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THE ENGLISH POETS

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THE ENGLISH POETS: LESSING,  
ROUSSEAU: ESSAYS BY JAMES  
RUSSELL LOWELL, WITH "AN  
APOLOGY FOR A PREFACE."

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## AN APOLOGY FOR A PREFACE.

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THE Editor of this little volume asks me to furnish it with a preface. I am by no means clear that I have any native desire to do this, while I am perfectly so, that whatever is written from an extraneous impulse alone must be a thing of naught. The Moralist no doubt assures me that to do what we do not like is good for us. But here the question is rather what is good for other people, since it is for them that prefaces are intended; and this is a point about which I have observed that the most sincere lovers of their neighbour are apt to be mistaken.

Prefaces may be roughly classed in two general divisions. They either are apologetic or explanatory. In the one case they prompt the retort of Dean Swift to his deprecatory host, that he would go where he could get what he wanted for his money; in the other they seem to cast a slight on the reader's intelligence, who is apt to grumble, "Does the fellow fancy himself so mighty deep, then, that I can't catch his drift without a nudge from his elbow at every turn?"

But whatever prefaces may be, their effect too commonly

is to remind the reader of his experience at an Ordinary, where the imposing flourish with which the waiter lifts a cover is apt to be in inverse ratio to the merit of the viands he betrays. Nevertheless, all prefaces may be said to have one valid excuse for being—namely, that the judicious reader can, and generally does, skip them, thus securing one pleasurable emotion at least from his book, a success beyond the average, if I may trust my own experience.

And yet, feeling as I do my incompetence for this species of literature, in which I have had no more practice than one has in dying, having written but one in my life, I see no great harm in doing, out of mere good-nature or easiness of disposition, what I had rather not do at all, just as an indifferent whist-player may consent to take his place at table to make out a fourth hand. But if he should, one can only wish that he may be as sure of a saint as he is of a martyr in his partner. And this puts one upon thinking that in the game of prefaces one's *vis-à-vis* is the Public, and in no conceivable hagiology will that respected name (which, I think, has parted with some of its dignity in dropping its final K) ever appear with an S before, or, if its bearer have any choice in the matter, an M after it.

Meanwhile, having been asked for a few paragraphs only, I find that I have nearly completed the task imposed on me in making my excuses for not venturing to attempt it.



And as I say this another obstacle rises in my path. The papers of which this volume is made up are more than thirty years old. Now, a preface is in some sort also a letter of introduction, and how shall I assume such a responsibility in respect of a person so little known to me as Myself of a generation ago? We are no longer on speaking terms, and, if we still nod to each other on the rare occasions when we chance to meet, it is more from involuntary habit than for any reason of good-fellowship. We are still intimate with each other's failings and weaknesses, as those of the same blood are apt to be; but there is likewise such an estrangement between us as is possible only between those who by birth are in possession of those fatal secrets.

Yet in trying to evade writing a preface, it occurs to me that there is one explanation I should be glad to make. The contents of this book (with the single exception of the essay on Lessing) were originally written as lectures for an audience consisting not only of my own classes, but also of whatever other members of the University might choose to attend. This will account for, if it do not excuse, their more rhetorical tone. They were meant to be suggestive rather than methodically pædagogic. As my own excursions widened, as I opened new vistas through the crowding growth of my own prejudices and predilections, I was fain to encourage in others that intellectual hospitality which in

myself I had found strengthening from an impulse till it became a conviction that the wiser mind should have as many entrances for unbidden guests as was fabled of the Arabian prince's tent. I have had much gratifying evidence that I was fairly successtul in hitting what I aimed at, though never satisfied that I had in me the stuff of which a perfectly adequate professor is made, however well it might have served the turn for a tolerable Mercury. I make this confession because I am conscious that, while capable of endless drudgery in acquisition, I am by nature quite too impatient of detail in communicating what I have acquired. Moreover, in giving what I had written to the press, I omitted much subsidiary and illustrative matter; and this I regret now when it is too late.

Let me end with saying how much it pleases me to think that I should find readers here in the Old Home, where I have never been made to feel that I was a stranger, though my ancestor did his best to make me one by seeking a new home in New England two hundred and fifty years ago.

J. R. LOWELL.

*October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1883.*

# ESSAYS ON THE ENGLISH POETS.

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## SPENSER.

CHAUCER had been in his grave one hundred and fifty years ere England had secreted choice material enough for the making of another great poet. The nature of men living together in societies, as of the individual man, seems to have its periodic ebbs and floods, its oscillations between the ideal and the matter-of-fact, so that the doubtful boundary line of shore between them is in one generation a hard sandy actuality strewn only with such remembrances of beauty as a dead sea-moss here and there, and in the next is whelmed with those lace-like curves of ever-gaining, ever-receding foam, and that dance of joyous spray which for a moment catches and holds the sunshine.

From the two centuries between 1400 and 1600 the indefatigable Ritson, in his *Bibliographia Poetica*, has made us a catalogue of some six hundred English poets, or, more properly, verse-makers. Ninety-nine in a hundred of them are mere names, most of them no more than shadows of names, some of them mere initials. Nor can it be said of them that their works have perished because they were written in an obsolete dialect; for it is the poem that keeps the language alive, and not the language that buoys up the poem. The revival of letters, as it is called, was at first the revival of *ancient* letters, which, while it made men pedants, could do very little toward



making them poets, much less toward making them original writers. There was nothing left of the freshness, vivacity, invention, and careless faith in the present which make many of the productions of the Norman Trouvères delightful reading even now. The whole of Europe during the fifteenth century produced no book which has continued readable, or has become, in any sense of the word, a classic. I do not mean that that century has left us no illustrious names, that it was not enriched with some august intellects who kept alive the apostolic succession of thought and speculation, who passed along the still unextinguished torch of intelligence, the *lampada vitæ*, to those who came after them. But a classic is properly a book which maintains itself by virtue of that happy coalescence of matter and style, that innate and exquisite sympathy between the thought that gives life and the form that consents to every mood of grace and dignity, which can be simple without being vulgar, elevated without being distant, and which is something neither ancient nor modern, always new and incapable of growing old. It is not his Latin which makes Horace cosmopolitan, nor can Béranger's French prevent his becoming so. No hedge of language, however thorny, no dragon-coil of centuries, will keep men away from these true apples of the Hesperides if once they have caught sight or scent of them. If poems die, it is because there was never true life in them—that is, that true poetic vitality which no depth of thought, no airiness of fancy, no sincerity of feeling, can singly communicate, but which leaps throbbing at touch of that shaping faculty, the imagination. Take Aristotle's ethics, the scholastic philosophy, the theology of Aquinas, the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, the small politics of a provincial city of the Middle Ages, mix in at will Grecian, Roman, and Christian mythology, and tell me what chance there is to make an immortal poem of such an incongruous mixture. Can these dry bones live? Yes, Dante can create such a soul under these ribs of death that one hundred and fifty editions of his poem shall be called for in these last sixty years, the first half of the sixth century since his death. Accordingly, I am apt to believe that the complaints



one sometimes hears of the neglect of our older literature are the regrets of archæologists rather than of critics. One does not need to advertise the squirrels where the nut-trees are, nor could any amount of lecturing persuade them to spend their teeth on a hollow nut.

On the whole, the Scottish poetry of the fifteenth century has more meat in it than the English, but this is to say very little. Where it is meant to be serious and lofty it falls into the same vices of unreality and allegory which were the fashion of the day, and which there are some patriots so fearfully and wonderfully made as to relish. Stripped of the archaisms (that turn every *y* to a meaningless *z*, spell which *quhilk*, shake *schaik*, bugle *bowgill*, powder *puldir*, and will not let us simply whistle till we have puckered our mouths to *quhissill*) in which the Scottish antiquaries love to keep it disguised—as if it were nearer to poetry the further it got from all human recognition and sympathy—stripped of these, there is little to distinguish it from the contemporary verse-mongering south of the Tweed. Their compositions are generally as stiff and artificial as a trellis, in striking contrast with the popular ballad-poetry of Scotland (some of which possibly falls within this period, though most of it is later), which clambers, lawlessly if you will, but at least freely and simply, twining the bare stem of old tradition with graceful sentiment and lively natural sympathies. I find a few sweet and flowing verses in Dunbar's "Merle and Nightingale"—indeed, one whole stanza that has always seemed exquisite to me. It is this—

" Ne'er sweeter noise was heard by living man  
Than made this merry, gentle nightingale,  
Her sound went with the river as it ran  
Out through the fresh and flourished lusty vale;  
O merle, quoth she, O fool, leave off thy tale,  
For in thy song good teaching there is none,  
For both are lost—the time and the travail  
Of every love but upon God alone."

But except this lucky poem, I find little else in the serious verses of Dunbar that does not seem to me tedious and

pedantic. I dare say a few more lines might be found scattered here and there, but I hold it a sheer waste of time to hunt after these thin needles of wit buried in unwieldy haystacks of verse. If that be genius, the less we have of it the better. His "Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins," over which the excellent Lord Hailes went into raptures, is wanting in everything but coarseness; and if his invention dance at all, it is like a galley-slave in chains under the lash. It would be well for us if the sins themselves were indeed such wretched bugaboos as he has painted for us. What he means for humour is but the dullest vulgarity; his satire would be Billingsgate if it could, and, failing, becomes a mere offence in the nostrils, for it takes a great deal of salt to keep scurrility sweet. Mr. Sibbald, in his *Chronicle of Scottish Poetry*, has admirably preserved more than enough of it, and seems to find a sort of national savour therein, such as delights his countrymen in a *haggis*, or the German in his *sauer-krout*. The uninitiated foreigner puts his handkerchief to his nose, wonders, and gets out of the way as soon as he civilly can. Barbour's "Brus," if not precisely a poem, has passages whose simple tenderness raises them to that level. That on Freedom is familiar.\* But its highest merit is the natural and unstrained tone of manly courage in it, the easy and familiar way in which Barbour always takes chivalrous conduct as a matter of course, as if heroism were the least you could ask of any man. I modernise a few verses to show what I mean. When the King of England turns to fly from the battle of Bannockburn (and Barbour, with his usual generosity, tells us he has heard that Sir Aymer de Valence led him away by the bridle-rein against his will), Sir Giles d'Argente

"Saw the king thus and his menie  
Shape them to flee so speedily,  
He came right to the king in hy [hastily]

\* Though always misapplied in quotation, as if he had used the word in that generalised meaning which is common now, but which could not without an impossible anachronism have been present to his mind. He meant merely freedom from prison.

And said, 'Sir, since that is so  
That ye thus gate your gate will go,  
Have ye good-day, for back will I :  
Yet never fled I certainly,  
And I choose here to bide and die  
Than to live shamefully and fly.' "

The "Brus" is in many ways the best rhymed chronicle ever written. It is national in a high and generous way, but I confess I have little faith in that quality in literature which is commonly called nationality—a kind of praise seldom given where there is anything better to be said. Literature that loses its meaning, or the best part of it, when it gets beyond sight of the parish steeple, is not what I understand by literature. To tell you, when you cannot fully taste a book, that it is because it is so thoroughly national, is to condemn the book. To say it of a poem is even worse, for it is to say that what should be true of the whole compass of human nature is true only to some north-and-by-east-half-east point of it. I can understand the nationality of Firdusi when, looking sadly back to the former glories of his country, he tells us that "the nightingale still sings old Persian;" I can understand the nationality of Burns when he turns his plough aside to spare the rough burr thistle, and hopes he may write a song or two for dear auld Scotia's sake. That sort of nationality belongs to a country of which we are all citizens—that country of the heart which has no boundaries laid down on the map. All great poetry must smack of the soil, for it must be rooted in it, must suck life and substance from it, but it must do so with the aspiring instinct of the pine that climbs forever toward diviner air, and not in the grovelling fashion of the potato. Any verse that makes you and me foreigners is not only not great poetry, but no poetry at all. Dunbar's works were disinterred and edited some thirty years ago by Mr. Laing, and whoso is national enough to like thistles may browse there to his heart's content. I am inclined for other pasture, having long ago satisfied myself by a good deal of dogged reading that every generation is sure of its own share of bores without borrowing from the past.



A little later came Gawain Douglas, whose translation of the *Æneid* is linguistically valuable, and whose introductions to the seventh and twelfth books—the one describing winter and the other May—have been safely praised, they are so hard to read. There is certainly some poetic feeling in them; and the welcome to the sun comes as near enthusiasm as is possible for a ploughman, with a good steady yoke of oxen, who lays over one furrow of verse, and then turns about to lay the next as cleverly alongside it as he can. But it is a wrong done to good taste to hold up this *item* kind of description any longer as deserving any other credit than that of a good memory. It is a mere bill of parcels, a *post-mortem* inventory of nature, where imagination is not merely not called for, but would be out of place. Why, a recipe in the cookery-book is as much like a good dinner as this kind of stuff is like true word-painting. The poet with a real eye in his head does not give us everything, but only the *best* of everything. He selects, he combines, or else gives what is characteristic only; while the false style of which I have been speaking seems to be as glad to get a pack of impertinences on its shoulders as Christian in the *Pilgrim's Progress* was to be rid of his. One strong verse that can hold itself upright (as the French critic Rivarol said of Dante) with the bare help of the substantive and verb, is worth acres of this dead cord-wood piled stick on stick, a boundless continuity of dryness. I would rather have written that half-stanza of Longfellow's, in the "Wreck of the Hesperus," of the "billow that swept her crew like icicles from her deck," than all Gawain Douglas's tedious enumeration of meteorological phenomena put together. A real landscape is never tiresome; it never presents itself to us as a disjointed succession of isolated particulars; we take it in with one sweep of the eye—its light, its shadow, its melting gradations of distance; we do not say it is this, it is that, and the other; and we may be sure that if a description in poetry is tiresome there is a grievous mistake somewhere. All the pictorial adjectives in the dictionary will not bring it a hair's-breadth nearer to truth and nature. The fact is that what we see is in the mind to

a greater degree than we are commonly aware. As Coleridge says—

“O lady, we receive but what we give,  
And in our life alone doth Nature live!”

I have made the unfortunate Dunbar the text for a diatribe on the subject of descriptive poetry, because I find that this old ghost is not laid yet, but comes back like a vampire to suck the life out of a true enjoyment of poetry—and the medicine by which vampires were cured was to unbury them, drive a stake through them, and get them under ground again with all despatch. The first duty of the Muse is to be delightful, and it is an injury done to all of us when we are put in the wrong by a kind of statutory affirmation on the part of the critics of something to which our judgment will not consent, and from which our taste revolts. A collection of poets is commonly made up, nine parts in ten, of this perfunctory verse-making, and I never look at one without regretting that we have lost that excellent Latin phrase, *Corpus poetarum*. In fancy I always read it on the backs of the volumes—a *body* of poets, indeed, with scarce one soul to a hundred of them.

One genuine English poet illustrated the early years of the sixteenth century—John Skelton. He had vivacity, fancy, humour, and originality. Gleams of the truest poetical sensibility alternate in him with an almost brutal coarseness. He was truly Rabelaisian before Rabelais. But there is a freedom and hilarity in much of his writing that gives it a singular attraction. A breath of cheerfulness runs along the slender stream of his verse, under which it seems to ripple and crinkle, catching and casting back the sunshine like a stream blown on by clear western winds.

But Skelton was an exceptional blossom of autumn. A long and dreary winter follows. Surrey, who brought back with him from Italy the blank-verse not long before introduced by Trissino, is to some extent another exception. He had the sentiment of nature and unhackneyed feeling, but he has no mastery of verse, nor any elegance of diction. We have Gascoyne, Surrey, Wyatt, stiff, pedantic, artificial,



systematic as a country cemetery, and, worst of all, the whole time desperately in love. Every verse is as flat, thin, and regular as a lath, and their poems are nothing more than bundles of such tied trimly together. They are said to have refined our language. Let us devoutly hope they did, for it would be pleasant to be grateful to them for something. But I fear it was not so, for only genius can do that ; and Sternhold and Hopkins are inspired men in comparison with them. For Sternhold was at least the author of two noble stanzas :—

“ The Lord descended from above  
And bowed the heavens high,  
And underneath his feet he cast  
The darkness of the sky ;  
On cherubs and on cherubims  
Full royally he rode,  
And on the wings of all the winds  
Came flying all abroad.”

But Gascoyne and the rest did nothing more than put the worst school of Italian love poetry into an awkward English dress. The Italian proverb says, “ *Inglese italianizzato, Diavolo incarnato,*” that an Englishman Italianized is the very devil incarnate, and one feels the truth of it here. The very titles of their poems set one yawning, and their wit is the cause of the dulness that is in other men. “ The lover, deceived by his love, repenteth him of the true love he bare her.” As thus :—

“ Where I sought heaven there found I hap ;  
From danger unto death,  
Much like the mouse that treads the trap  
In hope to find her food,  
And bites the bread that stops her breath,—  
So in like case I stood.”

“ The lover, accusing his love for her unfaithfulness, proposeth to live in liberty.” He says :—

“ But I am like the beaten fowl  
That from the net escaped ;  
And thou art like the ravening owl  
That all the night hath waked.”

And yet at the very time these men were writing there were simple ballad-writers who could have set them an example of simplicity, force, and grandeur. Compare the futile efforts of these poetasters to kindle themselves by a painted flame, and to be pathetic over the lay figure of a mistress, with the wild vigour and almost fierce sincerity of the "Twa Corbies" :—

"As I was walking all alone,  
I heard twa corbies making a moan;  
The one unto the other did say,  
Where shall we gang dine to-day?  
In beyond that old turf dyke  
I wot there lies a new-slain knight;  
And naebody kens that he lies there  
But his hawk and his hound and his lady fair.  
His hound is to the hunting gone,  
His hawk to fetch the wild fowl home,  
His lady has ta'en another mate,  
So we may make our dinner sweet.  
O'er his white bones as they lie bare  
The wind shall blow forevermair."

There was a lesson in rhetoric for our worthy friends, could they have understood it. But they were as much afraid of an attack of nature as of the plague.

Such was the poetical inheritance of style and diction into which Spenser was born, and which he did more than any one else to redeem from the leaden gripe of vulgar and pedantic conceit. Sir Philip Sidney, born the year after him, with a keener critical instinct, and a taste earlier emancipated than his own, would have been, had he lived longer, perhaps even more directly influential in educating the taste and refining the vocabulary of his contemporaries and immediate successors. The better of his pastoral poems in the "Arcadia" are, in my judgment, more simple, natural, and, above all, more pathetic than those of Spenser, who sometimes strains the shepherd's pipe with a blast that would better suit the trumpet. Sidney had the good sense to feel that it was unsophisticated

sentiment rather than rusticity of phrase that befitted such themes.\* He recognised the distinction between simplicity and vulgarity, which Wordsworth was so long in finding out, and seems to have divined the fact that there is but one kind of English that is always appropriate and never obsolete, namely, the very best.† With the single exception of Thomas Campion, his experiments in adapting classical metres to English verse are more successful than those of his contemporaries. Some of his elegiacs are not ungrateful to the ear, and it can hardly be doubted that Coleridge borrowed from his eclogue of Strephon and Klaius the pleasing movement of his own *Catullian Hendecasyllabics*. Spenser, perhaps out of deference to Sidney, also tried his hand at English hexameters, the introduction of which was claimed by his friend Gabriel Harvey, who thereby assured to himself an immortality of grateful remembrance. But the result was a series of jolts and jars, proving that the language had run off the track. He seems to have been half conscious of it himself, and there is a gleam of mischief in what he writes to Harvey: "I like your late English hexameter so exceedingly well that I also enure my pen sometime in that kind, which I find indeed, as I have often heard you defend in word, neither so hard nor so harsh but that it will easily yield itself to our mother-tongue. For the only or chiefest hardness, which seemeth, as in the accent, which sometime gapeth, and, as it were, yawneth ill-favouredly, coming short of that it should, and sometime exceeding the measure of the number, as in *Carpenter*; the middle syllable being used short in speech, when it shall be read long in verse, seemeth like a lame gosling that draweth one leg after her ;

\* In his "Defence of Poesy" he condemns the archaisms and provincialisms of the "Shepherd's Calendar."

† "There is, as you must have heard Wordsworth point out, a language of pure, intelligible English, which was spoken in Chaucer's time, and is spoken in ours; equally understood then and now; and of which the Bible is the written and permanent standard, as it has undoubtedly been the great means of preserving it."—(*Southey's Life and Correspondence*, iii., 193, 194.)



and *Heaven* being used short as one syllable, when it is in verse stretched out with a diastole, is like a lame dog that holds up one leg.\* It is almost inconceivable that Spenser's hexameters should have been written by the man who was so soon to teach his native language how to soar and sing, and to give a fuller sail to English verse.

One of the most striking facts in our literary history is the pre-eminence at once so frankly and unanimously conceded to Spenser by his contemporaries. At first, it is true, he had not many rivals. Before the "*Faery Queen*," two long poems were printed and popular—the "*Mirror for Magistrates*" and Warner's "*Albion's England*"—and not long after it came the "*Polyolbion*" of Drayton and the "*Civil Wars*" of Daniel. This was the period of the saurians in English poetry, interminable poems, book after book and canto after canto, like far-stretching *vertebræ*, that at first sight would seem to have rendered earth unfit for the habitation of man. They most of them sleep well now, as once they made their readers sleep, and their huge remains lie embedded in the deep morasses of Chambers and Anderson. We wonder at the length of face and general atrabilious look that mark the portraits of the men of that generation; but it is no marvel, when even their relaxations were such downright hard work. Fathers, when their day on earth was up, must have folded down the leaf and left the task to be finished by their sons—a dreary inheritance. Yet both Drayton and Daniel are fine poets, though both of them in their most elaborate works made shipwreck of their genius on the shoal of a bad subject. Neither of them could make poetry coalesce with gazetteering or chronicle-making. It was like trying to put a declaration of love into the forms of

\* Nash, who has far better claims than Swift to be called the English Rabelais, thus at once describes and parodies Harvey's hexameters in prose, "that drunken, staggering kind of verse, which is all up hill and down hill, like the way betwixt Stamford and Beechfield, and goes like a horse plunging through the mire in the deep of winter, now soused up to the saddle, and straight aloft on his tiptoes." It was a happy thought to satirise (in this inverted way) prose written in the form of verse.

a declaration in trover. The "Polyolbion" is nothing less than a versified gazetteer of England and Wales—fortunately Scotland was not yet annexed, or the poem would have been longer, and already it is the plesiosaurus of verse. Mountains, rivers, and even marshes are personified, to narrate historical episodes, or to give us geographical lectures. There are two fine verses in the seventh book, where, speaking of the cutting down some noble woods, he says:—

"Their trunks, like aged folk, now bare and naked stand,  
As for revenge to heaven each held a withered hand ;"

and there is a passage about the sea in the twentieth book that comes near being fine ; but the far greater part is mere joiner-work. Consider the life of man, that we flee away as a shadow, that our days are as a post ; and then think whether we can afford to honour such a draft upon our time as is implied in these thirty books all in alexandrines ! Even the laborious Selden, who wrote annotations on it, sometimes more entertaining than the text, gave out at the end of the eighteenth book. Yet Drayton could write well, and had an agreeable lightness of fancy, as his "Nymphidia" proves. His poem, "To the Cambro-Britons on their Harp," is full of vigour ; it runs, it leaps, clashing its verses like swords upon bucklers, and moves the pulse to a charge.

Daniel was in all respects a man of finer mould. He did indeed refine our tongue, and deserved the praise his contemporaries concur in giving him of being "well-languaged."\* Writing two hundred and fifty years ago, he stands in no need of a glossary, and I have noted scarce a dozen words, and not more turns of phrase, in his works, that have become obsolete.

\* Edmund Bolton, in his *Hypercritica*, says, "The works of Sam Daniel contained somewhat a flat, but yet withal a very pure and copious English, and words as warrantable as any man's, and fitter, perhaps, for prose than measure." I have italicised his second thought, which chimes curiously with the feeling Daniel leaves in the mind. (See *Haslewood's Ancient Critical Essays*, vol. ii.) Wordsworth, an excellent judge, much admired Daniel's poem to the Countess of Cumberland.



This certainly indicates both remarkable taste and equally remarkable judgment. There is an equable dignity in his thought and sentiment such as we rarely meet. His best poems always remind me of a table-land, where, because all is so level, we are apt to forget on how lofty a plane we are standing. I think his "Musophilus" the best poem of its kind in the language. The reflections are natural, the expression condensed, the thought weighty, and the language worthy of it. But he also wasted himself on an historical poem, in which the characters were incapable of that remoteness from ordinary associations which is essential to the ideal. Not that we can escape into the ideal by *merely* emigrating into the past or the unfamiliar. As in the German legend, the little black Kobold of prose that haunts us in the present will seat himself on the first load of furniture when we undertake our flitting, if the magician be not there to exorcise him. No man can jump off his own shadow, nor, for that matter, off his own age; and it is very likely that Daniel had only the thinking and languaging parts of a poet's outfit, without the higher creative gift which alone can endow his conceptions with enduring life and with an interest which transcends the parish limits of his generation. In the prologue to his "Masque at Court" he has unconsciously defined his own poetry:—

"Wherein no wild, no rude, no antic sport,  
But tender passions, motions soft and grave,  
The still spectator must expect to have."

And, indeed, his verse does not snatch you away from ordinary associations and hurry you along with it as is the wont of the higher kind of poetry, but leaves you, as it were, upon the bank watching the peaceful current, and lulled by its somewhat monotonous murmur. His best-known poem, blunderingly misprinted in all the collections, is that addressed to the Countess of Cumberland. It is an amplification of Horace's *Integer Vitæ*, and when we compare it with the original we miss the point, the compactness, and above all the urbane tone of the original. It is very fine English, but it is the English of

diplomacy somehow, and is never downright this or that, but always has the honour to be so or so, with sentiments of the highest consideration. Yet the praise of *well-linguaged*, since it implies that good writing then as now demanded choice and forethought, is not without interest for those who would classify the elements of a style that will wear and hold its colours well. His diction, if wanting in the more hardy evidences of muscle, has a suppleness and spring that give proof of training and endurance. His "Defence of Rhyme," written in prose (a more difficult test than verse), has a passionate eloquence that reminds one of Burke, and is more light-armed and modern than the prose of Milton fifty years later. For us Occidentals he has a kindly prophetic word :—

"And who in time knows whither we may vent  
The treasure of our tongue? to what strange shores  
The gain of our best glory may be sent  
To enrich unknowing nations with our stores?  
What worlds in the yet unformed Occident  
May come refined with accents that are ours?"

During the period when Spenser was getting his artistic training a great change was going on in our mother-tongue, and the language of literature was disengaging itself more and more from that of ordinary talk. The poets of Italy, Spain, and France began to rain influence, and to modify and refine not only style but vocabulary. Men were discovering new worlds in more senses than one, and the visionary finger of expectation still pointed forward. There was, as we learn from contemporary pamphlets, very much the same demand for a national literature that we have heard in America. This demand was nobly answered in the next generation. But no man contributed so much to the transformation of style and language as Spenser; for not only did he deliberately endeavour at reform, but by the charm of his diction, the novel harmonies of his verse, his ideal method of treatment, and the splendour of his fancy, he made the new manner popular and fruitful. We can trace in Spenser's poems the gradual growth of his taste through experiment and failure

to that assured self-confidence which indicates that he had at length found out the true bent of his genius—that happiest of discoveries (and not so easy as it might seem) which puts a man in undisturbed possession of his own individuality. Before his time the boundary between poetry and prose had not been clearly defined. His great merit lies not only in the ideal treatment with which he glorified common things and gilded them with a ray of enthusiasm, but far more in the ideal point of view which he first revealed to his countrymen. He at first sought for that remoteness, which is implied in an escape from the realism of daily life, in the pastoral—a kind of writing which, oddly enough, from its original intention as a protest in favour of naturalness, and of human as opposed to heroic sentiments, had degenerated into the most artificial of abstractions. But he was soon convinced of his error, and was not long in choosing between an unreality which pretended to be real and those everlasting realities of the mind which seem unreal only because they lie beyond the horizon of the every-day world, and become visible only when the mirage of fantasy lifts them up and hangs them in an ideal atmosphere. As in the old fairy tales, the task which the age imposes on its poet is to weave its straw into a golden tissue; and when every device has failed, in comes the witch Imagination, and with a touch the miracle is achieved, simple as miracles always are after they are wrought.

Spenser, like Chaucer a Londoner, was born in 1553.\* Nothing is known of his parents, except that the name of his mother was Elizabeth; but he was of gentle birth, as he more than once informs us, with the natural satisfaction of a poor man of genius at a time when the business talent of the middle

\* Mr. Hales, in the excellent memoir of the poet prefixed to the Globe edition of his works, puts his birth a year earlier, on the strength of a line in the sixtieth sonnet. But it is not established that this sonnet was written in 1593, and even if it were, a sonnet is not upon oath, and the poet would prefer the round number forty, which suited the measure of his verse, to thirty-nine or forty-one, which might have been truer to the measure of his days.



class was opening to it the door of prosperous preferment. In 1569 he was entered as a sizar at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, and in due course took his bachelor's degree in 1573, and his master's in 1576. He is supposed, on insufficient grounds, as it appears to me, to have met with some disgust or disappointment during his residence at the University.\* Between 1576 and 1578 Spenser seems to have been with some of his kinsfolk "in the North." It was during this interval that he conceived his fruitless passion for the Rosalinde, whose jilting him for another shepherd, whom he calls Menalcas, is somewhat perfunctorily bemoaned in his pastorals.† Before the publication of his "Shepherd's Calendar," in 1579, he had made the acquaintance of Sir Philip Sidney, and was domiciled with him for a time at Penshurst, whether as guest or literary dependant is uncertain. In October 1579 he is in the household of the Earl of Leicester. In July 1580 he accompanied Lord Grey de Wilton to Ireland

\* This has been inferred from a passage in one of Gabriel Harvey's letters to him. But it would seem more natural, from the many allusions in Harvey's pamphlets against Nash, that it was his own wrongs which he had in mind, and his self-absorption would take it for granted that Spenser sympathised with him in all his grudges. Harvey is a remarkable instance of the refining influence of classical studies. Amid the pedantic farrago of his omni-sufficiency (to borrow one of his own words) we come suddenly upon passages whose gravity of sentiment, stateliness of movement, and purity of diction remind us of Landor. These lucid intervals in his overweening vanity explain and justify the friendship of Spenser. Yet the reiteration of emphasis with which he insists on all the world's knowing that Nash had called him an ass, probably gave Shakespeare the hint for one of the most comic touches in the character of Dogberry.

† The late Major C. G. Halpine, in a very interesting essay, makes it extremely probable that Rosalinde is the anagram of Rose Daniel, sister of the poet, and married to John Florio. He leaves little doubt, also, that the name of Spenser's wife (hitherto unknown) was Elizabeth Nagle. (See *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. ii., 674, November 1858.) Mr. Halpine informed me that he found the substance of his essay among the papers of his father, the late Rev. N. J. Halpine, of Dublin. The latter published in the series of the Shakespeare Society a sprightly little tract, entitled "Oberon," which, if not quite convincing, is well worth reading for its ingenuity and research.

as secretary, and in that country he spent the rest of his life, with occasional flying visits to England to publish poems or in search of preferment. His residence in that country has been compared to that of Ovid in Pontus. And, no doubt, there were certain outward points of likeness. The Irishry by whom he was surrounded were to the full as savage, as hostile, and as tenacious of their ancestral habitudes as the Scythians\* who made Tomi a prison, and the descendants of the earlier English settlers had degenerated as much as the Mix-Hellenes who disgusted the Latin poet. Spenser himself looked on his life in Ireland as a banishment. In his "Colin Clout's come Home again" he tells us that Sir Walter Raleigh, who visited him in 1589, and heard what was then finished of the "Faery Queen"—

" 'Gan to cast great liking to my lore  
And great disliking to my luckless lot,  
That banisht had myself, like wight forlore,  
Into that waste, where I was quite forgot.  
The which to leave thenceforth he counselled me,  
Unmeet for man in whom was aught regardful,  
And wend with him his Cynthia to see,  
Whose grace was great and bounty most rewardful."

But Spenser was already living at Kilcolman Castle (which, with 3028 acres of land from the forfeited estates of the Earl of Desmond, was confirmed to him by grant two years later), amid scenery at once placid and noble, whose varied charm he felt profoundly. He could not complain with Ovid—

"Non liber hic ullus, non qui mihi commodet aurem,"

for he was within reach of a cultivated society, which gave him the stimulus of hearty admiration both as poet and scholar. Above all, he was fortunate in a seclusion that prompted study and deepened meditation, while it enabled him to converse with his genius disengaged from those worldly influences which would have disenchanted it of its mystic enthusiasm, if they did

\* In his prose tract on Ireland, Spenser, perhaps with some memory of Ovid in his mind, derives the Irish mainly from the Scythians.



not muddle it ingloriously away. Surely this sequestered nest was more congenial to the brooding of those ethereal visions of the "Faery Queen" and to giving his "soul a loose" than

"The smoke, the wealth, and noise of Rome,  
And all the busy pageantry  
That wise men scorn and fools adore."

Yet he longed for London, if not with the homesickness of Bussy-Rabutin in exile from the Parisian sun, yet enough to make him joyfully accompany Raleigh thither in the early winter of 1589, carrying with him the first three books of the great poem begun ten years before. Horace's *nonum prematur in annum* had been more than complied with, and the success was answerable to the well-seasoned material and conscientious faithfulness of the work. But Spenser did not stay long in London to enjoy his fame. Seen close at hand, with its jealousies, intrigues, and selfish basenesses, the court had lost the enchantment lent by the distance of Kilcolman. A nature so prone to ideal contemplation as Spenser's would be profoundly shocked by seeing too closely the ignoble springs of contemporaneous policy, and learning by what paltry personal motives the noble opportunities of the world are at any given moment endangered. It is a sad discovery that history is so mainly made by ignoble men.

"Vide questo globo  
Tal ch'ei sorrise del suo vil semblante."

In his "Colin Clout," written just after his return to Ireland, he speaks of the Court in a tone of contemptuous bitterness, in which, as it seems to me, there is more of the sorrow of disillusion than of the gall of personal disappointment. He speaks, so he tells us,—

"To warn young shepherds' wandering wit  
Which, through report of that life's painted bliss,  
Abandon quiet home to seek for it  
And leave their lambs to loss misled amiss;  
For, sooth to say, it is no sort of life  
For shepherd fit to live in that same place,

Where each one seeks with malice and with strife  
 To thrust down other into foul disgrace  
 Himself to raise ; and he doth soonest rise  
 That best can handle his deceitful wit  
 In subtle shifts . . . . .  
 To which him needs a guileful hollow heart  
 Masked with fair dissembling courtesy,  
 A filed tongue furnisht with terms of art,  
 No art of school, but courtiers' schoolery.  
 For arts of school have there small countenance,  
 Counted but toys to busy idle brains,  
 And there professors find small maintenance,  
 But to be instruments of others' gains,  
 Nor is there place for any gentle wit  
 Unless to please it can itself apply.

Even such is all their vaunted vanity,  
 Naught else but smoke that passeth soon away.

So they themselves for praise of fools do sell,  
 And all their wealth for painting on a wall.

Whiles single Truth and simple Honesty  
 Do wander up and down despised of all.\*

And, again, in his "Mother Hubbard's Tales," in the most pithy and masculine verses he ever wrote :—

"Most miserable man, whom wicked Fate  
 Hath brought to Court to sue for *Had-I-wist*  
 That few have found and many one hath mist !  
 Full little knowest thou that hast not tried  
 What hell it is in suing long to bide ;  
 To lose good days that might be better spent,  
 To waste long nights in pensive discontent,  
 To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow,  
 To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow,  
 To have thy Prince's grace yet want her Peers',  
 To have thy asking yet wait many years,  
 To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares,  
 To eat thy heart through comfortless despairs,

\* Compare Shakespeare's lxi. Sonnet.

To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,  
To spend, to give, to want, to be undone.

Whoever leaves sweet home, where mean estate  
In safe assurance, without strife or hate,  
Finds all things needful for contentment meek,  
And will to court for shadows vain to seek,

That curse God send unto mine enemy !”\*

When Spenser had once got safely back to the secure retreat and serene companionship of his great poem, with what profound and pathetic exultation must he have recalled the verses of Dante !—

“ Chi dietro a jura, e chi ad aforismi  
Sen giva, e chi seguendo sacerdozio,  
E chi regnar per forza e per sofismi,  
E chi rubare, e chi civil negozio,  
Chi nei dilette della carne involto  
S’ affaticava, e chi si dava all’ ozio,  
Quando da tutte queste cose sciolto,  
Con Beatrice m’ era suso in cielo  
Cotanto gloriosamente accolto.”†

What Spenser says of the indifference of the court to learning, and literature is the more remarkable because he himself was by no means an unsuccessful suitor. Queen Elizabeth bestowed on him a pension of fifty pounds, and shortly after he received

\* This poem, published in 1591, was, Spenser tells us in his dedication, “long sithens composed in the raw conceit of my youth.” But he had evidently retouched it. The verses quoted show a firmer hand than is generally seen in it, and we are safe in assuming that they were added after his visit to England. Dr. Johnson epigrammatised Spenser’s indictment into

“ There mark what ills the scholar’s life assail,  
Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail,”

but I think it loses in pathos more than it gains in point.

† Paradiso, xi. 4-12. Spenser was familiar with the “Divina Commedia,” though I do not remember that his commentators have pointed out his chief obligations to it.

the grant of lands already mentioned. It is said, indeed, that Lord Burleigh in some way hindered the advancement of the poet, who more than once directly alludes to him either in reproach or remonstrance. In "The Ruins of Time," after speaking of the death of Walsingham,

"Since whose decease learning lies unregarded,  
And men of armes do wander unrewarded,"

he gives the following reason for their neglect :—

"For he that now wields all things at his will,  
Scorns th' one and th' other in his deeper skill.  
O grief of griefs ! O gall of all good hearts,  
To see that virtue should despised be  
Of him that first was raised for virtuous parts,  
And now, broad-spreading like an aged tree,  
Lets none shoot up that nigh him planted be :  
O let the man of whom the Muse is scorned  
Nor live nor dead be of the Muse adorned !"

And in the introduction to the fourth book of the "Faery Queen" he says again :—

"The rugged forehead that with grave foresight  
Wields kingdoms' causes and affairs of state,  
My looser rhymes, I wot, doth sharply wite  
For praising Love, as I have done of late,—

By which frail youth is oft to folly led  
Through false allurements of that pleasing bait,  
That better were in virtues disciplined  
Than with vain poems' weeds to have their fancies fed.

"Such ones ill judge of love that cannot love  
Nor in their frozen hearts feel kindly flame ;  
Forthy they ought not thing unknown reprove,  
Ne natural affection faultless blame  
For fault of few that have abused the same :  
For it of honour and all virtue is  
The root, and brings forth glorious flowers of fame  
That crown true lovers with immortal bliss,  
The meed of them that love and do not live amiss."



If Lord Burleigh could not relish such a dish of nightingales' tongues as the "Faery Queen," he is very much more to be pitied than Spenser. The sensitive purity of the poet might indeed well be wounded when a poem in which he proposed to himself "to discourse at large" of "the ethick part of Moral Philosophy"\* could be so misinterpreted. But Spenser speaks in the same strain, and without any other than a general application, in his "Tears of the Muses," and his friend Sidney undertakes the defence of poesy because it was undervalued. But undervalued by whom? By the only persons about whom he knew or cared anything, those whom we should now call Society, and who were then called the Court. The inference I would draw is that, among the causes which contributed to the marvellous efflorescence of genius in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the influence of direct patronage from above is to be reckoned at almost nothing.† Then, as when the same phenomenon has happened elsewhere, there must have been a sympathetic public. Literature, properly so called, draws its sap from the deep soil of human nature's common and everlasting sympathies, the gathered leaf-mould of countless generations (*οὗ περ φύλλων γενεῆ*), and not from any top-dressing capriciously scattered over the surface at some

\* His own words as reported by Lodowick Bryskett. (Todd's Spenser, I. lx.) The whole passage is very interesting as giving us the only glimpse we get of the living Spenser in actual contact with his fellow-men. It shows him to us, as we could wish to see him, surrounded with loving respect, companionable and helpful. Bryskett tells us that he was "perfect in the Greek tongue," and "also very well read in philosophy both moral and natural." He encouraged Bryskett in the study of Greek, and offered to help him in it. Comparing the last verse of the above citation of the "Faery Queen" with other passages in Spenser, I cannot help thinking that he wrote, "do not love amiss."

† "And know, sweet prince, when you shall come to know,  
That 't is not in the power of kings to raise  
A spirit for verse that is not born thereto;  
Nor are they born in every prince's days."

*Daniel's Dedic. Trag. of "Philotas."*



master's bidding.\* England had long been growing more truly insular in language and political ideas when the Reformation came to precipitate her national consciousness by secluding her more completely from the rest of Europe. Hitherto there had been Englishmen of a distinct type enough, honestly hating foreigners, and reigned over by kings of whom they were proud or not as the case might be, but there was no England as a separate entity from the sovereign who embodied it for the time being.† But now an English people began to be dimly aware of itself. Their having got a religion to themselves must have intensified them much as the having a god of their own did the Jews. The exhilaration of relief after the long tension of anxiety, when the Spanish Armada was overwhelmed like the hosts of Pharaoh, while it confirmed their assurance of a provincial deity, must also have been like sunshine to bring into flower all that there was of imaginative or sentimental in the English nature, already just in the first flush of its spring.

("The yongè sonne  
Had in the Bull half of his course yronne.")

And just at this moment of blossoming every breeze was dusty with the golden pollen of Greece, Rome, and Italy. If Keats could say, when he first opened Chapman's *Homer*—

"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific, and all his men  
Looked at each other with a wild surmise;"

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\* Louis XIV. is commonly supposed in some miraculous way to have created French literature. He may more truly be said to have petrified it so far as his influence went. The French *renaissance* in the preceding century was produced by causes similar in essentials to those which brought about that in England not long after. The *grand siècle* grew by natural processes of development out of that which had preceded it, and which, to the impartial foreigner at least, has more flavour, and more French flavour too, than the Gallo-Roman usurper that pushed it from its stool. The best modern French poetry has been forced to temper its verses in the colder natural springs of the ante-classic period.

† In the Elizabethan drama the words "England" and "France" are constantly used to signify the kings of those countries.

if Keats could say this, whose mind had been unconsciously fed with the results of this culture—results that permeated all thought, all literature, and all talk—fancy what must have been the awakening shock and impulse communicated to men's brains by the revelation of this new world of thought and fancy, an unveiling gradual yet sudden, like that of a great organ, which discovered to them what a wondrous instrument was in the soul of man with its epic and lyric stops, its deep thunders of tragedy, and its passionate *vox humana*! It might almost seem as if Shakespeare had typified all this in Miranda, when she cries out at first sight of the king and his courtiers—

“O, wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is!—O, brave new world

That hath such people in't!”

The civil wars of the Roses had been a barren period in English literature, because they had been merely dynastic squabbles, in which no great principles were involved which could shake all minds with controversy and heat them to intense conviction. A conflict of opposing ambitions wears out the moral no less than the material forces of a people, but the ferment of hostile ideas and convictions may realise resources of character which before were only potential, may transform a merely gregarious multitude into a nation proud in its strength, sensible of the dignity and duty which strength involves, and groping after a common ideal. Some such transformation had been wrought or was going on in England. For the first time a distinct image of her was disengaging itself from the tangled blur of tradition and association in the minds of her children, and it was now only that her great poet could speak exultingly to an audience that would understand him with a passionate sympathy of

“This happy breed of men, this little world,

This precious stone set in a silver sea,

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,

This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,

England, bound in with the triumphant sea!”

Such a period can hardly recur again, but something like it, something pointing back to similar producing causes, is observable in the revival of English imaginative literature at the close of the last and in the early years of the present century. Again, after long fermentation, there was a war of principles, again the national consciousness was heightened and stung by a danger to the national existence, and again there was a crop of great poets and heroic men.

Spenser once more visited England, bringing with him three more books of the "Faery Queen," in 1595. He is supposed to have remained there during the two following years.\* In 1594 he had been married to the lady celebrated in his somewhat artificial *amoretti*. By her he had four children. He was now at the height of his felicity ; by universal acclaim the first poet of his age, and the one obstacle to his material advancement (if obstacle it was) had been put out of the way by the death of Lord Burleigh, August 1598. In the next month he was recommended in a letter from Queen Elizabeth for the shrievalty of the county of Cork. But alas for Polycrates ! In October the wild kerns and gallowglasses rose in no mood for sparing the house of Pindarus. They sacked and burned his castle, from which he with his wife and children barely escaped.† He sought shelter in London, and died there on the 16th

\* I say supposed, for the names of his two sons, Sylvanus and Peregrine, indicate that they were born in Ireland, and that Spenser continued to regard it as a wilderness and his abode there as exile. The two other children are added on the authority of a pedigree drawn up by Sir W. Betham and cited in Mr. Hales's *Life of Spenser*, prefixed to the Globe edition.

† Ben Jonson told Drummond that one child perished in the flames. But he was speaking after an interval of twenty-one years, and, of course, from hearsay. Spenser's misery was exaggerated by succeeding poets, who used him to point a moral, and from the shelter of his tomb launched many a shaft of sarcasm at an unappreciative public. Giles Fletcher, in his "Purple Island" (a poem which reminds us of the "Faery Queen" by the supreme tediousness of its allegory, but in nothing else), set the example in the best verse he ever wrote :—

"Poorly, poor man, he lived ; poorly, poor man, he died."



January 1599, at a tavern in King Street, Westminster. He was buried in the neighbouring Abbey next to Chaucer, at the cost of the Earl of Essex, poets bearing his pall and casting verses into his grave. He died poor, but not in want. On the whole, his life may be reckoned a happy one, as in the main the lives of the great poets must have commonly been. If they feel more passionately the pang of the moment, so also the compensations are incalculable, and not the least of them this very capacity of passionate emotion. The real good fortune is to be measured, not by more or less of outward prosperity, but by the opportunity given for the development and free play of the genius. It should be remembered that the power of expression which exaggerates their griefs is also no inconsiderable consolation for them. We should measure what Spenser says of his worldly disappointments by the bitterness of the unavailing tears he shed for Rosalind. A careful analysis of these leaves no perceptible residuum of salt, and we are tempted to believe that the passion itself was not much more real than the pastoral accessories of pipe and crook. I very much doubt whether Spenser ever felt more than one profound passion in his life, and that, luckily, was for his "*Faery Queen*." He was fortunate in the friendship of the best men and women of his time, in the seclusion which made him free of the still better society of the past, in the loving recognition of his countrymen. All that we know of him is amiable and of good report. He was faithful to

Gradually this poetical tradition established itself firmly as authentic history. Spenser could never have been poor, except by comparison. The whole story of his later days has a strong savour of legend. He must have had ample warning of Tyrone's rebellion, and would probably have sent away his wife and children to Cork, if he did not go thither himself. I am inclined to think that he did, carrying his papers with him, and among them the two cantos of "*Mutability*," first published in 1611. These, it is most likely, were the only ones he ever completed, for, with all his abundance, he was evidently a laborious finisher. When we remember that ten years were given to the elaboration of the first three books, and that five more elapsed before the next three were ready, we shall waste no vain regrets on the six concluding books supposed to have been lost by the carelessness of an imaginary servant on their way from Ireland.



the friendships of his youth, pure in his loves, unspotted in his life. Above all, the ideal with him was not a thing apart and unattainable, but the sweetener and ennobler of the street and the fireside.

