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Papers on Poetry, by Alfred Austin**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRIDLING OF PEGASUS: PROSE
PAPERS ON POETRY ***

THE BRIDLING OF PEGASUS

THE BRIDLING OF PEGASUS PROSE PAPERS ON POETRY

BY
ALFRED AUSTIN
POET LAUREATE

Essay Index Reprint Series

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When Bellerophon, mounted on Pegasus, set forth to kill the Chimera, Minerva, Goddess of Wisdom, gave him a golden bridle with which to curb and guide his winged steed. Hence the title of this volume, "The Bridling of Pegasus."

TO
THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
SIR ALFRED C. LYALL, K.C.B.

MY DEAR LYALL,

I should think you must have observed, in the course of your reading, that even in the most accredited organs of opinion, principles of literary criticism, either explicitly stated or tacitly assumed, are often utterly ignored, in the notice of some work or other in the self-same number. The result can only be to create confusion in the public mind.

In this volume, consisting of papers written at various times during the last thirty years, no such contradiction will, I think, be found. Whether they be deemed sound or otherwise, they are at least coherent; the canons of criticism underlying them being that no verse which is unmusical or obscure can be regarded as Poetry, whatever other qualities it may possess; that Imagination in Poetry, as distinguished from mere Fancy, is the transfiguring of the Real, or actual, into the Ideal, by what Prospero calls his "so potent art"; and, if these conditions are complied with, that the greatness of the poem depends on the greatness of the theme.

To no one so much as to you am I indebted for criticism of the frankest kind. That alone would lead me to ask you to accept the dedication of these pages. But I find a yet further and stronger impulse to do so, in the long and uninterrupted friendship that has subsisted between us, and to which I attach so much value.

Believe me always,
Yours most sincerely,
ALFRED AUSTIN.

SWINFORD OLD MANOR,
January 1910.

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THE ESSENTIALS OF GREAT POETRY

The decay of authority is one of the most marked features of our time. Religion, politics, art, manners, speech, even morality, considered in its widest sense, have all felt the waning of traditional authority, and the substitution for it of individual opinion and taste, and of the wavering and contradictory utterances of publications ostensibly occupied with criticism and

supposed to be pronouncing serious judgments. By authority I do not mean the delivery of dogmatic decisions, analogous to those issued by a legal tribunal from which there is no appeal, that have to be accepted and obeyed, but the existence of a body of opinion of long standing, arrived at after due investigation and experience during many generations, and reposing on fixed principles or fundamentals of thought. This it is that is being dethroned in our day, and is being supplanted by a babel of clashing, irreconcilable utterances, often proceeding from the same quarters, even the same mouths.

In no department of thought has this been more conspicuous than in that of literature, especially the higher class of literature; and it is most patent in the prevailing estimate of that branch of literature to which lip-homage is still paid as the highest of all, viz. poetry. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, have not been openly dethroned; but it would require some boldness to deny that even their due recognition has been indirectly questioned by a considerable amount of neglect, as compared with the interest shown alike by readers and reviewers in poets and poetry of lesser stature. Are we to conclude from this that there is no standard, that there exist no permanent canons by which the relative greatness of poets and poetry can be estimated with reasonable conclusiveness? It is the purpose of this essay to show that such there are.

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The expression of individual opinion upon a subject so wide, no matter who the individual might be, would obviously be worthless; and I have no wish to do what has been done too often in our time, to substitute personal taste or bias for canons of criticism that have stood the test of time, and whereon the relative position of poets, great, less great, and comparatively inferior, has reposed. The inductive method was employed long before it was explicitly proclaimed as distinct from and more trustworthy than the merely deductive; and it is such method that will, if indirectly, be employed in this paper. Finally, I shall carefully abstain from the rhetorical enthusiasm or invective that clouds the judgment of writers and readers alike, and invariably degenerates into personal dogmatism, together with intolerance of those who think otherwise. After indicating, to the best of my ability, the laws of thought and the canons of criticism on which should repose the estimate of the poetic hierarchy, I will then ask the reader to observe if the conclusions leave the recognised Masters of Song—Homer, Æschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Virgil, Lucretius, Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron—unassailed and unshaken in their poetic supremacy.

There must perforce be certain qualities common to all poetry, whether the greatest, the less great, or the comparatively inferior, and whether descriptive, lyrical, idyllic, reflective, epic, or dramatic; and, so long as there existed any authority or body of generally accepted opinion on the subject, these were at least two such qualities, viz. melodiousness, whether sweet or sonorous, and lucidity or clearness of expression, to be apprehended, without laborious investigation, by highly cultured and simple readers alike. Melodiousness is a quality so essential to, and so inseparable from, all verse that is poetry, that it often, by its mere presence, endows with the character of poetry verse of a very rudimentary kind, verse that just crosses the border between prosaic and poetic verse, and would otherwise be denied admission to the territory of the Muses. Some of the enthusiasts to whom allusion has been made have, I am assured, declared of certain compositions of our time, "This would be poetry, even if it meant nothing at all"—a dictum calculated, like others enunciated in our days, to harden the plain man in his disdain of poetry altogether. It would not be difficult to quote melodious verse published in our time of which it is no exaggeration to say that the words in it are used rather as musical notes than as words signifying anything. In all likelihood such compositions, and the widespread liking for them, arise partly from the prevailing preference for music over the other arts, and in part from the mental indolence that usually accompanies emotion in all but the highest minds. Nevertheless it cannot be too much insisted on that music, or melodiousness, either sweet or sonorous, is absolutely indispensable to poetry; and where it is absent, poetry is absent, even though thought and wide speculation be conspicuous in it. As Horace put it long ago in his *Art of Poetry*,

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Non satis est pulchra esse poemata: dulcia sunt.

Almost as essential to poetry, and equally as regards poetry of the loftiest and poetry of the lowliest kind, is lucidity, or clearness of expression. No poet of much account is ever obscure, unless the text happens to be corrupt. When essays and even volumes are issued, since deemed indispensable for the understanding of a writer labelled as a poet, one may be quite sure that, however deep a thinker, he is not a poet of the first order, and not a poet at all in the passages that require such explanation. When one hears a well-authenticated story to the effect that a great scholar said of an English paraphrase of a well-known Greek poem, that he thought he had succeeded in gathering its meaning with the help of the original, one ought to know what to think of the work. Yet, though much of its author's verse is of that non-lucid character, it is habitually saluted by many critics as great poetry. With all respect, I venture to affirm that in such circumstances the designation must be a misnomer. I remember a poem being read to me, in perfect good faith, by its author, a man of great mental distinction and no little imagination, of which, though I listened with the closest attention, not only did I not understand one word, but I had not the faintest idea, as the colloquial phrase is, what it was about. When it was published, I asked three ardent admirers of the author to explain to me its meaning. They failed entirely to do so. The saying, concerning the orator, *clarescit urendo*, is even yet more applicable to the poet. He brightens as he burns. Yet, of recent times, verse fuliginous, clouded, and enshrouded in

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obscurity, has been hailed in many quarters, not only as poetry, but poetry of an exceptionally superior sort.

If it be urged that Dante, and even Shakespeare, do not always yield up their meaning to the reader at once, the allegation must be traversed absolutely. The immediate apprehension of the meaning of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia* presupposes an intimate acquaintance with the various dialects of the Italian language existing in Dante's time, and likewise with the erudition he scatters so profusely, if allusively, throughout his verse. But to the Italian readers of Dante, even superficially acquainted with those dialects, and adequate masters of the theology and the astronomy of Dante's time, those poems present no difficulty. Of Shakespeare, the greatest of all the poets in our language, let it be granted that he is not unoften one of the most careless and even most slovenly; but rarely is he so to the obscuring of his meaning, and never save casually, and in some brief passage. Yet let it not be inferred that I am of opinion that the full meaning of the greatest passages in the greatest poems is to be seized all at once, or by the average reader at all. That is "deeper than ever plummet sounded," though Tennyson's "indolent reviewer" apparently imagines that he at once fathoms the more intellectual poetry of his time. There can be but few readers, and possibly none but poets themselves, or persons who, to quote Tennyson again, "have the great poetic heart," who master the full significance of *Hamlet* or of the tersely told story of Francesca da Rimini. But the whole world at once understood the more obvious tenor of both, and is not puzzled by either. There is a sliding scale of understanding, as there is a sliding scale of inspiration. "We needs must love the highest when we see it"; but "when we see it" is an important qualification in the statement.

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I do not know that there are any qualities save melodiousness, sweet or sonorous, and lucidity, that are absolutely essential to whatever is to be regarded as poetry. In order to preclude misapprehension, let it be added that, while both are essential to poetry, they will not, by themselves, go far towards endowing verse with the poetic character. As an example of this, let me cite verse which is not unmelodious, though not specially remarkable for melodiousness, and not obscure, yet is not poetry, and hardly on the border of it:

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I have a boy of five years old;
His face is fair and fresh to see;
His limbs are cast in beauty's mould,
And dearly he loves me.

One morn we strolled on our dry walk,
Our quiet home all full in view,
And held such intermitted talk
As we are wont to do.

My thoughts on former pleasures ran;
I thought of Kilve's delightful shore,
Our pleasant home when spring began,
A long, long year before.

A day it was when I could bear
Some fond regrets to entertain;
With so much happiness to spare,
I could not feel a pain.

This blameless, correct, harmonious, and thoroughly lucid verse is by a poet who has written poetry of the noblest quality, no less a poet than Wordsworth. Yet he sorely tries his readers by page after page no more poetical than the foregoing; and he offered, on the first appearance of every volume of his, ample matter for such critics as would rather be sweepingly censorious than discriminating, to depreciate and even to ridicule him. His reverent admirers, who comprise all true lovers of poetry, are acquainted with, and probably possess, a copy of Matthew Arnold's Selection, entitled *Poems of Wordsworth*—a small volume which that gifted Wordsworthian, who knew and acknowledged with his usual sense of humour how many unpoetical "sermons," as he called them, Wordsworth had written, deliberately considered to contain all the real poetry he has left us. If I may refer for a moment to my own copy of it, this is scored with brief observations in pencil, the upshot of which is that the small fraction of his work, which Matthew Arnold too liberally wished to be regarded as *digna Phœbi*, would have again to be materially reduced by a dispassionate criticism.

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The most generous critic, if he is to be discriminating and just, cannot, let me say again, allow that any verse which is profoundly obscure or utterly unmusical, no matter how intellectual in substance, deserves the appellation of poetry. But on a very thin thread of meaning poetry, or a very fair imitation of it, may be hung by the aid of musical sound. Without going so far as Arnold again, who once wrote to me that Shelley's "My soul is an enchanted boat" seemed to him "mere musical verbiage," that poem might serve as an instance of verse which, in spite of tenuity of meaning, becomes poetry by sheer magic of exquisite music.

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float

Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;
And thine doth like an angel sit
Beside a helm conducting it,
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing
It seems to float ever, for ever,
Upon that many-winding river,
Between mountains, woods, abysses.
A paradise of wildernesses!
Till, like one in slumber bound,
Borne to the ocean, I float down, around,
Into a sea profound of ever-spreading sound.

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There is a magic of sound in the verse so enchanting to a reader that he may be pardoned for failing to observe at once that it is mainly musical fancy. Many may remember a line of Tennyson:

Like a tale of little meaning, though the words are strong.

And are we not compelled to feel, on second thoughts, if we have any capacity for discrimination, that here we have poetry of little meaning, though the verse is exquisitely melodious? This is, I conclude, what Arnold meant when he designated it, with a little exaggeration, "musical verbiage."

I have been obliged to linger somewhat on the threshold of my subject in order to emphasise the essential importance and inseparable quality of metrical melodiousness and lucidity in poetry, in order that, in whatever follows in this paper, these indispensable conditions may not be lost sight of; and also because of late each of them has been ousted from consideration by those who have striven, and still strive, to induce literary opinion to accept not only as poetry, but as great poetry, what is conspicuously lacking in both. That I shall have the assent, however, of the weight of authority on this point, and likewise that of the ordinary unaffected lover of poetry, I can scarcely doubt; the more so, as the conclusions thus far reached leave undisturbed upon their seats those mighty ones, of all tongues and all nations, whose universally recognised greatness has received the seal and sanction of many generations.

What may be called the first principles of poetry having thus been propounded, without any necessity for reaffirming them in the investigation of other conclusions yet to be reached, I may move on to what I imagine will be less familiar and perhaps more original in the search for "The Essentials of Great Poetry." If we carefully observe the gradual development of mental power in human beings, irrespectively of any reference to poetry, but as applied to general objects of human interest, we shall find that the advance from elementary to supreme expansion of mental power is in the following order of succession, each preceding element in mental development being retained on the appearance of its successor: (1) Perception, vague at first, as in the newly born, gradually becoming more definite, along with desires of an analogous kind; (2) Sentiment, also vague at first, but by degrees becoming more definite, until it attaches itself to one or more objects exclusively; (3) Thought or Reflection, somewhat hazy in its inception, and often remaining in that condition to the last; (4) Action, which is attended and assisted by the three preceding qualities of Perception, Sentiment, and Thought or Reflection. In other words, human beings perceive before they feel, perceive and feel before they think, perceive, feel, and think before they act, or at least before they act reasonably, though it may be but imperfectly, and though the later or higher stages may in many cases scarcely be reached at all.

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Now let us see if, in poetry, the same order or succession in development and expansion does not exist. Never forgetting the essential qualities of melody and lucidity, do we not find that mere descriptive verse, which depends on perception or observation, is the humblest and most elementary form of poetry; that descriptive verse, when suffused with sentiment, gains in value and charm; that if, to the foregoing, thought or reflection be superadded, there is a conspicuous rise in dignity, majesty, and relative excellence; and finally, that the employment of these in narrative action, whether epic or dramatic, carries us on to a stage of supreme excellence which can rarely be predicated of any poetry in which action is absent? If this be so, we have to the successive development of observation, feeling, thought, and action, an exact analogy or counterpart in (1) Descriptive Poetry; (2) Lyrical Poetry; (3) Reflective Poetry; (4) Epic or Dramatic Poetry; in each of which, melody and lucidity being always present, there is an advance in poetic value over the preceding stage, without the preceding one being eliminated from its progress.

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Once again let us have recourse to illustration, which, when fairly chosen, is probably the most effective method for securing assent. Wordsworth presents us with an ample supply of illustrations in three out of the four different kinds of poetry; and therefore to him let us have recourse. In reading the first stanza of *The Pet Lamb*, and two or three stanzas that follow, we have descriptive verse which may be regarded as very elementary poetry, but to which it would seem to many to be hypercritical to refuse that designation. It is too well known to need citation. The opening lines of *The Leech-Gatherer* display the same elementary descriptive character.

There was a roaring in the wind all night;
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;

But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the distant woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

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All things that love the Sun are out of doors;
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;
The grass is bright with rain-drops; on the moors
The Hare is running races in her mirth;
And with her feet she from the plashy earth
Raises a mist, that, glittering in the sun,
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.

I was a traveller then upon the moor;
I saw the Hare that raced about with joy;
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;
Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:
The pleasant season did my heart employ;
My old remembrances went from me wholly,
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

I perceive that, in my copy of the volume of Selections made by Matthew Arnold from the poems of Wordsworth, already alluded to, I have written at the end of *Margaret*, "If this be poetry, surely many people may say they have written poetry all their lives without knowing it." But as Matthew Arnold's critical opinions will carry more weight than mine, and he has included *Margaret* in his Selection, let me quote a dozen lines or so from its opening passage:

'Twas Summer, and the Sun had mounted high:
Southward the landscape indistinctly glared
Through a pale steam; but all the northern downs,
In clearest air ascending, showed far off
A surface dappled o'er with shadows flung
From brooding clouds; shadows that lay in spots
Determined and unmoved, with steady beams
Of bright and pleasant sunshine interposed;
Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss
Extends his careless limbs along the front
Of some huge cave, whose rocky ceiling casts
A twilight of its own, an ample shade,
Where the Wren warbles.

But there is, it must not be overlooked, merely Descriptive Poetry of a much higher kind than the foregoing, though Wordsworth may not be the best source from which to draw it. Perhaps its highest possibilities are to be found in Byron, and conspicuously in the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold*. Many of the passages of the kind that one remembers there are, however, either too much suffused with the poet's personal feeling, or too closely connected with great incidents in history and the fall of empires, to be quite pertinent examples. A minor but sufficient example taken from *Childe Harold* may suffice for illustration:

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It is the hush of night, and all between
Thy margin and the mountains, dusk, yet clear,
Mellow'd and mingling, yet distinctly seen,
Save darken'd Jura, whose capt heights appear
Precipitously steep; and drawing near,
There breathes a living fragrance from the shore,
Of flowers yet fresh with childhood; on the ear
Drops the light drip of the suspended oar,
Or chirps the grasshopper one good-night carol more.

Far finer instances of poetry essentially descriptive in the same poem may be referred to, *e.g.* Canto IV., stanza xcix., beginning "There is a stern round tower of other days"; stanza cvii., beginning with "Cypress and ivy, weed and wallflower grown"; stanza clxxiii., descriptive of Lake Nemi; and even—for it also is strictly descriptive—stanza cxl., opening with the well-known line "I see before me the gladiator lie."

It could not be allowed that any of these, considered separately, satisfies the conditions or essentials of great poetry, though, in company with others, they contribute to that character in a very great poem indeed. Moreover, they serve to show that even mere Descriptive Poetry, which I have spoken of as the "lowest" or most elementary kind of poetry, may rise to striking elevation of merit, and has its counterpart in the sliding scale of observation in various individuals.

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Let us now take a step, and a long one, in the scale of importance attained by the various kinds of poetry, and consider the classics of Lyrical Poetry. Here extensive quotation will be

less necessary, partly by reason of the wide ground Lyrical Poetry covers, and partly because of its relative popularity in our time, and the familiarity of so many readers with its most enchanting specimens. There is ample room for personal taste and individual idiosyncrasy within the vast boundaries of this fruitful field. Many persons are sadly wanting in observation; and to only a minority can real, serious thought be ascribed. But we all feel, we all have visitations of sentiment; and therefore to all of us is Lyrical Poetry more or less welcome.

The causes, personal and social, that have given to Lyrical Poetry in our time almost exclusive favour in public taste will be dealt with presently. It will distract less from our main purpose to confine ourselves for the present to the recognition of the fact, and to seek to show how very various are the degrees of eminence in Lyrical Poetry. The lyrical note is so natural to poets and poetry that we may expect to find it in the verse of all poets, though in a minor degree in didactic verse; while in some poets it almost monopolises their utterance. Though perhaps not obvious to many ears to-day, it lurks in no little of Pope's *Epistle of Eloisa to Abelard*, and is unmistakably present in his *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*. If I am asked if the lyrical note is to be found in Chaucer, the reply must be that, though Chaucer has left nothing which the modern reader would recognise as lyrical, what is called his iambic or five-foot metre is far more anapæstic and lyrical than is the case with any subsequent poet, except Shakespeare. There is a lilt in it equivalent to the lyrical note, which those who read as Chaucer wrote recognise at once. One has only to read the opening lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* to perceive this. Not quite to the same extent perhaps as in Chaucer, but withal very noticeably to the ear, the lyrical note is frequently to be caught in Spenser, even where he is not obviously offering the reader Lyrical Poetry; as, for instance, in this stanza in the first canto of the *Fairy Queen*, beginning:

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A little lowly hermitage it was,
Down in a dale, hard by a forest's side.

This is not Lyrical Poetry proper, as now understood. But Spenser has left us in his *Epithalamion* a lyrical poem with which only one other English lyric can be placed in competition for the first place. It is too long for more than one brief excerpt to be cited here:

Wake now, my love, awake! for it is time;
The rosy Morne long since left Tithones bed,
All ready to her silver coche to clyme;
And Phœbus gins to shew his glorious hed.
Hark! how the cheerefull birds do chaunt theyr laies
And carroll of loves praise.
The merry Larke hir mattins sings aloft;
The Thrush replyes; the Mavis descant playes;
The Ouzell shrills; the Ruddock warbles soft;
So goodly all agree, with sweet consent,
To this dayes meriment,
Ah! my deere love, why doe ye sleepe thus long,
When meeter were that ye should now awake,
T' awayt the comming of your joyous make,
And hearken to the birds love-learned song,
The deawy leaves among?
For they of joy and pleasance to you sing
That all the woods them answer, and theyr eccho ring.

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One is sorry to think that this long, lovely, and varied lyric is less known than it ought to be to the modern readers of Lyrical Poetry. I can only say to them, "Make haste to read it."

In Shakespeare's plays the lyrical note is so often to be heard in the blank verse that the poet's natural aptitude and inclination for singing were amply exercised there; and he gives most voice to it in such plays as *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*. But it recurs again and again throughout his dramas. Such lines as:

All over-canopied with lush woodbine,

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank,

Under the shade of melancholy boughs,

are illustrations of what I am pointing out.

Without dwelling on the excellent lyrics written in the reigns of Charles I. and Charles II., and confining ourselves to the *di majores* of poetry, we may pass on to Milton, whose *Allegro* and *Penseroso* as likewise the lyrics in *Comus*, are too familiar to every one to be more than mentioned as evidence of the persistence, in the past as in the present, of the warbling impulse in all poets. Heard but fitfully during the greater part of the eighteenth century, yet most arrestingly in Gray, Collins, and Burns, Lyrical Poetry from the last onward without intermission, to our own time, in Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson, is almost the only poetry that has in recent days been much listened to, or much written and talked about. This circumstance is far from being conclusive as to whether, during the same period, poems higher and greater than mere Lyrical Poetry have or have not been produced.

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But it is absolutely certain that, if produced, they have been, so far, more or less ignored; and that, if the same poets have written such and Lyrical Poetry as well, they will have been considered and estimated by the latter only.

But the domain of feeling and emotion in which Lyrical Poetry has room to display its power and versatility is so extensive that lyrics are very various in their themes and in the treatment of them. Love, religion, patriotism, cosmopolitan benevolence, being, as I have shown in *The Human Tragedy*, the most elevated and most permanent sources of human sentiment and emotion, there will necessarily be in Lyrical Poetry, even considered by itself, and apart from all the other forms of poetry, a scale of relative elevation and importance.

The love of individuals for each other, whether domestic, romantic, or sexual, is much more common than any of the other three, being practically universal; and it has given birth to so many well-known lyrics that it is unnecessary to cite any of them here. Some of them are very beautiful; but none of them, by reason of the comparative narrowness of their theme, satisfies the essentials of great poetry. Not even Tennyson's *Maud*, which is perhaps the most ambitious and the best known of long poems dedicated mainly to the subject, though it contains lovely passages, approaches greatness.

Though what is understood as religious sentiment comes next to the love of individuals for each other in the extent of its influence, it has produced much verse, but, it must be allowed, little poetry, the reason probably being that the religious sentiment of the few who are endowed with the gift of writing poetry differs from that of the average "religious" person. Nor can the fact be overlooked that there is a certain character of reserve in Protestantism which has operated since the Reformation against the growth of religious Lyrical Poetry. For that we must go either to pre-Reformation days, or to the poetry of those who, like George Herbert and the poetic kin of his time, clung to the Roman Catholic creed after the modification of belief and ritual in the Anglican Church; or to the poets in our own time trained in the Roman Catholic faith, and to that extent, and on that ground, debarred from wide popularity among a Protestant people. The De Veres, Faber, Coventry Patmore, and Newman, the last notably in his *Dream of Gerontius*, may be named as instances of what has been done in recent times in the sphere of religious poetry. Scott's lovely "Ave Maria" in *The Lady of the Lake*, and Byron's stanza beginning:

Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of prayer,

are briefer specimens of what may be, and has been contributed in later times to religious poetry; much smaller in bulk and volume than poetry dedicated to the love of individuals for each other, but higher in the rising scale of greatness, because of the greater dignity of its theme.

Patriotic Lyrical Poetry need not detain us long. Most patriotic verse, however spirited, is verse only, nothing or little more, though exceptions could be cited, such as Drayton's *Agincourt*, Tennyson's *Relief of Lucknow*, and *The Ballad of the "Revenge."* But if in patriotic Lyrical Poetry we include, as I think we should, poetry in the English tongue, but not concerning England or the British Empire, I may name Byron's "Isles of Greece" in *Don Juan*, which I had in my mind when I observed that there is in our language only one lyrical poem that can compete for the first place in Lyrical Poetry with Spenser's *Epithalamion*.

3. Reflective Poetry. Over Reflective Poetry, in itself a stage of advance beyond Descriptive Poetry and Lyrical Poetry in themselves, we need not linger long, for the reason that, though Reflective Poetry is ample in quantity, it is, outside the Drama, very limited in quality, most of it being of so prosaic a character as not only not to be ranked above average Lyrical Poetry, but far below it. Wordsworth furnishes us, for the purpose of illustration, with both kinds, the higher and the lower Reflective Poetry. As regards the latter, I would rather let Matthew Arnold, than whom there is no warmer admirer of Wordsworth, be the spokesman:

The Excursion abounds with Philosophy [I prefer to call it Thought or Reflection]; and therefore *The Excursion* is to the Wordsworthian what it never can be to the disinterested lover of poetry, a satisfactory work. "Duty exists," says Wordsworth in *The Excursion*; and then he proceeds thus:

... Immutably survive,
For our support, the measures and the forms
Which an abstract Intelligence supplies,
Whose kingdom is where time and space are not.

And the Wordsworthian is delighted, and thinks that here is a sweet union of philosophy and poetry. But the disinterested lover of poetry will feel that the lines carry us really not a step farther than the proposition which they would interpret; that they are a tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage, alien to the very nature of poetry.

Merely observing that I wholly agree with the foregoing estimate, I pass to the higher Reflective Poetry, of which Wordsworth has given us such splendid but comparatively brief instances. The *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, *Elegiac Stanzas suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle*, his best Sonnets, the *Character of the Happy Warrior*, the *Ode to Duty*, and, finally, the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* seem to me to place Wordsworth above all other English Poets in the domain of exclusively Reflective Poetry. I do not forget

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much noble Reflective Poetry in *Childe Harold*; but it is too much blent with other elements, and into it the active quality enters too strongly, for its more reflective features to be separated from them. Moreover, it generally falls far short of the intellectual note so strongly marked in Wordsworth's best Reflective Poetry, into which, be it added, both the descriptive and the lyrical notes, in accordance with the general law I am seeking to expound in this paper, enter very largely, if, of course, subordinately. It will be obvious, however, to any dispassionate lover of poetry, that a merely reflective poem of any great length cannot well be entitled to the designation of a great poem. Had such been possible, Wordsworth would have bequeathed it to us. *The Excursion* is the answer; which, notwithstanding a certain number of fine passages, is, for the most part, what Matthew Arnold says of it, "doctrine such as we hear in church, religious and philosophical doctrine; and the attached Wordsworthian loves passages of such doctrine, and brings them forward as proofs of his poet's excellence."

If the reader has followed me so far, with more or less assent, he will be prepared not only to allow, but of himself to feel, that there must be yet another kind or order of poetry, in which the greatest poems are to be found, poems that are neither exclusively nor mainly either descriptive, lyrical, or reflective, but into which all three elements enter subordinately, though none of them gives it its distinctive and supreme character.

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4. Epic and Dramatic Poetry. That supreme kind of poetry is Epic and Dramatic Poetry, though there may be very poor Epics, and Dramas in which true poetry is scarcely to be observed, just as we have seen that there is very inferior Descriptive, Lyrical, and Reflective Poetry. All that is asserted is that great epic and dramatic poems must be greater than the greatest poetry of the preceding kinds by reason of their wider range and (as a rule) the higher majesty of their theme, and of their including every other kind of poetry.

It will perhaps have been noticed that Epic and Dramatic Poetry are here placed in conjunction, not separately; and their being thus conjoined needs a word of explanation. Though there is a radical distinction between the two, this provisional union of them has been adopted in order to afford an opportunity of pointing out what I think is generally ignored—that poems which are essentially epical, or merely narrative, may be written in dialogue or dramatic form, and so mislead incautious readers into inferring that they are offered as dramas, in the acting sense of the term. It is because, while remaining substantially epical or narrative in character they may contain, here and there, dramatic situations, dramatic rhetoric, and dramatic converse. The *Iliad* is a conspicuous example of this; the movement in the earlier portion of it being full of debate and defiance among its characters, and these dramatic elements recurring, if less frequently, throughout the entire work. To many persons the episodes in the narrative of the *Divina Commedia* that give rise to converse, whether tender, terrible, or pathetic, are the most delightful portions of it. What is it that makes the first six books of *Paradise Lost* so much more telling than the later ones? Surely it is the magnificence of the speeches emanating from the mouths of the chief characters. *Childe Harold* is ostensibly only descriptive, reflective, and narrative; but the personality and supposed wrongs of Byron himself, so frequently introduced, confer on it, beyond these characters, certain features of the drama and of dramatic action. Moreover, the magnificent ruins bequeathed to the seven-hilled city by the fall of the Roman Empire enter so largely into the fourth canto that this includes in it every species of verse, from the descriptive to the dramatic. To cite a much smaller example, I once said to Tennyson, "Do you not think that, had one met in a tragedy with the couplet from Pope (*Ep. to the Sat. ii. 205*)—

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F. You're strangely proud ...

P. Yes, I am proud: I must be proud to see
Men not afraid of God, afraid of *me*

—one would be right in regarding it as very fine, dramatically?" and he replied, "Yes, certainly." I recall the circumstance because it is an extreme illustration of the momentary intrusion of one style into another.

By slow but successive stages we have reached conclusions that may be thus briefly stated. (1) The essentials of great poetry are not to be found in poetry exclusively descriptive. (2) They are rarely to be met with in poetry that is lyrical, and then only when reflection of a high order, as in Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*, or what is equivalent to action operating on a great theme, as in Byron's *Isles of Greece*, largely and conspicuously enters into these. (3) That they are to be met with in Reflective Poetry of the very highest character, but never throughout an exclusively reflective poem of any length. (4) That they are chiefly to be sought for and most frequently found in either epic or dramatic poetry where description, emotion, thought, and action all co-operate to produce the result; that result being, to adduce supreme examples, the *Iliad*, *Paradise Lost*, the *Divina Commedia*, the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*.

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Many years ago, in a couple of papers published in the *Contemporary Review* on "New and Old Canons of Poetic Criticism," I propounded, as the most satisfactory definition of poetry generally, that it is "the transfiguration, in musical verse, of the Real into the Ideal"; and I have more than once advocated the definition. The definition applies to poetry of all kinds. But, while this is so, the transfiguration must operate on a great theme greatly treated,

either lyrically, reflectively, epically, or dramatically, in order to produce great poetry.

I fancy I hear some people saying, "Quite so; who ever denied or doubted it?" The answer must be that, for some time past, it has been tacitly, and often explicitly, denied by critics and readers alike; reviewers to-day criticising poetry in utter disregard and contravention of any such canons, and readers in their conversation and practice following suit, apparently without any knowledge or suspicion that such canons exist. Had it been otherwise, an inquiry into the essentials of great poetry would have been unnecessary.

The permanent passions of mankind—love, religion, patriotism, humanitarianism, hate, revenge, ambition; the conflict between free will and fate; the rise and fall of empires—these are all great themes, and, if greatly treated, and in accordance with the essentials applicable to all poetry, may produce poetry of the loftiest kind; the underlying reason being what, as usual, has been better and more convincingly stated by Shakespeare than by any one else:

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We [actors on the stage] are not all alone unhappy:
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play.

For the great treatment of great themes in Epic, and yet more in Dramatic, Poetry, think of what is required! Not mere fancy, not mere emotion, but a wide and lofty imagination, a full and flexible style, a copious and ready vocabulary, an ear for verbal melody and all its cadences, profound knowledge of men, women, and things in general, a congenital and cultivated sense of form—the foundation of beauty and majesty alike, in all art; an experience of all the passions, yet the attainment to a certain majestic freedom from servitude to these; the descriptive, lyrical, and reflective capacity; abundance and variety of illustration; a strong apprehension and grasp of the Real, with the impulse and power to transfigure it into the Ideal, so that the Ideal shall seem to the reader to be the Real; in a word, "blood and judgment," as Shakespeare says, "so commingled." These are the qualifications of the writers that have stirred, and still stir, in its worthier portion, the admiration, reverence, and gratitude of mankind.

Even this does not exhaust the requisite endowments of those who aspire to write great poetry. Their sympathy with all that is demands from them a fund of practical good sense, too often lacking in merely lyrical poets—a circumstance that may render their work less attractive to the average person, and even make it seem to such to be wanting in genius altogether. Sane they must essentially be; and their native sanity must have been fortified by some share in practical affairs, while their robustness of mind must have received aid from the open air. They will be found to be neither extravagant optimists nor extravagant pessimists, but wise teachers and indulgent moralists; neither teaching nor preaching overmuch in their verse, but unintentionally and almost unconsciously communicating their wisdom to others by radiation. Dante always speaks of Virgil as "Il Saggio." Tennyson puts it well where he says of the poet, "He saw through good, through ill; He saw through his own soul." Architecture, sculpture, music, the kindred of his own art, must be appreciated by him; and nothing that affects mankind is alien to him.

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I should like to say, incidentally, and I hope I may do so without giving offence, that I have sometimes thought that, in an age much given to theorising and to considering itself more "scientific" than perhaps it really is, the diminution of practical wisdom, somewhat conspicuous of late in politics and legislation, is due in no small measure to the neglect of the higher poetry, in favour, where concern for poetry survives at all, of brief snatches of lyrical emotion. Hence legislation by emotion and haste.

If we ask ourselves, as it is but natural to do, what are the chief causes that have brought about this change in public taste and sentiment, I believe they will be found to be mainly as follow. (1) The decay of authority already mentioned. (2) The perpetual reading of novels of every kind, many of them of a pernicious nature, but nearly all of them calculated to indispose readers to care for any poetry save of an emotional lyrical character. (3) The increase—be it said with all due chivalry—of feminine influence and activity alike in society and literature; women, generally speaking, showing but a moderate interest in great issues in public life, and finding their satisfaction, so far as reading is concerned, in prose romances, newspapers, and short lyrics. (4) The febrile quality of contemporaneous existence; the ephemeral excitements of the passing hour; and the wholesale surrender to the transient as contrasted with the permanent, great poetry concerning itself only with this last—a circumstance that makes the *Odyssey*, for instance, as fresh to-day as though it had been published for the first time last autumn; whereas the life of most prose romances, like the lady's scanty attire, *commence à peine, et finit tout de suite*.

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I hope no one will imagine—for they would be mistaken in doing so—that these pages have been prompted by a disposition to depreciate the age in which we are living, and just as little to manifest disdain of it, though one need not conceal the opinion, in respect of the lower literary taste so widely prevalent, that, as Shakespeare says, "it is not and it cannot be for good." My object has been something very different from this. It has been to recall canons of poetry and standards of literary excellence which I believe can never be destroyed though for a time they may be obscured, and which have of late been too much ignored. That such neglect will in the very faintest degree prevent those whose instinct it is to say, with Virgil, "paulo majora canamus," from following their vocation, without a thought of

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readers or reviewers, I do not suppose. It is good for poets, and indeed for others, not to be too quickly appreciated. It is dangerous for them, and sometimes fatal, to be praised prematurely.

The great stumbling-block of literary criticism, alike for the professional critic and the unprofessional reader, is the tacit assumption that the opinions, preferences, and estimates of to-day are not merely passing opinions, preferences, and estimates, but will be permanent ones; opinions, preferences, and estimates for all future time. There is no foundation, save self-complacency, for such a surmise. What solid reason is there to suppose that the present age is any more infallible in its literary judgments than preceding ages? On the contrary, its infallibility is all the less probable because of the precipitation with which its opinions are arrived at. Yet past ages have been proved over and over again, in course of time, to be wrong in their estimate of contemporaneous poetry, in consequence of their mistaking the passing for the permanent. The consequence in our time of this error has been that one has seen the passing away of several works loudly declared on their appearance to be immortal. The only chance a critic has of being right in his judgments is to measure contemporary literature by standards and canons upon which rests the fame of the great poets and writers of the past, and, tried by which, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron have been assigned their enduring rank in the poetic hierarchy. "Blessings be with them," says Wordsworth (Sonnet xxv.):

Blessings be with them, and eternal praise,
Who gave us nobler lives and nobler cares,
The Poets who on earth have made us heirs
Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays.

It is only the great poets, the poets in whom we can recognise the essentials of greatness, who can do that for us. They are not rebels, as are too many lyrical poets, but reconcilers; and they offer to external things and current ideas both receptivity and resistance, being not merely of an age, but for all time. It is their thoughts and the verse in which their thoughts are embodied that are enduringly memorable. For great poetry, as Wordsworth teaches us in a single line, is not mere emotion, not mere subtle or sensuous singing, but

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Reason in her most exalted mood.

A still greater authority than Wordsworth, no other than Milton, has immortalised in verse the principles for which I have ventured to contend in prose. In *Paradise Regained* (iv. 255-266) he says:

There thou shalt hear and learn the secret power
Of harmony, in tones and numbers hit
By voice or hand, and various-measured verse,
Æolian charms and Dorian lyric odes,
And his who gave them breath but higher sung,
Blind Melesigenes, thence Homer called,
Whose poem Phœbus challenged for his own;
Thence what the lofty grave tragedians taught
In Chorus or Iambick, teachers best
Of moral prudence, with delight receiv'd,
In brief sententious precepts, while they treat
Of fate, and chance, and change in human life,
High actions and high passions best describing.

THE FEMININE NOTE IN ENGLISH POETRY

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Women, to whom a barbarous description, willingly accepted by themselves, has been applied, have recently been much in the public eye, and still more in the public prints. But I should not class them under the designation of feminine; and, though they may have invaded prose fiction, they have not been, and I think they never will be, met with in Poetry. They are noisy, but numerically weak. Eve listening to the Tempter, then bewailing her weakness; Ruth amid the alien corn; Magdalen and her box of spikenard; Helen of Troy following evil-hearted Paris; Beatrice in heaven; Una and the milk-white lamb; Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*; the Lily Maid of Astolat in the *Idylls of the King*—these are women of whom, or, at least, of the sentiments and sympathies of whom, as manifested in English poetry, I wish to speak. The most progressive age one can possibly conceive will never succeed in leaving human nature behind, and I have not the smallest doubt that women will continue to be womanly to the end of time.

What, then, is feminine as contrasted with masculine? what is womanly as compared with manly, whether in literature or in life? Men and women have many qualities in common, and resemble more than they differ from each other. But while, speaking generally, the man's

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main occupations lie abroad, the woman's main occupation is at home. He has to deal with public and collective interests; she has to do with private and individual interests. We need not go so far as to say, with Kingsley, that man must work and woman must weep; but at least he has to fight and to struggle, she has to solace and to heal. Ambition, sometimes high, sometimes low, but still ambition—ambition and success are the main motives and purpose of his life. Her noblest ambition is to foster domestic happiness, to bring comfort to the afflicted, and to move with unostentatious but salutary step over the vast territory of human affection. While man busies himself with the world of politics, with the world of commerce, with the rise and fall of empires, with the fortunes and fate of humanity, woman tends the hearth, visits the sick, consoles the suffering—in a word, in all she does, fulfils the sacred offices of love.

Now the highest literature—and Poetry is confessedly the highest literature—is a transfiguring reflex of life; and in its magic mirror we perforce see reflected all the thoughts, feelings, interests, passions, and events of human existence. In English poetry, therefore, we shall expect to hear both the masculine note and the feminine note; and in what proportions we hear them will be incidentally indicated in the course of my remarks. But it is the Feminine Note in which we are at present specially interested, and if I am asked to define briefly what I mean by this Feminine Note, I should say that I mean the private or domestic note, the compassionate note or note of pity, and the sentimental note or note of romantic love.

