit, and wisdom. It is so cool and so warm, so mechanical and so impulsive, so measured and so impetuous, so clear and so profound, so simple and so rich. Its sentences are now the shortest, and now the longest; now bare as Butler, and now figured as Jeremy Taylor; now conversational, and now ornate, intense, and elaborate in the highest degree. He closes many of his paragraphs in a rushing thunder and fiery flood of eloquence, and opens the next as calmly as if he had ceased to be the same being. Indeed, he is the least monotonous and manneristic of modern writers, and in this, as in so many other respects, excels such authors as Macaulay and Chalmers, who are sometimes absurdly compared to him. He has, in fact, as we hinted above, three, if not four or five, distinct styles, and possesses equal mastery over all. He exhibits specimens of the law-paper style, in his articles of charge against Warren Hastings; of the calm, sober, uncoloured argument, in his *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*; of the ingenious, high-finished, but temperate philosophical essay, in his "Sublime and Beautiful;" of the flushed and fiery diatribe, here storming into fierce scorn and invective, and there soaring into poetical eloquence, in his "Letter to a Noble Lord," and in his "Regicide Peace;" and of a style combining all these qualities, and which he uses in his Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts, and in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*. Thus you may read a hundred pages of him at once, without finding any power but pure intellect at work, and at other times every sentence is starred with an image, even as



every moment of some men's sleep is spiritualised by a dream; and, in many of them, figures cluster and crowd upon each other. It is remarkable that his imagination becomes apparently more powerful as he draws near the end of his journey. The reason of this probably was: he became more thoroughly in earnest towards the close. Till the trial of Warren Hastings, or even on to the outbreak of the French Revolution, he was a volcano speaking and snorting out fire at intervals—an Etna at ease; but from these dates he began to pour out incessant torrents of molten lava upon the wondering nations. Figures are a luxury to cool thinkers; they are a necessity to prophets. The Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel have no choice. Their thought *must* come forth with the fiery edge of metaphor around it.

Let us look, in the course of the remarks that follow, to the following points—to Burke's powers, to his possible achievements, to his actual works, to his oratory, to his conversation, to his private character, to his critics, and to the question, what has been the result of his influence as a writer and a thinker?

1. We would seek to analyse shortly his powers. These were distinguished at once by their variety, comprehensiveness, depth, harmony, and brilliance. He was endowed in the very "prodigality of heaven" with genius of a creative order, with boundless fertility of fancy, with piercing acuteness and comprehension of intellect, with a tendency leading him irresistibly down into the depths of every subject, and with an eloquence at once massive, profuse, fiery, and flexible. To these powers he united, what are not often found in their company, slow plodding perseverance, indomitable industry, and a cautious, balancing disposition. We may apply to him the words of Scripture, "He could *mount* up with wings as an eagle, he could *run* and not be weary, he could *walk* and not be faint." Air, earth, and the things under the earth, were equally familiar to him; and you are amazed to see how easily he can fold up the mighty wings which had swept the ether, and "knit" the mountain to the sky, and turn to mole-like minings in the depths of the miry clay, which he found it necessary also to explore. These vast and various powers he had fed with the most extensive, most minute, most accurate, most artistically managed reading, with elaborate study, with the closest yet kindest observation of human nature, and with free and copious intercourse with all classes of men. And to inspire and inflame their action, there were a profound sense of public duty, ardent



benevolence, the passions of a hot but generous heart, and a strong-felt, although uncanting and unostentatious piety.

2. His possible achievements. To what was a man like this, who could at once soar and delve, overtop the mountain, skim the surface, and explore the mine, not competent? He was, shall we say? a mental camelopard—patient as the camel, and as the leopard swift and richly spotted. We have only in his present works the fragments of his genius. Had he not in some measure,

Born for the universe, narrow'd his mind,  
And to party given up what was meant for mankind,

what works on general subjects had he written! It had been, perhaps, a system of philosophy, merging and kindling into poetry, resembling Brown's "Lectures," but informed by a more masculine genius; or it had been, perhaps, a treatise on the Science of Politics, viewed on a large and liberal scale; or it had been, perhaps, a history of his country, abounding in a truer philosophy and a more vivid narrative than Hume, and in pictures more brilliant than Macaulay's; or it had been, perhaps, a work on the profounder principles of literature or of art; or it had been, perhaps—for this, too, was in his power—some strain of solemn poetry, rising higher than Akenside or Thomson; or else some noble argument or apology for the faith that was in him in the blessed religion of Jesus. Any or all of these tasks we believe to have been thoroughly within the compass of Burke's universal mind, had his lot been otherwise cast, and had his genius not been so fettered by circumstance and subject, that he seems at times a splendid generaliser in chains.

3. These decided views, as to the grand possibilities of this powerful spirit, must not be permitted to blind us to what he has actually done. This, alike in quantity and in quality, challenges our wonder. Two monster octavos of his works are lying before us; and we believe that, besides, there is extant matter from his pen equal to another volume. What strikes you most about the quality of his writing, is the amazing restlessness and richness of his thought. His book is an ant-hill of stirring, swarming, blackening ideas and images. His style often reposes—his mind never. Hall very unjustly accuses him of amplification. There are, indeed, a few passages of superb amplification sprinkled through his writings; but this is rarely his manner, and you never, as in some writers, see a thought small as the body of a fly suspended between the wings of an eagle. He has too much to say, to care in general about



expanding or beating it thin. Were he dallying long with, or seeking to distend, an image, a hundred more would become impatient for their turn. Foster more truly remarks, "Burke's sentences are pointed at the end—instinct with pungent sense to the last syllable; they are like a charioteer's whip, which not only has a long and effective lash, but cracks and inflicts a still smarter sensation at the end. They are like some serpents, whose life is said to be fiercest in the tail." It is a mind full to overflowing, pouring out, now calmly and now in tumult and heat, now deliberately and now in swift torrents, its thoughts, feelings, acquirements, and speculations. This rich restlessness might, by and by, become oppressive, were it not for the masterly ease of manner, and the great variety, as well as quantity, of thinking. He never harps too long on one string. He is perpetually making swift and subtle transitions from the grave to the gay, from the severe to the lively, from facts to figures, from statistics to philosophical speculations, from red-hot invective to caustic irony, from the splendid filth of his abuse to the flaming cataracts of his eloquence and poetry. His manner of writing has been accused of "caprice," but unjustly. Burke was a great speculator on style, and was regulated in most of its movements by the principles of art, as well as impelled by the force of genius. He held, for instance, that every great sentence or paragraph should contain a thought, a sentiment, and an image; and we find this rule attended to in all his more elaborate passages. He was long thought a "flowery and showy" writer, and contrasted, by Parr and others, unfavourably with such writers as MacIntosh and even Paine. Few now will have the hardihood to reiterate such egregious nonsense. His flowers were, indeed, numerous; but they sprang out naturally, and were the unavoidable bloom of deep and noble thought. We call the foam of a little river "froth," that of Niagara, or the ocean, "spray." Burke's imagination was the giant spray of a giant stream, and his fancy resembled the rainbows which often appear suspended in it. Besides all this, he had unlimited command of words and allusions, culled from every science, and art, and page of history; and this has rendered, and will ever render, his writings legible by those who care very little for his political opinions, and have slender interest in the causes he won or lost. His faults were not numerous, although very palpable. He cannot always reason with calm consecutiveness. He sometimes permits, not so much his imagination, as his morbidly active intellect and his



fierce passions, to run him into extravagance. He lays often too much stress upon small causes, although this sprung from what was one of his principal powers—that of generalising from the particular, and, Cuvier-like, seeing entire mammoths in small and single bones. He is occasionally too truculent in his invective, and too personal in his satire. His oracular tone is sometimes dogmatic and offensive; and he frequently commits errors of taste, especially when his descriptions verge upon the humorous; for, Irishman though he was, his wit and humour were not quite equal to his other powers.

We select three from among his productions for short special criticism: his "Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts," his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, and his "Letters on a Regicide Peace." The first is probably the most complete oration in literature. Henry Rogers, indeed, prefers the speeches of Demosthenes, as higher specimens of pure oratory; and so they are, if you take oratory, in a limited sense, as the art of persuasion and immediate effect. But Burke's speech, if not in this sense equal to the "Pro Corona," even as Milton's "Areopagitica" is not in this sense equal to Sheridan on the "Begum Charge," is, in all other elements which go to constitute the excellence of a composition, incomparably superior. You see a great mind meeting with a great subject, and intimate with it, in all its length, and breadth, and depth, and thickness; here diving down into its valleys, and there standing serene upon its heights; here ranging at ease through its calms, and there, with tyrant nerve, ruling its storms of passion and harrowing interest. The picture of Hyder Ali, and of the "cloud" which burst upon the plains of the Carnatic, has been subjected to Brougham's clumsy and captious criticism, but has come out unscathed; and we venture to say, that in massive, unforced magnificence it remains unsurpassed. There is no trick, no heaving effort, no "double, double toil and trouble," as in many of Lord Brougham's own elaborate passages. The flight is as calm and free, as it is majestic and powerful;

Sailing with supreme dominion,  
Through the azure deep of air.

His *Reflections* was certainly the most powerful pamphlet ever written, if pamphlet it can be called, which is only a pamphlet in form, but a book in reality. It should have been called a "Reply to the French Revolution." Etna had spoken, and this was Vesuvius answering in feebler, but still strong and far-heard thunder. Its power was proved by its effect. It did



not, indeed, create the terror of Europe against that dreadful Shape of Democracy which had arisen over its path, and by its shadow had turned all the waters into blood; but it condensed, pointed, and propelled the common fear and horror into active antagonism with its opponent. It sharpened the sword of the prevailing desire for the fight. It was the first wild, wailing trumpet of a battlefield of twenty-four years' duration. One is reminded of the contest between Fingal and the Spirit of Loda. There seemed, at first, a great disparity between the solitary warrior and the dreadful form riding upon the midnight tempest, and surrounded with his panoply of clouds. But the warrior was *ipse agmen*—his steel was sharp and true; he struck at the demon, and the demon shrieked, rolled himself together, and retired a space, to return, however, again, with his painful wound healed, and the fury of his blasts aggravated, when there was no Burke to oppose him. The merits of this production are, we think, greatly enhanced by the simplicity of the vehicle in which its thoughts ride. The book is a letter; but such a letter! In this simplest shape of literature, we find philosophy the most subtle; invective the most sublime; speculation the most far-stretching; Titanic ridicule, like the cachination of a Cyclops; piercing pathos; powerful historic painting; and eloquence the most dazzling that ever combined depth with splendour. That it is the ultimate estimate of the French Revolution is contended for by no one. THAT shall only be seen after the history of earth is ended, and after it is all inscribed (to allude to the beautiful Arabian fable) in laconics of light over "Allah's head;" but, meantime, while admitting that Burke's view of it is in some points one-sided, and in others coloured by prejudice, we contend that he has, with general fidelity, painted the thing as it then was—the bloody bantling as he saw it in the cradle—although he did not foresee that circumstances and events were greatly to modify and soften its features as it advanced. Let him have praise, at least, for this, that he discerned and exposed the true character of modern infidelity, which, amid all the disguises it has since assumed, is still, and shall remain till its destruction, the very monster of vanity, vice, malignity, and sciolism, which he has, by a few touches of lightning, shown it to be. How thoroughly he comprehended the devil-inspired monkey, Voltaire; and the winged frog, Rousseau; and that iron machine of artistic murder, Carnot; and La Fayette, the republican coxcomb; and that rude incarnation of the genius of the guillotine, Robespierre!



Through those strange Satanic shapes he moves in the majesty of his virtue and his manly genius; like a lofty human being through the corner of a museum appropriated to monsters—not doing violence to his own senses, by seeking to include them in the catalogue of men, nor in an attitude of affected pity and transcendental charity;—but feeling and saying, “How ugly and detestable these miscreations are, and, faugh! what a stench they emit.”

In a similar spirit, and with even greater power, does he seek to exorcise the evil spirit of his times, in his “Letters on a Regicide Peace.” These glorious fragments employed his last hours, and the shadow of the grave lies solemnly upon them. When he wrote them, although far from being a very old man (he was just sixty-four), yet the curtains of his life's hope had suddenly been dropped around him. It was not that he and his old friends, the Whigs, had quarrelled; it was not that he had stood by the death-bed of Johnson, and had undergone the far severer pang which attended his divorce from the friendship of Fox; it was not that his circumstances were straitened; it was not that his motives were misrepresented; it was not that “misery had made him acquainted with strange bedfellows,” and driven him to herd with beings so inferior and radically different as Pitt and Dundas;—but it was that death had snatched away him in whom he had “garnered up his heart”—his son. Be it that that son was not all his father had thought him to be, to others—he *was* it all to him. If not rich himself, was it nothing that his father had lavished on him his boundless wealth of esteem and affection? As it is, he shines before us in the light of his father's eloquence for evermore. Strange and enviable this power of genius! It can not only “give us back the dead even in the loveliest looks they wore,” but it can give them a loveliness they never possessed; it can dignify the obscure, it can illuminate the dark, it can embalm the decayed; and, in its transforming splendour, the common worm becomes a glow-worm, the common cloud a cloud of fire and glory, every arch a rainbow, every spark a star, and every star a sun. It can preserve obscure sorrows, and the obscurer causes of these sorrows, and hang a splendour in the tears of childhood, and eternise the pathos of those little pangs which rend little hearts. How De Quincey, for example, has beautified the sorrows, and peculiarities, and small adventures of his boyhood—and in what a transfiguring beam of imagination does he show the dead face of his dear sister, Elizabeth! And this young Burke sleeps, at



once guarded and glorified, beneath the bright angel-wings of his father's mighty genius.

It is most affecting to come upon those plaintive expressions of desolation which abound in Burke's later works, as where he calls himself an "unhappy man," and wishes to be permitted to "enjoy in his retreat the melancholy privileges of obscurity and sorrow;" and where he compares himself to an "old oak stripped of his honours, and torn up by the roots." But not for nothing were these griefs permitted to environ him. Through the descending cloud, a mighty inspiration stooped down upon his soul. Grief roused, and bared, and tossed up his spirit to its very depths. He compares himself to Job, lying on his dunghill, and insulted by the miserable comfort of his friends. And as Job's silent anguish broke out at last into sublime curses, and his dunghill heaved up into a burning prophetic peak, so it was with the "old man eloquent" before us. From his solitary Beaconsfield, with its large trees moaning around, as if in sympathy with his incommunicable sorrow, he uttered prophetic warnings which startled Europe; he threw forth pearls of deepest thought and purest eloquence; he blew war-blasts of no uncertain sound, to which armies were to move, and navies to expand their vast white wings; he poured out plaints of sorrow, which melted the hearts of millions; his "lightnings also he shot out," forked bolts of blasting invective, against the enemies or pretended friends, the impostors high or low, who dared to intrude on his sacred solitude; and it fared alike with a Duke of Bedford and a Thomas Paine, as with the rebel angels in Milton:—

On each wing

Uriel and Raphael, his vaunting foe,  
Though huge, and in a rock of diamond arm'd,  
Vanquish'd Adramelech and Asmadai,  
Two potent thrones, that to be less than gods  
Disdain'd, but meaner thoughts learn'd in their flight,  
Mangled with ghastly wounds through plate and mail.  
Nor stood unmindful Abdiel to annoy  
The atheist crew, but, with redoubled blow,  
Ariel and Arioch, and the violence  
Of Ramiel scorch'd and blasted, overthrew.