There are two ways of measuring a poet—either by an absolute æsthetic standard, or relatively to his position in the literary history of his country and the conditions of his generation. Both should be borne in mind as coefficients in a perfectly fair judgment. If his positive merit is to be settled irrevocably by the former, yet an intelligent criticism will find its advantage, not only in considering what he was, but what, under the given circumstances, it was possible for him to be.

The fact that the great poem of Spenser was inspired by the Orlando of Ariosto, and written in avowed emulation of it, and that the poet almost always needs to have his fancy set agoing by the hint of some predecessor, must not lead us to overlook his manifest claim to originality. It is not what a poet takes, but what he makes out of what he has taken, that shows what native force is in him. Above all, did his mind dwell complacently in those forms and fashions which in their very birth are already obsolescent, or was it instinctively drawn to those qualities which are permanent in language and whatever is wrought in it? There is much in Spenser that is contemporary and evanescent; but the substance of him is durable, and his work was the deliberate result of intelligent purpose and ample culture. The publication of his "*Shepherd's Calendar*" in 1579 (though the poem itself be of little interest), is one of the epochs in our literature. Spenser had at least the originality to see clearly and to feel keenly that it was essential to bring poetry back again to some kind of understanding with nature. His immediate predecessors seem to have conceived of it as a kind of bird of paradise, born to float somewhere between heaven and earth, with no very well defined relation to either. It is true that the nearest approach they were able to make to this airy ideal was a shuttlecock, winged with a bright plume or so from Italy, but, after all, nothing but cork and feathers, which they bandied back and forth from one stanza to another, with

the useful ambition of *keeping it up* as long as they could. To my mind the old comedy of "Gammer Gurton's Needle" is worth the whole of them. It may be coarse, earthy, but in reading it one feels that he is at least a man among men, and not a humbug among humbugs.

The form of Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar," it is true, is artificial, absurdly so if you look at it merely from the outside—not, perhaps, the wisest way to look at anything, unless it be a jail or a volume of the *Congressional Globe*—but the spirit of it is fresh and original. We have at last got over the superstition that shepherds and shepherdesses are any wiser or simpler than other people. We know that wisdom can be won only by wide commerce with men and books, and that simplicity, whether of manners or style, is the crowning result of the highest culture. But the pastorals of Spenser were very different things, different both in the moving spirit and the resultant form from the later ones of Browne or the "Piscatory Eclogues" of Phineas Fletcher. And why? Browne and Fletcher wrote because Spenser had written, but Spenser wrote from a strong inward impulse—an instinct it might be called—to escape, at all risks, into the fresh air from that horrible atmosphere into which rhymer after rhymer had been pumping carbonic-acid gas with the full force of his lungs, and in which all sincerity was on the edge of suffocation. His longing for something truer and better was as honest as that which led Tacitus so long before to idealise the Germans, and Rousseau so long after to make an angel of the savage.

Spenser himself supremely overlooks the whole chasm between himself and Chaucer, as Dante between himself and Virgil. He called Chaucer master, as Milton was afterwards to call *him*. And, even while he chose the most artificial of all forms, his aim—that of getting back to nature and life—was conscious, I have no doubt, to himself, and must be obvious to whoever reads with anything but the ends of his fingers. It is true that Sannazzaro had brought the pastoral into fashion again, and that two of Spenser's are little more than translations from Marot; but for manner he instinctively turned back

to Chaucer, the first and then only great English poet. He has given common instead of classic names to his personages, for characters they can hardly be called. Above all, he has gone to the provincial dialects for words wherewith to enlarge and freshen his poetical vocabulary.\* I look upon the "Shepherd's Calendar" as being no less a conscious and deliberate attempt at reform than Thomson's "Seasons" were in the topics, and Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" in the language of poetry. But the great merit of these pastorals was not so much in their matter as their manner. They show a sense of style in its larger meaning hitherto displayed by no English poet since Chaucer. Surrey had brought back from Italy a certain inkling of it, so far as it is contained in decorum. But here was a new language, a choice and arrangement of words, a variety, elasticity, and harmony of verse most grateful to the ears of men. If not passion, there was fervour, which was perhaps as near it as the somewhat stately movement of Spenser's mind would allow him to come. Sidney had tried many experiments in versification, which are curious and interesting, especially his attempts to naturalise the *sliding* rhymes of Sannazzaro in English. But there is everywhere the uncertainty of a 'prentice hand. Spenser shows himself already a master, at least in verse, and we can trace the studies of Milton, a yet greater master, in the "Shepherd's Calendar" as well as in the "Faery

\* Sir Philip Sidney did not approve of this. "That same framing of his style to an old rustic language I dare not allow, since neither Theocritus in Greek, Virgil in Latin, nor Sannazzaro in Italian, did affect it." ("Defence of Poesy.") Ben Jonson, on the other hand, said that Guarini "kept not decorum in making shepherds speak as well as himself could." ("Conversations with Drummond.") I think Sidney was right, for the poets' Arcadia is a purely ideal world, and should be treated accordingly. But whoever looks into the glossary appended to the "Calendar," by E. K., will be satisfied that Spenser's object was to find unhackneyed and poetical words rather than such as should seem more on a level with the speakers. See also the "Epistle Dedicatory." I cannot help thinking that E. K. was Spenser himself, with occasional interjections of Harvey. Who else could have written such English as many passages in this Epistle?



Queen." We have seen that Spenser, under the misleading influence of Sidney\* and Harvey, tried his hand at English hexameters. But his great glory is that he taught his own language to sing and move to measures harmonious and noble. Chaucer had done much to vocalise it, as I have tried to show elsewhere,† but Spenser was to prove

"That no tongue hath the muse's utterance heired  
For verse, and that sweet music to the ear  
Struck out of rhyme, so naturally as this."

The "Shepherd's Calendar" contains, perhaps, the most picturesquely imaginative verse which Spenser has written. It is in the eclogue for February, where he tells us of the

"Faded oak  
Whose body is sere, whose branches broke,  
Whose naked arms stretch unto the fire."

It is one of those verses that Joseph Warton would have liked in secret, that Dr. Johnson would have proved to be untranslatable into reasonable prose, and which the imagination welcomes at once without caring whether it be exactly conformable to *barbara* or *celarent*. Another pretty verse in the same eclogue—

"But gently took that ungently came"—

pleased Coleridge so greatly that he thought it was his own. But in general it is not so much the sentiments and images that are new as the modulation of the verses in which they float. The cold obstruction of two centuries' thaws, and the stream of speech, once more let loose, seeks out its old windings, or overflows musically in unpractised channels. The service which Spenser did to our literature by this exquisite sense of harmony is incalculable. His fine ear, abhorrent of

\* It was at Penshurst that he wrote the only specimen that has come down to us, and bad enough it is. I have said that some of Sidney's are pleasing.

† See *My Study Windows*, 264 *seqq.*



barbarous dissonance, his dainty tongue that loves to prolong the relish of a musical phrase, made possible the transition from the cast-iron stiffness of "Ferrex and Porrex" to the Damascus pliancy of Fletcher and Shakespeare. It was he that

"Taught the dumb on high to sing,  
And heavy ignorance aloft to fly:  
That added feathers to the learned's wing,  
And gave to grace a double majesty."

I do not mean that in the "Shepherd's Calendar" he had already achieved that transmutation of language and metre by which he was afterwards to endow English verse with the most varied and majestic of stanzas, in which the droning old alexandrine, awakened for the first time to a feeling of the poetry that was in him, was to wonder, like M. Jourdain, that he had been talking prose all his life—but already he gave clear indications of the tendency and premonitions of the power which were to carry it forward to ultimate perfection. A harmony and alacrity of language like this were unexampled in English verse :—

"Ye dainty nymphs, that in this blessed brook  
Do bathe your breast,  
Forsake your watery bowers and hither look  
At my request. . . .  
And eke you virgins that on Parnass dwell,  
Whence floweth Helicon, the learned well,  
Help me to blaze  
Her worthy praise,  
Which in her sex doth all excel."

Here we have the natural gait of the measure, somewhat formal and slow, as befits an invocation ; and now mark how the same feet shall be made to quicken their pace at the bidding of the tune :—

"Bring here the pink and purple columbine,  
With gilliflowers ;  
Bring coronations and sops in wine,  
Worne of paramours ;

Strow me the ground with daffadowndillies,  
 And cowslips and kingcúps and loved lilies;  
     The pretty paunce  
     And the chevisance  
 Shall match with the fair flowërdelice.”\*

The argument prefixed by E. K. to the tenth Eclogue has a special interest for us, as showing how high a conception Spenser had of poetry and the poet's office. By Cuddy he evidently means himself, though choosing out of modesty another name instead of the familiar Colin. “In Cuddy is set forth the perfect pattern of a Poet, which, finding no maintenance of his state and studies, complaineth of the contempt of Poetry and the causes thereof, specially having been in all ages, and even amongst the most barbarous, always of singular account and honour, *and being indeed so worthy and commendable an art, or rather no art, but a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to be gotten by labour and learning, but adorned with both, and poured into the wit by a certain*

\* Of course *dillies* and *lilies* must be read with a slight accentuation of the last syllable (permissible then), in order to chime with *delice*. In the first line I have put *here* instead of *hether*, which (like other words where *th* comes between two vowels) was then very often a monosyllable, in order to throw the accent back more strongly on *bring*, where it belongs. Spenser's innovation lies in making his verses by ear instead of on the finger-tips, and in valuing the stave more than any of the single verses that compose it. This is the secret of his easy superiority to all others in the stanza which he composed, and which bears his name. Milton (who got more of his schooling in these matters from Spenser than anywhere else) gave this principle a greater range, and applied it with more various mastery. I have little doubt that the tune of the last stanza cited above was clinging in Shakespeare's ear when he wrote those exquisite verses in “*Midsummer Night's Dream*” (“*I know a bank*”), where our grave pentameter is in like manner surprised into a lyrical movement. See also the pretty song in the eclogue for August. Ben Jonson, too, evidently caught some cadences from Spenser for his lyrics. I need hardly say that in those eclogues (May, for example) where Spenser thought he was imitating what wiseacres used to call the *riding-rhyme* of Chaucer, he fails most lamentably. He had evidently learned to scan his master's verses better when he wrote his “*Mother Hubbard's Tale*.”

*Enthousiasmos and celestial inspiration*, as the author hereof elsewhere at large discourseth in his book called THE ENGLISH POET, which book being lately come into my hands, I mind also by God's grace, upon further advisement, to publish." E. K., whoever he was, never carried out his intention, and the book is no doubt lost; a loss to be borne with less equanimity than that of Cicero's treatise, *De Gloria*, once possessed by Petrarch. The passage I have italicised is most likely an extract, and reminds one of the long-breathed periods of Milton. Drummond of Hawthornden tells us, "he [Ben Jonson] hath by heart some verses of Spenser's 'Calendar,' about wine, between Coline and Percy" (Cuddie and Piers).<sup>\*</sup> These verses are in this eclogue, and are worth quoting, both as having the approval of dear old Ben, the best critic of the day, and because they are a good sample of Spenser's earlier verse:—

"Thou kenst not, Percie, how the rhyme should rage;  
O, if my temples were distained with wine,  
And girt in garlands of wild ivy-twine,  
How I could rear the Muse on stately stage  
And teach her tread aloft in buskin fine  
With quaint Bellona in her equipage!"

---

<sup>\*</sup> Drummond, it will be remarked, speaking from memory, takes Cuddy to be Colin. In Milton's "Lycidas" there are reminiscences of this eclogue as well as of that for May. The latter are the more evident, but I think that Spenser's

"Cuddie, the praise is better than the price,"  
suggested Milton's

"But not the praise,  
Phœbus replied, and touched my trembling ears."  
Shakespeare had read and remembered this pastoral. Compare

"But, ah, Mæcenas is ycl d in clay,  
And great Augustus long ago is dead,  
And all the worthies ligen wrapt in lead,"

with

"King Pandion, he is dead;  
All thy friends are lapt in lead."

It is odd that Shakespeare, in his "lapt in lead," is more Spenserian than Spenser himself, from whom he caught this "hunting of the letter."



In this eclogue he gives hints of that spacious style which was to distinguish him, and which, like his own Fame,

“ With golden wings aloft doth fly  
Above the reach of ruinous decay,  
And with brave plumes doth beat the azure sky,  
Admired of base-born men from far away.”\*

He was letting his wings grow, as Milton said, and foreboding the “ Faery Queen ” :—

“ Lift thyself up out of the lowly dust  
To ’doubted knights whose woundless armour rusts  
And helms unbruised waxen daily brown :  
There may thy Muse display her fluttering wing,  
And stretch herself at large from East to West.”

Verses like these, especially the last (which Dryden would have liked), were such as English ears had not yet heard, and curiously prophetic of the maturer man. The language and verse of Spenser at his best have an ideal lift in them, and there is scarce any of our poets who can so hardly help being poetical.

It was this instantly felt if not easily definable charm that forthwith won for Spenser his never-disputed rank as the chief English poet of that age, and gave him a popularity which, during his life and in the following generation, was, in its select quality, without a competitor. It may be thought that I lay too much stress on this single attribute of diction. But apart from its importance in his case as showing their way to the poets who were just then learning the accidence of their art, and leaving them a material to work in already mellowed to their hands, it should be remembered that it is subtle perfection of phrase and that happy coalescence of music and meaning, where each reinforces the other, that define a man as poet and

\* “ Ruins of Time.” It is, perhaps, not considering too nicely to remark how often this image of *wings* recurred to Spenser’s mind. A certain aerial latitude was essential to the large circlings of his style.



make all ears converts and partisans. Spenser was an epicure in language. He loved "seldseen costly" words perhaps too well, and did not always distinguish between mere strangeness and that novelty which is so agreeable as to cheat us with some charm of seeming association. He had not the concentrated power which can sometimes pack infinite riches in the little room of a single epithet, for his genius is rather for dilatation than compression.\* But he was, with the exception of Milton and possibly Gray, the most learned of our poets. His familiarity with ancient and modern literature was easy and intimate, and as he perfected himself in his art, he caught the grand manner and high-bred ways of the society he frequented. But even to the last he did not quite shake off the blunt rusticity of phrase that was habitual with the generation that preceded him. In the fifth book of the "Faery Queen," where he is describing the passion of Britomart at the supposed infidelity of Arthegall, he descends to a Teniers-like realism†—

\* Perhaps his most striking single epithet is the "sea-shouldering whales," B. II. 12, xxiii. His ear seems to delight in prolongations. For example, he makes such words as *glorious, grations, joyeous havior, chapelet* dactyles, and that, not at the end of verses, where it would not have been unusual, but in the first half of them. Milton contrives a break (a kind of heave, as it were) in the uniformity of his verse by a practice exactly the opposite of this. He also shuns a *hiatus* which does not seem to have been generally displeasing to Spenser's ear, though perhaps in the compound epithet *bees-alluring* he intentionally avoids it by the plural form.

† "Like as a wayward child, whose sounder sleep  
Is broken with some fearful dream's affright,  
With froward will doth set himself to weep  
Ne can be stilled for all his nurse's might,  
But kicks and squalls and shrieks for fell despight,  
Now scratching her and her loose locks misusing,  
Now seeking darkness and now seeking light,  
Then craving suck, and then the suck refusing."

He would doubtless have justified himself by the familiar example of Homer's comparing Ajax to a donkey in the eleventh book of the *Iliad*. So also in the "Epithalamion" it grates our nerves to hear,

he whose verses generally remind us of the dancing Hours of Guido, where we catch but a glimpse of the real earth, and that far away beneath. But his habitual style is that of gracious loftiness and refined luxury.

He first shows his mature hand in the "Muiopotmos," the most airily fanciful of his poems, a marvel for delicate conception and treatment, whose breezy verse seems to float between a blue sky and golden earth in imperishable sunshine. No other English poet has found the variety and compass which enlivened the octave stanza under his sensitive touch. It can hardly be doubted that in Clarion, the butterfly, he has symbolised himself, and surely never was the poetic temperament so picturesquely exemplified :—

"Over the fields, in his frank lustiness,  
And all the champain o'er, he soar'd light,  
And all the country wide he did possess,  
Feeding upon their pleasures bounteously,  
That none gainsaid and none did him envy.

"The woods, the rivers, and the meadows green,  
With his air-cutting wings he measured wide,  
Nor did he leave the mountains bare unseen,  
Nor the rank grassy fens' delights untried ;  
But none of these, however sweet they been,  
Mote please his fancy, or him cause to abide ;  
His choiceful sense with every change doth flit ;  
No common things may please a wavering wit.

"To the gay gardens his unstaïd desire  
Him wholly carried, to refresh his sprights ;  
There lavish Nature, in her best attire,  
Pours forth sweet odours and alluring sights,  
And Art, with her contending doth aspire,  
To excel the natural with made delights ;  
And all that fair or pleasant may be found,  
In riotous excess doth there abound.

---

"Pour not by cups, but by the bellyful,  
Pour out to all that wull."

Such examples serve to show how strong a dose of Spenser's *aurum potabile* the language needed.

- " There he arriving, round about doth fie,  
 From bed to bed, from one to the other border,  
 And takes survey with curious busy eye,  
 Of every flower and herb there set in order,  
 Now this, now that, he tasteth tenderly,  
 Yet none of them he rudely doth disorder,  
 Ne with his feet their silken leaves displace,  
 But pastures on the pleasures of each place.
- " And evermore with most variety  
 And change of sweetness (for all change is sweet)  
 He casts his glutton sense to satisfy,  
 Now sucking of the sap of herbs most meet,  
 Or of the dew which yet on them doth lie,  
 Now in the same bathing his tender feet ;  
 And then he percheth on some branch thereby  
 To weather him and his moist wings to dry.
- " And then again he turneth to his play,  
 To spoil [plunder] the pleasures of that paradise ;  
 The wholesome sage, the lavender still grey,  
 Rank-smelling rue, and cummin good for eyes,  
 The roses reigning in the pride of May,  
 Sharp hyssop good for green wounds' remedies  
 Fair marigolds, and bees-alluring thyme,  
 Sweet marjoram and daisies decking prime.
- " Cool violets, and orpine growing still,  
 Embath'd balm, and cheerful galingale,  
 Fresh costmary and breathful camomill,  
 Dull poppy and drink-quickenng setuale,  
 Vein-healing vervain and head-purging dill,  
 Sound savoury, and basil hearty-hale,  
 Fat coleworts and comforting perseline,  
 Cold lettuce, and refreshing rosemarine.\*

---

\* I could not bring myself to root out this odourous herb-garden, though it make my extract too long. It is a pretty reminiscence of his master Chaucer, but is also very characteristic of Spenser himself. He could not help planting a flower or two among his serviceable plants, and after all this abundance he is not satisfied, but begins the next stanza with " And whatso else."



"And whatso else of virtue good or ill,  
 Grew in this garden, fetched from far away,  
 Of every one he takes and tastes at will,  
 And on their pleasures greedily doth prey;  
 Then, when he hath both played and fed his fill,  
 In the warm sun he doth himself embay,  
 And there him rests in riotous suffisance  
 Of all his gladfulness and kingly joyance.

"What more felicity can fall to creature  
 Than to enjoy delight with liberty,  
 And to be lord of all the works of nature?  
 To reign in the air from earth to highest sky,  
 To feed on flowers and weeds of glorious feature,  
 To take whatever thing doth please the eye?  
 Who rests not pleas'd with such happiness,  
 Well worthy he to taste of wretchedness."

The "Muiopotmos" pleases us all the more that it vibrates in us a string of classical association by adding an episode to Ovid's story of Arachne. "Talking the other day with a friend (the late Mr. Keats) about Dante, he observed that whenever so great a poet told us anything in addition or continuation of an ancient story, he had a right to be regarded as classical authority. For instance, said he, when he tells us of that characteristic death of Ulysses . . . we ought to receive the information as authentic, and be glad that we have more news of Ulysses than we looked for."\* We can hardly doubt that Ovid would have been glad to admit this exquisitely fantastic illumination into his margin.

No German analyser of æsthetics has given us so convincing a definition of the artistic nature as these radiant verses. "To reign in the air" was certainly Spenser's function. And yet the commentators, who seem never willing to let their poet be a poet pure and simple, though, had he not been so, they would have lost their only hold upon life, try to make out from his "Mother Hubberd's Tale" that he might have been a very sensible matter-of-fact man if he would. For my own part, I

\* Leigh Hunt's *Indicator*, xvii.



am quite willing to confess that I like him none the worse for being *unpractical*, and that my reading has convinced me that being too poetical is the rarest fault of poets. Practical men are not so scarce, one would think; and I am not sure that the tree was a gainer when the hamadryad flitted and left it nothing but ship-timber. Such men as Spenser are not sent into the world to be part of its motive power. The blind old engine would not know the difference though we got up its steam with attar of roses, nor make one revolution more to the minute for it. What practical man ever left such an heirloom to his countrymen as the "Faery Queen?"

Undoubtedly Spenser wished to be useful, and in the highest vocation of all, that of teacher, and Milton calls him "our sage and serious poet, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas." And good Dr. Henry More was of the same mind. I fear he makes his vices so beautiful now and then that we should not be very much afraid of them if we chanced to meet them; for he could not escape from his genius, which, if it led him as philosopher to the abstract contemplation of the beautiful, left him as poet open to every impression of sensuous delight. When he wrote the "Shepherd's Calendar" he was certainly a Puritan, and probably so by conviction rather than from any social influences or thought of personal interests. There is a verse, it is true, in the second of the two detached cantos of "Mutability,"

"Like that ungracious crew which feigns demurest grace,"

which is supposed to glance at the straiter religionists, and from which it has been inferred that he drew away from them as he grew older. It is very likely that years and widened experience of men may have produced in him their natural result of tolerant wisdom which revolts at the hasty destructiveness of inconsiderate zeal. But with the more generous side of Puritanism I think he sympathised to the last. His rebukes of clerical worldliness are in the Puritan tone, and as severe a one as any is in "Mother Hubbard's

Tale," published in 1591.\* There is an iconoclastic relish in his account of Sir Guyon's demolishing the Bower of Bliss that makes us think he would not have regretted the plundered abbeys as perhaps Shakespeare did when he speaks of the winter woods as "bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang":—

"But all those pleasant bowers and palace brave  
Guyon broke down with rigour pitiless,  
Ne ought their goodly workmanship might save  
Them from the tempest of his wrathfulness,  
But that their bliss he turned to balefulness;  
Their groves he felled, their gardens did deface,  
Their arbours spoil, their cabinets suppress,  
Their banquet-houses burn, their buildings rase,  
And of the fairest late now made the foulest place."

But whatever may have been Spenser's religious opinions (which do not nearly concern us here), the bent of his mind was toward a Platonic mysticism, a supramundane sphere where it could shape universal forms out of the primal elements of things, instead of being forced to put up with their fortuitous combinations in the unwilling material of mortal clay. He who, when his singing robes were on, could never be tempted nearer to the real world than under some subterfuge of pastoral or allegory, expatiates joyously in this untrammelled ether:—

"Lifting himself out of the lowly dust  
On golden plumes up to the purest sky."

---

\* Ben Jonson told Drummond "that in that paper Sir W. Raleigh had of the allegories of his Faery Queen, by the Blatant Beast the Puritans were understood." But this is certainly wrong. There were very different shades of Puritanism, according to individual temperament. That of Winthrop and Higginson had a mellowness of which Endicott and Standish were incapable. The gradual change of Milton's opinions was similar to that which I suppose in Spenser. The passage in "Mother Hubbard" may have been aimed at the Protestant clergy of Ireland (for he says much the same thing in his "View of the State of Ireland"), but it is general in its terms.

Nowhere does his genius soar and sing with such continuous aspiration, nowhere is his phrase so decorously stately, though rising to an enthusiasm which reaches intensity while it stops short of vehemence, as in his Hymns to Love and Beauty, especially the latter. There is an exulting spurn of earth in it, as of a soul just loosed from its cage. I shall make no extracts from it, for it is one of those intimately coherent and transcendently logical poems that "moveth altogether if it move at all," the breaking off a fragment from which would maim it as it would a perfect group of crystals. Whatever there is of sentiment and passion is for the most part purely disembodied and without sex, like that of angels—a kind of poetry which has of late gone out of fashion, whether to our gain or not may be questioned. Perhaps one may venture to hint that the animal instincts are those that stand in least need of stimulation. Spenser's notions of love were so nobly pure, so far from those of our common ancestor who could hang by his tail, as not to disqualify him for achieving the quest of the Holy Grail, and accordingly it is not uninteresting to remember that he had drunk, among others, at French sources not yet deboshed with *absinthe*.\* Yet, with a purity like that of thrice-bolted snow, he had none of its coldness. He is, of all our poets, the most truly sensuous, using the word as Milton probably meant it when he said that poetry should be "simple, sensuous, and passionate." A poet is innocently sensuous when his mind permeates and illumines his senses; when they, on the other hand, muddy the mind, he becomes sensual. Every one of Spenser's senses was as exquisitely alive to the impressions of material, as every organ of his soul was to those of spiritual beauty. Accordingly,

\* Two of his eclogues, as I have said, are from Marot, and his earliest known verses are translations from Bellay, a poet who was charming whenever he had the courage to play truant from a bad school. We must not suppose that an analysis of the literature of the *demi-monde* will give us all the elements of the French character. It has been both grave and profound; nay, it has even contrived to be wise and lively at the same time, a combination so incomprehensible by the Teutonic races that they have labelled it levity. It puts them out as Nature did Fusell.



if he painted the weeds of sensuality at all, he could not help making them "of glorious feature." It was this, it may be suspected, rather than his "praising love," that made Lord Burleigh shake his "rugged forehead." Spenser's gamut, indeed, is a wide one, ranging from a purely corporeal delight in "precious odours fetched from far away" upward to such refinement as

"Upon her eyelids many graces sate  
Under the shadow of her even brows,"

where the eye shares its pleasure with the mind. He is court-painter in ordinary to each of the senses in turn, and idealises these frail favourites of his majesty King Lusty Juventus, till they half believe themselves the innocent shepherdesses into which he travesties them.\*

In his great poem he had two objects in view—first, the ephemeral one of pleasing the court, and then that of recommending himself to the permanent approval of his own and following ages as a poet, and especially as a moral poet. To meet the first demand, he lays the scene of his poem in contemporary England, and brings in all the leading personages of the day under the thin disguise of his knights and their squires and lady-loves. He says this expressly in the prologue to the second book :—

\* Taste must be partially excepted. It is remarkable how little eating and drinking there is in the "Faery Queen." The only time he fairly sets a table is in the house of Malbecco, where it is necessary to the conduct of the story. Yet taste is not wholly forgotten :—

"In her left hand a cup of gold she held,  
And with her right the riper fruit did reach,  
Whose sappy liquor, that with fulness sweld,  
Into her cup she scrused with dainty breach  
Of her fine fingers without foul impeach,  
That so fair wine-press made the wine more sweet."

B. II., c. xii., 56.

Taste can hardly complain of unhandsome treatment !



"Of Faery Land yet if he more inquire,  
 By certain signs, here set in sundry place,  
 He may it find ; . . .  
 And thou, O fairest princess under sky,  
 In this fair mirror mayst behold thy face  
 And thine own realms in land of Faery."

Many of his personages we can still identify, and all of them were once as easily recognisable as those of *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*. This, no doubt, added greatly to the immediate piquancy of the allusions. The interest they would excite may be inferred from the fact that King James, in 1596, wished to have the author prosecuted and punished for his indecent handling of his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, under the name of *Duessa*.<sup>\*</sup> To suit the wider application of his plan's other and more important half, Spenser made all his characters double their parts, and appear in his allegory as the impersonations of abstract moral qualities. When the cardinal and theological virtues tell Dante,

"Noi siam qui ninfe e in ciel siamo stelle,"

the sweetness of the verse enables the fancy, by a slight gulp, to swallow without solution the problem of being in two places at the same time. But there is something fairly ludicrous in such a duality as that of Prince Arthur and the Earl of Leicester, Arthegall and Lord Grey, and Belphebe and Elizabeth.

"In this same interlude it doth befall  
 That I, one Snout by name, present a wall."

---

\* Had the poet lived longer, he might perhaps have verified his friend Raleigh's saying, that "whosoever in writing modern history shall follow truth too near the heels, it may haply strike out his teeth." The passage is one of the very few disgusting ones in the "*Faery Queen*." Spenser was copying Ariosto; but the Italian poet, with the discreeter taste of his race, keeps to generalities. Spenser goes into particulars which can only be called nasty. He did this, no doubt, to pleasure his mistress, Mary's rival; and this gives us a measure of the brutal coarseness of contemporary manners. It becomes only the more marvellous that the fine flower of his genius could have transmuted the juices of such a soil into the purity and sweetness which are its own peculiar properties.

The reality seems to heighten the improbability, already hard enough to manage. But Spenser had fortunately almost as little sense of humour as Wordsworth,\* or he could never have carried his poem on with enthusiastic good faith so far as he did. It is evident that to him the Land of Faery was an unreal world of picture and illusion,

“The world’s sweet inn from pain and wearisome turmoil,”

in which he could shut himself up from the actual, with its shortcomings and failures.

“The ways through which my weary steps I guide  
In this delightful land of Faery  
Are so exceeding spacious and wide,  
And sprinkled with such sweet variety  
Of all that pleasant is to ear and eye,  
That I, nigh ravisht with rare thoughts’ delight,  
My tedious travail do forget thereby,  
And, when I ’gin to feel decay of might,  
It strength to me supplies, and cheers my dullèd spright.”

Spenser seems here to confess a little weariness; but the alacrity of his mind is so great that, even where his invention fails a little, we do not share his feeling nor suspect it, charmed as we are by the variety and sweep of his measure, the beauty or vigour of his similes, the musical felicity of his diction, and the mellow versatility of his pictures. In this last quality Ariosto, whose emulous pupil he was, is as Bologna to Venice in the comparison. That, when the personal allusions have lost their meaning and the allegory has become a burden, the book should continue to be read with delight, is proof enough, were any wanting, how full of life and light and the other-worldliness of poetry it must be. As a narrative it has, I think, every fault

\* There is a gleam of humour in one of the couplets of “Mother Hubbard’s Tale,” where the Fox, persuading the Ape that they should disguise themselves as discharged soldiers in order to beg the more successfully, says—

“Be you the soldier, for you likest are  
For manly semblance and small skill in war”

of which that kind of writing is capable. The characters are vague, and, even were they not, they drop out of the story so often and remain out of it so long, that we have forgotten who they are when we meet them again; the episodes hinder the advance of the action instead of relieving it with variety of incident or novelty of situation; the plot, if plot it may be called,

"That shape has none  
Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,"

recalls drearily our ancient enemy, the Metrical Romance; while the fighting, which, in those old poems, was tediously sincere, is between shadow and shadow, where we know that neither can harm the other, though we are tempted to wish he might. Hazlitt bids us not mind the allegory, and says that it won't bite us nor meddle with us if we do not meddle with it. But how if it bore us, which after all is the fatal question? The truth is that it is too often forced upon us against our will, as people were formerly driven to church till they began to look on a day of rest as a penal institution, and to transfer to the Scriptures that suspicion of defective inspiration which was awakened in them by the preaching. The true type of the allegory is the "Odyssey," which we read without suspicion as pure poem, and then find a new pleasure in divining its double meaning, as if we somehow got a better bargain of our author than he meant to give us. But this complex feeling must not be so exacting as to prevent our lapsing into the old Arabian Nights simplicity of interest again. The moral of a poem should be suggested, as when in some mediæval church we cast down our eyes to muse over a fresco of Giotto, and are reminded of the transitoriness of life by the mortuary tablets under our feet. The vast superiority of Bunyan over Spenser lies in the fact that we help to make his allegory out of our own experience. Instead of striving to embody abstract passions and temptations, he has given us his own in all their pathetic simplicity. He is the Ulysses of his own prose-epic. This is the secret of his power and his charm



that, while the representation of what *may* happen to all men comes home to none of us in particular, the story of any one man's real experience finds its startling parallel in that of every one of us. The very homeliness of Bunyan's names and the everydayness of his scenery, too, put us off our guard, and we soon find ourselves on as easy a footing with his allegorical beings as we might be with Adam or Socrates in a dream. Indeed, he has prepared us for such incongruities by telling us at setting out that the story was of a dream. The long nights of Bedford jail had so intensified his imagination, and made the figures with which it peopled his solitude so real to him, that the creatures of his mind become *things*, as clear to the memory as if we had seen them. But Spenser's are too often mere names, with no bodies to back them, entered on the Muses' muster-roll by the specious trick of personification. There is, likewise, in Bunyan, a childlike simplicity and taking-for-granted which win our confidence. His Giant Despair,\* for example, is by no means the Ossianic figure into which artists who mistake the vague for the sublime have mis-conceived it. He is the ogre of the fairy-tales, with his malicious wife; and he comes forth to us from those regions of early faith and wonder as something beforehand accepted by the imagination. These figures of Bunyan's are already familiar inmates of the mind, and, if there be any sublimity in him, it is the daring frankness of his verisimilitude. Spenser's giants are those of the later romances, except that grand figure with the balances in the second Canto of Book V., the most original of all his conceptions, yet no real giant, but a pure eidolon of the mind. As Bunyan rises not seldom to a natural poetry, so Spenser sinks now and then, through the fault of his topics, to unmistakable prose. Take his description of the House of Alma,† for instance:—

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\* Bunyan probably took the hint of the Giant's suicidal offer of "knife, halter, or poison," from Spenser's "swords, ropes, poison," in "Faery Queen," B. I., c. ix., l.

† Book II., c. ix.



"The master cook was cald Concoction,  
A careful man, and full of comely guise;  
The kitchen-clerk, that hight Digestion,  
Did order all the achates in seemly wise."

And so on through all the organs of the body. The author of *Ecclesiastes* understood these matters better in that last pathetic chapter of his, blunderingly translated as it apparently is. This, I admit, is the worst failure of Spenser in this kind; though, even here, when he gets on to the organs of the mind, the enchantments of his fancy and style come to the rescue and put us in good-humour again, hard as it is to conceive of armed knights entering the chamber of the mind, and talking with such visionary damsels as Ambition and Shamefastness. Nay, even in the most prosy parts, unless my partiality deceive me, there is an infantile confidence in the magical powers of *Prosopopœia* which half beguiles us, as of children who *play* that everything is something else, and are quite satisfied with the transformation.

The problem for Spenser was a double one: how to commend poetry at all to a generation which thought it effeminate trifling,\* and how he, Master Edmund Spenser, of imagination all compact, could commend *his* poetry to Master John Bull, the most practical of mankind in his habitual mood, but at that moment in a passion of religious anxiety about his soul. *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci* was not only an irrefragable axiom because a Latin poet had said it, but it exactly met the case in point. He would convince the scorers that poetry might be seriously useful, and show Master Bull his new way of making fine words butter parsnips, in a rhymed moral primer. Allegory, as then practised, was imagination adapted for beginners, in words of one syllable and illustrated with cuts, and would thus serve both his ethical and pictorial purpose. Such a primer, or a first instalment of it, he proceeded to put forth; but he so bordered it with bright-

\* See Sidney's *Defence* and Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*, Book I., c. viii.

coloured fancies, he so often filled whole pages and crowded the text hard in others with the gay frolics of his pencil, that, as in the Grimani missal, the holy function of the book is forgotten in the ecstasy of its adornment. Worse than all, does not his brush linger more lovingly along the rosy contours of his sirens than on the modest wimples of the Wise Virgins? "The general end of the book," he tells us in his Dedication to Sir Walter Raleigh, "is to fashion a gentleman of noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline." But a little further on he evidently has a qualm, as he thinks how generously he had interpreted his promise of cuts: "To some I know this method will seem displeasing, which had rather have good discipline delivered plainly in way of precepts or sermoned at large,\* as they use, than thus cloudily enwrapped in allegorical devices." Lord Burleigh was of this way of thinking, undoubtedly, but how could poor Clarion help it? Has he not said,

"And whatso else, *of virtue good or ill,*  
Grew in that garden, fetcht from far away,  
Of every one he takes and tastes at will,  
And on their pleasures greedily doth prey?"

One sometimes feels in reading him as if he were the pure sense of the beautiful incarnated to the one end that he might interpret it to our duller perceptions. So exquisite was his sensibility,† that with him sensation and intellection seem identical, and we "can almost say his body thought." This subtle interfusion of sense with spirit it is that gives his poetry a crystalline purity without lack of warmth. He is full of feeling, and yet of such a kind that we can neither say it is mere intellectual perception of what is fair and good, nor yet associate it with that throbbing fervour which leads us to call sensibility by the physical name of heart.

\* We can fancy how he would have done this by Jeremy Taylor, who was a kind of Spenser in a cassock.

† Of this he himself gives a striking hint, where speaking in his own person he suddenly breaks in on his narrative with the passionate cry,

"Ah, dearest God, me grant I dead be not defouled."

"Faery Queen," B. I., c. x., 43.

Charles Lamb made the most pithy criticism of Spenser when he called him the poets' poet. We may fairly leave the allegory on one side, for perhaps, after all, he adopted it only for the reason that it was in fashion, and put it on as he did his ruff, not because it was becoming, but because it was the only wear. The true use of him is as a gallery of pictures which we visit as the mood takes us, and where we spend an hour or two at a time, long enough to sweeten our perceptions, not so long as to cloy them. He makes one think always of Venice; for not only is his style Venetian,\* but as the gallery there is housed in the shell of an abandoned convent, so his in that of a deserted allegory. And again, as at Venice you swim in a gondola from Gian Bellini to Titian, and from Titian to Tintoret, so in him, where other cheer is wanting, the gentle sway of his measure, like the rhythmical impulse of the oar, floats you lulling along from picture to picture.

"If all the pens that ever poet held  
Had fed the feeling of their master's thoughts,  
And every sweetness that inspired their hearts  
Their minds and muses on admir'd themes,  
If all the heavenly quintessence they still  
From their immortal flowers of poesy,

---

\* Was not this picture painted by Paul Veronese, for example?

"Arachne figured how Jove did abuse  
Europa like a bull, and on his back  
Her through the sea did bear: . . .  
She seemed still back unto the land to look,  
And her playfellows' aid to call, and fear  
The dashing of the waves, that up she took,  
Her dainty feet, and garments gathered near. . . .  
Before the bull she pictured wing'd Love,  
With his young brother Sport, . . .  
And many nymphs about them flocking round,  
And many Tritons which their horns did sound."

*Muicopotmos*, 281-296.

Spenser begins a complimentary sonnet prefixed to the "Commonwealth and Government of Venice" (1599) with this beautiful verse,

"Fair Venice, flower of the last world's delight,  
Perhaps we should read "lost"!



If these had made one poem's period,  
 And all combined in beauty's worthiness ;  
 Yet should there hover in their restless heads  
 One thought, one grace, one wonder at the best,  
 Which into words no virtue can digest." \*

Spenser, at his best, has come as near to expressing this unattainable something as any other poet. He is so purely poet that with him the meaning does not so often modulate the music of the verse as the music makes great part of the meaning and leads the thought along its pleasant paths. No poet is so splendidly superfluous as he ; none knows so well that in poetry enough is not only not so good as a feast, but is a beggarly parsimony. He spends himself in a careless abundance only to be justified by incomes of immortal youth.

" Pensier canuto nè molto nè poco  
 Si può quivi albergare in alcun cuore ;  
 Non entra quivi disagio nè inopia,  
 Ma vi sta ogn'or col corno pien la Copia." †

This delicious abundance and overrunning luxury of Spenser appear in the very structure of his verse. He found the *ottava rima* too monotonously iterative ; so, by changing the order of his rhymes, he shifted the couplet from the end of the stave, where it always seems to put on the brakes with a jar, to the middle, where it may serve at will as a brace or a bridge ; he found it not roomy enough, so first ran it over into another line, and then ran that added line into an alexandrine, in which the melody of one stanza seems forever longing and feeling forward after that which is to follow. There is no ebb and flow in his metre more than on the shores of the Adriatic, but wave follows wave with equable gainings and recessions, the one sliding back in fluent music to be mingled with and carried forward by

\* Marlowe's "Tamburlaine," Part I., Act v., 2.

† " Greyheaded Thought, nor much nor little, may  
 Take up its lodging here in any heart ;  
 Unease nor Lack can enter at this door ;  
 But here dwells full-horned Plenty evermore."

*Orl. Fur.*, c. vi., 73.



the next. In all this there is soothingness indeed, but no slumberous monotony; for Spenser was no mere metrist, but a great composer. By the variety of his pauses—now at the close of the first or second foot, now of the third, and again of the fourth—he gives spirit and energy to a measure whose tendency it certainly is to become languorous. He knew how to make it rapid and passionate at need, as in such verses as,

“ But he, my lion, and my noble lord,  
How does he find in cruel heart to hate  
Her that him loved and ever most adored  
As the God of my life? Why hath he me abhorred? ”\*

Or this,

“ Come hither, come hither, O, come hastily ! ”†

Joseph Warton objects to Spenser's stanza, that its “ constraint led him into many absurdities.” Of these he instances three, of which I shall notice only one, since the two others (which suppose him at a loss for words and rhymes) will hardly seem valid to any one who knows the poet. It is that it “ obliged him to dilate the thing to be expressed, however unimportant, with trifling and tedious circumlocutions—namely, ‘ Faery Queen,’ II., ii., 44 :—

‘ Now hath fair Phœbe with her silver face  
Thrice seen the shadows of this nether world,  
Sith last I left that honourable place,  
In which her royal presence is enrolled.’

That is, it is three months since I left her palace.”‡ But Dr. Warton should have remembered (what he too often forgets in his own verses) that, in spite of Dr. Johnson's dictum, poetry is

\* B. I., c. iii., 7. Leigh Hunt, one of the most sympathetic of critics, has remarked the passionate change from the third to the first person in the last two verses.

† B. II., c. viii., 3.

‡ *Observations on Faery Queen*, vol. i., pp. 158, 159. Mr. Hughes also objects to Spenser's measure, that it is “ closed always by a full-stop, in the same place, by which every stanza is made as it were a distinct

Senza la qual chi sua vita consuma,  
 Cotal vestigio in terra di se lascia  
 Qual fumo in aere ed in acqua la schiuma."\*

"Whoso in pomp of proud estate, quoth she,  
 Does swim, and bathes himself in courtly bliss,  
 Does waste his days in dark obscurity  
 And in oblivion ever buried is ;  
 Where ease abounds it's eath to do amiss :  
 But who his limbs with labours and his mind  
 Behaves with cares, cannot so easy miss.  
 Abroad in arms, at home in studious kind,  
 Who seeks with painful toil shall Honour soonest find.

"In woods, in waves, in wars, she wonts to dwell,  
 And will be found with peril and with pain,  
 Ne can the man that moulds in idle cell  
 Unto her happy mansion attain ;  
 Before her gate high God did Sweat ordain,  
 And wakeful watches ever to abide ;  
 But easy is the way and passage plain  
 To pleasure's palace ; it may soon be spied,  
 And day and night her doors to all stand open wide."†

Spenser's mind always demands this large elbow-room. His thoughts are never pithily expressed, but with a stately and sonorous proclamation, as if under the open sky, that seems to me very noble. For example—

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\* *Inferno*, xxiv., 46-52.

"For sitting upon down,  
 Or under quilt, one cometh not to fame,  
 Withouten which whoso his life consumeth  
 Such vestige leaveth of himself on earth  
 As smoke in air or in the water foam." —LONGFELLOW.

It shows how little Dante was read during the last century that none of the commentators on Spenser notice his most important obligations to the great Tuscan.

† "Faery Queen," B. II., c. iii., 40, 41.

" The noble heart that harbours virtuous thought  
And is with child of glorious-great intent  
Can never rest until it forth have brought  
The eternal brood of glory excellent."\*

One's very soul seems to dilate with that last verse. And here is a passage which Milton had read and remembered :—

" And is there care in Heaven ? and is there love  
In heavenly spirits to these creatures base,  
That may compassion of their evils move ?  
There is : else much more wretched were the case  
Of man than beasts : but O, the exceeding grace  
Of highest God, that loves his creatures so,  
And all his works with mercy doth embrace,  
That blessed angels he sends to and fro,  
To serve to wicked man, to serve his wicked foe !

" How oft do they their silver bowers leave,  
To come to succour us that succour want !  
How oft do they with golden pinions cleave  
The fleeting skies like flying pursuivant,  
Against foul fiends to aid us militant !  
They for us fight, they watch and duly ward,  
And their bright squadrons round about us plant ;  
And all for love and nothing for reward ;  
O, why should heavenly God to men have such regard ?"†

His natural tendency is to shun whatever is sharp and abrupt. He loves to prolong emotion, and lingers in his honeyed sensations like a bee in the translucent cup of a lily. So entirely are beauty and delight in it the native element of Spenser, that, whenever in the "Faery Queen" you come suddenly on the moral, it gives you a shock of unpleasant surprise, a kind of grit, as when one's teeth close on a bit of gravel in a dish of strawberries and cream. He is the most fluent of our poets. Sensation passing through emotion into revery is a prime quality of his manner. And to read him puts one in the condition of revery, a state of mind in which our thoughts and feelings float motionless, as one sees fish do in a

\* *Ibid.*, B. I., c. v., 1.      † *Ibid.*, B. II., c. viii., 1, 2.



gentle stream, with just enough vibration of their fins to keep themselves from going down with the current, while their bodies yield indolently to all its soothing curves. He chooses his language for its rich canorousness rather than for intensity of meaning. To characterise his style in a single word, I should call it *costly*. None but the daintiest and nicest phrases will serve him, and he allures us from one to the other with such cunning baits of alliteration, and such sweet lapses of verse, that never any word seems more eminent than the rest, nor detains the feeling to eddy around it, but you must go on to the end before you have time to stop and muse over the wealth that has been lavished on you. But he has characterised and exemplified his own style better than any description could do :—

“ For round about the walls yclothed were  
 With goodly arras of great majesty,  
 Woven with gold and silk so close and near  
 That the rich metal lurked privily  
 As faining to be hid from envious eye ;  
 Yet here and there and everywhere, unwares  
 It showed itself and shone unwillingly  
 Like to a discoloured snake whose hidden snares  
 Through the green grass his long bright-burnished back  
 declares.” \*

And of the lulling quality of his verse take this as a sample :—

“ And, more to lull him in his slumber soft,  
 A trickling stream from high rock tumbling down  
 And ever drizzling rain upon the loft,  
 Mixt with the murmuring wind much like the soun  
 Of swarming bees did cast him in a swoon.  
 No other noise, nor peoples’ troublous cries,  
 As still are wont to annoy the wallèd town,  
 Might there be heard : but careless quiet lies  
 Wrapt in eternal silence far from enemies.” †

In the world into which Spenser carries us there is neither time nor space, or rather it is outside of and independent of them both, and so is purely ideal, or, more truly, imaginary.