Now I am well aware there are numbers of people who look on poetry as something essentially and necessarily feminine, and who will say, "What do you mean by speaking of the Feminine Note in English poetry? Surely it has no other note, poetry being an effeminate business altogether, with which men, real robust men, need not concern themselves." The people who hold this opinion can have but a very limited acquaintance with English poetry, and a yet more limited familiarity with the poetry of other ages and other nations that has come down to us. As a matter of fact, though the feminine note has rarely, if ever, been wholly absent from poetry, it is only of late years comparatively that it has become a very audible note. I should be carried too far away from my subject if I attempted to demonstrate the accuracy of this assertion by a survey, however rapid, of all the best-known poetry in languages, dead and living, of other times and other peoples. But to cite one or two familiar examples, is the feminine note, I may ask, the predominant, or even a frequent, note in the *Iliad*? The poem opens, it is true, with a dispute among the Argive chiefs, and mainly between Agamemnon and Achilles, concerning two young women. But how quickly Chryseis and Bryseis fall into the background, and in place of any further reference to them, we have a tempest of manly voices, the clang of arms, the recriminations of the Gods up in Olympus, and the cataloguing of the Grecian ships! Lest perhaps tender interest should be absent overmuch, just when Paris is being worsted in his duel with Menelaus for the determination of the siege, Venus carries him off under cover of a cloud, and brings Helen to his side. Then follows a scene in which the fair cause of strife and slaughter stands distracted between her passion for Paris, her shame at his defeat and flight, and her recollection of the brave Argive Chief she once called her lord. But more fighting promptly supervenes, and, save in such a passing episode as the lovely leave-taking of Hector and Andromache, the poem moves on through a magnificent medley of fighting, plotting, and speech-making. Even in that exceptionally tender episode what are the farewell words of Hector to his wife, "Go to your house and see to your own duties, the loom and the distaff, and bid your handmaidens perform their tasks. But for war shall *man* provide." It is over the dead body of Patroclus that Achilles weeps; and whatever tears are shed in the *Iliad* are shed by heroes for heroes. Life, as represented in that poem, is a life in which woman plays a shadowy and insignificant part, and wherein domestic sentiments are subordinated to the rivalries of the Gods and the clash of chariot-wheels.

This subordinating of woman to man, of individual aims and private feelings to great aims and public issues, is equally present in the great Latin poem, the *Æneid*. "Arms and the Man, I sing," says Virgil at once, and in the very first line of his poem; and though in one book out of the twelve of which it consists he sings of the woman likewise, it is but to leave her to her fate and to liberate Æneas from her seductions. Virgil is rightly esteemed the most tender and refined writer of antiquity. Yet to the modern reader, accustomed to the feminine note in poetry, there is something amazingly callous, almost cruel, in the lines with which, while the funeral pyre of Dido is still smoking, he tells us how Æneas, without a moment's hesitation, makes for the open sea, and sails away from Carthage. But then the main business of Æneas was not to soothe or satisfy the Carthaginian queen, but to build the city and found the Empire of Rome. "Spirits," says Shakespeare, "are not finely touched save to fine issues"; and it never would have occurred to Virgil to allow the hero of the *Æneid* to be diverted from his masculine purpose by anything so secondary as the love, or even the self-immolation, of a woman.

Let us, however, overleap the intervening centuries, and betake ourselves to the poetry of our own land and our own language. Chaucer, the first great English poet, was, like all writers of supreme genius, a prolific and voluminous writer, and we have thousands of verses of his besides the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. But it is by this latter work that he is best known; and it is pre-eminently and adequately representative, both of his own genius and of the temper of the times in which he lived. You will have to hunt very diligently through his description of the Knight, the Squire, the Yeoman, the Prioress, the Monk, the

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Merchant, the Sergeant of the Law, the Franklin, the Miller, the Manciple, and the rest of his jovial company, in order to find anything approaching the feminine note. He says little about what any of them thought, and absolutely nothing concerning what they felt, but confines himself to descriptions of their personal appearance, of their conduct and their character, in a word, of their external presentation of themselves. The Knight who wore a doublet all stained by his coat of mail, was well mounted, and had ridden far, no man farther. The Squire, or page, had curly locks, and had borne himself well in Flanders and Picardy. The Yeoman bore a weighty bow, handled his arrows and tackle in admirable fashion, and was dressed in a coat of green. The Monk was fat and in good case, and loved a roast swan more than any other dish. The Friar, we are told, had made many a marriage at his own cost, and would get a farthing out of a poor widow, though she had only one shoe left. The Franklin had a white beard and a high complexion, kept a capital table, and blew up his cook loudly if the sauces were not to his liking. The Wife of Bath had married five husbands, not to speak of other company in her youth; and the Sumpnor loved garlic, onions, and leeks, had a fiery face, and doated on strong wine. There is nothing very feminine in all this, is there? The one sole touch of tenderness that I can remember, and it is very elementary and introduced quite casually, is that in which we are told that the Prioress is so full of pity that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap. One can easily surmise what sort of tales would proceed from such downright, hearty, unromantic personages; and, save where any of them recite well-known stories from ancient poets, their own narratives are as buxom, burly, and as unsentimental as themselves. If princes and princesses, fine lords and ladies, be the heroes and heroines of the Tale, a certain amount of conventional pity is extended to their woes. But if the personages of the story be, as they for the most part are, common folk, and such as the story-tellers themselves would be likely to know, their misfortunes and mishaps are used merely as a theme for mirth and merciless banter. The humour displayed is excellent, but it is not the humour of *charity*. It is not compassionate, and it is not feminine. The feminine note is not absent from Chaucer's Tales, but it is generally a subordinate note, a rare note, a note scarcely heard in his great concert of masculine voices.

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Passing from the pages of Chaucer to those of Spenser is like passing from some cheery tavern where the ale is good and the jokes are excellent, but a trifle coarse, and the company diverting but a little mixed, to the banqueting-hall of some stately palace, where the wines and meats are of the choicest, where all the guests are of high degree, the women all fair, the men all courtly, and where fine manners and dignified speech leave no place for loud lewd laughter or even for homely familiarity. Surely in one who is such a poet, and such a gentleman, and in every respect, to quote a line of his own "a very perfect gentle knight," we shall come across, ever and anon at least, the feminine note. And indeed we do. The first three stanzas of the *Fairy Queen* are dedicated to the description of the Knight that was pricking on the plain. But listen to the fourth:

A lovely lady rode him fair beside,
Upon a lowly ass more white than snow;
Yet she much whiter; but the same did hide
Under a veil that wimpled was full low,
And over all a black stole did she throw;
As one that inly mourned, so was she sad,
And heavy sate upon her palfrey slow.
Seem'd at heart some hidden care she had.
And by her in a line a milk-white lamb she lad.
So pure and innocent as that same lamb
She was, in life and every virtuous lore.
She by descent from royal lineage came.

Her name, as doubtless you well know, was Una, and, when by foul enchantment she is severed a while from her true knight, harken with what a truly feminine note Spenser bewails her misfortune:

Nought is there under heaven's wide hollowness
Did recover more dear compassion of the mind
Than beauty brought to unworthy wretchedness
Through envy's snare, or fortune's freaks unkind.
I, whether lately through her brightness blind,
Or through allegiance, and fast fealty
Which I do owe unto all womankind,
Feel my heart prest with so great agony,
When such I see, that all for pity I could die.

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Spenser cannot endure the thought of beauty in distress. So at once he brings upon the scene a ramping lion, which, in the ordinary course of things would have put a speedy end to her woes. But not so Spenser's lion:

Instead thereof he kissed her weary feet,
And licked her lily hands with fawning tongue,
As he her wrong'd innocence did weet.
O how can beauty master the most strong.

And thus he goes on:

The lion would not leave her desolate,
But with her went along, as a strong guard
Of her chaste person, and a faithful mate
Of her sad troubles and misfortunes hard:
Still when she slept, he kept both watch and ward,
And when she waked, he waited diligent
With humble service to her will prepared.

This allegiance and fast fealty which Spenser declares he owes unto all womankind is the attitude, not only of all true knights and all true gentlemen, but likewise, I trust, of all true poets. But do not suppose on that account that Spenser is a feminine poet. He is very much the reverse. It would be impossible for a poet to be more masculine than he.

Upon a great adventure he was bound,

he says at once of his hero, and describes how the knight's heart groaned to prove his prowess in battle brave. Spenser has the feminine note, but in subordination to the masculine note; and if I were asked to name some one quality by which you may know whether a poet be of the very highest rank, I should be disposed to say, "See if in his poetry you meet with the feminine note and the masculine note, and if the first be duly subordinated to the second."

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I wish it were possible, within the limit I have here assigned myself, to apply this test and pursue this enquiry at length in regard to Shakespeare, in regard to Milton, and likewise in regard to Dryden and Pope. But of this I am sure that the wider and deeper the survey the more clear would be the conclusion that in Shakespeare, as we might have expected, the masculine note and the feminine note are heard in perfect harmony, but by far the larger volume of sound proceeds from the former.

When, then, was it that the feminine note, the domestic or personal note, the compassionate note or note of pity, the purely sentimental note, was first heard in English poetry as a note asserting equality with the masculine note, and tending to assert itself as the dominant note?

One of the most beautiful and best-known poems in the English language is Gray's *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*; and in the following stanzas which many of you will recognise as belonging to it, do we not seem to overhear something like the note of which we are in search?—

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her ev'ning care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

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Here our sympathy is asked, not for kings and princesses, not for great lords and fine ladies, not for the rise and fall of empires, but for the rude forefathers of the hamlet, for the busy housewife, for the hard-working peasant and his children, for homely joys and the annals of the poor. But Gray does not maintain this note beyond the five stanzas I have just quoted. He quickly again lapses into the traditional, the classic, the purely masculine note:

The boast of Heraldry, the pomp of Pow'r,
And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e'er gave,
Await alike th' inevitable hour,
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tombs no trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle, and fretted vault,
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn, or animated bust,
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

The stanzas that follow are splendid stanzas, but they are the stately and sonorous verse of a detached and moralising mind, not the pathetic verse of a sympathising heart. We have to

wait another twenty years before we come upon a poem of consequence in which the feminine note is not only present, but paramount. In the year 1770, nearly a century and a half ago, appeared Goldsmith's poem, *The Deserted Village*, and in it I catch, for the first time, as the prevailing and predominant note, the note of feminine compassion, the note of humble happiness and humble grief. In Goldsmith's verse we hear nothing of great folks except to be told how small and insignificant are the ills which they can cause or cure.

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Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
A breath can make them, as a breath hath made;
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

Goldsmith's themes in *The Deserted Village* are avowedly:

The sheltered cot, the cultivated farm,
The never-failing brook, the busy mill,
The decent church that topped the neighbouring hill,
The hawthorn bush, with seats beneath the shade,
For talking age and whispering lovers made.

We seem to have travelled centuries away from the *Troilus and Cressida*, or the *Palamon and Arcite* of Chaucer, from the Red Cross Knight and Una, from the Britomart, the Florimel, the Calidore, the Gloriana of Spenser, from the kingly ambitions and princely passions of Shakespeare, from the throes and denunciations of *Paradise Lost*, and equally from the coffee-house epigrams and savage satire of Pope. We have at last got among ordinary people, among humble folk, people of our own flesh and blood, with simple joys and simple sorrows. What could be more unlike the poetry we have so far been surveying than these lines from *The Deserted Village*?—

Sweet was the sound when oft at evening's close
Up yonder hill the village murmur rose,
There, as I passed, with careless steps and slow,
The mingling notes came softened from below.
The swain responsive as the milkmaid sung,
The sober herd that lowed to meet their young,
The noisy geese that gabbled o'er the pool,
The playful children just let loose from school.

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Which of you does not remember the description in the same poem of the Village Clergyman? the man who was to all his country dear, etc. Some of you, I daresay, know it by heart. Nothing is too lowly, some would say, nothing too mean, for Goldsmith's tender Muse. He loves to dwell on the splendour of the humble parlour, on the whitewashed wall, the sanded floor, the varnished clock, the chest of drawers, and the chimney-piece with its row of broken teacups. Truly it is a feminine Muse which can make poetry, and, in my opinion, very charming poetry, out of broken teacups.

The feminine note once struck, the note of personal tenderness, of domestic interest, of compassion for the homely, the suffering, or the secluded was never again to be absent from English poetry; and Cowper continued, without a break, the still sad music of humanity first clearly uttered by Goldsmith. What is the name of Cowper's principal and most ambitious poem? As you know, it is called *The Task*; and what are the respective titles of the six books into which it is divided? They are: *The Sofa*, *The Time-Piece*, *The Garden*, *The Winter Evening*, *The Winter Morning Walk*, *The Winter Walk at Noon*. Other poems of a kindred character are entitled *Hope*, *Charity*, *Conversation*, *Retirement*. Open what page you will of Cowper's verse, and you will be pretty sure to find him either denouncing things which women, good women, at least, find abhorrent, such as the slave-trade, gin-drinking, gambling, profligacy, profane language, or dwelling on occupations which are dear to them.

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O for a lodge in some vast wilderness,

he exclaims—

Some boundless contiguity of shade,
Where rumour of oppression and deceit
Of unsuccessful or successful war,
Might never reach me more! My ear is pained,
My soul is sick with every day's report
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled.
There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
It does not feel for man.

These are the opening lines of the *Time-Piece*, and they sound what may be called the note of feminine indignation; a note which is reverted to by him again and again.

More placidly but still in the same spirit, he exclaims:

Now stir the fire and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
And while the bubbling and loud hissing urn

Throws up a steaming column, and the cups
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.

Farther on, he describes how—

'Tis pleasant through the loopholes of retreat
To peep at such a world, to see the stir
Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd.
Thus sitting, and surveying thus at ease
The globe and its concerns, I seem advanced
To some secure and more than mortal height,
That liberates and exempts me from them all.

Again, invoking evening, he says:

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Come then, and thou shalt find thy votary calm
Or make me so. Composure is thy gift:
And whether I devote the gentle hours of evening
To books, to music, or the poet's toil,
To weaving nets for bird-alluring fruit,
Or turning silken threads round ivory reels,
When they command whom man was born to please.

Could there well be a more feminine picture than that? All the politics, commerce, passions, conflicts of the world are shut out by Mrs. Unwin's comfortable curtains, and, with her and Lady Austen for sympathising companions, the poet fills his time, with perfect satisfaction, by holding their skeins of wool, and meditating such homely lines as these:

For I, contented with a humble theme,
Have poured my stream of panegyric down
The vale of nature where it creeps and winds
Among her lovely works, with a secure
And unambitious ease reflecting clear
If not the virtues, yet the worth of brutes.
And I am recompensed, and deem the toils
Of poetry not lost, if verse of mine
May stand between an animal and woe,
And teach one tyrant pity for his drudge.

Cowper was never married, nor ever, as far as I know, in love, though Lady Austen, to her and his misfortune, for a time seemed to fancy he was; and in his verse therefore we do not meet with the note of amatory sentiment. But what love is there in this world more beautiful, more touching, more truly romantic, than the love of a mother for her son, and of a son for his mother? And where has it been more charmingly expressed than in Cowper's lines on the receipt of his mother's picture? After that beautiful outburst—

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O that those lips had language! Life has passed
With me but roughly since I heard thee last

—he proceeds to recall the home, the scenes, the tender incidents of his childhood, but, most of all, the fond care bestowed on him by his mother:

Thy nightly visits to my chamber made
That thou mightst know me safe and warmly laid,
Thy fragrant waters on my cheek bestowed
By thy own hand, till fresh they were and glowed,
All this, and more endearing still than all,
Thy constant flow of love that knew no fall,
Ne'er roughened by those cataracts and breaks
That humour interposed too often makes;
All this still legible in memory's page,
And still to be so to my latest age,
Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay
Such honour to thee as my numbers may,
Perhaps a frail memorial, but sincere,
Not scorned in Heaven, though little noticed here.

The lines are not in what is called the highest vein of poetry. They have not the bluff masculinity of Chaucer. They lack the magic of Spenser. They do not purify the passions through terror as is done by *Lear* or *Macbeth*, and they are much inferior in majesty to the

Cherubic trumpets blowing martial sound

of Milton. But they come straight from the heart, and go straight to the heart. They are thoroughly human, what we all have felt, or are much to be pitied if we have not felt. They are instinct with the holiest form of domestic piety. They are feminine in the best sense, and have all the feminine power to attract, to chasten, and to subdue.

As far as character and conduct are concerned, there could not well be two poets more

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unlike than Cowper and Burns; and their poetry is as unlike as their temperament. I fear Burns indulged in most of the vices against which Cowper inveighs; and not unoften he glorified them in verse. Upon that theme do not ask me to dwell this evening. All it is necessary to point out here is, that in Burns, as in Cowper, and as in Goldsmith, we have the compassionate note, the note of pity for suffering, of sympathy with the lowly; in a word, we again have the feminine note. In *The Cotter's Saturday Night* Burns paints a picture, as complete as it is simple, of humble life. We have the cotter returning home through the chill November blast with the weary beasts; the collecting of his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes; the arrival at his cottage; the expectant wee things running out to meet him; the ingle-nook blinking bonnily; the cheerful supper of wholesome porridge; the reading of a passage from the Bible, the evening hymn, and the family prayer before retiring to rest. There is a line in *The Cotter's Saturday Night* which might be taken as the text on which most of Burns's poems are written:

The cottage leaves the palace far behind.

All his sympathies are with cottages and cottagers, whether he be expressly describing their existence, writing *A Man's a Man for a' that*, *The Birks of Aberfeldy*, *Auld Lang Syne*, or addressing lines to a mouse whose nest he has turned up with his plough. All are written in a spirit of compassion for suffering, of sympathy with the lowly, of admiration for honest poverty. They are fundamentally tender, and, though expressed in manly fashion enough, fundamentally feminine, the poetry of a man who lived habitually under the influence of women.

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I think it will be allowed that I have given no grudging admiration to the feminine note in English poetry, and in so far as it is a note of sympathy with the more humble and less fortunate ones of the earth. But, in verse, kindly and compassionate sentiment is not everything. Indeed, it is nothing at all unless it be expressed in such a manner, the manner suffused with charm of style, that it is thereby raised to the dignity of true poetry. There are many excellent persons who accept as poetry any sentiment, or any opinion expressed in metre with which they happen to agree. But neither sound opinion nor wholesome sentiment suffices to produce that exceedingly delicate and subtle thing which alone is rightly termed poetry, and, in abandoning lofty themes, and descending to humbler ones, writers of verse unquestionably expose themselves to the danger not only of not rising above the level of their subject, but even of sinking below it. The Romans had a proverb that you cannot carve a Mercury out of every piece of wood, meaning thereby that by reason of Mercury not being a standing or reposing figure, but a figure flying through the air, and therefore with limbs and wings extended, the material out of which he is made has to be both considerable in size and excellent in quality. What is true of Mercury is truer still of Apollo. You cannot make poetry out of every subject; and your only chance of making poetry out of any subject is to do so by treating the subject either nobly, or with charm. Realism, unadulterated Realism, which is a dangerous experiment in prose, is a sheer impossibility in poetry; for in poetry what is offered us, and what delights us, is not realistic but ideal representation. No doubt the very music of verse is part of the means whereby this ideal representation is effected; but it will not of itself suffice, as may easily be proved by reciting mere nonsense verses in which the rhythm or music may be faultless. I could quote page after page from Cowper, which is verse only, and not poetry, because it is nothing more than the bare statement of a fact set forth in lines consisting of so many feet. Here, for instance, is a specimen. It comes in his poem on *The Sofa*:

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Joint-stools were then created, on three legs,
Upborne they stood: three legs upholding firm
A mossy slab, in fashion square or round.
At length a generation more refined
Improved the simple plan, made three legs four,
Gave them a twisted form vermicular
And o'er the seat with plenteous wadding stuffed
Induced a splendid cover, green and blue,
Yellow and red, of tapestry richly wrought,
And woven close, or needlework sublime.

Perhaps you think this is a parody of Cowper. But I can assure you it is nothing of the kind. It was written by the poet himself; and in his abounding pages you will find hundreds of verses of this realistic and pedestrian character. But not Cowper alone, one much greater than Cowper, one who rose over and over again to the very heaven of poesy, Wordsworth himself, has likewise left hundreds, aye, thousands of verses, little better than the passage I have just read from Cowper, through the mistaken notion that kindly feeling, compassion for the poor and the patient, and sound moral sentiments, when expressed in verse, must result in poetry. There is no one here whose admiration of Wordsworth at his best can be greater than mine, but, in order to show you how the feminine note in poetry, the note of sympathy with the weak, the obscure, and the unfortunate, can even in the voice of a great master of poetry, lapse into verse utterly destitute of the soul and spirit of poetry, I will ask you to allow me to read you a portion of *Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman*:

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And he is lean and he is sick;
His body, dwindled and awry,
Rests upon ankles swoln and thick;

His legs are thin and dry.
One prop he has, and only one,
His Wife, an aged woman,
Lives with him, near the waterfall,
Upon the village Common.

Oft, working by her husband's side,
Ruth does what Simon cannot do;
For she, with scanty cause for pride,
Is stouter of the two.
And though you with your utmost skill
From labour could not wean them,
Alas! 'tis very little—all
Which they can do between them.

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you would find
A tale in everything.
What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it:
It is no tale; but, should you *think*,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.

Is not that sorry stuff, regarded as poetry? Wordsworth here had the assistance of the music, not only of verse, but of rhyme; and with what a result! It is the feminine note of pity in its dotage, whereby we see that it is not enough to have a warm heart, to have tender feelings, to be full of sympathy for the suffering, and then to express them in verse. In the prose of conversation and of everyday life, kindly feeling is all well enough. But the Heavenly Muse will not place herself at our disposal so readily and cheaply. She is a very difficult lady, is the Heavenly Muse, not easily won, and never allowing you, if you want to remain in her good graces, to approach her, that is to say, in dressing gown and slippers. She is the noblest and most gracious lady in the world, and the best, the most refined, the most elevating of companions. Therefore you must come into her presence and win her favour, not with free-and-easy gait and in slovenly attire, but arrayed in your very best, and with courtly and deferential mien. When poets wrote of gods and goddesses, of mighty sieges, and of the foundation and fall of empires; when their theme was the madness of princes, and the tragic fate of kings, when their hero was Lucifer, Son of the Morning, nay, even when they discoursed of free will and fate, or of the drawing-room intrigues of persons to whom powder, patches, billets-doux were the chief things in existence, there was no need to remind them that their style must be as lofty, as dignified, as refined, or as finished as their subject. No doubt, they sometimes waxed stilted and fell into excess, whether in rhetoric or in conceits, but they never forgot themselves so far as to be slovenly or familiar. Stella, you know, said Swift could write beautifully about a broomstick. Possibly he could; but note the concession, that if a man writes, at least if he would write poetry, he must write *beautifully*. Both Cowper and Wordsworth set the example of writing verse that is not beautiful, though indeed Young in his *Night Thoughts*, and Thomson in *The Seasons*, had already done something of the same kind. But they have not the authority of Cowper, much less the authority of Wordsworth. Let who will be the authority for it, prosaic utterance in verse, realism in rhyme, no matter what the subject, is an incongruity that cannot be too severely condemned. A very large proportion of the verse of Crabbe, once so popular, but now, I fancy, but little read, is of little value, by reason of the presence of this defect. Yet while I indicate, and venture to reprove, the feebleness into which the feminine note in English poetry has too often declined and deteriorated, never let us forget that it has contributed lovely and immortal poetry to the language, poetry to be found in Wordsworth, poetry such as melts us almost to tears in Hood's *Song of the Shirt*, or in Mrs. Barrett Browning's *The Cry of the Children*. Horace, who was a great critic as well as a great poet, said long ago that it is extremely difficult to express oneself concerning ordinary everyday facts and feelings in a becoming and agreeable manner; and to do this in verse demands supreme genius. As a set-off to the example of feebleness I just now cited in Wordsworth, listen how, when the mood of inspiration is on him, he can see a Highland girl reaping in a field—surely an ordinary everyday sight—and threw around her the heavenly halo of the divinest poetry:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
So sweetly to reposing bands

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Of Travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened till I had my fill,
And when I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

But there is another manifestation of the feminine note in English poetry, distinct from, though doubtless akin to, the one we have been considering; a note which likewise was not heard in it till about a hundred years ago, but which has been heard very frequently since, and which seems at times to threaten to become its dominant and all-prevailing note, or at any rate the only one that is keenly listened to. Instead of the note of interest in and pity for others, it has become the note of interest in and pity either for oneself, or for one's other self; a note so strongly personal and suggestive as to become egotistic and entirely self-regarding. This is the amatory or erotic note, which I think you will all recognise when I give it that designation; the note which appears to consider the love of the sexes as the only important thing in life, and certainly the only thing worth writing or singing about. More than two thousand years ago, a Greek poet wrote a lyric beginning, "I would fain sing of the heroes of the House of Atreus, I would fain chant the glories of the line of Cadmus; but my lyre refuses to sound any note save that of love." In these days the poet who expressed that sentiment and acted on it would have a great many listeners; and no doubt Anacreon, too, had his audience in ancient Greece. But he was not ranked by them side by side with their great poets who *did* take the tragic story of the House of Atreus for their theme. It can only be when feminine influence is supreme in society and in literature, and when the feminine note in poetry has become, or threatens to become, paramount, that the sentiment and practice of Anacreon is viewed with approbation and favour. Byron has said in a well-known passage:

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For love is of man's life a thing apart;
'Tis woman's whole existence.

If I know anything about women, that is a gross exaggeration, unless in the term love be included love of parents, love of brothers and sisters, love of children, in a word, every form and manifestation of affection. Still it is not necessary to deny—indeed if it be true it is necessary to admit—that love, in the narrower if more intense signification of the word, does play a larger part in the lives, or at any rate in the imagination, of most women than it does in the lives and the imagination of most men; and it is not to be denied that practically all women, and a fair sprinkling of men, now take an almost exclusive interest in the amatory note in poetry. Nor let any one say that this was always so, and that poetry and poets have from time immemorial occupied themselves mainly with the passion of love. Indeed they have not done so. It would be to show an utter ignorance of the genius of Homer, of the great Greek dramatists, of Virgil, of Dante, of Spenser, of Shakespeare, of Milton, and of the temper of the times in which they lived, to say that they could sound only notes of love. They sounded these sometimes, but seldom and rarely, in comparison with their other and more masculine notes, and always in due subordination to these. I will not go so far as to say that they thought, with Napoleon, that love is the occupation of the idle, and the idleness of the occupied, but they knew that however absorbing for a season the passion of love as described by many poets and by nearly all modern novelists may be, it *is* a thing apart; and, as such, they dealt with it. They did not ignore its existence, or even its importance, but they did not exaggerate its existence and its importance, relatively to other interests, other occupations, other duties in life. It was because of the high fealty and allegiance which Spenser declared he owed to all womankind that he did not represent women as perpetually sighing or being sighed for by men. It was because Shakespeare had such absolute familiarity, not with this or that part of life, but with the whole of it, that even in *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Othello*, in *Measure for Measure*, and again in *As You Like It*, he represented the passion of love at work and in operation along with other sentiments and other passions; and, in the greater portion of his dramas either does not introduce it at all, or assigns to it a quite subordinate place. In *Romeo and Juliet* the brave Mercutio, the Tybalt "deaf to peace,"

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the garrulous nurse, the true apothecary, the comfortable Friar, as Juliet calls him, all these and more, have their exits and their entrances, and all, in turn, demand our attention. *Romeo and Juliet* is a love-drama indeed; but even in *Romeo and Juliet*, though love occupies the foremost place and plays the leading part, it stands in relation to other passions and other characters, and moves onward to its doom surrounded and accompanied by a medley of other circumstances and occurrences; just as true love, even the most engrossing, does in real life. The same just apprehension of life, the same observance of accurate proportion between the action of love and the action of other passions and other interests, may be observed in *Othello*. Othello is not represented merely as a man who is consumed and maddened by jealousy, but as a citizen and a soldier, encompassed by friends and enemies, and brought into contact, not with Desdemona and Iago alone, but with the Duke of Venice, with valiant Cassio, with witty Montano, with Brabantio, with Gratiano, in a word with people and things in general.

Neither would it be any more to the purpose to object that Herrick, that Suckling, that Lovelace, and other poets of the seventeenth century wrote love-lyrics by the score, with many of which I have no doubt you are acquainted, and some of which are very beautiful. For these, for the most part, were amatory exercises, not real breathing and burning love-poems; dainty works of art sometimes, but not sicklied o'er with the pale cast of amatory passion. They were seventeenth-century reminiscences of the conventional love-lyrics of the Troubadours of Provence, when there existed an imaginary court of Love and a host of imaginary lovers. Indeed, if I were asked what was the truest and most succinct note uttered by their English imitators, I think I should have to say that I seem to catch it most distinctly in the lines of Suckling beginning:

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Why so pale and wan, fond lover?
Prithee, why so pale?

—and ending with:

If of herself she will not love,
Nothing can make her:
The devil take her!

But we catch a very different amatory note, and that of the most personal and earnest kind, when the voice of Burns, and then the voice of Byron, were heard in English poetry. In Byron the note is almost always passionate. In Burns it is sometimes sentimental, sometimes jovial, sometimes humorous, sometimes frankly and offensively coarse. Many readers cannot do full justice to the North-Country dialect in the following lines, but the most Southern of accents could not quite spoil their simple beauty:

The westlin wind blows loud an' shrill;
The night's baith mirk and rainy, O;
But I'll get my plaid, an' out I'll steal,
An' owre the hills to Nannie, O.

Her face is fair, her heart is true,
As spotless as she's bonnie, O:
The op'ning gowan, wat wi' dew,
Nae purer is than Nannie, O.

That is one amatory, one feminine note in Burns. Here is another:

There's nought but care on every han',
In every hour that passes, O;
What signifies the life o' man,
An' 'twere na for the lasses, O.

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Auld Nature swears the lovely dears
Her noblest work she classes, O:
Her 'prentice han' she tried on man,
An' then she made the lasses, O.

I have no fault to find with these lines. They express a profound and enduring truth; and, if they do so with some little exaggeration, they do it half humorously, and so protect themselves against criticism. But I really think—I hope you will not deem me unchivalrous in saying so—we have, during the present century, heard too much, both in poetry and in prose romance, as we are now hearing too much in newspapers and magazines, of “the lasses, O.” Not that we can hear too much of them in their relation to each other, to men, and to life. The “too much” I indicate is the too much of romantic love, that leaves no place for other emotions and other passions equally worthy, or relegates these to an inferior position and to a narrower territory. I should say that there is rather too much of the sentimental note in Byron, in Shelley, in Keats, just as I should say that there is not too much of it in Wordsworth or in Scott. To say this is not to decry Byron, Shelley, and Keats—what lover of poetry would dream of decrying such splendid poets as they?—but only to indicate a certain tendency against which I cannot help feeling it is well to be on our guard. The tendency of the times is to encourage writers, whether in prose or verse, to deal with this particular theme and to deal with it too frequently and too pertinaciously. Moreover, there is always a

danger that a subject, in itself so delicate, should not be quite delicately handled, and indeed that it should be treated with indelicacy and grossness. That, too, unfortunately, has happened in verse; and when that happens, then I think the Heavenly Muse veils her face and weeps. It must have been through some dread of poetry thus dishonouring itself that Plato in his ideal Republic proposed that poets should be crowned with laurel, and then banished from the city. For my part, I would willingly see such poets banished from the city, but not crowned with laurel. No doubt Plato's notion that poets should chant nothing but hymns to the Gods and praises of virtue is a little narrow and exacting, but if they are to sing songs worthy of themselves, and of mankind, they must be on the side of virtue and of the Gods. Hark with what perfect delicacy a masculine poet like Scott can deal with a feminine theme:

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What though no rule of courtly grace
To measured mood had trained her pace,
A foot more light, a step more true
Ne'er from the heath-flower dashed the dew.
Ev'n the light harebell raised its head,
Elastic from her airy tread.
What though upon her speech there hung
The accents of the mountain tongue?
Those solemn sounds, so soft, so clear,
The listener held his breath to hear.

That is how manly poets write and think of women. But they do not dwell over much on the theme; they do not harp on it; and when you turn the page, you read in a totally different key:

The fisherman forsook the strand,
The swarthy smith took dirk and brand;
With changèd cheer the mower blythe
Left in the half-cut swathe the scythe.
The herds without a keeper strayed,
The plough was in mid-furrow stayed.
The falconer tossed his hawk away,
The hunter left the stag at bay.
Prompt at the signal of alarms,
Each son of Albion rushed to arms.
So swept the tumult and affray
Along the margin of Achray.

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Does it not remind you of the passage I quoted from Homer, where Hector says to Andromache, "Go! to your house, and see to your loom and distaff, but for war men will provide"? Scott, like Homer, observed the due proportion between love and life, giving love ample room, but not allotting it excessive space. If again one wants to hear how delicately, how worthily, how manfully, poets can write of love and of women, what can one do better than recall this perfect lyric of Wordsworth's?—

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.

"She shall be sportive as the Fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.

"The floating Clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the Storm
Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form
By silent sympathy.

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"The Stars of midnight shall be dear

To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where Rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.

“And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to stately height,
Her virgin bosom swell;
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy Dell.”

Thus Nature spake—The work was done—
How soon my Lucy’s race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be.

Neither should I like it to be supposed that I think Byron could not write on this same theme in the noblest manner. He did so frequently; he would not have been the great poet he is if he had not done so. Listen to this, for example:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,
And all that’s best of dark and light
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o’er her face,
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear, their dwelling place.

And on that cheek, and o’er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent.

Women are honoured and exalted when they are sung of in that manner. They are neither honoured nor exalted, they are dishonoured and degraded, when they are represented, either in prose or verse, as consuming their days in morbid longings and sentimental regrets, and men are represented as having nothing to do save to stimulate or satisfy such feelings. What is written in prose is not here my theme. I am writing of poets and poetry, and of the readers of poetry. Novelists and novel-readers are a different and separate subject. But I may say in passing that poetry and the readers of poetry have suffered somewhat during the present generation from novels and novel-readers. A newer and narrower standard of human interest has been set up; and while the great bulk of readers have turned from poetry to prose romances, writers of verse have too frequently tried to compete with novelists, by treating love as the central interest and the main business of life. Homer did not think it such, neither did Virgil, nor Dante, nor Chaucer, nor Spenser, nor Shakespeare, nor Milton, and let us not think so. I urge every one, every now and again at least, to lay down the novel and open the poem: but let it be a poem that will enlarge one’s conception of life, that will help one to think loftily, and to feel nobly, will teach us that there is something more important to ourselves even than *ourselves*, something more important and deserving of attention than one’s own small griefs and own petty woes, the vast and varied drama of History, the boundless realm of the human imagination, and the tragic interests and pathetic struggles of mankind. We need not close our ear to the feminine note, but should not listen to it over much. The masculine note is necessarily dominant in life; and the note that is dominant in life should be dominant in literature, and, most of all, in poetry.

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No celebrations in our time have been more serious, more scholarly, or more impressive, than the various gatherings, held during the year lately come to end, in commemoration of the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Milton. The earliest was held, with peculiar appropriateness, at Christ College, Cambridge, in the month of June. In the hall of the college was given a dinner, presided over by the Master, who had gathered round him men holding high positions alike at Cambridge and Oxford, and poets, scholars, artists, historians, and essayists of true distinction. On this occasion an admirable eulogium of Milton was pronounced by Mr. Mackail. The dinner was succeeded by a representation of *Comus* in the theatre of the town, by the students of the University, with all the charm that usually accompanies the efforts of competent amateurs. With the advent of the exact date of the tercentenary the celebrations were many in number and interesting in variety, in which the members of the British Academy took a prominent part. On December 9 a musical celebration was held in the afternoon in the church of St. Mary-le-Bow, at which the Bishop of Ripon delivered an eloquent sermon; and at the same hour the writer of this paper gave a private lecture before the Dante Society, from the notes of which this article is expanded. In the evening he had the honour of attending and responding to the toast of Poetry, proposed by the Italian ambassador, at the banquet given by the Lord Mayor of London at the Mansion House, to the largest and most impressive gathering of men of eminence in letters, the arts, the drama, the law, and the Legislature, that has ever met in that spacious hall of traditionally magnificent hospitality. A week later a performance of *Samson Agonistes* was given in the Burlington Theatre before a large and representative audience. The more serious section of the daily press, moreover, allotted much space to reports of the celebrations in honour of Milton, the *Times* maintaining in this respect its best traditions.

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No one, therefore, can say that the birth, the poetry and prose, the character and the career and the influence of Milton have not been solemnly celebrated by his countrymen. But it is necessary to add, in the interests of truth, that the celebrations were essentially and exclusively scholarly, and were hardly, if at all, shared in by the nation at large. The intellectual sympathies of the educated were warmly touched, but the heart of the British people was not reached.

Now let us turn—for the subject of this paper is not Milton alone, but Milton and Dante—to the sexcentenary of the birth of Dante in the city of Florence, the month and year of his birth having been May 1265. I had been spending the winter in the City of Flowers, and I could not leave it, in order to journey northward, till after the Dante Commemoration had been held. I shall never forget it. From dawn to dusk the entire Florentine people held joyous festival; and, with the coming of night, not only the entire city, its palaces, its bridges, its Duomo, its Palazzo Vecchio, that noblest symbol of civic liberty, but indeed all its thoroughfares and the banks of its river broke into lovely light produced by millions of little cressets filled with olive oil, and every villa round was similarly illuminated. The pavement of the famous square of the Uffizi Palace was boarded over; and overhead was spread a canvas covering dyed with the three Italian national colours. Thither thronged hundreds of peasant men and women, who danced and made merry till the early hours of the morning. At the Pagliano Theatre were given *tableaux vivants* representing the most famous episodes in the *Divina Commedia*, Ristori, Salvini, and Rossi reciting the corresponding passages from that immortal poem.

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What a comparison, what a contrast it suggests between the solemn, serious, but limited honour done by us to Milton, and the exultant, universal, national honour paid by his countrymen to Dante! I should add that eight thousand Italian municipalities sent a deputation carrying their local pennons to the square of Santa Croce, where a statue of Dante was unveiled, amid thunderous applause, to popular gaze.

Now let us turn to a more personal contrast between the two poets. To many persons, probably to most in these days, the most interesting feature in the life of a poet is his relation to the sex that is commonly assumed, perhaps not quite correctly, to be the more romantic of the two. In comparing Dante and Milton in that respect one is struck at once by the fact that, while with Dante are not only associated, but inseparably interwoven, the name and person of Beatrice, so that the two seem in our minds but one, knit by a spiritual love stronger even than any bond sanctioned by domestic law for happiness and social stability, Milton had no Beatrice. It would be idle to contend that the absence of such love has not detracted, and will not continue to detract, from the interest felt in Milton and his poetry, not perhaps by scholars, but by the world at large, and the average lover of poetry and poets. For just as women can do much, to use a phrase of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, towards “making a poet out of a man,” so can they do even more, either by spiritual influence or by consummate self-sacrifice, to widen the field and deepen the intensity of his fame. No poet ever enjoyed this advantage so conspicuously as Dante. It will perhaps be said that this was effected more by himself than by her. Let us not be too sure of that. In Italy, far more than in northern climes, first avowals of love are made by the eyes rather than by the tongue, by tell-tale looks more than by explicit words. What says Shakespeare, who knew men and women equally well?

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A murderous guilt shows not itself more soon
Than love that would seem hid. Love's night is noon.

Dante's own account of his first meeting with Beatrice confirms this surmise. This is what he himself says, after Beatrice, as Boccaccio relates, “very winning, very graceful, in aspect

very beautiful," had turned her gaze on Dante from time to time at their first meeting. "At that moment the spirit of life which abides in the most secret chamber of the heart began to tremble, and tremulously it spake these words, 'Behold a god stronger than I, who cometh to lord it over me.'" These may perhaps seem strange words in which to record the first meeting of a boy of nine with a girl of eight. But, over and above the fact that they are the record, written several years later, of the feeling aroused by that first meeting, allowance must be made for the proverbial precocity of genius, and also for that of southern over northern temperaments. Its genuineness is confirmed by the whole sequel, as testified by the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia*; the presiding presence of Beatrice in both having long before been anticipated by the words, "If it shall please Him, by whom all things live, to spare my life for some years longer, I hope to say that of her which never yet hath been said of any lady." How completely that hope was attained is to be seen in the closing canto of the *Purgatorio* and in the whole of the *Paradiso*.

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The life and poetry of Milton contain nothing (if exception be made of his beautiful and lofty sonnet, written in the very spirit of the *Divina Commedia*, on his second wife, "Methought I saw my late espoused Saint") to compare with Dante's love, at once real and ideal, masculine yet mystical, for Beatrice. The language used by Eve in addressing Adam, in *Paradise Lost*—

My author and disposer, what thou bidst
Unargued I obey, so God ordains.
God is thy law, thou mine—

and the very choice of a subject the dominating incident of which is described by the well-known words, "The woman did give me, and I did eat," would almost seem to indicate that Milton's conception of woman, and his attitude towards her, were such as can be attributed to no other poet. It is the attitude of unqualified masculine domination. Again, in *Samson Agonistes* the very centre and pith of the poem is the incorrigible frailty and inferiority of women—a thesis that would be extraordinary, even if true, for a poet. Samson starts with a reproof of himself for weakly revealing the secret of his strength to the persistent subtlety of a woman, "that species monster, my accomplished snare," as he calls Dalila, since "yoked her bond-slave by foul effeminacy"—a servitude he stigmatises as "ignominious and infamous," whereby he is "shamed, dishonoured, quelled." When Dalila, profoundly penitent for what she has done, thereby incurring his displeasure, prostrates herself before him, and sues for pardon, he spurns her from him with the words,

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Out, out, hyæna! these are thy wonted arts,

and goes on to say they are the arts of every woman, "to deceive, betray," and then to "feign remorse." With abject humility she confesses that curiosity to learn all secrets, and then to publish them, are "common female faults incident to all our sex." This only causes him to insult and spurn her yet more fiercely; and he declares that God sent her to "debase him"—one of those theological peculiarities which apparently made God an accomplice with "this viper," for which the non-Calvinistic Christian finds it difficult to account.