But he had not only the inspiration of profound misery, but that, also, of a power projected forward from eternity. He knew that he was soon to die, and the motto of all his later productions might have been, "Moriturus vos saluto." This gave a deeper tone to his tragic warnings, a higher dignity to his prophetic attitude, and a weightier emphasis to his



terrible denunciations. He reminded men of that wild-eyed prophet, who ran around the wall of doomed Jerusalem till he sank down in death, and cried out, "Woe, woe, woe, to this city." In the utterance of such wild, but musical and meaning cries, did Burke breathe out his spirit.

The "Regicide Peace" contains no passages so well known as some in the *Reflections*, but has, on the whole, a profounder vein of thinking, a bolder imagery, a richer and more peculiar language, as well as certain long and high-wrought paragraphs, which have seldom been surpassed. Such is his picture of Carnot, "snorting away the fumes of the undigested blood of his sovereign;" his comparison of the revolutionary France to Algiers; his description of a supposed entrance of the Regicide ambassadors into London; and the magnificent counsels he gives Pitt as to what he thought *should* have been his manner of conducting the war. As we think this one of the noblest swells of poetic prose in the language, and have never seen it quoted, or even alluded to by former critics, we shall give it entire:

"After such an elaborate display had been made of the injustice and insolence of an enemy, who seems to have been irritated by every one of the means which had commonly been used with effect to soothe the rage of intemperate power, the natural result would be, that the scabbard in which we in vain attempted to plunge our sword, should have been thrown away with scorn. It would have been natural, that, rising in the fulness of their might, insulted majesty, despised dignity, violated justice, rejected supplication, patience goaded into fury, would have poured out all the length of the reins upon all the wrath they had so long restrained. It might have been expected that, emulous of the glory of the youthful hero (Archduke Charles of Austria) in alliance with him, touched by the example of what one man, well formed and well placed, may do in the most desperate state of affairs, convinced there is a courage of the cabinet full as powerful, and far less vulgar, than that of the field, our minister would have changed the whole line of that useless prosperous prudence, which had hitherto produced all the effects of the blindest temerity. If he found his situation full of danger (and I do not deny that it is perilous in the extreme), he must feel that it is also full of glory, and that he is placed on a stage, than which no muse of fire, that had ascended the highest heaven of invention, could imagine anything more awful and august. It was hoped that, in this swelling scene in which he



moved, with some of the first potentates of Europe for his fellow-actors, and with so many of the rest for the anxious spectators of a part which, as he plays it, determines for ever their destiny and his own, like Ulysses in the unravelling point of the epic story, he would have thrown off his patience and his rags together, and, stripped of unworthy disguises, he would have stood forth in the form and in the attitude of a hero. On that day it was thought he would have assumed the port of Mars; that he would have bid to be brought forth from their hideous kennel (where his scrupulous tenderness had too long immured them) those impatient dogs of war, *whose fierce regards affright even the minister of vengeance that feeds them*; that he would let them loose, in famine, fever, plagues, and death, upon a guilty race, to whose frame, and to all whose habit, order, peace, religion, and virtue are alien and abhorrent. It was expected that he would at last have thought of active and effectual war; that he would no longer amuse the British lion in the chase of rats and mice; that he would no longer employ the whole naval power of Great Britain, once the terror of the world, to prey upon the miserable remains of a peddling commerce, which the enemy did not regard, and from which none could profit. It was expected that he would have re-asserted the justice of his cause; that he would have re-animated whatever remained to him of his allies, and endeavoured to recover those whom their fears had led astray; that he would have rekindled the martial ardour of his citizens; that he would have held out to them the example of their ancestry, the asserter of Europe, and the scourge of French ambition; that he would have reminded them of a posterity which, if this nefarious robbery, under the fraudulent name and false colour of a government, should in full power be seated in the heart of Europe, must for ever be consigned to vice, impiety, barbarism, and the most ignominious slavery of body and mind. In so holy a cause, it was presumed that he would (as in the beginning of the war he did) have opened all the temples, and, with prayer, with fasting, and with supplication (better directed than to the grim Moloch of regicide in France), have called upon us to raise that united cry which has so often stormed heaven, and, *with a pious violence, forced down blessings upon a repentant people*. It was hoped that, when he had invoked upon his endeavours the favourable regards of the protector of the human race, it would be seen that his menaces to the enemy, and his prayers to the Almighty, were not followed, but accompanied, with corresponding action. It



was hoped that his shrilling trumpet should be heard, not to announce a show, but to sound a charge."

We come now to him as an orator. And here we must correct a prevailing misconception. Many seem to imagine that he had no power of oratorical impression; that he was a mere "dinner-bell;" and that all his speeches, however splendid, fell still-born from his lips. So far was this from being the case, that his very first orations in parliament—those, namely, on the Stamp Act—delivered when he had yet a reputation to make, according to Johnson, "filled the town with wonder;" an effect which, we fancy, their mere merit, if unaccompanied by some energy and interest of delivery, could hardly have produced. So long as he was in office under Lord Rockingham, and under the Coalition Ministry, he was listened to with deference and admiration. His speech against Hastings was waited for with greater eagerness, and heard with greater admiration, than any of that brilliant series, except, perhaps, Sheridan's on the Begum Charge; and in its closing passage, impeaching Hastings "in the name of Human Nature itself," it rose, even as to effect, to a height incomparably above any of the rest. His delivery, indeed, and voice were not first rate, but only fribbles or fools regard such things much, or at least long, in a true orator; and when Burke became fully roused, his minor defects were always either surmounted by himself, or forgotten by others. The real secret of his parliamentary unpopularity, in his later years, lay, first, in the envy with which his matchless powers were regarded; secondly, in his fierce and ungovernable temper, and the unguarded violence of his language; thirdly, in the uncertainty of his position and circumstances; and, lastly, in the fact, as Johnson has it, that "while no one could deny that he spoke well, yet all granted that he spoke too often and too long." His soul, besides, generally soared above his audience, and sometimes forgot to return. In honest Goldsmith's version of it,

Too deep for his hearers, he went on refining.

And thought of convincing, while they thought of dining.

But he could never be put down to the last, and might, had he chosen, have contested the cheap palm of instant popularity even with the most voluble of his rivals. But the "play was not worth the candle." He mingled, indeed, with their temporary conflicts; but it was like a god descending from Ida to the plains of Troy, and sharing in the vulgar shock of arms, with a high celestial purpose in view. He was, in fact, over



the heads of the besotted parliaments of his day, addressing the ears of all future time, and has not been inaudible in *that* gallery.

Goldsmith is right in saying that so far he "narrowed his mind." But, had he narrowed it a little further, he could have produced so much the more of immediate impression, and so much the more have circumscribed his future influence and power. He *was* by nature what Clootz pretended to be, and what all genuine speakers should aim at being, "an orator of the human race," and he never altogether lost sight of this his high calling. Hence, while a small class adored him, and a large class respected, the majority found his speaking apart from their purpose, and if they listened to it, it was from a certain vague impression that it was something great and splendid, only not very intelligible, and not at all practical. In fact, the brilliance of his imagination, and the restless play of his ingenuity, served often to conceal the solid depth and practical bearings of his wisdom. Men seldom give a famous man credit for all the faculties he possesses. If they dare not deny his genius, they deny his sense; or, if they are obliged to admit his sense, they question his genius. If he is strong, he cannot be beautiful, and if beautiful, he must be weak. That Burke suffered much from this false and narrow style of criticism, is unquestionable; but that he was ever the gigantic bore on the floor of the House of Commons which some pretend, we venture to doubt. The fact was probably this—on small matters he was thought prosy, and coughed down, but, whenever there was a large load to be lifted, a great question to be discussed—a Hastings to be crushed, or a French revolution to be analysed—the eyes of the house instinctively turned to the seat where the profound and brilliant man was seated, and their hearts irresistibly acknowledged, at times, what their tongues and prejudices often denied.

And yet it is amusing to find, from a statement of Burke's own, that the Whigs whom he had deserted solaced themselves for the unparalleled success of the *Reflections on the French Revolution*, by underrating it in a literary point of view. Is this the spirit of real or of mock humility in which he speaks, in his "Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs?" "The gentlemen who in the name of the party have passed sentence on Mr. Burke's book in the light of literary criticism, are judges above all challenge. He did not indeed flatter himself that, as a writer, he could claim the approbations of men whose talents,



in his judgment and in the public judgment, approach to prodigies, if ever such persons should be disposed to estimate the merit of a composition upon the standard of their own ability." Surely this must be ironical, else it would seem an act of voluntary humility as absurd as though De Quincey were deferring in matters of philosophy or style to the "superior judgment" of some of our American or St. Andrews made doctors; or as though Mrs. Stowe were to dedicate her next novel to the author of the "Coming Struggle." Pretty critics they were! Think of the glorious eloquence, wisdom, passion, and poetry, the "burning coals of juniper, sharp arrows of the strong," to be found in every page of the *Reflections*, sneered at by two men, at least, not one of whose works is now read—by the writer of a farrago like the "Spital Sermon," or by the author of such illegible dulness as the *History of James II.*, or even by Sheridan, with his clever, heartless plays, and the brilliant falsetto of his speeches; or even by MacIntosh, with the rhetorical logic and forced flowers of his *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*. Surely Burke did, in his heart, appeal from their tribunal to that of a future age. To do MacIntosh justice, he learned afterwards to form a far loftier estimate of the author of the *Reflections*. He was, soon after the publication of his *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, invited to spend some days at Beaconsfield. There he found the old giant, now toying on the carpet with little children, now cracking bad jokes and the vilest of puns, and now pouring out magnificent thoughts and images. In the course of a week's animated discussion on the French Revolution, and many cognate subjects, MacIntosh was completely converted to Burke's views, and came back impressed with an opinion of his genius and character, far higher than his writings had given him. Indeed, his speech in defence of Peltier—by much the most eloquent of his published speeches—bears on it the fiery traces of the influence which Burke had latterly exerted on his mind. The early sermons, too, and the "Apology for the Liberty of the Press," by Hall, are less coloured, than created by the power which Burke's writings had exerted on his dawning genius. But more of this afterwards.

What a pity that Boswell had not been born a twin, and that the brother had not attached himself as fondly and faithfully to Burke, as Jemmy to Johnson! Boswell's *Life of Burke* would now have been even more popular than Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. For, if Johnson's sayings were more pointed and witty, Burke's were profounder and sublimer far. Johnson



had lived as much with books and with certain classes of men, but Burke had conversed more with the silent company of thoughts; and all grand generalisations were to him palpable, familiar, and life-like as a gallery of pictures. Johnson was a lazy, slumbering giant, seldom moving himself except to strangle the flies which buzzed about his nostrils; Burke wrought like a Cyclops in his cave. Johnson, not Burke, was the master of amplification, from no poverty, but from indolence: he often rolled out sounding surges of commonplace, with no bark and little beauty, upon the swell of the wave; Burke's mind, as we have seen before, was morbidly active; it was impatient of circular movement round an idea, or of noise and agitation without progress: his motto ever was "Onwards," and his eloquence always bore the stamp of thought. Johnson looked at all things through an atmosphere of gloom; Burke was of a more sanguine temperament; and if cobwebs did at any time gather, the breath of his anger or of his industry speedily blew them away. Johnson had mingled principally with scholars, or the middle class of the community; Burke was brought early into contact with statesmen, the nobility and gentry, and this told both upon his private manners and upon his knowledge of human nature. Johnson's mind was of the sharp, strong, sturdy order; Burke's, of the subtle, deep, revolving sort; as Goldsmith said, he "wound into every subject like a serpent." Both were honest, fearless, and pious men; but, while Burke's honesty sometimes put on a court dress, and his fearlessness sometimes "licked the dust," and his piety could stand at ease, Johnson in all these points was ever roughly and nakedly the same. Johnson, in wit, the point of individual sentences, and in solemn pictures of human life, its sorrows and frailties, was above Burke; but was as far excelled by him in power of generalisation, vastness of range and reading, exuberance of fancy, daring rhetoric, and in skilful management and varied cadence of style. Johnson had a philosophical vein, but it had never received much culture; Burke's had been carefully fed, and failed only at times through the subjects to which it was directed. Johnson's talk, although more brilliant, memorable, and imposing, was also more set, starched, and produced with more effort than Burke's, who seemed to talk admirably because he could not help it, or, as his great rival said, "because his mind was full." Johnson was, notwithstanding his large proportions, of the earth earthy, after all; his wings, like those of the ostrich, were not commensurate with his size; Burke, to



vast bulk and stature, added pinions which bore him from peak to peak, and from one gorgeous tract of "cloudland" to another.

Boswell and Prior have preserved only a few specimens of Burke's conversation, which are, however, so rich as to excite deep regret that more has not been retained; and a conviction that his traditional reputation has not been exaggerated, and that his talk was the truest revelation of his powers. Every one knows the saying of Dr. Johnson, that you could not go with Burke under a shed to shun a shower, without saying, "this is an extraordinary man." Nor was this merely because he could talk cleverly and at random, on all subjects, and hit on brilliant things; but that he seemed to have weighed and digested his thoughts, and prepared and adjusted his language on all subjects, at the same time that impulse and excitement were ever ready to sprinkle splendid *impromptus* upon the stream of his speech. He combined the precision and perfect preparation of the lecturer, with the ease and fluency of the conversationist. He did not, like some, go on throwing out shining paradoxes; or, with others, hot gorgeous metaphors, hatched between excitement and vanity; or, with others, give prepared and polished orations, disguised in the likeness of extempore harangues; or, with others, perpetually strive to startle, to perplex, to mystify, and to shine. Burke's talk was that of a thoroughly furnished, gifted, and profoundly informed man, *thinking aloud*. His conversation was just the course of a great, rich river, winding at its sweet or its wild will—always full, often overflowing; sometimes calm, and sometimes fretted and fierce; sometimes level and deep, and sometimes starred with spray, or leaping into cataracts; sometimes rolling through rich alluvial plains, and sometimes through defiles of romantic interest. Who shall venture to give us an "Imaginary Conversation" between him and Johnson, on the subject referred to by Boswell, about the comparative merits of Homer and Virgil, or on some similar topic, in a style that shall adequately represent the point, roughness, readiness, and sense of the one, and the subtlety, varied knowledge, glares of sudden metaphoric illumination crossing the veins of profound reflection, which distinguished the other—the "no, sirs," and the "therefores" of the one, with the "buts," the "unlesses," and the terrible "excuse me, sirs," of the other? We wonder that Savage Landor has never attempted it, and brought in poor Burns—the only man then living in Britain quite worthy



to be a third party in the dialogue—now to shed his meteor light upon the matter of the argument; and now, by his wit or song, to soothe and harmonise the minds of the combatants.