\* B. III., c. xi., 28.

† B. I., c. i., 41.

yet it is full of form, colour, and all earthly luxury, and so far, if not real, yet apprehensible by the senses. There are no men and women in it, yet it throngs with airy and immortal shapes that have the likeness of men and women, and hint at some kind of foregone reality. Now this place, somewhere between mind and matter, between soul and sense, between the actual and the possible, is precisely the region which Spenser assigns (if I have rightly divined him) to the poetic susceptibility of impression—

“To reign in the air from earth to highest sky.”

Underneath every one of the senses lies the soul and spirit of it, dormant till they are magnetised by some powerful emotion. Then whatever is imperishable in us recognises for an instant and claims kindred with something outside and distinct from it, yet in some inconceivable way a part of it, that flashes back on it an ideal beauty which impoverishes all other companionship. This exaltation with which love sometimes subtilises the nerves of coarsest men so that they feel and see, not the thing as it seems to others, but the beauty of it, the joy of it, the soul of eternal youth that is in it, would appear to have been the normal condition of Spenser. While the senses of most men live in the cellar, his “were laid in a large upper chamber which opened toward the sunrising.”

“His birth was of the womb of morning dew,  
And his conception of the joyous prime.”

The very greatest poets (and is there, after all, more than one of them?) have a way, I admit, of getting within our inmost consciousness and in a manner betraying us to ourselves. There is in Spenser a remoteness very different from this, but it is also a seclusion, and quite as agreeable, perhaps quite as wholesome in certain moods when we are glad to get away from ourselves and those importunate trifles which we gravely call the realities of life. In the warm Mediterranean of his mind everything

“Suffers a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.”

He lifts everything, not beyond recognition, but to an ideal distance where no mortal, I had almost said human, fleck is visible. Instead of the ordinary bridal gifts, he hallows his wife with an Epithalamion fit for a conscious goddess, and the "savage soil"\* of Ireland becomes a turf of Arcady under her feet, where the merchants' daughters of the town are no more at home than the angels and the fair shapes of pagan mythology whom they meet there. He seems to have had a common-sense side to him, and could look at things (if we may judge by his tract on Irish affairs) in a practical and even hard way; but the moment he turned toward poetry he fulfilled the condition which his teacher Plato imposes on poets, and had not a particle of prosaic understanding left. His fancy, habitually moving about in words not realised, unrealises everything at a touch. The critics blame him because in his Prothalamion the subjects of it enter on the Thames as swans and leave it at Temple Gardens as noble damsels; but to those who are grown familiar with his imaginary world such a transformation seems as natural as in the old legend of the Knight of the Swan.

"Come, now, ye damsels, daughters of Delight,

Help quickly her to dight:

But first come ye, fair Hours, which were begot

In Jove's sweet paradise of Day and Night, . . .

And ye three handmaids of the Cyprian Queen,

The which do still adorn her beauty's pride,

Help to adorn my beautifullest bride.

Crown ye god Bacchus with a coronal,

And Hymen also crown with wreaths of vine,

And let the Graces dance unto the rest—

For they can do it best.

The whiles the maidens do their carols sing,

To which the woods shall answer and their echo ring."

---

\* This phrase occurs in the sonnet addressed to the Earl of Ormond, and in that to Lord Grey de Wilton in the series prefixed to the "Faery Queen." These sonnets are of a much stronger build than the "Amoretti," and some of them (especially that to Sir John Norris) recall the firm tread of Milton's, though differing in structure.



The whole "Epithalamion" is very noble, with an organ-like roll and majesty of numbers, while it is instinct with the same joyousness which must have been the familiar mood of Spenser. It is no superficial and tiresome merriment, but a profound delight in the beauty of the universe, and in that delicately-surfaced nature of his which was its mirror and counterpart. Sadness was alien to him, and at funerals he was, to be sure, a decorous mourner, as could not fail with so sympathetic a temperament; but his condolences are graduated to the unimpassioned scale of social requirement. Even for Sir Philip Sidney his sighs are regulated by the official standard. It was in an unreal world that his affections found their true object and vent, and it is in an elegy of a lady whom he had never known, that he puts into the mouth of a husband whom he has evaporated into a shepherd, the two most naturally pathetic verses he ever penned:—

"I hate the day because it lendeth light  
To see all things, but not my love to see."\*

In the "Epithalamion" there is an epithet which has been much admired for its felicitous tenderness:—

"Behold, whiles she before the altar stands,  
Hearing the holy priest that to her speakes  
And blesseth her with his two *happy* hands."

But the purely impersonal passion of the artist had already guided him to this lucky phrase. It is addressed by Holiness—a dame surely as far abstracted from the enthusiasms of love as we can readily conceive of—to Una, who, like the visionary Helen of Dr. Faustus, has every charm of womanhood, except that of being alive, as Juliet and Beatrice are.

"O happy earth,  
Whereon thy innocent feet do ever tread!"†

Can we conceive of Una, the fall of whose foot would be as soft as that of a rose-leaf upon its mates already fallen—can we

\* "Daphnaida," 407, 408.

† "Faery Queen," B. I., c. x., 9.

conceive of her treading anything so sordid? No; it is only on some unsubstantial floor of dream that she walks securely, herself a dream. And it is only when Spenser has escaped thither, only when this glamour of fancy has rarefied his wife till she is grown almost as purely a creature of the imagination as the other ideal images with which he converses, that his feeling becomes as nearly passionate—as nearly human, I was on the point of saying—as with him is possible. I am so far from blaming this idealising property of his mind, that I find it admirable in him. It is his quality, not his defect. Without some touch of it life would be unendurable prose. If I have called the world to which he transports us a world of unreality, I have wronged him. It is only a world of unrealism. It is from pots and pans and stocks and futile gossip and inch-long politics that he emancipates us, and makes us free of that to-morrow, always coming and never come, where ideas shall reign supreme.\* But I am keeping my readers from the sweetest idealisation that love ever wrought:—

“Unto this place whenas the elfin knight  
 Approached, him seem'd that the merry sound  
 Of a shrill pipe, he playing heard on height,  
 And many feet fast thumping the hollow ground,  
 That through the woods their echo did rebound;  
 He nigher drew to wit what it mote be.  
 There he a troop of ladies dancing found  
 Full merrily and making gladful glee;  
 And in the midst a shepherd piping he did see.

“He durst not enter into the open green  
 For dread of them unwares to be descried,  
 For breaking of their dance, if he were seen;  
 But in the covert of the wood did bide  
 Beholding all, yet of them unespied;  
 There he did see that pleased so much his sight

---

\* Strictly taken, perhaps his world is not *much* more imaginary than that of other epic poets, Homer (in the *Iliad*) included. He who is familiar with mediæval epics will be extremely cautious in drawing inferences as to contemporary manners from Homer. He evidently *archaisés* like the rest.

That even he himself his eyes envied,  
 A hundred naked maidens lily-white,  
 All rang'd in a ring and dancing in delight.

“ All they without were rang'd in a ring,  
 And danc'd round ; but in the midst of them  
 Three other ladies did both dance and sing,  
 The while the rest them round about did hem,  
 And like a garland did in compass stem.  
 And in the midst of these same three was placed  
 Another damsel, as a precious gem  
 Amidst a ring most richly well enchased,  
 That with her goodly presence all the rest much graced.

“ Look how the crown which Ariadne wove  
 Upon her ivory forehead that same day,  
 That Theseus her unto his bridal bore  
 (When the bold Centaurs made that bloody fray,  
 With the fierce Lapithes, that did them dismay),  
 Being now plac'd in the firmament,  
 Through the bright heaven doth her beams display,  
 And is unto the stars an ornament,  
 Which round about her move in order excellent :

“ Such was the beauty of this goodly band,  
 Whose sundry parts were here too long to tell,  
 But she that in the midst of them did stand,  
 Seemed all the rest in beauty to excel,  
 Crowned with a rosy garland that right well  
 Did her beseem. And, ever as the crew  
 About her danced, sweet flowers that far did smell,  
 And fragrant odours they upon her threw ;  
 But most of all those three did her with gifts endue.

“ Those were the graces, Daughters of Delight,  
 Handmaids of Venus, which are wont to haunt  
 Upon this hill and dance there, day and night ;  
 Those three to men all gifts of grace do grant  
 And all that Venus in herself doth vaunt  
 Is borrow'd of them ; but that fair one  
 That in the midst was placed paravant,  
 Was she to whom that shepherd piped alone,  
 That made him pipe so merrily, as never none.



"She was, to weet, that jolly shepherd's lass  
 Which piped there unto that merry rout ;  
 That jolly shepherd that there piped was  
 Poor Colin Clout (who knows not Colin Clout ?) ;  
 He piped apace while they him danced about ;  
 Pipe, jolly shepherd, pipe thou now apace,  
 Unto thy love that made thee low to lout ;  
 Thy love is present there with thee in place,  
 Thy love is there advanced to be another Grace."\*

Is there any passage in any poet that so ripples and sparkles with simple delight as this ? It is a sky of Italian April, full of sunshine and the hidden ecstasy of larks. And we like it all the more that it reminds us of that passage in his friend Sidney's *Arcadia*, where the shepherd-boy pipes "as if he would never be old." If we compare it with the mystical scene in Dante,† of which it is a reminiscence, it will seem almost like a bit of real life ; but taken by itself, it floats as unconcerned in our cares and sorrows and vulgarities as a sunset cloud. The sound of that pastoral pipe seems to come from as far away as Thessaly, when Apollo was keeping sheep there. Sorrow, the great idealiser, had had the portrait of Beatrice on her easel for years, and every touch of her pencil transfigured the woman more and more into the glorified saint. But Elizabeth Nagle was a solid thing of flesh and blood, who would sit down at meat with the poet on the very day when he had thus beatified her. As Dante was drawn upward from heaven to heaven by the eyes of Beatrice, so was Spenser lifted away from the actual by those of that ideal Beauty whereof his mind had conceived the lineaments in its solitary musings over Plato, but of whose haunting presence the delicacy of his senses had already premonished him. The intrusion of the real world upon this supersensual mood of his wrought an instant disenchantment :—

"Much wondered Calidore at this strange sight  
 Whose like before his eye had never seen,

---

\* "*Faery Queen*," B. VI., c. x., 10-16. † *Purgatorio*, XXIX., XXX.

And, standing long astonished in sprite  
 And rapt with pleasance, wist not what to ween,  
 Whether it were the train of Beauty's Queen,  
 Or Nymphs, or Fairies, or enchanted show  
 With which his eyes might have deluded been,  
 Therefore resolving what it was to know,  
 Out of the woods he rose and toward them did go.

"But soon as he appeared to their view  
 They vanished all away out of his sight  
 And clean were gone, which way he never knew,  
 All save the shepherd, who, for fell despite  
 Of that displeasure, broke his bagpipe quite."

Ben Jonson said that "he had consumed a whole night looking to his great toe, about which he had seen Tartars and Turks, Romans and Carthaginians, fight in his imagination;" and Coleridge has told us how his "eyes made pictures when they were shut." This is not uncommon, but I fancy that Spenser was more habitually possessed by his imagination than is usual even with poets. His visions must have accompanied him "in glory and in joy" along the common thoroughfares of life, and seemed to him, it may be suspected, more real than the men and women he met there. His "most fine spirit of sense" would have tended to keep him in this exalted mood. I must give an example of the sensuousness of which I have spoken:—

"And in the midst of all a fountain stood  
 Of richest substance that on earth might be,  
 So pure and shiny that the crystal flood  
 Through every channel running one might see;  
 Most goodly it with curious imagery  
 Was overwrought, and shapes of naked boys,  
 Of which some seemed with lively jollity  
 To fly about, playing their wanton toys,  
 Whilst others did themselves embay in liquid joys.

"And over all, of purest gold was spread  
 A trail of ivy in his native hue;  
 For the rich metal was so coloured  
 That he who did not well advised it view

Would surely deem it to be ivy true ;  
 Low his lascivious arms adown did creep  
 That themselves dipping in the silver dew  
 Their fleecy flowers they tenderly did steep,  
 Which drops of crystal seemed for wantonness to weep.

“ Infinite streams continually did well  
 Out of this fountain, sweet and fair to see,  
 The which into an ample laver fell,  
 And shortly grew to so great quantity  
 That like a little lake it seemed to be  
 Whose depth exceeded not three cubits' height,  
 That through the waves one might the bottom see  
 All paved beneath with jasper shining bright,  
 That seemed the fountain in that sea did sail upright.

“ And all the margent round about was set  
 With shady laurel-trees, thence to defend  
 The sunny beams which on the billows bet,  
 And those which therein bathed mote offend.  
 As Guyon happened by the same to wend,  
 Two naked Damsels he therein espied,  
 Which therein bathing seemed to contend  
 And wrestle wantonly, ne cared to hide  
 Their dainty parts from view of any which them eyed.

“ Sometimes the one would lift the other quite  
 Above the waters, and then down again  
 Her plunge, as overmastered by might,  
 Where both awhile would covered remain,  
 And each the other from to rise restrain ;  
 The whiles their snowy limbs, as through a veil,  
 So through the crystal waves appeared plain :  
 Then suddenly both would themselves unhele,  
 And the amorous sweet spoils to greedy eyes reveal.

“ As that fair star, the messenger of morn,  
 His dewy face out of the sea doth rear ;  
 Or as the Cyprian goddess, newly born  
 Of the ocean's fruitful froth, did first appear ;  
 Such seemed they, and so their yellow hair  
 Crystalline humour dropp'd down apace.  
 Whom such when Guyon saw, he drew him near,  
 And somewhat gan relent his earnest pace ;  
 His stubborn breast gan secret pleasance to embrace.



"The wanton Maidens him espying, stood  
 Gazing awhile at his unwonted guise ;  
 Then the one herself low ducked in the flood,  
 Abashed that her a stranger did advise ;  
 But the other rather higher did arise,  
 And her two lily paps aloft displayed,  
 And all that might his melting heart entice  
 To her delights, she unto him bewrayed ;  
 The rest, hid underneath, him more desirous made.

"With that the other likewise up arose,  
 And her fair locks, which formerly were bound  
 Up in one knot, she low adown did loose,  
 Which flowing long and thick her clothed around,  
 And the ivory in golden mantle gowned :  
 So that fair spectacle from him was reft,  
 Yet that which reft it no less fair was found ;  
 So hid in locks and waves from lookers' theft,  
 Naught but her lovely face she for his looking left.

"Withal she laughèd, and she blushed withal,  
 That blushing to her laughter gave more grace,  
 And laughter to her blushing, as did fall.

Eftsoones they heard a most melodious sound,  
 Of all that mote delight a dainty ear,  
 Such as at once might not on living ground,  
 Save in this paradise, be heard elsewhere :  
 Right hard it was for wight which did it hear  
 To read what manner music that mote be ;  
 For all that pleasing is to living ear  
 Was there consorted in one harmony ;  
 Birds, voices, instruments, winds, waters, all agree.

"The joyous birds, shrouded in cheerful shade,  
 Their notes unto the voice attempered sweet ;  
 The angelical soft trembling voices made  
 To the instruments divine response mete ;  
 The silver-sounding instruments did meet  
 With the base murmur of the water's fall ;  
 The water's fall with difference discreet,  
 Now soft, now loud, unto the wind did call ;  
 The gentle warbling wind low answered to all."

Spenser, in one of his letters to Harvey, had said, "Why, a God's name, may not we, as else the Greeks, have the kingdom of our own language?" This is in the tone of Bellay, as is also a great deal of what is said in the epistle prefixed to the "Shepherd's Calendar." He would have been wiser had he followed more closely Bellay's advice about the introduction of novel words: "Fear not, then, to innovate somewhat, particularly in a long poem, with modesty, however, with analogy, and judgment of ear; and trouble not thyself as to who may think it good or bad, hoping that posterity will approve it—she who gives faith to doubtful, light to obscure, novelty to antique, usage to unaccustomed, and sweetness to harsh and rude things." Spenser's innovations were by no means always happy, as not always according with the genius of the language, and they have, therefore, not prevailed. He forms English words out of French or Italian ones, sometimes, I think, on a misapprehension of their true meaning; nay, he sometimes makes new ones by unlawfully grafting a scion of Romance on a Teutonic root. His theory, caught from Bellay, of rescuing good archaisms from unwarranted oblivion, was excellent; not so his practice of being archaic for the mere sake of escaping from the common and familiar. A permissible archaism is a word or phrase that has been supplanted by something less apt, but has not become unintelligible; and Spenser's often needed a glossary, even in his own day.\* But he never endangers his finest passages by any experiments of this kind. There his language is living, if ever any, and of one substance with the splendour of his fancy. Like all masters of speech, he is fond of toying with and teasing it a little; and it may readily be granted that he sometimes "hunted the letter," as it was called, out of all cry. But even where his alliteration is tempted to an excess, its prolonged echoes caress the ear like the fading and gathering reverberations of an Alpine horn,

\* I find a goodly number of Yankeeisms in him, such as *idee* (not as a rhyme); but the oddest is his twice spelling *devo devo*, which is just as one would spell it who wished to phonetise its sound in rural New England.

and one can find in his heart to forgive even such a debauch of initial assonances as

"Eftsoones her shallow ship away did slide,  
More swift than swallow shears the liquid sky."

Generally, he scatters them at adroit intervals, reminding us of the arrangement of voices in an ancient catch, where one voice takes up the phrase another has dropped, and thus seems to give the web of harmony a firmer and more continuous texture.

Other poets have held their mirrors up to nature, mirrors that differ very widely in the truth and beauty of the images they reflect; but Spenser's is a magic glass in which we see few shadows cast back from actual life, but visionary shapes conjured up by the wizard's art from some confusedly remembered past or some impossible future. It is like one of those still pools of mediæval legend which covers some sunken city of the antique world—a reservoir in which all our dreams seem to have been gathered. As we float upon it, we see that it pictures faithfully enough the summer-clouds that drift over it, the trees that grow about its margin; but in the midst of these shadowy echoes of actuality we catch faint tones of bells that seem blown to us from beyond the horizon of time, and looking down into the clear depths, catch glimpses of towers and far-shining knights and peerless dames that waver and are gone. Is it a world that ever was, or shall be, or can be, or but a delusion? Spenser's world, real to him, is real enough for us to take a holiday in, and we may well be content with it when the earth we dwell on is so often too real to allow of such vacations. It is the same kind of world that Petrarca's Laura has walked in for five centuries, with all ears listening for the music of her footfall.

The land of Spenser is the land of Dream, but it is also the land of Rest. To read him is like dreaming awake, without even the trouble of doing it yourself, but letting it be done for you by the finest dreamer that ever lived, who knows how to colour his dreams like life, and make them move before you in



music. They seem singing to you as the sirens to Guyon, and we linger like him :—

"O, thou fair son of gentle Faery  
That art in mighty arms most magnified  
Above all knights that ever battle tried,  
O, turn thy rudder hitherward awhile,  
Here may thy storm-beat vessel safely ride,  
This is the port of rest from troublous toil,  
The world's sweet inn from pain and wearisome turmoil.\*

"With that the rolling sea, resounding swift  
In his big bass, them fitly answer'd,  
And on the rock the waves, breaking aloft,  
A solemn mean unto them measur'd,  
The whiles sweet Zephyrus loud whistel'd  
His treble, a strange kind of harmony  
Which Guyon's senses softly tickel'd  
That he the boatman bade row easily  
And let him hear some part of their rare melody."

Despite Spenser's instinctive tendency to idealise, and his habit of distilling out of the actual an ethereal essence in which very little of the possible seems left, yet his mind, as is generally true of great poets, was founded on a solid basis of good-sense. I do not know where to look for a more cogent and at the same time picturesque confutation of Socialism than in the Second Canto of the Fifth Book. If I apprehend rightly his words and images, there is not only subtle but profound thinking here. The French Revolution is prefigured in the well-meaning but too theoretic giant, and Rousseau's fallacies exposed two centuries in advance. Spenser was a conscious Englishman to his inmost fibre, and did not lack the sound

\* This song recalls that in Dante's *Purgatorio* (xix., 19-24), in which the Italian tongue puts forth all its siren allurements. Browne's beautiful verses ("Turn, hither turn your wing'd pines") were suggested by these of Spenser. It might almost seem as if Spenser had here, in his usual way, expanded the sweet old verses :—

"Merry sungen the monks binnen Ely  
When Knut king rew thereby;  
'Roweth knightes near the lond,  
That I may hear these monk's song."

judgment in politics which belongs to his race. He was the more English for living in Ireland, and there is something that moves us deeply in the exile's passionate cry :—

“ Dear Country ! O how dearly dear  
Ought thy remembrance and perpetual band  
Be to thy foster-child that from thy hand  
Did common breath and nouriture receive !  
How brutish is it not to understand  
How much to her we owe that all us gave,  
That gave unto us all whatever good we have ! ”

His race shows itself also where he tells us that

“ chiefly skill to ride seems a science  
Proper to gentle blood,”

which reminds one of Lord Herbert of Cherbury's saying that the finest sight God looked down on was a fine man on a fine horse.

Wordsworth, in the supplement to his preface, tells us that the “ Faery Queen ” “ faded before ” Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas. But Wordsworth held a brief for himself in this case, and is no exception to the proverb about men who are their own attorneys. His statement is wholly unfounded. Both poems, no doubt, so far as popularity is concerned, yielded to the graver interests of the Civil War. But there is an appreciation much weightier than any that is implied in mere popularity, and the vitality of a poem is to be measured by the kind as well as the amount of influence it exerts. Spenser has *coached* more poets and more eminent ones than any other writer of English verse. I need say nothing of Milton, nor of professed disciples like Browne, the two Fletchers, and More. Cowley tells us that he became “ irrecoverably a poet ” by reading the “ Faery Queen ” when a boy. Dryden, whose case is particularly in point because he confesses having been seduced by Du Bartas, tells us that Spenser had been his master in English. He regrets, indeed, comically enough, that Spenser could not have read the rules of Bossu, but adds that “ no man was ever born with a greater genius or more knowledge to support it. ” Pope says, “ There is something in Spenser that pleases one as strongly in one's

old age as it did in one's youth. I read the 'Faery Queen' when I was about twelve with a vast deal of delight; and I think it gave me as much when I read it over about a year or two ago." Thomson wrote the most delightful of his poems in the measure of Spenser; Collins, Gray, and Akenside show traces of him; and in our own day his influence reappears in Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. Landor is, I believe, the only poet who ever found him tedious. Spenser's mere manner has not had so many imitators as Milton's, but no other of our poets has given an impulse, and in the right direction also, to so many and so diverse minds; above all, no other has given to so many young souls a consciousness of their wings and a delight in the use of them. He is a standing protest against the tyranny of Commonplace, and sows the seeds of a noble discontent with prosaic views of life and the dull uses to which it may be put.

Three of Spenser's own verses best characterise the feeling his poetry gives us:—

"Among wide waves set like a little nest,"

"Wrapt in eternal silence far from enemies,"

"The world's sweet inn from pain and wearisome turmoil."

We are wont to apologise for the grossness of our favourite authors sometimes by saying that their age was to blame and not they; and the excuse is a good one, for often it is the frank word that shocks us while we tolerate the thing. Spenser needs no such extenuations. No man can read the "Faery Queen" and be anything but the better for it. Through that rude age, when Maids of Honour drank beer for breakfast and Hamlet could say a gross thing to Ophelia, he passes serenely abstracted and high, the Don Quixote of poets. Whoever can endure unmixed delight, whoever can tolerate music and painting and poetry all in one, whoever wishes to be rid of thought and to let the busy anvils of the brain be silent for a time, let him read in the "Faery Queen." There is the land of pure heart's ease, where no ache or sorrow of spirit can enter.



## SHAKESPEARE ONCE MORE.

IT may be doubted whether any language be rich enough to maintain more than one truly great poet—and whether there be more than one period, and that very short, in the life of a language, when such a phenomenon as a great poet is possible. It may be reckoned one of the rarest pieces of good-luck that ever fell to the share of a race, that (as was true of Shakespeare) its most rhythmic genius, its acutest intellect, its profoundest imagination, and its healthiest understanding should have been combined in one man, and that he should have arrived at the full development of his powers at the moment when the material in which he was to work—that wonderful composite called English, the best result of the confusion of tongues—was in its freshest perfection. The English-speaking nations should build a monument to the misguided enthusiasts of the Plain of Shinar; for, as the mixture of many bloods seems to have made them the most vigorous of modern races, so has the mingling of divers speeches given them a language which is perhaps the noblest vehicle of poetic thought that ever existed.

Had Shakespeare been born fifty years earlier, he would have been cramped by a book-language not yet flexible enough for the demands of rhythmic emotion, not yet sufficiently popularised for the natural and familiar expression of supreme thought, not yet so rich in metaphysical phrase as to render possible that ideal representation of the great passions which is the aim and end of Art, not yet subdued by practice and general consent to a definiteness of accentuation essential to ease and congruity of metrical arrangement. Had he been born fifty years later, his ripened manhood would have found

itself in an England absorbed and angry with the solution of political and religious problems, from which his whole nature was averse, instead of in that Elizabethan social system, ordered and planetary in functions and degrees as the angelic hierarchy of the Areopagite, where his contemplative eye could crowd itself with various and brilliant picture, and whence his impartial brain—one lobe of which seems to have been Normanly refined and the other Saxonly sagacious—could draw its morals of courtly and worldly wisdom, its lessons of prudence and magnanimity. In estimating Shakespeare, it should never be forgotten, that, like Goethe, he was essentially observer and artist, and incapable of partisanship. The passions, actions, sentiments, whose character and results he delighted to watch and to reproduce, are those of man in society as it existed; and it no more occurred to him to question the right of that society to exist than to criticise the divine ordination of the seasons. His business was with men as they were, not with man as he ought to be—with the human soul as it is shaped or twisted into character by the complex experience of life, not in its abstract essence, as something to be saved or lost. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the centre of intellectual interest was rather in the other world than in this—rather in the region of thought and principle and conscience than in actual life. It was a generation in which the poet was, and felt himself, out of place. Sir Thomas Browne, our most imaginative mind since Shakespeare, found breathing-room, for a time, among the "*O altitudines!*" of religious speculation, but soon descended to occupy himself with the exactitudes of science. Jeremy Taylor, who half a century earlier would have been Fletcher's rival, compels his clipped fancy to the conventual discipline of prose (Maid Marian turned nun), and waters his poetic wine with doctrinal eloquence. Milton is saved from making total shipwreck of his large-utteranced genius on the desolate Noman's Land of a religious epic only by the lucky help of Satan and his colleagues, with whom, as foiled rebels and republicans, he cannot conceal his sympathy. As purely poet, Shakespeare would have come too

late, had his lot fallen in that generation. In mind and temperament too exoteric for a mystic, his imagination could not have at once illustrated the influence of his epoch and escaped from it, like that of Browne; the equilibrium of his judgment, essential to him as an artist, but equally removed from propagandism, whether as enthusiast or logician, would have unfitted him for the pulpit; and his intellectual being was too sensitive to the wonder and beauty of outward life and Nature to have found satisfaction, as Milton's could (and perhaps only by reason of his blindness), in a world peopled by purely imaginary figures. We might fancy him becoming a great statesman, but he lacked the social position which could have opened that career to him. What we mean when we say *Shakespeare*, is something inconceivable either during the reign of Henry the Eighth, or the Commonwealth, and which would have been impossible after the Restoration.

All favourable stars seem to have been in conjunction at his nativity. The Reformation had passed the period of its vinous fermentation, and its clarified results remained as an element of intellectual impulse and exhilaration; there were small signs yet of the acetous and putrefactive stages which were to follow in the victory and decline of Puritanism. Old forms of belief and worship still lingered, all the more touching to Fancy, perhaps, that they were homeless and attainted; the light of sceptic day was baffled by depths of forest where superstitious shapes still cowered, creatures of immemorial wonder, the raw material of Imagination. The invention of printing, without yet vulgarising letters, had made the thought and history of the entire past contemporaneous; while a crowd of translators put every man who could read in inspiring contact with the select souls of all the centuries. A new world was thus opened to intellectual adventure at the very time when the keel of Columbus had turned the first daring furrow of discovery in that unmeasured ocean which still girt the known earth with a beckoning horizon of hope and conjecture, which was still fed by rivers that flowed down out of primeval silences, and which still washed the shores of Dreamland. Under a wise,



cultivated, and firm-handed monarch, also, the national feeling of England grew rapidly more homogeneous and intense, the rather as the womanhood of the sovereign stimulated a more chivalric loyalty; while the new religion, of which she was the defender, helped to make England morally, as it was geographically, insular to the continent of Europe.

If circumstances could ever make a great national poet, here were all the elements mingled at melting-heat in the alembic, and the lucky moment of projection was clearly come. If a great national poet could ever avail himself of circumstances, this was the occasion—and, fortunately, Shakespeare was equal to it. Above all, we may esteem it lucky that he found words ready to his use, original and untarnished—types of thought whose sharp edges were unworn by repeated impressions. In reading Hakluyt's *Voyages*, we are almost startled now and then to find that even common sailors could not tell the story of their wanderings without rising to an almost Odyssean strain, and habitually used a diction that we should be glad to buy back from desuetude at any cost. Those who look upon language only as anatomists of its structure, or who regard it as only a means of conveying abstract truth from mind to mind, as if it were so many algebraic formulæ, are apt to overlook the fact that its being alive is all that gives it poetic value. We do not mean what is technically called a living language—the contrivance, hollow as a speaking-trumpet, by which breathing and moving bipeds, even now, sailing o'er life's solemn main, are enabled to hail each other and make known their mutual shortness of mental stores—but one that is still hot from the hearts and brains of a people, not hardened yet, but moltenly ductile to new shapes of sharp and clear relief in the moulds of new thought. So soon as a language has become literary, so soon as there is a gap between the speech of books and that of life, the language becomes, so far as poetry is concerned, almost as dead as Latin, and (as in writing Latin verses) a mind in itself essentially original becomes in the use of such a medium of utterance unconsciously reminiscential and reflective, lunar and not solar, in expression and even in thought. For words

and thoughts have a much more intimate and genetic relation, one with the other, than most men have any notion of; and it is one thing to use our mother-tongue as if it belonged to us, and another to be the puppets of an overmastering vocabulary. "Ye know not," says Ascham, "what hurt ye do to Learning, that care not for Words, but for Matter, and so make a Divorce betwixt the Tongue and the Heart." *Lingua Toscana in bocca Romana* is the Italian proverb; and that of poets should be, *The tongue of the people in the mouth of the scholar*. I imply here no assent to the early theory, or, at any rate, practice, of Wordsworth, who confounded plebeian modes of thought with rustic forms of phrase, and then atoned for his blunder by absconding into a diction more Latinised than that of any poet of his century.

Shakespeare was doubly fortunate. Saxon by the father and Norman by the mother, he was a representative Englishman. A country boy, he learned first the rough and ready English of his rustic mates, who knew how to make nice verbs and adjectives courtesy to their needs. Going up to London, he acquired the *lingua aulica* precisely at the happiest moment, just as it was becoming, in the strictest sense of the word, *modern*—just as it had recruited itself, by fresh impressments from the Latin and Latinised languages, with new words to express the new ideas of an enlarging intelligence which printing and translation were fast making cosmopolitan—words which, in proportion to their novelty, and to the fact that the mother-tongue and the foreign had not yet wholly mingled, must have been used with a more exact appreciation of their meaning.\* It was in London, and chiefly by means of the stage, that a thorough amalgamation of the Saxon, Norman, and scholarly elements of English was brought about. Already, Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesy*, declares that the practice of the capital and the country within sixty miles of it was the standard of correct diction, the *jus et norma loquendi*. Already Spenser had almost re-created English poetry—and it is interesting to

\* As where Ben Jonson is able to say—

"Men may securely sin, but safely never."

observe that, scholar as he was, the archaic words which he was at first over-fond of introducing are often provincialisms of purely English origin. Already Marlowe had brought the English unrhymed pentameter (which had hitherto justified but half its name, by being always blank and never verse) to a perfection of melody, harmony, and variety which has never been surpassed. Shakespeare, then, found a language already to a certain extent *established*, but not yet fetlocked by dictionary and grammar mongers—a versification harmonised, but which had not yet exhausted all its modulations, nor been set in the stocks by critics who deal judgment on refractory feet, that will dance to Orphean measures of which their judges are insensible. That the language was established is proved by its comparative uniformity as used by the dramatists, who wrote for mixed audiences, as well as by Ben Jonson's satire upon Marston's neologisms ; that it at the same time admitted foreign words to the rights of citizenship on easier terms than now is in good measure equally true. What was of greater import, no arbitrary line had been drawn between high words and low ; vulgar then meant simply what was common ; poetry had not been aliened from the people by the establishment of an Upper House of vocables, alone entitled to move in the stately ceremonials of verse, and privileged from arrest while they forever keep the promise of meaning to the ear and break it to the sense. The hot conception of the poet had no time to cool while he was debating the comparative respectability of this phrase or that ; but he snatched what word his instinct prompted, and saw no indiscretion in making a king speak as his country nurse might have taught him.\* It was Waller who first learned in France that to talk in rhyme alone comported with the state of royalty. In the time of Shakespeare, the living tongue resembled that tree which Father Huc saw in Tartary, whose leaves were languaged—and every hidden root

\* "Vulgarem locutionem appellamus eam qua infantes adsuefiunt ab adistentibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt : vel, quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus *quam sine omni regula, nutricem imitantes accepimus.*"—Dante's *de Vulg. Eloquentia*, Lib. I., cap. i.



of thought, every subtlest fibre of feeling, was mated by new shoots and leafage of expression, fed from those unseen sources in the common earth of human nature.

The Cabalists had a notion, that whoever found out the mystic word for anything attained to absolute mastery over that thing. The reverse of this is certainly true of poetic expression; for he who is thoroughly possessed of his thought, who imaginatively conceives an idea or image, becomes master of the word that shall most amply and fitly utter it. Heminge and Condell tell us, accordingly, that there was scarce a blot in the manuscripts they received from Shakespeare; and this is the natural corollary from the fact that such an imagination as his is as unparalleled as the force, variety, and beauty of the phrase in which it embodied itself.\* We believe that Shakespeare, like all other great poets, instinctively used the dialect which he found current, and that his words are not more wrested from their ordinary meaning than followed necessarily from the unwonted weight of thought or stress of passion they were called on to support. He needed not to mask familiar thoughts in the weeds of unfamiliar phraseology; for the life that was in his mind could transfuse the language of every day with an intelligent vivacity, that makes it seem lambent with fiery purpose, and at each new reading a new creation. He could

\* Gray, himself a painful corrector, told Nicholls that "nothing was done so well as at the first concoction"—adding, as a reason, "We think in words." Ben Jonson said, it was a pity Shakespeare had not blotted more, for that he sometimes wrote nonsense—and cited in proof of it the verse,

"Cæsar did never wrong but with just cause."

The last four words do not appear in the passage as it now stands, and Professor Craik suggests that they were stricken out in consequence of Jonson's criticism. This is very probable; but we suspect that the pen that blotted them was in the hand of Master Heminge or his colleague. The moral confusion in the idea was surely admirably characteristic of the general who had just accomplished a successful *coup d'état*, the condemnation of which he would fancy that he read in the face of every honest man he met, and which he would therefore be forever indirectly palliating.

say with Dante, that "no word had ever forced him to say what he would not, though he had forced many a word to say what *it* would not"—but only in the sense that the mighty magic of his imagination had conjured out of it its uttermost secret of power or pathos. When I say that Shakespeare used the current language of his day, I mean only that he habitually employed such language as was universally comprehensible—that he was not run away with by the hobby of any theory as to the fitness of this or that component of English for expressing certain thoughts or feelings. That the artistic value of a choice and noble diction was quite as well understood in his day as in ours is evident from the praises bestowed by his contemporaries on Drayton, and by the epithet "well-languaged" applied to Daniel, whose poetic style is as modern as that of Tennyson; but the endless absurdities about the comparative merits of Saxon and Norman-French, vented by persons incapable of distinguishing one tongue from the other, were as yet unheard of. Hasty generalisers are apt to overlook the fact, that the Saxon was never, to any great extent, a literary language. Accordingly, it held its own very well in the names of common things, but failed to answer the demands of complex ideas, derived from them. The author of "*Piers Ploughman*" wrote for the people—Chaucer for the court. We open at random and count the Latin \* words in ten verses of the "*Vision*" and ten of the "*Romaunt of the Rose*" (a translation from the French), and find the proportion to be seven in the former and five in the latter.

The organs of the Saxon have always been unwilling and stiff in learning languages. He acquired only about as many British words as we have Indian ones, and I believe that more French and Latin was introduced through the pen and the eye than through the tongue and the ear. For obvious reasons, the question is one that must be decided by reference to prose-writers, and not poets; and it is, we think, pretty well settled that more words of Latin original were brought into the

\* We use the word *Latin* here to express words derived either mediately or immediately from that language.

language in the century between 1550 and 1650 than in the whole period before or since—and for the simple reason, that they were absolutely needful to express new modes and combinations of thought.\* The language has gained immensely, by the infusion, in richness of synonyme and in the power of expressing nice shades of thought and feeling, but more than all in light-footed polysyllables that trip singing to the music of verse. There are certain cases, it is true, where the vulgar Saxon word is refined, and the refined Latin vulgar, in poetry—as in *sweat* and *perspiration*; but there are vastly more in which the Latin bears the bell. Perhaps there might be a question between the old English *again-rising* and *resurrection*; but there can be no doubt that *conscience* is better than *inwit*, and *remorse* than *again-bite*. Should we translate the title of Wordsworth's famous ode, "Intimations of Immortality," into "Hints of Deathlessness," it would hiss like an angry gander. If, instead of Shakespeare's

"Age cannot wither her,

Nor custom stale her infinite variety,"

we should say, "her boundless manifoldness," the sentiment would suffer in exact proportion with the music. What home-bred English could ape the high Roman fashion of such togated words as—

"The multitudinous sea incarnadine"—

where the huddling epithet implies the tempest-tossed soul of the speaker, and at the same time pictures the wallowing waste of ocean more vividly than the famous phrase of Æschylus does its rippling sunshine? Again, *sailor* is less poetical than *mariner*, as Campbell felt, when he wrote,

"Ye mariners of England,"

and Coleridge, when he chose

"It was an ancient mariner,"

rather than

"It was an elderly seaman;"

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\* The prose of Chaucer (1390) and of Sir Thomas Malory (translating from the French, 1470) is less Latinised than that of Bacon, Browne.



for it is as much the charm of poetry that it suggest a certain remoteness and strangeness as familiarity ; and it is essential not only that we feel at once the meaning of the words in themselves, but also their melodic meaning in relation to each other, and to the sympathetic variety of the verse. A word once vulgarised can never be rehabilitated. We might say now a *buxom* lass, or that a chambermaid was *buxom*, but we could not use the term, as Milton did, in its original sense of *bowsome*—that is, *lithe, gracefully bending*.\*

But the secret of force in writing lies not so much in the pedigree of nouns and adjectives and verbs, as in having

Taylor, or Milton. The glossary to Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar" (1579) explains words of Teutonic and Romanic root in about equal proportions. The parallel but independent development of Scotch is not to be forgotten.

\* I believe that for the last two centuries the Latin radicals of English have been more familiar and homelike to those who use them than the Teutonic. Even so accomplished a person as Professor Craik, in his *English of Shakespeare*, derives *head*, through the German *haupt*, from the Latin *caput* ! I trust that its genealogy is nobler, and that it is of kin with *cælum tueri*, rather than with the Greek *κεφαλή*, if Suidas be right in tracing the origin of that to a word meaning *vacuity*. Mr. Craik suggests, also, that *quick* and *wicked* may be etymologically identical, *because* he fancies a relationship between *busy* and the German *böse*, though *wicked* is evidently the participial form of A.-S. *wacan* (German *weichen*), *to bend, to yield*, meaning *one who has given way to temptation*, while *quick* seems as clearly related to *wegan*, meaning *to move*, a different word, even if radically the same. In the *London Literary Gazette* for November 13, 1858, I find an extract from Miss Millington's *Heraldry in History, Poetry, and Romance*, in which, speaking of the motto of the Prince of Wales, *De par Houmout ich diene*, she says :—"The precise meaning of the former word [*Houmout*] has not, I think, been ascertained." The word is plainly the German *Hochmuth*, and the whole would read, *De par (Aus) Hochmuth ich diene*—"Out of magnanimity I serve." So entirely lost is the Saxon meaning of the word *knave* (A.-S. *cnava*, German *knabe*), that the name *navvie*, assumed by railway-labourers, has been transmogrified into *navigator*. I believe that more people could tell why the month of July was so called than could explain the origin of the names for our days of the week, and that it is oftener the Saxon than the French words in Chaucer that puzzle the modern reader.

something that you believe in to say, and making the parts of speech vividly conscious of it. It is when expression becomes an act of memory, instead of an unconscious necessity, that diction takes the place of warm and hearty speech. It is not safe to attribute special virtues (as Bosworth, for example, does to the Saxon) to words of whatever derivation, at least in poetry. Because Lear's "oak-cleaving thunderbolts," and "the all-dreaded thunder-stone" in "Cymbeline," are so fine, we would not give up Milton's Virgilian "fulmined over Greece," where the verb in English conveys at once the idea of flash and reverberation, but avoids that of riving and shattering. In the experiments made for casting the great bell for the Westminster Tower, it was found that the superstition which attributed the remarkable sweetness and purity of tone in certain old bells to the larger mixture of silver in their composition had no foundation in fact. It was the cunning proportion in which the ordinary metals were balanced against each other, the perfection of form, and the nice gradations of thickness, that wrought the miracle. And it is precisely so with the language of poetry. The genius of the poet will tell him what word to use (else what use in his being poet at all?); and even then, unless the proportion and form, whether of parts or whole, be all that Art requires and the most sensitive taste finds satisfaction in, he will have failed to make what shall vibrate through all its parts with a silvery unison—in other words, a poem.

I think the component parts of English were in the latter years of Elizabeth thus exquisitely proportioned one to the other. Yet Bacon had no faith in his mother-tongue, translating the works on which his fame was to rest into what he called "the universal language," and affirming that "English would bankrupt all our books." He was deemed a master of it, nevertheless; and it is curious that Ben Jonson applies to him in prose the same commendation which he gave Shakespeare in verse, saying, that he "performed that in our tongue which may be compared or preferred either to *insolent Greece* or *haughty Rome*;" and he adds this pregnant sentence: "In short, within his view and about his time were all the wits born

that could honour a language or help study. Now things daily fall: wits grow downwards, eloquence grows backwards." Ben had good reason for what he said of the wits. Not to speak of science, of Galileo and Kepler, the sixteenth century was a spendthrift of literary genius. An attack of immortality in a family might have been looked for then as scarlet-fever would be now. Montaigne, Tasso, and Cervantes were born within fourteen years of each other; and in England, while Spenser was still delving over the *propria quæ maribus*, and Raleigh launching paper navies, Shakespeare was stretching his baby hands for the moon, and the little Bacon, chewing on his coral, had discovered that impenetrability was one quality of matter. It almost takes one's breath away to think that "Hamlet" and the "Novum Organon" were at the risk of teething and measles at the same time. But Ben was right also in thinking that eloquence had grown backwards. He lived long enough to see the language of verse become in a measure traditional and conventional. It was becoming so, partly from the necessary order of events, partly because the most natural and intense expression of feeling had been in so many ways satisfied and exhausted—but chiefly because there was no man left to whom, as to Shakespeare, perfect conception gave perfection of phrase. Dante, among modern poets, his only rival in condensed force, says: "Optimis conceptionibus optima loquela conveniet; sed optimæ conceptiones non possunt esse nisi ubi scientia et ingenium est; . . . et sic non omnibus versificantibus optima loquela convenit, cum plerique sine scientiâ et ingenio versificantur."\*

Shakespeare must have been quite as well aware of the provincialism of English as Bacon was; but he knew that great poetry, being universal in its appeal to human nature, can make any language classic, and that the men whose

\* *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Lib. II., cap. i., *ad finem*. I quote this treatise as Dante's, because the thoughts seem manifestly his; though I believe that in its present form it is an abridgment by some transcriber, who sometimes copies textually, and sometimes substitutes his own language for that of the original.



appreciation is immortality will mine through any dialect to get at an original soul. He had as much confidence in his home-bred speech as Bacon had want of it, and exclaims:—

“ Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.”

He must have been perfectly conscious of his genius, and of the great trust which he imposed upon his native tongue as the embodier and perpetuator of it. As he has avoided obscurities in his sonnets, he would do so *a fortiori* in his plays, both for the purpose of immediate effect on the stage and of future appreciation. Clear thinking makes clear writing, and he who has shown himself so eminently capable of it in one case is not to be supposed to abdicate intentionally in others. The difficult passages in the plays, then, are to be regarded either as corruptions, or else as phenomena in the natural history of Imagination, whose study will enable us to arrive at a clearer theory and better understanding of it.

While I believe that our language had two periods of culmination in poetic beauty—one of nature, simplicity, and truth, in the ballads, which deal only with narrative and feeling—another of Art (or Nature as it is ideally reproduced through the imagination), of stately amplitude, of passionate intensity and elevation, in Spenser and the greater dramatists—and that Shakespeare made use of the latter as he found it, I by no means intend to say that he did not enrich it, or that any inferior man could have dipped the same words out of the great poet's inkstand. But he enriched it only by the natural expansion and exhilaration of which it was conscious, in yielding to the mastery of a genius that could turn and wind it like a fiery Pegasus, making it feel its life in every limb. He enriched it through that exquisite sense of music (never approached but by Marlowe), to which it seemed eagerly obedient, as if every word said to him,

“ Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,”

as if every latent harmony revealed itself to him as the gold to Brahma, when he walked over the earth where it was hidden,

crying, "Here am I, Lord! do with me what thou wilt!" That he used language with that intimate possession of its meaning possible only to the most vivid thought is doubtless true; but that he wantonly strained it from its ordinary sense, that he found it too poor for his necessities, and accordingly coined new phrases, or that, from haste or carelessness, he violated any of its received proprieties, I do not believe. I have said that it was fortunate for him that he came upon an age when our language was at its best; but it was fortunate also for us, because our costliest poetic phrase is put beyond reach of decay in the gleaming precipitate in which it united itself with his thought.

That the propositions I have endeavoured to establish have a direct bearing in various ways upon the qualifications of whoever undertakes to edit the works of Shakespeare will, I think, be apparent to those who consider the matter. The hold which Shakespeare has acquired and maintained upon minds so many and so various, in so many vital respects utterly unsympathetic and even incapable of sympathy with his own, is one of the most noteworthy phenomena in the history of literature. That he has had the most inadequate of editors, that, as his own Falstaff was the cause of the wit, so he has been the cause of the foolishness that was in other men (as where Malone ventured to discourse upon his metres, and Dr. Johnson on his imagination), must be apparent to every one—and also that his genius and its manifestations are so various, that there is no commentator but has been able to illustrate him from his own peculiar point of view, or from the results of his own favourite studies. But to show that he was a good common lawyer, that he understood the theory of colours, that he was an accurate botanist, a master of the science of medicine, especially in its relation to mental disease, a profound metaphysician, and of great experience and insight in politics—all these, while they may very well form the staple of separate treatises, and prove that, whatever the extent of his learning, the range and accuracy of his knowledge were beyond precedent or later parallel, are really outside the province of an editor.