Nor can it be said that Milton is here, like Shakespeare, speaking only dramatically and objectively. The Chorus in *Samson Agonistes* is of his opinion, declaring that the man is favoured of heaven who discovers "one virtuous woman, rarely found"; and that is why

God's universal law
Gave to the man despotic power
Over his female in due awe,
Nor from that right to part, an hour,
Smiles she or lours.

After delivering itself of these opinions, the Chorus suddenly exclaims, "I see a storm," which, in the circumstances, is perhaps scarcely wonderful.

What a different note is this from that struck by Dante, when he speaks of "that blessed Beatrice, who now dwells in heaven with the angels, and on earth in my heart, and with whom my soul is still in love." Far from thinking that severe command on the part of the one and unquestioning submission on the part of the other form the proper relation of lover and maiden, husband and wife, Dante avers that

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Amor e cor gentil son' una cosa,

that love and a gracious gentle heart are one and the same thing; and in the *Paradiso*, shortly before the close of the poem, he exclaims:

O Beatrice! dolce guida e cara.

It may perhaps be thought that one might be more lenient towards Milton's foibles, especially at such a time as the present, in contrasting his attitude towards woman with that of Dante. But in Milton there was so much that was noble, so pathetic, and even so attractive, that he can well afford to have the truth told concerning him; and to omit his view of the most important of all personal relations in life, as depicted for and bequeathed to us in his poetry, would be to leave an obvious gap of the utmost import in comparing and contrasting him with Dante.

But now let us ask, in order to redress the balance, what has Dante to show, in kind, against *Il Penseroso*, *L'Allegro*, *Lycidas*, and *Comus*? I put the prose works of both poets aside; and there remains on the side of Dante only the self-same Dante from first to last, the Dante of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia*. Milton, as a poet, had, on the contrary, a brilliant, an attractive, and a poetically productive youth. If Dante ever was young in the same sense, he has left no trace of it in his poetry. Save for Beatrice, there is an austerity even in the most tender passages of his verse. He seems never to relax in his gravity, I had almost said in his severity. His very love for Florence is expressed, for the most part, in harsh upbraiding. An unrelenting awe dominates his poetry. For Virgil he entertains a humble far-off reverence. There is no poet of whom it can be so truly said that he remained unchanged from first to last, and presents to us only one aspect throughout his works. In reading the English poet one finds oneself in the presence of two Miltons, not unlike each other in the splendid quality of the verse, but profoundly differing in tone, temperament, and outlook on life. In the author of *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Lycidas*, and *Comus* there is a youthful buoyancy, an all-pervading cheerful seriousness worthy of one complacently but justly confident of his powers, in no degree at war with the world, but on amicable terms with it, and regarding life on the whole, and on its human side, as a thing to sympathise with and enjoy. Hear the young Milton's invitation to vernal exultation and joy:

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But come, thou goddess fair and free,
In heaven yclept Euphrosyne,
And, by men, heart-easing Mirth,
Whom lovely Venus, at a birth,
With two sister Graces more,
To ivy-crowned Bacchus bore;
Or whether (as some sages sing)
The frolic wind that breathes the spring,
Zephyr, with Aurora playing,
As he met her once a-Maying;
There, on beds of violets blue,
And fresh-blown roses wash'd in dew,
Fill'd her with thee, a daughter fair,
So buxom, blithe, and debonnaire.

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What is there in Dante to compare with that? There is much by way of contrast, but no note anywhere in his verse so generous, so exhilarating, so thoroughly human. And this is how Milton, in the April of his days, continues:

Haste thee, nymph, and bring with thee
Jest, and youthful jollity,
Quips, and cranks, and wanton wiles,
Nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles,
Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,
And love to live in dimple sleek;
Sport that wrinkled Care derides,
And Laughter holding both his sides.
Come and trip it, as you go,
On the light fantastic toe;
And in thy right hand lead with thee
The mountain nymph, sweet Liberty;
And, if I give thee honour due,
Mirth, admit me of thy crew,
To live with her, and live with thee,
In unprov'd pleasures free.

And what, in the yet happy and in no degree morose Milton, are the "unprov'd pleasures"? They are:

To hear the lark begin his flight,
And, singing, startle the dull night,
From his watch-tower in the skies,
Till the dappled dawn doth rise;
Then to come, in spite of sorrow,
And at my window bid good-morrow,
Through the sweet-briar, or the vine,
Or the twisted eglantine;
While the cock, with lively din,
Scatters the rear of darkness thin,
And to the stack, or the barn-door,
Stoutly struts his dames before:
Oft listening how the hounds and horn
Cheerly rouse the slumbering morn,
From the side of some hoar hill,
Through the high wood echoing shrill.

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Where is the stern Puritan Milton in these cheerful, generous verses? Where the detester and active enemy of the Cavaliers in the lines that follow, dwelling proudly on the

Towers and battlements ...
Bosom'd high in tufted trees,

the homes of the hereditary gentlemen of England? And think of the lines "Then to the spicy nut-brown ale," down to "The first cock his matin rings." They are almost Shakespearean in their sympathy with mirth and laughter, their enjoyment of harmless practical jokes, their boundless indulgence to human nature. And what is the conclusion of the poem?

These delights if thou canst give,
Mirth, with thee I mean to live.

There exists in no language a more lyrical outburst inspired by the hey-day of life, and lavishly radiating rustic joy. They are as jocund as a gipsy rondeau of Haydn, as gracious as the tapestries of Fragonard, as tender as the Amorini of Albani, and as serenely cheerful as the matchless melodies of Mozart. You may read every line, whether in verse or prose, that Dante ever wrote, and you will come across no such spring-like note as this. Frequently he is tearful, tender, pathetic, and paternally compassionate, but nowhere does he express the faintest sympathy with "Laughter holding both its sides."

Gradually, however, there stole over the younger Milton a great, a grave change. His domestic experiences with his first wife could not have ministered to his happiness or content; experiences partly caused by the somewhat worldly ideals and desires of his spouse, but still more, perhaps, by his theory that what the husband bids it is the duty of the wife "unargued to obey."

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Meanwhile the promptings of his muse slackening for a long interval—an experience that has happened in the lives of other poets—he turned to prose, and to the controversial side of prose. Being of a dogmatic temperament, he quickly became involved in the acerbities of political, theological, and ethical polemics. For a time he employed his uncompromising pen on what seemed to be the winning side. But the aims of the ruling party in the Commonwealth were not then, any more than they are now, in harmony with the main character and ideals of the English people; and Milton found himself not only in the camp of the vanquished, but indicated by his previous actions as an object for Anglican and Royalist retaliation. The buoyant elasticity of youth had subsided in him; even the generous vigour of early manhood had vanished; and he found himself, in advanced middle life, disappointed and disheartened. The natural austerity of his character and principles deepened with his new situation and changed outlook. He had fallen, as he thought, on evil days and evil tongues; and, scandalised by the sensual levity of the King's Court and favourites, he pondered with almost exultant and vindictive retrospect on Adam and Eve's first disobedience and its fruits, and devoted his severe genius and magnificent diction to justifying the ways of God to man.

The Milton of these later years was bowed down by many family vexations, some of them due, no doubt, to his own exacting character and ideas. He was baffled and beaten in the political field where he had been so doughty a combatant, and for a time a triumphant one, and was finally deprived of all hope of regaining his pristine position; and last, and saddest of all, there fell on him total blindness, which, after his magnificent apostrophe to *Holy Light, Offspring of Heaven first-born*, he touchingly laments in the well-known but never too often to be recited passage in the third book of *Paradise Lost*:

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I sung of Chaos and eternal Night,
Taught by the heavenly muse to venture down
The dark descent, and up to reascend,
Though hard and rare: thee I revisit safe,
And feel thy sovereign vital lamp; but thou
Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain
To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;
So thick a drop serene hath quench'd their orbs,
Or dim suffusion veil'd. Yet not the more
Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt
Clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill,
Smit with the love of sacred song; but chief
Thee, Sion, and the flowery brooks beneath,
That wash thy hallow'd feet, and warbling flow,
Nightly I visit; nor sometimes forget
Those other two equall'd with me in fate,
So were I equall'd with them in renown,
Blind Thamyris and blind Mæonides,
And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.
Then feed on thoughts, that voluntary move
Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal note. Thus with the year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of even or morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;

But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
 Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
 Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
 Presented with a universal blank
 Of nature's works, to me expunged and rased,
 And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
 So much the rather, thou celestial light,
 Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
 Irradiate; there plant eyes, all mist from thence
 Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
 Of things invisible to mortal sight.

Could there be poetry of the personal kind more free from reprehensible egotism, more dignified, more majestic, and at the same time more pathetic than that? Let us recur to it, and read it, when we are tempted to judge Milton harshly for any less admirable, less lovable characteristics, from which no mortal can be wholly free; and the verdict must be, "Everything is forgiven him, because he suffered much, and expressed those sufferings in his verse, the truest exponent of his deepest feelings, with magnanimous and magnificent serenity." Nor let it ever be lost sight of that, though in the political and theological domain he was anything but free from fanaticism and bitter partisanship, he uniformly fought for liberty of speech and printing—liberty, of all our possessions the most precious, and for the safety and stability of the State the most indispensable condition. To what extent, in the part Dante played in the local politics of Florence, which led to his exile, he too was fighting for liberty, in the sense in which I have just expressed it, it is not possible for a dispassionate person to hold a confident opinion. In all probability liberty, as we understand the word, was struggled for and understood neither by him nor by those who drove him into exile. But, like Milton, he bore his ostracism with manly dignity, consoling himself and enriching posterity with a splendid poem, and only craving for safe shelter and peace, as he said at the monastery gate: *Son' uno che implora pace.*

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In comparing Milton and Dante one might justly be reproached for an obvious omission if one did not refer, however briefly, to the intense love of both for music. Very recently Mr. W. H. Hadow, than whom no one writes with more knowledge or sympathy of music, lectured before the Royal Society of Literature on Milton's love and knowledge of it. Music, he truly said, was Milton's most intimate of delights; and he referred to what Johnson relates of the poet's constantly playing on the organ. In the second canto of the *Purgatorio* Dante recognises the musician Casella, hails him as "Casella mio," and begs him who on earth had soothed Dante's soul with music to do the same for him now. Casella obeys, and Dante says it was done so sweetly that he can hear him still; words that recall Wordsworth's lovely couplet:

The music in my heart I bore
 Long after it was heard no more.

To my great surprise an eminent man of letters, who is also a poet, said to me recently that the present writer was one of the few writers of verse he knew who loved music, and who continually asked for music, more music, adding that poets, as a rule, did not care for it. I was amazed, and cited Shakespeare and Milton as a matter of course, and many a lesser poet, against so untenable a thesis, concluding with the opening lines of *Twelfth Night*:

If music be the food of love, play on.
 Give me excess of it.

Surely music is not only the food of love, but of poetry as well; and do not "music and sweet poetry agree"?

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Another point of similarity between Milton and Dante is their total lack of humour, so strange in two great poets, and one of them an Englishman. Chaucer is continually on the edge of boisterous laughter. Spenser seems constantly on the verge of a well-bred smile. Shakespeare, to use his own language, asks to be allowed with mirth and laughter to play the fool, though the most gravely thoughtful and awfully tragic of all poets. The author of *Childe Harold* is likewise the author of *The Vision of Judgment* and *Don Juan*. Scott is one of the greatest of British humorists. But on the face of neither Dante nor Milton do we find the trace of a smile either coming or gone.

The Rev. Lonsdale Ragg, in his searching and erudite work, *Dante and his Italy*, maintains the opposite view at p. 190 *sqq.* But I, at least, find him on this head unconvincing. None of the passages in Dante to which he refers would satisfy the definition of humour as employed by Sterne, Steele, Addison, or Charles Lamb, and cited by Thackeray in his delightful papers on *The English Humorists*. Dante is scornful, satirical, merciless; humorous he never is. Nor is Milton. They meet on the common ground of uncompromising seriousness.

Another parallel I will presume to draw between Dante and Milton is one of supreme importance; but I can do so only briefly. No man, in my humble opinion, has the full requisites of a poet of the highest order unless at some period or another of his life he has been associated by practice and direct experience with other men in matters of public interest. Milton and Dante alike had that experience. So had Chaucer, so had Spenser, so had Shakespeare, so had Byron. They were men of the world, and did not, as Matthew

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Arnold said of Wordsworth, "avert their gaze from half of human fate." I am aware that the opposite view is assumed in much criticism to-day; and the highest rank is claimed for poetic recluses who write only of individual joys, sorrows, and emotions, their own mostly, and manifest a complete want of concern in the wide issues of mankind. That was not a standard of criticism till our own time; nor will it, I believe, be the standard of future ages. Dante and Milton both satisfy the older standard, the older and the more abiding one.

No comparison of Dante with Milton would be complete that omitted consideration of the respective themes of their chief works, their two great epic poems, the *Divina Commedia* and *Paradise Lost*. I am disposed to think, though others may think differently, that Dante has in this respect a signal advantage over Milton. If any one is curious to see how a man of great parts, but in some respects of rather insular views, can fail to understand the theme of the *Divina Commedia*, and Dante's treatment of it, he has only to turn, as Mr. Courthope did in his address to the British Academy, to Macaulay's essay on Milton, where Dante is written of as though he were nothing but a great Realist. Many years ago I suggested as a definition of poetry, and have more than once urged the suggestion, that it is "the harmonious transfiguration of the Real into the Ideal by the aid of elevating imagination," so that, when the poet has performed that operation, his readers accept the ideal representation as real, that surest test of the greatness of a poet, provided his theme itself be great. The *Divina Commedia* stands that test triumphantly; and the result is that Dante makes credible, even to non-believers while they read the poem, the central conception and beliefs of medieval Christianity, which are still those of Roman Catholic Christianity. Hence they remain real facts for the transfiguring idealism of poets to deal with.

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Can the same be said of *Paradise Lost*? What is "real" does not depend on the arbitrary choice of any one, but on the *communis sensus*, the general assent of those to whom the treatment of the assumed "real" is addressed. Is that any longer so in the case of *Paradise Lost*? Are the personality of the devil, the insurrection of Lucifer and the rebel angels, and their condemnation to eternal punishment, with power to tempt mortals to do that which will lead to their sharing that punishment, now believed in by any large number of Christian Englishmen or English-speaking Christians, or is it ever likely again to be so believed in? I must leave the question to be answered by every one for himself. But on the answer to it, it is obvious, the realistic basis of *Paradise Lost* depends. If the reply be negative, then what remains is the magnificence of the imagery and the sonority of the diction. To extol the one over the other in these respects would indeed be invidious. It is enough to place them side by side to manifest their equality. If Milton writes:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy the Omnipotent to arms;

Dante writes:

Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
Parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,
Voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle,
Facevan un tumulto, il qual s'aggira
Sempre in quell' aria senza tempo tinta,
Come l'arena quando il turbo spira.

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Withal, it would show imperfect impartiality if one failed to allow that there is more variety in the *Divina Commedia* than in *Paradise Lost*. Milton never halts in his majestic journey to soothe us with such an episode as that of Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, or closes it with so celestial a strain as that describing the interview of Dante with Beatrice in Heaven.

No third poet in any nation or tongue could be named that equals Dante and Milton in erudition, or in the use they made of it in their poetry. The present writer is himself too lacking in erudition to presume to expatiate on that theme. Others have done it admirably, and with due competency. But on this ground, common to them both, I reluctantly part with them. To each alike may be assigned the words of Ovid, *Os sublime dedit*, and equally it may be said of both, that, in the splendid phrase of Lucretius, they passed beyond the *flammanitia mœnia mundi*. Finally, each could truly say of himself, in the words of Dante,

Minerva spira e conducemi Apollo.

"The Goddess of Wisdom inspires me, and the God of Song is my conductor and my guide."

The present age can hardly be reproached either with an absence of admirers or with a lack of self-complacency. Even its most fervid flatterers, however, ever and anon admit that it exhibits a few trifling defects; and among these is sometimes named a diminution of popular interest in poetic literature. Some have attributed this decline to one cause, some to another; but the fact can hardly be disputed. The Heavenly Muse is suffering a partial eclipse. The gross and material substance of the earth has somehow got between her and the Soul, that source and centre of her gentle light; and some enthusiasts aver that with the progress of Science and the production at will of its precise and steadfast lights, fitful luminaries of night may henceforth be dispensed with. But spiritual eclipses, though not to be predicted with the accuracy with which physical eclipses are foretold, and though unfortunately they endure for longer periods, are equally transitory; and the nineteenth century was scarcely original, nor will its successor prove to be correct, in fancying that the garish and obedient flame of material philosophy will prove a satisfactory substitute for the precious, if precarious illumination of the Spirit.

Among the causes that have contributed to divert popular affection and popular sympathy from poetical literature, there are three that deserve to be specially indicated. The first of these is the multiplication of prose romances, which, though so much lower in literary value and in artistic character than poetry, and so much less elevating in their tendency, are better fitted to stimulate the vulgar imagination, and minister more freely to the common craving for excitement. The second cause is the reaction that has settled upon mankind from the fervid hopes inspired by the propagation of those theories and the propounding of those promises which the historian associates with the French Revolution. All saner minds have long since discovered that happiness is to be procured neither for the individual nor for the community by mere political changes; and the discovery has been distinctly hostile to literary enthusiasm. Finally, many poets, and nearly all the critics of poetry, in our time, seem determined to alienate ordinary human beings from contact with the Muse. The world is easily persuaded that it is an ignoramus; and the vast majority of people, after being told, year after year, that what they do not understand is poetry, and what they do not care one straw about is the proper theme and the highest expression of song, end by concluding that poetry has become a mystery beyond their intelligence, a sort of freemasonry from whose symbols they are jealously excluded. Unable to appreciate what the critics tell them are the noblest productions of genius, they modestly infer that between genius and themselves there is no method of communication; and incapable of reading with pleasure the poetry they are assured ought to fill them with rapture, they desist from reading poetry altogether. They have not the self-confidence to choose their own poets and select their own poetry; and indeed in these days, the only chance any writer has of being read is that he should first be greatly talked about. Thus, what between the poets who are talked about by so-called experts, and thus made notorious, but whom ordinary folks find unreadable, and the poets, if there be any such, whom ordinary folks would read with pleasure if they knew of their existence, but of whom they have scarcely heard, poetry has become "caviare to the general," who content themselves with the coarser flavour of the novel, and the more easily digested pabulum of the newspaper.

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But if poetry is now comparatively little read, no one can deny that it is much written about; and many persons would perhaps see in the second of these facts a reason for doubting the reality of the first. But the contradiction is only apparent. Poetry is the subject at present of much prose criticism, prose exposition, and prose controversy; but the controversialists are largely the poets themselves, or those who aspire to the title. The subject is treated by them with much earnestness, indeed with some little heat; and it is easy to perceive that the main object of most of the disputants is to establish the superiority of the poet whom the critic himself most admires, and possibly whom he himself most resembles. The controversy rages around those poets alone who are claimed by the nineteenth century, and practically, these are five in number; Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth. Each of these has his votaries, his disciples, his passionate advocates. The public look on, a little bewildered; for who is to decide when doctors disagree? Few, if any, of the disputants lay down explicit canons respecting poetry, which may enable a competent bystander to play the part of umpire even to his own satisfaction; and he is left, like the controversialists themselves, to abide by his own personal tastes, and to estimate poets and poetry according to his individual fancy.

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It was therefore with no slight satisfaction one heard that one of our poets, who is likewise a critic, but who brings to his criticisms moderation of language and measure of statement, was about to appraise the English poets who have written in this century, but who have for many years joined the Immortals. To Mr. Matthew Arnold, if to any one amongst us, may be applied the passage from Wordsworth, to be found in the "Supplementary Essay" published in 1815:

Whither then shall we turn for that union of qualifications which must necessarily exist before the decisions of a critic can be of absolute value? For a mind at once poetical and philosophical; for a critic whose affections are as free and kindly as the spirit of society, and whose understanding is severe as that of dispassionate government? Where are we to look for that initiatory composure of mind which no selfishness can disturb; for a natural sensibility that has been tutored into correctness, without losing anything of its quickness; and for active faculties, capable of answering the demands which

an author of original imagination shall make upon them, associated with a judgment that cannot be duped into admiration by aught that is unworthy of it? Among those, and those only, who, never having suffered their youthful love of poetry to remit much of its force, have applied to the consideration of the laws of this art the best power of their understandings.

To Mr. Arnold, if to any, we say, this enumeration of the qualities indispensable to a trustworthy critic of poetry, may be applied; and if the conclusions at which he bids us to arrive should not turn out to be such as we can wholly accept, at least we shall have the satisfaction of feeling that we dissent from one who has not invited our attention in vain, and who perhaps, by the avowals he incidentally makes in the course of his argument, has enabled us to hold with all the more confidence certain opinions which we will endeavour to establish by independent reasons of our own.

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Here, with sufficient brevity for the present, is the conclusion of Mr. Arnold on the vexed question of the primacy among English poets, no longer living, of the last century:

I place Wordsworth's poetry above Byron's, on the whole, although in some points he was greatly Byron's inferior. But these two, Wordsworth and Byron, stand, it seems to me, first and pre-eminent in actual performance, a glorious pair, among the English poets of this century. Keats had probably, indeed, a more consummate poetic gift than either of them; but he died having produced too little and being as yet too immature to rival them. I for my part can never ever think of equalling with them any other of their contemporaries; either Coleridge, poet and philosopher wrecked in a mist of opium; or Shelley, beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain. Wordsworth and Byron stand out by themselves. When the year 1900 is turned, and our nation comes to recount her poetic glories in the century which has just then ended, the first names with her will be these.

We do not propose to traverse the entire field of controversy here lightly indicated; our purpose being to confine ourselves to a consideration of Mr. Arnold's particular conclusion, that Wordsworth's poetry should be placed above Byron's. But before passing to that duty, we may say, parenthetically, that though we agree with Mr. Arnold that Shelley's poetry often exhibits a lamentable "want of sound subject-matter," the claims of the "beautiful and ineffectual angel" are here somewhat summarily dismissed; and that when Mr. Arnold says further that he "doubts whether Shelley's delightful Essays and Letters, which deserve to be far more read than they are now, will not resist the wear and tear of time better, and finally come to stand higher than his poetry," he makes us lift our eyes in sheer amazement, and somewhat more than doubt whether this will not prove to be among the utterly falsified prophecies of very able critics.

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Holding the opinion he does concerning Wordsworth and Byron, Mr. Arnold has published a selection from the works of both, in distinct and separate volumes, and he believes that he has thereby rendered an equal service to each. "Alone," he writes, "among our poets of the earlier part of this century, Byron and Wordsworth not only furnish material enough for a volume of this kind, but also, it seems to me, they both of them gain considerably by being thus exhibited." We, on the contrary, submit that if the comparison is to end here, and is to be confined to the results produced by Mr. Arnold's method, a more unjust and inadequate method, as far as Byron is concerned, could not possibly be resorted to. Wordsworth gains considerably, but Byron loses considerably, to employ Mr. Arnold's language, by being thus exhibited. No doubt, Mr. Arnold means to be just. He always means to be just. But in the very description he gives of the contents of these two volumes on their respective title-pages, does he not betray a sort of unconscious consciousness that he is dealing with two very different poets, and with two poets whose works are very different? If this be not so, how comes it that he calls one volume "*Poems*" of Wordsworth, and the other "*Poetry*" of Byron? The distinction is a genuine one. Indeed, it is something more than genuine; it was inevitable, and Mr. Arnold was obliged to make it, if the title of each volume was to describe its contents correctly. The best poems of Wordsworth are short, most of them remarkably short; and therefore, in a volume of selections from his works, they can without difficulty be presented in their integrity. The best poems of Byron, like the best poems of Æschylus, of Virgil, of Dante, of Shakespeare, of Milton, are of considerable length; and if selections from Byron are to be made, his best poems must be mutilated for the purpose. Mr. Arnold has mutilated them accordingly. Thus, while intending to treat Wordsworth and Byron in precisely the same manner, he has treated them, and by the very conditions of the case could not help treating them, in an entirely different manner.

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That Mr. Arnold has not been altogether insensible to this objection—and, indeed, with his calm and dispassionate penetration, he was not likely to be—is apparent not only in the different description he gives of the contents of the two volumes, on their respective title-pages, but from certain observations in his prefatory essay upon Byron. When he says that "there are portions of Byron's poetry which are far higher in worth, and far more free from fault than others," or that "Byron cannot but be a gainer by having attention concentrated upon what is vivid, powerful, effective, in his work, and withdrawn from what is not so," he is, we would suggest, stating nothing more than a truism, or what is equally true of every poet. He is only beating the air, and hesitating to close with the real difficulty with which he feels himself confronted. But when he proceeds to urge that "Byron has not a great artist's

profound and patient skill in combining an action or in developing a character,—a skill which we must watch and follow if we are to do justice to it," he shows that he feels it to be necessary to offer a defence for applying to Byron a treatment from which Byron may possibly suffer. We confess, with all our admiration for Mr. Arnold—and it is as deep as it is sincere—we have never been able to resist the suspicion that he is *tant soit peu* a sophist; and surely it is sophistry, in the course of an attempt to show that Byron and Wordsworth each equally gain by the "selection" method of treatment, to urge, with that air of tranquil and well-bred triumph of which Mr. Arnold is so consummate a master, that "to take passages from work produced as Byron's was, is a very different thing from taking passages out of the *Ædipus* or the *Tempest* and deprives the poetry far less of its advantage"? For the question is not whether Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Byron may be treated ostensibly in the same manner by an editor of selections, without injustice being done to any of them, but whether Wordsworth and Byron can. That is the question; and it is not answered, but avoided, by altering the terms of the proposition.

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What, therefore, really remains of this plea of Mr. Arnold's, this excuse for mutilating Byron's poems and presenting them in fragments, is the allegation that Byron is not, *above and before all things*, a great, patient, and systematic artist. That much may be granted; and no competent critic would deny it. But more cannot be granted than is strictly true; and candour equally demands that it should be admitted that though Byron was not long-suffering and far-reaching enough in the conception of his poems, nor careful and self-critical enough in their execution, he possessed at least enough of the instinct and the scope of the artist to produce works that cohere with themselves, and that have a unity of design sufficiently definite to mark it as something distinct from the mere succession of executed detail. Will Mr. Arnold seriously pretend that a more "vivid, powerful, and effective" impression is not created upon the mind by a perusal of the whole of *Manfred*, than by a perusal of portions of it, or of one or two dissociated Acts? Mr. Arnold turns Byron's own modest confessions against himself, and lays stress upon the avowal that the *Giaour* is "a string of passages." But if any one were, after due reflection, to maintain, that more justice is done to Byron by reading some of its passages than by reading the whole of the poem, we confess we should be obliged to entertain some doubt as to his own instincts as an artist. For, where men like Byron are concerned, it is peculiarly true that the divinity of the Muse shapes their ends, rough-hew these how they may. Of every one of Byron's tales—the *Siege of Corinth*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *Parisina*—this is equally true. It has more than once been observed that *Childe Harold* suffers from the fact that a period of eight years elapsed between the composition of the first and second cantos, and the composition of the third and fourth; and as far as style is concerned, the contrast is very striking, two of the cantos being for the most part almost as feeble, and two of them as forcible, as anything deserving the name of poetry well can be. Nevertheless, there would be no difficulty in showing, and we think no reader of poetry endowed with a fair amount of artistic sense would require to be shown, that a certain oneness of purpose and unity of drift presides over and accompanies the entire poem, in a word that it is substantially homogeneous; and if any one, after reading through the third and fourth cantos at a stretch, as we recently did, were to tell us that he thought a few extracts from each give an adequate conception of the two, and that reading portions is in effect equivalent to reading the whole, we should have reached that limit of controversy which is expressed by a silence that is not assent. It is true that Mr. Arnold has been fairly lavish in his extracts from *Childe Harold*; yet out of the 300 stanzas which compose the third and fourth cantos, his selection contains only 114, or little more than a third. But it is not only by the curtailment of the quantity, but by the treatment applied to what is selected, that injury is done to *Childe Harold*. The passages quoted are scattered at intervals through the volume, so that all consecutiveness and coherence are lost. The majestic march of the poem is utterly broken. The subtle argument that lurks in the order of every poem—whether it be the *lucidus ordo* of a speech, or an order less obvious and patent—is completely destroyed. The strain neither begins nor ends, neither rises nor falls, neither pauses nor progresses. The statue is shivered to pieces, and we are offered a collection of chips, mixed up with fragments from other marbles that have been treated with equal ruthlessness. Here there is a hand, here a portion of a foot, here a section of the features, here a bit of the torso. They still are magnificent, and full of suggestiveness. But are they equal and equivalent to the entire statue? Are they as good as the whole of the original work? With surprising paradox Mr. Arnold assures us they are considerably better.

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This singular conclusion is attained, it seems to us, by the excessive assertion, or at least by the exaggerated application, of a theory in which there is, unquestionably, a solid element of truth. We have said that Byron is not an austere and consistent artist. But that is not to affirm that he is not an artist at all; whereas, in thus treating his productions fragmentarily, Mr. Arnold acts as though such an assertion were true. Byron, says Mr. Arnold, is not "architectural." But is he not? There is architecture, and architecture; the severe and systematic architecture of the Greeks, and the more free, irregular, unmethodical architecture which we know as Gothic. In the conception, and what in technical parlance is called the composition, of his works, Byron is assuredly no Greek. The exquisite oneness of design characteristic of Athenian genius he certainly did not borrow from the land and the race no one has so splendidly extolled. But if we turn to some of the noblest productions of Gothic architecture, what do we find? We find Cathedrals of unquestioned beauty and of universal fame, produced, it would superficially seem, almost haphazard; without design, without plan, even without architect. In our own land we may see Minsters that, begun in

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the eleventh, were not finished till the fifteenth century. Like *Childe Harold*, they bear the evident marks of different ages, and of different styles; and like *Don Juan*, they show that they were commenced without their parent knowing where or how they were to end. Nay, like it again, some of them remain unfinished to this day. But will any one affirm that their integrity, as they stand, is nothing to them, and nothing to us? Because no great master-conception presided over their origin and their execution, will no injury be done to them by taking them to pieces, and saying, "Here is a lovely apse; here you see a beautiful flying buttress; here contemplate an exquisite rood-screen; here you have an admirable bit of the choir, and there a glorious specimen of the roof"?

Nor can it be urged that this illustration does violence to the process Mr. Arnold has adopted. On the contrary, the analogy is not strong enough; for *Manfred*, *The Corsair*, *Cain*, *Childe Harold* itself, were conceived and executed, not less, but far more homogeneously, than the edifices with which we have compared them, and if it would be unjust and inadequate to treat Gothic cathedrals after this fashion, it is still more unjust and inadequate to treat Byron's poems after this fashion. More glaring still becomes the injustice, and more utter the inadequacy, when we remember in whose company he is so treated. Mr. Arnold does not break Wordsworth's poems to pieces and present us with the fragments; for there is no necessity to do so. The long ones Mr. Arnold cheerfully throws over, confessing that *The Excursion* "can never be a satisfactory work to the disinterested lover of poetry," and even that Jeffrey was not wrong when he said of it, "This will never do." To adhere to our metaphor, it is a large comfortless Meeting-house; and so is the *Recluse*. The best of Wordsworth's poems, as we have said, and as Mr. Arnold says, are his short ones. There are charming English cottages, or, if it be preferred—for we have no intention of decrying them, we admire them vastly—exquisite little wayside chapels; and they fit conveniently into the space, without being tampered with, which Mr. Arnold has provided for them. But the best of Byron's poems are the long ones; are vast Gothic edifices that soar high into the air and cover a vast amount of ground, and therefore cannot be compressed into the same compass. We have seen how Mr. Arnold gets over the difficulty. He pulls them down, places bits and sections of them side by side with the untouched cottages and still complete oratories of Wordsworth, and asks us to compare the two. We are far from saying that, even under these conditions, the comparison ends to Byron's disadvantage. But it surely must be evident to every one that the conditions are not equal, and therefore, however fair were the intentions of the editor, that they are not really just. We should be sorry if any one supposed we consider Mr. Swinburne as sound a critic as Mr. Arnold. But, upon this particular question, Mr. Swinburne has propounded a conclusion against which, we submit, Mr. Arnold contends in vain. "The greatest of Byron's works was his whole work taken together." Nothing could be more terse or more true; and if Mr. Swinburne would be content always to form his judgments thus calmly and comprehensively, and to express them with this brevity and directness, he would soon come to exercise an authority which is at present refused by many to his literary verdicts.

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But though, if the comparison instituted between Byron and Wordsworth by Mr. Arnold were to be confined within the conditions he has imposed on both alike, great injustice would be done to Byron, it may well be doubted if the plan adopted by Mr. Arnold will really tend to Byron's disadvantage. On the contrary we suspect that, with the best will in the world to do all he can for Wordsworth, Mr. Arnold has done him rather an ill turn. For the whole, or anything approaching to the whole, of the best of Byron, is not to be found in the volume of selections edited by Mr. Arnold; and everybody will feel that Byron is a far greater poet than he could possibly be made to appear by any such method. But all the best poetry of Wordsworth is in the volume Mr. Arnold dedicates to him; and we entertain little doubt that there is no dispassionate critic who would not be obliged to allow that a considerable portion, indeed we fear the greater portion of it, is not poetry at all. The process Mr. Arnold has applied to Wordsworth, will have to be applied over again, and with greater rigour. He has rejected as "not satisfactory work to the disinterested lover of poetry," an immense quantity of what Wordsworth conceived to be such. Another editor will have to reject a considerable proportion of what Mr. Arnold has too indulgently included. His selection will have to be selected from afresh; and thus, with doubtful friendliness, he has pointed and prepared the way for some entirely dispassionate critic who will leave of Wordsworth only what, to "the disinterested lover of poetry," is worth leaving; and this unfortunately, though of a high and delightful quality, will prove to be comparatively little. In a word, to do Byron anything like justice, we require several volumes of the size of that Mr. Arnold devotes to him; we require, in fact, most of what he wrote. To do Wordsworth justice, we require a volume less than half the size of what Mr. Arnold gives us; we require, in fact, to suppress at least three-fourths of what he wrote.

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But, again, we can raise no question, and propound no conclusion which Mr. Arnold, with his penetrating sense and acute susceptibility, has not himself more or less discerned. After observing, "we must be on our guard against Wordsworthians," he thus writes, in a vein of delicate humour:

I have spoken lightly of Wordsworthians: and if we are to get Wordsworth recognised by the public and by the world, we must recommend him not in the spirit of a clique, but in the spirit of disinterested lovers of poetry. But I am a Wordsworthian myself. I can read with pleasure and edification *Peter Bell*, and the whole series of *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, and the addresses to Mr.

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Wilkinson's spade, and even the *Thanksgiving Ode*; everything of Wordsworth, I think, except *Vaudracour and Julia*. It is not for nothing that one has been brought up in the veneration of a man so truly worthy of homage; that one has seen and heard him, lived in his neighbourhood, and been familiar with his country.

Alas! even the best of us are mortal; and we accept this graceful passage as Mr. Arnold's confession that he, too, is a Wordsworthian against whom we must be on our guard. An extremist of a school he could not now be; but "it is not for nothing," as he says, that he was trained in it. "Once a priest," says an Italian proverb, "always a priest"; and, we fear, once a Wordsworthian, always a Wordsworthian. It is no reproach; but "we must be on our guard." For our part, we are tolerably familiar with Wordsworth's country, but, beyond that, we are under no such spell as Mr. Arnold confesses to above. We entertain profound veneration and homage for Wordsworth, but it is the result, not so much of early teaching—the most difficult of all lessons to unlearn—as of independent admiration and sympathy inspired in riper years. We, too, can read *Peter Bell* and the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, but with more edification than pleasure; and we have read, afresh, every word of what Mr. Arnold has included in his *Poems of Wordsworth*, only to reach the conclusion we have already stated, that from many, only too many of them, the spirit, the essence, the indefinable something, of poetry is absent.

We should be sorry to be thought guilty of dogmatism, and there is always peril in generalisations. Let us therefore descend to particulars, as far as space will permit, and analyse the contents of Mr. Arnold's *Poems of Wordsworth*. The volume consists of 317 pages; of which 20 are dedicated to "Poems of Ballad Form," 92 to "Narrative Poems," 56 to "Lyrical Poems," 34 to "Poems akin to the Antique and Odes," 32 to "Sonnets," and 83 to "Reflective and Elegiac Poems."

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In the first division, *We are Seven*, *Lucy Gray*, and *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, are the only poems that can be pronounced wholly satisfactory, and that give real pleasure. *Anecdote for Fathers* and *Alice Fell* would be just as well away, for they would raise the reputation of no poet, save it be with those against whom "we must be on our guard." The poems, *The Childless Father*, *Power of Music*, and *Star-Gazers*, are redeemed only by their moral; and perhaps of *Power of Music*, even this cannot be said.

An Orpheus! an Orpheus!—yes, Faith may grow bold,
And take to herself all the wonders of old;—
Near the stately Pantheon you'll meet with the same
In the street that from Oxford hath borrowed its name.

His station is there;—and he works on the crowd,
He sways them with harmony merry and loud;
He fills with his power all their hearts to the brim—
Was aught ever heard like his Fiddle and him?

What an eager assembly! what an empire is this!
The weary have life, and the hungry have bliss;
The mourner is cheered, and the anxious have rest;
And the guilt-burthened soul is no longer opprest.

Then follow eight stanzas, in which the baker, the apprentice, the newsman, the lamplighter, the porter, the lass with her barrow, the cripple, the mother, and others, are described as stopping to listen, in language similar to that of the three stanzas we have quoted; the only slight improvement upon it being such lines as "She sees the Musician, 'tis all that she sees," until we reach the conclusion:

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Now, coaches and chariots! roar on like a stream;
Here are twenty souls happy as souls in a dream:
They are deaf to your murmurs, they care not for you,
Nor what ye are flying, nor what ye pursue.

The more ardent admirers of Wordsworth are in the habit of assuming that those persons who approach their favourite poet with a more hesitating homage, fail to appreciate the beauty of simplicity, and fancy that a composition is not poetical because it lacks what is called elevation of language and the "grand style." We can assure them, in all sincerity, that far from that being the basis of our inability to admire all that they admire, we admire Wordsworth most, and we admire him immensely, when he is as simple as it is possible to be. We have just cited a poem, which we scarcely think deserves that name. But, side by side with it, in Mr. Arnold's volume, is a much shorter composition, on precisely the same theme, which is, if possible, still more simple in treatment, but which is true poetry, if true poetry was ever written. It is called *The Reverie of Poor Susan*:

At the corner of Wood Street, when daylight appears,
Hangs a thrush that sings loud, it has sung for three years:
Poor Susan has passed by the spot, and has heard
In the silence of morning the song of the Bird.

'Tis a note of enchantment; what ails her? She sees

A mountain ascending, a vision of trees;
Bright volumes of vapour through Lothbury glide,
And a river flows on through the vale of Cheapside.

Green pastures she views in the midst of the dale,
Down which she so often has tripped with her pail;
And a single small cottage, a nest like a dove's,
The one only dwelling on earth that she loves.

She looks, and her heart is in heaven; but they fade,
The mist and the river, the hill and the shade:
The stream will not flow, and the hill will not rise,
And the colours have all passed away from her eyes.

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After reading *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, we may pay Wordsworth's Muse the compliment that was paid by the Latin poet to the woman who was *simplex munditiis*. Its neat simplicity is in great measure the secret of its success; but it is not mean in its simplicity. Neither, as in the other poems we have contrasted with it, have we to wait till the end of the poem for the moral and the meaning. The moral is interwoven and interfused with it, and every line breathes the soul and essence of the entire composition. But nearly all these "Poems of Ballad Form" are didactic; and does not Mr. Arnold tell us, in his preface, "Some kinds of poetry are in themselves lower kinds than others; the ballad kind is a lower kind; the didactic kind, still more, is a lower kind"? Of the twenty pages of these poems of lower kind, we are strongly disposed to think that the "disinterested lover of poetry" would discard twelve, and retain only eight, and that Wordsworth, to use Mr. Arnold's phrase, would "stand higher" if this were done.