Burke's talk is now, however, as a whole, irrecoverably lost. What an irrepressible sigh escapes us, as we reflect that this is true of so many noble spirits! Their works may remain with us, but that fine aroma which breathed in their conversation, that inspired beam which shone in their very eyes, are for ever gone. Some of the first of men, indeed, have had nothing to lose in this respect. Their conversation was inferior to their general powers. Their works were evening shadows, more gigantic than themselves. We have, at least, their essence preserved in their writings. This probably is true even of Shakspeare and Milton. But Johnson, Burke, Burns, and Coleridge were so constituted, that conversation was the only magnet that could draw out the full riches of their genius; and all of them would have required each his own Siamese twin to have accompanied him through life, and, with the pen and the patience of Bozzy, to have preserved the continual outpourings of their fertile brains and fluent tongues. We are not, however, arguing their superiority to the two just mentioned, or to others of a similar stamp, whose writings were above their talk—far the reverse—but are simply asserting, that we may regret more the comparative meagreness of biography in the case of the one class than of the other.

Burke, in private, was unquestionably one of the most blameless of the eminent men of his day. He was, in all his married life at least, entirely free from the licentiousness of Fox, the dissipation of Sheridan, and the hard-drinking habits of Pitt. But he was also the most amiable and actively-benevolent of them. Wise as a serpent, he was harmless as a dove; and, when the deep sources of his virtuous indignation were not touched, gentle as a lamb. Who has forgot his fatherly interest in poor Crabbe—that flower blushing and drooping unseen, till Burke lifted it up in his hand, and gave his protégé bread and immortality? or his kindness to rough, thankless Barry, whom he taught and counselled as wisely as if he had been a prophet of art, not politics, and as if he had studied nothing else but painting (proving thus, besides his tender heart, that a habit and power of deep and genuine thinking can easily be transferred from one branch to all, a truth substantiated, besides, by the well-known aid he gave Sir Joshua Reynolds in his lectures); or last, not least, his Good Samaritan



treatment of the wretched street-stroller he met, took home, introduced, after hearing her story, to Mrs. Burke, who watched over, reformed, and employed her in her service? "These are deeds which must not pass away." Like green laurels on the bald head of a Cæsar, they add a beauty and softness to the grandeur of Burke's mind, and leave you at a loss (fine balance! rare alternative! compliment, like a biforked sun-beam, cutting two ways!) whether more to love or to admire him. Fit it was that *he* should have passed that noble panegyric on Howard, the "Circumnavigator of Charity," which now stands, and shall long stand, like a mountain before its black and envious shadow, over against Carlyle's late unhappy attack on the unrivalled philanthropist.

We promised a word on Burke's critics. They have been numerous and various. From Johnson, Fox, Laurence, MacIntosh, Wordsworth, Brougham, Hazlitt, Macaulay, De Quincey, Croly, H. Rogers, etc., down to Prior, etc. Johnson gave again and again his sturdy verdict in his favour, which was more valuable then than it is now. "If I were," he said, when once ill and unable to talk, "to meet that fellow Burke to-night, it would kill me." Fox admitted that he had learned more from Burke's conversation than from all his reading and experience put together. Laurence, one of his executors, has left recorded his glowing sense of his friend's genius and virtues. Of MacIntosh's admiration we have spoken above; although, in an article which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, somewhere in 1830, he seems to modify his approbation; induced to this, partly, perhaps, by the influences of Holland House, and partly by those chills of age which, falling on the higher genius and nature of Burke, served only to revive and stimulate him, but which damped whatever glow MacIntosh once had. Wordsworth's lofty estimate is given in Lord John Russell's recent biography of Moore, and serves not only to prove what his opinion was, but to establish a strong distinction between the mere *dilettante littérateur* like Canning, and the mere statesman like Pitt, and a man who, like Burke, combined the deepest knowledge of politics, and the most unaffected love for literature and literary men. Brougham's estimate, in his *Statesmen*, etc., is not exactly unfair, but fails, first, through his lordship's profound unlikeness, in heart, habits, kind of culture, taste, and genius, to the subject of his critique—(Burke, to name two or three distinctions, was always a careful, while Brougham is often an extempore, thinker. Burke is a Cicero, and some-



thing far more; Brougham aspires to be a Demosthenes, and is something far less. Burke reasons philosophically—a mode of ratiocination which, as we have seen, can be employed with advantage on almost all subjects; Brougham reasons geometrically, and is one of those who, according to Aristotle, are sure to err when they turn their mathematical method to moral or mental themes. Burke's process of thought resembles the swift synthetic algebra; Brougham's, the slow, plodding, geometric analysis. Burke had prophetic insight, earnestness, and poetic fire; Brougham has marvellous acuteness, the earnestness of passion, and the fire of temperament. Burke had genuine imagination; Brougham has little or none); and, second, through his prodigious exaggeration of Burke's rivals, who, because they were near and around, appear to him cognate and equal, if not superior; even as St. Peter's is said to be lessened in effect by some tall but tasteless buildings in the neighbourhood; and as the giant Ben Macdhui was long concealed by the lofty but subordinate hills which crush in around him.

Hazlitt, Macaulay, and De Quincey have all seen Burke in a truer light, and praised him in the spirit of a more generous and richer recognition. Hazlitt has made, he tells us, some dozen attempts to describe Burke's style, without pleasing himself—so subtle and evasive he found its elements, and so strange the compound in it of matter-of-fact, speculation, and poetic eloquence. His views of him, too, veered about several times—at least they seem very different in his papers in the *Edinburgh Review*, and in his acknowledged essays; although we believe that at heart he always admired him to enthusiasm, and is often his unconscious imitator. Macaulay has also a thorough appreciation of Burke, the more that he is said to fancy—it is nothing more than a fancy—that there is a striking resemblance between his hero and himself! De Quincey, following in this Coleridge, has felt, and eloquently expressed, his immeasurable contempt for those who praise Burke's fancy at the expense of his intellect. Dr. Croly has published a *Political Life of Burke*, full of eloquence and fervid panegyric, as well as of strong discrimination; Burke is manifestly his master, nor has he found an unworthy disciple. Henry Rogers has edited and prefaced an edition of Burke's works, but the prefixed essay, although able, is hardly worthy of the author of *Reason and Faith*, and its eloquence is of a laborious, mechanical sort. And Hall has, in his "Apology for the Liberty of the Press," which was in part a reply to the *Reflections*,



painted him by a few beautiful touches, less true, however, than they are beautiful; and his pamphlet, although carefully modelled on the writings of his opponent, is not to be named beside them in depth, compass of thought, richness of imagery, or variety and natural vigour of style; his splendour, compared to Burke's, is stiff; his thinking and his imagery imitative—no more than in the case of Macaulay do you ever feel yourself in contact with a “great virgin mind,” melting down through the heat and weight of its own exhaustless wealth, although, in absence of fault, stateliness of manner, and occasional polished felicities of expression, Hall is superior even to Burke.

That Burke *was* Junius, we do not believe; but that Burke *had to do* with the composition of some of these celebrated letters, we are as certain as if we had seen his careful front, and dim, but searching eyes looking through his spectacles over the MS. He was notoriously (see Prior's *Life*) in the secret of their authorship. Johnson thought him the only man then alive capable of writing them. Hall's objection, that “Burke's great power was amplification, while that of Junius was condensation,” sprung, we think, from a totally mistaken idea of the very nature of Burke's mind. There is far more condensed thinking and writing in many parts of Burke than in Junius—the proof of which is, that no prose writer in the language, except, perhaps, Dean Swift, has had so many single sentences so often quoted. That the *motion* of the mind of Junius differs materially from Burke's, is granted; but we could account for this (even although we contended, which we do not, that he was the sole author), from the awkwardness of the position in which the anonymous would necessarily place him. He would become like a man writing with his left hand. The mask would confine as well as disguise him. He durst not venture on that free and soaring movement which was natural to him. Who ever heard of a man in a mask swaying a broadsword? He always uses a stiletto, or a dagger. Many of the best things in “Junius” are in one of Burke's manners; for, as we have seen, many manners and styles were his. He said to Boswell, in reference to Croft's *Life of Young*, “It is not a good imitation of Johnson: he has the nodosities of the oak, without its strength—the contortions of the sibyl, without her inspiration.” Junius says of Sir W. Draper, “He has all the melancholy madness of poetry, without the inspiration.” How like to many sentences in Burke are such expressions as these (speaking of Wilkes):—



“The gentle breath of peace would leave him on the surface, unruffled and unremoved; it is only the tempest which lifts him from his place.” We could quote fifty pithy sentences from Junius and from Burke, which, placed in parallel columns, would convince an unprejudiced critic that they came from the same mind.<sup>1</sup> It is the union in both of point, polish, and concentration—a union reminding you of the deep yet shining sentences of Tacitus—that establishes the identity. Junius has two salts in his style—the *sal acridum*, and the *sal Atticum*. Sir Philip Francis was equal to the supply of the first; Burke alone to that of the second. It adds to the evidence for this theory, that Burke was fond of anonymous writing, and that in it he occasionally “changed his voice,” and personated other minds: think of his “Vindication of Natural Society in the Manner of Lord Bolingbroke.” He often, too, assisted other writers *sub rosa*, such as Barry and Reynolds, in their prelections on painting. We believe, in short, this to be the truth on the subject: he was in the confidence of the Junius Club—for a club it certainly was; he overlooked many of the letters (Prior asserts that he once or twice spoke of what was to be the substance of a letter the day before it appeared); and he supplied many of his inimitable touches, just as Lord Jeffrey was wont to add spice even to some of Hazlitt’s articles in the *Edinburgh Review*. So that he could thus very safely and honestly deny, as he repeatedly did, that he was the author of Junius, and yet be connected with the authorship of the letters.

We come, lastly, to speak of the influences which Burke has exerted upon his and our times. This has been greater than most even of his admirers believe. He was one of the few parent minds which the world has produced. Well does Burns call him “Daddie Burke.” And both politics and literature owe filial obligations to his unbounded genius. In politics he has been the father of moderate Conservatism, which is, at

<sup>1</sup> Amid the innumerable full-grown beauties, or even hints of beauties, borrowed by after-writers from Burke, we have just noticed one, which MacIntosh, in his famous letter to Hall, has appropriated without acknowledgment. It is where he speaks of Hall turning from literature, etc., to the far nobler task of “*remembering the forgotten*,” etc. This grand simplicity, of which MacIntosh was altogether incapable, may be found in Burke’s panegyric on Howard. Indeed, we wish we had time to go over Burke’s works, and to prove that a vast number of the profound or brilliant things that have since been uttered (disguised or partially altered), in most of our favourite writers on grave subjects, present and past, are *stolen* from the great fountain mind of the eighteenth century. We may do so on some future occasion; and let the plagiarists tremble! Enough at present.



least, a tempering of Toryism, if not its sublimation. That conservatism in politics and in church matters exists now in Britain, is, we believe, mainly owing to the genius of two men—Burke and Coleridge. In literature, too, he set an example that has been widely followed. He unintentionally, and by the mere motion of his powerful mind, broke the chains in which Johnson was binding our style and criticism, without, however, going back himself, or leading back others, to the laxity of the Addisonian manner. All good and vigorous English styles since—that of Godwin, that of Foster, that of Hall, that of Horsley, that of Coleridge, that of Jeffrey, that of Hazlitt, that of De Quincey, that of the *Times* newspaper—are much indebted to the power with which Burke stirred the stagnant waters of our literature, and by which, while professedly an enemy of revolutions, he himself established one of the greatest, most beneficial, and most lasting—that, namely, of a new, more impassioned, and less conventional mode of addressing the intellects and hearts of men.

Latterly, another change has threatened to come over us. Some men of genius have imported from abroad a mangled and mystic Germanism, which has been for awhile the rage. This has not, however, mingled kindly with the current of our literature. The philosophic language or jargon—and it is partly both—of the Teutons has not been well assimilated, or thoroughly digested among us. From its frequent and affected use, it is fast becoming a nuisance. While thinkers have gladly availed themselves of all that is really valuable in its terminology, pretenders have still more eagerly sought shelter for their conceit or morbid weakness under its shield. The stuff, the verbiage, the mystic bewilderment, the affectation, the disguised commonplace, which every periodical almost now teems with, under the form of this foreign phraseology, are enormous, and would require a Swift, in a new *Tale of a Tub*, or *Battle of the Books*, to expose them.

We fancy, however, we see a reaction coming. Great is the Anglo-Saxon, the language of Shakspeare and Byron, and it shall yet prevail over the feeble refinements of the small mimics of the Teutonic giants. Germany was long Britain's humble echo and translator. Britain, please God! shall never become *its* shadow. Our thought, too, and faith, which have suffered from the same cause, are in due time to recover; nay, the process of restoration is begun. And among other remedies for the evil, while yet it in a great measure continues, we strongly



recommend a recurrence to the works of our great classics in the past; and, among their bright lists, let not *him* be forgotten, who, apart from his genius, his worth, and his political achievements, has in his works presented so many titles to be considered not only as the *facile princeps* among the writers of his own time (although this itself were high distinction), but as one of the first authors who, in any age or country, ever speculated or wrote.