We doubt if posterity owe a greater debt to any two men

living in 1623 than to the two obscure actors who in that year published the first folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. But for them, it is more than likely that such of his works as had remained to that time unprinted would have been irrecoverably lost, and among them were "Julius Cæsar," "The Tempest," and "Macbeth." But are we to believe them when they assert that they present to us the plays which they reprinted from stolen and surreptitious copies "cured and perfect of their limbs," and those which are original in their edition "absolute in their numbers as he [Shakespeare] conceived them?" Alas, we have read too many theatrical announcements, have been taught too often that the value of the promise was in an inverse ratio to the generosity of the exclamation-marks, too easily to believe that! Nay, we have seen numberless processions of healthy kine enter our native village unheralded save by the lusty shouts of drovers, while a wretched calf, cursed by step-dame Nature with two heads, was brought to us in a triumphal car, avant-couriered by a band of music as abnormal as itself, and announced as the greatest wonder of the age. If a double allowance of vituline brains deserve such honour, there are few commentators on Shakespeare that would have gone afoot, and the trumpets of Messieurs Heminge and Condell call up in our minds too many monstrous and deformed associations.

What, then, is the value of the first folio as an authority? For eighteen of the plays it is the only authority we have, and the only one also for four others in their complete form. It is admitted that in several instances Heminge and Condell reprinted the earlier quarto impressions with a few changes, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse; and it is most probable that copies of those editions (whether surreptitious or not) had taken the place of the original prompter's books, as being more convenient and legible. Even in these cases it is not safe to conclude that all or even any of the variations were made by the hand of Shakespeare himself. And where the players printed from manuscript, is it likely to have been that of the author? The probability is small that a writer so busy as Shakespeare must have been during his



productive period should have copied out their parts for the actors himself, or that one so indifferent as he seems to have been to the immediate literary fortunes of his works should have given much care to the correction of copies, if made by others. The copies exclusively in the hands of Heminge and Condell were, it is manifest, in some cases, very imperfect, whether we account for the fact by the burning of the Globe Theatre or by the necessary wear and tear of years, and (what is worthy of notice) they are plainly more defective in some parts than in others. "Measure for Measure" is an example of this, and we are not satisfied with being told that its ruggedness of verse is intentional, or that its obscurity is due to the fact that Shakespeare grew more elliptical in his style as he grew older. Profounder in thought he doubtless became; though in a mind like his, we believe that this would imply only a more absolute supremacy in expression. But, from whatever original we suppose either the quartos or the first folio to have been printed, it is more than questionable whether the proof-sheets had the advantage of any revision other than that of the printing-office. Steevens was of opinion that authors in the time of Shakespeare never read their own proof-sheets; and Mr. Spedding, in his recent edition of Bacon, comes independently to the same conclusion.\* We may be very sure that Heminge and Condell did not, as vicars, take upon themselves a disagreeable task which the author would have been too careless to assume.

Nevertheless, however strong a case may be made out against

\* Vol. iii., p. 348, *note*. He grounds his belief, not on the misprinting of words, but on the misplacing of whole paragraphs. We were struck with the same thing in the original edition of Chapman's *Biron's Conspiracy and Tragedy*. And yet, in comparing two copies of this edition, I have found corrections which only the author could have made. One of the misprints which Mr. Spedding notices affords both a hint and a warning to the conjectural emendator. In the edition of *The Advancement of Learning*, printed in 1605, occurs the word *duisinesse*. In a later edition this was conjecturally changed to *business*; but the occurrence of *vertigine* in the Latin translation enables Mr. Spedding to print rightly, *dizziness*.

the Folio of 1623, whatever sins of omission we may lay to the charge of Heminge and Condell, or of commission to that of the printers, it remains the only text we have with any claims whatever to authenticity. It should be deferred to as authority in all cases where it does not make Shakespeare write bad sense, uncouth metre, or false grammar, of all which we believe him to have been more supremely incapable than any other man who ever wrote English. Yet we would not speak unkindly even of the blunders of the Folio. They have put bread into the mouth of many an honest editor, publisher, and printer for the last century and a half; and he who loves the comic side of human nature will find the serious notes of a *variorum* edition of Shakespeare as funny reading as the funny ones are serious. Scarce a commentator of them all, for more than a hundred years, but thought, as Alphonso of Castile did of Creation, that, if he had only been at Shakespeare's elbow, he could have given valuable advice; scarce one who did not know off-hand that there was never a sea-port in Bohemia—as if Shakespeare's world were one which Mercator could have projected; scarce one but was satisfied that his ten finger-tips were a sufficient key to those astronomic wonders of poise and counterpoise, of planetary law and cometary seeming-exception, in his metres; scarce one but thought he could gauge like an ale-firkin that intuition whose edging shallows may have been sounded, but whose abysses, stretching down amid the sunless roots of Being and Consciousness, mock the plummet; scarce one but could speak with condescending approval of that prodigious intelligence so utterly without congener that our baffled language must coin an adjective to qualify it, and none is so audacious as to say Shakesperian of any other. And yet, in the midst of our impatience, we cannot help thinking also of how much healthy mental activity this one man has been the occasion, how much good he has indirectly done to society by withdrawing men to investigations and habits of thought that secluded them from baser attractions, for how many he has enlarged the circle of study and reflection; since there is nothing in history or politics, nothing in art or science, nothing in physics or

metaphysics, that is not sooner or later taxed for his illustration. This is partially true of all great minds, open and sensitive to truth and beauty through any large arc of their circumference ; but it is true in an unexampled sense of Shakespeare, the vast round of whose balanced nature seems to have been equatorial, and to have had a southward exposure and a summer sympathy at every point, so that life, society, statecraft, serve us at last but as commentaries on him, and whatever we have gathered of thought, of knowledge, and of experience, confronted with his marvellous page, shrinks to a mere foot-note, the stepping-stone to some hitherto inaccessible verse. We admire in Homer the blind, placid mirror of the world's young manhood, the bard who escapes from his misfortune in poems all memory, all life and bustle, adventure and picture ; we revere in Dante that compressed force of lifelong passion which could make a private experience cosmopolitan in its reach and everlasting in its significance ; we respect in Goethe the Aristotelian poet, wise by weariless observation, witty with intention, the stately *Geheimerrath* of a provincial court in the empire of Nature. As we study these, we seem in our limited way to penetrate into their consciousness, and to measure and master their methods ; but with Shakespeare it is just the other way—the more we have familiarised ourselves with the operations of our own consciousness, the more do we find, in reading him, that he has been beforehand with us, and that, while we have been vainly endeavouring to find the door of his being, he has searched every nook and cranny of our own. While other poets and dramatists embody isolated phases of character and work inward from the phenomenon to the special law which it illustrates, he seems in some strange way unitary with human nature itself, and his own soul to have been the law and life-giving power of which his creations are only the phenomena. We justify or criticise the characters of other writers by our memory and experience, and pronounce them natural or unnatural ; but he seems to have worked in the very stuff of which memory and experience are made, and we recognise his truth to Nature by an innate and unacquired sympathy, as if he



alone possessed the secret of the "ideal form and universal mould," and embodied generic types rather than individuals. In this Cervantes alone has approached him; and Don Quixote and Sancho, like the men and women of Shakespeare, are the contemporaries of every generation, because they are not products of an artificial and transitory society, but because they are animated by the primeval and unchanging forces of that humanity which underlies and survives the forever-fickle creeds and ceremonials of the parochial corners which we who dwell in them sublimely call The World.

That Shakespeare did not edit his own works must be attributed, we suspect, to his premature death. That he should not have intended it is inconceivable. Is there not something of self-consciousness in the breaking of Prospero's wand and burying his book—a sort of sad prophecy, based on self-knowledge of the nature of that man who, after such thaumaturgy, could go down to Stratford and live there for years, only collecting his dividends from the Globe Theatre, lending money on mortgage, and leaning over his gate to chat and bandy quips with neighbours? His mind had entered into every phase of human life and thought, had embodied all of them in living creations;—had he found all empty, and come at last to the belief that genius and its work were as phantasmagoric as the rest, and that fame was as idle as the rumour of the pit? However this may be, his works have come down to us in a condition of manifest and admitted corruption in some portions, while in others there is an obscurity which may be attributed either to an idiosyncratic use of words and condensation of phrase, to a depth of intuition for a proper coalescence with which ordinary language is inadequate, to a concentration of passion in a focus that consumes the lighter links which bind together the clauses of a sentence, or of a process of reasoning in common parlance, or to a sense of music which mingles music and meaning without essentially confounding them. We should demand for a perfect editor, then, first, a thorough glossological knowledge of the English contemporary with Shakespeare; second, enough logical acuteness of mind

and metaphysical training to enable him to follow recondite processes of thought ; third, such a conviction of the supremacy of his author as always to prefer his thought to any theory of his own ; fourth, a feeling for music, and so much knowledge of the practice of other poets as to understand that Shakespeare's versification differs from theirs as often in kind as in degree ; fifth, an acquaintance with the world as well as with books ; and last, what is, perhaps, of more importance than all, so great a familiarity with the working of the imaginative faculty in general, and of its peculiar operation in the mind of Shakespeare, as will prevent his thinking a passage dark with excess of light, and enable him to understand fully that the Gothic Shakespeare often superimposed upon the slender column of a single word, that seems to twist under it, but does not—like the quaint shafts in cloisters—a weight of meaning which the modern architects of sentences would consider wholly unjustifiable by correct principle.

Many years ago, while yet Fancy claimed that right in me which Fact has since, to my no small loss, so successfully disputed, I pleased myself with imagining the play of "Hamlet" published under some *alias*, and as the work of a new candidate in literature. Then I *played*, as the children say, that it came in regular course before some well-meaning doer of criticisms, who had never read the original (no very wild assumption, as things go), and endeavoured to conceive the kind of way in which he would be likely to take it. I put myself in his place, and tried to write such a perfunctory notice as I thought would be likely, in filling his column, to satisfy his conscience. But it was a *tour de force* quite beyond my power to execute without grimace. I could not arrive at that artistic absorption in my own conception which would enable me to be natural, and found myself, like a bad actor, continually betraying my self-consciousness by my very endeavour to hide it under caricature. The path of Nature is indeed a narrow one, and it is only the immortals that seek it, and, when they find it, do not find themselves cramped therein. My result was a dead failure—satire instead of comedy. I could not shake off that strange

accumulation which we call self, and report honestly what I saw and felt even to myself, much less to others.

Yet I have often thought, that, unless we can so far free ourselves from our own prepossessions as to be capable of bringing to a work of art some freshness of sensation, and receiving from it in turn some new surprise of sympathy and admiration—some shock even, it may be, of instinctive distaste and repulsion—though we may praise or blame, weighing our *pros* and *cons* in the nicest balances, sealed by proper authority, yet we shall not criticise in the highest sense. On the other hand, unless we admit certain principles as fixed beyond question, we shall be able to render no adequate judgment, but only to record our impressions, which may be valuable or not, according to the greater or less ductility of the senses on which they are made. Charles Lamb, for example, came to the old English dramatists with the feeling of a discoverer. He brought with him an alert curiosity, and everything was delightful simply because it was strange. Like other early adventurers, he sometimes mistook shining sand for gold; but he had the great advantage of not feeling himself responsible for the manners of the inhabitants he found there, and not thinking it needful to make them square with any Westminster Catechism of æsthetics. Best of all, he did not feel compelled to compare them with the Greeks, about whom he knew little, and cared less. He took them as he found them; described them in a few pregnant sentences, and displayed his specimens of their growth and manufacture. When he arrived at the dramatists of the Restoration, so far from being shocked, he was charmed with their pretty and unmoral ways; and what he says of them reminds us of blunt Captain Dampier, who, in his account of the island of Timor, remarks, as a matter of no consequence, that the natives “take as many wives as they can maintain, and as for religion, they have none.”

Lamb had the great advantage of seeing the elder dramatists as they were; it did not lie within his province to point out what they were not. Himself a fragmentary writer, he had more sympathy with imagination where it gathers into the



intense focus of passionate phrase than with that higher form of it, where it is the faculty that shapes, gives unity of design, and balanced gravitation of parts. And yet it is only this higher form of it which can unimpeachably assure to any work the dignity and permanence of a classic ; for it results in that exquisite something called Style, which, like the grace of perfect breeding, everywhere pervasive and nowhere emphatic, makes itself felt by the skill with which it effaces itself, and masters us at last with a sense of indefinable completeness. On a lower plane we may detect it in the structure of a sentence, in the limpid expression that implies sincerity of thought ; but it is only where it combines and organises, where it eludes observation in particulars to give the rarer delight of perfection as a whole, that it belongs to art. Then it is truly ideal, the *forma mentis æterna*, not as a passive mould into which the thought is poured, but as the conceptive energy which finds all material plastic to its preconceived design. Mere vividness of expression, such as makes quotable passages, comes of the complete surrender of self to the impression, whether spiritual or sensual, of the moment. It is a quality, perhaps, in which the young poet is richer than the mature, his very inexperience making him more venturesome in those leaps of language that startle us with their rashness only to bewitch us the more with the happy ease of their accomplishment. For this there are no existing laws of rhetoric, for it is from such felicities that the rhetoricians deduce and codify their statutes. It is something which cannot be improved upon or cultivated, for it is immediate and intuitive. But this power of expression is subsidiary, and goes only a little way toward the making of a great poet. Imagination, where it is truly creative, is a faculty, and not a quality ; it looks before and after, it gives the form that makes all the parts work together harmoniously toward a given end, its seat is in the higher reason, and it is efficient only as a servant of the will. Imagination, as it is too often misunderstood, is mere fantasy, the image-making power, common to all who have the gift of dreams, or who can afford to buy it in a vulgar drug as De Quincey bought it.

The true poetic imagination is of one quality, whether it be ancient or modern, and equally subject to those laws of grace, of proportion, of design, in whose free service, and in that alone, it can become art. Those laws are something which do not

“ Alter when they alteration find,  
And bend with the remover to remove.”

And they are more clearly to be deduced from the eminent examples of Greek literature than from any other source. It is the advantage of this select company of ancients that their works are defecated of all turbid mixture of contemporaneousness, and have become to us pure *literature*, our judgment and enjoyment of which cannot be vulgarised by any prejudices of time or place. This is why the study of them is fitly called a liberal education, because it emancipates the mind from every narrow provincialism, whether of egoism or tradition, and is the apprenticeship that every one must serve before becoming a free brother of the guild which passes the torch of life from age to age. There would be no dispute about the advantages of that Greek culture which Schiller advocated with such generous eloquence, if the great authors of antiquity had not been degraded from teachers of thinking to drillers in grammar, and made the ruthless pedagogues of root and inflection, instead of companions for whose society the mind must put on her highest mood. The discouraged youth too naturally transfers the epithet of *dead* from the languages to the authors that wrote in them. What concern have we with the shades of dialect in Homer or Theocritus, provided they speak the spiritual *lingua franca* that abolishes all alienage of race, and makes whatever shore of time we land on hospitable and home-like? There is much that is deciduous in books, but all that gives them a title to rank as literature in the highest sense is perennial. Their vitality is the vitality not of one or another blood or tongue, but of human nature; their truth is not topical and transitory, but of universal acceptance; and thus all great authors seem the coevals not only of each other, but of whoever reads them, growing wiser with him as he grows

wise, and unlocking to him one secret after another as his own life and experience give him the key, but on no other condition. Their meaning is absolute, not conditional ; it is a property of *theirs*, quite irrespective of manners or creed ; for the highest culture, the development of the individual by observation, reflection, and study, leads to one result, whether in Athens or in London. The more we know of ancient literature, the more we are struck with its modernness, just as the more we study the maturer dramas of Shakespeare, the more we feel his nearness in certain primary qualities to the antique and classical. Yet even in saying this, I tacitly make the admission that it is the Greeks who must furnish us with our standard of comparison. Their stamp is upon all the allowed measures and weights of æsthetic criticism. Nor does a consciousness of this, nor a constant reference to it, in any sense reduce us to the mere copying of a bygone excellence ; for it is the test of excellence in any department of art, that it can never be bygone ; and it is not mere difference from antique models, but the *way* in which that difference is shown, the direction it takes, that we are to consider in our judgment of a modern work. The model is not there to be copied merely, but that the study of it may lead us insensibly to the same processes of thought by which its purity of outline and harmony of parts were attained, and enable us to feel that strength is consistent with repose, that multiplicity is not abundance, that grace is but a more refined form of power, and that a thought is none the less profound that the limpidity of its expression allows us to measure it at a glance. To be possessed with this conviction gives us at least a determinate point of view, and enables us to appeal a case of taste to a court of final judicature, whose decisions are guided by immutable principles. When we hear of certain productions, that they are feeble in design, but masterly in parts, that they are incoherent, to be sure, but have great merits of style, we know that it cannot be true ; for in the highest examples we have, the master is revealed by his plan, by his power of making all accessories, each in its due relation, subordinate to it, and



that to limit style to the rounding of a period or a distich is wholly to misapprehend its truest and highest function. Donne is full of salient verses that would take the rudest March winds of criticism with their beauty, of thoughts that first tease us like charades and then delight us with the felicity of their solution; but these have not saved him. He is exiled to the limbo of the formless and the fragmentary. To take a more recent instance—Wordsworth had, in some respects, a deeper insight, and a more adequate utterance of it, than any man of his generation. But it was a piece-meal insight and utterance; his imagination was feminine, not masculine, receptive, and not creative. His longer poems are Egyptian sand-wastes, with here and there an oasis of exquisite greenery, a grand image, Sphinx-like, half buried in drifting commonplaces, or the solitary Pompey's Pillar of some towering thought. But what is the fate of a poet who owns the quarry, but cannot build the poem? Ere the century is out he will be nine parts dead, and immortal only in that tenth part of him which is included in a thin volume of "beauties." Already Moxon has felt the need of extracting this essential oil of him; and his memory will be kept alive, if at all, by the precious material rather than the workmanship of the vase that contains his heart. And what shall we forebode of so many modern poems, full of splendid passages, beginning everywhere and leading nowhere, reminding us of nothing so much as the amateur architect who planned his own house, and forgot the staircase that should connect one floor with another, putting it as an afterthought on the outside?

Lichtenberg says somewhere, that it was the advantage of the ancients to write before the great art of writing ill had been invented; and Shakespeare may be said to have had the good luck of coming after Spenser (to whom the debt of English poetry is incalculable) had reinvented the art of writing well. But Shakespeare arrived at a mastery in this respect which sets him above all other poets. He is not only superior in degree, but he is also different in kind. In that less purely artistic sphere of style which concerns the matter rather than the form his charm is often unspeakable. How perfect his style is may

be judged from the fact that it never curdles into mannerism, and thus absolutely eludes imitation. Though here, if anywhere, the style is the man, yet it is noticeable only, like the images of Brutus, by its absence, so thoroughly is he absorbed in his work, while he fuses thought and word indissolubly together, till all the particles cohere by the best virtue of each. With perfect truth he has said of himself that he writes

"All one, ever the same,  
Putting invention in a noted weed,  
That every word doth almost tell his name."

And yet who has so succeeded in imitating him as to remind us of him by even so much as the gait of a single verse? Those magnificent crystallisations of feeling and phrase, basaltic masses, molten and interfused by the primal fires of passion, are not to be reproduced by the slow experiments of the laboratory striving to parody creation with artifice. Mr. Matthew Arnold seems to think that Shakespeare has damaged English poetry. I wish he had! It is true he lifted Dryden above himself in "All for Love;" but it was Dryden who said of him, by instinctive conviction rather than judgment, that within his magic circle none dared tread but he. Is he to blame for the extravagances of modern diction, which are but the reaction of the brazen age against the degeneracy of art into artifice, that has characterised the silver period in every literature? We see in them only the futile effort of misguided persons to torture out of language the secret of that inspiration which should be in themselves. We do not find the extravagances in Shakespeare himself. We never saw a line in any modern poet that reminded us of him, and will venture to assert that it is only poets of the second class that find successful imitators. And the reason seems to

\* "At first sight, Shakespeare and his contemporary dramatists seem to write in styles much alike; nothing so easy as to fall into that of Massinger and the others; whilst no one has ever yet produced one scene conceived and expressed in the Shakespearian idiom. I suppose it is because Shakespeare is universal, and, in fact, has no manner."—Coleridge's *Table-talk*, 214.

us a very plain one. The genius of the great poet seeks repose in the expression of itself, and finds it at last in style, which is the establishment of a perfect mutual understanding between the worker and his material.\* The secondary intellect, on the other hand, seeks for excitement in expression, and stimulates itself into mannerism, which is the wilful obtrusion of self, as style is its unconscious abnegation. No poet of the first class has ever left a school, because his imagination is incommunicable; while, just as surely as the thermometer tells of the neighbourhood of an iceberg, you may detect the presence of a genius of the second class in any generation by the influence of his mannerism, for that, being an artificial thing, is capable of reproduction. Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, left no heirs either to the form or mode of their expression; while Milton, Sterne, and Wordsworth left behind them whole regiments uniformed with all their external characteristics. We do not mean that great poetic geniuses may not have influenced thought (though we think it would be difficult to show how Shakespeare had done so, directly and wilfully), but that they have not infected contemporaries or followers with mannerism. The quality in him which makes him at once so thoroughly English and so thoroughly cosmopolitan is that aëration of the understanding by the imagination which he has in common with all the greater poets, and which is the privilege of genius. The modern school, which mistakes violence for intensity, seems to catch its breath when it finds itself on the verge of natural expression, and to say to itself, "Good heavens! I had almost forgotten I was inspired!" But of Shakespeare we do not even suspect that he ever remembered it. He does not always speak in that intense way that flames up in *Lear* and *Macbeth* through the rifts of a soil volcanic with passion. He allows us here and there the repose of a commonplace character, the consoling distraction of a humorous one. He knows how to be equable and grand without effort, so that we forget the altitude of

\* Pheidias said of one of his pupils that he had an inspired thumb, because the modelling-clay yielded to its careless sweep a grace of curve which it refused to the utmost pains of others.



thought to which he has led us, because the slowly receding slope of a mountain stretching downward by ample gradations gives a less startling impression of height than to look over the edge of a ravine that makes but a wrinkle in its flank.

Shakespeare has been sometimes taxed with the barbarism of profuseness and exaggeration. But this is to measure him by a Sophoclean scale. The simplicity of the antique tragedy is by no means that of expression, but is of form merely. In the utterance of great passions, something must be indulged to the extravagance of Nature; the subdued tones to which pathos and sentiment are limited cannot express a tempest of the soul. The range between the piteous "no more but so," in which Ophelia compresses the heart-break whose compression was to make her mad, and that sublime appeal of Lear to the elements of Nature, only to be matched, if matched at all, in the "Prometheus," is a wide one, and Shakespeare is as truly simple in the one as in the other. The simplicity of poetry is not that of prose, nor its clearness that of ready apprehension merely. To a subtle sense, a sense heightened by sympathy, those sudden fervours of phrase, gone ere one can say it lightens, that show us Macbeth groping among the complexities of thought in his conscience-clouded mind, and reveal the intricacy rather than enlighten it, while they leave the eye darkened to the literal meaning of the words, yet make their logical sequence, the grandeur of the conception, and its truth to Nature clearer than sober daylight could. There is an obscurity of mist rising from the undrained shallows of the mind, and there is the darkness of thunder-cloud gathering its electric masses with passionate intensity from the clear element of the imagination, not at random or wilfully, but by the natural processes of the creative faculty, to brood those flashes of expression that transcend rhetoric, and are only to be apprehended by the poetic instinct.

In that secondary office of imagination, where it serves the artist, not as the reason that shapes, but as the interpreter of his conceptions into words, there is a distinction to be noticed between the higher and lower mode in which it performs its

function. It may be either creative or pictorial, may body forth the thought or merely image it forth. With Shakespeare, for example, imagination seems immanent in his very consciousness; with Milton, in his memory. In the one it sends, as if without knowing it, a fiery life into the verse,

“Sei die Braut das Wort,  
Bräutigam der Geist;”

in the other it elaborates a certain pomp and elevation. Accordingly, the bias of the former is toward over-intensity, of the latter toward over-diffuseness. Shakespeare's temptation is to push a willing metaphor beyond its strength, to make a passion over-inform its tenement of words; Milton cannot resist running a simile on into a fugue. One always fancies Shakespeare *in* his best verses, and Milton at the key-board of his organ. Shakespeare's language is no longer the mere vehicle of thought, it has become part of it, its very flesh and blood. The pleasure it gives us is unmixed, direct, like that from the smell of a flower or the flavour of a fruit. Milton sets everywhere his little pitfalls of bookish association for the memory. I know that Milton's manner is very grand. It is slow, it is stately, moving as in triumphal procession, with music, with historic banners, with spoils from every time and every region, and captive epithets, like huge Sicambrians, thrust their broad shoulders between us and the thought whose pomp they decorate. But it is manner, nevertheless, as is proved by the ease with which it is parodied, by the danger it is in of degenerating into mannerism whenever it forgets itself. Fancy a parody of Shakespeare—I do not mean of his words, but of his *tone*, for that is what distinguishes the master. You might as well try it with the Venus of Melos. In Shakespeare it is always the higher thing, the thought, the fancy, that is pre-eminent; it is Cæsar that draws all eyes, and not the chariot in which he rides, or the throng which is but the reverberation of his supremacy. If not, how explain the charm with which he dominates in all tongues, even under the disenchantment of translation? Among the most alien races he is as solidly at

home as a mountain seen from different sides by many lands, itself superbly solitary, yet the companion of all thoughts and domesticated in all imaginations.

In description Shakespeare is especially great, and in that instinct which gives the peculiar quality of any object of contemplation in a single happy word that colours the impression on the sense with the mood of the mind. Most descriptive poets seem to think that a hogshead of water caught at the spout will give us a livelier notion of a thunder-shower than the sullen muttering of the first big drops upon the roof. They forget that it is by suggestion, not cumulation, that profound impressions are made upon the imagination. Milton's parsimony (so rare in him) makes the success of his

"Sky lowered, and, muttering thunder, some sad drops  
Wept at completion of the mortal sin."

Shakespeare understood perfectly the charm of indirectness, of making his readers seem to discover for themselves what he means to show them. If he wishes to tell that the leaves of the willow are grey on the under side, he does not make it a mere fact of observation by bluntly saying so, but makes it picturesquely reveal itself to us as it might in Nature :—

"There is a willow grows athwart the flood,  
That shows his *hoar* leaves in the glassy stream."

Where he goes to the landscape for a comparison, he does not ransack wood and field for specialties, as if he were gathering simples, but takes one image, obvious, familiar, and makes it new to us either by sympathy or contrast with his own immediate feeling. He always looked upon Nature with the eyes of the mind. Thus he can make the melancholy of autumn or the gladness of spring alike pathetic :—

"That time of year thou mayst in me behold,  
When yellow leaves, or few, or none, do hang  
Upon those boughs that shake against the cold,  
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."



Or again :—

“ From thee have I been absent in the spring,  
When proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim,  
Hath put a spirit of youth in everything,  
That heavy Saturn leaped and laughed with him.”

But as dramatic poet, Shakespeare goes even beyond this, entering so perfectly into the consciousness of the characters he himself has created, that he sees everything through their peculiar mood, and makes every epithet, as if unconsciously, echo and re-echo it. Theseus asks Hermia—

“ Can you endure the livery of a nun,  
For aye to be in shady cloister mewed,  
To live a *barren* sister all your life,  
Chanting faint hymns to the *cold fruitless* moon ? ”

When Romeo must leave Juliet, the private pang of the lovers becomes a property of Nature herself, and

“ *Envious* streaks  
Do lace the *severing* clouds in yonder east.”

But even more striking is the following instance from “ Macbeth ” :—

“ The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under your battlements.”

Here Shakespeare, with his wonted tact, makes use of a vulgar superstition, of a type in which mortal presentiment is already embodied, to make a common ground on which the hearer and Lady Macbeth may meet. After this prelude we are prepared to be possessed by her emotion more fully, to feel in her ears the dull tramp of the blood that seems to make the raven's croak yet hoarser than it is, and to betray the stealthy advance of the mind to its fell purpose. For Lady Macbeth hears not so much the voice of the bodeful bird as of her own premeditated murder, and we are thus made her shuddering accomplices before the fact. Every image receives the colour of the mind, every word throbs with the pulse of

one controlling passion. The epithet *fatal* makes us feel the implacable resolve of the speaker, and shows us that she is tampering with her conscience by putting off the crime upon the prophecy of the Weird Sisters to which she alludes. In the word *battlements*, too, not only is the fancy led up to the perch of the raven, but a hostile image takes the place of a hospitable; for men commonly speak of receiving a guest under their roof or within their doors. That this is not overingenuity, seeing what is not to be seen, nor meant to be seen, is clear to me from what follows. When Duncan and Banquo arrive at the castle, their fancies, free from all suggestion of evil, call up only gracious and amiable images. The raven was but the fantastical creation of Lady Macbeth's overwrought brain.

"This castle hath a pleasant seat, the air  
Nimbly and sweetly doth commend itself  
Unto our gentle senses.

This guest of summer,  
The temple-haunting martlet, doth approve  
By his loved mansionry that the heaven's breath  
Smells wooingly here; no jutting, frieze,  
Buttress, or coigne of vantage, but this bird  
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle."

The contrast here cannot but be as intentional as it is marked. Every image is one of welcome, security, and confidence. The summer, one may well fancy, would be a very different hostess from her whom we have just seen expecting *them*. And why *temple-haunting*, unless because it suggests sanctuary? *O immaginativa, che si ne rubi delle cose di fuor*, how infinitely more precious are the inward ones thou givest in return! If all this be accident, it is at least one of those accidents of which only this man was ever capable. I divine something like it now and then in Æschylus, through the mists of a language which will not let me be sure of what I see, but nowhere else. Shakespeare, it is true, had, as I have said, as respects English, the privilege which only first-comers enjoy. The language was still fresh from those sources

at too great a distance from which it becomes fit only for the service of prose. Wherever he dipped, it came up clear and sparkling, undefiled as yet by the drainage of literary factories, or of those dye-houses where the machine-woven fabrics of sham culture are coloured up to the last desperate style of sham sentiment. Those who criticise his diction as sometimes extravagant should remember that in poetry language is something more than merely the vehicle of thought, that it is meant to convey the sentiment as much as the sense, and that, if there is a beauty of use, there is often a higher use of beauty.

What kind of culture Shakespeare had is uncertain; how much he had is disputed; that he had as much as he wanted, and of whatever kind he wanted, must be clear to whoever considers the question. Dr. Farmer has proved, in his entertaining essay, that he got everything at second-hand from translations, and that, where his translator blundered, he loyally blundered too. But Goethe, the man of widest acquirement in modern times, did precisely the same thing. In his character of poet he set as little store by useless learning as Shakespeare did. He learned to write hexameters, not from Homer, but from Voss, and Voss found them faulty; yet somehow *Hermann und Dorothea* is more readable than *Luise*. So far as all the classicism then attainable was concerned, Shakespeare got it as cheap as Goethe did, who always bought it ready-made. For such purposes of mere æsthetic nourishment Goethe always milked other minds—if minds those ruminators and digesters of antiquity into asses' milk may be called. There were plenty of professors who were forever assiduously browsing in vales of Enna and on Pentelican slopes among the vestiges of antiquity, slowly secreting lacteous facts, and not one of them would have raised his head from that exquisite pasturage, though Pan had made music through his pipe of reeds. Did Goethe wish to work up a Greek theme? He drove out Herr Böttiger, for example, among that fodder delicious to him for its very dryness, that sapless Arcadia of scholiasts, let him graze,



ruminate, and go through all other needful processes of the antiquarian organism, then got him quietly into a corner and milked him. The product, after standing long enough, mantled over with the rich Goethean cream, from which a butter could be churned, if not precisely classic, quite as good as the ancients could have made out of the same material. But who has ever read the *Achilleis*, correct in all *unessential* particulars as it probably is?

It is impossible to conceive that a man, who, in other respects, made such booty of the world around him, whose observation of manners was so minute, and whose insight into character and motives, as if he had been one of God's spies, was so unerring that we accept it without question, as we do Nature herself, and find it more consoling to explain his confessedly immense superiority by attributing it to a happy instinct rather than to the conscientious perfecting of exceptional powers till practice made them seem to work independently of the will which still directed them—it is impossible that such a man should not also have profited by the converse of the cultivated and quick-witted men in whose familiar society he lived, that he should not have over and over again discussed points of criticism and art with them, that he should not have had his curiosity, so alive to everything else, excited about those ancients whom university men then, no doubt, as now, extolled without too much knowledge of what they really were, that he should not have heard too much rather than too little of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Quintilian's *Rhetoric*, Horace's *Art of Poetry*, and the *Unities*, especially from Ben Jonson—in short, that he who speaks of himself as

“Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
With what he most enjoyed contented least,”

and who meditated so profoundly on every other topic of human concern, should never have turned his thought to the principles of that art which was both the delight and business of his life, the bread-winner alike for soul and body. Was there no harvest of the ear for him whose eye had stocked its garner

so full as well-nigh to forestall all after-comers? Did he who could so counsel the practisers of an art in which he never arrived at eminence, as in Hamlet's advice to the players, never take counsel with himself about that other art in which the instinct of the crowd, no less than the judgment of his rivals, awarded him an easy pre-eminence? If he had little Latin and less Greek, might he not have had enough of both for every practical purpose on this side pedantry? The most extraordinary, one might almost say contradictory, attainments have been ascribed to him, and yet he has been supposed incapable of what was within easy reach of every boy at Westminster School. There is a knowledge that comes of sympathy as living and genetic as that which comes of mere learning is sapless and unprocreant, and for this no profound study of the languages is needed.

If Shakespeare did not know the ancients, I think they were at least as unlucky in not knowing him. But is it incredible that he may have laid hold of an edition of the Greek tragedians, *Graecè et Latinè*, and then, with such poor wits as he was master of, contrived to worry some considerable meaning out of them? There are at least one or two coincidences which, whether accidental or not, are curious, and which I do not remember to have seen noticed. In the *Electra* of Sophocles, which is almost identical in its leading motive with *Hamlet*, the Chorus consoles Electra for the supposed death of Orestes in the same commonplace way which Hamlet's uncle tries with him.

Θνητοῦ πέφυκας πατρός, Ἡλέκτρα, φρόνει·  
 Θνητὸς δ' Ὀρέστης · ὥστε μὴ λίαν στένε,  
 Πᾶσιν γὰρ ἡμῶν τοῦτ' ὀφείλεται παθεῖν.

"Your father lost a father;  
 That father lost, lost his. . . .

But to perséver  
 In obstinate condolément is a course  
 Of impious stubbornness. . . .  
 "T is common; all that live must die."

Shakespeare expatiates somewhat more largely, but the sentiment in both cases is almost verbally identical. The resemblance is probably a chance one, for commonplace and consolation were always twin sisters, whom always to escape is given to no man; but it is nevertheless curious. Here is another, from the *Œdipus Coloneus*:—

“Τοῖς τοι δίκαιοις χῶ βραχὺς νικᾷ μέγαν,”

“Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just.”

Hamlet's “prophetic soul” may be matched with the πρόμαντις θυμός of Peleus (Eurip. *Androm.*, 1075), and his “sea of troubles” with the κακῶν πέλαγος of Theseus in the *Hippolytus*, or of the Chorus in the *Hercules Furens*. And, for manner and tone, compare the speeches of Pheres in the *Alcestis*, and Jocasta in the *Phænissæ*, with those of Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, and Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*.

The Greek dramatists were somewhat fond of a trick of words in which there is a reduplication of sense as well as of assonance, as in the *Electra*:—

“Ἀλεκτρα γηράσκονσαν ἀνυμέναιά τε.”

So Shakespeare:—

“Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled;”

and Milton after him, or, more likely, after the Greek:—

“Unrespited, unpitied, unreprieved.”\*

I mention these trifles, in passing, because they have interested me, and therefore may interest others. I lay no

\* The best instance I remember is in the “Frogs,” where Bacchus pleads his inexperience at the oar, and says he is

“ἀπειρος, ἀθαλάττωτος, ἀσαλαμίνος,”

which might be rendered,

“Unskilled, unsea-soned, and un-Salamised.



stress upon them, for, if once the conductors of Shakespeare's intelligence had been put in connection with those Attic brains, he would have reproduced their message in a form of his own. They would have inspired, and not enslaved him. His resemblance to them is that of consanguinity, more striking in expression than in mere resemblance of feature. The likeness between the Clytemnestra—*γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ*—of Æschylus and the Lady Macbeth of Shakespeare was too remarkable to have escaped notice. That between the two poets in their choice of epithets is as great, though more difficult of proof. Yet I think an attentive student of Shakespeare cannot fail to be reminded of something familiar to him in such phrases as "flame-eyed fire," "flax-winged ships," "star-neighbouring peaks," the rock Salmydessus,

"Rude jaw of the sea,  
Harsh hostess of the seaman, step-mother  
Of ships,"

and the beacon with its "*speaking eye* of fire." Surely there is more than a verbal, there is a genuine, similarity between the *ἀνῆριθμον γέλασμα* and "the unnumbered beach" and "multitudinous sea." Æschylus, it seems to me, is willing, just as Shakespeare is, to risk the prosperity of a verse upon a lucky throw of words, which may come up the sices of hardy metaphor or the ambsace of conceit. There is such a difference between far-reaching and far-fetching! Poetry, to be sure, is always that daring one step beyond, which brings the right man to fortune, but leaves the wrong one in the ditch, and its law is, Be bold once and again, yet be not over-bold. It is true, also, that masters of language are a little apt to play with it. But whatever fault may be found with Shakespeare in this respect will touch a tender spot in Æschylus also. Does he sometimes overload a word, so that the language not merely, as Dryden says, bends under him, but fairly gives way, and lets the reader's mind down with the shock as of a false step in taste? He has nothing worse than *πέλαγος ἀνθοῦν νεκροῖς*. A criticism, shallow in human nature,

however deep in Campbell's Rhetoric, has blamed him for making persons, under great excitement of sorrow, or whatever other emotion, parenthesise some trifling play upon words in the very height of their passion. Those who make such criticisms have either never felt a passion or seen one in action, or else they forget the exaltation of sensibility during such crises, so that the attention, whether of the senses or the mind, is arrested for the moment by what would be overlooked in ordinary moods. The more forceful the current, the more sharp the ripple from any alien substance interposed. A passion that looks forward, like revenge or lust or greed, goes right to its end, and is straightforward in its expression ; but a tragic passion, which is in its nature unavailing, like disappointment, regret of the inevitable, or remorse, is reflective, and liable to be continually diverted by the suggestions of fancy. The one is a concentration of the will, which intensifies the character and the phrase that expresses it ; in the other, the will is helpless, and, as in insanity, while the flow of the mind sets imperatively in one direction, it is liable to almost ludicrous interruptions and diversions upon the most trivial hint of involuntary association. I am ready to grant that Shakespeare sometimes allows his characters to spend time, that might be better employed, in carving some cherry-stone of a quibble ;\* that he is sometimes tempted away from the natural by the quaint ; that he sometimes forces a partial, even a verbal, analogy between the abstract thought and the sensual image into an absolute identity, giving us a kind of serious pun. In a pun our pleasure arises from a gap in the logical nexus too wide for the reason, but which the ear can bridge in an instant. "Is that your own hare, or a wig?" The fancy is yet more tickled where logic is treated with a mock ceremonial of respect.

\* So Euripides (copied by Theocritus, Id., xxvii.) :—

Πενθεὺς δ' ὅπως μὴ πένθος εἰσοῖσει δόμοις. (*Bacchæ*, 363.)  
 Ἐσωφρόνησεν οὐκ ἔχουσα σωφρονεῖν. (*Hippol.*, 1037.)

So Calderon: "Y apenas llega, cuando llega á penas."

"His head was turned, *and so* he chewed  
His pigtail till he died."

Now when this kind of thing is done in earnest, the result is one of those ill-distributed syllogisms which in rhetoric are called conceits.

"Hard was the hand that struck the blow,  
Soft was the heart that bled."

I have seen this passage from Warner cited for its beauty, though I should have thought nothing could be worse, had I not seen General Morris's

"Her heart and morning broke together  
In tears."

Of course, I would not rank with these Gloucester's

"What! will the aspiring blood of Lancaster  
Sink in the ground? I thought it would have mounted;"

though as mere rhetoric it belongs to the same class.\* It might be defended as a bit of ghastly humour characteristic of the speaker. But at any rate it is not without precedent in the two greater Greek tragedians. In a chorus of the "Seven against Thebes" we have:—

ἐν δὲ γαίᾳ

Ζωὰ φονορτυῶ

Μέμκται, κάρτα δ' εἶο' δμαιοί.

And does not Sophocles make Ajax in his despair quibble upon his own name quite in the Shakespearian fashion, under similar circumstances? Nor does the coarseness with which our great poet is reproached lack an Æschylean parallel. Even the Nurse in "Romeo and Juliet" would have found a true gossip in her of the "Agamemnon," who is so indiscreet in her confidences

\* I have taken the first passage in point that occurred to my memory. It may not be Shakespeare's, though probably his. The question of authorship is, I think, settled, so far as criticism can do it, in Mr. Grant White's admirable essay appended to the Second Part of Henry VI.



concerning the nursery life of Orestes. Whether Raleigh is right or not in warning historians against following truth too close upon the heels, the caution is a good one for poets as respects truth to Nature. But it is a mischievous fallacy in historian or critic to treat as a blemish of the man what is but the common tincture of his age. It is to confound a spatter of mud with a moral stain.

But I have been led away from my immediate purpose. I did not intend to compare Shakespeare with the ancients, much less to justify his defects by theirs. Shakespeare himself has left us a pregnant satire on dogmatical and categorical æsthetics (which commonly in discussion soon lose their ceremonious tails and are reduced to the internecine dog and cat of their bald first syllables) in the cloud-scene between Hamlet and Polonius, suggesting exquisitely how futile is any attempt at a cast-iron definition of those perpetually metamorphic impressions of the beautiful whose source is as much in the man who looks as in the thing he sees. In the fine arts a thing is either good in itself or it is nothing. It neither gains nor loses by having it shown that another good thing was also good in itself, any more than a bad thing profits by comparison with another that is worse. The final judgment of the world is intuitive, and is based, not on proof that a work possesses some of the qualities of another whose greatness is acknowledged, but on the immediate feeling that it carries to a high point of perfection certain qualities proper to itself. One does not flatter a fine pear by comparing it to a fine peach, nor learn what a fine peach is by tasting ever so many poor ones. The boy who makes his first bite into one does not need to ask his father if or how or why it is good. Because continuity is a merit in some kinds of writing, shall we refuse ourselves to the authentic charm of Montaigne's want of it? I have heard people complain of French tragedies because they were so very French. This, though it may not be to some particular tastes, and may from one point of view be a defect, is from another and far higher a distinguished merit. It is their flavour, as direct a tell-tale of the soil whence they draw it as that of French wines

is. Suppose we should tax the Elgin marbles with being too Greek? When will people, nay, when will even critics, get over this self-defrauding trick of cheapening the excellence of one thing by that of another, this conclusive style of judgment which consists simply in belonging to the other parish? As one grows older, one loses many idols, perhaps comes at last to have none at all, though he may honestly enough uncover in deference to the worshippers before any shrine. But for the seeming loss the compensation is ample. These saints of literature descend from their canopied remoteness to be even more precious as men like ourselves, our companions in field and street, speaking the same tongue, though in many dialects, and owing one creed under the most diverse masks of form.

Much of that merit of structure which is claimed for the ancient tragedy is due, if I am not mistaken, to circumstances external to the drama itself—to custom, to convention, to the exigencies of the theatre. It is formal rather than organic. The "Prometheus" seems to me one of the few Greek tragedies in which the whole creation has developed itself in perfect proportion from one central germ of living conception. The motive of the ancient drama is generally outside of it, while in the modern (at least in the English) it is necessarily within. Goethe, in a thoughtful essay,\* written many years later than his famous criticism of Hamlet in *Wilhelm Meister*, says that the distinction between the two is the difference between *sollen* and *wollen*—that is, between *must* and *would*. He means that in the Greek drama the catastrophe is foreordained by an inexorable Destiny, while the element of Free-will, and consequently of choice, is the very axis of the modern. The definition is conveniently portable, but it has its limitations. Goethe's attention was too exclusively fixed on the Fate tragedies of the Greeks, and upon Shakespeare among the moderns. In the Spanish drama, for example, custom, loyalty, honour, and religion are as imperative and as inevitable as doom. In the "Antigone," on the other hand, the crisis lies in the character of the protagonist. In this sense it is modern,

\* "Shakespeare und kein Ende."

and is the first example of true character-painting in tragedy. But, from whatever cause, that exquisite analysis of complex motives, and the display of them in action and speech, which constitute for us the abiding charm of fiction, were quite unknown to the ancients. They reached their height in Cervantes and Shakespeare, and, though on a lower plane, still belong to the upper region of art in Le Sage, Molière, and Fielding. The personages of the Greek tragedy seem to be commonly rather types than individuals. In the modern tragedy, certainly in the four greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies, there is still something very like Destiny, only the place of it is changed. It is no longer above man, but in him; yet the catastrophe is as sternly foredoomed in the characters of Lear, Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet as it could be by an infallible oracle. In "Macbeth," indeed, the Weird Sisters introduce an element very like Fate; but generally it may be said that with the Greeks the character is involved in the action, while with Shakespeare the action is evolved from the character. In the one case, the motive of the play controls the personages; in the other, the chief personages are in themselves the motive to which all else is subsidiary. In any comparison, therefore, of Shakespeare with the ancients, we are not to contrast him with them as unapproachable models, but to consider whether he, like them, did not consciously endeavour, under the circumstances and limitations in which he found himself, to produce the most excellent thing possible, a model also in its own kind—whether higher or lower in degree is another question. The only fair comparison would be between him and that one of his contemporaries who endeavoured to anachronise himself, so to speak, and to subject his art, so far as might be, to the laws of classical composition. Ben Jonson was a great man, and has sufficiently proved that he had an eye for the external marks of character; but when he would make a whole of them, he gives us instead either a bundle of humours or an incorporated idea. With Shakespeare the plot is an interior organism, in Jonson an external contrivance. It is the difference between man and tortoise. In the one the osseous



structure is out of sight, indeed, but sustains the flesh and blood that envelop it, while the other is boxed up and imprisoned in his bones.