But even this proportion between retention and rejection cannot well be maintained by the disinterested lover of poetry as he advances through the volume. The "Narrative Poems" occupy nearly a third of it, and in this section the amount of real poetry is meagre indeed. We had no conception how many short poems Wordsworth had written, unredeemed by "the gleam, the light that never was, on sea or land," till we read this collection consecutively; and we read it in the open air, in a beautiful country, on the loveliest day of a lovely May. But nothing could possibly attune the heart of the disinterested lover of poetry to such verses as these:

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When Ruth was left half desolate,
Her father took another mate;
And Ruth, not seven years old,
A slighted child, at her own will
Went wandering over dale and hill,
In thoughtless freedom, bold.

There came a Youth from Georgia's shore—
A military casque he wore,
With splendid feathers drest;
He brought them from the Cherokees;
The feathers nodded in the breeze,
And made a gallant crest.

"Belovèd Ruth!" No more he said.
The wakeful Ruth at midnight shed
A solitary tear:
She thought again—and did agree
With him to sail across the sea,
And drive the flying deer.

"And now, as fitting is and right,
We in the Church our faith will plight,
A husband and a wife."
Even so they did; and I may say
That to sweet Ruth that happy day
Was more than human life.

Not only is it impossible, we think, for the disinterested lover of poetry to read this either with pleasure or with edification, but it is not easy for him to read it without an ever-broadening smile. As a rule, the verse to be met with in our less fastidious Magazines is not of a very high order. But we doubt if the editor of any one of them would consent to insert the foregoing stanzas, or those that follow, with their, "But as you have before been told," "Meanwhile, as thus with him it fared, They for the voyage were prepared," "God help thee, Ruth! Such pains she had, That she in half a year was mad," and such like specimens of unartistic and naive childishness. Surely, if there be any one who thinks this poetry, it must be Mr. Arnold's friend, the British Philistine? If Murdstone and Quinion could be converted and ever took to reading poetry, would not this be the sort of verse that would delight them? And would they not do so by reason of that "stunted sense of beauty," and that "defective type" of intellect with which Mr. Arnold justly reproaches the English middle-class?

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Did these poems stand alone, in their prosaic puerility, we might be surprised that Mr. Arnold had reproduced them; but we should have been content to conclude that, like Homer, both poet and editor had been nodding. But we turn page after page of these “Narrative Poems” to be astonished by what we encounter. The next poem to *Ruth* is *Simon Lee: The Old Huntsman, with an Incident in which he was Concerned*:

Few months of life has he in store,
As he to you will tell,
For still, the more he works, the more
Do his weak ankles swell.
My gentle Reader, I perceive
How patiently you’ve waited,
And now I fear that you’ll expect
Some tale will be related.

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you would find
A tale in everything.
What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it:
It is no tale; but, should you *think*,
Perhaps a tale you’ll make it.

Simon is grubbing the stump of a tree, but was unequal to the task. The poet takes the mattock from his hand, and with a blow severs the root, “At which the poor Old Man so long, And vainly had endeavoured.” Thankful tears come into his eyes, whereupon the poet remarks:

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I’ve heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds
With coldness still returning;
Alas! the gratitude of men
Hath oftener left me mourning.

The sentiment is nice and pretty, but is it poetry, or, even if it were, could it make poetry of the doggerel—for surely there really is no other name for it—that precedes it? And do Wordsworthians against whom Mr. Arnold tells us we ought to be on our guard, or Wordsworthians who fancy that we need not be on our guard against *them*, suppose that moralising correctly and piously in verse about every “incident” in which somebody happens to be “concerned,” renders the narrative a “tale,”—much more, makes poetry of it? We are far from saying that Wordsworth might not, in a happier mood, have written poetry upon this particular incident. But we do say, with some confidence, that he has unfortunately not done so; that the incident, narrated in the manner in which he has narrated it, cannot of itself be accepted as poetry—which, as Mr. Arnold well knows, is the extreme Wordsworthian theory, as advocated by Wordsworth himself in pages upon pages of controversial prose; and that we are greatly astonished Mr. Arnold should indirectly lend it countenance, by reprinting and stamping with his precious approval, such infelicitous triviality as the above. We cannot shrink from saying this, through an unworthy dread lest we should be confounded with “the tenth-rate critics and compilers to whom it is still permissible to speak of Wordsworth’s poetry, not only with ignorance, but with impertinence.” Mr. Arnold has himself shown that he does not hesitate to speak in pretty strong terms of those portions of Wordsworth’s verse which he does not regard as poetry. He describes them as “abstract verbiage”; he acknowledges that they are so inferior, it seems wonderful how Wordsworth should have produced them; and in a passage delightfully humorous he imagines a long passage of Wordsworth being declaimed at a Social Science Congress to an admiring audience of men with bald heads and women in spectacles, “and in the soul of any poor child of nature who may have wandered in thither, an unutterable sense of lamentation, mourning, and woe.”

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All that we ask, therefore, is to be allowed the same amount of liberty which Mr. Arnold himself has exercised, and to be permitted to do what he has done. We, too, would fain disengage what is valuable in Wordsworth’s poetry from what is worthless. We, too, would fain “exhibit his best work, and clear away obstructions from around it.” But we contend, and we willingly leave the decision to disinterested lovers of poetry, that such poems as *Ruth* and *Simon Lee* are not only not Wordsworth’s best work, but not good work at all; on the contrary are part of the obstruction from which it should be cleared.

The next two poems in the “Narrative” section refer to the fidelity of dogs, and a single stanza will suffice to show that they are of much the same calibre as the two that precede them:

But hear a wonder for whose sake
This lamentable tale I tell!
A lasting monument of words
This wonder merits well.
The Dog, which still was hovering nigh,
Repeating the same timid cry,

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This Dog, had been through three months' space
A dweller in that savage place.

Next in order comes *Hart-Leap Well*, which consists of two parts. In the first we come across such lines and phrases as "Joy sparkled in the prancing courser's eyes," "A rout that made the echoes roar," "Soon did the Knight perform what he had said, And far and wide thereof the fame did ring," "But there is matter for a second rhyme, And I to this would add another tale," which are simply a distress to the disinterested reader of poetry. In the second part, the poet warms up, and ends with a passage which is very beautiful:

Grey-headed Shepherd, thou hast spoken well;
Small difference lies between thy creed and mine:
This Beast not unobserved by Nature fell;
His death was mourned by sympathy divine.

The Being, that is in the clouds and air,
That is in the green leaves among the groves,
Maintains a deep and reverential care
For the unoffending creatures whom he loves.

The Pleasure-house is dust:—behind, before,
This is no common waste, no common gloom;
But Nature, in due course of time, once more
Shall here put on her beauty and her bloom.

She leaves these objects to a slow decay,
That what we are, and have been, may be known;
But, at the coming of the milder day,
These monuments shall all be overgrown!

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One lesson, Shepherd, let us two divide,
Taught both by what she shows, and what conceals;
Never to blend our pleasure or our pride
With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels.

Of course, this is poetry, and very good poetry; and it is, justly, one of the favourite passages of ardent admirers of Wordsworth. But we can scarcely refrain from saying that, good as it is, there exists something of precisely the same kind, and, as it happens, in precisely the same metre, which is considerably better. Surely, no one will have any difficulty in naming it. It is Gray's famous *Elegy*. Yet we remember how indignant the "Wordsworthians against whom we ought to be on our guard" were with the *Quarterly Review*, because there appeared in it a paper in which Wordsworth and Gray were compared. To mention them in the same breath was sacrilege! We do not wish to affirm that the disinterested lover of poetry believes Gray ever to have scaled the heights where Wordsworth's wing sometimes floats almost without effort. But it cannot be uninteresting to mark that, in what we may call the middle notes, Wordsworth is distinctly inferior to Gray, though ever and anon his voice gets entirely beyond Gray's compass.

It would be impossible, with any regard for space, to quote from, or even to name, every poem reproduced by Mr. Arnold, which in our opinion would have been better suppressed. But if we seem to have established our contention so far, we think the reader may rely upon it that he would more or less concur in what else might be said on this score. *The Force of Prayer, The Affliction of Margaret, The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman*, are little if any less trivial than the poems already condemned; while in *The Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle*, we read six pages equally poor and unpoetical, suddenly to come upon such a quatrain as the following:

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Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;
His daily teachers had been woods and rills,
The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

The last two lines it would be impossible to praise too highly. Only the silence of profound reverence can do them justice. They are touches like these, touches like "the harvest of a quiet eye," that give to Wordsworth his holy predominance, and whatever predominance, after fair examination, must be adjudged him. But how few they are! Perhaps it is in the nature of things that they should be so. But being so few and far between, they cannot fill up the blank that intervenes. They are indeed "Angels' visits." But even poetry has to do mainly with human guests, and a poet must be judged, as Mr. Arnold truly affirms, by "the ample body of powerful work" he leaves behind. We cannot assume that much of Wordsworth's poetry is not unutterably bad, because some of it is unutterably beautiful. The utmost we can do is to grant, concerning him, what he himself said so finely of a young girl:

If thou appear'st untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year,
And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,

It is possible that like the "dear child, dear girl," he lay in Abraham's bosom "all the year," but he communicates the fact, he impresses us with the fact, but seldom. As a rule, he seems to be outside the Temple altogether. Hence these magnificent bursts of poetical depth and sublimity, which, be it said, are peculiar to Wordsworth, are mere short passages, and there are not many of them. But if they suffice, after a complete survey of the works of both poets, to place Wordsworth above Byron, we shall be obliged to conclude that they suffice to place him above every poet that ever lived. That such a theory of poetry, such a canon of criticism is untenable, unless we are to cast every hitherto accepted theory of poetry and every former canon of criticism to the winds, we trust, in due course, to be able to establish.

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We are aware that *The Brothers* is a favourite composition with thoroughgoing Wordsworthians. But as we have been told to be on our guard against them, we need not hesitate to say that it seems to us to consist of very ordinary verse, and the piece itself to be devoid of any real poetical temperament, though it fills sixteen pages in Mr. Arnold's collection. Sixteen more are occupied by *Margaret*, upon which we are unable to pronounce a different or a modified verdict. Both abound in such passages as the following:

He left his house: two wretched days had past,
And on the third, as wistfully she raised
Her head from off her pillow, to look forth,
Like one in trouble, for returning light,
Within her chamber-casement she espied
A folded paper, lying as if placed
To meet her waking eyes. This tremblingly
She opened—found no writing, but beheld
Pieces of money carefully enclosed,
Silver and gold. "I shuddered at the sight,"
Said Margaret, "for I knew it was his hand
Which placed it there: and ere that day was ended,
That long and anxious day! I learned from one
Sent hither by my husband to impart
The heavy news,—that he had joined a Troop
Of soldiers, going to a distant land.
He left me thus—he could not gather heart
To take a farewell of me; for he feared
That I should follow with my Babes, and sink
Beneath the misery of that wandering life."

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If this be poetry, then poetry is very easily written, and what has hitherto been supposed to be the highest, the most difficult, and the rarest, of the arts, presents no more difficulty to the person who knows how to write at all than the simplest, baldest, and most unartistic prose. What, for instance, is this?—

At length the expected letter from the kinsman came, with kind assurances that he would do his utmost for the welfare of the boy; to which requests were added that forthwith he might be sent to him. Ten times or more the letter was read over. Isabel went forth to show it to the neighbours round; nor was there at that time on English land a prouder heart than Luke's. When Isabel had to her house returned, the old man said, "He shall depart to-morrow." To this word the housewife answered, talking much of things which, if at such short notice he should go, would surely be forgotten. But at length she gave consent, and Michael was at ease.

Is this prose or verse? We have printed it as prose. Wordsworth wrote it as verse, and Mr. Arnold has reproduced it as poetry. Had all Wordsworth's compositions been of this calibre, and a painfully large number of them are, well might John Stuart Mill affirm that any man of good abilities might become as good a poet as Wordsworth by giving his mind to it, and we will add that a man of good abilities could hardly employ them worse. Yet this passage, and fourteen pages of verse not one whit better than it, are to be met with in *Michael*, one of the narrative poems Mr. Arnold, with special emphasis, begs us to admire. "The right sort of verse," he says, "to choose from Wordsworth, if we are to seize his true and most characteristic form of expression, is a line like this from *Michael*:

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And never lifted up a single stone.

There is nothing subtle in it, no heightening, no study of poetic style, strictly so called; yet it is expressive of the highest and most expressive kind." Of course, in order to properly appreciate it, we must know the context, which fortunately is easily compressed. Michael and his son Luke were to build a sheepfold; but, as told in the passage we have printed, Luke is sent to a kinsman, who will advance him in life. Before he goes, Michael takes him to lay the first stone of the sheepfold. The lad then leaves home, falls into dissolute courses, and at last hides himself beyond the seas. After that, it is narrated of Michael:

And to that hollow dell from time to time
Did he repair, to build the Fold of which
His flock had need. 'Tis not forgotten yet

The pity which was then in every heart
For the Old Man—and 'tis believed by all
That many and many a day he thither went,
And never lifted up a single stone.

We have asked several disinterested lovers of poetry, some of them ardent admirers of Wordsworth, what they think of this; and we are bound to say that most of them failed to see anything in it whatsoever. That is not our case. We feel the force of the situation, and the apt simplicity of the concluding line. Yet repeat it, dwell on it, and surrender ourselves to it as we will, we fail to persuade ourselves that it merits the lofty eulogy pronounced on it by Mr. Arnold. It is with hesitation that we presume, on such a point, and where the issue is so direct, to place our opinion in seeming competition with his; but we can only leave the decision to the *communis sensus* of disinterested lovers of poetry. But nothing—not even Mr. Arnold's authority—could satisfy us that this line suffices to lend the wings of poetry to fourteen closely printed pages of such pedestrian verse as that of which *Michael* for the most part consists.

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The only other poem in the "Narrative" section of the volume is *The Leech-Gatherer*; and it, besides containing many lines of admirable poetry, is itself a coherently beautiful poem. But when, resuming our analysis, we enquire how much poetry there is in the 112 pages, or in more than the third portion of the volume we have as yet examined, what do we find? Exactly 20, and only 20, which we honestly believe the disinterested lover of poetry, the critic to whom Mr. Arnold makes appeal, would recognise as strictly deserving that description. We can seriously assert that this is the amount we should save from the wreck, if we were editing a selection from Wordsworth, were disengaging his good work from his bad, and were seeking to obtain for him readers who care nothing whatever about him personally, and who only wish ever and anon to steep themselves in the atmosphere of native and sterling poetry. We are well aware that, from another and a more extended point of view, Wordsworth never wrote a line, in verse or in prose, which is not worth preserving, and worth reading. But that is not at present the question. We are dealing with the critical contention of a great and influential critic, that "what strikes me with admiration, what establishes in my opinion Wordsworth's superiority"—to Byron, be it understood, and to every English poet since Milton—"is the great and ample body of powerful work which remains to him, even after all his inferior work has been cleared away." This it is which renders it necessary to clear away the inferior work, in order that we may see if the body of "powerful" work that remains be really "ample" or not.

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The "Lyrical Poems" contain the best, the most characteristic, and the most valuable of the compositions of Wordsworth. For our part, we should have excluded *To a Sky-Lark*, at page 126—not the beautiful one with the same title at page 142—*Stray Pleasures*, the two poems *At the Grave of Burns*, *Yarrow Visited*, *Yarrow Revisited*, in spite of their vogue with Wordsworthians *quand même*, *To May*, and *The Primrose of the Rock*. There would then be left 33 pages containing the best poems of their kind anywhere to be found, and of inestimable value to the disinterested lover of poetry. The fervid lover of poetry knows them by heart, and carries them with him through life. Is it necessary to give their names? *She was a Phantom of Delight*, *The Solitary Reaper*, *Three Years She Grew*, *To the Cuckoo*, *I Wandered lonely as a Cloud*—these, and their companions, to be found about the middle of Mr. Arnold's volume, are among the most precious, and will remain among the enduring possessions of mankind. Nor is it only that they fill the mind with elevating thoughts and swell the heart with sacred sentiments. They make one regard, with a peculiar affection, the poet who wrote them. But we must not allow this literary love to warp literary judgment. No such feeling is awakened for their authors by *Childe Harold* or *Hamlet*. But to conclude that Wordsworth is, therefore, a greater poet than Byron or Shakespeare, would be as illegitimate in the one instance as in the other. It would be to imitate the filial and uxorious fondness of the late Mr. Carlyle, who gravely tells us that his father had a larger intellect than Burns, and that his amiable, long-suffering wife wrote letters of greater value and insight than the works of George Sand and George Eliot, and "all the pack of scribbling women from the beginning of time." To love Wordsworth is pardonable; nay, it is inevitable to those who are intimate with his tenderest work. But the critic must disengage his judgment from his affections, if he is not to mislead the persons he aspires to instruct, and to injure the art of whose dignity he is bound to be jealous.

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Briefly, then, and pursuing to the end the "disinterested-lover-of-poetry" method recommended to us by Mr. Arnold, and of which we think we have already given illustrations to enable any one to decide for himself whether we pursue it with equity and candour, we reach the conclusion that, of the 317 pages composing Mr. Arnold's collection, only 103, on a liberal estimate, contain what is worth preserving as poetry; or at least, if there be any dispute as to whether it is poetry, there can be none, outside the specially Wordsworthian circle, as to its being very inferior poetry indeed, and in no degree calculated to confer, extend, or uphold any man's reputation as a poet. That it is admirable in sentiment and laudable in moral purpose, may at once be granted. But the purest of sentiments and the loftiest of purposes do not constitute poetry, even when apparelled in verse. Indeed we may say of them what Mr. Arnold himself says of those portions of Wordsworth's writings which he discards, that they are "doctrine such as we hear in church, religious and philosophical doctrine; and the attached Wordsworthian loves passages of such doctrine, and brings them forward in proof of his poet's excellence. But however true the doctrine may be, it has, as

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here presented, more of the characters of *poetic* truth, the kind of truth we require from a poet."

It may possibly seem an ungracious part to dwell upon the inferior portions of Wordsworth work, and to play the *rôle* of Devil's Advocate in the case of one who is assured beforehand of the honours of canonisation. But it should be remembered that this invidious task has been imposed upon us by Mr. Arnold, who has asserted, and challenged contradiction to the assertion, that in Wordsworth is to be found "an ampler body of powerful work," which constitutes his superiority over every English poet since Milton. It is he who has rendered it necessary, in justice to other poets, to enquire with accuracy, what *is* the amount of powerful work to be found in Wordsworth; and this cannot be done without careful and judicial scrutiny. Our object is the same as Mr. Arnold's; not to decry Wordsworth, but to ascertain his proper place in relation to other poets. If we seem to have spoken of him harshly, then so must Mr. Arnold; the only difference between us being that he thinks a certain proportion of Wordsworth's verse poor stuff, while we view a yet larger portion of it in that light. Nor is it the example of Mr. Arnold alone that can be cited in exoneration of perfect outspokenness. M. Scherer is a distinguished French critic, whom Mr. Arnold quotes, and M. Scherer has in turn introduced Mr. Arnold's *Selections* from Wordsworth to the French public in the pages of the *Temps*. He is a warm admirer of Wordsworth, and, as Mr. Arnold tells us, an excessive depreciator of Byron. From him, therefore, we may, with all the less scruple, cite the following avowals:

The simplicity of Wordsworth's subjects and manner too often degenerates into triviality, the simplicity of his style into poverty. He abuses his love for puerile anecdotes, makes us a present of stories about dogs, and of recitals of what a little girl has said to her sheep. He not only parades enthusiasm for flowers and birds, but predilection for beggars, cripples, and idiots. The lower a person is in the scale of being, the more he strives to awaken our sympathy in his favour. There are no details so minute, so insignificant, that he does not take a special pleasure in remarking them. Is he narrating a walk he takes in summer, he will speak of "the host of insects gathering round his face, and which are ever with him as he paces along."

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The habit of seeking and finding lessons in the smallest incidents of his walks becomes a didactic mania. He extracts moralities from every object, he preaches sermons at every turn. Often, too, this preaching vein is far from being poetical. One sometimes seems to be listening to the psalm-singing of a Conventicle. This, for example, resembles a hymn of Watts.

The poetry of Wordsworth, with the tendency it always had towards the prosaic, often lapses into it altogether.

This, we submit, is only another way of saying what we have ventured to say, and what Mr. Arnold himself has said. May we not reasonably conclude that M. Scherer would reject at least all that we have rejected? But, in any case, that there is substantial agreement between us and him, so far, is evident.

What, then, is the "ample body of powerful work" that is left of Wordsworth after the eliminating process has been applied to it by the disinterested lover of poetry? Between three and four thousand lines; rather more than the amount of matter in the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold*, rather less than the amount of matter in *Hamlet*. The quantity therefore, the "body" of work left, is not very large. Still we should not contest that it was "ample" enough to establish the superiority of Wordsworth over Byron, if it happened to be sufficiently "powerful" for the purpose. Though quantity must count for something, even in the comparison of poet with poet, since quantity implies copiousness, and usually implies versatility, quality counts for much more, if the difference in quality be marked, and suffices to abolish the consideration of quantity altogether, if the superiority in respect of quality be sufficiently great. If, for example, the four thousand lines, or thereabouts, of poetry Wordsworth has written, had been embodied, say, in a *Hamlet*, then work so powerful would have been ample to establish his superiority not only over every English poet since Milton, but over every poet since the one who has left us, so to speak, several *Hamlets*.

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For what is it that renders *Hamlet* so great and so powerful? Is it single lines of beautiful poetry? Is it detached passages of profound and elevated thought presented in poetic guise? These go for much, more especially when we consider them in connection with that of which they are the drapery. But what would they be, and what should we think of them, detached from the conception of the drama itself, without the plot, action, and progress of the piece, without the invention and unfolding of its characters, without its varied and forcible situations, without its wit, its irony, its humour? What should we think of *Hamlet* if divested of the panorama of moving human passions, of its merciless tragedy, and, finally, of its utter absence of moral so complete, that moralists have been for a hundred years wrangling what the moral is? These are the qualities, and these alone, which make great poetry and great poets.

What has Wordsworth of all these? The answer, if candid and disinterested, must be, Absolutely nothing. He has written no epic, no drama, no poem of any kind in which so much as an attempt is made to deal with the clashing of the various passions that "stir this mortal frame." Of Action he is utterly devoid. Of Invention, he seems absolutely unconscious. He

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has no wit; he has no humour. He has conceived no character, he has portrayed no character. If he can be said to deal with situations at all, they are of the simplest and most elementary kind, and he does not in any sense create them. He finds them at his door. No one blames him for making use of them, where he makes use of them well; but this is a very different thing from the invention shown in *Macbeth* or *The Tempest*, or even in *Cain*, in *Manfred*, and in *The Siege of Corinth*. Sardanapalus is not a Lear, nor is Myrra a Cordelia. But, as exhibitions and portraitures of human character and human passion in poetry they are as much beyond *Lucy Gray*, or *Michael*, or the little Child in *We are Seven*, as Lear and Cordelia are beyond them in turn.

Upon this point let us again hear M. Scherer:

We must expect from Wordsworth neither the knowledge of the human heart which worldly experience gives, nor that interior drama of the passions which a man can describe well only on condition of having been their victim, nor those general views upon history and society which are formed partly by study, partly by the practice of public affairs. Our poet is as much a stranger to the disquietudes of thought as to those of ambition, to the sufferings of love and of hate as to that resignation at which one arrives when one has discerned how very small are the great affairs of this world. He has nothing of that sublime melancholy, of those fervid questionings, of those audacious revolts, in which poetry delighted fifty years ago. Still less has he that mocking scepticism, that raillery now gay now bitter, which succeeded the songs of despair. He will never be of those who trouble souls as Byron does, who arm them with irony like Heine, or who calm them, like Goethe, by the virtue of true understanding. Wordsworth is simply a Solitary who has long gazed upon Nature and much analysed his own feelings. Scarcely should we dare to call him a philosopher, so wanting in him is the reasoning and speculative element. Even the title of thinker only half becomes him. He is a contemplative.

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It is true that, at the end of his review of Wordsworth, and without any previous admonition that he is going to do so, M. Scherer says, in one brief sentence, "Wordsworth seems to me to come after Milton, notably below him in my opinion, but withal the first after him"; thus endorsing the judgment of Mr. Arnold. But, unlike Mr. Arnold, he makes no attempt to establish or justify this view, but throws it out, as an *obiter dictum*, after writing a long essay, every argument and every phrase of which tend towards a diametrically opposite conclusion. So thoroughly is this the case, that we can honestly say we agree with every word in his essay, with the exception of the one brief sentence we have just cited.

But in the longer and more detailed passage quoted above, is not everything conceded for which we are contending? According to M. Scherer, Wordsworth has knowledge neither of the human heart nor of the interior drama of the passions. He has no broad views of history and society. He is a stranger to love, hatred, ambition, and the disquietudes they cause, as well as to the disquietudes caused by deep thought; and not having passed through these, he has necessarily not "come out upon the other side," and is equally a stranger to the tranquillity of complete knowledge and complete experience. He is not a philosopher; he is hardly a thinker. He is a contemplative solitary, who has consorted much with woods, lakes, and mountains, and has dwelt much upon the sensations they excite in himself. Verily, this is a sorry equipment for a great poet. Is it an exaggeration to say that, if all this be true, Wordsworth is destitute of most of the qualities which in a great poet have hitherto been deemed indispensable? If, in spite of these remarkable deficiencies, he really be the greatest English poet since Milton, we shall be forced to conclude that English poets since Milton have been far less powerful, of far lower calibre, and of far less value, than has generally been supposed.

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What then is the precise value, the real calibre, the particular kind of power, of that "ampler body of powerful work" which Wordsworth has given us? We have seen it is not an epic, nor a drama, nor one great comprehensive poem of any kind. It consists of lyrics, ballads, sonnets, and odes; of many of which it would not be just or critical to say more than that they are very sweet and charming, several of which must be pronounced exquisite, and a few, very few, of which may be designated sublime. We own we share the general opinion that the greatest composition of Wordsworth is the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*. We are surprised and disappointed to find Mr. Arnold speaking rather coldly of it; and M. Scherer likewise refers to it in a depreciatory tone, though he gives different reasons for his conclusion. M. Scherer thinks it "sounds a little false," and adds that he "cannot help seeing in it a theme adopted with reference to the poetic developments of which Wordsworth was susceptible, rather than a very serious belief of the author." We confess we think the judgment harsh, and the reasons given for it insufficient, if not indeed irrelevant. The objection Mr. Arnold entertains for it is that "it has not the character of poetic truth of the best kind; it has no real solidity. The instinct of delight in Nature and her beauty had no doubt extraordinary strength in Wordsworth himself as a child. But to say that universally this instinct is mighty in childhood, and tends to die away afterwards, is to say what is extremely doubtful."

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Now, with all deference to Mr. Arnold, which is due to him in a special manner when he is expounding Wordsworth, Wordsworth does not say this. In the first place, Wordsworth, after describing the comparative and temporary diminution of this instinct, describes its revival

and transfiguration in another guise. But what is far more important to note is, Wordsworth does *not* say the instinct is universal. He is writing as a poet, not as a psychologist; and though he treats of an objective infant for a time, and uses the pronoun “*our* infancy,” he in reality is describing his own experience, and letting it take its chance of being the experience of a certain number of other people. What, we may well ask, can a poet do more than this, when he gets into the higher range, the upper atmosphere of poetry? When Shakespeare talks of “the shade of melancholy boughs,” he does not mean that everybody feels them to be melancholy. That is the privilege—the melancholy privilege, if any one wills it so—of the higher natures. That what Wordsworth describes in his splendid *Ode* not only was true of himself, but is true likewise of all great poetic spirits, we entertain no doubt; and it will become true of an ever-increasing number of persons, if mankind is to make progress in the intimate and integral union of intellectual and poetic sentiment. In our opinion, the highest note of Wordsworth is struck in this *Ode*, and maintained through a composition of considerable length and of argumentative unity of purpose. It is struck by him elsewhere—indeed in the lines on Hartley Coleridge, we have a distinct overture, so to speak, to the *Ode*; but nowhere is it sustained for so long, or with such oneness, definiteness, and largeness of aim. There is, perhaps, no finer poem, of equal length, in any language. We could well understand any one maintaining that there exists no other so fine.

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But, if this *Ode* be struck out of the account, what remains to represent an “ample body of powerful work”? For, after all, in criticism, if we criticise at all, we must use words with some definite meaning. Perhaps Mr. Arnold would tell us that it is not the business of true Culture to be too definite; and we should heartily agree with him. One of the things that makes prose so inferior to poetry is its inaccurate precision. But it is Mr. Arnold himself who, on this occasion, compels us to be precise. He has elected to compare Wordsworth with every poet since Milton, and, in doing so, he has been obliged to use language which, to be of any use, must be more or less definite. What is meant by “ample”? Still more, what is meant by “powerful”? Does he mean that Wordsworth’s “*Lyrical Poems*,” which we think to be the best of Wordsworth’s compositions after the *Ode*, and which he thinks the best, before the *Ode*, are “powerful”? Let us quote perhaps the best of them, already quoted elsewhere, but that can never be read too often:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

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No Nightingale did ever chaunt
So sweetly to reposing bands
Of Travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o’er the sickle bending;—
I listened till I had my fill,
And when I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

This is exquisite; and of the sort of exquisiteness that leads one, in private, and in uncritical colloquies, to fall, as the phrase runs, into ecstasies. But can it, with any regard to accuracy of speech, be described as “powerful” work? We submit that it cannot. *Lear* is powerful. The first six books of *Paradise Lost* are powerful. The first four cantos of *Don Juan* are powerful. The *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* is powerful. But unless we are to lose ourselves in a labyrinth of critical confusion, we must no more allege or allow that *The Solitary Reaper* is powerful, than we can affirm that *Where the Bee Sucks* is powerful, that Milton’s sonnet, *To the Nightingale* is powerful, or that Byron’s *She Walks in Beauty like the Night* is powerful.

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They are all very beautiful; but that is another matter, and it will not do to confound totally different things.

How many lyrics, as perfect as the one we have quoted, has Wordsworth written? We can count but nine; and the most liberal computation could not extend them beyond twelve. To these would have to be added perhaps twice as many, very inferior to these, but still very beautiful, a certain number, but a very limited number, of first-rate sonnets, the Odes we have referred to, and detached lines and passages from other poems, notably the passage in the poem *On Revisiting Tintern Abbey*. The result would be about a third of the amount we ourselves should altogether extract from Wordsworth, and of which alone it could justly be said that some of it was powerful, and all of it was very beautiful work.

This is what, we venture to assert, remains, after rigid scrutiny, of "the ampler body of powerful work" which Wordsworth has given us. These are the compositions which, according to Mr. Arnold, "in real poetical achievement ... in power, in interest, in the qualities which give enduring freshness," establish Wordsworth's superiority.

Now can this claim possibly be allowed, unless, as we have said, all previous canons of criticism, and all previous estimates of poetry are to be cast to the winds? If it is to be allowed, then Æschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, must come down from their pedestals, and be regarded by us with very different eyes from those with which we have hitherto scanned them. For what are the marks, what the qualities, which have distinguished these poets above their fellows, and by reason of which the world has extolled their genius? It is not merely for poetic diction, for tenderness of sentiment, for elevation of feeling, for apt simile, appropriate metaphor, illuminating imagery, and the play of fancy as exhibited in subordinate detail, that we estimate them as we do. Neither is it, as we have already pointed out, but as we must repeat, for detached passages of sublimity, nor yet for short poems of exquisite beauty, that they have been assigned the rank they occupy. They occupy that rank by reason of their great conceptions, by reason of their capacity to project long and comparatively complex poems dedicated to a lofty theme, and to conduct these through all their intricate windings from first to last, by employing all the arts, all the expedients, all the resources of Imagination, chief among which are Action, Invention, and Situation. To these, of course, must be added copious, elastic, and dignified language, melody, pathos, and just imagery; for, without these, a man is not a poet at all. These are the very instruments of his craft, the very credentials of his profession; and if he has these, no one will challenge his right to be called a poet. But, unless the higher qualities, the greater credentials are also his, he must be content with an inferior place, no matter how many beautiful or sublime things he may have said, and no matter how excellent the doctrines he may have taught. He has failed to show his mastery over the great materials, his familiarity with the great purposes, of his art. Wordsworth projected two long poems, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*; and, practically, these two are one. They are of portentous length; and that is their only claim to be considered great. They have no Action, no Situation, no Invention, no Characters. They consist of pages upon pages, nay, of books upon books, of interminable talk, in which in reality Wordsworth himself is the only talker. Little of the talk is poetry. Much of it is, as Mr. Arnold says, "abstract verbiage." But we need not pursue the theme. Mr. Arnold candidly confesses that when Jeffrey said of *The Excursion*, "this will never do," he was quite right.

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Unquestionably, he was right; and he would still have been right, even had *The Excursion* contained a far greater number of passages of true poetry than it does. It will be an evil day for poetry, and for the readers of poetry, if it ever comes to be allowed that the sole or the main function of poetry is to *talk about* things, and that a man can get himself accepted as a great poet by pursuing this course. Unfortunately, it was Wordsworth's theory that he could. It would be fatal if critics became of the same opinion. It is their bounden duty, on the contrary, to protest against such a theory. Wordsworth sets it down, in black and white, both in prose and verse, over and over again:

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you will find
A tale in everything.
What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it:
It is no tale; but, should you think,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.

Here is the theory full-blown. The poet is not to tell the tale, the reader is to make it one, by thinking; and if he only thinks enough, he will find a tale in everything! Could anything be more grotesque, or more utterly opposed to any sane canon of the function of an author, and his relation to his readers? It is the business of the poet to tell the tale, and thereby to set the reader thinking; an altogether different process from the one here suggested. "Wordsworthians against whom we must be upon our guard," often cite the following stanza with admiration:

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The moving accident is not my trade;
To freeze the blood I have no ready arts:
'Tis my delight, alone in summer shade,

To pipe a simple song for thinking hearts!

Have they forgotten the "moving accidents by flood and field," or do they not know whose trade it was to unfold a tale that

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood?

Piping a simple song for thinking hearts, is all very well. But it will not do to say, or to suggest, or to allow it to be inferred, that doing this makes a man as great a poet as doing what Wordsworth did not and plainly could not do. In the last book of *The Excursion*, he says:

Life, death, eternity! momentous themes
Are they—and might demand a seraph's tongue,
Were they not equal to their own support;
And therefore no incompetence of mine
Could do them wrong....
Ye wished for art and circumstance, that make
The individual known and understood;
And such as my best judgment could select
From what the place afforded, could be given.

But *no* subject is equal to its own support, where the poet is concerned, however it may be with the preacher and the moralist. The poet himself must support it. We *do* wish for act and circumstance, in poetry; and when Wordsworth tells us that he has, in *The Excursion*, given us the best of these he can, we can only answer that this best is not enough, but wholly insufficient and inadequate. [Pg 122]

That Mr. Arnold would deny all this, if put to him plainly, we do not believe. It is all the more to be regretted that he should have expressed himself in such a manner as to encourage others in forming judgments and holding opinions which imply affirmation to the contrary. When he quotes from Wordsworth the following lines,

Of truth, of grandeur, beauty, love, and hope,
And melancholy fear subdued by faith,
Of blessed consolation, in distress,
Of moral strength and intellectual power,
Of joy in widest commonalty spread,

and adds that "here we have a poet intent on the best and master thing," and wishes us to infer Wordsworth's superiority from that fact, does he not perceive that he is not only misleading his readers, but flagrantly contradicting what he himself avers in the selfsame essay? Being "intent" on these subjects is not enough. A further question remains to be answered; viz. how has the poet dealt with them? Nowhere has Wordsworth dealt with them so completely, so ambitiously, so exhaustively, as in *The Excursion*. Yet what does Mr. Arnold say of it? He says that *The Excursion* can never be a satisfactory work to the disinterested lover of poetry, and that much of it is "a tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage, alien to the very nature of poetry." It is plain, therefore, that being "intent" even on "the best and master thing" does not suffice. The passage Mr. Arnold quotes, leaving the incautious reader to infer that it *does* suffice, is merely the [Pg 123]

Life, death, eternity! momentous themes,

and their being "equal to their own support" over again. Wordsworth is perpetually telling us that his subject is Man, and wishes us to infer that, the subject being great, what is written on it must be great. Unfortunately, Man, with him, is like Love with the Scotch girl; it is Man "in the abstract." Shakespeare also treats of Man; but he treats of him *in men*, and Wordsworth does not. In fact, he communes. As M. Scherer says, he is a Solitary, a Contemplative. In a word, he is essentially, and before all things a subjective poet, and reader after reader has complained, and critic after critic has confessed, that to be subjective, not objective, to reflect instead of to act, to think rather than to narrate, is the bane of modern poetry, and the conclusive mark of the inferiority of so large a proportion of it.

Yet, this notwithstanding, Mr. Arnold tells us that Wordsworth "deals with that in which life really consists"; and, not content with this, he actually goes on to declare that "Wordsworth deals with more of life than they do";—"they" being every English poet since Milton, and indeed every poet of every tongue since Milton, with the exception of Goethe! We can only say that such an assertion is astounding; the most startling paradox, indeed, we ever encountered in a criticism by a critic of authority. To argue upon it against Mr. Arnold is, happily, superfluous; for Mr. Arnold has anticipated and categorically answered his own paradox. Let him open his own poems; let him turn to *Stanzas In Memory Of Obermann*, and let him read on until he comes to the following couplet: [Pg 124]

But Wordsworth's eyes avert their ken,
From half of human fate.

Has he forgotten the passage? or would he now expunge it? Mr. Arnold the poet, and Mr. Arnold the critic, are evidently at issue. But we think no one will experience much difficulty

in deciding which of two has “hit the nail on the head,” and whether it be sound criticism to affirm that Wordsworth deals with that in which life really consists, or sound criticism to affirm that with one half of life he does not deal at all. At any rate, these rival criticisms are not to be reconciled, and Mr. Arnold must elect between the two.

What is the first and broad conclusion to be drawn from all that has been said? It is this: that Wordsworth, as a poet, has treated great subjects with marked and striking inadequacy, and smaller subjects with marked and striking success. Now we submit that no man deserves to be called or considered a great poet who has not treated some great subject in a great manner. This is the mark, this is the test, of a great poet; and if we once surrender this distinction, this standard, we soon lose ourselves in hopeless critical confusion and entanglement. But no great subject *can* be greatly or adequately treated in poetry, save objectively, and with the help of action, passion, incident, of all the expedients, in fact, we have enumerated. It never can be treated adequately or greatly by merely writing *about* it. This is all that Wordsworth has done with his great subjects, with “truth, grandeur, beauty, love,” and the rest of them; and therefore, as far as great subjects are concerned, he has failed, and failed conspicuously. Where he has succeeded, and succeeded conspicuously, succeeded admirably, succeeded perfectly, is in smaller subjects, such as *The Solitary Reaper*, *The Cuckoo*, *Three Years She Grew*, and their companions. This is to have done much; but it is not to have left behind “an ample body of powerful work.” Much less is it to have left behind an “amplifier” body of powerful work than every English poet since Milton, Byron included.

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For what is the “ample body of powerful work” that Byron has left? If Byron had failed as completely as Wordsworth in the treatment of his larger themes, in a word, of his great subjects, then, in spite of much fine lyrical work in Byron, the palm would have to be adjudged to Wordsworth. But what critic of authority, who means to retain it, will come forward and assert that Byron has failed in the treatment of his larger themes, of his great subjects? Is *Childe Harold* a failure? Is *Manfred* a failure? Is *Cain* a failure? Is *Don Juan* a failure? We, like Mr. Arnold, can honestly say that though we “felt the expiring wave of Byron’s mighty influence,” we now “regard him, and have long regarded him, without illusion”; in fact, with just as little illusion as we regard Wordsworth, which is perhaps more than Mr. Arnold can yet say. We are unable to assert, with Scott, that, in *Cain*, “Byron has matched Milton on his own ground.” It would have been very wonderful if he had, as wonderful as if Virgil had matched Homer on Homer’s own ground. “Sero venientibus ossa”; or, as some one put it during the controversy between the respective merits of the Ancients and the Moderns, “The Ancients have stolen all our best ideas.” Besides, though Byron has not matched Milton on the ground Milton occupied first and pretty nigh exhausted, Byron has done many other things that Milton has not done. We are equally unable to say that Byron, “as various in composition as Shakespeare himself, has embraced every topic in human life”; though we strongly incline to think that a dispassionate and exhaustive survey would show him to be more various in composition, and to have embraced a greater number of topics appertaining to human life, than any poet, English or foreign, ancient or modern, except Shakespeare.[1] Equally unable are we to accept the dictum of Goethe, which Mr. Arnold vainly endeavours to explain away, by trying to prove that Goethe did not mean what he certainly said, viz. that Byron “is in the main greater than any other English poet.”