## SHAKSPERE—A LECTURE<sup>1</sup>

IF a clergyman, thirty years ago, had announced a lecture on Shakspeare, he might, as a postscript, have announced the resignation of his charge, if not the abandonment of his office. Times are now changed, and men are changed along with them. The late Dr. Hamilton of Leeds, one of the most pious and learned clergymen in England, has left, in his *Nugæ Literariæ*, a genial paper on Shakspeare, and was never, so far as I know, challenged thereanent. And if you ask me one reason of this curious change, I answer, it is the long-continued presence of the spirit of Shakspeare, in all its geniality, breadth, and power, in the midst of our society and literature. He is among us like an unseen ghost, colouring our language, controlling our impressions, if not our thoughts, swaying our imaginations, sweetening our tempers, refining our tastes, purifying our manners, and effecting all this by the simple magic of his genius, and through a medium—that of dramatic writing and representation—originally the humblest, and not yet the highest, form in which poetry and passion have chosen to exhibit themselves. Waiving, at present, the consideration of Shakspeare in this form—the dramatist, let us look at him now in his *essence*—the poet. But, first, does any one ask, What is a poet? What is the ideal of the somewhat indefinite, but large and swelling term—poet? I answer, the greatest poet is the man who most roundly, clearly, easily, and strikingly, reflects, represents, and reproduces, in an imaginative form, his own sight or observation, his own heart or feeling, his own history or experience, his own memory or knowledge, his own imagination or dream—sight, heart, history, memory, and imagination, which, so far as they are faithfully represented from his consciousness, do also reflect the consciousness of general humanity. The poet is more a mirror than a maker; he may, indeed, unite with his reflective power others, such as that of forming, infusing into his song, and thereby

<sup>1</sup> This having been originally delivered as a lecture, we have decided that it should retain the shape. "Shakspeare: a Sketch," would look, and be, a ludicrous idea. As well a mountain in a flower-pot, as Shakspeare in a single sketch. A sketch seeks to draw, at least, an outline of a whole. From a lecture, so much is not necessarily expected. From *A Third Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 1854.



glorifying a particular creed or scheme of speculation; but, just as surely as a rainbow, rising between two opposing countries or armies, is but a feeble bulwark, so, the real power of poetry is, not in conserving, nor in resisting, nor in supporting, nor in destroying, but in meekly and fully reflecting, and yet recreating and beautifying all things. Poetry, said Aristotle, is *imitation*; this celebrated aphorism is only true in one acceptation. If it mean that poetry is in the first instance prompted by a conscious imitation of the beautiful, which gradually blossoms into the higher shape of unconscious resemblance, we demur. But if by imitation is meant the process by which love for the beautiful in art or nature, at first silent and despairing, as the child's affection for the star, strengthens, and strengthens still, till the admired quality is transfused into the very being of the admirer, who then pours it back in eloquence or in song, so sweetly and melodiously, that it seems to be flowing from an original fountain in his own breast; if this be the meaning of the sage when he says that poetry is imitation, he is unquestionably right. Poetry is just the saying Amen, with a full heart and a clear voice, to the varied symphonies of nature, as they echo through the vaulted and solemn aisles of the poet's own soul.

It follows, from this notion of poetry, that in it there is no such thing as *absolute* origination or creation; its Beilicht simply evolves the element which already has existed amidst the darkness—it does not call it into existence. It follows, again, that the grand distinction between philosophy and poetry is, that while the former tries to trace things to their causes, and to see them as a great naked abstract scheme, poetry catches them as they are, in the concrete, and with all their verdure and flush about them; for even philosophical truths, ere poetry will reflect them, must be personified into life, and thus fitted to stand before her mirror. The ocean does not act as a prism to the sun—does not divide and analyse his light—but simply shows him as he appears to her in the full crown-royal of his beams. It follows still farther, that the attitude of the true poet is exceedingly simple and sublime. He is not an inquirer, asking curious questions at the universe—not a tyrant speculator, applying to it the splendid torture of investigation; his attitude is that of admiration, reception, and praise. He loves, looks, is enlightened, and shines—even as Venus receives and renders back the light of her parent sun.

If, then, the greatest poet be the widest, simplest, and clearest reflector of nature and man, surely we may claim this high



honour for Shakspeare—the eighth wonder of the world. “Of all men,” says Dryden, “he had the largest and most comprehensive soul!” You find everything included in him, just as you find that the blue sky folds around all things, and after every new discovery made in her boundless domains, seems to retire quietly back into her own greatness, like a queen, and to say, “I am richer than all my possessions;” thus Shakspeare never suggests the thought of being exhausted, any more than the sigh of an Æolian lyre, as the breeze is spent, intimates that the mighty billows of the air shall surge no more. Responsive as such a lyre to all the sweet or strong influences of nature, she must cease to speak, ere he can cease to respond. I can never think of that great brow of his, but as a large lake-looking-glass, on which, when you gaze, you see all passions, persons, and hearts: here, suicides striking their own breasts, there, sailors staggering upon drunken shores; here, kings sitting in purple, and there, clowns making mouths behind their backs; here, demons in the shape of man, and there, angels in the form of women; here, heroes bending their mighty bows, and there, hangmen adjusting their greasy ropes; here, witches picking poisons, and culling infernal simples for their caldron, and there, joiners and weavers enacting their piece of very tragical mirth, amid the moonlight of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*; here, statesmen uttering their ancient saws, and there, watchmen finding “modern instances” amid the belated revellers of the streets; here, misanthropes cursing their day, and there, pedlars making merry with the lasses and lads of the village fair; here, Mooncalfs, like Caliban, throwing forth eloquent curses and blasphemy, and there, maidens like Miranda, “sole-sitting” by summer seas, beautiful as foam-bells of the deep; here, fairies dancing like motes of glory across the stage, and there, hush! it is the grave that has yawned, and, lo! the buried majesty of Denmark has joined the motley throng, which pauses for a moment to tremble at his presence. Such the spectacle presented on that great mirror! How busy it is, and yet how still! How melancholy, and yet how mirthful! Magical as a dream, and yet sharp and distinct as a picture! How fluctuating, yet how fixed! “It trembles, but it cannot pass away.” It is the world—the world of every age—the miniature of the universe!

The times of Shakspeare require a minute's notice in our hour's analysis of his genius. They were times of a vast upheaving in the public mind. Protestantism, that strong man-child, had



newly been born on the continent, and was making wild work in his cradle. Popery, the ten-horned monster, was dying, but dying hard; but over England there lay what might be called a "dim religious light"—being neither the gross darkness of mediæval Catholicism, nor the naked glare of Nonconformity—a light highly favourable to the exercise of imagination—in which dreams seemed realised, and in which realities were softened with the haze of dreams. The Book of God had been brought forth, like Joseph from his dungeon, freed from prison attire and looks—although it had not yet, like him, mounted its chariot of general circulation, and been carried in triumphal progress through the land. The copies of the Scriptures, for the most part, were confined to the libraries of the learned, or else chained in churches. Conceive the impetus given to the poetical genius of the country, by the sudden discovery of this spring of loftiest poetry—conceive it by supposing that Shakspeare's works had been buried for ages, and been dug up now. Literature in general had revived; and the soul of man, like an eagle newly fledged, and looking from the verge of her nest, was smelling from afar many a land of promise, and many a field of victory. Add to this, that a New World had recently been discovered; and if California and Australia have come over us like a summer's (golden) cloud, and made not only the dim eye of the old miser gleam with joy, and his hand, perhaps, relax its hold of present, in the view of prospective gold, but made many a young bosom, too, leap at the thought of adventure upon those marvellous shores—and woven, as it were, a girdle of virgin gold round the solid globe—what must have been the impulse and the thrill, when first the bars of ocean were broken up, when all customary landmarks fled away, like the islands of the Apocalyptic vision, and when in their room a thousand lovely dreams seemed retiring, and beckoning as they retired, toward isles of palms, and valleys of enchantment, and mountains ribbed with gold, and seas of perfect peace and sparkling silver, and immeasurable savannahs and forests hid by the glowing west; and when, month after month, travellers and sailors were returning to testify by their tales of wonder that such dreams were true, must not such an ocean of imaginative influence have deposited a rich residuum of genius? And that verily it did, the names of four men belonging to this period are enough to prove; these are, need I say? Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh, Francis Bacon, and William Shakspeare.

The Life of Shakspeare I do not seek to write, and do not



profess to understand, after all that has been written regarding it. Still he seems to me but a shade, without shape, limit, or local habitation; having nothing but power, beauty, and grandeur. I cannot reconcile him to life, present or past. Like a brownie, he has done the work of his favourite household, unheard and unseen. His external history is, in his own language, a blank; his internal, a puzzle, save as we may dubiously gather it from the escapes of his sonnets, and the masquerade of his plays.

O Cuckoo, shall I call thee bird,  
Or but a wandering voice?

A munificent and modest benefactor, he has knocked at the door of the human family at night; thrown in inestimable wealth as if he had done a guilty thing; and the sound of his feet dying away in the distance is all the tidings he has given of himself.

Indeed, so deep still are the uncertainties surrounding the history of Shakspeare, that I sometimes wonder that the process applied by Strauss to the Life of our Saviour has not been extended to his. A Life of Shakspeare, on this worthy model, would be a capital exercise for some aspiring sprig of Straussism!

I pass to speak of the qualities of his genius. First of these, I name a quality to which I have already alluded—his universality. He belongs to all ages, all lands, all ranks, all faiths, all professions, all characters, and all intellects. And why? because his eye pierced through all that was conventional, and fastened on all that was eternal in man. He knew that in humanity there was one heart, one nature, and that "God had made of one blood all nations who dwell on the face of the earth." He saw the same heart palpitating through a myriad faces—the same nature shining amid all varieties of customs, manners, languages, and laws—the same blood rolling red and warm below innumerable bodies, dresses, and forms. It was not, mark you, the universality of indifference—it was not that he loved all beings alike—it was not that he liked Iago as well as Imogen, Bottom or Bardolph as well as Hamlet or Othello; but that he saw, and showed, and loved, in proportion to its degree, *so much* of humanity as all possessed. Nature, too, he had watched with a wide yet keen eye. Alike the spur of the rooted pine-tree and the "grey" gleam of the willow leaf drooping over the death-stream of Ophelia—(he was the first in poetry, says Hazlitt, to notice that the leaf is grey only on the side which bends down)—the nest of the temple-haunting



martlet with his "loved masonry," and the eagle eyrie which "buildeth on the cedar's top, and dallies with the wind and scorns the sun"—the forest of Arden, and the "blasted heath of Forres"—the "still vexed Bermoothes, and the woods of Crete"—"the paved fountains," "rushing brooks," "pelting rivers," "the beached margents of the sea," "sweet summer buds," "hoary-headed frosts," "chiding autumn," "angry winter," the "sun robbing the vast sea," and the "moon her pale fire snatching from the sun!"

Flowers of all hues—

Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram,  
 The marigold that goes to bed with the sun,  
 And with him rises weeping; daffodils  
 That come before the swallow dares, and take  
 The winds of March with beauty; violets dim  
 But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,  
 Or Cytherea's breath—pale primroses,  
 That die unmarried ere they can behold  
 Bright Phoebus in his strength—  
 —————bold ox lips and  
 The Crown, Imperial—lilies of all kinds"—

such are a few of the natural objects which the genius of Shakspeare has transplanted into his own garden, and covered with the dew of immortality. He sometimes lingers beside such lovely things, but more frequently he touches them as he is hurrying on to an object. He paints as does the lightning, which, while rushing to its aim, shows in fiery relief all intermediate objects. Like an arrowy river, his mark is the sea, but every cloud, tree, and tower is reflected on its way, and serves to beautify and to dignify the waters. Frank, all-embracing, and unselecting is the motion of his genius. Like the sun-rays, which, secure in their own purity and directness, pass fearlessly through all deep, dark, intricate, or unholy places—equally illustrate the crest of a serpent and the wing of a bird, pause on the summit of an ant-hillock as well as on the brow of Mont Blanc—take up as a little thing alike the crater of the volcano and the shed cone of the pine, and after they have, in one wide charity, embraced all shaped and sentient things, expend their waste strength and beauty upon the inane space beyond—thus does the imagination of Shakspeare count no subject or object too low, and none too high, for its comprehensive and uncontrollable sweep.

I have named *impersonality*, as his next quality. The term seems strange and rare—the thing is scarcer still: I mean by it that Shakspeare, when writing, thought of nothing but his sub-



ject, never of himself. Snatching from an Italian novel, or an ill-translated Plutarch's Lives, the facts of his play, his only question was, Can these dry bones live? How shall I impregnate them with force, and make them fully express the meaning and beauty which they contain? Many writers set to work in a very different style: one in all his writings wishes to magnify his own powers, and his solitary bravo is heard resounding at the close of every paragraph. Another wishes to imitate another writer—a base ambition, pardonable only in children. A third, scorning slavish imitation, wishes to emulate some one school or class of authors. A fourth writes deliberately and professedly *ad captandum vulgus*. A fifth, worn to dregs, is perpetually wishing to imitate his former doings, like a child crying to get yesterday back again. Shakspeare, when writing, thought no more of himself, or other authors, than the sun when shining thinks of Sirius, of the stars composing the Great Bear, or of his own proud array of beams.

This unconsciousness, or impersonality, I have always held to be the highest style of genius. I am aware, indeed, of a subtle objection. It has been said by a high authority—John Sterling—that men of genius are conscious, not of what is peculiar in the individual, but of what is universal in the race; of what characterises, not a man, but man; not of their own individual genius, but of the Great Spirit moving within their minds. Yet what in reality is this but the unconsciousness for which the author, to whom Sterling is replying, contends. When we say that men of genius, in their highest moods, are unconscious, we mean, not that these men become the mere tubes through which a foreign influence descends, but that certain emotions or ideas so fill and possess them, as to produce temporary forgetfulness of themselves, save as the passive though intelligent instruments of the feeling or the thought. It is true that afterwards self may suggest the reflection—the fact that we have been selected to receive and convey such melodies proves our breadth and fitness—it is from the oak, not the reed, that the wind elicits its deepest music; but, in the first place, this thought never takes place at the same time with the true afflatus, and is almost inconsistent with its presence—it is a mere after inference;—an inference, secondly, which is not always made;—nay, thirdly, an inference which is often rejected, when the prophet, off the stood, feels tempted to regard with suspicion or shuddering disgust the result of his raptured hour of inspiration. Milton seems to have shrunk back at



the retrospect of the height he had reached in the *Paradise Lost*, and preferred his *Paradise Regained*. Shakspeare, having written his tragic miracles under a more entire self-abandonment, became in his sonnets, owing to a reflex act of sagacity, aware of what feats he had done. Bunyan is carried on, through all the stages of his immortal pilgrimage, like a child in the leading-strings of her nurse, but, after looking back upon its contemplated course, begins, with all the harmless vanity of a child (see the prefatory poem to the second part), to crow over the achievement. Burns, while composing "Tam o' Shanter," felt little else than the animal rapture of the excitement; it dawned on him afterwards that he had produced his finest poem. Thus all gifted spirits do best when they know not what they do. The boy Tell was great,

Nor knew how great he was.