I have been careful to confine myself to what may be called Shakespeare's ideal tragedies. In the purely historical or chronicle plays, the conditions are different, and his imagination submits itself to the necessary restrictions on its freedom of movement. Outside the tragedies also, the "*Tempest*" makes an exception worthy of notice. If I read it rightly, it is an example of how a great poet should write allegory—not embodying metaphysical abstractions, but giving us ideals abstracted from life itself, suggesting an under-meaning everywhere, forcing it upon us nowhere, tantalising the mind with hints that imply so much and tell so little, and yet keep the attention all eye and ear with eager, if fruitless, expectation. Here the leading characters are not merely typical, but symbolical—that is, they do not illustrate a class of persons, they belong to universal Nature. Consider the scene of the play. Shakespeare is wont to take some familiar story, to lay his scene in some place the name of which, at least, is familiar—well knowing the reserve of power that lies in the familiar as a background, when things are set in front of it under a new and unexpected light. But in the "*Tempest*" the scene is laid nowhere, or certainly in no country laid down on any map. Nowhere, then? At once nowhere and anywhere—for it is in the soul of man, that still vexed island hung between the upper and the nether world, and liable to incursions from both. There is scarce a play of Shakespeare's in which there is such variety of character, none in which character has so little to do in the carrying on and development of the story. But consider for a moment if ever the Imagination has been so embodied as in Prospero, the Fancy as in Ariel, the brute Understanding as in Caliban, who, the moment his poor wits are warmed with the glorious liquor of Stephano, plots rebellion against his natural lord, the higher Reason. Miranda is mere abstract Womanhood, as truly so before she sees Ferdinand as Eve before she was wakened to consciousness by the echo of her own nature

coming back to her, the same, and yet not the same, from that of Adam. Ferdinand, again, is nothing more than Youth, compelled to drudge at something he despises, till the sacrifice of will and abnegation of self win him his ideal in Miranda. The subordinate personages are simply types: Sebastian and Antonio, of weak character and evil ambition; Gonzalo, of average sense and honesty; Adrian and Francisco, of the walking gentlemen who serve to fill up a world. They are not characters in the same sense with Iago, Falstaff, Shallow, or Leontius; and it is curious how every one of them loses his way in this enchanted island of life, all the victims of one illusion after another, except Prospero, whose ministers are purely ideal. The whole play, indeed, is a succession of illusions, winding up with those solemn words of the great enchanter who had summoned to his service every shape of merriment or passion, every figure in the great *tragi-comedy* of life, and who was now bidding farewell to the scene of his triumphs. For in Prospero shall we not recognise the Artist himself—

“That did not better for his life provide  
Than public means which public manners breeds,  
Whence comes it that his name receives a brand?”—

who has forfeited a shining place in the world's eye by devotion to his art, and who, turned adrift on the ocean of life in the leaky carcass of a boat, has shipwrecked on that Fortunate Island (as men always do who find their true vocation) where he is absolute lord, making all the powers of Nature serve him, but with Ariel and Caliban as special ministers? Of whom else could he have been thinking, when he says—

“Graves, at my command,  
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let them forth,  
By my so potent art?”

Was this man, so extraordinary from whatever side we look at him, who ran so easily through the whole scale of human sentiment, from the homely common-sense of, “When two men ride

of one horse, one *must* ride behind," to the transcendental subtlety of—

"No, Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change;  
Thy pyramids, built up with newer might,  
To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;  
They are but dressings of a former sight"—

was he alone so unconscious of powers, some part of whose magic is recognised by all mankind, from the school-boy to the philosopher, that he merely sat by and saw them go without the least notion what they were about? Was he an inspired idiot, *vôtre bizarre Shakespeare*? a vast, irregular genius? a simple rustic, warbling his *native* wood-notes wild—in other words, insensible to the benefits of culture? When attempts have been made at various times to prove that this singular and seemingly contradictory creature, not one, but all mankind's epitome, was a musician, a lawyer, a doctor, a Catholic, a Protestant, an atheist, an Irishman, a discoverer of the circulation of the blood, and finally, that he was not himself, but somebody else, is it not a little odd that the last thing anybody should have thought of proving him was an artist? Nobody believes any longer that immediate inspiration is possible in modern times (as if God had grown old)—at least, nobody believes it of the prophets of those days, of John of Leyden, or Reeves, or Muggleton—and yet everybody seems to take it for granted of this one man Shakespeare. He, somehow or other, without knowing it, was able to do what none of the rest of them, though knowing it all too perfectly well, could begin to do. Everybody seems to get afraid of him in turn. Voltaire plays gentleman usher for him to his countrymen, and then, perceiving that his countrymen find a flavour in him beyond that of *Zaïre* or *Mahomet*, discovers him to be a *Sauvage ivre, sans le moindre étincelle de bon goût, et sans le moindre connoissance des règles*. Goethe, who tells us that *Götz von Berlichingen* was written in the Shakespearian manner—and we certainly should not have guessed it, if he had not blabbed—comes to the final conclusion, that Shakespeare was a poet, but not a dramatist.



Châteaubriand thinks that he has corrupted art. "If, to attain," he says, "the height of tragic art, it be enough to heap together disparate scenes without order and without connection, to dovetail the burlesque with the pathetic, to set the water-carrier beside the monarch and the huckster-wench beside the queen, who may not reasonably flatter himself with being the rival of the greatest masters? Whoever should give himself the trouble to retrace a single one of his days, . . . to keep a journal from hour to hour, would have made a drama in the fashion of the English poet." But there are journals and journals, as the French say, and what goes into them depends on the eye that gathers for them. It is a long step from St. Simon to Dangeau, from Pepys to Thoresby, from Shakespeare even to the Marquis de Châteaubriand. M. Hugo alone, convinced that, as founder of the French Romantic School, there is a kind of family likeness between himself and Shakespeare, stands boldly forth to prove the father as extravagant as the son. Calm yourself, M. Hugo, you are no more a child of his than Will Davenant was! But, after all, is it such a great crime to produce something absolutely new in a world so tedious as ours, and so apt to tell its old stories over again? I do not mean new in substance, but in the manner of presentation. Surely the highest office of a great poet is to show us how much variety, freshness, and opportunity abides in the obvious and familiar. He invents nothing, but seems rather to *re*-discover the world about him, and his penetrating vision gives to things of daily encounter something of the strangeness of new creation. Meanwhile the changed conditions of modern life demand a change in the method of treatment. The ideal is not a strait-waistcoat. Because *Alexis and Dora* is so charming, shall we have no *Paul and Virginia*? It was the idle endeavour to reproduce the old enchantment in the old way that gave us the pastoral, sent to the garret now with our grandmothers' achievements of the same sort in worsted. Every age says to its poets, like a mistress to her lover, "Tell me what I am like;" and he who succeeds in catching the evanescent expression that reveals character—which is as much as to say, what is intrinsically

human—will be found to have caught something as imperishable as human nature itself. Aristophanes, by the vital and essential qualities of his humorous satire, is already more nearly our contemporary than Molière; and even the *Trouvères*, careless and trivial as they mostly are, could fecundate a great poet like Chaucer, and are still delightful reading.

The Attic tragedy still keeps its hold upon the loyalty of scholars through their imagination, or their pedantry, or their feeling of an exclusive property, as may happen, and, however alloyed with baser matter, this loyalty is legitimate and well bestowed. But the dominion of the Shakespearian is even wider. It pushes forward its boundaries from year to year, and moves no landmark backward. Here Alfieri and Lessing own a common allegiance; and the loyalty to him is one not of guild or tradition, but of conviction and enthusiasm. Can this be said of any other modern? of robust Corneille? of tender Racine? of Calderon even, with his tropical warmth and vigour of production? The Greeks and he are alike and alone in this, and for the same reason, that both are unapproachably the highest in their kind. Call him Gothic, if you like, but the inspiring mind that presided over the growth of these clustered masses of arch and spire and pinnacle and buttress is neither Greek nor Gothic—it is simply genius lending itself to embody the new desire of man's mind, as it had embodied the old. After all, to be delightful is to be classic, and the chaotic never pleases long. But manifoldness is not confusion, any more than formalism is simplicity. If Shakespeare rejected the unities, as I think he who complains of "Art made tongue-tied by Authority" might very well deliberately do, it was for the sake of an imaginative unity more intimate than any of time and place. The antique in itself is not the ideal, though its remoteness from the vulgarity of every-day associations helps to make it seem so. The true ideal is not opposed to the real, nor is it any artificial heightening thereof, but lies *in* it, and blessed are the eyes that find it! It is the *mens divini* which hides within the actual, transfiguring matter-of-fact into matter-of-meaning for him who has the gift of second-sight. In this

sense Hogarth is often more truly ideal than Raphael, Shakespeare often more truly so than the Greeks. I think it is a more or less conscious perception of this ideality, as it is a more or less well-grounded persuasion of it as respects the Greeks, that assures to him, as to them, and with equal justice, a permanent supremacy over the minds of men. This gives to his characters their universality, to his thought its irradiating property, while the artistic purpose running through and combining the endless variety of scene and character will alone account for his power of dramatic effect. Goethe affirmed, that, without Schröder's prunings and adaptations, Shakespeare was too undramatic for the German theatre—that, if the theory that his plays should be represented textually should prevail, he would be driven from the boards. The theory has prevailed, and he not only holds his own, but is acted oftener than ever. It is not irregular genius that can do this, for surely Germany need not go abroad for what her own Werners could more than amply supply her with.

But I would much rather quote a fine saying than a bad prophecy of a man to whom I owe so much. Goethe, in one of the most perfect of his shorter poems, tells us that a poem is like a painted window. Seen from without (and he accordingly justifies the Philistine, who never looks at them otherwise), they seem dingy and confused enough; but enter, and then

“ Da ist's auf einmal farbig helle,  
Geschicht' und Zierath glänzt in Schnelle.”

With the same feeling he says elsewhere in prose, that “there is a destructive criticism and a productive. The former is very easy; for one has only to set up in his mind any standard, any model, however narrow” (let us say the Greeks), “and then boldly assert that the work under review does not match with it, and therefore is good for nothing—the matter is settled, and one must at once deny its claim. Productive criticism is a great deal more difficult; it asks, What did the author propose to himself? Is what he proposes reasonable and comprehensible? and how far has he succeeded in carrying it out?” It is in



they not the ear-mark of a school which has become unhappily numerous, I turn to the consideration of his work as a whole. I think he made a mistake in his very plan, or else was guilty of a misnomer in his title. His book is not so much a life of Milton as a collection of materials out of which a careful reader may sift the main facts of the poet's biography. His passion for minute detail is only to be equalled by his diffuseness on points mainly, if not altogether, irrelevant. He gives us a Survey of British Literature, occupying one hundred and twenty-eight pages of his first volume, written in the main with good judgment, and giving the average critical opinion upon every writer, great and small, who was in any sense a contemporary of Milton. I have no doubt all this would be serviceable and interesting to Mr. Masson's classes in Edinburgh University, and they may well be congratulated on having so competent a teacher; but what it has to do with Milton, unless in the case of such authors as may be shown to have influenced his style or turn of thought, one does not clearly see. Most readers of a life of Milton may be presumed to have some knowledge of the general literary history of the time, or at any rate to have the means of acquiring it; and Milton's manner (his style was his own) was very little affected by any of the English poets, with the single exception, in his earlier poems, of George Wither. Mr. Masson also has something to say about everybody, from Wentworth to the obscurest Brownist fanatic who was so much as heard of in England during Milton's lifetime. If this theory of a biographer's duty should hold, our grandchildren may expect to see "A Life of Thackeray, or who was who in England, France, and Germany during the first Half of the Nineteenth Century." These digressions of Mr. Masson's from what should have been his main topic (he always seems somehow to be "completing his tendency towards the suburbs" of his subject) gave him an uneasy feeling that he must get Milton in somehow or other at intervals, if it were only to remind the reader that he has a certain connection with the book. He is eager even to discuss a mere hypothesis, though

an untenable one, if it will only increase the number of pages devoted specially to Milton, and thus lessen the apparent disproportion between the historical and the biographical matter. Milton tells us that his morning wont had been "to read good authors, or cause them to be read, till the attention be weary, or memory have his full fraught; then with useful and generous labours preserving the body's health and hardiness, to render lightsome, clear, and not lumpish obedience to the mind, to the cause of religion and our country's liberty when it shall require firm hearts in sound bodies to stand and cover their stations rather than see the ruin of our Protestantism and the enforcement of a slavish life." Mr. Masson snatches at the hint: "This is interesting," he says; "Milton, it seems, has for some time been practising drill! The City Artillery Ground was near. . . . Did Milton, among others, make a habit of going there of mornings? Of this more hereafter." When Mr. Masson returns to the subject he speaks of Milton's "all but positive statement . . . that in the spring of 1642, or a few months before the breaking out of the Civil War, he was in the habit of spending a part of each day *in military exercise somewhere not far from his house in Aldersgate Street.*" What he puts by way of query on page 402 has become downright certainty seventy-nine pages further on. The passage from Milton's tract makes no "statement" of the kind it pleases Mr. Masson to assume. It is merely a Miltonian way of saying that he took regular exercise, because he believed that moral, no less than physical, courage demanded a sound body. And what proof does Mr. Masson bring to confirm his theory? Nothing more nor less than two or three passages in "*Paradise Lost*," of which I shall quote only so much as is essential to his argument:—

"And now

Advanced in view they stand, a horrid front  
Of dreadful length and dazzling arms, in guise  
Of warriors old with *ordered* spear and shield,  
Awaiting what command their mighty chief  
Had to impose."\*

\* Book 1., 562-567.

Mr. Masson assures us that "there are touches in this description (as, for example, the *ordering* of arms at the moment of halt, and without word of command) too exact and technical to have occurred to a mere civilian. Again, at the same review . . .

'He now prepared  
To speak; whereat their doubled ranks they bend  
From wing to wing, and half enclose him round  
With all his peers; *attention* held them mute.'

To the present day this is the very process, or one of the processes, when a commander wishes to address his men. They wheel inward and stand at 'attention.' But his main argument is the phrase "*ported* spears," in Book Fourth, on which he has an interesting and valuable comment. He argues the matter through a dozen pages or more, seeking to prove that Milton *must* have had some practical experience of military drill. I confess a very grave doubt whether "attention" and "ordered" in the passages cited have any other than their ordinary meaning, and Milton could never have looked on at the pike-exercise without learning what "*ported*" meant. But, be this as it may, I will venture to assert that there was not a boy in New England, forty years ago, who did not know more of the manual than is implied in Milton's use of these terms. Mr. Masson's object in proving Milton to have been a proficient in these martial exercises is to increase our wonder at his not entering the army. "If there was any man in England of whom one might surely have expected that he would be in arms among the Parliamentarians," he says, "that man was Milton." Milton may have had many an impulse to turn soldier, as all men must in such times, but I do not believe that he ever seriously intended it. Nor is it any matter of reproach that he did not. It is plain, from his works, that he believed himself very early set apart and consecrated for tasks of a very different kind, for services demanding as much self-sacrifice and of more enduring result. I have no manner of doubt that



he, like Dante, believed himself divinely inspired with what he had to utter, and, if so, why not also divinely guided in what he should do or leave undone? Milton wielded in the cause he loved a weapon far more effective than a sword.

It is a necessary result of Mr. Masson's method, that a great deal of space is devoted to what might have befallen his hero and what he might have seen. This leaves a broad margin indeed for the insertion of purely hypothetical incidents. Nay, so desperately addicted is he to what he deems the vivid style of writing, that he even goes out of his way to imagine what might have happened to anybody living at the same time with Milton. Having told us fairly enough how Shakespeare, on his last visit to London, perhaps saw Milton "a fair child of six playing at his father's door," he must needs conjure up an imaginary supper at the Mermaid. "Ah! what an evening . . . was that; and how Ben and Shakespeare *be-tongued* each other, while the others listened and wondered; and how, when the company dispersed, the sleeping street heard their departing footsteps, and the stars shone down on the old roofs." Certainly, if we may believe the old song, the stars "had nothing else to do," though their chance of shining in the middle of a London November may perhaps be reckoned very doubtful. An author should consider how largely the art of writing consists in knowing what to leave in the ink-stand.

Mr. Masson's volumes contain a great deal of very valuable matter, whatever one may think of its bearing upon the life of Milton. The chapters devoted to Scottish affairs are particularly interesting to a student of the Great Rebellion, its causes and concomitants. His analyses of the two armies, of the Parliament, and the Westminster Assembly, are sensible additions to our knowledge. A too painful thoroughness, indeed, is the criticism we should make on his work as a biography. Even as a history, the reader might complain that it confuses by the multiplicity of its details, while it wearies by want of continuity. Mr. Masson lacks the skill of an accomplished story-teller. A fact is to him a fact, never mind

how unessential, and he misses the breadth of truth in his devotion to accuracy. The very order of his title-page, *The Life of Milton, narrated in Connection with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time*, shows, it should seem, a misconception of the true nature of his subject. Milton's chief importance, it might be fairly said his only importance, is a literary one. His place is fixed as the most classical of our poets.

Neither in politics, theology, nor social ethics, did Milton leave any distinguishable trace on the thought of his time or in the history of opinion. In both these lines of his activity circumstances forced upon him the position of a controversialist whose aims and results are by the necessity of the case desultory and ephemeral. Hooker before him and Hobbes after him had a far firmer grasp of fundamental principles than he. His studies in these matters were perfunctory and occasional, and his opinions were heated to the temper of the times and shaped to the instant exigencies of the forum, sometimes to his own convenience at the moment, instead of being the slow result of a deliberate judgment enlightened by intellectual and above all historical sympathy with his subject. His interest was rather in the occasion than the matter of the controversy. No aphorisms of political science are to be gleaned from his writings as from those of Burke. His intense personality could never so far dissociate itself from the question at issue as to see it in its larger scope and more universal relations. He was essentially a *doctrinaire*, ready to sacrifice everything to what at the moment seemed the abstract truth, and with no regard to historical antecedents and consequences, provided those of scholastic logic were carefully observed. He has no respect for usage or tradition except when they count in his favour, and sees no virtue in that power of the past over the minds and conduct of men which alone insures the continuity of national growth and is the great safeguard of order and progress. The life of a nation was of less importance to him than that it should be conformed to certain principles of belief and conduct. Burke could distil political wisdom out of

history because he had a profound consciousness of the soul that underlies and outlives events, and of the national character that gives them meaning and coherence. Accordingly his words are still living and operative, while Milton's pamphlets are strictly occasional and no longer interesting except as they illustrate him. In the Latin ones especially there is an odd mixture of the pedagogue and the public orator. His training, so far as it was thorough, so far, indeed, as it may be called optional, was purely poetical and artistic. A true Attic bee, he made boot on every lip where there was a trace of truly classic honey.

Milton, indeed, could hardly have been a match for some of his antagonists in theological and ecclesiastical learning. But he brought into the contest a white heat of personal conviction that counted for much. His self-consciousness, always active, identified him with the cause he undertook. "I conceived myself to be now not<sup>a</sup> as mine own person, but as a member incorporate into that truth whereof I was persuaded and whereof I had declared myself openly to be the partaker."\* Accordingly it does not so much seem that he is the advocate of Puritanism, Freedom of Conscience, or the People of England, as that all these are *he*, and that he is speaking for himself. He was not nice in the choice of his missiles, and too often borrows a dirty lump from the dunghill of Luther; but now and then the gnarled sticks of controversy turn to golden arrows of Phœbus in his trembling hands, singing as they fly and carrying their messages of doom in music. Then, truly, in his prose as in his verse, his is the large utterance of the early gods, and there is that in him which tramples all learning under his victorious feet. From the first he looked upon himself as a man dedicated and set apart. He had that sublime persuasion of a divine mission which sometimes lifts his speech from personal to cosmopolitan significance; his genius unmistakably asserts itself from time to time, calling down fire from heaven to kindle the sacrifice of irksome private duty, and turning the

\* "Apology for Smectymnuus."



hearthstone of an obscure man into an altar for the worship of mankind. Plainly enough here was a man who had received something other than Episcopal ordination. Mysterious and awful powers had laid their unimaginable hands on that fair head and devoted it to a nobler service. Yet it must be confessed that, with the single exception of the "Areopagitica," Milton's tracts are wearisome reading, and going through them is like a long sea-voyage whose monotony is more than compensated for the moment by a stripe of phosphorescence heaping before you in a drift of star-sown snow, coiling away behind in winking disks of silver, as if the conscious element were giving out all the moon-light it had garnered in its loyal depths since first it gazed upon its pallid regent. Which, being interpreted, means that his prose is of value because it is Milton's, because it sometimes exhibits in an inferior degree the qualities of his verse, and not for its power of thought, of reasoning, or of statement. It is valuable, where it is best, for its inspiring quality, like the fervencies of a Hebrew prophet. The English translation of the Bible had to a very great degree Judaised, not the English mind, but the Puritan temper. Those fierce enthusiasts could more easily find elbow-room for their consciences in an ideal Israel than in a practical England. It was convenient to see Amalek or Philistia in the men who met them in the field, and one unintelligible horn or other of the Beast in their theological opponents. The spiritual provincialism of the Jewish race found something congenial in the English mind. Their national egotism quintessentialised in the prophets was especially sympathetic with the personal egotism of Milton. It was only as an inspired and irresponsible person that he could live on decent terms with his own self-confident individuality. There is an intolerant egotism which identifies itself with omnipotence,\* and whose sublimity is its apology; there is an intolerable egotism which subordinates the sun to the watch in its own fob. Milton's was of the former kind, and accordingly

\* "For him I was not sent, nor yet to free  
That people, victor once, now vile and base,  
Deservedly made vassal."—*P. R.*, iv. 131-133.

the finest passages in his prose and not the least fine in his verse are autobiographic, and this is the more striking that they are often unconsciously so. Those fallen angels in utter ruin and combustion hurled, are also cavaliers fighting against the Good Old Cause; Philistia is the Restoration, and what Samson did, that Milton would have done if he could.

The "Areopagitica" might seem an exception, but that also is a plea rather than an argument, and his interest in the question is not one of abstract principle, but of personal relation to himself. He was far more rhetorician than thinker. The sonorous amplitude of his style was better fitted to persuade the feelings than to convince the reason. The only passages from his prose that may be said to have survived are emotional, not argumentative, or they have lived in virtue of their figurative beauty, not their weight of thought. Milton's power lay in dilation. Touched by him, the simplest image, the most obvious thought,

"Dilated stood  
Like Teneriffe or Atlas . . .  
. . . nor wanted in his grasp  
What *seemed* both spear and shield."

But the thin stiletto of Macchiavelli is a more effective weapon than these fantastic arms of his. He had not the secret of compression that properly belongs to the political thinker, on whom, as Hazlitt said of himself, "nothing but abstract ideas makes any impression." Almost every aphoristic phrase that he has made current is borrowed from some one of the classics, like his famous

"License they mean when they cry liberty,"

from Tacitus. This is no reproach to him so far as his true function, that of poet, is concerned. It is his peculiar glory that literature was with him so much an art, an end and not a means. Of his political work he has himself told us, "I should not choose this manner of writing, wherein, knowing myself inferior to myself (led by the genial power of nature to another task), I have the use, as I may account, but of my left hand."

Mr. Masson has given an excellent analysis of these writings, selecting with great judgment the salient passages, which have an air of blank-verse thinly disguised as prose, like some of the corrupted passages of Shakespeare. We are particularly thankful to him for his extracts from the pamphlets written against Milton, especially for such as contain criticisms on his style. It is not a little interesting to see the most stately of poets reproached for his use of vulgarisms and low words. We seem to get a glimpse of the schooling of his "choiceful sense" to that nicety which could not be content till it had made his native tongue "search all her coffers round." One cannot help thinking also that his practice in prose, especially in the long involutions of Latin periods, helped him to give that variety of pause and that majestic harmony to his blank-verse which have made it so unapproachably his own. Landor, who, like Milton, seems to have thought in Latin, has caught somewhat more than others of the dignity of his gait, but without his length of stride. Wordsworth, at his finest, has perhaps approached it, but with how long an interval! Bryant has not seldom attained to its serene equanimity, but never emulates its pomp. Keats has caught something of its large utterance, but altogether fails of its nervous severity of phrase. Cowper's muse (that moved with such graceful ease in slippers) becomes stiff when (in his translation of Homer) she buckles on her feet the cothurnus of Milton. Thomson grows tumid wherever he assays the grandiosity of his model. It is instructive to get any glimpse of the slow processes by which Milton arrived at that classicism which sets him apart from, if not above, all our other poets.

In gathering up the impressions made upon us by Mr. Masson's work as a whole, we are inclined rather to regret his copiousness for his own sake than for ours. The several parts, though disproportionate, are valuable, his research has been conscientious, and he has given us better means of understanding Milton's time than we possessed before. But how is it about Milton himself? Here was a chance, it seems to me, for a fine bit of portrait-painting. There is hardly a more stately figure in literary history than Milton's, no life in some of



its aspects more tragical, except Dante's. In both these great poets, more than in any others, the character of the men makes part of the singular impressiveness of what they wrote and of its vitality with after times. In them the man somehow overtops the author. The works of both are full of autobiographical confidences. Like Dante, Milton was forced to become a party by himself. He stands out in marked and solitary individuality, apart from the great movement of the Civil War, apart from the supine acquiescence of the Restoration, a self-opinionated, unforgiving, and unforgetting man. Very much alive he certainly was in his day. Has Mr. Masson made him alive to us again? I fear not. At the same time, while we cannot praise either the style or the method of Mr. Masson's work, we cannot refuse to be grateful for it. It is not so much a book for the ordinary reader of biography as for the student, and will be more likely to find its place on the library-shelf than the centre-table. It does not in any sense belong to light literature, but demands all the muscle of the trained and vigorous reader. "Truly, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is Milton's life it is naught."

Mr. Masson's intimacy with the facts and dates of Milton's career renders him peculiarly fit in some respects to undertake an edition of the poetical works. His edition, accordingly, has distinguished merits. The introductions to the several poems are excellent, and leave scarcely anything to be desired. The general introduction, on the other hand, contains a great deal that might well have been omitted, and not a little that is positively erroneous. Mr. Masson's discussions of Milton's English seem often to be those of a Scotsman to whom English is in some sort a foreign tongue. It is almost wholly inconclusive, because confined to the Miltonic verse, while the basis of any altogether satisfactory study should surely be Miltonic prose; nay, should include all the poetry and prose of his own age and of that immediately preceding it. The uses to which Mr. Masson has put the concordance to Milton's poems tempt one sometimes to class him with those whom the poet himself taxed with being "the mousehunts and ferrets of an index."

For example, what profits a discussion of Milton's ἀπαξ λεγόμενα, a matter in which accident is far more influential than choice? \* What sensible addition is made to our stock of knowledge by learning that "the word *woman* does not occur in any form in Milton's poetry before 'Paradise Lost,'" and that it is "exactly so with the word *female*?" Is it any way remarkable that such words as *Adam, God, Heaven, Hell, Paradise, Sin, Satan, and Serpent* should occur "very frequently" in "Paradise Lost?" Would it not rather have been surprising that they should not? Such trifles at best come under the head of what old Warner would have called cumber-minds. It is time to protest against this minute style of editing and commenting great poets. Gulliver's microscopic eye saw on the fair skins of the Brobdingnagian maids of honour "a mole here and there as broad as a trencher," and we shrink from a cup of the purest Hippocrene after the critic's solar microscope has betrayed to us the grammatical, syntactical, and, above all, hypothetical monsters that sprawl in every drop of it. When a poet has been so much edited as Milton, the temptation of whosoever undertakes a new edition to see what is not to be seen becomes great in proportion as he finds how little there is that has not been seen before.

Mr. Masson is quite right in choosing to modernise the spelling of Milton, for surely the reading of our classics should be made as little difficult as possible, and he is right also in making an exception of such abnormal forms as the poet may fairly be supposed to have chosen for melodic reasons. His exhaustive discussion of the spelling of the original editions seems, however, to be the less called-for as he himself appears to admit that the compositor, not the author, was supreme in these matters, and that in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases to the thousand Milton had no system, but spelt by immediate inspiration. Yet Mr. Masson fills nearly four pages with an analysis of the vowel sounds, in which, as if

\* If things are to be scanned so micrologically, what weighty inferences might not be drawn from Mr. Masson's invariably printing ἀπαξ λεγόμενα!

to demonstrate the futility of such attempts so long as men's ears differ, he tells us that the short *a* sound is the same in *man* and *Darby*, the short *o* sound in *God* and *does*, and what he calls the long *o* sound in *broad* and *wrath*. Speaking of the apostrophe, Mr. Masson tells us that "it is sometimes inserted, not as a possessive mark at all, but merely as a plural mark: *hero's* for *heroes*, *myrtle's* for *myrtles*, *Gorgons* and *Hydra's*, etc." Now, in books printed about the time of Milton's the apostrophe was put in almost at random, and in all the cases cited is a misprint, except in the first, where it serves to indicate that the pronunciation was not *heroës* as it had formerly been.\* In the "possessive singular of nouns already ending in *s*," Mr. Masson tells us, "Milton's general practice is not to double the *s*; thus, *Nereus wrinkled look*, *Glaucus spell*. The necessities of metre would naturally constrain to such forms. In a possessive followed by the word *sake* or the word *side*, dislike to [of] the double sibilant makes us sometimes drop the inflection. In addition to '*for righteousness sake*,' such phrases as '*for thy name sake*,' and '*for mercy sake*' are allowed to pass; *bedside* is normal and *riverside* nearly so." The necessities of metre need not be taken into account with a poet like Milton, who never was fairly in his element till he got off the soundings of prose and felt the long swell of his verse under him like a steed that knows his rider. But does the dislike of the double sibilant account for the dropping of the *s* in these cases? Is it not far rather the presence of the *s* already in the sound satisfying an ear accustomed to the English slovenliness in the pronunciation of double consonants? It was this which led to such forms as *conscience sake* and *on justice side*, and

\* "That you may tell heroës, when you come  
To banquet with your wife."

—CHAPMAN'S *Odyssey*, viii. 336, 337.

In the fac-simile of the sonnet to Fairfax I find

"Thy firm, unshak'n vertue ever brings,"

which shows how much faith we need give to the apostrophe.



which beguiled Ben Jonson and Dryden into thinking, the one that *noise* and the other that *corps* was a plural.\* What does Mr. Masson say to *hillside*, *Bankside*, *seaside*, *Cheapside*, *spindleside*, *spearside*, *gospelside* (of a church), *nightside*, *countryside*, *wayside*, *brookside*, and I know not how many more? Is the first half of these words a possessive? Or is it not rather a noun impressed into the service as an adjective? How do such words differ from *hilltop*, *townend*, *candlelight*, *rushlight*, *cityman*, and the like, where no double *s* can be made the scapegoat? Certainly Milton would not have avoided them for their sibilancy, he who wrote

"And airy tongues that syllable men's names  
On sands and shores and desert wildernesses,"

"So in his seed all nations shall be blest,"

"And seat of Salmanasser whose success,"

verses that hiss like Medusa's head in wrath, and who was, I think, fonder of the sound than any other of our poets. Indeed, in compounds of the kind we always make a distinction wholly independent of the doubled *s*. Nobody would boggle at *mountainside*; no one would dream of saying *on the fatherside* or *motherside*.

Mr. Masson speaks of "the Miltonic forms *vanquisht*, *markt*, *lookt*, etc." Surely he does not mean to imply that these are peculiar to Milton? Chapman used them before Milton was born, and pressed them farther, as in *nakt* and *saf't* for *naked* and *saved*. He often prefers the contracted form in his prose also, showing that the full form of the past participle in *ed* was

\* Mr. Masson might have cited a good example of this from Drummond, whom (as a Scotchman) he is fond of quoting for an authority in English—

"Sleep, Silence' child, sweet father of soft rest."

The survival of *horse* for *horses* is another example. So by a reverse process *pult* and *shay* have been vulgarly deduced from the supposed plurals *pulse* and *chaise*.

passing out of fashion, though available in verse.\* Indeed, I venture to affirm that there is not a single variety of spelling or accent to be found in Milton which is without example in his predecessors or contemporaries. Even *highth*, which is thought peculiarly Miltonic, is common (in Hakluyt, for example), and still often heard in New England. Mr. Masson gives an odd reason for Milton's preference of it, "as indicating more correctly the formation of the word by the addition of the suffix *th* to the adjective *high*." Is an adjective, then, at the base of *growth*, *earth*, *birth*, *truth*, and other words of this kind? Horne Tooke made a better guess than this. If Mr. Masson be right in supposing that a peculiar meaning is implied in the spelling *beareth* ("Paradise Lost," ix., 624), which he interprets as "collective produce," though in the only other instance where it occurs it is neither more nor less than *birth*, it should seem that Milton had hit upon Horne Tooke's etymology. But it is really solemn trifling to lay any stress on the spelling of the original editions, after having admitted, as Mr. Masson has honestly done, that in all likelihood Milton had nothing to do with it. And yet he cannot refrain. On the word *voutsafe* he hangs nearly a page of dissertation on the nicety of Milton's ear. Mr. Masson thinks that Milton "must have had a reason for it,"† and finds that reason in "his dislike to [of] the sound

\* Chapman's spelling is presumably his own. At least he looked after his printed texts. I have two copies of his *Byron's Conspiracy*, both dated 1608, but one evidently printed later than the other, for it shows corrections. The more solemn ending in *ed* was probably kept alive by the reading of the Bible in churches. Though now dropped by the clergy, it is essential to the right hearing of the more metrical passages in the Old Testament, which are finer and more scientific than anything in the language, unless it be some parts of "Samson Agonistes." I remember an old gentleman who always used the contracted form of the participle in conversation, but always gave it back its embezzled syllable of reading. Sir Thomas Browne seems to have preferred the more solemn form. At any rate he has the spelling *empuzzed* in prose.

† He thinks the same of the variation *strook* and *struck*, though they were probably pronounced alike. In Marlowe's "Faustus" two consecutive sentences (in prose) begin with the words "Cursed be he that struck." In

*ch*, or to [of] that sound combined with *s*. . . . His fine ear taught him not only to seek for musical effects and cadences at large, but also to be fastidious as to syllables, and to avoid harsh or difficult conjunctions of consonants, except when there might be a musical reason for harshness or difficulty. In the management of the letter *s*, the frequency of which in English is one of the faults of the speech, he will be found, I believe, most careful and skilful. More rarely, I think, than in Shakespeare will one word ending in *s* be found followed immediately in Milton by another word beginning with the same letter; or, if he does occasionally pen such a phrase as *Moab's sons*, it will be difficult to find in him, I believe, such a harsher example as *earth's substance*, of which many writers would think nothing. [With the index to back him Mr. Masson could safely say this.] The same delicacy of ear is even more apparent in his management of the *sh* sound. He has it often, of course; but it may be noted that he rejects it in his verse when he can. He writes *Basan* for *Bashan*, *Sittim* for *Shittim*, *Silo* for *Shiloh*, *Asdod* for *Ashdod*. Still more, however, does he seem to have been wary of the compound sound *ch* as in *church*. Of his sensitiveness to this sound in excess there is a curious proof in his prose pamphlet, entitled 'An Apology against a Pamphlet, called A Modest Completion, etc.,' where, having occasion to quote these lines from one of the Satires\* of his opponent, Bishop Hall,

'Teach each hollow grove to sound his love,  
Wearying echo with one changeless word,'

he adds, ironically, 'And so he well might, and all his auditory besides, with his *teach each!*'\* Generalisations are always

a note on the passage Mr. Dyce tells us that the old editions (there were three) have *stroke* and *strooke* in the first instance, and all agree on *strucke* in the second. No inference can be drawn from such casualties.

\* The lines are not "from one of the Satires," and Milton made them worse by misquoting and bringing *love* jinglingly near to *grove*. Hall's verse (in his Satires) is always vigorous and often harmonious. He long before Milton spoke of rhyme almost in the very terms of the preface to "Paradise Lost."



risky, but when extemporised from a single hint they are maliciously so. Surely it needed no great sensitiveness of ear to be set on edge by Hall's echo of *teach each*. Did Milton reject the *h* from *Bashan* and the rest because he disliked the sound of *sh*, or because he had found it already rejected by the Vulgate and by some of the earlier translators of the Bible into English? Oddily enough, Milton uses words beginning with *sh* seven hundred and fifty-four times in his poetry, not to speak of others in which the sound occurs, as, for instance, those ending in *tion*. Hall, had he lived long enough, might have retorted on Milton his own

"Manliest, resoluteſt, breſt,  
As the magnetick hardeſt iron draws,"

or his

"What moves thy inquiſition?  
Know'ſt thou not that my riſing is thy fall,  
And my promotion thy deſtruction?"

With the playful controversial wit of the day he would have hinted that too much *est-est* is as fatal to a blank-verse as to a bishop, and that danger was often incurred by those who too eagerly *shunned* it. Nay, he might even have found an echo almost tallying with his own in

"To begirt the almighty throne  
Beseeching or besieging,"

a pun worthy of Milton's worst prose. Or he might have twitted him with "a *sequent* king who *seeks*." As for the *sh* sound, a poet could hardly have found it ungracious to his ear who wrote,

"Gnashing for anguish and despite and shame,"

or again,

"Then bursting forth  
Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round  
That rest or intermission none I find.  
Before mine eyes in opposition sits  
Grim Death, my son."

poor bleaching victim hung up to moult its dragged feathers in the rain that he wishes to show us. He loves the hawk-nature as well as the hen-nature ; and if he is unequalled in anything, it is in that sunny breadth of view, that impregnability of reason, that looks down all ranks and conditions of men, all fortune and misfortune, with the equal eye of the pure artist.

Whether I have fancied anything into "Hamlet" which the author never dreamed of putting there I do not greatly concern myself to inquire. Poets are always entitled to a royalty on whatever we find in their works ; for these fine creations as truly build themselves up in the brain as they are built up with deliberate forethought. Praise art as we will, that which the artist did not mean to put into his work, but which found itself there by some generous process of Nature of which he was as unaware as the blue river is of its rhyme with the blue sky, has somewhat in it that snatches us into sympathy with higher things than those which come by plot and observation. Goethe wrote his "Faust" in its earliest form without a thought of the deeper meaning which the exposition of an age of criticism was to find in it : without foremeaning it, he had impersonated in Mephistopheles the genius of his century. Shall this subtract from the debt we owe him ? Not at all. If originality were conscious of itself, it would have lost its right to be original. I believe that Shakespeare intended to impersonate in Hamlet not a mere metaphysical entity, but a man of flesh and blood : yet it is certainly curious how prophetically typical the character is of that introversion of mind which is so constant a phenomenon of these latter days, of that over-consciousness which wastes itself in analysing the motives of action instead of acting.

The old painters had a rule, that all compositions should be pyramidal in form—a central figure, from which the others slope gradually away on the two sides. Shakespeare probably had never heard of this rule, and, if he had, would not have been likely to respect it more than he has the so-called classical unities of time and place. But he understood perfectly the artistic advantages of gradation, contrast, and relief. Taking

Hamlet as the key-note, we find in him weakness of character, which, on the one hand, is contrasted with the feebleness that springs from overweening conceit in Polonius and with frailty of temperament in Ophelia, while, on the other hand, it is brought into fuller relief by the steady force of Horatio and the impulsive violence of Laertes, who is resolute from thoughtlessness, just as Hamlet is irresolute from overplus of thought.

If we must draw a moral from Hamlet, it would seem to be, that Will is Fate, and that, Will once abdicating, the inevitable successor in the regency is Chance. Had Hamlet acted, instead of musing how good it would be to act, the king might have been the only victim. As it is, all the main actors in the story are the fortuitous sacrifice of his irresolution. We see how a single great vice of character at last draws to itself as allies and confederates all other weaknesses of the man, as in civil wars the timid and the selfish wait to throw themselves upon the stronger side.

"In Life's small things be resolute and great  
To keep thy muscles trained: know'st thou when Fate  
Thy measure takes? or when she'll say to thee,  
'I find thee worthy, do this thing for me?'"

I have said that it was doubtful if Shakespeare had any conscious moral intention in his writings. I meant only that he was purely and primarily poet. And while he was an English poet in a sense that is true of no other, his method was thoroughly Greek, yet with this remarkable difference—that, while the Greek dramatists took purely national themes and gave them a universal interest by their mode of treatment, he took what may be called cosmopolitan traditions, legends of human nature, and nationalised them by the infusion of his perfectly Anglican breadth of character and solidity of understanding. Wonderful as his imagination and fancy are, his perspicacity and artistic discretion are more so. This country tradesman's son, coming up to London, could set high-bred wits, like Beaumont, uncopyable lessons in drawing gentlemen such as are seen nowhere else but on the canvas of Titian; he



could take Ulysses away from Homer and expand the shrewd and crafty islander into a statesman whose words are the pith of history. But what makes him yet more exceptional was his utterly unimpeachable judgment, and that poise of character which enabled him to be at once the greatest of poets and so unnoticeable a good citizen as to leave no incidents for biography. His material was never far-sought (it is still disputed whether the fullest head of which we have record were cultivated beyond the range of grammar-school precedent!); but he used it with a poetic instinct which we cannot parallel, identified himself with it, yet remained always its born and questionless master. He finds the Clown and Fool upon the stage—he makes them the tools of his pleasantry, his satire, and even his pathos; he finds a fading rustic superstition, and shapes out of it ideal Pucks, Titania, and Ariels, in whose existence statesmen and scholars believe forever. Always poet, he subjects all to the ends of his art, and gives in "Hamlet" the churchyard ghost, but with the cothurnus on—the messenger of God's revenge against murder; always philosopher, he traces in "Macbeth" the metaphysics of apparitions, painting the shadowy Banquo only on the o'erwrought brain of the murderer, and staining the hand of his wife-accomplice (because she was the more refined and higher nature) with the disgusting blood-spot that is not there. We say he had no moral intention, for the reason, that, as artist, it was not his to deal with the realities, but only with the shows of things; yet, with a temperament so just, an insight so inevitable as his, it was impossible that the moral reality, which underlies the *mirage* of the poet's vision, should not always be suggested. His humour and satire are never of the destructive kind; what he does in that way is suggestive only—not breaking bubbles with Thor's hammer, but puffing them away with the breath of a Clown, or shivering them with the light laugh of a genial cynic. Men go about to prove the existence of a God! Was it a bit of phosphorus, that brain whose creations are so real, that, mixing with them, we feel as if we ourselves were but fleeting magic-lantern shadows?

But higher even than the genius we rate the character of this unique man, and the grand impersonality of what he wrote. What has he told us of himself? In our self-exploiting nineteenth century, with its melancholy liver-complaint, how serene and high he seems! If he had sorrows, he has made them the woof of everlasting consolation to his kind; and if, as poets are wont to whine, the outward world was cold to him, its biting air did but trace itself in loveliest frost-work of fancy on the many windows of that self-centred and cheerful soul.

## MILTON.\*

IF the biographies of literary men are to assume the bulk which Mr. Masson is giving to that of Milton, their authors should send a phial of *elixir vitæ* with the first volume, that a purchaser might have some valid assurance of surviving to see the last. Mr. Masson has already occupied thirteen hundred and seventy-eight pages in getting Milton to his thirty-fifth year, and an interval of eleven years stretches between the dates of the first and second instalments of his published labours.† As Milton's literary life properly begins at twenty-one, with the "Ode on the Nativity," and as by far the more important part of it lies between the year at which we are arrived and his death at the age of sixty-six, we might seem to have the terms given us by which to make a rough reckoning of how soon we are likely to see land. But when we recollect the baffling character of the winds and currents we have already encountered, and the eddies that may at any time slip us back to the reformation in Scotland or the settlement of New England; when we consider, moreover, that Milton's life overlapped the *grand*

\* *The Life of John Milton: narrated in Connection with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time.* By DAVID MASSON, M.D., LL.D., Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature in the University of Edinburgh. Vols. I., II. 1638-1643. London and New York: Macmillan & Co. 1871. 8vo. pp. xii., 603.

*The Poetical Works of John Milton*, edited, with Introduction, Notes, and an Essay on Milton's English, by DAVID MASSON, M.A., LL.D., Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature in the University of Edinburgh. 3 vols. 8vo. Macmillan & Co. 1874.

† Since this essay was written, the remaining volumes have appeared, and Mr. Masson's work is now complete.—ED.



*siècle* of French literature, with its irresistible temptations to digression and homily for a man of Mr. Masson's temperament, we may be pardoned if a sigh of doubt and discouragement escape us. We envy the secular leisures of Methusaleh, and are thankful that *his* biography at least (if written in the same longeval proportion) is irrecoverably lost to us. What a subject would that have been for a person of Mr. Masson's spacious predilections! Even if he himself can count on patriarchal prorogations of existence, let him hang a print of the Countess of Desmond in his study to remind him of the ambushes which Fate lays for the toughest of us. For myself, I have not dared to climb a cherry-tree since I began to read his work. Even with the promise of a speedy third volume before me, I feel by no means sure of living to see Mary Powell back in her husband's house; for it is just at this crisis that Mr. Masson, with the diabolical art of a practised serial writer, leaves us while he goes into an exhaustive account of the Westminster Assembly, and the political and religious notions of the Massachusetts Puritans. One could not help thinking, after having got Milton fairly through college, that he was never more mistaken in his life than when he wrote,

"How *soon* hath Time, that subtle thief of youth,  
Stolen on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!"

Or is it Mr. Masson who has scotched Time's wheels?

It is plain from the preface to the second volume that Mr. Masson himself has an uneasy consciousness that something is wrong, and that Milton ought somehow to be more than a mere incident of his own biography. He tells us that, "whatever may be thought by a hasty person looking in on the subject from the outside, no one can study the life of Milton as it ought to be studied without being obliged to study extensively and intimately the contemporary history of England, and even incidentally of Scotland and Ireland too. . . . Thus on the very compulsion, or at least the suasion, of the biography, a history grew on my hands. It was not in human nature to confine the historical inquiries, once they were in progress, within the

precise limits of their demonstrable bearing on the biography, even had it been possible to determine these limits beforehand; and so the history assumed a co-ordinate importance with me, was pursued often for its own sake, and became, though always with a sense of organic relation to the biography, continuous in itself." If a "hasty person" be one who thinks eleven years rather long to have his button held by a biographer ere he begin his next sentence, I take to myself the sting of Mr. Masson's covert sarcasm. I confess with shame a pusillanimity that is apt to flag if a "to be continued" do not redeem its promise before the lapse of a quinquennium. I could scarce await the "Autocrat" himself so long. The heroic age of literature is past, and even a duodecimo may often prove too heavy (*ὅλον νῦν βρότοι*) for the descendants of men to whom the folio was a pastime. But what does Mr. Masson mean by "continuous"? To me it seems rather as if his somewhat rambling history of the seventeenth century were interrupted now and then by an unexpected apparition of Milton, who, like Paul Pry, just pops in and hopes he does not intrude, to tell us what *he* has been doing in the meanwhile. The reader, immersed in Scottish politics or the schemes of Archbishop Laud, is a little puzzled at first, but reconciles himself on being reminded that this fair-haired young man is the protagonist of the drama. *Pars minima est ipsa puella sui.*

If Goethe was right in saying that every man was a citizen of his age as well as of his country, there can be no doubt that in order to understand the motives and conduct of the man we must first make ourselves intimate with the time in which he lived. We have therefore no fault to find with the thoroughness of Mr. Masson's "historical inquiries." The more thorough the better, so far as they were essential to the satisfactory performance of his task. But it is only such contemporary events, opinions, or persons as were really operative on the character of the man we are studying that are of consequence, and we are to familiarise ourselves with them, not so much for the sake of explaining them as for understanding him. The biographer, especially of a literary man, need only mark the main currents

of tendency, without being officious to trace out to its marshy source every runlet that has cast in its tiny pitcherful with the rest. Much less should he attempt an analysis of the stream and to classify every component by itself, as if each were ever effectual singly and not in combination. Human motives cannot be thus chemically cross-examined, nor do we arrive at any true knowledge of character by such minute subdivision of its ingredients. Nothing is so essential to a biographer as an eye that can distinguish at a glance between real events that are the levers of thought and action, and what Donne calls "unconcerning things, matters of fact"—between substantial personages, whose contact or even neighbourhood is influential, and the supernumeraries that serve first to fill up a stage and afterwards the interstices of a biographical dictionary.