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Therefore, as we say, we look upon Byron without any illusion, and without any wish to extol him above his real rank, by calling on his behalf even such witnesses as Scott and Goethe. We look at his works with the same detachment and dispassionateness as we look at the Parthenon or on the Venus of Milo. But, so looking on them, looking on them not through any pet theories of our own, not with any moral, theological, or sectarian bias, but simply with the same “dispassionate-lover-of-poetry” eyes with which we look on *Antigone*, the *Aeneid*, the *Fairy Queen*, or *Faust*, we find ourselves unable to resist the conclusion, that, like them, *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, *Cain*, and *Don Juan* are great poems, are great themes, greatly treated. This is not to say that they are perfect, that they are in every way satisfactory. Is the *Fairy Queen* perfectly satisfactory? Is the *Aeneid* perfectly satisfactory? No critic has ever found them so. Is the *Iliad* perfectly satisfactory? It would be very odd if it were, seeing that, as no one but Mr. Gladstone any longer doubts, it is the work, not of one poet, but of several poets. But when all has been urged against them that can be urged by the most judicial criticism, they remain great subjects greatly executed. In the same manner, so do Byron’s greater poems. Roughly and broadly speaking, they *are* satisfactory; whereas in no sense can *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* be said to be satisfactory. On the contrary, they are entirely unsatisfactory. In a word, of Byron’s larger works, it may be said that they will “do”; of Wordsworth’s, on the contrary, as Jeffrey said, and as Mr. Arnold himself allows, they “won’t.” That is the distinction; and it is an immense one.

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Byron is not Shakespeare; for he lags considerably behind Shakespeare in Invention, Action, and Character, by dint of which, and in conjunction with which, the highest faculties of the poet are displayed. But a poet may lag considerably behind Shakespeare, and yet exhibit these in a conspicuous degree. It is in Character, no doubt, that Byron is more particularly weak, as compared with Shakespeare, though he is by no means so weak, in himself, and as compared with others, as people have come to assume, by hearing the point so superficially iterated. It is not that Byron cannot depict character; but he does not depict a sufficient number of characters. They are not numerous and various enough. When M. Scherer says that “Byron has treated hardly any subject but one—himself,” he is repeating the parrot-cry

of very shallow people, and is doing little justice to his own powers as a critic. Indeed, had Shakespeare never lived, it is probable that it would never have occurred to any one to urge against Byron his deficiencies in this respect. It is because he is so great a poet, because he is so great in other respects, and because some critics have therefore inadvertently attempted to place him on a level with Shakespeare, that his inferiority in this particular suggested itself to those holding a juster view. Once suggested, it was harped upon, exaggerated, and, we may fairly say, has now been done to death. We presume, however, that no one would suggest that, even in the poetic presentation of *Character*, Byron, however inferior to certain other writers, is not immeasurably superior to Wordsworth, who never even attempted to portray *Character*.

When we turn from the consideration of the power shown by Byron in the presentation of *Character*, to his power shown in *Action*, *Invention*, and *Situation*, the account becomes a very different one. In brisk and rapid narrative, in striking incident, in prompt and perpetual movement—qualities in which not only is Wordsworth deficient, but of which he is absolutely devoid—Byron exhibits his true greatness as a poet. Even in the *Tales*, in *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *The Siege of Corinth*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, which it has of late been the fashion, we had almost said the affectation, to depreciate, there is a stir, a “go,” a swift and swirling torrent of action, a current of animation, a full and foaming stream of narrative, a tumult and conflict of incident, which will never cease to be regarded as among the best, the highest, and the most indispensable elements of poetry, until we are all laid up in lavender, until we all take to moping and brooding over our own feelings, until we all confine ourselves to “smooth passions, smooth discourse, and joyous thought”; until we all become content

To sit without emotion, hope, or aim,
In the loved presence of the cottage-fire.
And listen to the flapping of the flame,
Or kettle whispering its faint undersong.

Even if one confined oneself merely to Byron’s *Tales*, the assertion that Wordsworth “deals with more of life” than Byron, would be startling. Love, hatred, revenge, ambition, the rivalry of creeds, travel, fighting, fighting by land and fighting by sea, almost every passion, and every form of adventure, these are the “life” they deal with; and we submit that it is to deal with a considerable portion of it; with far more of life at any rate than Wordsworth deals with in the whole of his poems. Listen to his own confession:

And thus from day to day my little boat
Rocks in its harbour, lodging peaceably.

Now turn to Byron:

O’er the glad waters of the dark blue sea,
Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free,
Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,
Survey our empire, and behold our home.
These are our realms, no limit to their sway!

That is precisely the difference. The horizon of Byron is so much larger. Far from it being true that Wordsworth deals with more of life than Byron does, the precise opposite is the truth, that Byron deals with far more of life than Wordsworth does, if by life we mean the life of men, of men of action, of men of the world, and not the life, as M. Scherer says, of Solitaries, Contemplatives, and Recluses.

If we turn to Byron’s Dramas, to *Sardanapalus*, to *The Two Foscari*, to *The Doge of Venice*, no doubt we crave for yet more action, more incident, more situation, than Byron gives us. But we do so because Shakespeare has accustomed us to crave for more; and the craving has been intensified by the sensational character of modern novels and modern stage-plays. Nevertheless these are present, in no small amount, in the plays we have named; and whether people choose to consider the amount great or small, surely it is immeasurably greater than the amount of action, invention, and situation Wordsworth exhibits in any and every poem, of any and every kind, he ever wrote.

We have more than once mentioned *Childe Harold*, but we must refer to it once more and finally, in support and illustration of what we have been urging. The persons who are of opinion that Byron never treated any subject but himself, will perhaps likewise be of opinion that, in *Childe Harold*, Byron treats only of himself, and that it is a purely contemplative and subjective poem. A more superficial opinion could not well be held. In form contemplative, it is in substance a poem full of action, situation, and incident; in a word, it is a poem essentially and notably objective. It is the only poem, ostensibly contemplative, of which this can be said; and it assumes this complexion and character by dint of Byron’s own character, which was above all things active, and could not be content without action. In *Childe Harold*, Byron summons dead men and dead nations from their sepulchres, and makes them live and act again. He revivifies Athens, he resuscitates Rome. He makes Cicero breathe and burn; he makes the fallen columns and shattered pillars of the Forum as eloquent as Tully. Petrarch once more waters the tree that bears his lady’s name. The mountains find a tongue. Jura answers from her misty shroud. The lightning becomes a word. Rousseau tortures himself afresh; Gibbon afresh saps solemn creeds with solemn sneer; afresh Egeria visits

Numa in the silence of the night, his breast to hers replying. Lake Lemano woos, and kisses away the cries of the Rhone, as they awake. Then she reproves like a sister's voice. The boats upon the lake are wings to waft us from distraction. The stars become the poetry of Heaven. Waterloo is fought before our very eyes. The defiles fatal to Roman rashness are again crowded with Numidian horse, and Hannibal and Thrasymene flash before our eyes. A soul is infused into the dead; a spirit is instilled into the mountains. The torrents talk; the sepulchres act. Movement never ceases, and the situation is perpetually shifting. Its incidents are almost the whole of History. In it we have—what M. Scherer justly says Wordsworth has not—the knowledge of the human heart which worldly experience gives, the interior drama of the passions which a man can describe well only on condition of having been their victim, and those general views upon History and society which are formed partly by study, partly by the practice of affairs. All this, too, we have, in the third and fourth cantos—for the first and second are very inferior—presented, in language, imagery, and music, of the noblest and most elevated kind; till, swelling, as an organ swells, before it closes, the poem concludes with that magnificent address to the Ocean, which rounds it off and completes it, even as the physical ocean rounds off and completes the physical earth. In no other poem that was ever written are Nature and man—not Man in the abstract, but men as they act, strive, feel, and suffer—so thoroughly interfused and interwoven; and they are interwoven and interfused as they are interwoven and interfused in actual life, not by men contemplating and talking, but by men doing and acting, in a word, by living. And if the reference be to men in general and life in general, and not to a particular sort of man living a particular sort of life away from other men, then we make bold to say, though in doing so we contradict Mr. Arnold roundly, that in *Childe Harold* alone there is “an ampler body of powerful work,” and that *Childe Harold* alone “deals with more of life,” than all Wordsworth's poems, not even selected from, but taken in their integrity, without the diminution of a single passage or the omission of a single line.

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At this point, Mr. Arnold steps in with a notable plea. It may be that much of what Wordsworth has written is trivial, and that still more of it is abstract verbiage, or doctrine we hear in church, perfectly true, but wanting in the sort of truth we require, poetic truth. It may also be that Wordsworth has written no one great poem, and that the poem he fancied to be great will not do, and can never be satisfactory to the disinterested lover of poetry. It may furthermore be the case that in Wordsworth's poems we have to lament a deficiency, if not indeed a total absence of Action, Invention, Situation, and Character, and that he is only a Contemplative, a Recluse, a Solitary, analysing the sensations produced upon himself by dwelling upon mountains, woods, and waters. All this may be so. But, says Mr. Arnold, “Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life,” the greatness of a poet depends upon his criticism of life, and Wordsworth's criticism of life is more complete, more powerful, and more sound, than that of any English poet since Milton, indeed than that of any poet since Milton, with the one exception of Goethe.

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The great and the justly acquired authority of Mr. Arnold must not deter us from saying that to no canon of criticism upon poetry with which we are acquainted do so many objections present themselves. We suspect Mr. Arnold himself has discerned some of these since he first propounded it; for while in his Prefatory Essay upon Wordsworth he urges it with absolute confidence, in his Prefatory Essay on Byron he does so more hesitatingly, and exhibits more anxiety to explain it. But does he not explain it away, when he says, “We are not brought much on our way, I admit, towards an adequate definition of poetry as distinguished from prose by that truth”? Upon this point M. Scherer, an admirer, like ourselves, of both Wordsworth and Mr. Arnold, has some just observations:

Wordsworth seems to Mr. Arnold to have the qualities of poetic greatness, and Mr. Arnold accordingly defines these qualities. The great poet, in his opinion, is the one that expresses the most noble and the most profound idea, upon the nature of man, the one who has a philosophy of life, and who impresses it powerfully on the subjects which he treats. The definition, it will be perceived, is a little vague.

Mr. Arnold, we all know, is rather partial to vagueness, being of opinion that it is of the essence of Culture to be more or less vague, and that without a certain amount of vagueness there can be no sweetness and no light. We should be sorry to seem to say anything against those delightful characteristics, lest we should be supposed to be without them; and we hereby declare ourselves all in favour of our “consciousness playing about our stock notions,” even if those stock notions be sweetness and light themselves, with their accompanying charm of vagueness. But though, in all seriousness, what Swift calls sweetness and light are invaluable qualities, despite the partial vagueness they entail, yet when two poets are compared, and a definition of the main business and main essence of poetry is offered, in order that by it the relative greatness of the two may be tested, it is just as well that the definition should not be too vague, should be at any rate precise enough to afford the test desired. But what is the use of it if it does not “bring us much on our way”?

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Unfortunately, Mr. Arnold's theory of poetry being a criticism of life not only does not help us along our road, it tends to take us off our road. We regret we have not left ourselves space to deal with his theory at length, and can only hope we may have an opportunity of returning to it. But lest Mr. Arnold should be tempted to raise it to the dignity of a “stock notion,” and to bestow upon it the privilege of that faithful iteration which is bestowed upon

"culture," "sweetness and light," "Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace," which have a good deal more to say for themselves, we think it well to point out to him that, by averring poetry to be "a criticism of life," he is giving a handle to the Philistines of criticism, and to the enemies of sweetness and light, which they may turn against him in a notable manner.

For *whose* "criticism of life"? Does he not perceive that he is enabling people to maintain, which unfortunately they are already only too disposed to do, that this poet is a great poet because they consider his criticism of life to be right and true, and that other poet to be not a great poet, or a much smaller poet, because they consider his criticism of life to be wrong and false? Why, this is the very pest and bane of English criticism upon poetry, and upon art generally; the criticism which in reality resolves itself into "I agree with this; I like that." This is the criticism of sheer and unadulterated Philistinism, against which Mr. Arnold has been waging such excellent and needed war for several years. Nor, in spite of much vagueness, will it be possible for Mr. Arnold to escape from this consequence of his dictum that poetry is a criticism of life. For at last, after much that seems to us like beating about the bush, he goes straight to the point, and makes the fatal confession in plain words.

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As compared with Leopardi, Wordsworth, though at many points less lucid, though far less a master of style, far less of an artist, gains so much by his criticism of life being, in certain matters of profound importance, healthful and true, whereas Leopardi's pessimism is not, that the value of Wordsworth's poetry, on the whole, stands higher for us, I think, than that of Leopardi's, as it stands higher for us, I think, than that of any modern poetry except Goethe's.

Higher, because it is more healthful! That any critic, not an abject Philistine, should say such a thing, amazes us beyond words. Surely Mr. Arnold is aware that there are persons whose opinion on that subject carries much weight, who consider that Goethe's criticism of life is neither healthful nor true, but on the contrary false or mischievous, yet who do not on that account deny to Goethe the title of a great poet. Is Mr. Arnold really serious when he asserts that, other things being equal, one poet is less great than another poet because the first is a pessimist, and the other is an optimist? If he is, let us have two more volumes of Selections; one containing all the best optimist poetry, and the other containing all the best pessimist poetry, that was ever written. Which collection would be the more true, we do not undertake to know, and, as critics and disinterested lovers of poetry, we do not care. But we entertain no doubt whatever which Selection would contain the finest poetry. It would not be the optimist one. Some of the finest poetry ever written upon life is to be found surely in the Old Testament. What might be taken as its motto? "Vanity of Vanities. All is Vanity." As far as this life, and any criticism of it are concerned, it is a very Gospel of Pessimism.

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Is the conclusion then that a pessimistic criticism of life necessarily makes a poet greater than another poet who criticises it from an optimistic point of view? Not in the least. The consideration—we do not say to the positive philosopher, to the historian, to the moralist, but—to the disinterested lover of poetry, is simply irrelevant.

But there is an attitude towards life which does give a poet the chance at least of being greater than either a poet who criticises life as a pessimist, or than a poet who criticises it as an optimist. That attitude is one neither of pessimism nor of optimism; indeed, not a criticism of life at all, or at least not such a criticism of life as to leave it open to any one to declare that it is healthful and true, or that it is insalubrious and false. Will Mr. Arnold tell us what is Shakespeare's criticism of life? Is it pessimistic or optimistic? We are almost alarmed at asking the question; for who knows that, in doing so, we may not be sowing the seeds of a controversy as long and as interminable as the controversy respecting the moral purpose, the criticism of life in *Hamlet*? Once started, the controversy will go on for ever, precisely because there is no way of ending it. What constitutes, not the superiority, but the comparative inferiority, of Byron and Wordsworth alike, is their excessive criticism of life. They criticise life overmuch. It is the foible of each of them. What constitutes the superiority of Shakespeare is, that he does not so much criticise life, as present it. He holds the mirror up to nature, and is content to do so, showing it with all its beautiful and all its ugly features, and with perfect dispassionateness. Hence his unequalled greatness.

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We regret we have not space to set this forth more at length. But Mr. Arnold will scarcely misunderstand us; and we would venture to ask him to ponder these objections, and to let his consciousness play freely about them. If he does so, we have little doubt that the theory about poetry being a criticism of life, with its appalling consequences to the critic, to the disinterested lover of poetry, to the adherent of culture, to the friend of sweetness and light, and in fact to every one but the Philistine with his stock ideas, will silently be dropped.

But if Mr. Arnold sees insuperable objections to this course, and the canon about poetry being a criticism of life is to be added to that list of delightful formulæ, which, during the last decade, have shed so much light on our condition, then we can only once more appeal from Mr. Arnold to Mr. Arnold, and ask how it is that Wordsworth can be considered to have criticised life, and to "deal with that in which life really consists," if it be true, as Mr. Arnold tells us it is true, that

Wordsworth's eyes avert their ken
From half of human fate.

How, we shall still have to ask, can a poet be said to have criticised life of whom such an

ardent admirer as M. Scherer can observe, "As for cities, Wordsworth seeks to ignore them. He takes them for a discordant note which it is only just and right to drown and get rid of in the general harmony of creation."

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But we must end; and we submit that we have established our case. Wordsworth can be made to figure as the greatest poet since Milton, only by canons of criticism that would make him not only a greater poet than Milton, but a greater poet than any poet that preceded Milton. If this be so, let us know it. But if not, it is vain work, trying to extol him, as a poet, above Byron. Mr. Arnold has done Byron injustice by making selections from his works, and asserting that selections are better than the whole of the works from which they are selected. You might as well select from a mountain. What should we think of the process that said, "Here is an edelweiss, here some heather, here a lump of quartz, here a bit of ice from a glacier, here some water from a torrent, here some pine-cones, here some eggs from an eagle's nest; and now you know all about Mont Blanc"? Byron is no more to be known in that fashion than the Matterhorn is. You must make acquaintances with pastoral valleys, with yawning precipices, with roaring cataracts, with tinkling cattle-bells, with the rumble of avalanches, with the growl of thunder, with the zigzag lightning, with storm, and mists, and sudden burst of tenderest sunshine, with these, with more, in fact with all, if Alp or Byron is to be really known. But Mr. Arnold has rendered Byron one service at least. When he says that Byron and Wordsworth stand first and pre-eminent among the English poets of this century, he relieves Byron of danger of rivalry.

DANTE'S REALISTIC TREATMENT OF THE IDEAL

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READ AT THE TWENTIETH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE DANTE SOCIETY ON JUNE 13, 1900.

To discourse of Dante, concerning whom, ever since Boccaccio lectured on the *Divina Commedia* in the *Duomo* of Florence, more than five hundred years ago, there has been an unbroken procession of loving commentators, must always be a difficult undertaking; and the difficulty is increased when the audience addressed, as I believe is the case this evening, is composed, for the most part, of serious students of the austere Florentine. The only claim I can have on your attention is that I am, in that respect at least, in a more or less degree, one of yourselves. It is now close on forty years since, in Rome, as Rome then was, one repaired, day after day, to the Baths of Caracalla—not, as now, denuded of the sylvan growth of successive centuries, but cloaked, from shattered base to ruined summit, in tangled greenery—and in the silent sunshine of an Imperial Past surrendered oneself to

quella fonte
Che spande di parlar sì largo fiume,

that unfailing stream of spacious speech which Dante, you remember, ascribes to Virgil, which Dante equally shares with him, and to each alike of whom one can sincerely say:

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Vagliami il lungo studio e il grande amore,
Che m'han fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

But love and study of Dante will not of themselves suffice to make discourse concerning him interesting or adequate; and I am deeply impressed with the disadvantages under which I labour this evening. But my task has been made even exceptionally perilous, since it has been preceded by the entrancing influence of music, and music that borrowed an added charm from the melodious words of the poet himself. May it not be with you as it was with him when the musician Casella—"Casella mio"—acceded to his request in the Purgatorial Realm, and sang to him, he says,

sì dolcemente,
Che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona—

sang to him so sweetly that the sweetness of it still sounded in his ears; words that strangely recall the couplet in Wordsworth, though I scarcely think Wordsworth was a Dante scholar:

The music in my heart I bore
Long after it was heard no more.

Many of you remember, I am sure, the entire passage in the second canto of the *Purgatorio*. But, since there may be some who have forgotten it—and the best passages in the *Divina Commedia* can never be recalled too often—and since, moreover, it will serve as a fitting introduction to the theme on which I propose for a brief while to descant this evening, let me recall it to your remembrance. Companioned by Virgil, and newly arrived on the shores of Purgatory, Dante perceives a barque approaching, so swift and light that it causes no ripple on the water, driven and steered only by the wings of an Angel of the Lord, and carrying a hundred disembodied spirits, singing "*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*." As they disembark, one of them recognises Dante, and stretches out his arms to embrace the Poet. The passage is too

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beautiful to be shorn of its loveliness either by curtailment or by mere translation:

Io vidi uno di lor trarresi avante
Per abbracciarmi con sì grande affetto,
Che mosse me a far lo somigliante.
O ombre vane, fuor che nell' aspetto!
Tre volte dietro a lei le mani avvinsi,
E tante mi tornai con esse al petto.

Among them was there one who forward pressed,
So keen to fold me to his heart, that I
Instinctively was moved to do the like.
O shades intangible, save in your seeming!
Toward him did I thrice outstretch my arms,
And thrice they fell back empty to my side.[2]

Words that will recall to many of you the lines in the second book of the *Aeneid*, where Æneas describes to Dido how the phantom of his perished wife appeared to him as he was seeking for her through the flames and smoke of Troy, and how in vain he strove to fold her in one farewell embrace.

Ter conatus ibi collo dare bracchia circum,
Ter frustra compresa manus effugit imago.

Similarly, the incorporeal figure in the *Divine Comedy* bids Dante desist from the attempt to embrace him, since it is useless; and then Dante discerns it is that of Casella, who used oftentimes in Florence to sing to him, and now assures the poet that, as he loved him upon earth, so here he loves him still. Encouraged by the tender words, Dante calls him "Casella mio," and addresses to him the following request:

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Se nuova legge non ti toglie
Memoria o uso all' amoroso canto,
Che mi solea quietar tutte mie voglie,
Di ciò ti piaccia consolare alquanto
L'anima mia, che con la sua persona
Venendo qui, è affannata tanto.

If by new dispensation not deprived
Of the remembrance of beloved song
Wherewith you used to soothe my restlessness,
I pray you now a little while assuage
My spirit, which, since burdened with the body
In journeying here, is wearied utterly.

Quickly comes the melodious response:

"Amor che nella mente mi ragiona,"
Cominciò egli allor sì dolcemente,
Che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona.
Lo mio Maestro, ed io, e quella gente
Ch'eran con lui, parevan sì contenti,
Com'a nessun toccasse altro la mente.

"Love that holds high discourse within mind,"
With such sweet tenderness he thus began
That still the sweetness lingers in my ear.
Virgil, and I, and that uncarnal group
That with him were, so captivated seemed,
That in our hearts was room for naught beside.

Not so, however, the guide of the spirits newly arrived in Purgatory. Seeing them "*fissi ed attenti alle sue note*," enthralled by Casella's singing, he begins to rate them soundly as "*spiriti lenti*," lazy, loitering spirits, asks them what they mean by thus halting on the way, and bids them hasten to the spot where they will be gradually purged of their earthly offences, and be admitted to the face of God. The canto closes with the following exquisite lines:

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Come quando, cogliendo biada o loglio,
Gli colombi adunati alla pastura,
Queti, senza mostrar l'usato orgoglio,
Se cosa appare ond' elli abbian paura,
Subitamente lasciano star l'esca,
Perchè assaliti son da maggior cura;
Così vid'io quella masnada fresca
Lasciar il canto, e fuggir ver la costa,
Com'uom che va, nè sa dove riesca.

As when a flight of doves, in quest of food,

Have settled on a field of wheat or tares,
 And there still feed in silent quietude,
 If by some apparition that they dread
 A sudden scared, forthway desert the meal,
 Since by more strong anxiety assailed,
 So saw I that new-landed company
 Forsake the song and seek the mountain side,
 Like one who flees, but flies he knows not whither.

Now, if we consider this episode in its integrity, do we not find ourselves, from first to last, essentially in the region of the Ideal? Whether you believe in the existence of a local habitation named Purgatory, or you do not, none of us, not even Dante himself, has seen it, save with the mind's eye. It was said of his austere countenance by his contemporaries that it was the face of the man who had seen Hell. But the phrase, after all, was figurative, and not even the divine poet had, with the bodily vision, seen what Virgil, in one of the most pathetic of his lines, calls the further ashore. Moreover, for awhile, and in what may be termed the exordium of the episode, Dante surrenders himself wholly to this Ideal, and treats it idealistically. First he discerns only two wings of pure white light, which, when he has grown more accustomed to their brightness, he perceives to be the Angel of the Lord, the steersman of the purgatorial bark:

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Vedi che sdegnà gli argomenti umani,
 Sì che remo non vuol, nè altro velo
 Che l'ale sue, tra liti sì lontani

Trattando l'aere con l'eterne penne—

lines that for ethereal beauty, are, I think unmatched; and I will not presume to render them into verse. But what they say is that the Angel had no need of mortal expedients, of sail, or oar, or anything beside, save his own wings, that fanned the air with their eternal breath. The barque, thus driven and thus steered, is equally unsubstantial and ideal, for it makes no ripple in the wave through which it glides. But at length—not, you may be quite sure, of purpose prepense, but guided by that unerring instinct which is the great poet's supreme gift—Dante gradually passes from idealistic to realistic treatment of the episode, thereby compelling you, by what Shakespeare, in *The Tempest*, through the mouth of Prospero, calls "my so potent art," to believe implicitly in its occurrence, even if your incapacity to linger too long in the rarefied atmosphere of the Ideal has begun to render you incredulous concerning it. For all at once he introduces Casella, Florence, his own past cares and labours there, the weariness of the spirit that comes over all of us, even from our very spiritual efforts, and the soothing power of tender music. Then, with a passing touch of happy egotism, which has such a charm for us in poets that are dead, but which, I am told, is resented, though perhaps not by the gracious or the wise, in living ones, Dante enforces our belief by representing Casella as forthwith chanting a line of the poet's own that occurs in a *Canzone* of the *Convito*:

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Amor che nella mente mi ragiona.

Love that holds high discourse within my mind.

For a moment we seem to be again transported into the pure realm of the Ideal, as not Dante and Virgil alone, but the souls just landed on the shores of Purgatory, are described as being so enthralled by the song—*tutti fissi ed attenti*—that they can think of and heed nothing else. But quickly comes another realistic touch in the reproof to the spellbound spirits not there to loiter listening to the strain, but to hurry forward to their destined bourne. Finally, as if to confirm the impression of absolute reality, while not removing us from the world, or withdrawing from us the charm, of the Ideal, the poet ends with the exquisite but familiar simile of the startled doves already recited to you.

What is the impression left, what the result produced, by the entire canto? Surely it is that the poet's imagination, operating through the poet's realistic treatment of the Ideal, and his idealistic treatment of the Real, has taken us all captive, so that we feel nothing of the *Incredulus odi* disposition, the unwillingness to believe, and the mental antipathy engendered by that unwillingness, so tersely and so truly described by Horace, but yield credence wholly and absolutely to the existence of a place called Purgatory, with its circles, its denizens, its hopes, its aspirations, and purifying power. But, read where you will in the pages of the *Divina Commedia*, you will find this is one of the main causes of its permanent hold on the attention of the world. Its theology may to many seem open to question, to some obsolete and out of date; its astronomy necessarily labours under the disadvantage of having been prior to the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, not to speak of the great astronomers of later date, including our own times; and its erudition, weighty and wonderful as it is, can occasionally be shown by more recent and more advantageously circumstanced scholarship to be faulty and inaccurate. But so long as these are presented to us nimbused by the wizard light that fuses the Real and the Ideal, we believe while we read and listen, and that is enough. The very first line of the *Divina Commedia*, so familiar to every one, though it is to introduce us to the horrors of the *Inferno*, is so realistic, so within the range of the experience of all who have reached the meridian of life or even looked on that period in others, that we are at once predisposed to yield our imagination passively to what follows.

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But I must allow that the passage which does immediately follow, and which discourses of the panther, the lion, and the wolf, is so symbolic, and has lent itself to so many suggestions and interpretations, that, had the poem generally been conceived and composed in that fashion, it would not only have fallen short of immortality, it would long since have been buried in the pool of Lethe, which is the predestined resting-place of all untempered and unredeemed symbolism in verse. I smile, and I have no doubt you will smile also, when I say that I, too, have my own interpretation of the inner meaning of those three menacing beasts. But be assured I have not the smallest intention of communicating it to you. I gladly pass on, gladly and quickly, as Dante himself passes on, to a more welcome and less disputable apparition, who answers, when questioned as to who and what he is, that man he is not, but man he was; that his parents were of Lombardy, and all his folk of Mantuan stock; that he lived in the age of the great Cæsar and the fortunate Augustus; that he was a poet—*Poeta fui*—sang of the just and right-minded son of Anchises, the pious Æneas, who came to Italy and founded a greater city even than Troy, when proud Ilium was levelled to the dust. In the presence of Virgil we forget the embarrassing symbolism of the preceding passage, and believe once more; and, when Dante addresses him in lines of affectionate awe, that you all know by heart, and with repeating which all lovers of poets and poetry console themselves when the prosaic world passes on the other side, every doubt, every misgiving, every lingering remnant of incredulity is dismissed, and we are prepared, nay, we are eager, to take the triple journey, along two-thirds of which Virgil tells Dante he has been sent by the *Imperador che lassù regna*, the Ruler of the Universe, to conduct him. Prepared we are, nay, eager, I say, to hear the *disperate strida* of the *spiriti dolenti*, the wailings of despair of the eternally lost, and the yearning sighs of those *che son contenti nel fuoco*, who are resigned to purgatorial pain, and scarce suffer from it, since they are buoyed up by the hope of finally joining the *beate genti*, and, along with the blessed, seeing the face of God.

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Allor si mosse, ed io gli tenni dietro,

says Dante in the closing line of this, the First Canto of the *Divina Commedia*.

Then moved he on, and I paced after him.

Could you have a more realistic touch? So realistic, so real is it, in the Realm of the Ideal, that, just as Dante followed Virgil, so we follow both, humble and unquestioning believers in whatever may be told us.

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I am not unaware that, in an age in which the approval of inflexibly avenging justice consequent on wrongdoing is less marked and less frequent than sentimental compassion for the wrongdoer, the punishments inflicted in the *Inferno* for the infraction of the Divine Law, as Dante understood it, are found repellent by many persons, and agreeable to few. I grant that they are appalling in their sternness; nor was Dante himself unconscious of this, for he does describe Minos as "scowling horribly" as the souls of the damned came before him for judgment, and for discriminating consignment to their allotted circle of torture. Always terse, and therefore all the more terrible, he nevertheless exhausts the vocabulary of torment in describing the *doloroso ospizio*, the dolorous home from which they will never return. As Milton speaks of the "darkness visible" of Hell, so Dante, before him, writes of it as *loco d'ogni luce muto*, a place silent of light, but that wails and moans like a tempestuous sea, battered and buffeted by jarring winds, finally designated

La bufera infernal, che mai non resta.

The infernal hurricane that ceases never.

Of those who are whirled about by it, *di qua, di là, di giù, di su*, hither and thither, upward and downward, he writes the awful line:

Nulla speranza li conforta mai,
Non che di posa, ma di minor pena.

They have no hope of consolation ever,
Or even mitigation of their woe.

I could not bring myself, and I am sure you would not wish me to cite more minutely, the magnificently merciless phrases—all of them thoroughly realistic touches concerning ideal torment—wherewith Dante here makes his *terza rima* an instrument or organ on which to sound the very diapason of the damned; and, did he dwell overlong on those deep, distressing octaves of endless suffering, without passing by easy and natural gradations into the pathetic minor, he would end by alienating all but the austerer natures. But he is too great an artist, too human, too congenitally and rootedly a poet, to make that mistake. I am sure you all know in which canto of the *Inferno* occur the terrific phrases I have been citing, and need no telling that they are immediately followed by the most tender and tearful passage in the wide range of poetic literature. While even yet the sound of *la bufera infernal* seems howling in our ears, suddenly it all subsides, and we hear instead a musically plaintive voice saying:

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Siede la terra, dove nata fui,
Sulla marina dove il Po discende,
Per aver pace co' seguaci sui.

The land where I was born sits by the sea,
Unto whose shore a restless river rolls,
To be at peace with all its followers.

Then comes the love-story of Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, told in such exquisite accents, so veiled in music, so transfigured by verse, that even the sternest moralist, I imagine, can hardly bring himself to call it illicit. I confess I think it the loveliest single passage in poetry ever written; yes, lovelier even than anything in Shakespeare, for it has all Shakespeare's genius, and more than Shakespeare's art; and I compassionate the man or woman who, having had the gift of birth, goes down to the grave without having read it. There is no such other love-story, no such other example of the *lacrymæ rerum*, the deep abiding tearfulness of things. Nothing should be taken from, nothing can be added to it. To me it seems sacred, like the Ark of the Covenant, that no one must presume to touch; and I own I tremble as I presume, here and there, to attempt, unavailingly, to translate it. It was my good fortune to be in Florence in the month of May 1865, when the City of Flowers, the City of Dante, which then seemed peopled with nightingales and roses, was celebrating the six-hundredth anniversary of the birth of her exiled poet; and those of us who loved him assembled in the Pagliano Theatre to hear Ristori, Salvini, and Rossi repeat, to the accompaniment of living pictures, the best-known passages of the *Divina Commedia*. One of those supreme elocutionists, who still lives, recited the story of Paolo and Francesca; and from her gifted voice we heard of the *tempo de' dolci sospiri* and *i dubbiosi aesiri*, the season of sweet sighs and hesitating desires, the *disiato riso*, the longed-for smile, the trembling kiss, the closing of the volume, and then the final lines of the canto:

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Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,
L'altro piangeva sì, che di pietade
Io venni men così com'io morisse:
E caddi, come corpo morto cade.

While the one told to us this dolorous tale,
The other wept so bitterly, that I
Out of sheer pity felt as like to die;
And down I fell, even as a dead body falls.

This unmatched tale of tender transgression and vainly penitential tears almost reconciles us to the more abstract description of punishment that precedes it, and the detailed account of pitiless penalty that follows it, in succeeding cantos; and the absolute fusion of the ideal and the real in the woeful story imparts to it a verisimilitude irresistible even by the most unimaginate and incredulous. Rimini, Ravenna, Malatesta, are names so familiar to us all that any story concerning them would have to be to the last degree improbable to move our incredulity. But who is it that is not prepared to believe in the sorrows of a love-tale?

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Ah me! for aught that ever I could read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth.

It is the greatest of all masters of the human heart, the greatest and wisest teacher concerning human life, who tells us that; and Dante, who in this respect is to be almost as much trusted as Shakespeare himself, makes Francesca, with her truly feminine temperament, say:

Amor, che a nullo amato amar perdona,
Mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,
Che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.

Love that compels all who are loved to love,
Entangled both in such abiding charm,
That, as you see, he still deserts me not.

As we hear those words, it is no longer Rimini, Ravenna, Malatesta, Paolo, Francesca, that arrest our attention and rivet it by their reality. We are enthralled by the ideal realism, or realistic idealism, call it which you will, of the larger and wider world we all inhabit, of this vast and universal theatre, of whose stage Love remains to-day, as it was yesterday, and will remain for ever, the central figure, the dominant protagonist.

So far we have seen, by illustrations purposely taken from passages in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* familiar to all serious readers of the *Divine Comedy*, how Dante, by realistic touches, makes us believe in the ideal, and how, by never for long quitting the region of the Ideal, he reconciles us to the most accurate and merciless realism. But there is a third Realm to which he is admitted, and whither he transports us, the *Paradiso*. Some prosaically precise person would, perhaps, say that the thirtieth canto of the *Purgatorio* is not a portion of the *Paradiso*. But you know better, for in it Beatrice appears to her poet-lover:

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Sotto verde manto,
Vestita di color di fiamma viva,

In mantle green, and girt with living light,

while angelic messengers and ministers from Heaven round her scatter lilies that never fade; and when Dante, overcome by the celestial vision, turns to Virgil with the same instinctive feeling of trust

Col quale il fantolin corre alla mamma,
Quando ha paura

—trust such as is shown by a little child hurrying to its mother when afraid, and exclaims, translating a line of Virgil's own:

Conosco i segni dell' antica fiamma,

O how I know, and feel, and recognise
The indications of my youthful love;—

he finds that Virgil, *dolcissimo padre*, his gentle parent and guide, has left him, and he stands alone in the presence of Beatrice, and hears her voice saying:

Non pianger anco, non pianger ancora;
Chè pianger ti convien per altra spada.

Weep not as yet, Dante, weep not as yet,
Though weep you shortly shall, and for good cause.

Tearless, and with downcast eyes, he listens to her just reproaches, trying not even to see the reflection of himself in the water of the translucent fountain at his side:—

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Tanta vergogna mi gravò la fronte.

So strong the shame that weighed my forehead down.

And so he turns aside his glance to the untransparent sward, till comes the line, awful in its reproving simplicity:

Guardami ben: ben son, ben son Beatrice!

Look at me well! Yes, I am Beatrice!

Then full and fast flow the tears, like melting snows of Apennine under Slavonian blast.

But there is yet worse to come, yet harder to bear, when, not even addressing him, but turning from him to her heavenly escort, she speaks of him as "*Questi*," "this man," and tells them, in his hearing, how much his love for her might have done for him, had he still lived the *vita nuova*, the pure fresh life with which love had inspired him while she was yet on earth. But when she was withdrawn from him to Heaven, when she was of flesh disrobed and became pure spirit, and so was more deserving of love than before.

Questi si tolse a me, e diessi altrui.

This man from me withdrew himself, and gave
Himself to others.

What think you of that as a realistic treatment of the Ideal? If there be any among my audience, members of the sex commonly supposed to be the wiser, who but partly feel and imperfectly apprehend it, then let them ask any woman they will what she thinks of it, and she will answer, "It is supreme, it is unapproachable."

After such an illustration of the power of Dante over one of the main secrets of fascination in great poetry, it is unnecessary to go in search of more. With illustrating my theme of this evening I have done, and it only remains to add a few words of repetition and enforcement of what has been already indicated, lest perchance, if they were omitted, my meaning and purpose should be misapprehended or overlooked. Did you happen to observe that, a little while back, I used the phrase, "the ideal realism, or realistic idealism, call it which you will"? But now, before concluding, let me say, what has been in my mind all along, and has been there for many years, that great poetry consists of the combination of ideal Realism, realistic Idealism, and Idealism pure and simple. Upon that point much might be said, and perhaps some day I may venture to say it. In all ages the disposition of the more prosaic minds—by which term I do not mean minds belonging to persons devoid of feeling, or even of sentiment, but persons destitute of the poetic sense, or of what Poetry essentially is—has been to incline, in works of fiction whether in prose or verse, to Realism pure and simple; and the present Age, thanks to the invention of photography and the dissemination of novels that seek to describe persons and things such as they are or are supposed to be, has a peculiar and exceptional leaning in that direction. The direction is a dangerous one, for the last stage of Realism pure and simple in prose fiction is the exhibition of demoralised man and degraded woman. In poetry, thank Heaven, that operation is impossible. No doubt, it is possible in verse just as it is possible in prose, and perhaps even more so; and there are persons who will tell you that it is Poetry. But it is not, and never can be made such. Poetry is either the idealised Real, the realistic Ideal, or the Ideal pure and simple. In other words, as I long since endeavoured to show, Poetry is Transfiguration. Attempts are made in these days, as we all well know, to get you to accept Realism pure and simple as the newest and

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most inspired utterance of the Heavenly Maid. But they will not be successful. In that great hall of the Vatican, whither throng pilgrims from every quarter of the world, and to whose walls Raphael has bequeathed the ripest and richest fruits of his lucid, elevated, and elevating genius, is a presentation of the Muse. She is seated on a throne of majestic marble. Her feet are planted on the clouds, but her laurelled head and outstretched wings are high in the Empyrean, and round her maiden throat is a circlet enamelled with the unageing stars. With one hand she cherishes the lyre, with the other she grasps the Book of Wisdom; and her attendants are, not the sycophants of passing popularity, but the eternal angels of God, upholding a scroll wherein are inscribed the words *Numine afflatur*. She sings only when inspired. That is the Muse for me. Surely it is the Muse for you. At any rate, it was the Muse of Dante; the Muse that inspired the *Divina Commedia* through his love for Beatrice. As an old English song has it, "Tis love that makes the world go round," a homely truth that Dante idealised and transfigured in the last line of his immortal poem:

L'Amor che muove il Sole e l'altre stelle.

Love,

That lights the sun and makes the planets sing;

love of Love, love of Beauty, love of Virtue, love of Country, love of Mankind; or, as one might put it in this age of physical discovery:

Electric love illuminates the world.