I mention next his humanity. It was said of Burns, that if you had touched his hand it would have burned yours. And although Shakspeare, being a far broader and greater, was, consequently, a calmer man, yet I would not have advised any very timid person to have made the same experiment with him. Poor Hartley Coleridge wrote a clever paper, in *Blackwood*, entitled, "Shakspeare a Tory and a Gentleman;" I wish some one had answered it, under the title, "Shakspeare a Radical and a Man." A man's heart beats in his every line. He loves, pities, feels for, as well as with, the meanest of his fellow "human mortals." He addresses men as brothers, and as brothers have they responded to his voice.

I need scarcely speak of his simplicity. He was a child as well as a man. His poetry, in the language of Pitt, comes "sweetly from nature." It is a "gum" oozing out without effort or consciousness: occasionally, indeed (for I do not, like the Germans, believe in the infallibility of Shakspeare), he condescends to indite a certain swelling, rumbling bombast, especially when he is speaking through the mouth of kings; but even his bombast comes rolling out with an ease and a gusto, a pomp and a prodigality, which are quite delightful. Shakspeare's nonsense is like no other body's nonsense. It is always the nonsense of a great genius. A dignitary of the Church of England went once to hear Robert Hall. After listening with delight to that great preacher, he called at his house. He found him lying on the floor, with his children performing somersets over him. He lifted up his hands in wonder, and exclaimed,



“Is that the great Robert Hall?”—“Oh,” replied Hall, “I have all my nonsense out of the pulpit, you have all yours in it.” So Shakspeare, after having done a giant's work, could take a giant's recreation; and were he returning to earth, would nearly laugh himself dead again, at the portentous attempts of some of his critics to prove his nonsense sense, his blemishes beauties, and his worst puns fine wit!

The subtlety of Shakspeare is one of his most wonderful qualities. Coleridge used to say, that he was more of a philosopher than a poet. His penetration into motives, his discernment of the most secret thoughts and intents of the heart, his discrimination of the delicate shades of character, the manner in which he makes little traits tell large tales, the complete grasp he has of all his characters, whom he lifts up and down like ninepins, the innumerable paths by which he reaches similar results, the broad, comprehensive maxims on life, manners, and morals, which he has scattered in such profusion over his writings, the fact that he never repeats a thought, figure, or allusion, the wonderful art he has of identifying himself with all varieties of humanity—all proclaim the inexhaustible and infinite subtlety of his genius, and, when taken in connection with its power and loftiness, render him the prodigy of poets and of men. I once, when a student, projected a series of essays, entitled “Sermons on Shakspeare,” taking for my texts some of those profound and far-reaching sentences, which abound in him, where you have the fine gold, which is the staple of his works, collected in little knots, or nuggets of thick gnarled magnificence. It was this quality in him which made a French author say, that, were she condemned to select three volumes for her whole library, the three would be, Bacon's Essays, the Bible, and Shakspeare. You can never open a page of his dramas without being startled at the multitude of sentences which have been, and are perpetually being, quoted. The proverbs of Shakspeare, were they selected, would be only inferior to the proverbs of Solomon.

When I name purity as another quality of this poet, I may be thought paradoxical. And yet, when I remember his period, his circumstances, the polluted atmosphere which he breathed; when I compare his writings with those of contemporary dramatists; when I weigh him in the scales with many of our modern authors; and when I remember that his writings never seek to corrupt the imagination, to shake the principles, or to influence the passions of men, I marvel how thoroughly his



genius has saved him, harmless, amid formidable difficulties, and say, that Marina, in his own "Pericles," did not come forth more triumphantly scathless, than does her poet. Let those who prate of Shakspeare's impurity first of all read him candidly; secondly, read, *if they can*, Massinger, or Beaumont and Fletcher; and, thirdly, if they have Bowdler's contemptible *Family Shakspeare*, fling it into the fire, and take back the unmutilated copy to their book-shelves and their bosoms. The moonlight is not contaminated by shining on a dunghill, and neither is the genius of Shakspeare by touching transiently, on its way to higher regions, upon low, loathsome, or uncertain themes. His language is sometimes coarse, being that of his age; his spirit, belonging to no age (would I could say the same of Burns, Byron, Moore, and Eugene Sue), is always clean, healthy, and beautiful.

His imagination and fancy are nearly equal, and, like two currents of air, are constantly interpenetrating. They seem twins—the one male, the other female. Not only do both stand ever ready to minister to the subtlest and deepest motions of his intellect, and all the exigencies of his plots (like spray, which decorates the river, when running under ground, as well as when shining in the sunlight), but he has, besides, committed himself to several distinct trials of the strength of both. The caldron in *Macbeth* stands up an unparalleled collection of dark and powerful images, all shining as if shown in hell-fire, and accompanied by a dancing, mirthful measure, which adds unspeakably to their horror. It is as though a sentence of death were given forth in doggerel. And, for light and fanciful figures, we may take either Titania's speech to the Fairies, or the far-famed description of Queen Mab by Mercutio. In these passages, artistic aim is for a season abandoned. A single faculty, like a horse from a chariot stud, breaks loose, and revels and riots in the fury of its power.

Shakspeare's wit and humour are bound together in general by the amiable band of good-nature. What a contrast to Swift! He loathes; Shakspeare, at the worst, hates. His is the slaving and ferocious ire of a maniac; Shakspeare's, that of a man. Swift broods like their shadow over the festering sores and the moral ulcers of humanity; Shakspeare touches them with a ray of poetry, which beautifies, if it cannot heal. *Gulliver* is the day-book of a fiend; *Timon* is the magnificent outbreak of an injured angel. His wit, how fertile, quick, forgetive! Congreve and Sheridan are poor and forced in the comparison. How long



they used to sit hatching some clever conceit; and what a cackling they made when it had chipped the shell! Shakspeare threw forth a Mercutio or a Falstaff at once, each embodying in himself a world of laughter, and there an end. His humour, how broad, rich, subtle, powerful, and full of genius and geniality it is! Why, Bardolph's red nose eclipses all the dramatic characters that have succeeded. Ancient Pistol himself shoots down the whole of the Farquhars, Wycherleys, Sheridans, Goldsmiths, and Colmans, put together. Dogberry is the prince of donkeys, past, present, and to come. When shall we ever have such another tinker as Christopher Sly? Sir Andrew Aguecheek! the very name makes you *quake* with laughter. And like a vast sirloin of English roast beef, rich and dripping, lies along the mighty Falstaff, with humour oozing out of every corner and cranny of his vast corporation.

Byron describes man as a pendulum, between a smile and tear. Shakspeare, the representative of humanity, must weep as well as laugh, and his tears, characteristically, must be large and copious. What variety, as well as force, in his pathetic figures! Here pines in the centre of the forest the melancholy Jacques, musing tenderly upon the sad pageant of human life, finding sermons in stones, although not "good in everything," now weeping beside a weeping deer, and now bursting out into elfish laughter, at the "fool" he found in the forest. Here walks and talks, in her guilty and desperate sleep, the Fiend Queen of Scotland, lighted on her way by the fire that never shall be quenched, which is already kindled around her, seeking in vain to sweeten her "little" hand, on which there is a spot with which eternity must deal, and yet moving you to weep for her as you tremble. Here turns away from men for ever the haughty Timon, seeking his low grave beside, and his only mourner in, the everlasting brine of the sea. Here the noble Othello, mad with imaginary wrongs, bends over the bed of Desdemona, and kisses ere he kills the purest and best of women. Here Juliet awakes too late from her fatal sleep, and finds a dead lover where she had hoped to find a living husband. Here poor Ophelia, garlanded with flowers, sinks into her pool of death—a pool which might again and again have been replenished from the tears which her story has started. And here, once king of England, but now king of the miserable in every clime—once wise in everything but love, now sublime in madness—once wearing a royal coronet, now crowned with the howling blackness of heaven above his grey dishevelled locks—



once clad in purple, now wreathing around him fantastic wreaths of flowers—it is Lear who cries aloud—

Ye heavens!

If ye do love old men, if your sweet sway  
Hallow obedience, if *yourselves are old*,  
Make it your cause—avenge me of my daughters.

That Shakspeare is the greatest genius the world ever saw is acknowledged now by all sane men; for even France has, at last, after many a reluctant struggle, fallen into the procession of his admirers. But that Shakspeare also is out of all sight and measure the finest artist that ever constructed a poem or drama, is a less general, and yet a growing belief. By no mechanical rules, indeed, can his works be squared. But tried, as all great works should be, by principles of their own—principles which afterwards control and create their true criticism (for it is the office of the critic to find out and expound the elements which mingled in the original inspiration—not to test them by a preconceived and arbitrary standard), and when, especially, you remember the object contemplated by the poet, that of mirroring the motley life of man, his works appear as wonderful in execution as in conception. Their very faults are needed to prove them human, otherwise their excellences would have classed them with the divine.

It is amusing to read the criticism which the eighteenth century passed upon Shakspeare. They did not, in fact, know very well what to make of him. They walked and talked “about him, and about him.” I am reminded of the astonishment felt by the inhabitants of Lilliput at the discovery of Gulliver, the “Man Mountain.” One critic mounted on a ladder to get a nearer view of the phenomenon. Another peered at him through a telescope. A third insisted on strapping him down by the ligatures of art. A fourth measured his size geometrically. But all agreed, that, although much larger, he was much coarser and uglier than themselves; and expressed keen regret that so much strength was not united with more symmetry. He seemed to them a monster, not a man. Voltaire, with the dauntless effrontery of a monkey, called him an enormous dunghill, with a few pearls scattered upon it—unconsciously thereby re-enacting the part of Dogberry, and degrading from the monkey into the ass.

In our day all this is changed. Shakspeare no more seems a large lucky barbarian, with wondrous powers growing wild and struggling, but a wise man, wisely managing the most magni-



ficient gifts. His art—whether you regard it as moulding his individual periods, or as regulating his plays—seems quite as wonderful as his genius. Men criticise now even the successful battles of Napoleon, and seek very learnedly to show that he ought not to have gained them, and that by all the rules of war it was very ridiculous in him to gain them. But Shakspeare's great victories can stand every test, and are seen not only to be triumphs of overwhelming genius, but of consummate skill.

Ere glancing at his plays individually, I would, first of all, try to divide them under various classes. The division which occurs to me as the best, is that of his metaphysical, his imaginative, his meditative, his passionate, his historical, and his comic dramas. His metaphysical plays are, properly speaking, only two—*Macbeth* and *King Lear*. I call them metaphysical, not in the common sense, but in Shakspeare's own sense of the word. Lady Macbeth says—

Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,  
And chastise with the valour of my tongue,  
All that impedes thee from the golden round,  
Which fate and *metaphysical* aid doth seem,  
To have thee crown'd withal.

Metaphysics means here an agency beyond nature, and at the same time evil. Now, in *Macbeth*, it is this metaphysical power which, through the witches, controls like destiny the whole progress of the play. In *Lear*, not only does destiny brood over the whole, but the hell-dog of madness—which in Shakspeare is metaphysical power—is let loose. In some other plays, it is true, he introduces superhuman agents, but in these two alone all the springs seem moved by a dark unearthly power. By his imaginative plays, I mean those where his principal object is to indulge that one stupendous faculty of his. Such are the *Tempest* and the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. These are selections from his dream-book. By his meditative plays, I mean those in which incident, passion, and poetry are made subservient to the workings of subtle and reckless reflection. Such are *Hamlet*, *Timon*, and *Measure for Measure*. His passionate plays—for example, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*—are designed to paint, whether in simple or compound form, whether stationary, progressive, or interchanging, the passions of humanity. His historical and comic plays explain themselves. All his plays, indeed, have more or less of all those qualities, “floating, mingling, interweaving.” But I have thus arranged them according to the master element and purpose of each.



Let me select one of the different classes for rapid analysis. And I feel myself, first of all, attracted toward the weird and haggard tragedy of *Macbeth*. And, first, in this play we must notice again its *metaphysical* character. A nightmare from hell presses down all the story and all the characters. From the commencement of the race to its close, there is a fiend—the fiend sitting behind the rider, and at every turn of the dark descending way you hear his suppressed or his resounding laughter. All is out of nature. The ground reels below you. The play is a caldron, mixed of such ingredients as the Weird Sisters, a blasted heath, an air-drawn dagger, the blood-boltered ghost of a murdered man rising to sup with his murderer, lamentings heard in the air, strange screams of death, horses running wild and eating each other, a desperate king asking counsel at the pit of Acheron, an armed head, a bloody child, child crowned and with a tree in his hand, and eight kings rising from the abyss to answer his questions, a moving forest, a sleep-walking and suicide queen—such are some of the ingredients which a cloudy hand seems to shed into the broth, till it bubbles over with terror and blood. It is not a tragedy, but a collection of tragedies—the death of Duncan being one, that of Banquo another, that of Macduff's family another, that of Lady Macbeth another, and that of Macbeth himself a fifth. And yet the master has so managed them, by varying their character and circumstances, and relieving them by touches of imagination, that there is no repletion—we “sup,” but not “full,” of horrors. By his so potent art, he brings it about, that his supernatural and human persons never jostle. You never wonder at finding them on the stage together; they meet without a start, they part without a shiver; they obey one power, and you feel, that not only does one touch of nature make the “whole world kin,” but that it can link the universe in one brotherhood. It is the humanity which bursts out of every corner and crevice of this drama, like grass and wild flowers from a ruin, that reconciles you to its otherwise intolerable desolation.

This crowding in, and heaping up, distinguished the style, sentiment, imagery, and characters, as well as the incidents of *Macbeth*. It is a short play, but the style is uniformly massive—the sentiment and imagery are rich to exuberance—the characters stand out, mild or terrible wholes distinct from each other as statues, even when dancing their wild dance together, to the music of Shakspeare's magical genius. Banquo, Duncan,



Macduff, and Malcolm, have all this distinct colossal character. But the most interesting persons in the drama are the witches, Macbeth, and his dark Ladye! What unique creations the witches are! Borderers between earth and hell, they have most of the latter. Their faces are faded, and their raiment withered in its fires. Their age seems supernatural; their ugliness, too, is not of the earth. A wild mirth mingles with their malice; they have a certain strange sympathy with their victims; they fancy them, and toy with Macbeth while destroying him, as a cat with a mouse. They do not ride on broomsticks, nor even on winds; their motions have a dream-like rapidity and ease. They are connected, too, with a mythology of Shakspeare's own making, perfectly new and complete. They come and go, and you are left in total uncertainty as to their nature, origin, and history, and must merely say, "the air hath bubbles as the water hath. And these are of them." Altogether, they are the most singular daughters of Shakspeare; and you wonder what Desdemona, Cordelia, and Imogen would have thought of their Weird Sisters.