"Time hath a wallet at his back  
Wherein he puts alms for Oblivion."

Let the biographer keep his fingers off that sacred and merciful deposit, and not renew for us the bores of a former generation as if we had not enough of our own. But if he cannot forbear that unwise inquisitiveness, we may fairly complain when he insists on taking us along with him in the processes of his investigation, instead of giving us the sifted results in their bearing on the life and character of his subject, whether for help or hindrance. We are blinded with the dust of old papers ransacked by Mr. Masson to find out that they have no relation whatever to his hero. He had been wise if he had kept constantly in view what Milton himself says of those who gathered up personal traditions concerning the apostles: "With less fervency was studied what Saint Paul or Saint John had written than was listened to one that could say, 'Here he taught, here he stood, this was his stature, and thus he went habited; and O, happy this house that harboured him, and that cold stone whereon he rested, this village where he wrought such a miracle.' . . . Thus while all their thoughts were poured out upon circumstances and the gazing after such men as had sat at table with the Apostles, . . . by this means they



lost their time and truanted on the fundamental grounds of saving knowledge, as was seen shortly in their writings." Mr. Masson has so *poured out his mind upon circumstances*, that his work reminds us of Allston's picture of "Elijah in the Wilderness," where a good deal of research at last enables us to guess at the prophet absconded like a conundrum in the landscape where the very ravens could scarce have found him out, except by divine commission. The figure of Milton becomes but a speck on the enormous canvas crowded with the scenery through which he may by any possibility be conjectured to have passed. I will cite a single example of the desperate straits to which Mr. Masson is reduced in order to hitch Milton on to his own biography. He devotes the first chapter of his Second Book to the meeting of the Long Parliament. "Already," he tells us, "in the earlier part of the day, the Commons had gone through the ceremony of hearing the writ for the Parliament read, and the names of the members that had been returned called over by Thomas Wyllys, Esq., the Clerk of the Crown of Chancery. His deputy, *Agar, Milton's brother-in-law, may have been in attendance on such an occasion.* During the preceeding month or two, at all events, Agar and his subordinates in the Crown Office had been unusually busy with the issue of the writs and with the other work connected with the opening of Parliament."—(Vol. ii. p. 156.) Mr. Masson's resolute "at all events" is very amusing. Meanwhile,

"The hungry sheep look up and are not fed."

Augustine Thierry has a great deal to answer for, if to him we owe the modern fashion of writing history picturesquely. At least his method leads to most unhappy results when essayed by men to whom nature has denied a sense of what the picturesque really is. The historical picturesque does not consist, in truth of costume and similar accessories, but in the grouping, attitude, and expression of the figures, caught when they are unconscious that the artist is sketching them. The moment they are posed for a composition, unless by a man of genius, the life has gone out of them. In the hands of an

inferior artist, who fancies that imagination is something to be squeezed out of colour-tubes, the past becomes a phantasmagoria of jack-boots, doublets, and flap-hats, the mere property-room of a deserted theatre, as if the light had been scenical and illusory, the world an unreal thing that vanished with the foot-lights. It is the power of catching the actors in great events at unawares that makes the glimpses given us by contemporaries so vivid and precious. And St. Simon, one of the great masters of the picturesque, lets us into the secret of his art when he tells us how, in that wonderful scene of the death of Monseigneur, he saw "*du premier coup d'œil vivement porté, tout ce qui leur échappoit et tout ce qui les accableroit.*" It is the gift of producing this reality that almost makes us blush, as if we had been caught peeping through a keyhole, and had surprised secrets to which we had no right—it is this only that can justify the pictorial method of narration. Mr. Carlyle has this power of contemporising himself with bygone times, he cheats us to

"Play with your fancies and believe we see ;"

but we find the *tableaux vivants* of the apprentices who "deal in his command without his power," and who compel us to work very hard indeed with our fancies, rather wearisome. The effort of weaker arms to shoot with his mighty bow has filled the air of recent literature with more than enough fruitless twanging.

Mr. Masson's style, at best cumbrous, becomes intolerably awkward when he strives to make up for the want of St. Simon's *premier coup d'œil* by impertinent details of what we must call the pseudo-dramatic kind. For example, does Hall profess to have traced Milton from the University to a "suburb sink" of London? Mr. Masson fancies he hears Milton saying to himself, "A suburb sink! has Hall or his son taken the trouble to walk all the way to Aldersgate here, to peep up the entry where I live, and so have an exact notion of my whereabouts? There has been plague in the neighbourhood certainly; and I hope Jane Yates had my doorstep

tidy for the visit." Does Milton, answering Hall's innuendo that he was courting the graces of a rich widow, tell us that he would rather "choose a virgin of mean fortunes honestly bred?" Mr. Masson forthwith breaks forth in a paroxysm of what we suppose to be picturesqueness in this wise: "What have we here? Surely nothing less, if we choose so to construe it, than a marriage advertisement! Ho, all ye virgins of England (widows need not apply), here is an opportunity such as seldom occurs: a bachelor, unattached; age, thirty-three years and three or four months; height [Milton, by the way, would have said *highth*], middle or a little less; personal appearance unusually handsome, with fair complexion and light auburn hair; circumstances independent; tastes intellectual and decidedly musical; principles Root-and-Branch! Was there already any young maiden in whose bosom, had such an advertisement come in her way, it would have raised a conscious flutter? If so, did she live near Oxford?" If there *is* anything worse than an unimaginative man trying to write imaginatively, it is a heavy man when he fancies he is being facetious. He tramples out the last spark of cheerfulness with the broad damp foot of a hippopotamus.

I am no advocate of what is called the dignity of history, when it means, as it too often does, that dulness has a right of sanctuary in gravity. Too well do I recall the sorrows of my youth, when I was shipped in search of knowledge on the long Johnsonian swell of the last century, favourable to anything but the calm digestion of historic truth. I had even then an uneasy suspicion, which has ripened into certainty, that thoughts were never draped in long skirts like babies, if they were strong enough to go alone. But surely there should be such a thing as good taste, above all a sense of self-respect, in the historian himself, that should not allow him to play any tricks with the dignity of his subject. A halo of sacredness has hitherto invested the figure of Milton, and our image of him has dwelt securely in ideal remoteness from the vulgarities of life. No diaries, no private letters, remain to give the idle curiosity of after-times the right to force itself on the hallowed seclusion of



his reserve. That a man whose familiar epistles were written in the language of Cicero, whose sense of personal dignity was so great that, when called on in self-defence to speak of himself, he always does it with an epical stateliness of phrase, and whose self-respect even in youth was so profound that it resembles the reverence paid by other men to a far-off and idealised character—that he should be treated in this off-hand familiar fashion by his biographer seems to us a kind of desecration, a violation of good manners no less than of the laws of biographic art. Milton is the last man in the world to be slapped on the back with impunity. Better the surly injustice of Johnson than such presumptuous friendship as this. Let the seventeenth century, at least, be kept sacred from the insupportable foot of the interviewer!

But Mr. Masson, in his desire to be (shall I say) idiomatic, can do something worse than what has been hitherto quoted. He can be even vulgar. Discussing the motives of Milton's first marriage, he says, "Did he come seeking his £500, and did Mrs. Powell *heave a daughter at him?*" We have heard of a woman throwing herself at a man's head, and the image is a somewhat violent one; but what is this to Mr. Masson's improvement on it? It has been sometimes affirmed that the fitness of an image may be tested by trying whether a picture could be made of it or not. Mr. Masson has certainly offered a new and striking subject to the historical school of British art. A little further on, speaking of Mary Powell, he says, "We have no portrait of her, nor any account of her appearance; but on the usual rule of the elective affinities of opposites, Milton being fair, *we will vote her* to have been dark-haired." I need say nothing of the good taste of this sentence, but its absurdity is heightened by the fact that Mr. Masson himself had left us in doubt whether the match was one of convenience or inclination. I know not how it may be with other readers, but for myself I feel inclined to resent this hail-fellow-well-met manner with its jaunty "*we will vote.*" In some cases, Mr. Masson's indecorums in respect of style may possibly be accounted for as attempts at humour by one who has an imperfect notion of its ingredients. In such

experiments, to judge by the effect, the pensive element of the compound enters in too large an excess over the hilarious. Whether I have hit upon the true explanation, or whether the cause lie not rather in a besetting velleity of the picturesque and vivid, I shall leave the reader to judge by an example or two. In the manuscript copy of Milton's sonnet in which he claims for his own house the immunity which the memory of Pindar and Euripides secured for other walls, the title had originally been, "*On his Door when the City expected an Assault.*" Milton has drawn a line through this and substituted "*When the Assault was intended to the City.*" Mr. Masson fancies "a mood of jest or semi-jest in the whole affair;" but we think rather that Milton's quiet assumption of equality with two such famous poets was as seriously characteristic as Dante's ranking himself *sesto tra cotanto senno*. Mr. Masson takes advantage of the obliterated title to imagine one of Prince Rupert's troopers entering the poet's study and finding some of his "Anti-Episcopal pamphlets that had been left lying about inadvertently. 'Oho!' the Cavalier Captain might then have said, 'Pindar and Euripides are all very well, by G——! I've been at college myself; and when I meet a gentleman and scholar, I hope I know how to treat him; but neither Pindar nor Euripides ever wrote pamphlets against the Church of England, by G——! It won't do, Mr. Milton!'" This, it may be supposed, is Mr. Masson's way of being funny and dramatic at the same time. Good taste is shocked with this barbarous dissonance. Could not the Muse defend her son? Again, when Charles I., at Edinburgh, in the autumn and winter of 1641, fills the vacant English sees, we are told, "It was more than an insult; it was a sarcasm! It was as if the King, while giving Alexander Henderson his hand to kiss, had winked his royal eye over that reverend Presbyter's back!" Now one can conceive Charles II. winking when he took the Solemn League and Covenant, but never his father under any circumstances. He may have been, and I believe he was, a bad king, but surely we may take Marvell's word for it, that

"He nothing common did or mean,"

upon any of the "memorable scenes" of his life. The image is, therefore, out of all imaginative keeping, and vulgarises the chief personage in a grand historical tragedy, who, if not a great, was at least a decorous actor. But Mr. Masson can do worse than this. Speaking of a Mrs. Katherine Chidley, who wrote in defence of the Independents against Thomas Edwards, he says, "People wondered who this she-Brownist, Katherine Chidley, was, and did not quite lose their interest in her when they found that she was an oldish woman, and a member of some hole-and-corner congregation in London. Indeed, *she put her nails into Mr. Edwards with some effect.*" Why did he not say at once, after the good old fashion, that she "set her ten commandments in his face?" In another place he speaks of "Satan standing with his *staff* around him." Mr. Masson's style, a little Robertsonian at best, naturally grows worse when forced to condescend to every-day matters. He can no more dismount and walk than the man in armour on a Lord Mayor's day. "It [Aldersgate Street] stretches away northwards a full fourth of a mile as one continuous thoroughfare, until, crossed by Long Lane and the Barbican, it parts with the name of Aldersgate Street, and, under the new names of Goswell Street and Goswell Road, *completes its tendency towards the suburbs* and fields about Islington." What a noble work might not the Directory be if composed on this scale! The imagination even of an alderman might well be lost in that full quarter of a mile of continuous thoroughfare. Mr. Masson is very great in these passages of civic grandeur; but he is more surprising, on the whole, where he has an image to deal with. Speaking of Milton's "two-handed engine" in "Lycidas," he says: "May not Milton, whatever else he meant, have meant a coming English Parliament, with its two Houses? Whatever he meant, his prophecy had come true. As he sat among his books in Aldersgate Street, the two-handed engine at the door of the English Church was on the swing. Once, twice, thrice, it had swept its arcs to gather energy; now it was on the backmost poise, and the blow was to descend." One cannot help wishing that Mr.



Masson would try his hand on the tenth horn of the beast in Revelation, or on the time and half a time of Daniel. There is something so consoling to a prophet in being told that, no matter what he meant, his prophecy had come true, and that he might mean "whatever else" he pleased, so long as he *may* have meant what we choose to think he did, reasoning backward from the assumed fulfilment! But, perhaps, there may be detected in Mr. Masson's "swept its arcs" a little of that prophetic hedging-in vagueness to which he allows so generous a latitude. How if the "two-handed engine," after all, were a broom (or besom, to be more dignified),

"Sweeping—vehemently sweeping,  
No pause admitted, no design avowed,"

like that wielded by the awful shape which Dion the Syracusan saw? I make the suggestion modestly, though somewhat encouraged by Mr. Masson's system of exegesis, which reminds one of the casuists' doctrine of probables, in virtue of which a man may be *probabiliter obligatus* and *probabiliter deobligatus* at the same time. But, perhaps, the most remarkable instance of Mr. Masson's figures of speech is where we are told that the king might have established a *bona fide* government "by giving public ascendancy to the popular or Parliamentary element in his Council, and *inducing the old leaven in it either to accept the new policy, or to withdraw and become inactive.*" There is something consoling in the thought that yeast should be accessible to moral suasion. It is really too bad that bread should ever be heavy for want of such an appeal to its moral sense as should "induce it to accept the new policy." Of Mr. Masson's unhappy infection with the *vivid* style, an instance or two shall be given in justification of what has been alleged against him in that particular. He says of Loudon that "he was committed to the Tower, where for more than two months he lay, with as near a prospect as ever prisoner had of a *chop* with the executioner's axe on a scaffold on Tower Hill." I may be over-fastidious, but the word "chop"

offends my ears with its coarseness, or, if that be too strong, has certainly the unpleasant effect of an emphasis unduly placed. Old Auchinleck's saying of Cromwell, that "he gart kings ken they had a lith in their necks," is a good example of really vivid phrase, suggesting the axe and the block, and giving one of those dreadful hints to the imagination which are more powerful than any amount of detail, and whose skilful use is the only magic employed by the masters of truly picturesque writing. The sentence just quoted will serve also as an example of that tendency to *surplusage* which adds to the bulk of Mr. Masson's sentences at the cost of their effectiveness. If he had said simply "chop on Tower Hill" (if chop there must be), it had been quite enough, for we all know that the executioner's axe and the scaffold are implied in it. Once more, and I have done with the least agreeable part of my business. Mr. Masson, after telling over again the story of Strafford with needless length of detail, ends thus: "On Wednesday, the 12th of May, that proud *curly* head, the casket of that brain of power, rolled on the scaffold of Tower Hill." Why *curly*? Surely it is here a ludicrous impertinence. This careful thrusting forward of outward and unmeaning particulars, in the hope of giving that reality to a picture which genius only has the art to do, is becoming a weariness in modern descriptive writing. It reminds one of the Mrs. Jarley expedient of dressing the waxen effigies of murderers in the very clothes they wore when they did the deed, or with the real halter round their necks wherewith they expiated it. It is probably very effective with the torpid sensibilities of the class who look upon wax figures as works of art. True imaginative power works with other material. Lady Macbeth striving to wash away from her hands the damned spot that is all the more there to the mind of the spectator because it is not there at all, is a type of the methods it employs and the intensity of their action.

Having discharged my duty in regard to Mr. Masson's faults of manner, which I should not have dwelt on so long had they not greatly marred a real enjoyment in the reading, and were

they not the ear-mark of a school which has become unhappily numerous, I turn to the consideration of his work as a whole. I think he made a mistake in his very plan, or else was guilty of a misnomer in his title. His book is not so much a life of Milton as a collection of materials out of which a careful reader may sift the main facts of the poet's biography. His passion for minute detail is only to be equalled by his diffuseness on points mainly, if not altogether, irrelevant. He gives us a Survey of British Literature, occupying one hundred and twenty-eight pages of his first volume, written in the main with good judgment, and giving the average critical opinion upon every writer, great and small, who was in any sense a contemporary of Milton. I have no doubt all this would be serviceable and interesting to Mr. Masson's classes in Edinburgh University, and they may well be congratulated on having so competent a teacher; but what it has to do with Milton, unless in the case of such authors as may be shown to have influenced his style or turn of thought, one does not clearly see. Most readers of a life of Milton may be presumed to have some knowledge of the general literary history of the time, or at any rate to have the means of acquiring it, and Milton's manner (his style was his own) was very little affected by any of the English poets, with the single exception, in his earlier poems, of George Wither. Mr. Masson also has something to say about everybody, from Wentworth to the obscurest Brownist fanatic who was so much as heard of in England during Milton's lifetime. If this theory of a biographer's duty should hold, our grandchildren may expect to see "A Life of Thackeray, or who was who in England, France, and Germany during the first Half of the Nineteenth Century." These digressions of Mr. Masson's from what should have been his main topic (he always seems somehow to be "completing his tendency towards the suburbs" of his subject) gave him an uneasy feeling that he must get Milton in somehow or other at intervals, if it were only to remind the reader that he has a certain connection with the book. He is eager even to discuss a mere hypothesis, though



an untenable one, if it will only increase the number of pages devoted specially to Milton, and thus lessen the apparent disproportion between the historical and the biographical matter. Milton tells us that his morning wont had been "to read good authors, or cause them to be read, till the attention be weary, or memory have his full fraught; then with useful and generous labours preserving the body's health and hardiness, to render lightsome, clear, and not lumpish obedience to the mind, to the cause of religion and our country's liberty when it shall require firm hearts in sound bodies to stand and cover their stations rather than see the ruin of our Protestantism and the enforcement of a slavish life." Mr. Masson snatches at the hint: "This is interesting," he says; "Milton, it seems, has for some time been practising drill! The City Artillery Ground was near. . . . Did Milton, among others, make a habit of going there of mornings? Of this more hereafter." When Mr. Masson returns to the subject he speaks of Milton's "all but positive statement . . . that in the spring of 1642, or a few months before the breaking out of the Civil War, he was in the habit of spending a part of each day *in military exercise somewhere not far from his house in Aldersgate Street.*" What he puts by way of query on page 402 has become downright certainty seventy-nine pages further on. The passage from Milton's tract makes no "statement" of the kind it pleases Mr. Masson to assume. It is merely a Miltonian way of saying that he took regular exercise, because he believed that moral, no less than physical, courage demanded a sound body. And what proof does Mr. Masson bring to confirm his theory? Nothing more nor less than two or three passages in "Paradise Lost," of which I shall quote only so much as is essential to his argument:—

"And now

Advanced in view they stand, a horrid front  
Of dreadful length and dazzling arms, in guise  
Of warriors old with *ordered* spear and shield,  
Awaiting what command their mighty chief  
Had to impose."<sup>\*</sup>

\* Book 1., 562-567.

Mr. Masson assures us that "there are touches in this description (as, for example, the *ordering* of arms at the moment of halt, and without word of command) too exact and technical to have occurred to a mere civilian. Again, at the same review . . .

'He now prepared  
To speak; whereat their doubled ranks they bend  
From wing to wing, and half enclose him round  
With all his peers; *attention* held them mute.'

To the present day this is the very process, or one of the processes, when a commander wishes to address his men. They wheel inward and stand at 'attention.' But his main argument is the phrase "*ported* spears," in Book Fourth, on which he has an interesting and valuable comment. He argues the matter through a dozen pages or more, seeking to prove that Milton *must* have had some practical experience of military drill. I confess a very grave doubt whether "attention" and "ordered" in the passages cited have any other than their ordinary meaning, and Milton could never have looked on at the pike-exercise without learning what "ported" meant. But, be this as it may, I will venture to assert that there was not a boy in New England, forty years ago, who did not know more of the manual than is implied in Milton's use of these terms. Mr. Masson's object in proving Milton to have been a proficient in these martial exercises is to increase our wonder at his not entering the army. "If there was any man in England of whom one might surely have expected that he would be in arms among the Parliamentarians," he says, "that man was Milton." Milton may have had many an impulse to turn soldier, as all men must in such times, but I do not believe that he ever seriously intended it. Nor is it any matter of reproach that he did not. It is plain, from his works, that he believed himself very early set apart and consecrated for tasks of a very different kind, for services demanding as much self-sacrifice and of more enduring result. I have no manner of doubt that

he, like Dante, believed himself divinely inspired with what he had to utter, and, if so, why not also divinely guided in what he should do or leave undone? Milton wielded in the cause he loved a weapon far more effective than a sword.

It is a necessary result of Mr. Masson's method, that a great deal of space is devoted to what might have befallen his hero and what he might have seen. This leaves a broad margin indeed for the insertion of purely hypothetical incidents. Nay, so desperately addicted is he to what he deems the vivid style of writing, that he even goes out of his way to imagine what might have happened to anybody living at the same time with Milton. Having told us fairly enough how Shakespeare, on his last visit to London, perhaps saw Milton "a fair child of six playing at his father's door," he must needs conjure up an imaginary supper at the Mermaid. "Ah! what an evening . . . was that; and how Ben and Shakespeare *be-tongued* each other, while the others listened and wondered; and how, when the company dispersed, the sleeping street heard their departing footsteps, and the stars shone down on the old roofs." Certainly, if we may believe the old song, the stars "had nothing else to do," though their chance of shining in the middle of a London November may perhaps be reckoned very doubtful. An author should consider how largely the art of writing consists in knowing what to leave in the ink-stand.

Mr. Masson's volumes contain a great deal of very valuable matter, whatever one may think of its bearing upon the life of Milton. The chapters devoted to Scottish affairs are particularly interesting to a student of the Great Rebellion, its causes and concomitants. His analyses of the two armies, of the Parliament, and the Westminster Assembly, are sensible additions to our knowledge. A too painful thoroughness, indeed, is the criticism we should make on his work as a biography. Even as a history, the reader might complain that it confuses by the multiplicity of its details, while it wearies by want of continuity. Mr. Masson lacks the skill of an accomplished story-teller. A fact is to him a fact, never mind



how unessential, and he misses the breadth of truth in his devotion to accuracy. The very order of his title-page, *The Life of Milton, narrated in Connection with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time*, shows, it should seem, a misconception of the true nature of his subject. Milton's chief importance, it might be fairly said his only importance, is a literary one. His place is fixed as the most classical of our poets.

Neither in politics, theology, nor social ethics, did Milton leave any distinguishable trace on the thought of his time or in the history of opinion. In both these lines of his activity circumstances forced upon him the position of a controversialist whose aims and results are by the necessity of the case desultory and ephemeral. Hooker before him and Hobbes after him had a far firmer grasp of fundamental principles than he. His studies in these matters were perfunctory and occasional, and his opinions were heated to the temper of the times and shaped to the instant exigencies of the forum, sometimes to his own convenience at the moment, instead of being the slow result of a deliberate judgment enlightened by intellectual and above all historical sympathy with his subject. His interest was rather in the occasion than the matter of the controversy. No aphorisms of political science are to be gleaned from his writings as from those of Burke. His intense personality could never so far dissociate itself from the question at issue as to see it in its larger scope and more universal relations. He was essentially a *doctrinaire*, ready to sacrifice everything to what at the moment seemed the abstract truth, and with no regard to historical antecedents and consequences, provided those of scholastic logic were carefully observed. He has no respect for usage or tradition except when they count in his favour, and sees no virtue in that power of the past over the minds and conduct of men which alone insures the continuity of national growth and is the great safeguard of order and progress. The life of a nation was of less importance to him than that it should be conformed to certain principles of belief and conduct. Burke could distil political wisdom out of

history because he had a profound consciousness of the soul that underlies and outlives events, and of the national character that gives them meaning and coherence. Accordingly his words are still living and operative, while Milton's pamphlets are strictly occasional and no longer interesting except as they illustrate him. In the Latin ones especially there is an odd mixture of the pedagogue and the public orator. His training, so far as it was thorough, so far, indeed, as it may be called optional, was purely poetical and artistic. A true Attic bee, he made boot on every lip where there was a trace of truly classic honey.

Milton, indeed, could hardly have been a match for some of his antagonists in theological and ecclesiastical learning. But he brought into the contest a white heat of personal conviction that counted for much. His self-consciousness, always active, identified him with the cause he undertook. "I conceived myself to be now not as mine own person, but as a member incorporate into that truth whereof I was persuaded and whereof I had declared myself openly to be the partaker."\* Accordingly it does not so much seem that he is the advocate of Puritanism, Freedom of Conscience, or the People of England, as that all these are *he*, and that he is speaking for himself. He was not nice in the choice of his missiles, and too often borrows a dirty lump from the dunghill of Luther; but now and then the gnarled sticks of controversy turn to golden arrows of Phœbus in his trembling hands, singing as they fly and carrying their messages of doom in music. Then, truly, in his prose as in his verse, his is the large utterance of the early gods, and there is that in him which tramples all learning under his victorious feet. From the first he looked upon himself as a man dedicated and set apart. He had that sublime persuasion of a divine mission which sometimes lifts his speech from personal to cosmopolitan significance; his genius unmistakably asserts itself from time to time, calling down fire from heaven to kindle the sacrifice of irksome private duty, and turning the

\* "Apology for Smectymnus."

hearthstone of an obscure man into an altar for the worship of mankind. Plainly enough here was a man who had received something other than Episcopal ordination. Mysterious and awful powers had laid their unimaginable hands on that fair head and devoted it to a nobler service. Yet it must be confessed that, with the single exception of the "Areopagitica," Milton's tracts are wearisome reading, and going through them is like a long sea-voyage whose monotony is more than compensated for the moment by a stripe of phosphorescence heaping before you in a drift of star-sown snow, coiling away behind in winking disks of silver, as if the conscious element were giving out all the moon-light it had garnered in its loyal depths since first it gazed upon its pallid regent. Which, being interpreted, means that his prose is of value because it is Milton's, because it sometimes exhibits in an inferior degree the qualities of his verse, and not for its power of thought, of reasoning, or of statement. It is valuable, where it is best, for its inspiring quality, like the fervencies of a Hebrew prophet. The English translation of the Bible had to a very great degree Judaised, not the English mind, but the Puritan temper. Those fierce enthusiasts could more easily find elbow-room for their consciences in an ideal Israel than in a practical England. It was convenient to see Amalek or Philistia in the men who met them in the field, and one unintelligible horn or other of the Beast in their theological opponents. The spiritual provincialism of the Jewish race found something congenial in the English mind. Their national egotism quintessentialised in the prophets was especially sympathetic with the personal egotism of Milton. It was only as an inspired and irresponsible person that he could live on decent terms with his own self-confident individuality. There is an intolerant egotism which identifies itself with omnipotence,\* and whose sublimity is its apology; there is an intolerable egotism which subordinates the sun to the watch in its own fob. Milton's was of the former kind, and accordingly

\* "For him I was not sent, nor yet to free  
That people, victor once, now vile and base,  
Deservedly evade vassal."—*P. R.*, iv. 131-133.



the finest passages in his prose and not the least fine in his verse are autobiographic, and this is the more striking that they are often unconsciously so. Those fallen angels in utter ruin and combustion hurled, are also cavaliers fighting against the Good Old Cause; Philistia is the Restoration, and what Samson did, that Milton would have done if he could.

The "Areopagitica" might seem an exception, but that also is a plea rather than an argument, and his interest in the question is not one of abstract principle, but of personal relation to himself. He was far more rhetorician than thinker. The sonorous amplitude of his style was better fitted to persuade the feelings than to convince the reason. The only passages from his prose that may be said to have survived are emotional, not argumentative, or they have lived in virtue of their figurative beauty, not their weight of thought. Milton's power lay in dilation. Touched by him, the simplest image, the most obvious thought,

"Dilated stood  
Like Teneriffe or Atlas . . .  
. . . nor wanted in his grasp  
What *seemed* both spear and shield."

But the thin stiletto of Macchiavelli is a more effective weapon than these fantastic arms of his. He had not the secret of compression that properly belongs to the political thinker, on whom, as Hazlitt said of himself, "nothing but abstract ideas makes any impression." Almost every aphoristic phrase that he has made current is borrowed from some one of the classics, like his famous

"License they mean when they cry liberty,"

from Tacitus. This is no reproach to him so far as his true function, that of poet, is concerned. It is his peculiar glory that literature was with him so much an art, an end and not a means. Of his political work he has himself told us, "I should not choose this manner of writing, wherein, knowing myself inferior to myself (led by the genial power of nature to another task), I have the use, as I may account, but of my left hand."

Mr. Masson has given an excellent analysis of these writings, selecting with great judgment the salient passages, which have an air of blank-verse thinly disguised as prose, like some of the corrupted passages of Shakespeare. We are particularly thankful to him for his extracts from the pamphlets written against Milton, especially for such as contain criticisms on his style. It is not a little interesting to see the most stately of poets reproached for his use of vulgarisms and low words. We seem to get a glimpse of the schooling of his "choiceful sense" to that nicety which could not be content till it had made his native tongue "search all her coffers round." One cannot help thinking also that his practice in prose, especially in the long involutions of Latin periods, helped him to give that variety of pause and that majestic harmony to his blank-verse which have made it so unapproachably his own. Landor, who, like Milton, seems to have thought in Latin, has caught somewhat more than others of the dignity of his gait, but without his length of stride. Wordsworth, at his finest, has perhaps approached it, but with how long an interval! Bryant has not seldom attained to its serene equanimity, but never emulates its pomp. Keats has caught something of its large utterance, but altogether fails of its nervous severity of phrase. Cowper's muse (that moved with such graceful ease in slippers) becomes stiff when (in his translation of Homer) she buckles on her feet the cothurnus of Milton. Thomson grows tumid wherever he assays the grandiosity of his model. It is instructive to get any glimpse of the slow processes by which Milton arrived at that classicism which sets him apart from, if not above, all our other poets.

In gathering up the impressions made upon us by Mr. Masson's work as a whole, we are inclined rather to regret his copiousness for his own sake than for ours. The several parts, though disproportionate, are valuable, his research has been conscientious, and he has given us better means of understanding Milton's time than we possessed before. But how is it about Milton himself? Here was a chance, it seems to me, for a fine bit of portrait-painting. There is hardly a more stately figure in literary history than Milton's, no life in some of

its aspects more tragical, except Dante's. In both these great poets, more than in any others, the character of the men makes part of the singular impressiveness of what they wrote and of its vitality with after times. In them the man somehow overtops the author. The works of both are full of autobiographical confidences. Like Dante, Milton was forced to become a party by himself. He stands out in marked and solitary individuality, apart from the great movement of the Civil War, apart from the supine acquiescence of the Restoration, a self-opinionated, unforgiving, and unforgetting man. Very much alive he certainly was in his day. Has Mr. Masson made him alive to us again? I fear not. At the same time, while we cannot praise either the style or the method of Mr. Masson's work, we cannot refuse to be grateful for it. It is not so much a book for the ordinary reader of biography as for the student, and will be more likely to find its place on the library-shelf than the centre-table. It does not in any sense belong to light literature, but demands all the muscle of the trained and vigorous reader. "Truly, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is Milton's life it is naught."

Mr. Masson's intimacy with the facts and dates of Milton's career renders him peculiarly fit in some respects to undertake an edition of the poetical works. His edition, accordingly, has distinguished merits. The introductions to the several poems are excellent, and leave scarcely anything to be desired. The general introduction, on the other hand, contains a great deal that might well have been omitted, and not a little that is positively erroneous. Mr. Masson's discussions of Milton's English seem often to be those of a Scotsman to whom English is in some sort a foreign tongue. It is almost wholly inconclusive, because confined to the Miltonic verse, while the basis of any altogether satisfactory study should surely be Miltonic prose; nay, should include all the poetry and prose of his own age and of that immediately preceding it. The uses to which Mr. Masson has put the concordance to Milton's poems tempt one sometimes to class him with those whom the poet himself taxed with being "the mousehunts and ferrets of an index."



For example, what profits a discussion of Milton's ἀπαξ λεγόμενα, a matter in which accident is far more influential than choice? \* What sensible addition is made to our stock of knowledge by learning that "the word *woman* does not occur in any form in Milton's poetry before 'Paradise Lost,'" and that it is "exactly so with the word *female*?" Is it any way remarkable that such words as *Adam, God, Heaven, Hell, Paradise, Sin, Satan, and Serpent* should occur "very frequently" in "Paradise Lost?" Would it not rather have been surprising that they should not? Such trifles at best come under the head of what old Warner would have called cumber-minds. It is time to protest against this minute style of editing and commenting great poets. Gulliver's microscopic eye saw on the fair skins of the Brobdingnagian maids of honour "a mole here and there as broad as a trencher," and we shrink from a cup of the purest Hippocrene after the critic's solar microscope has betrayed to us the grammatical, syntactical, and, above all, hypothetical monsters that sprawl in every drop of it. When a poet has been so much edited as Milton, the temptation of whosoever undertakes a new edition to see what is not to be seen becomes great in proportion as he finds how little there is that has not been seen before.

Mr. Masson is quite right in choosing to modernise the spelling of Milton, for surely the reading of our classics should be made as little difficult as possible, and he is right also in making an exception of such abnormal forms as the poet may fairly be supposed to have chosen for melodic reasons. His exhaustive discussion of the spelling of the original editions seems, however, to be the less called-for as he himself appears to admit that the compositor, not the author, was supreme in these matters, and that in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases to the thousand Milton had no system, but spelt by immediate inspiration. Yet Mr. Masson fills nearly four pages with an analysis of the vowel sounds, in which, as if

\* If things are to be scanned so micrologically, what weighty inferences might not be drawn from Mr. Masson's invariably printing ἀπαξ λεγόμενα!

to demonstrate the futility of such attempts so long as men's ears differ, he tells us that the short *a* sound is the same in *man* and *Darby*, the short *o* sound in *God* and *does*, and what he calls the long *o* sound in *broad* and *wrath*. Speaking of the apostrophe, Mr. Masson tells us that "it is sometimes inserted, not as a possessive mark at all, but merely as a plural mark: *hero's* for *heroes*, *myrtle's* for *myrtles*, *Gorgons* and *Hydra's*, etc." Now, in books printed about the time of Milton's the apostrophe was put in almost at random, and in all the cases cited is a misprint, except in the first, where it serves to indicate that the pronunciation was not *heroës* as it had formerly been.\* In the "possessive singular of nouns already ending in *s*," Mr. Masson tells us, "Milton's general practice is not to double the *s*; thus, *Nereus wrinkled look*, *Glaucus spell*. The necessities of metre would naturally constrain to such forms. In a possessive followed by the word *sake* or the word *side*, dislike to [of] the double sibilant makes us sometimes drop the inflection. In addition to '*for righteousness sake*,' such phrases as '*for thy name sake*,' and '*for mercy sake*' are allowed to pass; *bedside* is normal and *riverside* nearly so." The necessities of metre need not be taken into account with a poet like Milton, who never was fairly in his element till he got off the soundings of prose and felt the long swell of his verse under him like a steed that knows his rider. But does the dislike of the double sibilant account for the dropping of the *s* in these cases? Is it not far rather the presence of the *s* already in the sound satisfying an ear accustomed to the English slovenliness in the pronunciation of double consonants? It was this which led to such forms as *conscience sake* and *on justice side*, and

\* "That you may tell heroës, when you come  
To banquet with your wife."

—CHAPMAN'S *Odyssey*, viii. 336, 337.

In the fac-simile of the sonnet to Fairfax I find

"Thy firm, unshak'n vertue ever brings,"

which shows how much faith we need give to the apostrophe.

which beguiled Ben Jonson and Dryden into thinking, the one that *noise* and the other that *corps* was a plural.\* What does Mr. Masson say to *hillside*, *Bankside*, *seaside*, *Cheapside*, *spindleside*, *spearside*, *gospelside* (of a church), *nightside*, *countryside*, *wayside*, *brookside*, and I know not how many more? Is the first half of these words a possessive? Or is it not rather a noun impressed into the service as an adjective? How do such words differ from *hilltop*, *townend*, *candlelight*, *rushlight*, *cityman*, and the like, where no double *s* can be made the scapegoat? Certainly Milton would not have avoided them for their sibilancy, he who wrote

“And airy tongues that syllable men’s names  
On sands and shores and desert wildernesses,”

“So in his seed all nations shall be blest,”

“And seat of Salmanasser whose success,”

verses that hiss like Medusa’s head in wrath, and who was, I think, fonder of the sound than any other of our poets. Indeed, in compounds of the kind we always make a distinction wholly independent of the doubled *s*. Nobody would boggle at *mountainside*; no one would dream of saying *on the fatherside* or *motherside*.

Mr. Masson speaks of “the Miltonic forms *vanguisht*, *markt*, *lookt*, etc.” Surely he does not mean to imply that these are peculiar to Milton? Chapman used them before Milton was born, and pressed them farther, as in *nak’t* and *saf’t* for *naked* and *saved*. He often prefers the contracted form in his prose also, showing that the full form of the past participle in *ed* was

\* Mr. Masson might have cited a good example of this from Drummond, whom (as a Scotchman) he is fond of quoting for an authority in English—

“Sleep, Silence’ child, sweet father of soft rest.”

The survival of *horse* for *horses* is another example. So by a reverse process *pult* and *shay* have been vulgarly deduced from the supposed plurals *pulse* and *chaise*.



passing out of fashion, though available in verse.\* Indeed, I venture to affirm that there is not a single variety of spelling or accent to be found in Milton which is without example in his predecessors or contemporaries. Even *highth*, which is thought peculiarly Miltonic, is common (in Hakluyt, for example), and still often heard in New England. Mr. Masson gives an odd reason for Milton's preference of it, "as indicating more correctly the formation of the word by the addition of the suffix *th* to the adjective *high*." Is an adjective, then, at the base of *growth*, *earth*, *birth*, *truth*, and other words of this kind? Horne Tooke made a better guess than this. If Mr. Masson be right in supposing that a peculiar meaning is implied in the spelling *beareth* ("Paradise Lost," ix., 624), which he interprets as "collective produce," though in the only other instance where it occurs it is neither more nor less than *birth*, it should seem that Milton had hit upon Horne Tooke's etymology. But it is really solemn trifling to lay any stress on the spelling of the original editions, after having admitted, as Mr. Masson has honestly done, that in all likelihood Milton had nothing to do with it. And yet he cannot refrain. On the word *voutsafe* he hangs nearly a page of dissertation on the nicety of Milton's ear. Mr. Masson thinks that Milton "must have had a reason for it,"† and finds that reason in "his dislike to [of] the sound

\* Chapman's spelling is presumably his own. At least he looked after his printed texts. I have two copies of his *Byron's Conspiracy*, both dated 1608, but one evidently printed later than the other, for it shows corrections. The more solemn ending in *ed* was probably kept alive by the reading of the Bible in churches. Though now dropped by the clergy, it is essential to the right hearing of the more metrical passages in the Old Testament, which are finer and more scientific than anything in the language, unless it be some parts of "Samson Agonistes." I remember an old gentleman who always used the contracted form of the participle in conversation, but always gave it back its embezzled syllable of reading. Sir Thomas Browne seems to have preferred the more solemn form. At any rate he has the spelling *empuzzled* in prose.

† He thinks the same of the variation *strook* and *struck*, though they were probably pronounced alike. In Marlowe's "Faustus" two consecutive sentences (in prose) begin with the words "Cursed be he that struck." In

*ch*, or to [of] that sound combined with *s*. . . . His fine ear taught him not only to seek for musical effects and cadences at large, but also to be fastidious as to syllables, and to avoid harsh or difficult conjunctions of consonants, except when there might be a musical reason for harshness or difficulty. In the management of the letter *s*, the frequency of which in English is one of the faults of the speech, he will be found, I believe, most careful and skilful. More rarely, I think, than in Shakespeare will one word ending in *s* be found followed immediately in Milton by another word beginning with the same letter; or, if he does occasionally pen such a phrase as *Moab's sons*, it will be difficult to find in him, I believe, such a harsher example as *earth's substance*, of which many writers would think nothing. [With the index to back him Mr. Masson could safely say this.] The same delicacy of ear is even more apparent in his management of the *sh* sound. He has it often, of course; but it may be noted that he rejects it in his verse when he can. He writes *Basan* for *Bashan*, *Sittim* for *Shittim*, *Silo* for *Shiloh*, *Asdod* for *Ashdod*. Still more, however, does he seem to have been wary of the compound sound *ch* as in *church*. Of his sensitiveness to this sound in excess there is a curious proof in his prose pamphlet, entitled 'An Apology against a Pamphlet, called A Modest Completion, etc.,' where, having occasion to quote these lines from one of the Satires\* of his opponent, Bishop Hall,

'Teach each hollow grove to sound his love,  
Wearying echo with one changeless word,'

he adds, ironically, 'And so he well might, and all his auditory besides, with his *teach each!*'" Generalisations are always

a note on the passage Mr. Dyce tells us that the old editions (there were three) have *stroke* and *strooke* in the first instance, and all agree on *strucke* in the second. No inference can be drawn from such casualties.

\* The lines are not "from one of the Satires," and Milton made them worse by misquoting and bringing *love* jingly near to *grove*. Hall's verse (in his Satires) is always vigorous and often harmonious. He long before Milton spoke of rhyme almost in the very terms of the preface to "Paradise Lost."

risky, but when extemporised from a single hint they are maliciously so. Surely it needed no great sensitiveness of ear to be set on edge by Hall's echo of *teach each*. Did Milton reject the *h* from *Bashan* and the rest because he disliked the sound of *sh*, or because he had found it already rejected by the Vulgate and by some of the earlier translators of the Bible into English? Oddily enough, Milton uses words beginning with *sh* seven hundred and fifty-four times in his poetry, not to speak of others in which the sound occurs, as, for instance, those ending in *tion*. Hall, had he lived long enough, might have retorted on Milton his own

"Manliest, resolute<sup>st</sup>, breast,  
As the magnetick hardest iron draws,"

or his

"What moves thy inquisition?  
Know'st thou not that my rising is thy fall,  
And my promotion thy destruction?"

With the playful controversial wit of the day he would have hinted that too much *est-est* is as fatal to a blank-verse as to a bishop, and that danger was often incurred by those who too eagerly *shunned* it. Nay, he might even have found an echo almost tallying with his own in

"To begirt the almighty throne  
Beseeching or besieging,"

a pun worthy of Milton's worst prose. Or he might have twitted him with "a *sequent* king who *seeks*." As for the *sh* sound, a poet could hardly have found it ungracious to his ear who wrote,

"Gnashing for anguish and despite and shame,"

or again,

"Then bursting forth  
Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round  
That rest or intermission none I find.  
Before mine eyes in opposition sits  
Grim Death, my son."



And if Milton disliked the *ch* sound, he gave his ears unnecessary pain by verses such as these—

“Straight *couches* close; then, rising, *changes* oft  
His *couchant* watch, as one who *chose* his ground;”

still more by such a juxtaposition as “matchless chief.”\*

The truth is, that Milton was a harmonist rather than a melodist. There are, no doubt, some exquisite melodies (like “Sabrina Fair”) among his earlier poems, as could hardly fail to be the case in an age which produced or trained the authors of our best English glees, as ravishing in their instinctive felicity as the songs of our dramatists, but he also showed from the first that larger style which was to be his peculiar distinction. The strain heard in the “Nativity Ode,” in the “Solemn Music,” and in “Lycidas,” is of a higher mood, as regards metrical construction, than anything that had thrilled the English ear before, giving no uncertain augury of him who was to show what sonorous metal lay silent till he touched the keys in the epical organ-pipes of our various language, that have never since felt the strain of such prevailing breath. It was in the larger movements of metre that Milton was great and original. I have spoken elsewhere of Spenser’s fondness for dilatation as respects thoughts and images. In Milton it extends to the language also, and often to the

\* Mr. Masson goes so far as to conceive it possible that Milton may have committed the vulgarism of leaving a *t* out of *sleep’st*, “for ease of sound.” Yet the poet could bear *boast’st* and—one stares and gasps at it—*doast’st*. There is, by the way, a familiar passage in which the *ch* sound predominates, not without a touch of *sh*, in a single couplet:—

“Can any mortal mixture of earth’s mould  
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?”

So

“Blotches and blains must all his flesh emboss,”

and perhaps

“I see his tents  
Pitched about Sechem”

might be added.

single words of which a period is composed. He loved phrases of towering port, in which every member dilated stands like Teneriffe or Atlas. In those poems and passages that stamp him great, the verses do not dance interweaving to soft Lydian airs, but march rather with resounding tread and clang of martial music. It is true that he is cunning in alliterations, so scattering them that they tell in his orchestra without being obvious, but it is in the more scientific region of open-voweled assonances which seem to proffer rhyme and yet withhold it (rhyme-wraiths one might call them), that he is an artist and a master. He even sometimes introduces rhyme with misleading intervals between and unobviously in his blank-verse :—

“ There rest, if any rest can harbour *there* ;  
And, reassembling our afflicted powers,  
Consult how we may henceforth most offend  
Our enemy, our own loss how *repair*,  
How overcome this dire calamity,  
What reinforcement we may gain from hope,  
If not, what resolution from *despair*. ”\*

There is one almost perfect quatrain—

“ Before thy fellows, ambitious to win  
From me some plume, that thy success may show  
Destruction to the rest. This pause between  
(Unanswered lest thou boast) to let thee know ; ”

and another hardly less so, of a rhyme and an assonance—

“ If once they hear that voice, their liveliest pledge  
Of hope in fears and dangers, heard so oft  
In worst extremes and on the perilous edge  
Of battle when it raged, in all assaults. ”

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\* I think Coleridge's nice ear would have blamed the nearness of *enemy* and *calamity* in this passage. Mr. Masson leaves out the comma after *If not*, the pause of which is needful, I think, to the sense, and certainly to keep *not* a little farther apart from *what* (“ teach each ! ”).

There can be little doubt that the rhymes in the first passage cited were intentional, and perhaps they were so in the others ; but Milton's ear has tolerated not a few perfectly rhyming couplets, and others in which the assonance almost becomes rhyme, certainly a fault in blank-verse :—

“ From the Asian Kings (and Parthian among these),  
From India and the Golden Chersonese ;”

“ That soon refreshed him wearied, and repaired  
What hunger, if aught hunger, had impaired ;”

“ And will alike be punished, whether thou  
Reign or reign not, though to that gentle brow ;”

“ Of pleasure, but all pleasure to destroy,  
Save what is in destroying, other joy ;”

“ Shall all be Paradise, far happier place  
Than this of Eden, and far happier days ;”

“ This my long sufferance and my day of grace  
They who neglect and scorn shall never taste ;”

“ So far remote with diminution seen,  
First in his East the glorious lamp was seen.”\*

These examples (and others might be adduced) serve to show that Milton's ear was too busy about the larger interests of his measures to be always careful of the lesser. He was a strategist rather than a drill-sergeant in verse, capable, beyond any other English poet, of putting great masses through the most complicated evolutions without clash or confusion, but he was not curious that every foot should be at the same angle. In reading “Paradise Lost” one has a feeling of vastness. You float under an illimitable sky, brimmed with sunshine or hung with constellations ; the abysses of space are about you ; you hear the cadenced surges of an unseen ocean ; thunders mutter round the horizon ; and if the scene change, it is with an elemental movement like the shifting of mighty winds. His imagination seldom condenses, like

\* “First in his East” is not soothing to the ear.