DANTE'S POETIC CONCEPTION OF WOMAN

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The imaginative estimate or ideal conception of Woman by the Poets has always been deemed exceptionally interesting, especially by women themselves, for, as a rule, it is agreeable; and, even if the presentation be sometimes a little overcharged with glowing colour, all of us, men and women alike, are not otherwise than pleased with descriptions that portray us, not exactly as we are, but as we should like to be. Withal, a portrait, to obtain recognition, must have in it some resemblance to the original; and, speaking in the most prosaic manner, one need not hesitate to affirm that any representation of women, at least of womanly women, that was not attractive would be a travesty of the fact.

Alike in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia*, Beatrice Portinari figures so largely, and Dante's love for her from childhood in her tenth till her death in her twenty-sixth year is so striking that most persons think of the great Florentine Poet in association with no other women, their characters, their occupations, temptations, weaknesses, virtues, and everyday duties. Yet no man could be a Poet such as Dante who confined his ken to so limited a field of observation and feeling, and to whom the whole range of feminine emotion and action was not familiar; and, in the exposition of that theme, I would invite attention to that wider range and scope of interest, though from it Beatrice will not be forgotten. Let us turn, first of all, to the fifteenth canto of the *Paradiso*, where Cacciaguida, the Poet's ancestor, describes, while Beatrice looks on with assenting smile, the simplicity of Florentine manners in former times, alike in men and women, but in women especially—times dear to Dante, since they immediately preceded those in which he himself lived.

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Fiorenza,

says Cacciaguida, calling the city by its original name,

Fiorenza, dentro della cerchia antica,
Si stava in pace, sobria e pudica.
Non avea catenella, non corona,
Non donne contigiate, non cintura,
Che fosse a veder più che la persona.

Florence, within her ancient boundaries
Was chaste, and sober, and in peace abode.
No golden bracelets and no head-tires then,
Transparent garments, rich embroideries,
That caught the eye more than the wearer's self.

He goes on to say that the Florentine ladies of that day left their mirror without any artificial colouring on their cheeks. Mothers themselves tended the cradle, and maidens and matrons drew off the thread from the distaff, while listening to old tales of Troy, Fiesole, and Rome. It is Dante's own description of the manners and customs of the days when he was a child.

Some, perhaps, will ask, "Surely there is nothing very poetic in the foregoing description of woman?" If so, one must reply, indeed there is, and only the acceptance of the idea of Poetry prevailing amongst us of late years, which is essentially false, because so narrow and so

exclusive of the simplest poetry at one end of the scale, and of the highest poetry at the other, could make any one doubt that a really poetic and imaginative conception of woman must include the dedication, though not the entire dedication, of herself to domestic duty and tenderness.

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Is there nothing poetic in Wordsworth's picture of a girl turning her wheel beside an English fire?

Is there nothing poetic in Byron's description?—

A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose hopes are innocent.

Or in Coventry Patmore's?—

So wise in all she ought to know,
So ignorant in all beside.

Is there, I venture to ask, nothing poetic, nothing romantic in the description of a young girl who blends with cultivated sensibility to Literature and Art homely tasks thus described?—

... She brims the pail,
Straining the udders with her dainty palms,
Sweet as the milk they drain. She skims the cream,
And, with her sleeves rolled up and round white arms,
Makes the churn sing like boulder-baffled stream.
A wimple on her head, and kirtled short,
She hangs the snow-white linen in the wind,
A heavenly earthliness.

In the whole range of poetic literature there is no more celebrated passage than the essentially domestic picture, in the Sixth Book of the *Iliad*, of Hector, Andromache, and their baby boy, where the Trojan hero, before sallying forth to battle afresh, stretches out his arms to clasp the little Astyanax. It might be pedantic to recite the passage in the original. But here is an excellent translation of it by Mr. Walter Leaf:

So spake glorious Hector, and stretched out his arms to his boy. But the child shrank back to the bosom of his fair-girdled nurse, dismayed at his dear father's aspect, and in dread at the horse-hair crest that he beheld nodding fiercely from the helmet's top. Then his dear father laughed aloud, and his lady-mother; and forthwith glorious Hector took the helmet from his head and laid it, all gleaming, upon the ground; then kissed he his dear son, and dandled him in his arms.

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Surely everybody feels the poetic, the romantic character of the incident, founded on the loves of the household and the hearth. Turn to Chaucer, to Milton, to Shakespeare, to any great Poet, and you will find that, like Dante, they included simple duties in their poetic conception of woman. Only in an age sicklied o'er with lackadaisical or sensuous sentimentality could it be otherwise.

But a poet's ideals of what women should be, and often are, is shown not only by what he extols, but by what he condemns, and, in this respect, Dante, poet-like, is sparing and reserved. Most—indeed, nearly all—of the persons whom he indicates by name as being eternally punished in the Circles of the Inferno are men; partly, perhaps, because Dante, who, it must be owned, would have been loved by Doctor Johnson as a good hater, had political and other scores of the kind to settle with those he describes as having a perpetual lease in the lower regions, but in part, also, because he could not bring himself to write harshly of any woman he had known. But to a few notorious female rebels against what he deemed womanly character and conduct, and who had lived many hundred years before his day, he is pitilessly severe. It would be difficult to quote lines from any Poet more so than those in which he describes Semiramis as among those whom

Nulla speranza gli conforta mai.

She has not even hope to fall back on as a mitigation of her endless torments. Of her offences against his ideal of woman he says:

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A vizio di lussuria fu si rotta,
Che libito fe lecito in sua legge,
Per torre il biasmo in che era condotta.

She was so steeped in wickedness that she promulgated laws permitting others to act as she herself did, in order to annul the stigma that would otherwise have been attached to her. He is a little hard and unjust to Dido, whom Virgil treats with such exquisite tenderness, in naming her along with "lustful Cleopatra" in the same passage. To Helen he is more indulgent, in words at least, content with saying that she was the guilty cause of dire events, "*per cui tanto reo tempo si volse*"; but she does not escape endless expiation. Some of my readers will remember how much more damning of her conduct is Virgil in the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*, where Priam represents her as giving the signal to the Greeks to enter Troy, and having concealed his sword, that he may fall a helpless victim to the vengeance of Paris,

whom the fair wanton wished to propitiate in the hour of her lord's triumph.

But what is Dante's attitude towards Francesca da Rimini, in the most beautiful passage, it seems to me, in the whole range of narrative Poetry? Many, I am sure, know it by heart, and have thereby fortified themselves against the modern less-refined treatment of it even by men aspiring to be regarded as poets. Often as one has repeated it to oneself, one has never felt that Dante had for Francesca any harsher feeling than sympathetic compassion. He casts around her the halo of the purest sentiment; he brings music of matchless verbal sweetness to the description of the hour, the place, the circumstances of her disinterested and unselfish surrender. The very lines in which he leads up to her pathetic story, lines in which his feeling concerning frail and hapless love seems to be purposely expressed in general and wide-embracing language, are in themselves significant to those who observe their meaning. He says that when he heard Virgil name the numerous knights and fair dames who were suffering from having subordinated prudence to impulse, he only felt troubled for them and bewildered.

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Pietà mi vinse, e fu quasi smarrito.

The first thing he notices in Francesca and her lover is their buoyancy in the air, as though they were the finest and most tenuous of spirits; and when he says to Virgil that he would fain have speech with them, the reply is that he has only to appeal to them by the love that still moves them, and they will draw nigh to him. Then follows that lovely simile of doves floating to call, and Francesca's recognition of Dante with the words:

O animal grazioso e benigno!

who is sure to have pity on her hapless doom. When Francesca pauses in her narrative, and Dante bows his head for sorrow, Virgil shows what is his own feeling by the brief question addressed to Dante, "What think you?" Dante replies in a voice broken by emotion:

... O lasso,
Quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio
Menò costoro al doloroso passo!

and, turning to Francesca, he says that her fate fills his eyes with tears and his heart with anguish. Encouraged by the poet's sympathy, she tells him what happened, "*al tempo de' dolci sospiri*," in the season of sweet sighs, in itself a preliminary and melodious appeal for indulgence, and that he must be patient with her if she tells her tale, sobbing as she speaks. Torn between sweet remembrance and regret, she cannot refrain from recalling

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... il disiato riso
Esser baciato da cotanto amante,

or intimating with supreme delicacy what ensued in the final line of her narrative:

Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante.

The story she had been reading with Paolo Malatesta of Lancelot and Guinevere fell from their hands, and that day they read no further on. And Dante? All he says is that he felt like to die for grief, and fell to the ground even as a dead body falls. From the first line to the last he utters no word of blame or reproach. He would not have been a poet had he done so.

Let us now turn from the fifth book of the *Inferno* to the third of the *Paradiso*, that we may add to our knowledge of Dante's poetic conception of Woman. He there beholds Piccarda Donati, whom he had known in her lifetime on earth, but at first does not recognise, because, as she herself says with heavenly humility, she is now much fairer to look on than she was then. Withal, she adds, she occupies only an inferior place in Heaven, because she was forced, and sorely against her own will, to violate her vow of virginity. She begins her story by saying simply:

Io fui nel mondo vergine sorella,

that she was a nun dedicated to God, and goes on to tell how she was violently torn from her cloister by her brother, Forese Donati, and his accomplices, to further family ambition, and compelled to submit to the marriage rite. Dante, feeling, as it seems to me, that this did not detract from her merit, asks her if she is contented with the relatively inferior position in Paradise she says she is assigned among celestial denizens. I trust many readers know her reply, for it is one of the noblest and most beautiful passages in the whole of the *Divina Commedia*. Like all fine passages in Poetry, adequate rendering of it in another tongue is not attainable. But the best translation of it with which I am acquainted is that of C. B. Cayley—no Cary, mark you—in *terza rima*, and of which I remember I availed myself when, many years ago, I was beginning to learn Italian, and read Dante for the first time among the then leafy-covered ruins of the Baths of Caracalla. Here is Piccarda's reply:

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Our will, O brother mine, is kept at rest
By power of heavenly love, which makes us will,
For nought else thirsting, only things possessed.
If we should crave to be exalted still
More highly, then our will would not agree
With His, who gives to us the place we fill.

For 'tis of our own will the very ground,
That in the will of God we govern ours.

Then comes that supremely beautiful line, not to be surpassed by any line even in Dante:

In la sua voluntade è nostra pace.

Our peace is in submission to His will.

Is it fanciful to think that in that line also Dante has betrayed and bequeathed to us, perhaps unconsciously, his main conception of Woman, as a gentle and adoring creature, who finds her greatest happiness in subordinating her will to those who are deserving of the trust she reposes in them?

But Piccarda does not end the dialogue with her own story. She tells Dante that the great Costanza, as she calls her, who married the German Henry the Fifth, was also torn from a convent where she had taken the veil, and forced into Royal nuptials. But when she was thus compelled to violate her vows,

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Contra suo grado e contra buona usanza,
Non fu dal vel del cuor giammai disciolta.

She wore the vestal's veil within her heart.

And, as if to indicate that the conduct of each was condoned by the Virgin of Virgins, Dante concludes by saying:

... *Ave*
Maria, cantando; e cantando vanio,

She faded from our sight, singing *Ave Maria*,

and once again he concentrated his gaze on Beatrice, Beatrice whom he regarded as his highest poetic conception of Woman. Fully to grasp what that was, we must descend from Heaven to earth and recall the origin and growth of his adoration of her, as described in the *Vita Nuova*.

To some commentators on Dante, the narrative to be read there has suggested difficulties when, in reality, there are none, leading them to urge that a child of nine years of age could not feel what is therein described, and that, therefore, it is purely symbolic, and was written not about any human creature, but indicated Philosophy, or the desire for spiritual enlightenment and the search for heavenly wisdom, which was Dante's overpowering impulse almost from the cradle. The answer to such an interpretation of the passage is that it betrays an utter ignorance of the emotional precocity of the poetic temperament, and of the vague but intense hold Love can acquire over Poets from their earliest years.

Of the reality underlying the idealism of the *Vita Nuova*, we therefore need have no doubt whatever. Dante's Beatrice was Beatrice Portinari, a Florentine maid first, a Florentine bride later, whose people lived in the Corso, near the Canto de' Pazzi.

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All that follows in the narrative of the *Vita Nuova* may be relied on just as implicitly; how, when she was eighteen years of age, he met her again walking in the streets of Florence between two noble ladies older than herself, and graciously, as Dante says, returned his salute; how, with the naïf shyness of a youth consumed with love, he tried to dissemble it by pretending to be enamoured of another damsel, which only made Beatrice look away when she met him; and how he contrived to convey to her indirectly, through a poem he wrote, that she had misjudged him; how, thereon, she looked on him graciously once more; and how, alas! in her twenty-fifth year, she was summoned from this world to the world above. Then the *Vita Nuova* draws mournfully to a close, ending with these significant words:—

After I had written this sonnet, there appeared to me a wonderful vision, in which I saw things that made me determine to write no more of this dear Saint until I should be able to write of her more worthily; and, of a surety, she knows that I study to attain unto this end with all my powers. So, if it shall please Him by Whom all things live, to spare my life for some more years, I hope to say that of her which never yet hath been said of any lady; and then may it please Him, who is the Father of all good, to suffer my soul to see the glory of its mistress, the sainted Beatrice, who now, abiding in glory, looketh upon the face of Him who is blessed for ever and ever.

For the fulfilment of that determination we must return to the *Divina Commedia*, written in the fullness of the Poet's powers. But there are three lines in the *Vita Nuova* about the death of Beatrice that have haunted me ever since I first read them, and whose beauty, I am sure, all will feel:

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Non la ci tolse qualità di gelo,
Nè di color, siccome l'altro fece,
Ma sola fu sua gran benignitate:

lines very difficult to translate, but the meaning of which is that she died neither from chill

nor from fever, which carries off other mortals, but only of her great benignness, or excess of goodness, which rendered earth an unfitting dwelling-place for her, and Paradise her only true home.

It is not necessary to comment here on the First Canto of the *Divina Commedia*. That, one has done already before the Dante Society, and it is not requisite for one's present theme. But in Canto the Second we meet with the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova*. She it is that sends Virgil, who dwells in the neutral territory of Limbo, to the Poet, saying:

Io son Beatrice, che ti faccio andare:
Amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.

And not only does she say that she is animated by love, which has caused her, now in Heaven, to feel so compassionately towards him, but also because he loved her so while she was on earth, and continued to do so after she had quitted it, with a fidelity that has lifted him above the crowd of ordinary mortals, and made of him a Poet. Here, let it be said in passing, we get another indication of Dante's poetic conception of Woman, which is, among other qualities, to co-operate in the making and fostering of Poets, a mission in which they have never been wanting. Where, indeed, is the Poet who could not say of some woman, and, if he be fortunate, of more than one, what, in the Twenty-second Canto of the *Purgatorio*, Dante makes Statius say to Virgil, "*Per te poeta fui*," "It was through you that I became a Poet."

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Throughout the remaining Cantos of the *Inferno*, Beatrice naturally is never mentioned, nor yet in the *Purgatorio*, till we reach Canto the Thirtieth, wherein occurs perhaps the most painful scene in the awe-inspiring poem. In it she descends from Heaven, an apparition of celestial light, compared by the Poet to the dazzling dawn of a glorious day. Smitten with fear, he turns for help to Virgil, but Virgil has left him. "Weep not," says Beatrice to him, "that Virgil is no longer by your side; you will need all your tears when you hear me." Then begins her terrible arraignment:

Guardaci ben: ben sem, ben sem Beatrice.

Look on me well! Yes, I am Beatrice.

Confused, Dante gazes upon the ground, and then glances at a fountain hard by; but, seeing his own image trembling in the water, he lowers his eyes to the green sward encircling it, and fixes them there, while she upbraids him for his deviation from absolute fidelity to her memory, and his disregard of her heavenly endeavours still to help and purify him. Boccaccio says that Dante was a man of strong passions, and possibly, indeed probably, he was. But Beatrice seems to reproach him with only one transgression, and, if one is to say what one thinks, she has always appeared to me a little hard on him. Nor does she rest content till she has compelled him to confess his fault. He does so, and then she tells him to lay aside his grief, and think no more of it, for he is forgiven. Perhaps, in mitigation of the feeling that her severity was in excess of the cause, one ought to remember, since it is peculiarly pertinent to my theme, that we are in the above harrowing scene presented with the crowning characteristic of Dante's poetic conception of Woman, that, be the offence against her what it may, she forgets and forgives.

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It might be interesting on some other occasion to inquire how far Dante's poetic conception of Woman is shared by Poets generally, and by the greater Poets of our own land in particular. Meanwhile one may affirm that the inquiry would serve to show that it is in substance the same, though no other Poet, in whatsoever tongue, has extolled and glorified a woman as Dante did Beatrice. But Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Shakespeare, Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, could all be shown, by apposite illustration, to leave on the mind a conception of woman as a being tender, devoted, faithful, helpful, "sweet, and serviceable," as Tennyson says of Elaine, quick to respond to affection, sensitive to beauty in Nature and Arts, sympathising companion alike of the hearth and of man's struggle with life—in a word, a creature of whom it is true to say, as, indeed, Byron *has* said, that "Love is her whole existence," meaning by Love not what is too frequently in these days falsely presented to us in novels as such, but Love through all the harmonious scale of loving, maternal, filial, conjugal, romantic, religious, and universal.

Read then the Poets. They have a nobler conception of woman and of life than the novelists. Their unobtrusive but conspicuous teaching harmonises with the conduct of the best women, and has its deep foundation in a belief in the beneficent potency of Love, from the most elementary up to an apprehension of the meaning of the last line of the *Divina Commedia*:

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L'amor che muove il Sole e l'altre stelle.

Love that keeps the sun in its course, and journeys with the planets in their orbit.

The term Pessimism has in these later days been so intimately associated with the philosophical theories of a well-known German writer, that I can well excuse those who ask, What may be the connection between Pessimism and Poetry? There are few matters of human interest that may not become suitable themes for poetic treatment; but I scarcely think Metaphysics is among them. It is not, therefore, to Schopenhauer's theory of the World conceived as Will and Idea, that I invite your attention. The Pessimism with which we are concerned is much older than Metaphysics, is as old as the human heart, and is never likely to become obsolete. It is the Pessimism of which the simplest, the least cultured, and the most unsophisticated of us may become the victims, and which expresses the feeling that, on the whole, life is rather a bad business, that it is not worth having, and that it is a thing which, in the language used by the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, in order to console Claudio, none but fools would keep.

Now, as all forms of feeling, and most forms of thought, are reflected in the magic mirror of Poetry, it is only natural that gloomy views of existence, of the individual life, and of the world's destiny should from time to time find expression in the poet's verse. There is quite enough pain in the experience of the individual, quite enough vicissitude in the history of nations, quite enough doubt and perplexity in the functions and mission of mankind, for even the most cheerful and masculine Song to change sometimes into the pathetic minor. What I would ask you to consider with me is if there be not a danger lest poetry should remain for long in this minor key, and if the Poet does not find ample justification and warrant—nay, should he be a true and comprehensive interpreter of life, of

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All moods, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,

if he does not find himself compelled, in reply to the question, "What of the night?" to answer, "The stars are still shining."

No survey of the attitude of Poetry towards Pessimism would be satisfactory that confined itself to one particular age; and I shall ask you, therefore, to attend to the utterances of poets in other generations than our own. But, since our own age necessarily interests us the most, let us at least *begin* with it.

I should be surprised to find any one doubting that during the last few years a wave of disillusion, of doubt, misgiving, and despondency has passed over the world. We are no longer so confident as we were in the abstract wisdom and practical working of our Institutions; we no longer express ourselves with such certainty concerning the social and moral advantages of our material discoveries; we entertain growing anxiety as to the future of our Commerce; many persons have questioned the very foundations of religious belief, and numbers have taken refuge from conflicting creeds in avowed Agnosticism, or the confession that we know and can know absolutely nothing concerning what it had long been assumed it most behoves us to know. One by one, all the fondly cherished theories of life, society and Empire; our belief in Free Trade as the evangelist of peace, the solution of economic difficulties and struggles, and the sure foundation of national greatness; all the sources of our satisfaction with ourselves, our confidence in our capacity to reconcile the rivalry of capital and labour, to repress drunkenness, to abolish pauperism, to form a fraternal confederation with our Colonies, and to be the example to the whole world of wealth, wisdom, and virtue, are one by one deserting us. We no longer believe that Great Exhibitions will disarm the inherent ferocity of mankind, that a judicious administration of the Poor Law will gradually empty our workhouses, or that an elastic law of Divorce will correct the aberrations of human passion and solve all the problems of the hearth. The boastfulness, the sanguine expectations, the confident prophecies of olden times are exchanged for hesitating speculations and despondent whispers. We no longer seem to know whither we are marching, and many appear to think that we are marching to perdition. We have curtailed the authority of kings; we have narrowed the political competence of aristocracies; we have widened the suffrage, till we can hardly widen it any further; we have introduced the ballot, abolished bribery and corruption, and called into play a more active municipal life; we have multiplied our railways, and the pace of our travel has been greatly accelerated. Telegraph and telephone traverse the land. Surgical operations of the most difficult and dangerous character are performed successfully by the aid of anæsthetics, without pain to the patient. We have forced from heaven more light than ever Prometheus did; with the result that we transcend him likewise in our pain. No one would assert that we are happier, more cheerful, more full of hope, than our predecessors, or that we confront the Future with greater confidence. All our Progress, so far, has ended in Pessimism more or less pronounced; by some expressed more absolutely, by some with more moderation; but felt by all, permeating every utterance, and infiltrating into every stratum of thought.

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Now let us see to what extent these gloomy views have found expression in poetry, and, first of all, in the writings of not only the most widely read but the most sensitive and receptive poet of our time, Alfred Tennyson. Tennyson came of age in 1830, or just on the eve of the first Reform Bill, when a great Party in the State, which was to enjoy almost a monopoly of power for the next thirty years, firmly believed, and was followed by a majority of the nation in believing, that we had only to legislate in a generous and what was called a liberal sense,

to bring about the Millennium within a reasonable period. They had every possible opportunity of putting their belief into practice, and they did so with generous ardour. Now in that year 1830 there appeared what was practically Tennyson's first volume; and save in the instance of the short poem beginning

You ask me, why, tho' ill at ease,
Within this region I subsist,

and the somewhat longer but still comparatively brief one, opening with

Love thou thy land, with love far-brought
From out the storied Past,

there is no reference in it to the political or social condition of the English people. The bulk of the poems had evidently been composed, so to speak, in the lofty vacuum created by the poet and the artist for himself, save where, in the lines,

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Vex not thou the Poet's mind
With thy shallow wit:
Vex not thou the poet's mind,
For thou canst not fathom it,

he seemed to be giving the great body of his countrymen notice that they had nothing in common with him, or he with them. And, in the two exceptions I have named, what is his attitude? You all remember the lines:

But pamper not a hasty time,
Nor feed with vague imaginings
The herd, wild hearts and feeble wings
That every sophister can lime.

And so he goes on, through stanzas with which, I am sure, you are thoroughly familiar, ending with the often-quoted couplet:

Earn well the thrifty months, nor wed
Raw Haste, half-sister to Delay.

It would be difficult to find, in verse, a more terse or accurate embodiment of what, in no Party sense, we may call the Conservative mind, the Conservative way of looking at things, or a more striking instance of contemporaneous verse reflecting what had recently been the average public temper of the moment. The England of the years that immediately preceded 1830 was an England wearied with the strain and stress of the great war and the mighty agitations of the early part of the century, and now, craving for repose, was in politics more or less stationary. Therefore in this earliest volume, of one of the most sensitive and receptive of writers, we encounter only quiet panegyrics of

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A land of settled government,
A land of just and old renown,
Where Freedom slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent.

Where Faction seldom gathers head,
But, by degrees to fulness wrought,
The strength of some diffusive thought
Hath time and space to work and spread.

Here we have none of the rebellious political protests of Byron, none of the iconoclastic fervour of Shelley, none even of the philosophic yearning of Wordsworth. It was a Conservative, a self-satisfied England, and the youthful Tennyson accordingly was perfectly well satisfied with it, evidently having as yet no cognizance of the fact that Radicalism was already more than muling and pewking in the arms of its Whig nurse, and that Reforms were about to be carried neither "slowly," nor by "still degrees," nor in accordance with any known "precedent."

Tennyson's next volume was not published till 1842. During the twelve years that had elapsed since the appearance of its predecessor, a mighty change had come not only over the dream, but over the practice, of the English People. It was an England in which the stationary or conservative tone of thought of which I spoke was, if not extinct, discredited and suppressed, and the fortunes of the Realm were moulded by the generous and hopeful theories of Liberalism. Tennyson meanwhile had been subjected to the influences of what he called the wondrous Mother Age; and harken how now—it scarcely sounds like the same voice—the eulogist of the "storied Past," the deprecator of "crude imaginings" and of a "hasty time," confronts the dominant spirit and rising impulses of the new generation:

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For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;

Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm;

Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.

Did Optimism ever find a clearer, more enthusiastic, or more confident voice than that? I have sometimes thought that when the Historian comes to write, in distant times, of the rise, progress, and decline of Liberalism in England, he will cite that passage as the melodious compendium of its creed. You all know where the passage comes; for you have, I am sure, the first *Locksley Hall* by heart.

But there is another *Locksley Hall*, the *Locksley Hall* which the Author himself calls *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*, published as recently as 1886. You are acquainted with it, no doubt; but I should be surprised to find any one quite so familiar with it as with its predecessor. It is not so attractive, so fascinating, so saturated with beauty. But for my purpose it is eminently instructive, and I will ask you to listen to some of its rolling couplets.

Chaos, Cosmos! Cosmos, Chaos! who can tell how all will end?
Read the wide world's annals, you, and take their wisdom for your friend.

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Hope the best, but hold the Present fatal daughter of the Past,
Shape your heart to front the hour, but dream not that the hour will last.

Ay, if dynamite and revolver leave you courage to be wise:
When was age so cramm'd with menace? madness? written, spoken lies?

Envy wears the mask of Love, and, laughing sober fact to scorn,
Cries to Weakest as to Strongest, "Ye are equals, equal-born."

Equal-born? O yes, if yonder hill be level with the flat.
Charm us, Orator, till the Lion look no larger than the Cat.

Till the Cat thro' that mirage of overheated language loom
Larger than the Lion,—Demos end in working its own doom.

Chaos, Cosmos! Cosmos, Chaos! once again the sickening game;
Freedom, free to slay herself, and dying while they shout her name.

Step by step we gain'd a freedom known to Europe, known to all;
Step by step we rose to greatness,—thro' the tonguesters we may fall.

Was there ever such a contrast as between these two *Locksley Halls*? The same poet, the same theme, the same metre, but how different the voice, the tone, the tendency, the conclusion! All the Liberalism, all the enthusiasm, the hope, the confidence, of former years have vanished, and in their place we have reactionary despondency. It is as though the same hand that wrote the Christening Ode to Liberalism, had composed a dirge to be chanted over its grave.

The genius of Tennyson needs no fresh panegyric. It is but yesterday he died, in the fullness of his Fame; and that his works will be read so long as the English language remains a living tongue, I cannot doubt. But if, while his claim to the very highest place as an artist must ever remain uncontested, doubts should be expressed concerning his equality with the very greatest poets, those who express that doubt will, I imagine, base their challenge on the excessive receptivity, and consequent lack of serenity of his mind. In the first *Locksley Hall* the poet is an Optimist. In the second *Locksley Hall* he is a Pessimist. And why? Because, when the first was written, the prevailing tone of the age was optimistic; and, when the second was composed, the prevailing tone of the time had become pessimistic.

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It will scarcely be doubted, therefore, that there does exist a real and a very grave danger lest Poetry should, in these perplexing and despondent days, not only be closely associated with Pessimism, but should become for the most part its voice and echo. I am precluded from presenting to you illustrations of this danger from the works of living writers of verse. But in truth, the malady of which I am speaking—for malady, in my opinion, it is—began to manifest itself long before the present generation, long before Tennyson wrote, and when indeed he was yet a child in the cradle. The main original source of Modern Pessimism is the French movement known as the Revolution, which, by exciting extravagant hopes as to the happy results to be secured from the emancipation of the individual, at first generated a fretful impatience at the apparently slow fulfilment of the dream, and finally aroused a sceptical and reactionary despondency at the only too plain and patent demonstration that the dream was not going to be fulfilled at all. It is this blending of wild hopes and extravagant impatience that inspired and informed the poetry of Shelley, that produced *Queen Mab*, *The Revolt of Islam*, and *Prometheus Unbound*. In Byron it was impatience blent with disillusion that dictated *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, and *Cain*, and finally culminated

in the mockery of *Don Juan*. Keats, while ostensibly holding aloof from the political and social issues of his time, succumbed and ministered to the disease, even if unconsciously and unintentionally, more even than either Byron or Shelley; for *they* went on fighting against, while *he* passively submitted, to it. Keats found nothing in his own time worth sympathising with or singing about, and so took refuge in mythological and classical themes, or in the expression of states of feeling in which he grows half in love with easeful death, in which more than ever it seems sweet to die and to cease upon the midnight with no pain, and to the high requiem of the nightingale to become a sod that does not hear.

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Now it is an instructive circumstance that, in recent years, a distinct and decided preference has been manifested both by the majority of critics and by the reading public for the poetry of Keats even over the poetry of the other two writers I have named in connection with him. In Byron, notwithstanding his rebellious tendency, notwithstanding the gloom that often overshadows his verse, notwithstanding his being one of the exponents of those exaggerated hopes and that exaggerated despondency of which I have spoken, there was a considerable fund of common sense and a good deal of manliness. He was a man of the world and could not help being so, in spite of his attitude of hostility to it. Moreover, in many of his poems, action plays a conspicuous part, and the general passions, interests, and politics of mankind are dealt with by him in a more or less practical spirit, and as though they concerned him likewise. Shelley, too, not unoften condescended to deal with the political, social, and religious polemics of his time, though he always did so in a passionate and utterly impracticable temper, and would necessarily leave on the mind of the reader, the conviction that everything in the world is amiss, and that the only possible remedy is the abolition of everything that had hitherto been regarded as an indispensable part of the foundation of human society. But Keats does not trouble himself about any of these things. He gives them the go-by, he ignores them, and only asks to be allowed to leave the world unseen, and with the nightingale, to fade away into the forest dim.

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Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

This is the voice, I say, which, during the last few years, has been preferred even to Shelley's, and very much preferred to Byron's. And why? You will perhaps say that Keats's workmanship is fascinatingly beautiful. In the passage I have cited, and in the entire poem from which it is taken, that unquestionably is so. But I trust I shall not give offence if I say that the number of my countrymen and countrywomen who lay stress on the artistic manner, whether in verse or prose, in which an opinion is expressed, compared with the number of those who value poetry or prose chiefly because it expresses the opinions they value and the sentiments they cherish, is very small. No, Keats is preferred because Keats turns aside from the world at large, and thinks and writes only of individual feeling. Hence he has been more welcomed by recent critics, and by recent readers of poetry. Indeed, certain critics have laboured to erect it into a dogma, indeed into an absolute literary and critical canon, that a poet who wishes to attain true distinction must turn his back on politics, on people, on society, on his country, on patriotism, on everything in fact save books—his own thoughts, his own feelings, and his own art. Because Byron did not do so they have dubbed him a Philistine; and because Pope did precisely the reverse, and the reverse, no doubt, overmuch, they assert that he was not a poet at all.

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It is not necessary to dwell on the fatuousness of such criticism, more especially as one discerns welcome signs of a disposition on the part of the reading public to turn away from these guides, and a disposition even on the part of the guides themselves in some degree to reconsider and revise their unfortunate utterances. But I have alluded to the doctrine in question, in order to show you to what lengths Pessimism, which is only a compendious expression of dissatisfaction with things in general, in other words with life, with society, and with mankind, can go, and how it has culminated in such disdain of them by poets, that they brush them aside as subjects unworthy of the Muse. Surely Pessimism in Poetry can no farther go, than to assume, without question, that man, life, society, patriotism are not worth a song?

I should not wonder if some will have been saying to themselves, "But what about Wordsworth; Wordsworth, who was the contemporary, and at least the equal, alike in genius and in influence, of the three poets just named?" I have not forgotten Wordsworth. Wordsworth was of too pious a temperament, using the word pious in its very largest signification, to be a Pessimist; for true piety and Pessimism are irreconcilable. Nevertheless Wordsworth, as a poet, likewise experienced, and experienced acutely, the influence of the French Revolution. Upon this point there can be no difference of opinion; for he himself left it on record in a well-known passage. Everybody knows with what different eyes Wordsworth finally looked on the French Revolution; how utterly he broke with its tenets, its

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promises, its offspring; taking refuge from his disappointment.

But something akin to despondency, if too permeated with sacred resignation wholly to deserve that description, may be discovered in the attitude henceforward assumed by Wordsworth, as a poet, towards the world, society, and mankind. Not only did he write a long poem, *The Recluse*, but he himself was a recluse, and the whole of *The Excursion* is the composition of a recluse. Matthew Arnold, always a high authority on Wordsworth, has said:

But Wordsworth's eyes avert their ken
From half of human fate.

Indeed they did; turning instead to the silence that is in the sky, to the sleep that is in the hills, to the mountains, the flowers, and the poet's own solitary *meditations*. He declared that he would rather be a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn than one of those Christian worldlings, of which society seemed to him mainly to consist. This is not necessarily Pessimism. But it goes perilously near to it; and the boundary line would have been crossed, but that Wordsworth's prayer was answered, in which he petitioned that his days might be linked each to each by natural piety.

Of Matthew Arnold himself, as a poet, I am able to speak; for though he was not long ago one's contemporary, he is no longer one of ourselves. In Matthew Arnold it has always seemed to me, the poet and the man, his reason and his imagination, were not quite one. They were harnessed together rather than incorporated one with the other; and, many years before he died, if I may press the comparison a little farther, the poet, the imaginative part of him became lame and halt, and he conveyed his mind in the humbler one-horse vehicle of prose. The poetic impulse in him was not strong enough to carry him along permanently against the prosaic opposition of life. Nevertheless, he was a poet who wrote some very beautiful poetry; and he exercised a powerful influence, both as a poet and as a prose-writer, on the thoughts and sentiments of his time. Now, what do we find him saying? Listen!

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Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
Their faith, My tears, the world deride,
I come to shed them at your side.

There yet perhaps may dawn an age,
More fortunate alas! than we,
Which without hardness will be sage,
And gay without frivolity.
Sons of the world, oh haste those years!
But, till they rise, allow our tears.

Hark to the words he puts into the mouth of Empedocles:

And yet what days were those, Parmenides!
Then we could still enjoy, then neither thought
Nor outward things were closed and dead to us;
But we received the shock of mighty thoughts
On simple minds with a pure natural joy.

We had not lost our balance then, nor grown
Thought's slaves, and dead to every natural joy.

In another poem he declares:

Achilles ponders in his tent:
The Kings of modern thought are dumb;
Silent they are, though not content,
And wait to see the future come.

Our fathers watered with their tears
The sea of time whereon we sail;
Their voices were in all men's ears
Who passed within their puissant hail.
Still the same ocean round us raves,
But we stand mute and watch the waves.

Last and worst of all, and in utter despondency and pessimism he cries:

Your creeds are dead, your rites are dead,
Your social order, too!
Where tarries He, the Power who said,
See, I make all things new?
... The past is out of date,
The future not yet born;
And who can be alone elate,

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Can Pessimism in Poetry go farther than that? Many will perhaps think it cannot; but, unfortunately, it can. It is only from poets who are dead, if dead but recently, that one can draw one's illustrations; otherwise I could suggest you should read to yourselves volume upon volume of verse, the one long weary burden of which is the misery of being alive. I daresay you will not be sorry that one is precluded from introducing these melancholy minstrels. But the spirit that imbues and pervades them is compendiously and conveniently expressed in a composition that I *can* read to you, and which I select because it seems to express, in reasonably small compass, the indictment which our metrical pessimists labour to bring against existence.

I have confined my survey entirely to poets of our own land, and have said nothing to you of Giacomo Leopardi, the celebrated Italian Pessimistic Poet; nothing of Heine, whose beautiful but too often cynical lyrics must be known to you either in the original German, or in one or other of the various English versions, into which they have been rendered; nothing of the long procession of railers, sometimes bestial, nearly always repulsive, in French verse, beginning with Baudelaire, and coming down to the *petits crevés* of poetry who are not ashamed to be known by the name of *décadents*, and who certainly deserve it, for if they possess nothing else, they possess to perfection the art of sinking. One would naturally expect to find in the country where occurred the French Revolution, the most violent forms of the malady which, as I have said, is mainly attributable to it; and surely it is a strong confirmation of the truth of that theory that it is in France poetic pessimism has in our day had its most outrageous and most voluminous expression.

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I hope no one supposes that I am, even incidentally, intending to pronounce a sweeping and unqualified condemnation of the great movement known in history as the French Revolution. That would indeed be to be as narrow as the narrowest pessimist could possibly show himself. The French Revolution, as is probably the case with every great political, religious, or social movement, was in its action partly beneficial, partly detrimental. It abolished many monstrous abuses, it propounded afresh some long-neglected or violated truths; and it gave a vigorous impulse to human hope. But it was perhaps the most violent of all the great movements recorded in human annals. Accordingly, it destroyed over much, and it promised over much. In all probability, action and reaction are as nicely balanced in the intellectual and moral world as in the physical, and exaggerated hopes must have their equivalent in correlated and co-equal disappointment. I sometimes think that the nineteenth century now closed will be regarded in the fullness of time as a colossal egotist, that began by thinking somewhat too highly of itself, its prospects, its capacity, its performances, and ended by thinking somewhat too meanly of what I have called things in general, or those permanent conditions of man, life, and society, which no amount of Revolutions, French or otherwise, will avail to get rid of.

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In truth, if I were asked to say briefly what Pessimism is, I should say it is disappointed Egotism; and the description will hold good, whether we apply it to an individual, to a community, or to an age.

For nothing is more remarkable in the writings of pessimistic poets than the attention they devote, and that they ask us to devote, to their own feelings. Far be it from me to deny that some very lovely and very valuable verse has been written by poets concerning their personal joys, sorrows, hopes, longings, and disappointments. But then it is verse which describes the joys, sorrows, hopes, longings, and disappointments common to the whole human race, and which every sensitive nature experiences at some time or another, in the course of chequered life, and which are peculiar to no particular age or generation, but the pathetic possession of all men, and all epochs. The verse to which I allude with less commendation, is the verse in which the writer seems to be occupied, and asking us to occupy ourselves, with exceptional states of suffering which appertain to him alone, or to him and the little esoteric circle of superior martyrs to which he belongs, and to some special period of history in which their lot is cast. The sorrows we entertain in common with others never lead to pessimism, they lead to pity, sympathy, pathos, to pious resignation, to courageous hope. I wish these privileged invalids would take to heart those noble lines of Wordsworth:

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So once it would have been—'tis so no more—
I have submitted to a new control—
A power is gone which nothing can restore,
A deep distress hath humanized my soul!

I sometimes think these doleful bards have never had a really deep distress, that their very woe is fanciful, and that like the young gentleman in France of whom Arthur speaks in *King John*, they are as sad as night, only for wantonness. But far from being rebuked by critics for their sea-green melancholy, they have been hailed as true masters of song for scarcely any better reason than that they declare themselves to be utterly miserable, and life to be equally so. Indeed by some critics it has been raised into a literary canon, not only that all Poetry, to be of much account, must be written in the pathetic minor, but that the poets themselves, if we are to recognise them as endowed with true genius and real sacred fire, must be unhappy from the cradle to the grave. If they can die young, if they can go mad, or commit suicide, so much the better. Their credentials as great poets are then firmly

established. Even a pathetic phrase has been invented to describe the natural and inevitable condition of such sacred persons, a phrase that must be well known to you—the Sorrows of Genius.

Therefore, in the really sacred name of Genius, of Literature, of Poetry, I protest against this pitiable, this mawkish, unmanly, unwholesome, and utterly untrue estimate both of poetry and poets. No first-rate poet ever went mad, or ever committed suicide, though one or two, no doubt, have happened to die comparatively young. It is utterly dishonouring to poets, it is utterly discrediting to men of genius, to represent them as feeble, whining, helpless, love-sick, life-sick invalids, galvanised from time to time into activity by a sort of metrical hysteria. Because Shelley has truly said that

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Our sweetest songs are those which tell of saddest thought

—and because in *Julian and Maddalo* he has represented Byron as saying that men

... learn in suffering what they teach in song

—are we to conclude that sadness and suffering are the only things in life, the only things in it deserving of the poet's music? No one will ever be a poet of much consequence who has not suffered, for, as Goethe finely says, he who never ate his bread in sorrow, knows not the Heavenly Powers. But, if our sweetest songs are those which tell of saddest thought, they are not necessarily our strongest or our greatest songs; and if we accept the assertion that men learn in suffering what they teach in song, do not let us forget the "learning" spoken of in the line. The poet, no doubt, has to learn by suffering, but having learnt, he has then, in my opinion, to help others not to be miserable, but to be happy.