Next comes the gloomy tyrant of Scotland. I figure him as a tall, strong, dark-haired, dark-eyed, black-browed mountaineer, possessing originally a strong, if not a noble nature. Ambition is dropped like hagseed by the fiends into his bosom, and in the progress of its growth makes him first a murderer, and ultimately a desperate madman. Not natively cruel, he at last, from the necessities of his career, must dine, breakfast, and supper on blood. Yet there is something to me exceedingly pensive as well as sublime in all the actions and utterances of Macbeth's despair. It is a powerful nature at bay, and his language, in its fierce sweep—its lurid magnificence—its lofty yet melancholy tone—its wild moralising, reminds us of that which Milton puts into the mouth of the Prince of Darkness. Hear the celebrated lines:—

*Mac.* Wherefore was that cry?

*Sey.* The queen, my lord, is dead.

*Mac.* She should have died hereafter,  
 There would have been time for such a word—  
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow;  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.



How terribly has despair concentrated and sharpened the intellect which can, in the crisis of its fate, thus moralise. I have sometimes compared Macbeth to Saul the unhappy King of Israel. Like him, he has risen from a lower station; like him, he has cemented his tottering throne by blood; like him, he is possessed by an evil spirit; like him, at last he becomes desperate. Macbeth hies to consult the Weird Sisters; Saul, the Philistines being upon him—David at a distance—Samuel dead—God refusing to answer him by Urim, or prophets, or dreams—goes in his extremity and knocks at the door of hell.

About Lady Macbeth there has been much needless critical discussion. Some have painted her in colours supernaturally dark and deformed, another and more hideous Hecate. Others have, in defending, gone so far as to make her almost amiable; who, I suppose, kissed as she killed the sleeping grooms. I can coincide with neither of those notions—if, indeed, the latter have formed itself into a proper and solid notion. I look upon Lady Macbeth as a female shape of her husband—his shadow in the other sex—a specimen of the different effects which the same passion produces upon different sexes. The better the sex, the worse are the evil consequences, *corruptio optumæ pessuma*. Even as a female infidel, or a female debauchee is incomparably worse than a male in similar predicaments; so with a female murderer—one drained of all the feelings of humanity by the prevalence of a bad ambition. Foster speaks of Lady Macbeth's pure demoniac firmness—meaning to intimate that she was originally worse than her husband, but, in reality, well describing the more total and terrible induration which vice or cruelty produces in a female bosom. It makes man a butcher, and woman a fiend. These very terms, indeed, are applied through Malcolm to the pair:—

The dead butcher and his fiend-like queen

—words which, though uttered through the voice of an enemy, seem intended to convey Shakspeare's own notion of their ultimate characters: only Macbeth must be admitted to have become an inspired butcher ere the close!

And how thoroughly in keeping their different dooms! Macbeth, having sinned as a man, dies like a man, in broad battle, with harness on his back, yielding rather to destiny than to the foe. His lady, having offended against the nobler code, and the higher nature of woman, has a different fate. After long internal anguish, expressed not to the full, even by



her awful sleep, she perishes by her own hand. Woman, inferior it may be to man in intellect, is so far superior in moral qualities, that when these are violated, the pillars of humanity shake, and destruction, in one or other of its forms, must avenge the outrage committed against the very highest feelings of human nature.

From his imaginative plays I select the *Tempest*. I said before, that in poetry there was no absolute origination. If anything could induce me to recall this opinion, it were the recollection of this marvellous play. It rises before us as the New World to the eye of Columbus, fresh, peopled with strange forms, glittering with dew, and radiant in sunshine. As in *Macbeth*, all is strange, but, unlike it, all is glad and genial. Its magic is mild and harmless. The lightnings of this tempest affright, but they do not burn. The isle is full of noises, but they are most of them soothing and musical—

Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices,  
That, if I waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again.

Here all the stern laws both of nature and of the world are repealed. The very villains of the play are treated with lenity—exposed—countermined—but not punished. And what beauty shines in this lonely place from the face of Miranda, the fairest, simplest, noblest female ever made by genius. And what aerial life is given to the scene, by the presence of Ariel, that gay creature of the elements, light as the down of the thistle, yet powerful as the thunderbolt, so *delicate* in the discharge of his mighty tasks, possessed at once of omnipotence and of *tact*, and whose songs have in them a snatch of the sphere music. Hear him, in the prospect of liberty, singing—

Where the bee sucks, there suck I;  
In a cowslip's bell I lie:  
There I couch where owls do cry,  
On the bat's back I do fly,  
After summer, merrily:  
Merrily, merrily, shall I live now,  
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

And what a savage seal-skin ornament to the whole is the redoubted Caliban—the misshapen Mooncalf—rude, revengeful, ignorant, lustful, and who yet caught in this enchanted circle, and surrounded by the influences of this magic isle, when sober speaks, and when drunk belches out the finest imagination and poetry.



Surely Shakspeare, when he wrote the *Tempest*, must have been in the gladdest of all his moods. I fancy him writing it on the first week of a beautiful spring, when nature leaps at once out of the icy grasp of winter into summer's full flush and glory, and when every heart leaps in unison, and finds a new joy and life-like heaven suddenly infused into it, and life, love, beauty, and joy, seem for a season to compose all the categories of being.

*Hamlet* is Shakspeare's grand poetical puzzle, confessedly the most intellectual of all his dramas, and expresses most fully, although by no means most clearly, the results of his deep, subtle, and long-continued musings upon man, and all the strange phenomena by which, in this little life of his, he is surrounded.

Coleridge once remarked, that Shakspeare never seems to have come to his full height, else he had not been a man, but a monster. Had he written, we may add, ten plays equal to *Hamlet*, this monstrous growth had been complete. Its wisdom, so deep and varied—its calm mastery—its profusion of incidents and characters—the skill with which the most contradictory elements, from a ghost to a gravedigger, are harmonised—the philosophic self-possession, united to the burning passion and the imaginative interest—the combination of breadth and length, of height and depth—the mere size of the canvas chosen—the mystic uncertainty of the whole co-existing with singular clearness and finish in most of the parts—the rapidity of the transitions—the unflagging spirit of the dialogue, and the energy of the soliloquies—all go to constitute it a unique amid a world of uniques, the most wonderful of wonders, the most Shaksperian of Shakspeare's works. Shakspeare, in *Hamlet*, seems *growing* into that somewhat greater than himself, for which at present we want a name, and was arrested, we might almost think, while becoming the *tertium quid* between man and a superior order of intelligences.

It is the point of view maintained in *Hamlet* which gives it its peculiar power as a meditative play. Hamlet is a man loosened in a great measure from earth, although not utterly exasperated against it. He sees it not at the point of the misanthrope, nor altogether at that of the maniac, but at that of one who is half-way toward *both* these characters. His sadness casts a moonlight of contemplation around all things, which, as it shines, now twists them into odd and mirthful attitudes, invests them now with shadowy horror, and now



with pleasing gloom. Man and woman have both ceased to delight him, but have not ceased to be objects of eager interest, curiosity, and speculation. Driven by circumstances and temperament toward an insulated position, he pauses, in his full retreat from mankind, to record his impressions of them. Madame Roland, on her way to the scaffold, wished she had been able to record the strange thoughts which were rising in her mind. So Hamlet—a wounded deer seeking the forest of death, separated from men for ever—*has*, in immortal soliloquies, in pungent lines, in wild and whirling words, or in wilder laughter, uttered the strange ideas which he felt flocking around his mind. Profound as wisdom itself are many of those thoughts, and expressed in sentences of the most compact significance.

But this characteristic extends to the whole play. Hamlet has infected all the subordinate characters with his own wisdom. Old Polonius talks at times like another Dr. Johnson; Ophelia is far too wise for one so young; the king himself hiccups aphorisms; and the ghost, while he says, "Brief must I be, I smell the hour of dawn," makes up for the brevity by the pith of his speeches. Indeed, had *Hamlet* appeared in this century, we should have said, that it was constructed on the principle of bringing in all the fine thoughts which had been accumulating for years on the pages of its author's note-book. But such a practice was, in Shakspeare's day, unknown; and, in a writer of his rich and spontaneous power, is unlikely, if not impossible.

In *Hamlet*, strong distemperature of mind ministers the principal part of the interest. It is so, too, with his *Winter's Tale*, his *Othello*, his *Timon of Athens*, his *King Lear*, and his *Macbeth*. These are dreams of Shakspeare's darker moods, for the smile of the "gentle Willy" disguised often wild tumults of thought and feeling, and resembled that red morning sunshine which introduces long days of tempest. There was a vein in Shakspeare's heart running in a deep and secret channel seldom disclosed, but which found now and then a fearful vent in his impersonations of the jealous lover, the maniac, the misanthrope, the murderous king, or the wild, changeful, witty, exasperated, and more than half-maddened prince. In these he is thoroughly in earnest; the large iron which has pierced a large soul is boldly displayed; and, under a thin mask, you see the biggest of human hearts agitated to agony, and the most sweet-blooded of men doing well to be angry even unto death. It is terribly sublime to stand by the shore of an angry Shakspeare, and to see him, like the troubled sea, casting out a furious, yet



rainbow-tinted spray, against the hollowness and the abuses of human society, and making sport, for a season, of man himself! Thus Timon seems to fling his platters of hot water *past* his flatterers upon humanity at large; thus Lear shrieks up questions to the heavens, which make the gloomy curtains of night to shiver; thus Macbeth, when not hewing at his enemies, is cutting, with a like desperate hand, at the problems of human life and destiny; and thus Hamlet, while dancing on his wild erratic way to his uncle's death, tramples on many an ancient saw, and makes many a popular error to tremble below his uncontrollable feet.

This did not, as some might imagine, arise from the necessity of fully impersonating certain eccentric characters; for, first, why did he create or select such characters at all? and, secondly, could he have presented them with such effect without profound sympathy for them? Shakspeare was not a mere mimic or mocking-bird: he spoke out of the abundance of a universal heart, he reproduced himself in many of his characters, and his frequent choice and *con amore* treatment of dark and morbid subjects, seem conclusively to show that there was a fever somewhere in his own system, although it has often been identified, and that, on the whole, justly, with all that is genial and gentle. It was, indeed, *a priori* impossible that a being who formed the microcosm and mirror of humanity should not reflect its shadows as well as its lights; and that, as the representative of man, he should not pass through man's hour of darkness.

There is no play in all Shakspeare's works, if we, perhaps, except *Timon* and *Lear*, where the interest and power are so inextricably interwoven with the main character as in *Hamlet*. *He* is the play. Compared to him, the other characters seem shadows as unsubstantial as his father's ghost. That ghost himself is hardly so interesting as his son. Like shadows swaying to the motions of their substances, do the various characters obey Hamlet's changeful whims, yield to his tempestuous rage, and echo his wild wisdom. Never was the overbearing influence of one driven on the wind of destiny, over idle and commonplace personages, more powerfully displayed. Truly, the slightest whisper of real despair is thunder, its merest touch is iron, its breath an irresistible tempest! It will bespeak a visitor from the other world, "although all hell should yawn;" it will make "a ghost" of any one who dares to stand in its fierce way.

Many critics, while seeking to unravel the mystery of Hamlet's



character, have omitted to notice what is the main moral and purpose of the play—that is, unquestionably, to show the ramified wretchedness springing from crime. This it is which is the root of all the mischief and calamity in the play. This disturbs the grave, embroils the state, infuriates and half deranges the great soul of Hamlet, and is avenged by the successive deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Hamlet, the king, the queen, and Laertes. *This* object of the poet is thoroughly gained. Nemesis is left sitting upon heaps of carcasses, and surveying with an iron smile the manifold and mingling streams of blood, which are all traceable to the one murder in the garden. And the moral is—crime never speaks without being answered by echo upon echo from the rocks of eternal justice; and, in the ruin which follows, the innocent are often as deeply involved as the guilty.

Shakspeare, no doubt, puts into the mouths of his characters words which might seem to accuse Providence. Hamlet, in one of his last speeches, calls it a “harsh world.” And Horatio’s language, when, in summing up the whole eventful history, he speaks of

Cruel, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,  
Purposes mistook,

is hardly that of profound faith. But both are speaking from partial and one-sided points of view; whereas the spirit of the whole play, and many of the words, go to teach us that in everything there is a purpose, that Providence “commends the poisoned chalice” to the lips of those who have mingled it, and that the inequalities and gaps which do exist in the administration of human affairs are but the open mouths of a general cry for a scene of more perfect retribution in another world.

But two deductions from the catastrophe of Hamlet seem possible: the one, that this world is a mere atheistic hubbub, the scene of innumerable wrongs—wrong, too, mixing and intertwining for evermore, and which are never to be redressed; or that there must be a future state. We advise any one who is doubtful as to which of these conclusions Shakspeare wished us to draw, first to ponder the impression left on his own mind as he rises from the perusal of the play, for that, let him depend on it, is the impression the poet meant to leave; and then to read carefully Hamlet’s several soliloquies, and the soliloquy of the miserable king. In these, and throughout the play, the power of conscience, the supremacy of the “canons of the



Eternal," the existence of a future world, and the influence of prayer with God, are recognised in language so decided, and in a manner so sincere, that we are led, and many may be driven, to the conviction, that this most profound of dramas—this broadest of all panoramic views of human nature, and life, and destiny—a view caught on the shuddering brink and from the fearful angle of all but madness—is not a libel upon the Divine Author like the *Cenci*, nor a pæan sheathed in blasphemy like the *Faust*, but that, in spirit, tone, and language, it doth

Assert Eternal Providence,  
And vindicate the ways of God to man.

And if *Hamlet* explains not, and if it even deepens in some measure the mystery of human guilt, it at the same time proclaims, trumpet-tongued, the clear certainty of present punishment, and the strong probability of future retribution.

What Shakspeare's theological creed was, we do not profess to know. An author recently maintains that he was an ideal pantheist, and quotes in proof of it his words in *Macbeth*—"we are such stuff as dreams are made of," and the famous finale of Prospero. But Prospero's speech is merely a paraphrase of the Scripture statement—"all these things shall be dissolved." And Macbeth's words are more in keeping with the moment in his history, when, in the prospect of death, and in the madness of desperate guilt, all things were becoming unreal and swimming around his vision, than they are expressive of his Creator's calm and settled opinion. The murderer is hunted back into the refuge of atheism, and, sleepless himself, would seek to identify sleep and death. "Our little life is rounded with a sleep." As if he said, with a ghastly smile—"sleep has forsaken me, and thus rendered my life a hideous fragment, a yawning chasm; but death cannot so fly: it must close and complete my career." But he who speaks of "sleep" with Macbeth, speaks also of "dreams" with Hamlet. Whatever Shakspeare's notion of religious matters, however, might be, it is interesting to know that his theory of morals, as it may be gathered from his greater and more serious plays, is essentially sound. This may not appear to some a matter of much consequence; but, as it is pleasing now and then to turn from commonplace clocks, and to learn the hour from a sun-dial, so we like sometimes to look away from systems of moral philosophy, to the living and sunlit tables of this great master of human nature. To others, again, his deliverances on such subjects may possibly seem oracular, as from a new Dodona seated among the oaks of the Avon.