Shakespeare's, in the kindling flash of a single epithet, but loves better to diffuse itself. Witness his descriptions, wherein he seems to circle like an eagle bathing in the blue streams of air, controlling with his eye broad sweeps of champaign or of sea, and rarely fulminating in the sudden swoop of intenser expression. He was fonder of the vague, perhaps I should rather say the indefinite, where more is meant than meets the ear, than any other of our poets. He loved epithets (like *old* and *far*) that suggest great reaches, whether of space or time. This bias shows itself already in his earlier poems, as where he hears

"The *far off* curfew sound  
Over some *widewatered* shore,"

or where he fancies the shores\* and sounding seas washing Lycidas far away; but it reaches its climax in the "Paradise Lost." He produces his effects by dilating our imaginations with an impalpable hint rather than by concentrating them upon too precise particulars. Thus in a famous comparison of his, the fleet has no definite port, but plies stemming nightly toward the pole in a wide ocean of conjecture. He generalises always instead of specifying—the true secret of the ideal treatment in which he is without peer, and, though everywhere grandiose, he is never turgid. Tasso begins finely with

"Chiama gli abitator dell' ombre eterne  
Il rauco suon della tartarea tromba;  
Tremar le spaziose atre caverne  
E l' aer cieco a quel rumor rimbomba,"

but soon spoils all by condescending to definite comparisons with thunder and intestinal convulsions of the earth; in other words, he is unwary enough to give us a standard of measurement, and the moment you furnish Imagination with a yardstick she abdicates in favour of her statistical poor-relation, Commonplace. Milton, with this passage in his memory, is too

\* There seems to be something wrong in this word *shores*. Did Milton write *shoals*?

wise to hamper himself with any statement for which he can be brought to book, but wraps himself in a mist of looming indefiniteness ;

“He called so loud that all the hollow deep  
Of hell resounded,”

thus amplifying more nobly by abstention from his usual method of prolonged evolution. No caverns, however spacious, will serve his turn, because they have limits. He could practise this self-denial when his artistic sense found it needful, whether for variety of verse or for the greater intensity of effect to be gained by abruptness. His more elaborate passages have the multitudinous roll of thunder, dying away to gather a sullen force again from its own reverberations, but he knew that the attention is recalled and arrested by those claps that stop short without echo and leave us listening. There are no such vistas and avenues of verse as his. In reading the “Paradise Lost” one has a feeling of spaciousness such as no other poet gives. Milton’s respect for himself and for his own mind and its movements rises well-nigh to veneration. He prepares the way for his thought and spreads on the ground before the sacred feet of his verse tapestries inwoven with figures of mythology and romance. There is no such unfailing dignity as his. Observe at what a reverent distance he begins when he is about to speak of himself, as at the beginning of the Third Book and the Seventh. His sustained strength is especially felt in his beginnings. He seems always to start full-sail ; the wind and tide always serve ; there is never any fluttering of the canvas. In this he offers a striking contrast with Wordsworth, who has to go through with a great deal of *yo-heave-ohing* before he gets under way. And though, in the didactic parts of “Paradise Lost,” the wind dies away sometimes, there is a long swell that will not let us forget it, and ever and anon some eminent verse lifts its long ridge above its tamer peers heaped with stormy memories. And the poem never becomes incoherent ; we feel all through it, as in the symphonies of Beethoven, a great controlling reason in whose safe conduct we trust implicitly.

Mr. Masson's discussions of Milton's English are, it seems to me, for the most part unsatisfactory. He occupies some ten pages, for example, with a history of the genitival form *its*, which adds nothing to our previous knowledge on the subject, and which has no relation to Milton except for its bearing on the authorship of some verses attributed to him against the most overwhelming internal evidence to the contrary. Mr. Masson is altogether too resolute to find traces of what he calls oddly enough "recollectiveness of Latin constructions" in Milton, and scents them sometimes in what would seem to the uninstructed reader very idiomatic English. More than once, at least, he has fancied them by misunderstanding the passage in which they seem to occur. Thus, in "Paradise Lost," xi, 520, 521,

"Therefore so abject is their punishment,  
Disfiguring not God's likeness but their own,"

has no analogy with *eorum deformantium*, for the context shows that it is the *punishment* which disfigures. Indeed, Mr. Masson so often finds constructions difficult, ellipses strange, and words needing annotation that are common to all poetry, nay, sometimes to all English, that his notes seem not seldom to have been written by a foreigner. On this passage in "Comus"—

"I do not think my sister so to seek  
Or so unprincipled in virtue's book  
And the sweet peace that virtue bosoms ever  
As that the single want of light and noise  
(Not being in danger, as I trust she is not)  
Could stir the constant mood of her calm thoughts,"

Mr. Masson tells us, that "in very strict construction, *not being* would cling to *want* as its substantive; but the phrase passes for the Latin ablative absolute." So on the words *forestalling night*, "i.e., anticipating. *Forestall* is literally to anticipate the market by purchasing goods before they are brought to the stall." In the verse,

"Thou hast immanacled while Heaven sees good,"



he explains that "*while* here has the sense of *so long as*." But Mr. Masson's notes on the language are his weakest. He is careful to tell us, for example, "that there are instances of the use of *shine* as a substantive in Spenser, Ben Jonson, and other poets." It is but another way of spelling *sheen*, and if Mr. Masson never heard a shoeblack in the street say, "Shall I give you a shine, sir?" his experience has been singular.\* His notes in general are very good (though too long). Those on the astronomy of Milton are particularly valuable. I think he is sometimes a little too scornful of parallel passages,† for if there is one thing more striking than another in this poet, it is that his great and original imagination was almost wholly nourished by books, perhaps I should rather say set in motion by them. It is wonderful how, from the most withered and juiceless hint gathered in his reading, his grand images rise like an exhalation; how from the most battered old lamp caught in that huge drag-net with which he swept the waters of learning,

\* But his etymological notes are worse. For example, "*recreant*, renouncing the faith, from the old French *recoire*, which again is from the mediæval Latin *recredere*, to 'believe back,' or apostatise." This is pure fancy. The word has no such meaning in either language. He derives *serenate* from *sera*, and says that *parle* means treaty, negotiation, though it is the same word as *parley*, had the same meanings, and was commonly pronounced like it, as in Marlowe's

"What, shall we *parle* with this Christian?"

It certainly never meant *treaty*, though it may have meant *negotiation*. When it did it implied the meeting face to face of the principals. On the verses,

"And some flowers and some bays  
For thy hearse to strew the ways,"

he has a note to tell us that *hearse* is not to be taken "in our sense of a carriage for the dead, but in the older sense of a tomb or framework over a tomb," though the obvious meaning is "to strew the ways for thy hearse." How could one do that for a tomb or the framework over it?

† A passage from Dante (*Inferno*, xi. 96-105), with its reference to Aristotle, would have given him the meaning of "Nature taught art," which seems to puzzle him. A study of Dante and of his earlier commentators would also have been of great service in the astronomical notes.

he could conjure a tall genius to build his palaces. Whatever he touches swells and towers. That wonderful passage in "Comus" of the airy tongues, perhaps the most imaginative in suggestion he ever wrote, was conjured out of a dry sentence in Purchas's abstract of Marco Polo. Such examples help us to understand the poet. When I find that Sir Thomas Browne had said before Milton, that Adam "was *the wisest of all men since*," I am glad to find this link between the most profound and the most stately imagination of that age. Such parallels sometimes give a hint also of the historical development of our poetry, of its apostolical succession, so to speak. Every one has noticed Milton's fondness of sonorous proper names, which have not only an acquired imaginative value by association, and so serve to awaken our poetic sensibilities, but have likewise a merely musical significance. This he probably caught from Marlowe, traces of whom are frequent in him. There is certainly something of what afterwards came to be called Miltonic in more than one passage of "Tamburlaine," a play in which gigantic force seems struggling from the block, as in Michel Angelo's "Dawn."

Mr. Masson's remarks on the versification of Milton are, in the main, judicious, but when he ventures on particulars, one cannot always agree with him. He seems to understand that our prosody is accentual merely, and yet, when he comes to what he calls *variations*, he talks of the "substitution of the Trochee, the Pyrrhic, or the Spondee, for the regular Iambus, or of the Anapæst, the Dactyl, the Tribrach, etc., for the same." This is always misleading. The shift of the accent in what Mr. Masson calls "dissyllabic variations" is common to all pentameter verse, and, in the other case, most of the words cited as trisyllables either were not so in Milton's day,\* or were so or not at choice of the poet, according to their place in the verse. There is not an elision of Milton's without precedent in the

\* Almost every combination of two vowels might in those days be a diphthong or not, at will. Milton's practice of elision was confirmed and sometimes (perhaps) modified by his study of the Italians, with whose usage in this respect he closely conforms.

dramatists from whom he learned to write blank-verse. Milton was a greater metrist than any of them, except Marlowe and Shakespeare, and he employed the elision (or the slur) oftener than they to give a faint undulation or retardation to his verse, only because his epic form demanded it more for variety's sake. How Milton would have *read* them, is another question. He certainly often marked them by an apostrophe in his manuscripts. He doubtless composed according to quantity, so far as that is possible in English, and as Cowper somewhat extravagantly says, "gives almost as many proofs of it in his 'Paradise Lost' as there are lines in the poem."\* But when Mr. Masson tells us that

"Self-fed and self-consumed : if this fail,"

and

"Dwells in all Heaven charity so rare,"

are "only nine syllables," and that in

"Created hugest that swim the ocean-stream,"

"either the third foot must be read as an *anapæst* or the word *hugest* must be pronounced as one syllable, *hug'st*," I think Milton would have invoked the soul of Sir John Cheek. Of course Milton read it

"Created hugest that swim th' ocean-stream,"

just as he wrote (if we may trust Mr. Masson's fac-simile)

"Thus sang the uncouth swain to th' oaks and rills,"

a verse in which both hiatus and elision occur precisely as in the Italian poets.† "Gest that swim" would be rather a knotty *anapæst*, an insupportable foot indeed! And why is even *hug'st* worse than Shakespeare's

"Young'st follower of thy drum?"

In the same way he says of

"For we have also our evening and our morn,"

\* Letter to Rev. W. Bagot, 4th January 1791.

† So Dante:—

"Ma sapienza e amore e virtute."

So Donne:—

"Simony and sodomy in churchmen's lives."



that "the metre of this line is irregular," and of the rapidly fine

"Came flying and in mid-air aloud thus cried,"

that it is "a line of unusual metre." Why more unusual than

"As being the contrary to his high will?"

What would Mr. Masson say to these three verses from Dekkar?—

"And *knowing* so much, I muse thou art so poor;"

"I fan away the dust *flying* in mine eyes;"

"*Flowing* o'er with court news only of you and them."

All such participles (where no consonant divided the vowels) were normally of one syllable, permissibly of two.\* If Mr. Masson had studied the poets who preceded Milton as he has studied *him*, he would never have said that the verse,

"Not this rock only; his omnipresence fills,"

was "peculiar as having a distinct syllable of over-measure." He retains Milton's spelling of *hunderd* without perceiving the metrical reason for it, that *d*, *t*, *b*, *p*, etc., followed by *l* or *r*, might be either of two or of three syllables. In Marlowe we find it both ways in two consecutive verses:—

"A hundred [hunderəd] and fifty thousand horse,  
Two hundred thousand foot, brave men-at-arms."†

Mr. Masson is especially puzzled by verses ending in one or more unaccented syllables, and even argues in his introduction that some of them might be reckoned Alexandrines. He cites

\* Mr. Masson is evidently not very familiar at first hand with the versification to which Milton's youthful ear had been trained, but seems to have learned something from Abbott's *Shakespearian Grammar* in the interval between writing his notes and his introduction. Walker's *Shakespeare's Versification* would have been a great help to him in default of original knowledge.

† Milton has a verse in "Comus" where the *e* is elided from the word *sister* by its preceding a vowel:—

"Heaven keep my sister! again, again, and near!"

This would have been impossible before a consonant.

some lines of Spenser as confirming his theory, forgetting that rhyme wholly changes the conditions of the case by throwing the accent (appreciably even now, but more emphatically in Spenser's day) on the last syllable.

"A spirit and judgment equal or superior,"

he calls "a remarkably anomalous line, consisting of twelve or even thirteen syllables." Surely Milton's ear would never have tolerated a dissyllabic "spirit" in such a position. The word was then more commonly of one syllable, though it might be two, and was accordingly spelt *spreet* (still surviving in *sprite*), *sprit*, and even *spirt*, as Milton himself spells it in one of Mr. Masson's fac-similes.\* Shakespeare, in the verse

"Hath put a spirit of youth in everything,"

uses the word admirably well in a position where it *cannot* have a metrical value of more than one syllable, while it gives a dancing movement to the verse in keeping with the sense. Our old metrists were careful of elasticity, a quality which modern verse has lost in proportion as our language has stiffened into uniformity under the benumbing fingers of pedants.

This discussion of the value of syllables is not so trifling as it seems. A great deal of nonsense has been written about imperfect measures in Shakespeare, and of the admirable dramatic effect produced by filling up the gaps of missing syllables with pauses or prolongations of the voice in reading. In rapid, abrupt, and passionate dialogue this is possible, but in passages of continuously level speech it is barbarously absurd. I do not believe that any of our old dramatists has knowingly left us a single imperfect verse. Seeing in what a hap-hazard way and in how mutilated a form their plays have mostly reached us, we should attribute such *faults* (as a geologist would call them) to anything rather than to the deliberate design of the poets. Marlowe and Shakespeare, the two best metrists among them, have given us a standard by which to measure what licenses they took in versification—the one in his translations,

\* So *spirito* and *spirto* in Italian, *esperis* and *espirs* in Old French.

the other in his poems. The unmanageable verses in Milton are very few, and all of them occur in works printed after his blindness had lessened the chances of supervision and increased those of error. There are only two, indeed, which seem to me wholly indigestible as they stand. These are,

"Burnt after them to the bottomless pit,"

and

"With them from bliss to the bottomless deep."

This certainly looks like a case where a word had dropped out or had been stricken out by some proof-reader who limited the number of syllables in a pentameter verse by that of his finger-ends. Mr. Masson notices only the first of these lines, and says that to make it regular by accenting the word *bottomless* on the second syllable would be "too horrible." Certainly not, if Milton so accented it, any more than *blasphémous* and twenty more which sound oddly to us now. However that may be, Milton could not have intended to close not only a period, but a paragraph also, with an unmusical verse, and in the only other passage where the word occurs it is accented as now on the first syllable:

"With hideous ruin and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell."

As *bottom* is a word which, like *bosom* and *besom*, may be monosyllabic or dissyllabic according to circumstances, I am persuaded that the last passage quoted (and all three refer to the same event) gives us the word wanting in the two others, and that Milton wrote, or meant to write,

"Burnt after them down to the bottomless pit,"

which leaves in the verse precisely the kind of ripple that Milton liked best.\*

\* Milton, however, would not have balked at *th' bottomless* any more than Drayton at *th' rejected* or Donne at *th' sea*. Mr. Masson does not seem to understand this elision, for he corrects *i' th' midst* to *i' the midst*,



Much of what Mr. Masson says in his Introduction of the way in which the verses of Milton should be read is judicious enough, though some of the examples he gives, of the "comicality" which would ensue from compressing every verse into an exact measure of ten syllables, are based on a surprising ignorance of the laws which guided our poets just before and during Milton's time in the structure of their verses. Thus he seems to think that a strict scansion would require us in the verses.

"So he with difficulty and labour hard,"

and

"Carnation, purple, azure, or specked with gold,"

to pronounce *diffikty* and *purp*. Though Mr. Masson talks of "slurs and elisions," his ear would seem somewhat insensible to their exact nature or office. His *diffikty* supposes a hiatus where none is intended, and his making *purple* of one syllable wrecks the whole verse, the real slur in the latter case being an *azure or*.\* When he asks whether Milton required "these pronunciations in his verse," no positive answer can be given, but I very much doubt whether he would have thought that some of the lines Mr. Masson cites "remain perfectly good blank verse even with the most leisurely natural enunciation of the spare syllable," and I am sure he would have stared if told that "the number of accents" in a pentameter verse was "variable." It may be doubted whether elisions and compressions which would be thought in bad taste or even vulgar now were more abhorrent to the ear of Milton's generation than to a cultivated Italian would be the hearing Dante read as prose. After all, what Mr. Masson says may be reduced to the infallible axiom that poetry should be read as poetry.

Mr. Masson seems to be right in his main principles, but the examples he quotes make one doubt whether he knows what a

and takes pains to mention it in a note. He might better have restored the *n* in *è*, where it is no contraction, but merely indicates the pronunciation, as *o'* for *of* and *on*.

\* Exactly analogous to that in *treasurer* when it is shortened to two syllables.

verse is. For example, he thinks it would be a "horror," if in the verse

"That invincible Samson far renowned,"

we should lay the stress on the first syllable of *invincible*. It is hard to see why this should be worse than *conventicle* or *rémonstrance* or *successor* or *incompatible* (the three latter used by the correct Daniel), or why Mr. Masson should clap an accent on *surface* merely because it comes at the end of a verse, and deny it to *invincible*. If one read the verse just cited with those that go with it, he will find that the accent *must* come on the first syllable of *invincible* or else the whole passage becomes chaos.\* Should we refuse to say *oblegged* with Pope because the fashion has changed? From its apparently greater freedom in skilful hands, blank verse gives more scope to sciolistic theorising and dogmatism than the rhyming pentameter couplet, but it is safe to say that no verse is good in the one that would not be good in the other when handled by a master like Dryden. Milton, like other great poets, wrote some bad verses, and it is wiser to confess that they are so than to conjure up some unimaginable reason why the reader should accept them as the better for their badness. Such a bad verse is

"Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens and shapes of death,"

which might be cited to illustrate Pope's

"And ten low words oft creep in one dull line."

Milton cannot certainly be taxed with any partiality for low words. He rather loved them tall, as the Prussian King loved men to be six feet high in their stockings, and fit to go into the grenadiers. He loved them as much for their music as for their meaning—perhaps more. His style, therefore, when it

\* Milton himself has *invisible*, for we cannot suppose him guilty of a verse like

"Shoots invisible virtue ever to the deep,"

while, if read rightly, it has just one of those sweeping elisions that he loved.

has to deal with commoner things, is apt to grow a little cumbrous and unwieldy. A Persian poet says that when the owl would boast he boasts of catching mice at the edge of a hole. Shakespeare would have understood this. Milton would have made him talk like an eagle. His influence is not to be left out of account as partially contributing to that decline toward poetic diction which was already beginning ere he died. If it would not be fair to say that he is the most artistic, he may be called in the highest sense the most scientific of our poets. If to Spenser younger poets have gone to be sung to, they have sat at the feet of Milton to be taught. Our language has no finer poem than "Samson Agonistes," if any so fine in the quality of austere dignity or in the skill with which the poet's personal experience is generalised into a classic tragedy.

Gentle as Milton's earlier portraits would seem to show him, he had in him by nature, or bred into him by fate, something of the haughty and defiant self-assertion of Dante and Michel Angelo. In no other English author is the man so large a part of his works. Milton's haughty conception of himself enters into all he says and does. Always the necessity of this one man became that of the whole human race for the moment. There were no walls so sacred but must go to the ground when *he* wanted elbow-room; and he wanted a great deal. Did Mary Powell, the cavalier's daughter, find the abode of a Roundhead schoolmaster *incompatible* and leave it, forthwith the cry of the universe was for an easier dissolution of the marriage covenant. If *he* is blind, it is with the excess of light, it is a divine partiality, an overshadowing with angels' wings. Phineus and Teiresias are admitted among the prophets because they, too, had lost their sight, and the blindness of Homer is of more account than his *Iliad*. After writing in rhyme till he was past fifty, he finds it unsuitable for his epic, and it at once becomes "the invention of a barbarous age to set off wretched matter and lame metre." If the structure of *his* mind be undramatic, why, then, the English drama is naught, learned Jonson, sweetest Shakespeare, and the rest notwithstanding, and he will compose a tragedy on a Greek model with the blinded Samson



for its hero, and he will compose it partly in rhyme. Plainly he belongs to the intenser kind of men whose yesterdays are in no way responsible for their to-morrows. And this makes him perennially interesting even to those who hate his politics, despise his Socinianism, and find his greatest poem a bore. A new edition of his poems is always welcome, for, as he is really great, he presents a fresh side to each new student, and Mr. Masson, in his three handsome volumes, has given us, with much that is superfluous and even erroneous, much more that is a solid and permanent acquisition to our knowledge.

It results from the almost scornful withdrawal of Milton into the fortress of his absolute personality that no great poet is so uniformly self-conscious as he. We should say of Shakespeare that he had the power of transforming himself into everything ; of Milton, that he had that of transforming everything into himself. Dante is individual rather than self-conscious, and he, the cast-iron man, grows pliable as a field of grain at the breath of Beatrice, and flows away in waves of sunshine. But Milton never lets himself go for a moment. As other poets are possessed by their theme, so is he *self*-possessed, his great theme being John Milton, and his great duty that of interpreter between him and the world. I say it with all respect, for he was well worthy translation, and it is out of Hebrew that the version is made. Pope says he makes God the Father reason "like a school-divine." The criticism is witty, but inaccurate. He makes Deity a mouthpiece for his present theology, and had the poem been written a few years later, the Almighty would have become more heterodox. Since Dante, no one had stood on these visiting terms with heaven.

Now it is precisely this audacity of self-reliance, I suspect, which goes far toward making the sublime, and which, falling by a hair's-breadth short thereof, makes the ridiculous. Puritanism showed both the strength and weakness of its prophetic nurture ; enough of the latter to be scoffed out of England by the very men it had conquered in the field, enough of the former to intrench itself in three or four immortal memories. It has left an abiding mark in politics and religion, but its great

monuments are the prose of Bunyan and the verse of Milton. It is a high inspiration to be the neighbour of great events ; to have been a partaker in them, and to have seen noble purposes by their own self-confidence become the very means of ignoble ends, if it do not wholly depress, may kindle a passion of regret deepening the song which dares not tell the reason of its sorrow. The grand loneliness of Milton in his latter years, while it makes him the most impressive figure in our literary history, is reflected also in his maturer poems by a sublime independence of human sympathy like that with which mountains fascinate and rebuff us. But it is idle to talk of the loneliness of one the habitual companions of whose mind were the Past and Future. I always seem to see him leaning in his blindness a hand on the shoulder of each, sure that the one will guard the song which the other had inspired.

## WORDSWORTH.

A GENERATION has now passed away since Wordsworth was laid with the family in the churchyard at Grasmere.\* Perhaps it is hardly yet time to take a perfectly impartial measure of his value as a poet. To do this is especially hard for those who are old enough to remember the last shot which the foe was sullenly firing in that long war of critics which began when he published his manifesto as Pretender, and which came to a pause rather than end when they flung up their caps with the rest at his final coronation. Something of the intensity of the *odium theologicum* (if indeed the *æstheticum* be not in these days the more bitter of the two) entered into the conflict. The Wordsworthians were a sect, who, if they had the enthusiasm, had also not a little of the exclusiveness and partiality to which sects are liable. The verses of the master had for them the virtue of religious canticles stimulant or zeal and not amenable to the ordinary tests of cold-blooded criticism. Like the hymns of the Huguenots and Covenanters, they were songs of battle no less than of worship, and the combined ardours of conviction and conflict lent them a fire that was not naturally their own. As we read them now, that virtue of the moment is gone out of them, and whatever of Dr. Wattsiness there is gives us a slight shock of disenchantment. It is something like the difference between the *Marseillaise* sung by armed propagandists on the edge of battle, or

\* "I pay many little visits to the family in the churchyard at Grasmere," writes James Dixon (an old servant of Wordsworth) to Crabb Robinson, with a simple, one might almost say canine, pathos, thirteen years after his master's death. Wordsworth was always considerate and kind with his servants, Robinson tells us.



by Brissotins in the tumbrel, and the words of it read coolly in the closet, or recited with the factitious frenzy of Thérèse. It was natural in the early days of Wordsworth's career to dwell most fondly on those profounder qualities to appreciate which settled in some sort the measure of a man's right to judge of poetry at all. But now we must admit the shortcomings, the failures, the defects, as no less essential elements in forming a sound judgment as to whether the seer and artist were so united in him as to justify the claim first put in by himself and afterwards maintained by his sect to a place beside the few great poets who exalt men's minds, and give a right direction and safe outlet to their passions through the imagination, while insensibly helping them toward balance of character and serenity of judgment by stimulating their sense of proportion, form, and the nice adjustment of means to ends. In none of our poets has the constant propulsion of an unbending will, and the concentration of exclusive, if I must not say somewhat narrow, sympathies done so much to make the original endowment of nature effective, and in none, accordingly, does the biography throw so much light on the works, nor enter so largely into their composition as an element whether of power or of weakness. Wordsworth never saw, and I think never wished to see, beyond the limits of his own consciousness and experience. He early conceived himself to be, and through life was confirmed by circumstances in the faith that he was, a "dedicated spirit,"\* a state of mind likely to further an intense, but at the same time one-sided, development of the intellectual powers. The solitude in which the greater part of his mature life was passed, while it doubtless ministered to the passionate intensity of his musings upon man and nature, was, it may be suspected,

\* In the "Prelude" he attributes this consecration to a sunrise seen (during a college vacation) as he walked homeward from some village festival where he had danced all night :—

" My heart was full ; I made no vows, but vows  
Were then made for me ; bond unknown to me  
Was given that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
A dedicated Spirit."—Book iv.

harmful to him as an artist, by depriving him of any standard of proportion outside himself by which to test the comparative value of his thoughts, and by rendering him more and more incapable of that urbanity of mind which could be gained only by commerce with men more nearly on his own level, and which gives tone without lessening individuality. Wordsworth never quite saw the distinction between the eccentric and the original. For what we call originality seems not so much anything peculiar, much less anything odd, but that quality in a man which touches human nature at most points of its circumference, which reinvigorates the consciousness of our own powers by recalling and confirming our own unvalued sensations and perceptions, gives classic shape to our own amorphous imaginings, and adequate utterance to our own stammering conceptions or emotions. The poet's office is to be a Voice, not of one crying in the wilderness to a knot of already magnetised acolytes, but singing amid the throng of men and lifting their common aspirations and sympathies (so first clearly revealed to themselves) on the wings of his song to a purer ether and a wider reach of view. We cannot, if we would, read the poetry of Wordsworth as mere poetry; at every other page we find ourselves entangled in a problem of æsthetics. The world-old question of matter and form, of whether nectar *is* of precisely the same flavour when served to us from a Grecian chalice or from any jug of ruder pottery, comes up for decision anew. The Teutonic nature has always shown a sturdy preference of the solid bone with a marrow of nutritious moral to any shadow of the same on the flowing mirror of sense. Wordsworth never lets us long forget the deeply rooted stock from which he sprang—*vien ben dà lui*.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH was born at Cockermouth in Cumberland on the 7th of April 1770, the second of five children. His father was John Wordsworth, an attorney-at-law, and agent of Sir James Lowther, afterwards first Earl of Lonsdale. His mother was Anne Cookson, the daughter of a mercer in Penrith. His paternal ancestors had been settled

immemorially at Penistone in Yorkshire, whence his grandfather had emigrated to Westmoreland. His mother, a woman of piety and wisdom, died in March 1778, being then in her thirty-second year. His father, who never entirely cast off the depression occasioned by her death, survived her but five years, dying in December 1783, when William was not quite fourteen years old.

The poet's early childhood was passed partly at Cockermouth, and partly with his maternal grandfather at Penrith. His first teacher appears to have been Mrs. Anne Birkett, a kind of Shenstone's Schoolmistress, who practised the memory of her pupils, teaching them chiefly by rote, and not endeavouring to cultivate their reasoning faculties, a process by which children are apt to be converted from natural logicians into impertinent sophists. Among his schoolmates here was Mary Hutchinson, who afterwards became his wife.

In 1778 he was sent to a school founded by Edwin Sandys, Archbishop of York, in the year 1585, at Hawkshead in Lancashire. Hawkshead is a small market-town in the vale of Esthwaite, about a third of a mile north-west of the lake. Here Wordsworth passed nine years, among a people of simple habits and scenery of a sweet and pastoral dignity. His earliest intimacies were with the mountains, lakes, and streams of his native district, and the associations with which his mind was stored during its most impressible period were noble and pure. The boys were boarded among the dames of the village, thus enjoying a freedom from scholastic restraints, which could be nothing but beneficial in a place where the temptations were only to sports that hardened the body, while they fostered a love of nature in the spirit and habits of observation in the mind. Wordsworth's ordinary amusements here were hunting and fishing, rowing, skating, and long walks around the lake and among the hills, with an occasional scamper on horseback.\* His life as a school-boy was favourable also to his poetic development, in being identified with that of the people among

\* "Prelude," Book ii.



whom he lived. Among men of simple habits, and where there are small diversities of condition, the feelings and passions are displayed with less restraint, and the young poet grew acquainted with that primal human basis of character where the Muse finds firm foothold, and to which he ever afterward cleared his way through all the overlying drift of conventionalism. The dalesmen were a primitive and hardy race who kept alive the traditions and often the habits of a more picturesque time. A common level of interests and social standing fostered unconventional ways of thought and speech, and friendly human sympathies. Solitude induced reflection, a reliance of the mind on its own resources, and individuality of character. Where everybody knew everybody, and everybody's father had known everybody's father, the interest of man in man was not likely to become a matter of cold hearsay and distant report. When death knocked at any door in the hamlet, there was an echo from every fireside, and a wedding dropt its white flowers at every threshold. There was not a grave in the churchyard but had its story; not a crag or glen or aged tree untouched with some ideal hue of legend. It was here that Wordsworth learned that homely humanity which gives such depth and sincerity to his poems. Travel, society, culture, nothing could obliterate the deep trace of that early training which enables him to speak directly to the primitive instincts of man. He was apprenticed early to the difficult art of being himself.

At school he wrote some task-verses on subjects imposed by the master, and also some voluntaries of his own, equally undistinguished by any peculiar merit. But he seems to have made up his mind as early as in his fourteenth year to become a poet.\* "It is recorded," says his biographer vaguely, "that the poet's father set him very early to learn portions of the best English poets by heart, so that at an

\* "I to the muses have been bound,  
These fourteen years, by strong indentures."

—*Idiot Boy* (1798).

early age he could repeat large portions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser.\*

The great event of Wordsworth's school-days was the death of his father, who left what may be called a hypothetical estate, consisting chiefly of claims upon the first Earl of Lonsdale, the payment of which, though their justice was acknowledged, that nobleman contrived in some unexplained way to elude so long as he lived. In October 1787 he left school for St. John's College, Cambridge. He was already, we are told, a fair Latin scholar, and had made some progress in mathematics. The earliest books we hear of his reading were *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and the *Tale of a Tub*; but at school he had also become familiar with the works of some English poets, particularly Goldsmith and Gray, of whose poems he had learned many by heart. What is more to the purpose, he had become, without knowing it, a lover of Nature in all her moods, and the same mental necessities of a solitary life which compel men to an interest in the transitory phenomena of scenery, had made him also studious of the movements of his own mind, and the mutual interaction and dependence of the external and internal universe.

Doubtless his early orphanage was not without its effect in confirming a character naturally impatient of control, and his mind, left to itself, clothed itself with an indigenous growth, which grew fairly and freely, unstinted by the shadow of exotic plantations. It has become a truism, that remarkable persons have remarkable mothers; but perhaps this is chiefly true of such as have made themselves distinguished by their industry, and by the assiduous cultivation of faculties in themselves of only an average quality. It is rather to be noted how little is known of the parentage of men of the first magnitude, how often they seem in some sort foundlings, and how early an apparently adverse destiny begins the culture of those who are to encounter and master great intellectual or spiritual experiences.

\* I think this more than doubtful, for I find no traces of the influence of any of these poets in his earlier writings. Goldsmith was evidently his model in the "Descriptive Sketches" and the "Evening Walk." I speak of them as originally printed.

Of his disposition as a child little is known, but that little is characteristic. He himself tells us that he was "stiff, moody, and of violent temper." His mother said of him that he was the only one of her children about whom she felt any anxiety—for she was sure that he would be remarkable for good or evil. Once, in resentment at some fancied injury, he resolved to kill himself, but his heart failed him. I suspect that few boys of passionate temperament have escaped these momentary suggestions of despairing helplessness. "On another occasion," he says, "while I was at my grandfather's house at Penrith, along with my eldest brother Richard, we were whipping tops together in the long drawing-room, on which the carpet was only laid down on particular occasions. The walls were hung round with family pictures, and I said to my brother, 'Dare you strike your whip through that old lady's petticoat?' He replied, 'No, I won't.' 'Then,' said I, 'here goes,' and I struck my lash through her hooped petticoat, for which, no doubt, though I have forgotten it, I was properly punished. But, possibly from some want of judgment in punishments inflicted, I had become perverse and obstinate in defying chastisement, and rather proud of it than otherwise." This last anecdote is as happily typical as a bit of Greek mythology which always prefigured the lives of heroes in the stories of their childhood. Just so do we find him afterward striking his defiant lash through the hooped petticoat of the artificial style of poetry, and proudly unsubdued by the punishment of the Reviewers.

Of his college life the chief record is to be found in "The Prelude." He did not distinguish himself as a scholar, and if his life had any incidents, they were of that interior kind which rarely appear in biography, though they may be of controlling influence upon the life. He speaks of reading Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton while at Cambridge,\* but no reflection from them is visible in his earliest published poems. The

\* "Prelude," Book iii. He studied Italian also at Cambridge; his teacher, whose name was Isola, had formerly taught the poet Gray. It may be pretty certainly inferred, however, that his first systematic study



greater part of his vacations was spent in his native Lake-country, where his only sister, Dorothy, was the companion of his rambles. She was a woman of large natural endowments, chiefly of the receptive kind, and had much to do with the formation and tendency of the poet's mind. It was she who called forth the shyer sensibilities of his nature, and taught an originally harsh and austere imagination to surround itself with fancy and feeling, as the rock fringes itself with a sun-spray of ferns. She was his first public, and belonged to that class of prophetically appreciative temperaments whose apparent office it is to cheer the early solitude of original minds with messages from the future. Through the greater part of his life she continued to be a kind of poetical conscience to him.

Wordsworth's last college vacation was spent in a foot journey upon the Continent (1790). In January 1791 he took his degree of B.A., and left Cambridge. During the summer of this year he visited Wales, and, after declining to enter upon holy orders under the plea that he was not of age for ordination, went over to France in November, and remained during the winter at Orleans. Here he became intimate with the republican General Beaupuis, with whose hopes and aspirations he ardently sympathised. In the spring of 1792 he was at Blois, and returned thence to Orleans, which he finally quitted in October for Paris. He remained here as long as he could with safety, and at the close of the year went back to England, thus, perhaps, escaping the fate which soon after overtook his friends the Brissotins.

As hitherto the life of Wordsworth may be called a fortunate one, not less so in the training and expansion of his faculties was this period of his stay in France. Born and reared in a country where the homely and familiar nestles confidently amid the most savage and sublime forms of nature, he had

of English poetry was due to the copy of Anderson's *British Poets*, left with him by his sailor brother John on setting out for his last voyage in 1805.

experienced whatever impulses the creative faculty can receive from mountain and cloud and the voices of winds and waters, but he had known man only as an actor in fireside histories and tragedies, for which the hamlet supplied an ample stage. In France he first felt the authentic beat of a nation's heart; he was a spectator at one of those dramas where the terrible footfall of the Eumenides is heard nearer and nearer in the pauses of the action; and he saw man such as he can only be when he is vibrated by the orgasm of a national emotion. He sympathised with the hopes of France and of mankind deeply, as was fitting in a young man and a poet; and if his faith in the gregarious advancement of men was afterward shaken, he only held the more firmly by his belief in the individual, and his reverence for the human as something quite apart from the popular and above it. Wordsworth has been unwisely blamed, as if he had been recreant to the liberal instincts of his youth. But it was inevitable that a genius so regulated and metrical as his, a mind which always compensated itself for its artistic radicalism by an involuntary leaning toward external respectability, should recoil from whatever was convulsionary and destructive in politics, and above all in religion. He reads the poems of Wordsworth without understanding, who does not find in them the noblest incentives to faith in man and the grandeur of his destiny, founded always upon that personal dignity and virtue, the capacity for whose attainment alone makes universal liberty possible and assures its permanence. He was to make men better by opening to them the sources of an inalterable well-being; to make them free, in a sense higher than political, by showing them that these sources are within them, and that no contrivance of man can permanently emancipate narrow natures and depraved minds. His politics were always those of a poet, circling in the larger orbit of causes and principles, careless of the transitory oscillation of events.

The change in his point of view (if change there was) certainly was complete soon after his return from France, and was perhaps due in part to the influence of Burke.

" While he [Burke] forewarns, denounces, launches forth,  
 Against all systems built on abstract rights,  
 Keen ridicule ; the majesty proclaims  
 Of institutes and laws hallowed by time ;  
 Declares the vital power of social ties  
 Endeared by custom ; and with high disdain,  
 Exploding upstart theory, insists  
 Upon the allegiance to which men are born.  
 . . . Could a youth, and one  
 In ancient story versed, whose breast hath heaved  
 Under the weight of classic eloquence,  
 Sit, see, and hear, unthankful, uninspired ? " \*

He had seen the French for a dozen years eagerly busy in tearing up whatever had roots in the past, replacing the venerable trunks of tradition and orderly growth with liberty-poles, then striving vainly to piece together the fibres they had broken, and to reproduce artificially that sense of permanence and continuity which is the main safeguard of vigorous self-consciousness in a nation. He became a Tory through intellectual conviction, retaining, I suspect, to the last, a certain radicalism of temperament and instinct. Haydon tells us that in 1809 Sir George Beaumont said to him and Wilkie, " Wordsworth may perhaps walk in ; if he do, I caution you both against his terrific democratic notions ; " and it must have been many years later that Wordsworth himself told Crabb Robinson, " I have no respect whatever for Whigs, but I have a great deal of the Chartist in me. " In 1802, during his tour in Scotland, he travelled on Sundays as on the other days of the week.† He afterwards became a theoretical church-goer. " Wordsworth defended earnestly the Church establishment. He even said he would shed his blood for it. Nor was he disconcerted by a

\* " Prelude," Book vii. Written before 1805, and referring to a still earlier date. " Wordsworth went in powder, and with cocked hat under his arm, to the Marchioness of Stafford's rout. " — (Southey to Miss Barker, May 1806.)

† This was probably one reason for the long suppression of Miss Wordsworth's journal, which she had evidently prepared for publication as early as 1805.



laugh raised against him on account of his having confessed that he knew not when he had been in a church in his own country. 'All our ministers are so vile,' said he. The mischief of allowing the clergy to depend on the caprice of the multitude he thought more than outweighed all the evils of an establishment."<sup>\*</sup>

In December 1792 Wordsworth had returned to England, and in the following year published "Descriptive Sketches" and the "Evening Walk." He did this, as he says in one of his letters, to show that, although he had gained no honours at the University, he *could* do something. They met with no great success, and he afterward corrected them so much as to destroy all their interest as juvenile productions, without communicating to them any of the merits of maturity. In commenting, sixty years afterward, on a couplet in one of these poems—

"And, fronting the bright west, the oak entwines  
Its darkening boughs and leaves in stronger lines"—

he says: "This is feebly and imperfectly expressed, but I recollect distinctly the very spot where this first struck me. . . . The moment was important in my poetical history; for I date from it my consciousness of the infinite variety of natural appearances which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country, so far as I was acquainted with them, and I made a resolution to supply in some degree the deficiency." lx.

It is plain that Wordsworth's memory was playing him a trick here, misled by that instinct (it may almost be called) of consistency which leads men first to desire that their lives should have been without break or seam, and then to believe that they have been such. The more distant ranges of perspective are apt to run together in retrospection. How far could Wordsworth at fourteen have been acquainted with the poets of all ages and countries—he who to his dying day could not endure to read Goethe and knew nothing of Calderon? It seems to me rather that the earliest influence traceable in him

<sup>\*</sup> Crabb Robinson, I., 250, Am. Ed.

is that of Goldsmith, and later of Cowper, and it is, perhaps, some slight indication of its having already begun that his first volume of "Descriptive Sketches" (1793) was put forth by Johnson, who was Cowper's publisher. By and by the powerful impress of Burns is seen both in the topics of his verse and the form of his expression. But whatever their ultimate effect upon his style, certain it is that his juvenile poems were clothed in the conventional habit of the eighteenth century. "The first verses from which he remembered to have received great pleasure were Miss Carter's 'Poem on Spring,' a poem in the six-line stanza, which he was particularly fond of, and had composed much in—for example, 'Ruth.'" This is noteworthy, for Wordsworth's lyric range, especially so far as tune is concerned, was always narrow. His sense of melody was painfully dull, and some of his lighter effusions, as he would have called them, are almost ludicrously wanting in grace of movement. We cannot expect in a modern poet the thrush-like improvisation, the impulsively bewitching cadences, that charm us in our Elizabethan drama, and whose last warble died with Herrick; but Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning have shown that the simple pathos of their music was not irrecoverable, even if the artless poignancy of their phrase be gone beyond recall. We feel this lack in Wordsworth all the more keenly if we compare such verses as

" Like an army defeated  
The snow hath retreated  
And now doth fare ill  
On the top of the bare hill,"

with Goethe's exquisite *Ueber allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, in which the lines (as if shaken down by a momentary breeze of emotion) drop lingeringly one after another like blossoms upon turf.

"The Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches" show plainly the prevailing influence of Goldsmith, both in the turn of thought and the mechanism of the verse. They lack altogether the temperance of tone and judgment in selection which have made the "Traveller" and the "Deserted Village,"

perhaps, the most truly classical poems in the language. They bear here and there, however, the unmistakable stamp of the maturer Wordsworth, not only in a certain blunt realism, but in the intensity and truth of picturesque epithet. Of this realism, from which Wordsworth never wholly freed himself, the following verses may suffice as a specimen. After describing the fate of a chamois-hunter killed by falling from a crag, his fancy goes back to the bereaved wife and son :—

“ Haply that child in fearful doubt may gaze,  
Passing his father's bones in future days,  
Start at the reliques of that very thigh  
On which so oft he prattled when a boy.”

In these poems there is plenty of that “poetic diction” against which Wordsworth was to lead the revolt nine years later.

“ To wet the peak's impracticable sides  
He opens of his feet the sanguine tides,  
Weak and more weak the issuing current eyes  
Lapped by the panting tongue of thirsty skies.”

Both of these passages have disappeared from the revised edition, as well as some curious outbursts of that motiveless despair which Byron made fashionable not long after. Nor are there wanting touches of fleshliness which strike us oddly as coming from Wordsworth.\*

“ Farewell ! those forms that in thy noontide shade  
Rest near their little plots of oaten glade,  
Those steadfast eyes that beating breasts inspire  
To throw the ‘sultry ray’ of young Desire ;  
Those lips whose tides of fragrance come and go  
Accordant to the cheek's unquiet glow ;  
Those shadowy breasts in love's soft light arrayed,  
And rising by the moon of passion swayed.”

\* Wordsworth's purity afterwards grew sensitive almost to prudery. The late Mr. Clough told me that he heard him at Dr. Arnold's table denounce the first line in Keats's “Ode to a Grecian Urn” as indecent, and Haydon records that when he saw the group of Cupid and Psyche he exclaimed, “The dev-ils !”



The political tone is also mildened in the revision, as where he changes "despot courts" into "tyranny." One of the alterations is interesting. In the "Evening Walk" he had originally written—

"And bids her soldier come her wars to share  
Asleep on Minden's charnel hill afar."

An *erratum* at the end directs us to correct the second verse, thus :—

"Asleep on Bunker's charnel hill afar."\*

Wordsworth somewhere rebukes the poets for making the owl a bodesful bird. He had himself done so in the "Evening Walk," and corrects his epithets to suit his later judgment, putting "gladsome" for "boding," and replacing

"The tremulous sob of the complaining owl"

by

"The sportive outcry of the mocking owl"

Indeed, the character of the two poems is so much changed in the revision as to make the dates appended to them a misleading anachronism. But there is one truly Wordsworthian passage which already gives us a glimpse of that passion with which he was the first to irradiate descriptive poetry, and which sets him on a level with Turner.

"'Tis storm; and hid in mist from hour to hour  
All day the floods a deepening murmur pour;  
The sky is veiled and every cheerful sight;  
Dark is the region as with coming night;  
But what a sudden burst of overpowering light!  
Triumphant on the bosom of the storm,  
Glances the fire-clad eagle's wheeling form;  
Eastward, in long prospective glittering shine  
The wood-crowned cliffs that o'er the lake recline;  
Those eastern cliffs a hundred streams unfold,

\* The whole passage is omitted in the revised edition. The original, a quarto pamphlet, is now very rare, but fortunately Charles Lamb's copy of it is now owned by my friend, Professor C. E. Norton.

At once to pillars turned that flame with gold ;  
Behind his sail the peasant tries to shun  
The West that burns like one dilated sun,  
Where in a mighty crucible expire  
The mountains, glowing hot like coals of fire."

Wordsworth has made only one change in these verses, and that for the worse, by substituting "glorious" (which was already implied in "glances" and "fire-clad") for "wheeling." In later life he would have found it hard to forgive the man who should have made cliffs recline over a lake. On the whole, what strikes us as most prophetic in these poems is their want of continuity, and the purple patches of true poetry on a texture of unmistakable prose ; perhaps we might add, the incongruous clothing of prose thoughts in the ceremonial robes of poesy.