I cannot here allude to well-known poets of other ages and other nations, avowedly great and permanent benefactors of mankind, all of whom alike were completely free from this malady of universal discontent. But let me at least take a cursory survey of our native poets; for, after all, to us English men and English women, what English poets have felt and said concerns us most and interests us most deeply. Let us see what is their attitude to external nature, to man, woman, life, society, and the general dispensation of existence.

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You know how our modern pessimists cannot see a tree, a flower, or a mountain, but straightway they drop into what I may call a falling sickness, and all the beauty of the woods, fields, and sky merely suggests to them a picturesque background for their own superior sighs and sorrows. How differently Chaucer looks upon the panorama of this fair earth of ours! He is a great student, as men in the early days of the Renaissance were, and he tells us that he hath such delight in reading books, and has in his heart for them such reverence, that there is no game which can tear him away from them. But, when the month of May comes, and the birds sing, and the flowers begin to shoot, then, he adds, "Farewell my book and my devotion!" He wanders forth and beholds the eye of the daisy; and this blissful sight, as he calls it, softeneth all his sorrow. Elsewhere he describes how he cannot lie in bed for the glad beams of the sun that pour in through the window. He rushes out, and is delighted with everything. The welkin is fair, the air blue and light, it is neither too hot nor too cold, and not a cloud is anywhere to be seen. This disposition of content with and joy in external Nature, Chaucer displays equally when he consorts with his kind. It is very noticeable, though I am not aware if it has been pointed out before, how he portrays all the various pilgrims and personages in the famous *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* as of cheerful and generally jovial spirits. There is not a melancholy person, not a pessimist, in the whole company. He describes himself as talking and having fellowship with every one of them, and we may therefore conclude he also was pretty cheerful and genial himself. Even of his "perfect gentle knight," whom he evidently intended to describe as the pink of chivalry, he says:

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And though that he was worthy, he was wise.

And there never was, and never will be, wisdom without cheerfulness. As for the young Squire, the lover and lusty bachelor, that accompanied the Knight, Chaucer says of him, in a couplet that has always struck me as possessing a peculiar charm:

Singing he was or fluting all the day,
He was as merry as the month of May.

He says of him, though he could sit a horse well, he could also write songs; and we can easily surmise what the songs were like. Chaucer's Nun or Prioress is delineated by him as full pleasant and amiable of port, and as even taking trouble to feign the cheerful air of a lady of the Court. When the Monk rides abroad, men could hear his bridle jingling in a whistling wind as clear and loud as the chapel bell. Do not the words stir one's blood to cheerfulness, and sound like a very carillon of joy? Of the Friar it is recorded that certainly he had a merry note, and well could he sing and play upon the harp, and that while he sang and played, his eyes twinkled in his head, like stars in the frosty night. The business of the Clerk of Oxenford was by his speech to sow abroad moral virtue; but Chaucer adds, "And gladly would he learn—" mark that word "gladly" "—and gladly teach." The Franklin, a country gentleman, he declares, was wont to live in delight, for he was Epicurus' own son. The Shipman draws many a draught of wine from Bordeaux; well can the wife of Bath laugh and jest; the Miller is a regular joker and buffoon; a better fellow you cannot find, he avers, than the Sumpnor; and the Pardoner, for very jollity, goes bareheaded, singing full merrily

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and loud. As for the Landlord of the "Tabard," he is described as making great cheer, being a right merry man. He declares there is no comfort nor mirth in riding to Canterbury, even on pilgrimage, as dumb as a stone, and that they may smite off his head if he does not succeed in making them merry; and it all ends by Chaucer declaring that every wight was blithe and glad. Indeed, these are such a cheery, such a jovial set, that the only sorrow we can feel in connection with them is regret that we, too, were not of that delightful company.

I wonder if it has occurred to you, while reading these brief and cursory extracts from Chaucer, to say to yourselves, "How English it all is!" If not, may I say it for you? I am free to confess that I am one of those who think—and I hope there are some in this room who share my opinion—that the epithet English is an epithet to be proud of, an adjective of praise, a mark of commendation, and connotes, as the logician would say, everything that is manly, brave, wholesome, and sane. These latter-day melancholy moping minstrels are not English at all, they are feeble copies of foreign originals. Between them and Chaucer there is absolute alienation. About them there is nothing jolly or jovial, and there is not one good fellow among them.

Let us turn to the next great name according to chronological order in English Poetry; let us glance, if but rapidly, at the pages of Spenser. You could not well have two poets of more different dispositions than Chaucer and Spenser. One seems to hear Chaucer's own bridle jingling in a whistling wind, to see his own eyes twinkling in his head like stars in the frosty night, and one thinks of him, too, as singing or fluting all the day long and being as merry as the month of May. In the gaze, on the brow, and in the pages of Spenser, there abides a lofty dignity, as of a high-born stately gentleman, deferential to all, but familiar with none. Indeed he resembles his own Gentle Knight in the opening lines of the *Fairy Queen*, the description of whom I have always thought is none other than the portraiture of himself. If ever a poet had high seriousness it is Spenser. He never condescends to indulge in the broad jests dear to Chaucer, frequent in Shakespeare, common in Byron. Yet between him and Chaucer, between him and every great poet, there is this similarity, that he looks on life with a cheerful mind. It is a grave cheerfulness, but cheerfulness all the same; and, in truth, cheerful gravity, and high seriousness are one and the same thing.

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Full jolly Knight he seemed, and fair did sit,
As one for Knightly jousts and fierce encounters fit!

he says in the very first stanza of his noble poem. "Jolly," no doubt, does not mean quite the same thing with Spenser as it does with Chaucer. There is the difference in signification, we may say, that there is, in character, between the Landlord of the "Tabard" and the Gentle Knight. But never does the latter lapse into melancholy, much less into Pessimism. He is too active, on too great adventure bound, and too impressed with its solemn importance, for that. Spenser himself significantly expresses the fear that his Gentle Knight

Of his cheer did seem too solemn sad,

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as though he wished to let us know that even solemn sadness is a fault. But he soon enables us to discern that appearance is misleading, and reflects in reality only a noble, lofty, and serene temper, and that desire to win the worship and favour of the Fairy Queen, which he tells us, "of all earthly things, the Knight most did crave." As soon as Spenser has described the lovely lady that rode the Knight beside, he says:

And forth they pass, with *pleasure* forward led.

And again

Led with *delight*, they thus beguile the way.

There is no buffoonery, as in the *Canterbury Tales*, but a wise equable serenity that contemplates man and woman, beauty, temptation, danger, sorrow, struggle, honour, this world and the next, with a Knightly equanimity that nothing can disturb. But why should I dwell on the point, when Spenser himself has written one line which I may call his confession of faith on the subject?—

The noblest mind the best contentment has.

What a noble line! the noblest, I think, in all literature. Let us commit it to heart, repeat it morning, noon, and night, and it will cast out for us all the devils, aye, all the swine of Pessimism. What does this grave, this serious, this dignified English poet say of the Muses themselves?—

The Sisters Nine, which dwell on Parnass' height,
Do make them music for their more delight!

That is Spenser's conception of the mission of poetry, and of the function of the poet—to make them music for their more delight—I acknowledge it is mine. I earnestly trust it is that of many.

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There is no passion of the human heart, no speculation of the human mind, to which Shakespeare has not, in some passage or another, given expressive utterance; and since in life there is much sorrow, no little suffering, and ample sadness, chapter and verse can readily be found in his universal pages for any mood or any state of feeling. But what is the

one, broad, final impression we receive of the gaze with which Shakespeare looked on life? A complete answer to that question would furnish matter for a long paper. But one brief passage must here suffice. In the most terrible and tragic of all his tragedies, *King Lear*, and in the most terrible and tragic of all its appalling incidents, the following brief colloquy takes place between Edgar and his now sightless father:

Away, old man; give me thy hand; away!
King Lear hath lost, he and his daughter ta'en:
Give me thy hand, come on.
No farther, sir,

replies Gloster in despair,

No farther, sir! A man may rot even here.

What is Edgar's answer?—

What! In ill thoughts again? Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither,
Ripeness is all: come on!

If, at such a moment, and in the very darkest hour of disaster, Shakespeare puts such language into the mouth of Edgar, is it wonderful that he should, in less gloomy moments, take so cheerful a view of life, that Milton can only describe his utterances by calling them "woodnotes wild"?

And Milton himself? Milton almost as grave as Spenser and certainly more austere. Yet I do not think that Pessimism, that the advocates of universal suicide, since life is not worth living, will be able to get much help or sanction for their doleful gospel from the poet who wrote *Paradise Lost* expressly to

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... assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to man.

Milton has given us, in two of the loveliest lyrics in the language, his conception of Melancholy and of Joy. Of his *L'Allegro* I need not speak. But in *Il Penseroso*, if anywhere in Milton, we must look for some utterance akin to the desolation and the despair of modern pessimistic poets. We may look, but assuredly we shall not find it.

Then let the pealing organ blow,
To the full-voicèd choir below.

In protesting, therefore, against Pessimism in Poetry, I am only returning to the oldest, soundest, and noblest traditions in English Literature, and in the English character. I trust no one supposes I am denying or that I am insensible to the existence of pain, woe, sadness, loss, even anguish and acute suffering, as integral and inevitable elements in life; and if poetry did not take note of these, and give to them pathetic and adequate expression, poetry would not be, as it is, coextensive with life, would not be the Paraclete or Comforter, with the gift of tongues. In poetry the note of sorrow will be, and must be, occasionally, and indeed frequently struck; it should not be the dominant key, much less the only key in which the poet tunes his song. There is much in our modern civilisation that is very unbeautiful, nay, that is downright ugly, whether we look on it with the eye of the artist or with the vision of the moralist. Moreover, I perceive—who could fail to perceive?—that we have in these days some very dark and difficult social problems to solve. Then let the poet come to our assistance by accompanying us with musical encouragement. For, remember, the poet has to make harmony, not out of language only, but out of life as well. I was once looking at a violin, a very lovely violin, a Stradivarius of great value and exquisite tone, and I asked the lady to whom it belonged of what wood the various parts of the instrument was composed. She told me, with much loving detail; but, she said, "I ought to add that I have been told no violin can be made of supreme quality unless the wood be taken from that side of the tree which faces south." It is the same with the Poet. If he is to give us the sweetest, the most sonorous, and the truest notes, his nature must have a bias towards the sunny side.

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A VINDICATION OF TENNYSON

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[This paper appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* a quarter of a century ago, in reply to one that had been published in the same periodical in the previous month.]

In the days of Chivalry, whose spirit, I trust, still lingers with us, though its forms may have passed away, the prelude to a peaceful tournament, or *joute de plaisance*, was the salutation of each other by the combatants. In the pages which follow an effort will be made in some

degree to dislodge Mr. Swinburne from that seat of critical judgment which he occupies with such gallant confidence, with such waving of plume and such clashing of shield. But before the lists are opened, let me salute, with something more than ceremonial courtesy, the exquisite lyrical genius of the poet, and the solid accomplishments of the scholar. That premised, I will, without further preliminary, betake me to my task.

In the latest number of one of the ablest of monthly reviews, Mr. Swinburne, enlarging on a passage, rather cursory and incidental than definitive or judicial, inserted by M. Taine at the close of his brilliant survey of English poetry, institutes a comparison between Mr. Tennyson and Alfred de Musset. With Mr. Swinburne's opening remark every one must agree. It is distinctive of this age, he says, that the greatest of the great writers who were born about the opening of the century, are still working with splendid persistence. It was affirmed by Menander that those the gods love die young. Is it because the gods themselves are dead, that the heavenly favourites are nowadays permitted to exceed even the scriptural span of life? Be this as it may, to Mr. Tennyson, with peculiar aptness, may be addressed the lines of Wordsworth, inspired by a very different personage:

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Thy thoughts and feelings shall not die,
Nor leave thee when gray hairs are nigh,
A melancholy slave;
But an old age serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night,
Shall lead thee to thy grave.

More appropriate still perhaps, for the moment, would be an excerpt from Alfred de Musset himself, whom the gods loved not well enough either to cut off in the flower of his youth, or to leave hanging till he had achieved maturity. Mr. Swinburne, no doubt, knows the lines by heart:

Mais comment fais-tu donc, vieux maître
Pour renaître?
Car tes vers, en dépit du temps,
Ont vingt ans.

Si jamais ta tête qui penche
Devient blanche,
Ce sera comme l'amandier,
Cher Nodier:

Ce qui le blanchit n'est pas l'âge,
Ni l'orage;
C'est la fraîche rosée en pleurs
Dans les fleurs.

To this survival of power in Mr. Tennyson, Mr. Swinburne pays homage after his fashion. Who could possibly withhold it? *The "Revenge," The Battle of Lucknow*, and most of all *Rizpah*, show that, even as in the days of *Locksley Hall*, ancient founts of inspiration well through Mr. Tennyson's fancy yet; serving to remind us that Nature rejoices in the occasional violation of her own laws, that roses are not altogether unknown in November, and that even when the snowdrop whitens the ground, the lark will sometimes carol up to heaven.

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To the wedded strength and sadness in *Rizpah* Mr. Swinburne offers ample testimony, and this is how he does it:

Nothing more piteous, more passionate, more adorable for intensity of beauty, was ever before this wrought by human cunning into the likeness of such words, as words are powerless to praise. Any possible commentary on a poem of this rank must needs be as weak and worthless as the priceless thing which evoked it is beautiful and strong.

I confess I am disposed to feel that this is so. But Mr. Swinburne, disregarding his candid avowal of what is worthless, proceeds with the commentary:

But one which should attempt by selection or indication to underline, as it were, and to denote the chiefest among its manifold beauties and glories, would be also as long and as wordy as the poem is short and reticent. Once or twice in reading it a man may feel, and may know himself to be none the unmanlier for feeling, as though the very heart in him cried out for agony of pity, and hardly the flesh could endure the burden and the strain of it, the burning bitterness of so keen and divine a draught. A woman might weep it away and be "all right" again—but a man born of woman can hardly be expected to bear the pity of it.

There is more to the same effect; indeed two whole pages, in the course of which we are assured that "never assuredly has any poor penman of the humblest order been more inwardly conscious of such impotence in words to sustain the weight of their intention than am I at this moment of my inability to cast into any shape of articulate speech, the

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impression and the emotion produced by the first reading of Tennyson's *Rizpah*"; that "the poet never lived on earth whose glory would not be heightened by the attribution of this poem to his hand"; that any one who hesitated to affirm as much must be "either cancerous with malevolence or paralytic with stupidity"; that now at least "there must be an end for ever on all hands to the once debatable question whether the author can properly be called in the strictest sense a great poet"; and, finally, that "there must be an end for ever, and a day beyond at least, of a question which once was even more hotly debatable than this, the long-contested question of poetic precedence between Alfred Tennyson and Alfred de Musset."

To all who, like myself, admire *Rizpah* vastly, and who never doubted that Mr. Tennyson was a larger poet than Alfred de Musset, the above is, in a sense, consolatory. But I confess that, even when first perusing it, and not having yet reached what follows, the note of panegyric struck me as strained, not to say forced, and I had an uncomfortable sort of feeling that somebody would have to pay the expense of this prodigal eulogium. To borrow a line Mr. Swinburne himself quotes:

Cette promotion me laisse un peu rêveur.

Even when Mr. Swinburne praises, and no one praises more liberally, I do not know how it strikes other people, but he always gives me the idea that he is directing his panegyric *at* somebody who is not being panegyricised; in other words, that he is, to say the least, as much bent upon scarifying some one who is not mentioned, as on complimenting the person who is. Even in the passage just reproduced, with the chant over the glories of Mr. Tennyson, is mingled a gibe at "wandering apes" and "casual mules." This, I say, put me upon my guard. "Is it conceivable," I said to myself, "that *Rizpah*, fine, forcible, and effective as it is, should cause all this difference in a man's estimate of Mr. Tennyson as a poet? Is it possible that any Englishman at least, should have had to wait till this time of day to discover that 'any comparison of claims between the two men must be unprofitable in itself, as well as unfair to the memory of the lesser poet'?" Finally, and to speak my whole mind with perfect candour, it struck me that, splendid of its kind as *Rizpah* undoubtedly is, there is surely some exaggeration in saying, "If this be not great work, no great work was ever, or will ever be done in verse by any human hand"; and that Mr. Tennyson himself has not unfrequently done work fully as good as it, and, *me judice*, even better.

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One had not to read much farther to discern that these misgivings were well founded. Somebody indeed had to pay for all the lavish praise of *Rizpah*, and it was the author of *Rizpah* himself. I felt sure I should come to the other side of the shield, the obverse hollows of all this embossed, and, if I may be permitted to say so, somewhat turgid appreciation; and come to it I did.

There are whole poems of Mr. Tennyson's first period which are no more properly to be called metrical than the more shapeless and monstrous parts of Walt Whitman, which are lineally derived as to their form—if form that can be called where form is none—from the vilest example set by Cowley, when English verse was first infected and convulsed by the detestable duncery of sham Pindarics. At times, of course, his song was then as sweet as ever it has sounded since; but he never could make sure of singing right for more than a few minutes or stanzas. The strenuous drill through which since then he has felt it necessary to put himself, has done all that hard labour can do to rectify this congenital complaint: by dint of stocks and backboard he has taught himself a more graceful carriage.... It may be the highest imaginable sign of poetic power or native inspiration that a man should be able to grind a beauty out of a deformity or carve a defect into a perfection; but whatever may be the comparative worth of this peculiar faculty, no poet surely ever had it in a higher degree or cultivated it with more patient and strenuous industry than Mr. Tennyson. Idler men, or men less qualified, and disposed to expend such length of time and energy of patience on the composition and modification, the rearrangement and recision and re-issue, of a single verse or copy of verses, can only look on at such a course of labour with amused or admiring astonishment, and a certain doubt whether the linnets, to whose method of singing Mr. Tennyson compares his own, do really go through the training of such a musical gymnasium before they come forth qualified to sing.

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Everybody has heard of the operation described by Pope as "damning with faint praise." But damning with exaggerated praise is a new invention, and it is employed in Mr. Swinburne's paper, doubtless unintentionally, but with striking effect. As we shall see directly, it is not only on what Mr. Swinburne calls "the crowning question of metre," that Mr. Tennyson is assigned a comparatively inferior place, but he is arraigned for his low estimate of women, for his sympathy with princes, and for various other crimes and misdemeanours. To say of *Rizpah*, "never since the beginning of all poetry were the twin passions of terror and pity more divinely done into deathless words, or set to more perfect and profound magnificence of music," seems a poor set-off to the reproaches just cited, and still more to those that have yet to be set forth. There is no fear that any one—and Mr. Tennyson himself, I should think, least of all—will place *Rizpah* quite in the same category with *Ædipus* or *Lear*. But there is perhaps some little danger lest the inadvertent should believe, on Mr. Swinburne's authority, that Mr. Tennyson hits and maintains the right note only after the same sad

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drudgery and pain by dint of which we are told—with about equal accuracy—poor Malibran was taught to sing. It is said that women of not very generous temperament will go out of their way to insist that a beautiful slattern dresses admirably, in order to be in a position plausibly to challenge her beauty. I am sure Mr. Swinburne is not purposely ungenerous; but in first extolling Mr. Tennyson to the skies for his poem of *Rizpah*, and then decrying him almost below the ground for his defective ear, for his base estimate of women, and for his adulation of princes, he reminds me of the fable of the eagle who bore the tortoise aloft into heaven, and then let it fall to earth, in the hope of smashing its shell, and dining off the contents. If I remember rightly, the shell did not break after all, and the bird had to flap away as hungry as ever. In any case, after reading first the extravagant laudation, and then the yet more extreme obloquy contained in Mr. Swinburne's paper, I think everybody will agree that, to quote a line with which doubtless he is familiar, Mr. Tennyson deserved:

Ni cet excès d'honneur ni cette indignité.

What is the full measure of "*cette indignité*" will be seen by and by. But before passing to the other reproaches addressed by Mr. Swinburne to the Laureate, I should like to be allowed to say something about this question of singing, of ear, of what Mr. Swinburne calls "the crowning question of metre." It is not the first time Mr. Swinburne has assumed that he possesses infallible authority upon this point. Now he must forgive me for remarking that though musicalness is unquestionably the most noticeable mark, and the most delightful quality, of his own verse, it is, for the most part, music of a particular kind. It is of the florid order, rather than of the stately; it is lyrical and Lydian, well calculated to soothe or to carry along, and sometimes enjoying the Lethean faculty of making those who read it forget to ask what it means, or indeed if it means anything very substantial. I will not say that Mr. Swinburne has adopted the principle, "Take care of the sound, and the sense will take care of itself." But he not unfrequently reminds one of this facile theory, and some of his imitators have adopted it without reserve. I cannot say whether the story is accurate; but I remember being told that, on hearing a poem of Mr. Swinburne's read aloud, Mr. Tennyson quietly quoted a line of his own from *The Lotos-Eaters*:

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Like a tale of little meaning, though the words are strong.

I should be as unfair to Mr. Swinburne as Mr. Swinburne is to Mr. Tennyson, if I hinted that he has not done much work to which the above verse is altogether inapplicable. But he is at once the poet, the prophet, and the critic of what I may call, *par excellence*, the Lyrical School; and his idea of singing, his standard of ear, his touchstone of "the crowning question of metre," is associated with the great triumphs of lyricism pure and simple.

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Now I trust I am not insensible to the exquisite melody, the delicious dactyls of Shelley, of De Musset, and, I will add, of Mr. Swinburne himself. But the Lyricists pure and simple—and certainly, as far as verse is concerned, De Musset never became anything else—are, after all, the *flentes in limine primo*. They are children, or at most they are boys. Every poet, no doubt, should pass through that preliminary stage; but he should not stay there. There should come a time when the puerile voice changes, and henceforward is recognised as masculine. It should acquire a passionate composure, and like the spirit that informs it, should be, not only spacious as the air, not only soaring and circumambient as the sky, but deep and sonorous as the sea. De Musset, as Mr. Swinburne half allows, never underwent this solemn transformation; and it is perhaps, on that very account, that all of us find him, within limits, so irresistibly attractive. He is the poet of the transitional period between boyhood and manhood.

Mes premiers vers sont d'un enfant,
Les seconds, d'un adolescent.

He never got beyond the sweet sick springtime of the soul, when it searches for what it is never to find, when it strains towards what it never can clutch, when the "flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of the birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig-tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell," and the whole want and utterance of the heart is embodied in the cry, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away!" He who has not "*passé par là*" will never be much of a poet; but he who does not pass beyond it, will never be a great one. Yet this season of the "Song of Songs" is the eternal quest of the young, the eternal regret of the old. Nothing can superannuate its charm, nothing can quench its fascination. At the climax of his strength and his fame, Byron could not help exclaiming, "The days of our youth are the days of our glory," and M. Taine was doubtless under the spell of this periodically recurring sentiment, this irresistible return, ever and anon, to one's first love, when, for a brief moment, flinging sober criticism and just judgment to the winds, he asked if it is not pardonable to prefer the author of *Les Nuits* to the author of the *Idylls*.

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Just one word more about "singing." Speaking of the earlier poems of De Musset, Mr. Swinburne observes: "Of all thin and shallow criticisms, none ever was shallower or thinner than that which would describe these firstlings of Musset's genius as mere Byronic echoes." True enough. But, he goes on to say, "in that case they would be tuneless as their original, whereas they are the notes of a singer who cannot but sing."

This is not the first time we have been treated to this opinion. Once before Mr. Swinburne has spoken of Byron as a singer who could not sing. I ventured to reply, at the time, that he

was a singer who could not or would not shriek. It is necessary to repeat the protest. No doubt Byron shows, as a rule, rather volume of voice than flexibility; and from a determination not to resemble excellent models, but to strike out a line for himself—a passion for pseudo-originality, from which lesser poets that could be named, since his time, have likewise suffered—his blank verse is generally detestable. But Shelley did not find out that Byron could not sing; neither did Scott, nor Goethe, nor Lamartine, nor Pushkin, nor Leopardi, nor De Musset himself. He speaks of the “chant” of Byron as that of “*un cygne*,” and compares the echo of his song to “*le torrent dans la verte vallée*.” Mr. Swinburne’s discovery is strictly his own, and I should advise him not to press it. Indeed it would not be difficult to dispose of it by the method of reasoning familiarly known as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Mr. Swinburne affirms that the question of metre is the crowning question, in other words, that the greatest poets are the most musical, and most people would be disposed to agree with the dictum, if the question what music is were first satisfactorily settled. But Mr. Swinburne will have it that Byron cannot sing, whereas it is quite certain that Mr. Swinburne can. Therefore Mr. Swinburne is a greater poet than Byron: which, everybody will allow, is absurd. Q.E.D.

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I daresay larks do not find much music in the thunder. But they have the sense to be silent when they hear the roll of that untrembling diapason that makes all things tremble.

To speak the plain truth, we are threatened, just at present, with too much of what Mr. Swinburne means by “singing.” Does he not remember the following passage in the Fourth Book of *Paradise Regained*?—

There shalt thou hear and learn the secret power
Of harmony, in tones and numbers hit
By voice or hand, and various-measured verse,
Æolian charms and Dorian lyric odes,
And his who gave them birth, *but higher sung*,
Blind Melesigenes, thence Homer called.

Milton goes on to speak of “the lofty grave tragedians” who employed “chorus or iambic,”

High actions and high passions best describing.

Sheer lyricism just now is overmuch the mode. It is all very nice and pleasant in its way, and within bounds, but one can have too much of a good thing, and one does not want poetry to become *vox et præterea nihil*. It is a fashion, doubtless, that will pass. If it does not, I fear people will begin to say of poetry what some one said of operatic music, *Ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d’être dit on le chante*, and we shall require a Wagner in literature to denounce the meaningless *fioriture* of musical bards bent on recalling the most irrelevant flourishes of Donizetti. Mr. Tennyson never does, and has never done, that.

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The assertion that Mr. Tennyson was born with an inaptitude for musical verse, though I conceive it to be very wide of the mark, I can at least understand. It is made intelligible by remembering the limits Mr. Swinburne assigns to music, and the characteristic preference he exhibits, in his own writings, for certain forms of it. But when we are told that “among all poems of serious pretensions in that line ... this latest epic of King Arthur took the very lowest view of virtue, set up the very poorest and most pitiful standard of duty, or of heroism for woman or for man,” I own I feel as much perplexity as surprise. Perhaps the solution of the riddle might be got at by again resorting to the process just employed, and by inquiring what is Mr. Swinburne’s own standard of duty or heroism for woman or for man, and informing ourselves through a diligent reperusal of his poems, and of those writers whose productions he has the loudest extolled, what it is he and they consider men and women ought mainly to feel, and what it is they ought mainly to occupy themselves with. But such a course might be invidious. Happily, moreover, it is unnecessary. It is enough to bring Mr. Tennyson’s men and women into court, to let men and women be the jury, and to read over to them the following indictment:

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I cannot say that Mr. Tennyson’s life-long tone about women and their shortcomings has ever commended itself to my poor mind as the note of a very pure or high one. There is always a latent, if not a patent propensity in many of his very lovers, to scold and whine after a fashion which makes even Alfred de Musset seem by comparison a model or a type of manliness. His Enids and Edith Aylmers are much below the ideal mark of Wordsworth, who has never, I believe, been considered a specially great master in that kind; but his “little Letties” were apparently made mean and thin of nature to match their pitifully poor-spirited suitors! It cannot respectfully be supposed that Mr. Tennyson is unaware of the paltry currishness and mean-spirited malice displayed in verse too dainty for such base uses by the plaintively spiteful manikins with the thinnest whey of sour milk in their poor fretful veins, whom he brings forward to vent upon some fickle or too discerning mistress the vain and languid venom of their contemptible contempt.

What does it mean? Several years ago I ventured to express the opinion that Mr. Tennyson’s was rather a feminine than a masculine Muse, borrowing, naturally enough, its idiosyncrasy from the period when it was most susceptible to surrounding influences. One or two persons of far higher critical authority than I can pretend to, told me I had struck a true note, and to

wished the one to be entirely identified with the other, much more that when he mentions the one he means the other? I fear some people will conclude that the above unmagnanimous passage was dictated by Mr. Swinburne's hatred of princes; and less indulgent persons will add, by his want of love for Mr. Tennyson.

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Now, to my thinking, the most loathsome of all characters is a sycophant. Perhaps I am more comprehensive in my contempt for that tribe even than Mr. Swinburne himself; for I hold in equal disdain the flatterers of princes and the flatterers of the people. The folly, the feebleness, and the fury of kings is to be matched only by the feebleness, the folly, and the fury of crowds. Sensible men entertain a careful distrust of each, and devise and maintain every possible barrier against the selfish vagaries of both alike. It is the rare distinction of Prince Albert that he imposed upon himself those checks which most men require to have imposed upon them by others, and against which, whether proceeding from within or from without, princes usually rebel. When we are shown a *demos* as wise, as patriotic, as conscientious, and as capable of self-abnegation, as Prince Albert, the time will have come for an honest man to chant its virtues, and we shall be able to look forward to the future of our race with more hopeful feelings than are at present possible to a sane philanthropy.

Sycophants, therefore, can dance attendance on the Many as easily and as mischievously as on the One; and of all the unmeasured adulators of the multitude I know no one to compare with the poet before whom Mr. Swinburne is perpetually prostrating himself, and before whom he bows and bobs and genuflects an almost countless number of times in the course of the paper on which I am commenting—to wit, M. Victor Hugo.

I have no wish to assail any man of letters, be his foibles what they may. But when Mr. Swinburne girds at both De Musset and Mr. Tennyson for having written civilly of princes, and observes that "poeticules love princelings as naturally as poets abhor tyrants," it is perhaps pertinent to ask him if he is aware that the first verses of M. Victor Hugo were passionately Royalist; that the refrain of one of his early poems is "*Vive le Roi! Vive la France!*" that he celebrated the Duc d'Angoulême as "the greatest of warriors"; that he mourned the death of Louis XVIII. with loyal pathos; that he wrote a tragedy whose last line was "*Quand on haït les tyrans, on doit aimer les rois!*"; that the first patron of the author of *Odes et Poésies Diverses* was a king, who gave M. Victor Hugo a pension of a thousand francs out of his privy purse, which was afterwards doubled, and which I believe was not resigned till the year 1832, or when M. Victor Hugo was thirty years of age; and that though he for a time seemed disposed to declare himself a Republican, he sought for and obtained a seat in the House of Peers from Louis Philippe as recently as 1845. Far be it from me to attempt to turn these facts against the reputation of M. Victor Hugo. I entertain no doubt they are capable of a perfectly satisfactory explanation. But let us not have two weights and two measures; and before Mr. Swinburne takes to throwing stones against those who incur his displeasure, let him look carefully round to see if some of those who excite his admiration are not living in a house with a good many glass windows.

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Against M. Victor Hugo as a man I have necessarily no word to utter. But Mr. Swinburne compels one to say something about him as a poet. In this paper upon Mr. Tennyson and De Musset alone, we come upon the following phrases, all of them applied to M. Victor Hugo: "The mightiest master of the nineteenth century"; "One far greater than Byron or Lamartine"; "The greatest living poet"; "The godlike hand of Victor Hugo"; "Only Victor Hugo himself can make words thunder and lighten like these." There is more, I think, of the same kind; but it perhaps suffices to mention these, for previous experience has made us familiar with the assumption that underlies them.

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It would be as presumptuous in me to make the world a present of my opinion as to who is the greatest of modern poets, as I conceive it is in Mr. Swinburne to be perpetually pursuing that course. I will therefore content myself with saying that to attribute that distinction to M. Hugo seems to me simply ludicrous, unless clatter be the same thing as fame, and confident copiousness is to be accepted as a conclusive credential of superiority; that in the opinion of Sainte-Beuve, De Musset was far more of a poet than M. Victor Hugo; and that, with the exception of Mr. Swinburne himself, all English critics, with whom I am acquainted, entertain no sort of doubt that Mr. Tennyson is a more considerable poet than both De Musset and M. Victor Hugo put together with a large margin to spare. In any case, does Mr. Swinburne think that, by "damnable iteration" about the "great master," he will alter the fact, or convert any human being to a creed in the propagation of which he seems unaccountably zealous? If he does, I recommend to his perusal the following brief observation of Sainte-Beuve, which he will find in a "Causerie" upon George Sand:

Ceux qui cherchent à imposer aux autres une foi qu'ils ne sont pas bien sûrs d'avoir eux-mêmes, s'échauffent en parlant, affirment sur tous les tons, et se font prophètes afin de tâcher d'être croyants.

I have said that the zeal of Mr. Swinburne in perpetually asseverating the unapproachable superiority of M. Victor Hugo is unaccountable. Perhaps, however, it is to be accounted for by reading between the lines of the following passage:

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"As lyric poet and as republican leader, the master poet of the world has equally deserved to attain this obloquy, to incur this tribute from a journal"—the reference, I believe, is to the *Figaro* of Paris—"to which the principles of republican faith, a writer to whom the pretensions of lyric poetry are naturally

and equally abhorrent and contemptible: nor could any law of nature or any result of chance be more equitably satisfactory than one which should gratify the wish—or the three wishes—that all who do not love the one should hate the other: that all such men should be even as M. Zola: and that all such writers as M. Zola, should be haters and scorners alike of republican principles and of lyric song.”

With every desire not to be intolerant, and to inform oneself of what is going on in this world, I think one may be pardoned for being unable to read M. Zola. I should as soon think of doing things I will not even name, as of reading *L'Assommoir*; and I fancy most Englishmen, whether Monarchists or Republicans, whether lyrists or the most prosaic folk in the world, entertain the same repugnance. But what, in the name of all that is fair, and manly, and magnanimous, have political opinions got to do with literary merit? Politics and literature are distinct, and though, as abundant experience has shown, one and the same man may make his mark in both, they are separate spheres of the same brain, and a man may be a good poet and a bad politician, or a bad poet and a good politician, or either good or bad in each capacity alike. Once you care one straw what are the political opinions of a poet, there is an end of you as a critic. Royalist, Republican, Communist, Deist, Pantheist,—what care I which of these a poet is, so he is a poet? As a fact, I fancy the greater sort of poets usually wear their creeds rather loosely; and if we find a poet, in his character of poet, a perpetually passionate advocate, misgivings as to his permanent fame may reasonably be entertained. Still no absolute rule can be applied to these irregular planets. One likes a poet to love his country, on the same principle which Cicero says made Ulysses love Ithaca, “not because it was broad, but because it was his own.” Mr. Tennyson loves his country warmly, and for this Mr. Swinburne rebukes him with indulging in the “beardless bluster of the Tory member, not of a provincial deputy, but of a provincial schoolboy.” This is perhaps the most inapt of all the inapt observations in his amazing piece of criticism.

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I might say more, but I feel I have said enough, I hope, not too much of a paper which, it seems to me, would be not unjustly described, in Mr. Swinburne’s own words, as “pseudo-poetic rhapsody in hermaphroditic prose,” and concerning which a person whose authority all would recognise were I to mention him, observed to me, “This is the *Carmagnole* of criticism.” But, before concluding, I should like, if Mr. Swinburne will not think me presuming, to remind him, in all friendliness, that he, no more than I, is any longer in the consulship of Plancus; that some of us would have been thankful to have had our youthful follies treated as leniently as his have been; and that the least return he can make for the indulgence that has been extended to him in consideration of his genius, is to remember the lines of the really “great master,”—not M. Victor Hugo, but Shakespeare:

... Reverence,
That angel of the world, doth make distinction
Of place 'tween high and low.

ON THE RELATION OF LITERATURE TO POLITICS

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It occasionally happens to men of letters, at political gatherings, to be asked to respond to the toast of Literature; so one may fairly conclude that, in the opinion of many persons, there is between literature and politics a close and familiar relation. I have long believed that there is; and observation of the opinions of others has led me to inquire whether the relation be one of amity or of antagonism. I propose to endeavour, even though it be by reflections that may appear deliberative rather than dogmatic, to elucidate a question that is not devoid of interest.

Mr. Trevelyan has recorded a saying of Macaulay to this effect, that a man who, endowed with equal capacity for achieving distinction in literature and in politics, selects a political career, gives proof of insanity. Most men of letters, I fancy, would endorse that sentiment. But the decisions which men have to make in this world are not, as a rule, presented to them with the definiteness that gives artistic charm, as well as moral meaning, to a well-known masterpiece in the Palazzo Borghese. Between Sacred and Profane Love, between the love of literature and the pursuit of politics, the line is not, in practice, drawn so hard and fast as in the beautiful apologue immortalised by Titian. Loves that are altogether sacred and in no degree profane, are not, I imagine, frequently offered to any one; and though loves wholly profane and in no measure sacred, are, perhaps, not so uncommon, they are not likely in that absolutely coarse form to exercise enduring attraction over the finer spirits. It is the curious and inextricable amalgam of the two that constitutes the embarrassment. Literature entirely divorced from politics is a thing by no means so easily attained, or so disinterestedly sought after, as it is sometimes assumed to be; and though, with much Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary oratory before our minds, we should hesitate to affirm that politics are not occasionally cultivated with a fine disregard for literature, yet the literary flavour that is still present in the speeches of some Party Politicians, suffices to show that literature and

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politics are in practice not so much distinct territories as border-lands whose boundaries are not easily defined, but that continually run into, overlap, and are frequently confounded with, each other.

But is it to be desired, even should it appear to be possible, to restrict literature and politics each to its own particular sphere, and forbid either to trespass upon the territory of the other? Would they be gainers by this absolute severance? I am disposed to think that both would be losers; and the loss, I fancy, would fall more heavily upon literature even than upon politics. Dickens is said to have expressed his regret that, as he worded it, a man like Disraeli should have thrown himself away by becoming a politician. The observation, perhaps, smacks a little of the too narrow estimate of life with which that man of genius may not unjustly be reproached. But few people, if any, would think of denying that Lord Beaconsfield might have won more enduring distinction in the Republic of Letters than can be accurately placed to his account, had he dedicated himself with less ardour—or, perhaps it would be more correct to say, with less tenacity—to party politics. Like most persons of a contemplative disposition, he read sparingly, and found in the pages of others not so much what they themselves put there, as a provocation and stimulus to fresh thoughts of his own. “See what my gracious Sovereign sent me as a present at Christmas,” he said to me one day. It was a copy of the edition de luxe of *Romola*; and in it was written, in the beautiful flowing hand of the Queen, “To the Earl of Beaconsfield, K.G., from his affectionate and grateful friend, Victoria.” “But,” he added, “I cannot read it.” I ventured to recommend him not to make that confession to everybody, for it would not raise their estimate of his literary acumen. “Well,” he said, “it’s no use. I can’t.” No doubt *Romola* not unoften smells overmuch of the lamp, and in all probability will not permanently occupy the position assigned to it with characteristic over-confidence by contemporaneous enthusiasm. But, if a man can read novels at all, and if he demands from the novelist something more than the mere craft of the story-teller, surely *Romola* ought to give him pleasure; and I suspect it would have pleased him, had he permitted his taste as a man of letters the same amount of expansion he afforded to his tendencies as a practical politician. At the same time, I could well understand a person arguing, though I could hardly agree with him, that he was not designed by nature to be a more complete and finished man of letters than he actually became, and that his keen interest in politics, and the knowledge of political and social life he in consequence acquired, contribute to his written works their principal charm and their most valuable ingredients. I suspect the truth to be, that he was compounded in such equal proportions of the man of meditation and the man of action, that under no circumstances would he have been content to be merely a man of letters, or merely a politician, and that he fulfilled his nature by being alternately one and the other. That a man should attain to supreme eminence in literature by pursuing such a course, is out of the question. The wonder is that, having achieved even such literary distinction as he did, he should have attained to such supreme eminence as a statesman.