The intellectual and poetical qualities of Shakspeare find in *Hamlet* ample scope for display. It is the longest of his dramas, and, at the same time, the richest. The sun of semi-madness, vertical above, has produced a wild and tropical luxuriance of imagery. Every sentence is starred. No play of his contains at once so much sense and so much nonsense, so much bombastic verse and so much dense and pointed prose, so much extravagant licence of fancy and so much profound insight. And so broad is the canvas, that there is ample room in it for all those extremes: they never interfere or jostle; the profoundest practical philosophy and the wildest raving here meet together: "vice and a radiant angel" embrace each other; and Billingsgate like that of a drab, and eloquence and apprehension like that of a god, are united, if not reconciled. It is this exceeding comprehension of view which has rendered *Hamlet* the true "Psalm of Life," exhibiting it, not partially, or by selection, or in colours, but calotyping it calmly and sternly as a mystic, fantastical, but real *whole*.

Across this broad picture, Shakspeare has caused to shoot one ray from the unseen world. We refer, of course, to the ghost. There is nothing which shows more the delicate and masterly handling of a Creator (who loves, understands, and treats tenderly his own children, not, like a plagiarist and stepfather, ignorantly and despitefully uses them) than the management of this awful visitor. The words "horribly beautiful" are applicable to him, and to him alone. There is not one vulgar element about him. He is—shall we say?—a perfect gentleman, and has a "courteous action." One desire, that of revenge, burns in his bosom, but it burns rather against the crime than the criminal. He leaves his wife "to Heaven, and to the thorns" in her own breast. In his last appearance, while the queen is affrighted at Hamlet's ecstasy, he tells him, in compassion, to "step between her and her fighting soul." And how admirably has Shakspeare caught the true shape, form, and figure of a spiritual being, such as we at present conceive of it! He is not a vague vapour: he is "clad in complete steel;" his beard is visible, "a sable silvered;" his "beaver is up;" his countenance is "very pale," but "more in sorrow than in anger;" he has come from literal "fire," and his thoughts, feelings, and language, resemble those of one still in the flesh. And yet, around the steel, and the beaver, and the beard, there hangs a haze of spiritual mystery and terror, which lends and receives effect from the materialism of the apparition. He



“vanishes at the crowing of the cock.” He passes, like heat, through the solid ground. Shakspeare has thus avoided the extremes of representing a ghost in too shadowy or too gross a light—of spinning this grisly thread too thickly or too thin—to homespun or to gossamer. His shadow is something of a substance, and his substance is something of a shade.

And such a nondescript form, too, appears at first Hamlet himself—a ghost among men, the phantom son of a phantom sire, neither a hero nor a coward, neither right flesh and blood nor a mere abstraction, armed, like Satan, “with what *seemed* both sword and shield,” and yet, like him, shrinking away, at times, from the contest. He stands between the living and the dead, and seems to disdain all critical classification. He may be compared to one of those shifting shapes, met with in water, mist, or cloud, which appears, at one angle and from one distance, a palace; at another, a temple; at a third, a misshapen monster; and at a fourth, a man. Thus, Hamlet, at one time, and to one observer, seems the bravest and strongest of men; anon, the weakest and most cowardly: at one time, devout and rational; at another, a fierce and profane babbler: now, an ardent lover; and now, a heartless insulter of the woman he had professed to love: now, prompt in action to rashness; and now, slow to indolence and fatuity: now, a counterfeit of madness; and now, really insane: now, the most cunning, and now the most careless, of men: now a rogue, now a fool, now a wise man, and now a heterogeneous compound of all three. Twenty theories have been propounded of him; all have been plausibly based on particular points in his character; and yet no theory hitherto is entirely, or even approximately, complete; each is serviceable chiefly in blowing out the one immediately before itself: and still Hamlet seems, as he stands, shrouded and shifting to every breath, to say to his critics, as he said to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would *pluck* out the *heart* of my mystery; you would *sound* me from the lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is *much music*, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet *cannot you make it speak*.”

We happen at present to have beside us only two of those twenty “soundings,” and beg leave to say something of them, ere propounding our own view. The first is that of Dr. Johnson. It comes, as Hamlet would say, “trippingly off the tongue,” and is written with more than his usual careless rotundity and lazy elaboration of style. It commences by praising, very



properly, the "variety" of the play. But what does the doctor mean by the "merriment" it excites? Surely it is "very tragical mirth." Even in the laughter of this drama, its heart is sad. Hamlet and a gravedigger are the two jesters! And while the wit of the one is wild, reckless, turbulent, like the glee of the damned, that of the other has a death-rattle in its throat, and, returned to us on the echoes of the grave, produces an unspeakably dreary effect. Dr. Johnson adds, "The pretended madness of Hamlet causes much mirth." This we question. At least us it has always impressed with a feeling of melancholy. Indeed, the lighter parts of the play, consisting more of wit than of humour, excite rather wonder at the sharp turns, lively sallies, and fierce retorts of a stung spirit, than any broad and genial laughter. He says, that "some scenes neither forward nor retard the action." This we may grant; but are not these in fine keeping with the "slow, reluctant" delay of the hero? Shakspeare must linger, in sympathy with Hamlet. Nay, this was sometimes, as we have seen, the manner of the poet. An inspired loiterer, he now and then leans over some beautiful stream, or pauses at some fine point of prospect, or strikes into some brief byway of humour, or character, or pathos, even when his day's journey, and the day itself, are both drawing to a close. For why? He was a man, not a railway machine; and, besides, as his soul had its habitual dwelling in summer, *his* days were all long.

He says, that "Hamlet was an instrument rather than an agent," but suggests no reason why Shakspeare has made him so. He charges, finally, the play with "a lack of poetical justice and poetical probability. The apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose. The revenge which he demands is not obtained but by the death of him who is required to take it; and the gratification which would arise from the destruction of a usurper and a murderer is abated by the death of Ophelia, the young and beautiful, the harmless and the pious." But, first, the apparition's object *was* gained—the ghost did not leave the grave in vain—the murderer was detected, and died; and, secondly, Shakspeare probably consulted something higher than our "gratification." He sought, probably, the broad moral purpose we have already expressed; and, if questioned as to poetical justice, might have replied in words similar to those of Scott—perhaps the noblest passage, in a moral point of view, in all that writer's works—"A character of a lofty stamp is degraded, rather than exalted, by an attempt to reward



virtue with temporal prosperity. Such is not the recompense which Providence has deemed worthy of suffering merit, and it is a dangerous and fatal doctrine, that rectitude of conduct and of principle are either naturally allied with, or adequately rewarded by, the gratification of our passions, or attainment of our wishes. In a word, if a virtuous and self-denied character is dismissed with temporal wealth, greatness, or rank, the reader will be apt to say, 'Verily, virtue has had its reward.' But a glance at the great picture of life will show that duty is seldom thus remunerated." And what is true of the apportionment of the gifts of Providence is true also of its evils. It were degrading to a lofty character, not only to enrich it with uniform good fortune, but to give it an unnatural insulation from the great and wide ruin which is produced by guilt.

We pass to Goethe's far more celebrated account of *Hamlet*, of which the *Edinburgh Review* declares, that there is "nothing so good in all our own commentators—nothing at once so poetical, so feeling, and so just." After a beautiful picture of Hamlet's original character, and a paraphrase of his story, Goethe says, "to me it is clear that Shakspeare meant to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul *unfit* for the performance of it." And then follows the well-known and exquisitely-beautiful figure—"An oak-tree is planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom: the roots expand, the jar is shivered. A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear, and must not cast away." This is very fine, but is it true? Does it open the lock of Hamlet's character? Does it account for all, or for the most, of the mysteries connected with it?

Now, we do not find any proofs that Hamlet was peculiarly weak of nerve; nay, we find many proofs to the contrary. Did he not front his father's spirit in arms? Did he not rebuke his mother, and pink old Polonius, mistaking him for his uncle? Did he not bravely confront Laertes, and at last stab the king? These actions and others seem to prove him endowed with the "Nemean lion's nerve;" and, although he more than once charges himself with cowardice, yet this occurs always in passages where he seems to be beating about in search of causes for his conduct, and to be lashing himself, by imaginary arguments, into rage. Nor does Shakspeare wish to represent him as peculiarly delicate and tender. He seems rather an oak than a flower-jar, though it be an oak shaken by the wind. No



namby-pamby sentimentalist had he ever been, but a brave, strong man, whose melancholy and exasperation bring forth, in tumultuous profusion, the excessive riches of a prematurely thoughtful and very powerful soul. His is manifestly no weakly elegant and graceful nature unhinged; but a strong, rarely-gifted, and bold spirit, in anguish, uncertainty, aberration, and despair. Though there were no other evidence, the vigour and tact discovered in the trick passed upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in sending them to be executed instead of himself, prove that he was an energetic and not a feeble character. So that, although Goethe has extracted "music" from this strange instrument, he has not "plucked out" the *heart* of its mystery.

Let us now come to state our own impressions, which we do not propound as dogmatically certain, but simply as highly probable.

First, then, we do not think that Shakspeare ever intended Hamlet for a thoroughly consistent and regular character, swayed always by intelligible motives, and adjusted, in his actions, either according to fixed principles or to steady currents of passion. He meant to show us a mind of great general powers and warm passions, liable to every species of whim and caprice, and at last, through the force of melancholy and mingling circumstances, partially unhinged—aware, however, of this, and with astuteness enough to turn the *real* aberration into a means for supplying evidence for the existence of the *assumed*. Such a nondescript being, hovering between the worlds of reality and insane dream, Shakspeare chose, that he might survey mankind from a new and strange angle, and through a medium which should bring out more forcibly the mysterious contrasts of human life. Hamlet is a being all but loosened from humanity, whom we see bursting tie after tie which had bound him to his kind, and surveying them at last almost from an ideal altitude. He is a "chartered libertine," with method in his madness, and with madness in his method, and who, whether he rushes or pauses on his uncertain path—now with the rush of the cataract above, and now with the pause of the deep pool below—is sure to dash a strong and lawless light upon the subjects or the persons he encounters. He becomes thus a quaint and mighty mask, from behind which Shakspeare speaks out sentiments which he could not else have so freely disclosed; and—shall we say?—the great dramatist has used Hamlet as Turpin did Black Bess—he has drenched him with the wine



of demi-derangement, and then accomplished his perilous ride.

Secondly, Hamlet's conduct is entirely what might have been expected from the construction of his mind, and the effect sad circumstances have produced upon him. He is "everything by turns, and nothing long." No deep passion of any kind can root itself in his mind, although a hundred passions pass and repass, and rage and subside within his soul. He well speaks of himself as consisting of divers "parts." His very convictions are not profound. He at first implicitly believes the word of the ghost as to his uncle's guilt, but afterwards his belief falters, and he has to be reassured by the matter of the play. The mask of total madness he snatches up, wears *con amore* for awhile, and then wearies of it, and drops it, and then resumes it again. This, too, explains his conduct to Ophelia. He loves her; but his love, or its expression, yields for a time to the paroxysm of the passions excited by the ghost; it returns, like a demon who had been dismissed, in sevenfold force, and he rushes into her apartment, and goes through antics, partly to sustain his assumed character of madness, but principally as the wild outcome of real love; his passion is again overlaid by the whirling current of events, but breaks out at last, like a furnace, at her grave. So, too, with his desire for vengeance on his father's murderer. It has lighted, not as Goethe has it, on a feeble, but on a flighty nature; the oak is not in a tiny jar, it is planted in a broad field, but a field where there is not much "depth of earth," and where many other trees growing beside draw a portion of that depth away. It is not the want of nerve: he could kill the king, in a momentary impulse, as he killed Polonius, but he cannot form or pursue any strong and steady plan for his destruction; if that plan, at least, required time for its development. Other feelings, too, interfere with its accomplishment. There is at times in his mind a reluctance to the task, as a work of butchery—the butchery of an uncle and a stepfather. Regard for his mother's feelings, and the consequences to result on her, is no stranger to his soul, and serves to cool his ardour and to excuse his delay. The desire of vengeance never, in short, becomes the main and master passion of his mind, and this, simply, because that powerful, but morbid and jangled mind is incapable of a master passion, and of the execution of a fixed purpose. One consistency only is there in Hamlet's character, that of subtle and poetic intellect. This penetrates with its searching light every



nook and corner of the play, follows him through all the windings of his course, unites in some measure the contradictory passions which roll and fluctuate around him, inspirits his language into eloquence, wit, and wisdom, and makes him the *facile princeps* of Shakspeare's fools—those illustrious personages who “never say a foolish thing, and never do a wise one.” Such a “foremost *fool* of all this world,” with brilliant powers, uncertain will, and “scattery” purposes and passions, is Hamlet the Dane, as, at least, he appears to us after much and careful pondering of his character. Throw into the crucible strong intellect, vivid fancy, irregular will, fluctuating courage, impulsive and inconstant feelings, an excitable heart, a melancholy temperament, and add to these the damaging, weakening, yet infuriating influences of a father's murder, a mother's marriage, the visit of a ghost, an unsettled passion for Ophelia, the meddling interference of a weak father-in-law, the spectacle of a disturbed and degraded country, the feeling of his own incapacity for fixed resolve or permanent energy of passion, and from this weird mixture there will come out a Hamlet, in all his strength and weakness, wisdom and folly, energetic commencements and lame and impotent conclusions, insane and aimless fury, and strong, sudden gleams of resolution and valour, vain and sounding bombast, and clear, terse, and inspired eloquence. What weakness he has does not lie so much in any one part of his mind, as in the want of proper management and grasp of his powers as a whole. Partially insane he is, but his insanity is the reverse of a monomania; it arises from the confusion and too rapid succession of moods and feelings, which he cannot consolidate into a whole, or press into one strong, narrow current, running on to his purpose

As the Pontick sea  
To the Propontick and the Hellespont.

Is it too much to call him a sublime and sententious, an earnest and eloquent fool?

Yet it is clear that Shakspeare had a peculiar and profound sympathy with Hamlet. He lingers beside him long. He lavishes all his wealth upon him. He seems to love to look out at mankind through the strange window of those wild eyes. Was this because Hamlet was (as is generally supposed) the child of his mature age, or was it from a certain fellow-feeling? Hamlet is what Shakspeare would have been, had he ever been thoroughly soured, and had that magnificent head of his ever begun to reel and totter. Had Shakspeare, like Swift,



Johnson, Byron, and Scott, a fear of "dying a top," and has he shot out that awful fear into his impersonation of the Prince of Denmark, and thus relieved and carried it off?