During the same year (1793) he wrote, but did not publish, a political tract, in which he avowed himself opposed to monarchy and to the hereditary principle, and desirous of a republic, if it could be had without a revolution. He probably continued to be all his life in favour of that ideal republic "which never was on land or sea," but fortunately he gave up politics, that he might devote himself to his own nobler calling, to which politics are subordinate, and for which he found freedom enough in England as it was.\* Dr. Wordsworth admits that his uncle's opinions were democratical so late as 1802. I suspect that they remained so in an esoteric way to the end of his days. He had himself suffered by the arbitrary selfishness of a great landholder, and he was born and bred in

\* Wordsworth showed his habitual good sense in never sharing, so far as is known, the communistic dreams of his friends Coleridge and Southey. The latter of the two had, to be sure, renounced them shortly after his marriage, and before his acquaintance with Wordsworth began. But Coleridge seems to have clung to them longer. There is a passage in one of his letters to Cottle (without date, but apparently written in the spring of 1798) which would imply that Wordsworth had been accused of some kind of social heresy. "Wordsworth has been caballed against *so long and so loudly* that he has found it impossible to prevail on the tenant of the Allfoxden estate to let him

a part of England where there is a greater social equality than elsewhere. The look and manner of the Cumberland people especially are such as recall very vividly to a New-Englander the associations of fifty years ago, ere the change from New England to New Ireland had begun. But meanwhile, Want, which makes no distinctions of Monarchist or Republican, was pressing upon him. The debt due to his father's estate had not been paid, and Wordsworth was one of those real idealists who esteem it the first duty of a friend of humanity to live for, and not on, his neighbour. He at first proposed establishing a periodical journal to be called *The Philanthropist*, but luckily went no further with it, for the receipts from an organ of opinion which professed republicanism, and at the same time discountenanced the plans of all existing or defunct republicans, would have been necessarily scanty. There being no appearance of any demand, present or prospective, for philanthropists, he tried to get employment as correspondent of a newspaper. Here also it was impossible that he should succeed; he was too great to be merged in the editorial We, and had too well defined a private opinion on all subjects to be able to express that average of public opinion which constitutes able editorials. But so it is that to the prophet in the wilderness the birds of ill-omen are already on the wing with food from heaven; and while Wordsworth's relatives were getting impatient at what they considered his waste of time, while one thought he had gifts enough to make a good parson, and another lamented the rare attorney that was lost in him,\* the prescient muse guided

the house after their first agreement is expired." Perhaps, after all, it was Wordsworth's insulation of character and habitual want of sympathy with anything but the moods of his own mind that rendered him incapable of this copartnery of enthusiasm. He appears to have regarded even his sister Dora (whom he certainly loved as much as it was possible for him to love anything but his own poems) as a kind of tributary dependency of his genius, much as a mountain might look down on one of its ancillary spurs.

\* Speaking to one of his neighbours in 1845 he said, "that, after he had finished his college course, he was in great doubt as to what



the hand of Raisley Calvert while he wrote the poet's name in his will for a legacy of £900. By the death of Calvert, in 1795, this timely help came to Wordsworth at the turning-point of his life, and made it honest for him to write poems that will never die, instead of theatrical critiques as ephemeral as play-bills, or leaders that led only to oblivion.

In the autumn of 1795 Wordsworth and his sister took up their abode at Racedown Lodge, near Crewkerne, in Dorsetshire. Here nearly two years were passed, chiefly in the study of poetry, and Wordsworth to some extent recovered from the fierce disappointment of his political dreams, and regained that equable tenor of mind which alone is consistent with a healthy productiveness. Here Coleridge, who had contrived to see something more in the "Descriptive Sketches" than the public had discovered there, first made his acquaintance. The sympathy and appreciation of an intellect like Coleridge's supplied him with that external motive to activity which is the chief use of popularity, and justified to him his opinion of his own powers. It was now that the tragedy of "The Borderers"

his future employment should be. He did not feel himself good enough for the Church; he felt that his mind was not properly disciplined for that holy office, and that the struggle between his conscience and his impulses would have made life a torture. He also shrank from the Law, although Southey often told him that he was well fitted for the higher parts of the profession. He had studied military history with great interest, and the strategy of war; and he always fancied that he had talents for command; and he at one time thought of a military life, but then he was without connections, and he felt, if he were ordered to the West Indies, his talents would not save him from the yellow-fever, and he gave that up."—(*Memoirs*, ii., 466.) It is curious to fancy Wordsworth a soldier. Certain points of likeness between him and Wellington have often struck me. They resemble each other in practical good sense, fidelity to duty, courage, and also in a kind of precise uprightness which made their personal character somewhat uninteresting. But what was decorum in Wellington was piety in Wordsworth, and the entire absence of imagination (the great point of dissimilarity) perhaps helped as much as anything to make Wellington a great commander.

was for the most part written, and that plan of the *Lyrical Ballads* suggested which gave Wordsworth a clew to lead him out of the metaphysical labyrinth in which he was entangled. It was agreed between the two young friends, that Wordsworth was to be a philosophic poet, and, by a good fortune uncommon to such conspirators, Nature had already consented to the arrangement. In July 1797 the two Wordsworths removed to Allfoxden in Somersetshire, that they might be near Coleridge, who in the meanwhile had married and settled himself at Nether-Stowey. In November "The Borderers" was finished, and Wordsworth went up to London with his sister to offer it for the stage. The good Genius of the poet again interposing, the play was decisively rejected, and Wordsworth went back to Allfoxden, himself the hero of that first tragi-comedy so common to young authors.

The play has fine passages, but is as unreal as *Jane Eyre*. It shares with many of Wordsworth's narrative poems the defect of being written to illustrate an abstract moral theory, so that the overbearing thesis is continually thrusting the poetry to the wall. Applied to the drama, such predestination makes all the personages puppets, and disenables them for being characters. Wordsworth seems to have felt this when he published "The Borderers" in 1842, and says in a note that it was "at first written . . . without any view to [its exhibition upon the stage]." But he was mistaken. The contemporaneous letters of Coleridge to Cottle show that he was long in giving up the hope of getting it accepted by some theatrical manager.

He now applied himself to the preparation of the first volume of the *Lyrical Ballads* for the press, and it was published toward the close of 1798. The book, which contained also "The Ancient Mariner" of Coleridge, attracted little notice, and that in great part contemptuous. When Mr. Cottle, the publisher, shortly after sold his copyrights to Mr. Longman, that of the *Lyrical Ballads* was reckoned at zero, and it was at last given up to the authors. A few persons were not wanting, however, who discovered the dawn-streaks of a new day in

that light which the critical fire-brigade thought to extinguish with a few contemptuous spurts of cold water.\*

Lord Byron describes himself as waking one morning and finding himself famous, and it is quite an ordinary fact, that a blaze may be made with a little saltpetre that will be stared at by thousands who would have thought the sunrise tedious. If we may believe his biographer, Wordsworth might have said that he awoke and found himself in-famous, for the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* undoubtedly raised him to the distinction of being the least popular poet in England. Parnassus has two peaks—the one where improvising poets cluster; the other where the singer of deep secrets sits alone—a peak veiled sometimes from the whole morning of a generation by earth-born mists and smoke of kitchen fires, only to glow the more consciously at sunset, and after nightfall to crown itself with imperishable stars. Wordsworth had that self-trust which in the man of genius is sublime, and in the man of talent insufferable. It mattered not to him though all the reviewers had been in a chorus of laughter or conspiracy of silence behind him. He went quietly over to Germany to write more *Lyrical Ballads*, and to begin a poem on the growth of his own mind, at a time when there were only two men in the world (himself and Coleridge) who were aware that he had one, or at least one anywise differing from those mechanically uniform ones which are stuck drearily, side by side, in the great pin-paper of society.

\* Cottle says, "The sale was so slow and the severity of most of the reviews so great that its progress to oblivion seemed to be certain." But the notices in the *Monthly* and *Critical Reviews* (then the most influential) were fair, and indeed favourable, especially to Wordsworth's share in the volume. The *Monthly* says, "So much genius and originality are discovered in this publication that we wish to see another from the same hand." The *Critical*, after saying that "in the whole range of English poetry we scarcely recollect anything superior to a passage in 'Lines written near Tintern Abbey,'" sums up thus: "Yet every piece discovers genius; and ill as the author has frequently employed his talents, they certainly rank him with the best of living poets." Such treatment cannot surely be called discouraging.



In Germany Wordsworth dined in company with Klopstock, and after dinner they had a conversation, of which Wordsworth took notes. The respectable old poet, who was passing the evening of his days by the chimney-corner, Darby and Joan like, with his respectable Muse, seems to have been rather bewildered by the apparition of a living genius. The record is of value now chiefly for the insight it gives us into Wordsworth's mind. Among other things he said, "that it was the province of a great poet to raise people up to his own level, not to descend to theirs"—memorable words, the more memorable that a literary life of sixty years was in keeping with them.

It would be instructive to know what were Wordsworth's studies during his winter in Goslar. De Quincey's statement is mere conjecture. It may be guessed fairly enough that he would seek an entrance to the German language by the easy path of the ballad, a course likely to confirm him in his theories as to the language of poetry. The Spinosism with which he has been not unjustly charged was certainly not due to any German influence, for it appears unmistakably in the "Lines composed at Tintern Abbey" in July 1798. It is more likely to have been derived from his talks with Coleridge in 1797.\* When Emerson visited him in 1833, he spoke with loathing of *Wilhelm Meister*, a part of which he had read in Carlyle's translation apparently. There was some affectation in this, it should seem, for he had read Smollett. On the whole, it may be fairly concluded that the help of Germany in the development of his genius may be reckoned as very small, though there is certainly a marked resemblance both in form and sentiment between some of his earlier lyrics and those of Goethe. His poem of the "Thorn," though vastly more imaginative, may have been suggested by Bürger's *Pfarrer's*

\* A very improbable story of Coleridge's in the *Biographia Literaria* represents the two friends as having incurred a suspicion of treasonable dealings with the French enemy by their constant references to a certain "Spy Nosey." The story at least seems to show how they pronounced the name, which was exactly in accordance with the usage of the last generation in New England.

*Tochter von Taubenhain.* The little grave *drei Spannen lang*, in its conscientious measurement, certainly recalls a famous couplet in the English poem.

After spending the winter at Goslar, Wordsworth and his sister returned to England in the spring of 1799, and settled at Grasmere in Westmoreland. In 1800, the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* being exhausted, it was republished with the addition of another volume, Mr. Longman paying £100 for the copyright of two editions. The book passed to a second edition in 1802, and to a third in 1805.\* Wordsworth sent a copy of it, with a manly letter, to Mr. Fox, particularly recommending to his attention the poems "Michael" and "The Brothers," as displaying the strength and permanence among a simple and rural population of those domestic affections which were certain to decay gradually under the influence of manufactories and poor-houses. Mr. Fox wrote a civil acknowledgment, saying that his favourites among the poems were "Harry Gill," "We are Seven," "The Mad Mother," and "The Idiot," but that he was prepossessed against the use of blank verse for simple subjects. Any political significance in the poems he was apparently unable to see. To this second edition Wordsworth prefixed an argumentative Preface, in which he nailed to the door of the cathedral of English song the critical theses which he was to maintain against all comers in his poetry and his life. It was a new thing for an author to undertake to show the goodness of his verses by the logic and learning of his prose; but Wordsworth carried to the reform of poetry all that fervour and faith which had lost their political object, and it is another proof of the sincerity and greatness of his mind, and of that

\* Wordsworth found (as other original minds have since done) a hearing in America sooner than in England. James Humphreys, a Philadelphia bookseller, was encouraged by a sufficient list of subscribers to reprint the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. The second English edition, however, having been published before he had wholly completed his reprinting, was substantially followed in the first American, which was published in 1802.

heroic simplicity which is their concomitant, that he could do so calmly what was sure to seem ludicrous to the greater number of his readers. Fifty years have since demonstrated that the true judgment of one man outweighs any counterpoise of false judgment, and that the faith of mankind is guided to a man only by a well-founded faith in himself. To this *Defensio* Wordsworth afterwards added a supplement, and the two form a treatise of permanent value for philosophic statement and decorous English. Their only ill effect has been, that they have encouraged many otherwise deserving young men to set a Sibylline value on their verses in proportion as they were unsaleable. The strength of an argument for self-reliance drawn from the example of a great man depends wholly on the greatness of him who uses it; such arguments being like coats of mail, which, though they serve the strong against arrow-flights and lance-thrusts, may only suffocate the weak or sink him the sooner in the waters of oblivion.

An advertisement prefixed to the *Lyrical Ballads*, as originally published in one volume, warned the reader that "they were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far *the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society* is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." In his preface to the second edition, in two volumes, Wordsworth already found himself forced to shift his ground a little (perhaps in deference to the wider view and finer sense of Coleridge), and now says of the former volume that "it was published as an experiment which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement, *a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation*, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted which a poet may *rationaly endeavour* to impart."\* Here is evidence of a retreat towards a safer position, though Wordsworth seems to have remained unconvinced at heart, and for many years longer clung obstinately to the passages of bald prose into

\* Some of the weightiest passages in this Preface, as it is now printed, were inserted without notice of date in the edition of 1815.



which his original theory had betrayed him. In 1815 his opinions had undergone a still further change, and an assiduous study of the qualities of his own mind and of his own poetic method (the two subjects in which alone he was ever a thorough scholar) had convinced him that poetry was in no sense that appeal to the understanding which is implied by the words "rationally endeavour to impart." In the preface of that year he says, "The observations prefixed to that portion of these volumes which was published many years ago under the title of *Lyrical Ballads* have so little of special application to the greater part of the present enlarged and diversified collection, that they could not with propriety stand as an introduction to it." It is a pity that he could not have become an earlier convert to Coleridge's pithy definition, that "prose was words in their best order, and poetry the *best* words in the best order." But idealisation was something that Wordsworth was obliged to learn painfully. It did not come to him naturally as to Spenser and Shelley and to Coleridge in his higher moods. Moreover, it was in the too frequent choice of subjects incapable of being idealised without a manifest jar between theme and treatment that Wordsworth's great mistake lay. For example, in "The Blind Highland Boy" he had originally the following stanzas :—

" Strong is the current, but be mild,  
Ye waves, and spare the helpless child !  
If ye in anger fret or chafe,  
A bee-hive would be ship as safe  
As that in which he sails.

" But say, what was it? Thought of fear !  
Well may ye tremble when ye hear !  
—A household tub like one of those  
Which women use to wash their clothes  
This carried the blind boy."

In endeavouring to get rid of the downright vulgarity of phrase in the last stanza, Wordsworth invents an impossible tortoise-shell, and thus robs his story of the reality which alone

gave it a living interest. Any extemporised raft would have floated the boy down to immortality. But Wordsworth never quite learned the distinction between Fact, which suffocates the Muse, and Truth, which is the very breath of her nostrils. Study and self-culture did much for him, but they never quite satisfied him that he was capable of making a mistake. He yielded silently to friendly remonstrance on certain points, and gave up, for example, the ludicrous exactness of

"I've measured it from side to side,  
 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide."

But I doubt if he was ever really convinced, and to his dying day he could never quite shake off that habit of over-minute detail which renders the narratives of uncultivated people so tedious, and sometimes so distasteful.\* "Simon Lee," after his latest revision, still contains verses like these:—

"And he is lean and he is sick;  
 His body, dwindled and awry,  
 Rests upon ankles swollen and thick;  
 His legs are thin and dry

Few months of life he has in store,  
 As he to you will tell,  
 For still, the more he works, the more  
 Do his weak ankles swell,"—

which are not only prose, but *bad* prose, and moreover guilty of the same fault for which Wordsworth condemned Dr. Johnson's famous parody on the ballad-style—that their

\* "On my alluding to the line,

'Three feet long and two feet wide,'

and confessing that I dared not read them aloud in company, he said, 'They ought to be liked.'"—(Crabb Robinson, 9th May 1815.) His ordinary answer to criticisms was that he considered the power to appreciate the passage criticised as a test of the critic's capacity to judge of poetry at all.

"*matter* is contemptible." The sonorousness of conviction with which Wordsworth sometimes gives utterance to common-places of thought and trivialities of sentiment has a ludicrous effect on the profane, and even on the faithful, in unguarded moments. We are reminded of a passage in the "Excursion:—"

"List! I heard  
From yon huge breast of rock a solemn bleat,  
*Sent forth as if it were the mountain's voice.*"

In 1800 the friendship of Wordsworth with Lamb began, and was thenceforward never interrupted. He continued to live at Grasmere, conscientiously diligent in the composition of poems, secure of finding the materials of glory within and around him; for his genius taught him that inspiration is no product of a foreign shore, and that no adventurer ever found it, though he wandered as long as Ulysses. Meanwhile the appreciation of the best minds and the gratitude of the purest hearts gradually centred more and more towards him. In 1802 he made a short visit to France, in company with Miss Wordsworth, and soon after his return to England was married to Mary Hutchinson, on the 4th of October of the same year. Of the good fortune of this marriage no other proof is needed than the purity and serenity of his poems, and its record is to be sought nowhere else.

On the 18th of June 1803 his first child, John, was born, and on the 14th of August of the same year he set out with his sister on a foot journey into Scotland. Coleridge was their companion during a part of this excursion, of which Miss Wordsworth kept a full diary. In Scotland he made the acquaintance of Scott, who recited to him a part of the "*Lay of the Last Minstrel*," then in manuscript. The travellers returned to Grasmere on the 25th of September. It was during this year that Wordsworth's intimacy with the excellent Sir George Beaumont began. Sir George was an amateur painter of considerable merit, and his friendship was undoubtedly of service to Wordsworth in making him familiar with the laws of a sister art, and thus contributing to enlarge the sympathies of his criticism, the tendency of which was toward too great



exclusiveness. Sir George Beaumont, dying in 1827, did not forego his regard for the poet, but contrived to hold his affection in mortmain by the legacy of an annuity of £100, to defray the charges of a yearly journey.

In March 1805 the poet's brother, John, lost his life by the shipwreck of the *Abergavenny* East-Indiaman, of which he was captain. He was a man of great purity and integrity, and sacrificed himself to his sense of duty by refusing to leave the ship till it was impossible to save him. Wordsworth was deeply attached to him, and felt such grief at his death as only solitary natures like his are capable of, though mitigated by a sense of the heroism which was the cause of it. The need of mental activity as affording an outlet to intense emotion may account for the great productiveness of this and the following year. He now completed "The Prelude," wrote "The Wagoner," and increased the number of his smaller poems enough to fill two volumes, which were published in 1807.

This collection, which contained some of the most beautiful of his shorter pieces, and among others the incomparable Odes to Duty and on Immortality, did not reach a second edition till 1815. The reviewers had another laugh, and rival poets pillaged while they scoffed, particularly Byron, among whose verses a bit of Wordsworth showed as incongruously as a sacred vestment on the back of some buccaneering plunderer of an abbey.\* There was a general combination to put him down, but on the other hand there was a powerful party in his favour, consisting of William Wordsworth. He not only continued in good heart himself, but, reversing the order usual on such occasions, kept up the spirits of his friends.†

\* Byron, then in his twentieth year, wrote a review of these volumes not, on the whole, unfair. Crabb Robinson is reported as saying that Wordsworth was indignant at the *Edinburgh Review's* attack on "Hours of Idleness." "The young man will do something if he goes on," he said.

† The Rev. Dr. Wordsworth has encumbered the memory of his uncle with two volumes of Memoirs, which for confused dreariness are only matched by the Rev. Mark Noble's *History of the Protectorate House of Cromwell*. It is a misfortune that his materials were not put into the

Wordsworth passed the winter of 1806-7 in a house of Sir George Beaumont's, at Coleorton in Leicestershire, the cottage at Grasmere having become too small for his increased family. On his return to the Vale of Grasmere he rented the house at Allan Bank, where he lived three years. During this period he appears to have written very little poetry, for which his biographer assigns as a primary reason the smokiness of the Allan Bank chimneys. This will hardly account for the failure of the summer crop, especially as Wordsworth composed chiefly in the open air. It did not prevent him from writing a pamphlet upon the Convention of Cintra, which was published too late to attract much attention, though Lamb says that its effect upon him was like that which one of Milton's tracts might have had upon a contemporary.\* It was at Allan Bank that

hands of Professor Reed, whose notes to the American edition are among the most valuable parts of it, as they certainly are the clearest. The book contains, however, some valuable letters of Wordsworth; and those relating to this part of his life should be read by every student of his works, for the light they throw upon the principles which governed him in the composition of his poems. In a letter to Lady Beaumont (May 21, 1807) he says, "Trouble not yourself upon their present reception; of what moment is that compared with what I trust is their destiny!—to console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier; to teach the young and the gracious of every age, to see, to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous; this is their office, which I trust they will faithfully perform long after we (that is, all that is mortal of us) are mouldered in our graves. . . . To conclude, my ears are stone-dead to this idle buzz [of hostile criticism], and my flesh as insensible as iron to these petty stings; and, after what I have said, I am sure yours will be the same. I doubt not that you will share with me an invincible confidence that my writings (and among them these little poems) will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society wherever found; and that they will in their degree be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier." Here is an odd reversal of the ordinary relation between an unpopular poet and his little public of admirers; it is he who keeps up their spirits, and supplies them with faith from his own inexhaustible cistern.

\* "Wordsworth's pamphlet will fail of producing any general effect, because the sentences are long and involved; and his friend De Quincey, who corrected the press, has rendered them more obscure by an unusual

Coleridge dictated "The Friend," and Wordsworth contributed to it two essays, one in answer to a letter of Mathetes\* (Professor Wilson), and the other on Epitaphs, republished in the Notes to "The Excursion." Here also he wrote his "Description of the Scenery of the Lakes." Perhaps a truer explanation of the comparative silence of Wordsworth's Muse during these years is to be found in the intense interest which he took in current events, whose variety, picturesqueness, and historical significance were enough to absorb all the energies of his imagination.

In the spring of 1811 Wordsworth removed to the Parsonage at Grasmere. Here he remained two years, and here he had his second intimate experience of sorrow in the loss of two of his children, Catharine and Thomas, one of whom died 4th June, and the other 1st December 1812.† Early in 1813 he bought Rydal Mount, and, having removed thither, changed his abode no more during the rest of his life. In March of this year he was appointed Distributor of Stamps for the county of Westmoreland, an office whose receipts rendered him independent, and whose business he was able to do by deputy, thus leaving him ample leisure for nobler duties. De Quincey speaks of this appointment as an instance of the remarkable good-luck which waited upon Wordsworth through his whole life. In our view it is only another illustration of that scripture which describes the righteous as never forsaken. Good-luck is the willing handmaid of upright, energetic character, and conscientious observance of duty. Wordsworth owed his nomination to

system of punctuation."—(Southey to Scott, 30th July 1809.) The tract is, as Southey hints, heavy.

\* The first essay in the third volume of the second edition.

† Wordsworth's children were:—

John, born 18th June 1803; still living; a clergyman.

Dorothy, born 16th August 1804; died 9th July 1847.

Thomas, born 16th June 1806; died 1st December 1812.

Catharine, born 6th September 1808; died 4th June 1812.

William, born 12th May 1810; succeeded his father as Stamp Distributor.



the friendly exertions of the Earl of Lonsdale, who desired to atone as far as might be for the injustice of the first Earl, and who respected the honesty of the man more than he appreciated the originality of the poet.\* The Collectorship at Whitehaven (a more lucrative office) was afterwards offered to Wordsworth, and declined. He had enough for independence, and wished nothing more. Still later, on the death of the Stamp-Distributor for Cumberland, a part of that district was annexed to Westmoreland, and Wordsworth's income was raised to something more than £1000 a-year.

In 1814 he made his second tour in Scotland, visiting Yarrow in company with the Ettrick Shepherd. During this year "The Excursion" was published, in an edition of five hundred copies, which supplied the demand for six years. Another edition of the same number of copies was published in 1827, and not exhausted till 1834. In 1815 "The White Doe of Rylstone" appeared, and in 1816 "A Letter to a Friend of Burns," in which Wordsworth gives his opinion upon the limits to be observed by the biographers of literary men. It contains many valuable suggestions, but allows hardly scope enough for personal details, to which he was constitutionally indifferent.† Nearly the same date may be ascribed to a rhymed translation of the first three books of the *Æneid*, a specimen of which was printed in the Cambridge *Philological Museum* (1832). In 1819 "Peter Bell," written twenty years before, was published, and, perhaps in consequence of the ridicule of the reviewers, found a more rapid sale than any of his previous volumes. "The Waggoner," printed in the same year, was less successful.

\* Good luck (in the sense of *Chance*) seems properly to be the occurrence of Opportunity to one who has neither deserved nor knows how to use it. In such hands it commonly turns to ill-luck. Moore's Bermudan appointment is an instance of it. Wordsworth had a sound common-sense and practical conscientiousness, which enabled him to fill his office as well as Dr. Franklin could have done. A fitter man could not have been found in Westmoreland.

† "I am not one who much or oft delight  
In personal talk."

His next publication was the volume of *Sonnets on the river Duddon*, with some miscellaneous poems, 1820. A tour on the Continent in 1820 furnished the subjects for another collection, published in 1822. This was followed in the same year by the volume of *Ecclesiastical Sketches*. His subsequent publications were "Yarrow Revisited," 1835, and the tragedy of "The Borderers," 1842.

During all these years his fame was increasing slowly but steadily, and his age gathered to itself the reverence and the troops of friends which his poems and the nobly simple life reflected in them deserved. Public honours followed private appreciation. In 1838 the University of Dublin conferred upon him the degree of D.C.L. In 1839 Oxford did the same, and the reception of the poet (now in his seventieth year) at the University was enthusiastic. In 1842 he resigned his office of Stamp-Distributor, and Sir Robert Peel had the honour of putting him upon the civil list for a pension of £300. In 1843 he was appointed Laureate, with the express understanding that it was a tribute of respect, involving no duties except such as might be self-imposed. His only official production was an Ode for the installation of Prince Albert as Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. His life was prolonged yet seven years, almost, it should seem, that he might receive that honour which he had truly conquered for himself by the unflinching bravery of a literary life of half-a-century, unparalleled for the scorn with which its labours were received, and the victorious acknowledgment which at last crowned them. Surviving nearly all his contemporaries, he had, if ever any man had, a foretaste of immortality, enjoying in a sort his own posthumous renown, for the hardy slowness of its growth gave a safe pledge of its durability. He died on the 23rd of April 1850, the anniversary of the death of Shakespeare.

We have thus briefly sketched the life of Wordsworth—a life uneventful even for a man of letters; a life like that of an oak, of quiet self-development, throwing out stronger roots toward the side whence the prevailing storm-blasts blow, and of tougher fibre in proportion to the rocky nature of the soil in

which it grows. The life and growth of his mind, and the influences which shaped it, are to be looked for, even more than is the case with most poets, in his works, for he deliberately recorded them there.

Of his personal characteristics little is related. He was somewhat above the middle height, but, according to De Quincey, of indifferent figure, the shoulders being narrow and drooping. His finest feature was the eye, which was grey and full of spiritual light. Leigh Hunt says, "I never beheld eyes that looked so inspired, so supernatural. They were like fires, half burning, half smouldering, with a sort of acrid fixtured regard. One might imagine Ezekiel or Isaiah to have had such eyes." Southey tells us that he had no sense of smell, and Haydon that he had none of form. The best likeness of him, in De Quincey's judgment, is the portrait of Milton prefixed to Richardson's notes on "*Paradise Lost*." He was active in his habits, composing in the open air, and generally dictating his poems. His daily life was regular, simple, and frugal; his manners were dignified and kindly; and in his letters and recorded conversations it is remarkable how little that was personal entered into his judgment of contemporaries.

The true rank of Wordsworth among poets is, perhaps, not even yet to be fairly estimated, so hard is it to escape into the quiet hall of judgment uninflamed by the tumult of partisanship which besets the doors.

Coming to manhood, predetermined to be a great poet, at a time when the artificial school of poetry was enthroned with all the authority of long succession and undisputed legitimacy, it was almost inevitable that Wordsworth, who, both by nature and judgment was a rebel against the existing order, should become a partisan. Unfortunately, he became not only the partisan of a system, but of William Wordsworth as its representative. Right in general principle, he thus necessarily became wrong in particulars. Justly convinced that greatness only achieves its ends by implicitly obeying its own instincts, he perhaps reduced the following his instincts too much to a system, mistook his own resentments for the



promptings of his natural genius, and, compelling principle to the measure of his own temperament or even of the controversial exigency of the moment, fell sometimes into the error of making naturalness itself artificial. If a poet resolve to be original, it will end commonly in his being merely peculiar.

Wordsworth himself departed more and more in practice, as he grew older, from the theories which he had laid down in his prefaces ;\* but those theories undoubtedly had a great effect in retarding the growth of his fame. He had carefully constructed a pair of spectacles through which his earlier poems were to be studied, and the public insisted on looking through them at his mature works, and were consequently unable to see fairly what required a different focus. He forced his readers to come to his poetry with a certain amount of conscious preparation, and thus gave them beforehand the impression of something like mechanical artifice, and deprived them of the contented repose of implicit faith. To the child a watch seems to be a living creature ; but Wordsworth would not let his readers be

\* How far he swung backward toward the school under whose influence he grew up, and toward the style against which he had protested so vigorously, a few examples will show. The advocate of the language of common life has a verse in his "Thanksgiving Ode" which, if one met with it by itself, he would think the achievement of some later copyist of Pope :—

"While the *tubed engine* [the organ] feels the inspiring blast."

And in "The Italian Itinerant" and "The Swiss Goatherd" we find a thermometer or barometer called

"The well-wrought scale  
Whose sentient tube instructs to time  
A purpose to a fickle clime."

Still worse in the "Eclipse of the Sun," 1821 :—

"High on her speculative tower  
Stood Science, waiting for the hour  
When Sol was destined to endure  
That darkening."

So in "The Excursion,"

"The cold March wind raised in her tender throat  
Viewless obstructions."

children, and did injustice to himself by giving them an uneasy doubt whether creations which really throbbed with the very heart's blood of genius, and were alive with nature's life of life, were not contrivances of wheels and springs. A naturalness which we are told to expect has lost the crowning grace of nature. The men who walked in Cornelius Agrippa's visionary gardens had probably no more pleasurable emotion than that of a shallow wonder, or an equally shallow self-satisfaction in thinking they had hit upon the secret of the thaumaturgy ; but to a tree that has grown as God willed we come without a theory and with no botanical predilections, enjoying it simply and thankfully ; or the Imagination recreates for us its past summers and winters, the birds that have nested and sung in it, the sheep that have clustered in its shade, the winds that have visited it, the cloud-bergs that have drifted over it, and the snows that have ermined it in winter. The Imagination is a faculty that flouts at foreordination, and Wordsworth seemed to do all he could to cheat his readers of her company by laying out paths with a peremptory *Do not step off the gravel!* at the opening of each, and preparing pitfalls for every conceivable emotion, with guide-boards to tell each when and where it must be caught.

But if these things stood in the way of immediate appreciation, he had another theory which interferes more seriously with the total and permanent effect of his poems. He was theoretically determined not only to be a philosophic poet, but to be a *great* philosophic poet, and to this end he must produce an epic. Leaving aside the question whether the epic be obsolete or not, it may be doubted whether the history of a single man's mind is universal enough in its interest to furnish all the requirements of the epic machinery, and it may be more than doubted whether a poet's philosophy be ordinary metaphysics, divisible into chapter and section. It is rather something which is more energetic in a word than in a whole treatise, and our hearts uncloseth themselves instinctively at its simple *Open sesame!* while they would stand firm against the reading of the whole body of philosophy. In point of fact, the one element of

greatness which "The Excursion" possesses indisputably is heaviness. It is only the episodes that are universally read, and the effect of these is diluted by the connecting and accompanying lectures on metaphysics. Wordsworth had his epic mould to fill, and, like Benvenuto Cellini in casting his "Perseus," was forced to throw in everything, debasing the metal, lest it should run short. Separated from the rest, the episodes are perfect poems in their kind, and without example in the language.

Wordsworth, like most solitary men of strong minds, was a good critic of the substance of poetry, but somewhat niggardly in the allowance he made for those subsidiary qualities which make it the charmer of leisure and the employment of minds without definite object. It may be doubted, indeed, whether he set much store by any contemporary writing but his own, and whether he did not look upon poetry too exclusively as an exercise rather of the intellect than as a nepenthe of the imagination.\* He says of himself, speaking of his youth:—

"In fine,  
I was a better judge of thoughts than words,  
Misled in estimating words, not only  
By common inexperience of youth,  
But by the trade in classic niceties,  
The dangerous craft of culling term and phrase  
From languages that want the living voice  
To carry meaning to the natural heart;  
To tell us what is passion, what is truth,  
What reason, what simplicity and sense."†

Though he here speaks in the preterite tense, this was always true of him, and his thought seems often to lean upon a word too weak to bear its weight. No reader of adequate insight can help regretting that he did not earlier give himself to "the trade of classic niceties." It was precisely this which gives to the blank-verse of Landor the severe dignity and reserved force

\* According to Landor, he pronounced all Scott's poetry to be "not worth five shillings."

† "Prelude," Book vi.



which alone among later poets recall the tune of Milton, and to which Wordsworth never attained. Indeed, Wordsworth's blank-verse (though the passion be profounder) is always essentially that of Cowper. They were alike also in their love of outward nature and of simple things. The main difference between them is one of scenery rather than of sentiment, between the life-long familiar of the mountains and the dweller on the plain.

It cannot be denied that in Wordsworth the very highest powers of the poetic mind were associated with a certain tendency to the diffuse and commonplace. It is in the understanding (always prosaic) that the great golden veins of his imagination are imbedded.\* He wrote too much to write always well; for it is not a great Xerxes-army of words, but a compact Greek ten thousand, that march safely down to posterity. He set tasks to his divine faculty, which is much the same as trying to make Jove's eagle do the service of a clucking hen. Throughout "The Prelude" and "The Excursion" he seems striving to bind the wizard Imagination with the sand-ropes of dry disquisition, and to have forgotten the potent spell-word which would make the particles cohere. There is an arenaceous quality in the style which makes progress wearisome. Yet with what splendours as of mountain-sunsets are we rewarded! what golden rounds of verse do we not see stretching heavenward with angels ascending and descending! what haunting harmonies hover around us deep and eternal like the undying barytone of the sea! and if we are compelled to fare through sands and desert wildernesses, how often do we not hear airy shapes that syllable our names with a startling

\* This was instinctively felt, even by his admirers. Miss Martineau said to Crabb Robinson in 1839, speaking of Wordsworth's conversation: "Sometimes he is annoying from the pertinacity with which he dwells on trifles; at other times he flows on in the utmost grandeur, leaving a strong impression of inspiration." Robinson tells us that he read "Resolution" and "Independence" to a lady, who was affected by it even to tears, and then said, "I have not heard anything for years that so much delighted me; but, *after all, it is not poetry.*"

personal appeal to our highest consciousness and our noblest aspiration, such as we wait for in vain in any other poet!

Take from Wordsworth all which an honest criticism cannot but allow, and what is left will show how truly great he was. He had no humour, no dramatic power, and his temperament was of that dry and juiceless quality, that in all his published correspondence you shall not find a letter, but only essays. If we consider carefully where he was most successful, we shall find that it was not so much in description of natural scenery, or delineation of character, as in vivid expression of the effect produced by external objects and events upon his own mind, and of the shape and hue (perhaps momentary) which they in turn took from his mood or temperament. His finest passages are always monologues. He had a fondness for particulars, and there are parts of his poems which remind us of local histories in the undue relative importance given to trivial matters. He was the historian of Wordsworthshire. This power of particularisation (for it is as truly a power as generalisation) is what gives such vigour and greatness to single lines and sentiments of Wordsworth, and to poems developing a single thought or sentiment. It was this that made him so fond of the sonnet. That sequestered nook forced upon him the limits which his fecundity (if I may not say his garrulity) was never self-denying enough to impose on itself. It suits his solitary and meditative temper, and it was there that Lamb (an admirable judge of what was permanent in literature) liked him best. Its narrow bounds, but fourteen paces from end to end, turn into a virtue his too common fault of giving undue prominence to every passing emotion. He excels in monologue, and the law of the sonnet tempers monologue with mercy. In "The Excursion" we are driven to the subterfuge of a French verdict of extenuating circumstances. His mind had not that reach and elemental movement of Milton's, which, like the trade-wind, gathered to itself thoughts and images like stately fleets from every quarter; some deep with silks and spicery, some brooding over the silent thunders of their battailous armaments, but all swept forward in their destined track, over the long

billows of his verse, every inch of canvas strained by the unifying breath of their common epic impulse. It was an organ that Milton mastered, mighty in compass, capable equally of the trumpet's ardours or the slim delicacy of the flute, and sometimes it bursts forth in great crashes through his prose, as if he touched it for solace in the intervals of his toil. If Wordsworth sometimes puts the trumpet to his lips, yet he lays it aside soon and willingly for his appropriate instrument, the pastoral reed. And it is not one that grew by any vulgar stream, but that which Apollo breathed through, tending the flocks of Admetus—that which Pan endowed with every melody of the visible universe—the same in which the soul of the despairing nymph took refuge and gifted with her dual nature—so that ever and anon, amid the notes of human joy or sorrow, there comes suddenly a deeper and almost awful tone, thrilling us into dim consciousness of a forgotten divinity.

Wordsworth's absolute want of humour, while it no doubt confirmed his self-confidence by making him insensible both to the comical incongruity into which he was often led by his earlier theory concerning the language of poetry and to the not unnatural ridicule called forth by it, seems to have been indicative of a certain dulness of perception in other directions.\* We cannot help feeling that the material of his nature was

\* Nowhere is this displayed with more comic self-complacency than when he thought it needful to rewrite the ballad of "Helen of Kirconnel"—a poem hardly to be matched in any language for swiftness of movement and savage sincerity of feeling. Its shuddering compression is masterly. Compare

"Curst be the heart that thought the thought,  
And curst the hand that fired the shot,  
When in my arms burd Helen dropt,  
That died to succour me!  
O, think ye not my heart was sair  
When my love dropt down and spake na mair?"

compare this with—

"Proud Gordon cannot bear the thoughts  
That through his brain are travelling,  
And, starting up, to Bruce's heart  
He launched a deadly javelin :



essentially prose, which, in his inspired moments, he had the power of transmuting, but which, whenever the inspiration failed or was factitious, remained obstinately leaden. The normal condition of many poets would seem to approach that temperature to which Wordsworth's mind could be raised only by the white heat of profoundly inward passion. And in proportion to the intensity needful to make his nature thoroughly aglow is the very high quality of his best verses. They seem rather the productions of nature than of man, and have the lastingness of such, delighting our age with the

Fair Ellen saw it when it came,  
And, *stepping forth to meet the same*,  
Did with her body cover  
The Youth, her chosen lover.

And Bruce (*as soon as he had slain  
The Gordon*) sailed away to Spain,  
And fought with rage incessant  
Against the Moorish Crescent."

These are surely the verses of an attorney's clerk "penning a stanza when he should engross." It will be noticed that Wordsworth here also departs from his earlier theory of the language of poetry by substituting a javelin for a bullet as less modern and familiar. Had he written—

"And Gordon never gave a hint,  
But, having somewhat picked his flint,  
Let fly the fatal bullet  
That killed that lovely pullet,"

it would hardly have seemed more like a parody than the rest. He shows the same insensibility in a note upon the "Ancient Mariner" in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*: "The poem of my friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of mariner, or as a human being who, having been long under the control of supernatural impressions, might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural; secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon; thirdly, that the events, having no necessary connection, do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat laboriously accumulated." Here is an indictment, to be sure, and drawn, plainly enough, by the attorney's clerk aforementioned. One would think that the strange charm of Coleridge's most truly original poems lay in this very emancipation from the laws of cause and effect.

same startle of newness and beauty that pleased our youth. Is it his thought? It has the shifting inward lustre of diamond. Is it his feeling? It is as delicate as the impressions of fossil ferns. He seems to have caught and fixed forever in immutable grace the most evanescent and intangible of our intuitions, the very ripple-marks on the remotest shores of being. But this intensity of mood which insures high quality is by its very nature incapable of prolongation, and Wordsworth, in endeavouring it, falls more below himself, and is, more even than many poets his inferiors in imaginative quality, a poet of passages. Indeed, one cannot help having the feeling sometimes that the poem is there for the sake of these passages, rather than that these are the natural jets and elations of a mind energised by the rapidity of its own motion. In other words, the happy couplet or gracious image seems not to spring from the inspiration of the poem conceived as a whole, but rather to have dropped of itself into the mind of the poet in one of his rambles, who then, in a less rapt mood, has patiently built up around it a setting of verse too often ungraceful in form, and of a material whose cheapness may cast a doubt on the priceless quality of the gem it encumbers.\* During the most happily productive period of his life, Wordsworth was impatient of what may be called the mechanical portion of his art. His wife and sister seem from the first to have been his scribes. In later years he had learned and often insisted on the truth that poetry was an art no less than a gift, and corrected his poems in cold blood, sometimes to their detriment. But he certainly had more of the vision than of the faculty divine, and was always a little numb on the side of form and proportion. Perhaps his best poem in these respects is the "Laodamia," and it is not un instructive

\* "A hundred times when, roving high and low,  
I have been harassed with the toil of verse,  
Much pains and little progress, and at once  
Some lovely Image in the song rose up,  
Full-formed, like Venus rising from the sea."

— *Prelude*, Book iv.

to learn from his own lips that "it cost him more trouble than almost anything of equal length he had ever written." His longer poems (miscalled epical) have no more intimate bond of union than their more or less immediate relation to his personality. Of character other than his own he had but a faint conception, and all the personages of "The Excursion" that are not Wordsworth are the merest shadows of himself upon mist, for his self-concentrated nature was incapable of projecting itself into the consciousness of other men and seeing the springs of action at their source in the recesses of individual character. The best parts of these longer poems are bursts of impassioned soliloquy, and his fingers were always clumsy at the *callida junctura*. The stream of narration is sluggish, if varied by times with pleasing reflections (*viridesque placido æquore sylvas*); we are forced to do our own rowing, and only when the current is hemmed in by some narrow gorge of the poet's personal consciousness do we feel ourselves snatched along on the smooth but impetuous rush of unmistakable inspiration. The fact that what is precious in Wordsworth's poetry was (more truly even than with some greater poets than he) a gift rather than an achievement should always be borne in mind in taking the measure of his power. I know not whether to call it height or depth this peculiarity of his, but it certainly endows those parts of his work which we should distinguish as Wordsworthian with an unexpectedness and impressiveness of originality such as we feel in the presence of Nature herself. He seems to have been half conscious of this, and recited his own poems to all comers with an enthusiasm of wondering admiration that would have been profoundly comic\* but for its simple sincerity, and for the fact that William Wordsworth, Esquire, of Rydal Mount, was one person, and the William Wordsworth whom he so heartily

\* Mr. Emerson tells us that he was at first tempted to smile, and Mr. Ellis Yarnall (who saw him in his eightieth year) says, "These quotations [from his own works] he read in a way that much impressed me; it seemed almost as if he were awed by the greatness of his own power, the gifts with which he had been endowed." (The italics are mine.)



reverenced quite another. We recognise two voices in him, as Stephano did in Caliban. There are Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch. If the prophet cease from dictating, the amanuensis, rather than be idle, employs his pen in jotting down some anecdotes of his master, how he one day went out and saw an old woman, and the next day did *not*, and so came home and dictated some verses on this ominous phenomenon, and how another day he saw a cow. These marginal annotations have been carelessly taken up into the text, have been religiously held by the pious to be orthodox scripture, and by dexterous exegesis have been made to yield deeply oracular meanings. Presently the real prophet takes up the word again, and speaks as one divinely inspired, the Voice of a higher and invisible power. Wordsworth's better utterances have the bare sincerity, the absolute abstraction from time and place, the immunity from decay, that belong to the grand simplicities of the Bible. They seem not more his own than ours and every man's, the word of the inalterable Mind. This gift of his was naturally very much a matter of temperament, and accordingly by far the greater part of his finer product belongs to the period of his prime, ere Time had set his lumpish foot on the pedal that deadens the nerves of animal sensibility.\* He did not grow as those poets do in whom the artistic sense is predominant. One of the most delightful fancies of the

\* His best poetry was written when he was under the immediate influence of Coleridge. Coleridge seems to have felt this, for it is evidently to Wordsworth that he alludes when he speaks of "those who have been so well pleased that I should, year after year, flow with a hundred nameless rills into *their* main stream."—(*Letters, Conversations, and Recollections of S. T. C.*, vol. i., pp. 5, 6.) "Wordsworth found fault with the repetition of the concluding sound of the participles in Shakespeare's line about bees:

'The singing masons building roofs of gold.

This, he said, was a line that Milton never would have written. Keats thought, on the other hand, that the repetition was in harmony with the continued note of the singers."—(*Leigh Hunt's Autobiography.*) Wordsworth writes to Crabb Robinson in 1837, "My ear is susceptible to the clashing of sounds almost to disease." One cannot help thinking that his training in these niceties was begun by Coleridge.

Genevese humorist, Toepffer, is the poet Albert, who, having had his portrait drawn by a highly-idealising hand, does his best afterwards to look like it. Many of Wordsworth's later poems seem like rather unsuccessful efforts to resemble his former self. They would never, as Sir John Harrington says of poetry, "keep a child from play and an old man from the chimney-corner."\*

Chief Justice Marshall once blandly interrupted a junior counsel who was arguing certain obvious points of law at needless length, by saying, "Brother Jones, there are *some* things which a Supreme Court of the United States sitting in equity may be presumed to know." Wordsworth has this fault of enforcing and restating obvious points till the reader feels as if his own intelligence was somewhat underrated. He is over-conscientious in giving us full measure, and once profoundly absorbed in the sound of his own voice, he knows not when to stop. If he feel himself flagging, he has a droll way of keeping the floor, as it were, by asking himself a series of questions sometimes not needing, and often incapable of answer. There are three stanzas of such near the close of the First Part of "Peter Bell," where Peter first catches a glimpse of the dead body in the water, all happily incongruous, and ending with one which reaches the height of comicality:—

"Is it a fiend that to a stake  
Of fire his desperate self is tethering?  
Or stubborn spirit doomed to yell,  
In solitary ward or cell,  
Ten thousand miles from all his brethren?"

The same want of humour which made him insensible to incongruity may perhaps account also for the singular unconsciousness of disproportion which so often strikes us in his poetry. For example, a little farther on in "Peter Bell" we find:—

"Now—like a tempest-shattered bark  
That overwhelmed and prostrate lies,  
And in a moment to the verge  
Is lifted of a foaming surge—  
Full suddenly the Ass doth rise!"

\* In the Preface to his translation of the "Orlando Furioso."

And one cannot help thinking that the similes of the huge stone, the sea-beast, and the cloud, noble as they are in themselves, are somewhat too lofty for the service to which they are put.\*

The movement of Wordsworth's mind was too slow and his mood too meditative for narrative poetry. He values his own thoughts and reflections too much to sacrifice the least of them to the interests of his story. Moreover, it is never action that interests him, but the subtle motives that lead to or hinder it. "The Wagoner" involuntarily suggests a comparison with "Tam O'Shanter" infinitely to its own disadvantage. "Peter Bell," full though it be of profound touches and subtle analysis, is lumbering and disjointed. Even Lamb was forced to confess that he did not like it. "The White Doe," the most Wordsworthian of them all in the best meaning of the epithet, is also only the more truly so for being diffuse and reluctant. What charms in Wordsworth and will charm forever is the

"Happy tone  
Of meditation slipping in between  
The beauty coming and the beauty gone."

A few poets, in the exquisite adaptation of their words to the tune of our own feelings and fancies, in the charm of their manner, indefinable as the sympathetic grace of woman, *are* everything to us without our being able to say that they are much in themselves. They rather narcotise than fortify. Wordsworth must subject our mood to his own before he admits us to his intimacy; but, once admitted, it is for life, and we find ourselves in his debt, not for what he has been to us in our hours of relaxation, but for what he has done for us as a reinforcement of faltering purpose and personal independence of character. His system of a Nature-cure, first professed by Dr. Jean Jaques and continued by Cowper, certainly breaks down as a whole. The Solitary of "The Excursion," who has not been cured of his scepticism by living among the medicinal mountains, is, so far as we can see, equally proof against the

\* In "Resolution" and "Independence."