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If, therefore, Lord Beaconsfield might have been a more distinguished man of letters, had he not been so keen a politician, the proper conclusion would seem to be that literature in his case suffered hurt, not from politics, but from an excess of politics. It would not be easy to name a character more utterly unlike his than Wordsworth—a man of letters pure and simple, if we are ever to find one. True it is that Wordsworth in extreme youth wrote some political verse, that he loved his country with ardour, and that the word England had for him great and stimulating associations; but, as a rule, he lived remote from human ken, divorced from human business, amid the silence of the starry sky and the sleep of the everlasting hills. What was the result? I admire the best and highest poetry of Wordsworth with a fervour and an enthusiasm not exceeded by those who will, perhaps, forgive me for calling them his more fanatical worshippers. But I must continue to think that Wordsworth would have given himself the chance of being a yet greater poet than he was, had he—I do not say quitted his lakes, and hills, and streams; heaven forbid!—but had he consorted at times more freely and fully with his fellow-men, had he been not a poet only, but something in addition to a poet; had he led a rather more mixed life; had he done, in fact, what we know was done by the great Athenian dramatists, by Virgil, by Dante, by Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, and even by Shelley. Politics do not necessarily mean party politics, though in this country, at this moment, the one runs dangerously near to implying the other. Politics mean, or ought to mean, the practical concerns of the many, of the state, of the Empire, or of mankind at large, as contradistinguished from the mere personal or class interests. But with those wider concerns Wordsworth would have little or nothing to do, except in the most abstract way; and the consequence is that his poetry is the poetry of the individual, and nearly always of the same individual, and is lacking in the element of variety, especially in the greatest element of all, viz. action, in which is necessarily included the portrayal of passion and character.

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Would not the proper conclusion, therefore—a conclusion not overstrained and if not stated with excessive dogmatism—seem to be, that literature, though demanding precedence in the affections, and exacting the chief attention of one who professes really to love it, is not a jealous mistress, but, on the contrary, is only too well pleased to see even its most attached votaries combine with their one supreme passion a number of minor interests and even minor affections. A very sagacious person has said, “Action may not bring happiness; but there is no happiness without action.” I am not sure that that is quite true, for Epictetus, and even Epicurus, would have something to say on the other side. But I entertain little doubt that it is strictly true to affirm that the highest literary eminence is not attainable by persons

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who stand aloof, and have always stood aloof, from the field of action; that mere contemplation, no matter how lofty, how profound, or how persistent, will not make a man a supreme poet or a supreme artist of any kind; and that the doctrine of "art for art's sake," if applied in a perverse signification, must end by narrowing and finally debasing what it is intended to elevate. Action helps thought, and thought helps action. By action thought is rendered more masculine, attains to greater breadth, and acquires a certain nobleness and dignity. Thanks to thought, action may become more definite, more precise, more fruitful. But that is on the assumption that each exerts itself in due times and seasons, and leaves to the other abundant opportunities and ample latitude. When we are bidden to observe that

the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

we well understand that thought has been excessive, that action has not had fair play, and that the brain has paralysed the hand.

No one can read the *Iliad* without feeling that the writer, or writers, of the stirring debates with which it is thronged had consorted with, and was intimately familiar with public life. Many years ago, addressing an assembling of Cambridge undergraduates at a political meeting, and seeking to justify the toast of literature they had given me as a text, I ventured, with a certain levity congenial to my young but classical audience, to ask if the *Iliad* is not a political poem, for is it not full of discussions as animated as any of our own Parliamentary ones, in which Agamemnon, Nestor, Ulysses, to say nothing of Thersites, successively take part; and are not these succeeded, as in our own case, by deliberations in an Upper House, where Juno, Venus, Vulcan, and even Jove himself, participate in the oratorical debate? The first and last note of the *Aeneid*, indeed the one text of the great poem of Virgil, is *Romanam condere gentem*, to show how was established, and to intimate how might be extended, the Empire of Rome. Virgil, the most tender, the most finished, the most literary of poets, took the warmest interest in the politics of his country, or he would never have got much beyond the range of his Pastorals and Bucolics. The first word in the first ode of Horace is the name of an Augustan minister, quickly to be followed by the ode, *Jam satis terris*, with its patriotic allusions to national pride and military honour. Most people, I imagine, associate Dante with the period of his exile, forgetting why he was exiled. He had to thank the interest he displayed in the politics of his native city for that prolonged banishment; and so keen a politician was this great contemplative bard, that in the same poem in which Beatrice reproves him in heaven, Dante represents his political enemies as gnashing their teeth in hell. That was when he had become the man of letters pure and simple. But, in the hey-day of his fortunes, and long after he had first seen and become enamoured of Beatrice, and had written the *Vita Nuova*, he had taken so active a part and become so influential a personage in the public affairs of Florence, that, when invited to go on a difficult embassy, he exclaimed, "If I go, who will stay? Yet, if I stay, who will go?" It was no backsliding, therefore, no hesitation, that made Dante a public character for a moment, quickly to repent his infidelity to the Muse. To the last, it is abundantly evident that he would fain have combined in his career the poet and the politician. Yet the first words addressed by Virgil to Dante, when they met *nel gran deserto*, and Dante asked him whether he was *ombra od uomo certo*, seem almost to imply that Virgil meant to reprove the intruder upon the *selva oscura* with condescending to mix in the turmoil of public life, instead of confining himself to literature and philosophy. These are the words, which students of the *Divina Commedia* will scarcely require to have cited for them:

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
Figliuol d'Anchise, che venne da Troia,
Poichè il superbo Ilion fu combusto.
Ma tu perchè ritorni a tanta noia?
Perchè non sali il diletto monte,
Ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?

I was a poet, and I sang of that just son of Anchises, who came from Troy after proud Ilion was laid in ashes. But you—why do you return to worries of that sort! Why do you not ascend the delectable mountain, which is the principle and cause of all true happiness?

We must bear in mind, however, that the words are not the real words of Virgil, but words put into his mouth by Dante at a period when Dante himself was weary and sick to death of *tanta noia*, the annoyances and mortifications of political life, and had cast longing eyes upon the *diletto monte*. What real man of letters that ever ventured into the arid and somewhat vulgar domain of Party-politics has not felt the same feeling of revulsion, the same longing for the water-brooks? But, years after Dante wrote that passage, he strove, petitioned, and conspired to be allowed to return to Florence and its perpetual civic strife, and envied, as Byron makes him say, in *The Prophecy of Dante*:

... Every dove its nest and wings,
Which waft it where the Apennine look down
On Arno, till it perches, it may be,
Within my all inexorable town.

If the Crusades were not politics, we should have to narrow the meaning of the word very considerably; and if the Crusades were political, another Italian poet must be added to the

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list of those who have not disdained to draw inspiration from public affairs, Torquato Tasso, the author of *Gerusalemme Liberata*. And what are the first two lines of the *Orlando Furioso*?—

Le donne, i cavallier, l'arme, gli amori,
Le cortesie, l'audaci imprese, io canto.

L'audaci imprese! The loves of fair ladies were not enough for Ariosto, but with them he needs must blend the clash of arms and mighty enterprise. Both these poets were, in the phrase of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "unscrupulously epic," and fused the red-hot lava of their time in the mould of their enduring verse. No one should need to be reminded that Chaucer was the friend of statesmen and the colleague of ambassadors. In him we find the two salient characteristics of all the best English poetry—a close observation and tender love of external nature, and a keen interest in the characters and doings of men; and, for this reason, he has often been hailed as the precursor of Shakespeare. The lofty symbolism of Spenser, and the unvarying elevation and dignity of his style, seem to place him rather remote from the common herd, and to make him, in a sense, a little less human than some might wish him to be. But in his writings he holds himself aloof from the vulgar no more than Dante does; and like Dante, he was a man of the world, and participated in the art of government and the administration of public affairs. The "poet of the poets" combined literature with politics.

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The days of Burleigh were hardly days when the son of a provincial wool-stapler was likely to be much heard of in the domain of politics. But the historical plays of Shakespeare traverse a space of more than two hundred years, or from King John to Henry VIII., and could not have been written by one who did not combine with his unmatched poetic gifts a lively interest in the politics of his country. Shakespeare is the idol of us all, the only reproach I have ever heard addressed to him being that he was rather too aristocratic in his sympathies, and too Conservative in the non-Party sense, in his views; foibles which perhaps ought not to surprise us in one who had so intimate a knowledge of human nature, and so shrewd an appreciation of its strong and weak points. Nor was it an injury, but a distinct gain, to the prince of dramatic poets, that he should have been compelled to concern himself with the practical affairs of life, and to busy himself actively with the management of a theatre. The lament about his nature being subdued to what it worked in, may be taken as an ebullition of momentary weakness, even in that robust and manly temperament. Shakespeare was compounded of too many and too large elements to have been a poet only; and "art for art's sake," wrongly interpreted, could never have found lodgment in his wide sympathies, his capacious understanding, and his versatile imagination.

If Conservatism may, in a non-party sense, claim Shakespeare as an authority in its favour, in Milton, on the other hand, I suppose Liberalism again in a non-party sense would recognise a support. At any rate, Cromwell's secretary was a keen politician, and even a passionate partisan. I have always thought the allusion made by Walter Scott to him in his *Life of Dryden* hasty and unfair. "Waller was awed into silence," he says, "by the rigour of the puritanic spirit; and even the muse of Milton was scared from him by the clamour of religious and political controversy, and only returned, like a sincere friend, to cheer the adversity of one who had neglected her during his career of worldly importance." A more recent writer seems to echo the same charge. "In 1641," he says, "Milton stepped into the lists of controversy as a prose writer, beginning the series of works which, far more than his poetry, gave him his conspicuous public standing during his lifetime, and have doubtless bereaved the world of many an immortal verse which it would otherwise have to treasure." That Milton's controversial writings gave him more conspicuous public standing in his lifetime than his poetry is indisputable, and not to be wondered at. A man's contemporaries would naturally rather have him useful than ornamental, provided he be useful on their side; and while persons whose opinions were furthered by his political writings were, as might have been expected, more interested in these than in poems from which they reaped no advantage, those people, on the other hand, to whom his political writings were obnoxious, felt themselves, as might also have been expected, but little disposed to extol, or even to read, his poetry. It may, perhaps, be taken as an absolute rule that a man of letters who takes a conspicuous interest in contemporary politics thereby debars himself to a considerable extent from literary popularity in his lifetime; a matter of little moment, however, since to every reflective mind contemporary popularity is no pledge of enduring fame, while contemporary neglect is not necessarily an omen of eternal oblivion. But it is quite another thing to affirm that men of letters who, like Milton, participate freely in the political controversies of their time "bereave the world of many an immortal verse," or to insinuate, with Scott, that they desert the Muse for "a career of worldly importance," and only remember its charms in the season of their adversity. I think any one who has read *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* will be of opinion that Milton wrote quite as much verse as was desirable, whether for our delectation or for his own fame. We see the appalling result of always writing verse and never doing anything else, in the portentous bulk bequeathed to us by even so eminent a poet as Wordsworth, of matter that his idolaters persist in asking the world to accept as a precious revelation, but which the world persists, and I cannot doubt will always persist, in regarding as verse that ought to have gone up the chimney. Matthew Arnold has, in current phrase, "boiled down" Wordsworth, in order to make him more palatable to general consumption; and he gives excellent reasons for having done so.

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"In Wordsworth's seven volumes," he says, "the pieces of high merit are mingled with a mass of pieces very inferior to them: so inferior to them, that it seems wonderful how the same poet should have produced both. Work altogether inferior, work quite uninspired, flat and dull, is produced by him with evident unconsciousness of its defects, and he presents it to us with the same faith and seriousness as his best work."

Even in the edition of Wordsworth's poetry Matthew Arnold has given us, and which contains not a tenth of what Wordsworth published, he has himself exhibited a little too much "faith and seriousness" respecting what he has laboured to save from Lethe, and the "boiling down" process will have to be gone through again by somebody else. The tenth part will have to undergo the operation applied to the whole, and be itself reduced to another one-tenth. The corn must be winnowed by a yet finer sieve; all the chaff and husk must be blown away; and what then remains will be the *fine fleur* of poetry indeed. In a word, had Wordsworth, like Milton, devoted himself, at some season of his life, to public affairs, he would doubtless have written less verse, and possibly more poetry. Had Milton abstained altogether from politics, he would possibly have written more verse, but it is improbable that he would have written more poetry. What he wrote acquired strength, and even elevation, from his temporary contact with affairs and his judicious co-operation with the active interests of the State. "As the giant Antæus," says Heine, "remained invincible in strength as long as he touched mother earth with his feet, and lost this power when Hercules lifted him into the air, so also is the poet strong and mighty as long as he does not abandon the firm ground of reality, but forfeits his power when he loses himself in the blue ether." No doubt the poet must have his head in the air, and no ether need be too high or too rarefied for his imagination to breathe; but without a strong foothold of the ground he runs the risk of too often lapsing, as Matthew Arnold affirms Wordsworth constantly lapsed, into "abstract verbiage," or of falling into intolerable puerilities.

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Nor is it just to assert that Milton neglected the Muse during his career of worldly importance. It would be as fair to say the same of Dante, between whom and Milton, in point of genius as well as in vicissitudes of life, there is a striking similarity. Dante wrote the *Vita Nuova* at a comparatively early age, just as Milton wrote *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus*, and *Lycidas* in the springtime of his life. Then came a pause, indeed a long silence, for each of them, and it was not till they had reached the meridian of intellectual life that they betook themselves each to his *magnum opus*, Dante to the *Divina Commedia*, Milton to *Paradise Lost*. Any one observant of the habit of our best English song-birds must be aware that after singing, with a rapturous lyrical carelessness, through the vernal months, they become silent during the heat of summer. Then in early autumn they sing again, with more measure, more continence, let us say with more self-criticism and fastidiousness; and though the note may not be so boisterous, it is more mellow and mature.

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No doubt Dante and Milton did not take this course, of deliberate purpose; with them, too, it was an instinct; but may we not suspect that poets would give themselves a better chance of writing works that posterity will not willingly let die, by observing a "close time," a season of summer silence between the April of the soul when sing they must, and the advent of the early autumn days, with auburn tints, meditative haze, and grave tranquil retrospects. Who shall say when the fruits of harvest-time begin to ripen? But this clearly one may affirm, that but for the summer months, when they seem almost to be stationary in colour, they would never ripen at all. We know, I think, as a fact, that Milton commenced writing *Paradise Lost* some years before the restoration of the Monarchy, but no one can tell how much earlier still it was really commenced. Milton himself could not have told. The children of the Muse are conceived long before they quicken; and even a lyric, apparently born in a moment, was often begotten in the darkness and the silence of the days gone by. Works as colossal as the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* have deep and distant foundations, and the noblest passages of human verse are the unpremeditated outpourings of men who are habitually plunged in meditation. The least serious reflection upon the subject, if coupled with any insight into the methods and operations of imaginative genius, will satisfy anybody that in the very midst of his political controversies and ecclesiastical polemics Milton was in reality already composing *Paradise Lost*. Dante never returned to Florence after he was exiled, and it was in banishment that he wrote the *Divina Commedia*. Yet the "Sasso di Dante," the stone on which he used to sit, gazing intently at the Duomo and at Giotto's Campanile, is one of the sacred sights of the profane Tuscan city, and his townsmen had already learnt to speak of him as "One who had seen Hell." What enabled him to see it so clearly was his familiarity with the ways of men and the uncelestial politics of Florence. It was through Beatrice and the passion of Love—*Amor, che il ciel governi*—that he gained access to Paradise, and a knowledge of those things of which he says:

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... che ridire
Nè sa nè può qual di lassù discende.

But the sadness of Purgatory, and the horrors of Hell, these he learned from the wrangles of Guelph and Ghibelline, of these he obtained mastery by being, in A.D. 1300, Priore of the fairest, but most mercurial of cities. We have the authority of Shakespeare, who ought to have been well informed on that subject, that the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact, and the brisk air of public policy is the best corrective for the disease of narrow intensity to which both alike are peculiarly subject.

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There would be no difficulty, I think, in showing that all the greater men of letters of the

eighteenth century were largely indebted for the literary success they attained to the vivid interest they displayed in public affairs. To mention Dryden, Swift, Pope, Addison is to conjure up before the mind chapter upon chapter of English political history. Pope says:

Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory;

and not without some reason, for, like his friend Swift, he cared more for his own career than for either Party in the State. But no one can read the valuable notes appended by Mr. Courthorpe to his edition of the great satirist, without seeing how alive Pope was to the *quidquid agunt homines* of his generation. As for Swift, he was for a time, as the writer of an admirable paper upon him in the *Quarterly Review* asserts, the political dictator of Ireland. When Gibbon betook himself to the task of writing that monumental work which, I find, many persons to-day declare to be unreadable, but which, I suspect, will be read when the most popular books of this generation are forgotten, he wisely retired to the studious quietude of Lausanne. But he narrates how the description of the tactics of Roman legions and the victories of Roman Proconsuls was rendered more facile and familiar to him by his previous experience as a Captain of Yeomanry at home, while even his brief tenure of a seat in the British Parliament enabled him to grasp with more alacrity and precision the legislative conduct of the Conscript Fathers.

In the nineteenth century which, despite its many privileges—not the least of which, perhaps, was that of being able to express a very high opinion of itself, without at the time being contradicted—enjoyed no immunity from the general laws of human nature, I think the proposition still holds good that men of letters who aspire to high distinction do well not to disdain altogether the politics of their time. I have already referred to Wordsworth, and ventured to suggest that he suffered in some degree, as a poet, from being nothing but a poet. Byron presents a marked contrast in this respect; and I am still of opinion, which I am comforted to find is shared by most persons who are men of the world, and by men of letters who are something more than men of letters, that Byron is, on the whole, the most considerable English poet since Milton. Art for Art's sake is a creed that has been embraced by too many critics of our time. Do we not find in this circumstance an explanation of their tendency to extol the quietistic and solitary poets, and, on the other hand, to depreciate the poets who deal with action and the more complex features of life? It is the business of poets to deal with the relation of the individual to himself, to the silent uniform forces of nature, and to other individuals, singly and collectively: in other words, to be dramatic or epic, as well as lyrical or idyllic. All poets of the first rank are both; yet the quietistic and purely introspective critics assign a place, and a prior place as a rule, in the front rank, to poets who are only second. I cannot think that conclusions reposing on such demonstrably unsound canons of criticism will permanently hold their ground. Byron contrived to crowd into a very short life a vast amount both of poetry and of public activity; acting upon his own recorded opinion that a man was sent into the world to do something more than to write poetry. A writer who, I fancy, belongs to the school, now happily becoming obsolete, whose verdict was that Byron's poetry, though good enough for Scott, Shelley, and Goethe, is only "the apotheosis of common-place," has recently expressed the opinion that "Byron would not have gone to Greece if he had not become tired of the Contessa Guiccioli." As far as she is concerned, I can only say, as one who knew her, and has many letters written by her on the subject of Byron, that if at any time she ever became indifferent to him, her affection for him experienced a marvellous revival. As for the suggestion that he went to Greece because he was tired of his companion, it surely was not necessary for a man to go to Greece to get rid of a woman of whom he was tired, and certainly Byron was not the man to consider the "world well lost" for a woman. But the letters he wrote to his "companion" from Greece attest that his affection for her was still not slight. In any case there is no necessity to cast about one for any reason to explain Byron's going to Greece, beyond the exceedingly simple one that he was a man of action as well as a poet. Had he lived, instead of dying, for Greece, I cannot doubt that English poetry would have reaped a yet more glorious harvest from him, thanks to his incidental experiences as a soldier and a statesman.

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The theme is one that easily lends itself to illustration; but enough perhaps has been said to justify the conclusion that it is for the best and highest interests of literature that those who love it before all other things, and cherish it beyond all other considerations, should nevertheless take a large and liberal view of what constitutes life, and should include in the excursions of their experience and in the survey of their contemplation what are called politics, or the business and interests of the State. I do not propose that they should be vestrymen, though I cannot forget that Shakespeare did not disdain to concern himself in the local business of Stratford-upon-Avon. For men of letters to be willing to interest themselves in politics, politics generally, must be interesting. The issues raised must be issues of moment and dignity, issues affecting the greatness of an Empire, the stability of a State, or the general welfare of humanity. In a country like our own, where Party Government prevails, it is not easy, indeed it is impossible, for a man of letters to interest himself in politics without inclining, through sympathy and conviction, to one Party in the State rather than to the other; and there are occasions, no doubt, when Party issues are synonymous with the greatness of the Empire, the stability of the State, and the welfare of mankind. But a wise man of letters will do well to stand more or less aloof from all smaller issues, and to avoid, as degrading to the character and lowering to the imagination, Party wrangles that are mere Party wrangles and nothing more.

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There have been seasons in the history of the human race, melancholy seasons for the human mind, the "evil days" spoken of by Milton, when men of letters could not, with any self-respect, mix in politics. How much more highly we should think of Seneca if that literary Stoic had not been a minister of Nero. There was no room for a self-respecting man of letters in French politics during the reign of Napoleon I., none during the earlier years of the reign of Napoleon III., unless he happened to be a sincere admirer of a corrupt and brilliant despotism. There are despotisms that are corrupt, or what is equally bad, vulgar and servile, without being brilliant; and I am not alone in entertaining the fear lest unadulterated Democracy—that is to say, the passions, interests, and power of a homogeneous majority, acting without any regard to the passions and interests that exist outside of it, and purged of all respect for intellect that does not provide it with specious reasons and feed it with constant adulation—should inflict upon us a despotism under which, again, there will be no room in the domain of politics for men of letters who respect themselves. It is not the business of a man of letters to take his politics either from a Monarch or a Mob, or to push his fortunes—slightly to alter a celebrated phrase—by those services which demagogues render to crowds. If the love and pursuit of literature do not make a man more independent in character, more disinterested in his reasonings, more elevated in his views, they will not have done for him what I should have expected from them. That politicians pure and simple are becoming less imbued with the literary spirit is, I think, certain, and it is to be regretted, because polite Politics are almost as much to be desired as polite Literature, and should be little less imbued with the Horatian sentiment, *Emollit mores, nec sinit esse ferus*. Many years ago I heard a prominent politician in the House of Commons reproach Disraeli, then Leader of the House, with servility to the Crown, for no other reason that I could see than that, in explaining certain communications that had passed between the Queen and the Prime Minister, he had made use of the customary mode of speaking of the Sovereign. The imperturbability of Disraeli in debate under the strongest provocation was notoriously one of the secrets of his authority and influence. But it was plain on that occasion, when he rose to reply, that he had been irritated by the charge. But how did he rebut it? "The right honourable gentleman," he said, "has been pleased to accuse me of servility to the Crown. Well, Sir, I appeal to gentlemen on both sides of the House, for they *are* gentlemen on both sides of the House——" There was a sudden outburst of cheering. He did not finish the sentence, but turned away to another matter. Could there have been a more crushing yet a more parliamentary and well-bred rebuke? Mr. Gladstone did not possess the same quiet power of reproof. But his courtesy was uniformly faultless, even when he most indulged in indignant invective. It is told of Guizot, that, when President of the Council in France, on being interrupted by his opponents with unseemly clamour, he observed, "I do not think, gentlemen, the solution of the controversy will be assisted by shouting; and such clamour, however loud, will never reach the height of my disdain." One does not ask politicians to disarm; but they must use the rapier, not the tomahawk; and it is Literature, and Literature only, that can adequately teach them how to employ with ample effect the seemingly weapons of debate. If politicians and even Monarchs are wise, they will respect Literature. After all, Literature has always the last word. "A hundred years hence," said a French poet to a rather saucy beauty, "you will be just as beautiful as I choose to say you were"; and the verses in which he said this have survived. Politicians whom Literature ignores are in the same position. If Literature ignores them they will be forgotten. If Literature condemns them they will stand condemned. But Literature, in turn, should be fair-minded and sincere, not disingenuous, not a partisan. It wields, in the long run, enormous power, and therefore has corresponding responsibilities. If the public taste in any direction, in politics, in letters, or any of the other Arts grows debased, and current critical opinion follows the debasement, Literature can only stand apart, or loftily reprehend them. Of all influences, Literature is the most patient, the most persistent, and the most enduring. Unfairness cannot long injure, malevolence cannot permanently damage or depreciate it; for, as I have said, Literature, lofty self-respecting Literature, always has the last word, the final hearing, political partisanship having no power over the final estimation in which it is held. At the beginning of the nineteenth century current Tory criticism strove to belittle men of letters who happened to be Liberals; and, since Toryism was then in the ascendant, it for a time, but only for a time, partially succeeded. In our day, and for some few years past, the influence of Liberalism has been visibly uppermost in current criticism, which has in turn done scant justice to men of letters suspected of holding different views. To the latter, as to the great Liberal poets and other men of letters in the earlier days of the nineteenth century, such patent partisanship can do no lasting injury. Perhaps men of letters might themselves raise the standard of dispassionate criticism were they always fair to each other, and not, as I fear sometimes happens, be ungenerous to contemporaries, who for one reason or another are not much favoured by them. There is a curious passage in the 11th Canto of the *Purgatorio* of the *Divina Commedia*, where Dante recognises a certain Oderesi, and compliments him on the talent he showed when on earth as an illuminator or miniature painter. Oderesi replies that Franco Bolognese was his superior in that art, but that from jealousy he had failed to allow as much, and adds

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Di tal superbia qui si paga il fio:

meaning thereby that he was now undergoing punishment for his unworthy jealousy on earth.

Even those to whom an Inferno or Purgatorio is a sheer fiction may be reminded that Time's final court of appeal, when it readjusts balances falsely weighted in days gone by, will not

fail to stigmatise those who once belittled what, had they been more candid, they would have better appreciated.

A CONVERSATION WITH SHAKESPEARE IN THE ELYSIAN FIELDS

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I am aware that, in these days, when realism is all the rage and true imagination at a discount, people will ask how, not being either an Æneas or a Dante, I came to be admitted to an actual sight of the Elysian Fields, and will not be fobbed off by any fanciful explanation such as used to satisfy the more unsophisticated reader of former times. I therefore hasten to satisfy their exacting curiosity by saying that I happen to have done a good turn of late to the Pagan gods—not forgetting the goddesses, whom one should always have on one’s side, since they hold the keys of the position equally on earth, in the air, and underground—and they made their acknowledgments to me by letting me know that I might have my choice of an interview with any one, but only one, of the personages among those who are now disporting themselves in the other world. At first, I was rather tempted to name Eve, in order that I might get an intelligible account from the most trustworthy source of the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Good and Evil. But I thought she perhaps would know as little about them as myself; so I thought I would ask for an interview, with either Helen of Troy or with Cleopatra, when it suddenly struck me that I should probably find both one and the other not very unlike women I had already come across here in this upper world. So, anxious to know whether or not there ever was a real flesh-and-blood Shakespeare, and explaining that, if there was not, I had not the smallest desire to have a talk with my Lord Verulam, I said, “Let me have a colloquy with Shakespeare, the wisest, sweetest, wittiest, largest-hearted, biggest-brained of human beings”; and, almost before I had finished the sentence, I found myself in the Elysian Fields.

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At first, I forgot what I was there for at all, in my amazement at the place itself. Though I am a tolerably close observer of external Nature, I could not for the life of me surmise what season of the year I was in, and finally perceived that I was in all the four seasons at one and the same time. Primroses and bluebells were to be seen side by side with roses and irises, with meadowsweet and traveller’s joy, grass ready for the scythe not far from swaying wheat and heavily-burred hop-garden; while, well within view, I could see slopes of virgin snow, and folks making ready to go tobogganing on them. It was just the same with bird-life. Stormcock, nightingale, cuckoo, corncrake, woodpecker, robin redbreast, were all singing together, yet there was no discord in the concert.

“You want to see me, I am told,” I heard some one say behind me, and, turning, I at once perceived that it was Shakespeare, not from the striking resemblance to any of the portraits or busts, Droeshout, Chandos, Stratford-on-Avon, or other effigy, but by his seeming to be compounded of them all, with something superadded that I could recall in none of them. Similarly, he did not seem to be of any particular age, either of youth, early manhood, middle life, or yet elderly, but compounded of all the years, at once young and engaging, in the grand climacteric, and withal full of mellow wisdom. His eye glowed with fine frenzy, withal was tender and melting as that of a boy-lover. I could not fail to observe this extraordinary combination of ages and qualities; yet they did not strike me as in any way incongruous, any more than I had found incongruity in all the seasons being contemporaneous, and blossom and fruit subsisting together. I had expected to be rather embarrassed and somewhat overawed on first coming across this king of men; but his manner was so simple, so frank and friendly, that he put me at my ease at once, and I ventured to inquire if, in the Elysian Fields, they had any knowledge of what was going on in the world they had once inhabited.

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“Ample knowledge,” he replied, “though we are not troubled with newspapers, nor yet tormented by telegrams or telephones, but confine our regard to what interests us.”

“Have you happened to notice,” I asked, “that *A Winter’s Tale* has recently been produced at His Majesty’s Theatre?”

“Yes, and all the more because that indefatigable manager and all-embracing actor, Mr. Tree, has not taken a part in it. He would have rendered Autolycus very suitably.”

“Perhaps,” I went on, since I now felt on a footing of the most friendly familiarity with one I had hitherto always thought of at a respectful distance, “perhaps you have observed some of the criticisms on the play.”

“To tell the truth,” he replied, “I have not. There were few such things in my time, save by the audience; and my recollection of what few there were does not dispose me to read fresh ones. But, if they have said anything instructive or amusing, I shall be most happy to hear it.”

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"I am afraid," I said, "they are more amusing than instructive."

"Then let me have them by all means. The only thing one is sometimes tempted to find fault with in the Elysian Fields is that its denizens are a trifle too serious for me; being just as much inclined as ever to say, when I find myself in the company of my fellow-creatures, 'With mirth and laughter let me play the fool.'"

Thus encouraged, I said that one critic had pronounced the play to be dull as drama, and inferior as poetry; Autolycus to be a bore, yet by no means the only tiresome feature in the play; the plot to be a succession of gaps and puerilities; and that another observed what a pity it was you had made Leontes a lunatic, a raving maniac, and a nuisance. As I recounted these opinions, I could see no sign of annoyance on the face of the playwright, but only a philosophic smile illumining his tranquil features.

"I seem," he said, "to have heard that some time ago some one commented on the meanness of the fable and the extravagant conduct of it, and declared that the comedy caused no mirth, and the serious portion no concernment. I daresay there is truth in the first part of the criticism, but, in regard to the second, I seem to remember that, at the Globe, there was a good deal of mirth at the lighter scenes, and no small attention at the grave ones. But perhaps audiences in my day were different from audiences in yours. I am by no means sure that I wrote the whole of the play; indeed I am pretty certain I did not. My chief share in it was the love-scene between Florizel and Perdita."

"Which I have always thought very beautiful, and the very opposite of 'inferior as poetry.'"

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"Very good of you to say so; for I much enjoyed writing it. For the rest, I suspect that a change has come over audiences, and still more over those people whom you call critics. From what I have heard, they appear not to confine themselves to appraising what is offered them, but want authors to offer them something quite different, which is scarcely reasonable. Moreover, they impute to an author motives he did not entertain, and ends he did not have in view. For instance, I am supposed by them to have been a rather successful delineator of character; overlooking the fact that I over and over again cast character to the winds, in favour of the situation, to which one surrendered oneself only too willingly, because in doing so one was enabled to indulge one's humour and temperament more freely and fully."

"Am I right," I asked, "in thinking that your humour and temperament lay chiefly in a keen enjoyment of rural nature, the delineation of love between men and women, and philosophic reflections on the various passions of human beings?"

"You put it rather flatteringly," he said. "But I will not deny that what you say concerning one's disposition is true. The external world is so beautiful, loving and being loved are so delightful, and human beings are so interesting, that it is a writer's own defect if he does not make them appear beautiful, delightful, and interesting to others, no matter in what form he presents them. If he has what you call the way with him, he will make you accept as true almost any story, so long as he is telling it, no matter what you may think of it afterwards. As a famous poet and critic said long ago, *Incredulus odi*. Men naturally turn away from what seems incredible. But what seems somewhat incredible when only read, appears credible enough when acted, if acted well; and Ellen Terry was so attractive and winning in her treatment of Polixenes, that the conjugal jealousy of Leontes becomes, at least, almost intelligible."

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"That was exactly what I myself felt the other day, when I went to see the performance," I said. "But I observe you quote Horace, though many persons have maintained that you had little Latin, if any."

"Rather a mistake that, arising, I imagine, from their not knowing what Grammar Schools were like in my time, when we were taught something more than the rudiments of Latin, with the assistance of prompt corporal chastisement if we showed a disinclination to master them. Nowadays, I see, the birch, the ferule, and the cane, have fallen into disfavour, with the result that many English boys, at schools supposed to be very superior in the education they provide, refuse to learn anything except cricket and rowing; two excellent accomplishments, but not quite covering the whole ground of a liberal education."

"May I inquire," I said, "if you, among others, had a liberal application of the cane?"

"My fair share," he said, "but not for refusing to learn, since I enjoyed being taught, and, still more, teaching myself; and a very little learning, though some people have said it is a dangerous thing, goes a long way if you only know how to turn it to account. My thrashings, which were richly deserved, were given for being behindhand of a morning because I had loitered with some rustic sight or sound that arrested me, and suchlike irregularities of conduct. But what was taught us was taught thoroughly, and I have sometimes thought that men deemed poets may be taught and learn too much, as, for instance, my good friend Ben Jonson, who has been justly compared to a heavy galleon, though a very well trimmed and steered one, but which perhaps would sometimes have benefited by a portion of its dead weight being cast overboard. Still he was a rare poet all the same."

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"Who is that, may I ask, with the pointed beard, that has just been joking with a rubicund friar whom I no longer see, and then more gravely with a seemingly and tender-looking young

woman, also vanished 'into air, into thin air,' while he now stoops to gather daisies from the grass? I seem to know his face."

"That is a delightful fellow, perhaps of all my companions here the most congenial; the morning star of English song, Geoffrey Chaucer. *He* could, and did, delineate character consistently if you like. I think it is his cheerful, kindly sense of humour that recommends him so strongly to me. But a nearer contemporary of mine in the other world whom you see there, wearing an aspect of stately distinction, essentially what English folk call a perfect gentleman, likewise enters much into the study of my imagination. See! Now he turns his face towards you."

"Surely it is Edmund Spenser, is it not?"

"Yes, the Poet's poet. His verse is at once so natural and so noble, as to be irresistible. I often repeat to myself two exquisitely musical and briefly descriptive lines of his:

A little lowly Hermitage it was,
Down in a dale, hard by a forest side.

No amount of elaboration and detail would enable one to see the Hermitage better, or indeed, as well; and the lyrical freedom of the ostensibly iambic verse gives to it an irresistible charm."

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"And, over and over again, if I may say so, gives to the blank verse of your dramas the same magical quality that a more stately treatment of it can never confer. But where is Milton?"

"One sees him but seldom," he replied; "and when Chaucer and I do catch sight of him, we behave rather like truant schoolboys, and put on a grave face, especially if he finds us in one of our lighter moods. We are all rather in awe of him, for he never stoops to playfulness; and Chaucer, who is rather irreverent sometimes, says he is so uniformly sublime as now and then to be ridiculous. But, in our hearts, we greatly revere him. To tell the truth, I think he prefers Wordsworth's company to ours; and we find more congenial society from time to time in—look! that handsome youth, who carries his head with unconscious pride, and even here seems half-discontented. The best is never good enough for him, and he cannot be deluded even by his own illusions, poor fellow!"

"It's Byron," I said, "is it not?"

"Yes, there is no mistaking him; part man, part god, part devil. I believe there was some doubt about admitting him here, lest he should rouse even the Elysian Fields to mutiny, and a question whether he should not have an enclosure all to himself. But he is a man of the world, and knows how to behave himself when he chooses; and, when one of his misanthropic moods comes over him, he wanders about scowling and muttering like a gathering thunderstorm. I am told he breaks bounds sometimes to go in search of Sappho. There would be a pair of them, would there not? What an explosive power there was in him! for in the mind, as in your melanite, force packs small."

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"And Shelley? Where is Shelley?"

"Where the bee sucks, I suspect; for he is the very Ariel of our company; ever, even here, in search of the unattainable! But he is a great favourite with all of us, he is so lovable."

"And the poet who has delighted my own generation," I inquired. "Surely he is among you."

"Not yet," he replied; "though I have not the least doubt he will be, in due course. No one is admitted here until he has been dead for fifty years; Time, the door-keeper and guardian of Eternity, being more deliberate than the janitors of Westminster Abbey, who, you must allow, make some rather ludicrous blunders in admitting, on the very morrow of their decease, at the importunity of friends and associates, persons for whom, half a century later, no one will dream of claiming any special posthumous distinction."

"I fear that is so," I confessed. "We have been rather fussy and feverish of late, and attribute to notoriety an enduring power it does not possess."

"Just so. Notoriety is one thing, Fame quite another. Will not the result be that men who may without presumption entertain a humble hope that, as our lofty friend Milton puts it, Posterity will not willingly let die all that they may have done or written, will feel a distaste for these precipitate distinctions, and even take precautions against them. We notice that something of the same kind is taking place among you in regard to what you call titular honours, since they have become so common, and are lavished on such undistinguished persons, as to be no longer valued by the truly distinguished."

"That is so," I said; "but it is inevitable in these days, and probably useful to the State, satisfying a number of small ambitions."

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"I understand," he replied; and I thought to myself, of course he does, he who understood everything. "In these days it is more important to satisfy the many," he went on, "than to content the few, and persons of real distinction must always be few; and, after all, if these are wise as well as distinguished, they must be content with anything that ministers to the welfare of the community at large."

It was so interesting to me to hear this great dramatist and supreme poet talking wisdom in this familiar manner, like any ordinary being, that I made the most of my opportunity, and asked him if he thought what he had just said served to explain the magnificent manner in which his plays are presented to modern audiences, and if he approved of such presentation.

"I should approve," he replied, "if there were no danger of the mounting of the piece diverting the attention of the audience from the play itself, and if it did not appear necessary to modern stage-managers to cut out whatever does not easily lend itself to spectacular devices. I quite understand their motive; for, having been in my time not only an actor, but part proprietor, and part stage-manager of theatres, I do not forget that they must take into consideration the material results of their enterprise. But my colleagues and I contrived to make a fair livelihood out of our theatres without any large outlay on the scenery or the dresses. Apparently, your modern audiences would yawn at, and not understand, speeches that not only the courtiers of Elizabeth, but the citizens of Blackfriars and the Chepe, listened to with rapt and straining ears. We observe that you pique yourselves upon what you call the progress you have made during the last three hundred years, and some of us are rather amused at the self-complacent claim; and, though you travel much faster, live much more luxuriously, and blow each other to pieces more successfully than we did, it may be doubted if men's minds have made much advance, or if their intellectual qualities are not, notwithstanding the increase of what you deem education, poorer and more stunted than when the bulk of the nation read less, but reflected more."

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"In one respect," I ventured to say, "you can hardly withhold your sympathy from the claim of our having made progress. We no longer regard actors as vagabonds."

"I am not quite so sure of that," he said, with a significant smile. "Myself an actor as well as an author, my utterances in the second capacity respecting the former are not particularly flattering; and the fances you have of late made over actors and actresses, as over millionaires and transatlantic heiresses, is perhaps evidence less of admiration than of self-interest, and an appetite for diversion."

"But," I observed, "an actor was recently buried, with the customary honours, in Westminster Abbey."

"But did everybody approve of it? Milton took care to inform me that many did not; but my withers remained unwrung, and I playfully replied that I was rather disposed to think that special form of posthumous acknowledgment might not unsuitably be reserved for actors and politicians—the author of *Paradise Lost* was, every now and then, an active politician, was he not?—since the two have much in common, both appealing to their audiences by voice, intonation, gesticulation, and pursuit of popularity, and enjoying a wide but ephemeral notoriety."

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I remembered the passage in *Henry the Sixth* where he says that he hates "the loud applause and *aves* vehement" of the many, and of his little esteem for those who "affect" such, and I followed up that silent recollection by saying:

"And, after all, Milton, Pope, Byron, Wordsworth, Keats, lie far away from that edifice; also, I might add, one greater than any of them—yourself."

"Dear old Stratford-on-Avon!" he said, as though he were musing rather than addressing himself to me. "I am well content to be sepulchred there. How I loved it! How I love it still! And how much I owed to it! My works, such as they are, have in your ingenious age been attributed to one much more nobly born, more highly educated, more deeply read, more erudite, than I. They who started, and those who have accepted, that theory, little understand that no such man could have written them. Whatever may be their merit or demerit, their author could only be one who, born in a modest condition, began by having the closest touch with frank unaffected human nature, and for whom life and society expanded by degrees, until, though still preferring the life removed, he could tell sad stories of the death of kings, find books in the running brooks, and good in everything."

As he slowly uttered these familiar majestic words, he faded from my sight; and all that was left was an enduring recollection of that privileged interview.

Footnotes:

[1] In estimating Byron, people too often forget that the same poet wrote *Manfred* and *Beppo*, *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*. It is the variety, in other words the extent, of Byron's genius, that constitutes his greatness.

[2] The renderings into English verse from Dante are by the author of the paper.

Transcriber's Notes:

Other than the one correction noted by hover information, inconsistencies in spelling and hyphenation have been retained from the original.

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