The general moral of the play has been stated above; but there are besides numberless minor morals, as well as separate beauties, scattered in golden sentences throughout, which must be familiar to all. There is the picture of man, in his strange contrarieties of wormhood and godhood—his head of gold, and his feet of miry clay—compacted out of all contradictions; and who—even as the Andes include in their sweep, from the ocean below to the hoary head of Chimborazo above, all climates, seasons, and productions of earth—touches, as *he* ascends, all conditions of being, and runs parallel to all the gradations of the universe. Pascal, Herbert, Young, and Pope, have written in emulous and eloquent antithesis on the same theme; but they all pale before this one expression of Hamlet's (after a matchless enumeration of man's noble qualities)—"this *quint-essence of dust*." Where in literature such an anticlimax? such a jerking down of proud pretensions; such two worlds of description and satire condensed into two words? This, and many other expressions here, and in other of Shakspeare's works, prove what an accusing spirit, what a myriad-armed and tongued misanthrope, he might have been! But a soured Shakspeare is a thought difficult to be entertained.

The two famous soliloquies, again, seem "God's canon against self-slaughter" versified. They have, we doubt not, deterred many a rash spirit from suicide. If they do not oppose it upon the highest ground, they do it on one generally intelligible and powerful. The prayer of the guilty king is worth a thousand dull homilies on the subject. It points to the everlasting distinction between a *sinful*, and a *sinner's* prayer. The advice of Polonius to his son is full of practical wisdom; but, owing to the contrast with the frozen stupidity of the man from whom it comes, reminds us of a half-melted and streaming mass of ice. The irony and quaint moral which gild the skull in the graveyard, till it glares and chatters, are in keeping with the wild story and wilder characters, but are not devoid of edifying instruction to those who can surpass the first shudder of disgust. And the character and fate of Ophelia convey, in the most plaintive manner, a still tenderer and more delicate lesson.

Surely Shakspeare was the greatest and most humane of all mere moralists. Seeing more clearly than mere man ever saw



into the evils of human nature and the corruptions of society, into the natural weakness and the acquired vice of man, he can yet love, pity, forget his anger, and clothe him in the mellow light of his genius, like the sun, who, in certain days of peculiar balm and beauty, seems to shed his beams, like an amnesty, upon all beings. But we must not forget that Shakspeare is no pattern for us—that this very generosity of heart seems, we fear, to have blinded him to the *special* character and adaptations of the Christian scheme—and that we, as Christians, and not mere philanthropists, are bound, while pitying the guilty, to do indignant and incessant battle against that giant Something, for which sin is but a feeble name, which slew our Saviour, and which has all but ruined our race.

I have dwelt so long on *Hamlet*, that I must now hurry to a close.

With regard to Shakspeare's critics and commentators, I will not say, with Hazlitt, that "if you would see the greatness of human genius, read Shakspeare; if you would see the smallness of human learning, read his commentators." But I will say, that I have learned more of Shakspeare from Hazlitt than from any other quarter, except from Shakspeare himself.

In preparing these cursory remarks upon Shakspeare, I have studiously avoided re-reading any works upon the subject. I may, however, recommend to those who wish to sail out farther upon this great ocean—Johnson's *Preface to Shakspeare* (excellent so far as it goes), Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakspeare's Plays*, Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Literature*, Mrs. Jameson on Shakspeare's Female Characters, and an admirable series which appeared in *Blackwood*, entitled *Shakspeare in Germany*.

I close by claiming a high place for this poet among the benefactors of his kind. With august philanthropists, Howard or Wilberforce, we may not class him. Into that seventh heaven of invention, where Milton and Dante dwelt, he came only sometimes, not for want of power, but because his sphere was a wider and larger one—he had business to do in the veins of the earth as well as in the azure depth of air. But if force of genius—sympathy with every form and every feeling of humanity—the heart of a man united to the imagination of a poet, and wielding the Briarean hands of a demigod—if the writing of thirty-two plays which are colouring to this hour the literature of the world—if the diffusion of harmless happiness in immeasurable quantity—if the stimulation of innumerable minds—if the promotion of the spirit of charity and of universal



brotherhood—if these constitute for mortal man titles to the name of benefactor, and to that praise which ceases not with the sun, but expands into immortality, the name and the praise must support the throne which Shakspeare has established over the minds of the inhabitants of an earth which may be known in other parts of the universe as “Shakspeare’s world.”



## SIR EDWARD LYTTON BULWER <sup>1</sup>.

THE attention of the Scottish public has of late been strongly attracted to Sir Edward Lytton Bulwer, through his visit to Edinburgh; and the elegant and scholarly addresses he delivered there. We propose taking the opportunity so lawfully and gracefully furnished by his recent appearances among us, to analyse at some length, and in a critical yet kindly spirit, the leading elements of his literary character and genius.

Bulwer has been now twenty-seven years before the public, and has during that period filled almost every phase of authorship and of life. He has been a critic, an editor, a dramatist, an historian, a politician, a speculator in metaphysics, a poet, a novelist, a member of parliament, a roué, a husband, a divorcée, a winebibber, a subject of the cold water cure, a sceptic, a christian, a philosophical radical, and a moderate conservative. In his youth he worshipped Hazlitt and Shelley,—in his middle age he vibrated between Brougham and Coleridge,—and in his waning manhood he associates with Alison and Aytoun. He has poured out books in all manners, on all subjects, and in all styles; and his profusion might have seemed that of a spendthrift, if it had not been for the stores in the distance which even his scatterings by the wayside revealed. For versatility of genius, variety of intellectual experience, and the brilliant popularity which has followed him in all his diversified career, he reminds us rather of Goethe or Voltaire, than of any living author. Like them he has worshipped the god Proteus, and so devoutly and diversely worshipped him that he might almost, at times, be confounded with the object of his adoration.

We think decidedly, however, that this boundless fertility and elasticity have tended to lessen the general idea of Bulwer's powers, and to cast an air of tentative experiment and rash adventure over many of his works. Had he concentrated himself upon some grand topic,—his fame had now been equally wide, not less brilliant, and much more solid than it is;—had he taken some one lofty Acropolis by storm, and shown the flag of

<sup>1</sup> The Novels and Romances of Sir E. B. Lytton, Bart. London: Chapman and Hall. From the *Scottish Review*, April 1854.



his genius floating on its summit, instead of investing a hundred at once, he had been—and been counted—a greater general. We would willingly have accepted two or three superb novels, one large conclusive history, along with a single work of systematic and profound criticism, in exchange for all that motley and unequal, although most varied and imposing mass of fiction, history, plays, poems, and politics, which forms the collected works of Sir E. Lytton Bulwer.

Some of Sir Edward's admirers have ventured to compare him to Shakspeare and to Scott. Such comparisons are not just. Than Shakspeare he owes a great deal less to nature, and a great deal more to culture, as well as to that indomitable perseverance to which he has lately ascribed so much of his success, so that we may indeed call the one the least, and the other the most cultivated of great authors; and to Scott, he is vastly inferior in that simple power, directness of aim, natural dignity, manly spirit, fire and health, which rank him immediately below Homer. We may here remark that, notwithstanding all that has been said and sung about the genius of Scott, we are convinced that justice has never been done to one feature of his novels—we mean their excellence as specimens of English style. Except in Burke and De Quincey, whose mode of thinking is so very different, we know of no passages in English prose, which approach the better parts of the Waverley series in the union of elegance and strength, in manly force, natural grace, and noble rhythmical cadence. Would that any word of ours could recall the numerous admirers of the morbid magnificence, and barbarous dissonance of Carlyle's style; of the curt affected jargon which mars the poetic beauty of Emerson's; of the loose fantastic verbiage in which Dickens chooses to indite most of his serious passages; and of the laboured antithesis, uneasy brilliance and assumed carelessness of Macaulay; and induce them to take up again the neglected pages of the Titan Burke, with all the wondrous treasures of wisdom, knowledge, imagery, and language they contain, and to read night and day Scott's novels—not for their story, or their pictures of national manners—but for the sake of the wells of English undefiled; the specimens of picturesque, simple, rich, and powerful writing, which they so abundantly contain.

Bulwer, too, although even in his most favoured hours he cannot write like Scott, is distinguished by the merit of his style. It has more point, if not so much simplicity; if possessing less strength, it has far more brilliance; and it has, moreover, a cer-



tain classical charm—a certain Attic elegance—a certain tinge of the antique—which few writers of the age can rival. If D'Israeli's mode of writing remind you of the gorgeous dress of Jewish females, with their tiaras shining on the brow, their diamond necklaces gleaming above the breast, the vivid yellow or deep red of their garments, their brodered hair, and pearls, and costly array, Bulwer's, in his happier vein, reminds you of the attire of the Grecian women, shod with sandals, clothed with the simple, yet elegant tunic, and bearing each on her head a light and tremulous urn.

Passing from his style, we have some remarks to make on the following points connected with him,—the alleged non-poetical nature of his mind, his originality, the impersonal faculty he possesses to such a degree, his remarkable width of mind, his dramatic power, the fact that with all his frequent flippancy, levity, and excess of point, he is equal to all the great crises of his narrative; and finally to that power or principle of *growth* which has been so conspicuous in his literary history.

First not a few have maintained that Bulwer, with all his brilliant effect and eloquence, is not properly speaking a poet. An eloquent detractor of his has said—"The author is an orator, and has tried to be a poet. Dickens' John the Carrier was perpetually on the verge of a joke, but never made one: Bulwer's relation to poetry is of the same provoking kind. The lips twitch; the face glows; the eyes light; but the joke is not there. An exquisite *savoir faire* has led him within sight of the intuitions of poetic instinct. Laborious calculation has almost stood for sight, but his maps and charts are not the earth and the heavens. His vision is not a dream, but a night-mare; you have Parnassus before you, but the light that never was on sea or shore is wanting. The whole reminds you of a lunar landscape, rocks and caves to spare, but *no atmosphere*. It is fairy-land travelled by dark. How you sigh even for the chaos, the *discordia semina* of genius, while toiling through the impotent waste of this sterile maturity."

This is vivid and vigorous, but hardly just. We need meet it only by pronouncing one magic word—"Zanoni." Who that ever read that glorious romance, with its pictures of love and life and death, and the mysteries of the unseen world; the fine dance of the human, and the preternatural elements which are in it, and keep time so admirably to the music of the genius which has created both, and the melting sublimity of its close—will deny the author the name of poet? Or, who that has ever read



those allegories and little tales, which are sprinkled through *The Student* and the *Pilgrims of the Rhine*, can fail to see in them the creative element? Or, take the end of his Harold, the death of Rienzi, the *Hell* scene in *Night and Morning*, and the closing chapters of the *Last Days of Pompeii*—the terms “oratory” or “art” will not measure these: they are instinct with power: their words are the mighty rushing wings of a supernal tempest; and to us, at least, they always, even at the twentieth perusal, give that deep delightful shiver, that thrill of awful joy, which proclaims that the Spirit of Genius is passing by, and is making every hair on our flesh start up to do him obeisance.

True genius is, and must be, original; so that the terms “original genius” are a poor pleonasm. Now, we think that Bulwer can be proved to have originality; and originality in any department of the fine arts is genius. His thought, his imagery, his style, his form of fiction, are all intensely his own; and, *therefore*, since exerted on ideal subjects, are all those of a poet. He began his career indeed, as most writers do, with imitation. He found certain models in vogue at the time, besides some, which, although not generally popular, were recommended to him by his own taste. Hence in his early novels, he has now Godwin, now Scott, and now the authors of what were then called the fashionable novels, such as Tremaine and Almacks, in his eye. But he soon soared out of these trammels, and exhibited, and began to realise, his own ideal of fiction, the peculiarity of which perhaps lies in the extreme *breadth* of the purpose he seeks through the novel and romance to fulfil. He has tried to make it a cosmopolitan thing,—a mirror—not of low or high life exclusively, not of the everyday or the ideal alone, not of the past, or present, or future, merely; but of each and all;—each set in its proper proportions, and all shown in a brilliant light. Ward, and the whole of that school, including D’Israeli in his *Vivian Grey* and *Young Duke*, wrote for the fashionable classes. Godwin wrote for political and moral philosophers. Dickens writes for Londoners, Lever for Irishmen, and Thackeray for the microscopic students of human nature everywhere. Even Scott neither expressed the spirit of his own age, nor ever attempted to reproduce the classical periods; nor has he discovered any sympathy with the mighty metaphysical, moral, and religious problems with which all thinkers are now compelled to grapple. But Bulwer has written *of* the world, and *for* the world, in the broadest sense; has



described society, from the glittering crown of its head, to the servile sole of its foot; has painted all kinds of life, the high, the middle, the mean, the town and the country, the convulsive and the calm,—that of noblemen, of gamesters, of students, of highwaymen, of murderers, and of milliners; has mated with the men and manners of all ages; has reproduced with startling vraisemblance the ancient Roman times, and breathed life into the gigantic skeletons of Herculaneum and Pompeii; has coped with many of the social and moral questions, as well as faithfully reflected the salient features of our own wondrous mother-age; and has with bold foot invaded those regions of speculation, which blend with the shadows and splendours of the life to come. It is this wide and catholic character, which makes his writings so popular on the Continent. We do not, indeed, say that he has completely filled up the broad outline of his purpose; otherwise he had been the greatest novelist, perhaps also the greatest writer, in the world. But he has succeeded so far as to induce us to class him with the first authors of his time. He *has*, although, with much effort, long training and over consciousness both of the toil and the triumph, fairly lifted himself above this “ignorant present time,” and caught on his wings the wide calm light of the universe. Yet, with all this Goethe-like breadth, he has none of his icy indifference; but is one of the most fervid and glowing, as well as clear and cosmopolitan, of modern writers.

His depth has often been denied, nor are we careful to maintain it. There are in some of our authors, certain quiet subtle touches, certain profound “asides,” certain piercing single thoughts, which proclaim a native vein, communicating directly with the great Heart of Being; but which we seldom, if ever, find in Bulwer. Although he be in our judgment a true poet, he is not a poet of the very highest order. But, perhaps, his exceeding width may be taken as in some measure a compensation for his deficiency in depth. Indeed some may even contend that if there be the same *amount* of *mind*, it is of little consequence whether it be diffused over a hundred intellectual regions, or gathered together in one or two profound pits; that as depth and height are only relative terms, so it is with width and depth; and that as you call the sky indifferently either lofty or profound, so a very wide man is deep in one way and direction, and a very deep man is wide in another. Be this as it may, and there seems a proportion of truth as well as of fallacy in it, we contend that the writer who, like Bulwer, has traversed