

Hearts of Controversy eBook

Hearts of Controversy by Alice Meynell

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Contents

Hearts of Controversy eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	6
Page 3.....	7
Page 4.....	8
Page 5.....	9
Page 6.....	11
Page 7.....	12
Page 8.....	14
Page 9.....	15
Page 10.....	16
Page 11.....	18
Page 12.....	19
Page 13.....	20
Page 14.....	21
Page 15.....	22
Page 16.....	23
Page 17.....	24
Page 18.....	25
Page 19.....	26
Page 20.....	27
Page 21.....	28
Page 22.....	29



Page 23..... 30
Page 24..... 32
Page 25..... 33
Page 26..... 34
Page 27..... 36
Page 28..... 38
Page 29..... 39
Page 30..... 40
Page 31..... 41
Page 32..... 42
Page 33..... 43
Page 34..... 45
Page 35..... 46
Page 36..... 47
Page 37..... 49
Page 38..... 50
Page 39..... 51
Page 40..... 53
Page 41..... 55

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
SOME THOUGHTS OF A READER OF TENNYSON		1
DICKENS AS A MAN OF LETTERS		8
SWINBURNE'S LYRICAL POETRY		19
CHARLOTTE AND EMILY BRONTE		28
CHARMIAN		36
THE CENTURY OF MODERATION		38



Page 1

SOME THOUGHTS OF A READER OF TENNYSON

Fifty years after Tennyson's birth he was saluted a great poet by that unanimous acclamation which includes mere clamour. Fifty further years, and his centenary was marked by a new detraction. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish the obscure but not unmajestic law of change from the sorry custom of reaction. Change hastes not and rests not, reaction beats to and fro, flickering about the moving mind of the world. Reaction—the paltry precipitancy of the multitude—rather than the novelty of change, has brought about a ferment and corruption of opinion on Tennyson's poetry. It may be said that opinion is the same now as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century—the same, but turned. All that was not worth having of admiration then has soured into detraction now. It is of no more significance, acrid, than it was, sweet. What the herding of opinion gave yesterday it is able to take away to-day, that and no more.

But besides the common favour-disfavour of the day, there is the tendency of educated opinion, once disposed to accept the whole of Tennyson's poetry as though he could not be "parted from himself," and now disposed to reject the whole, on the same plea. But if ever there was a poet who needed to be thus "parted"—the word is his own—it is he who wrote both narrowly for his time and liberally for all time, and who—this is the more important character of his poetry—had both a style and a manner: a masterly style, a magical style, a too dainty manner, nearly a trick; a noble landscape and in it figures something ready-made. He is a subject for our alternatives of feeling, nay, our conflicts, as is hardly another poet. We may deeply admire and wonder, and, in another line or hemistich, grow indifferent or slightly averse. He sheds the luminous suns of dreams upon men & women who would do well with footlights; waters their way with rushing streams of Paradise and cataracts from visionary hills; laps them in divine darkness; leads them into those touching landscapes, "the lovely that are not beloved;" long grey fields, cool sombre summers, and meadows thronged with unnoticeable flowers; speeds his carpet knight—or is that hardly a just name for one whose sword "smites" so well?—upon a carpet of authentic wild flowers; pushes his rovers, in costume, from off blossoming shores, on the keels of old romance. The style and the manner, I have said, run side by side. If we may take one poet's too violent phrase, and consider poets to be "damned to poetry," why, then, Tennyson is condemned by a couple of sentences, "to run concurrently." We have the style and the manner locked together at times in a single stanza, locked and yet not mingled. There should be no danger for the more judicious reader lest impatience at the peculiar Tennyson trick should involve the great Tennyson style in a sweep of protest.



Page 2

Yet the danger has in fact proved real within the present and recent years, and seems about to threaten still more among the less judicious. But it will not long prevail. The vigorous little nation of lovers of poetry, alive one by one within the vague multitude of the nation of England, cannot remain finally insensible to what is at once majestic and magical in Tennyson. For those are not qualities they neglect in their other masters. How, valuing singleness of heart in the sixteenth century, splendour in the seventeenth, composure in the eighteenth; how, with a spiritual ear for the note—commonly called Celtic, albeit it is the most English thing in the world—the wild wood note of the remoter song; how, with the educated sense of style, the liberal sense of ease; how, in a word, fostering Letters and loving Nature, shall that choice nation within England long disregard these virtues in the nineteenth-century master? How disregard him, for more than the few years of reaction, for the insignificant reasons of his bygone taste, his insipid courtliness, his prettiness, or what not? It is no dishonour to Tennyson, for it is a dishonour to our education, to disparage a poet who wrote but the two—had he written no more of their kind—lines of “The Passing of Arthur,” of which, before I quote them, I will permit myself the personal remembrance of a great contemporary author’s opinion. Mr. Meredith, speaking to me of the high-water mark of English style in poetry and prose, cited those lines as topmost in poetry:-

On one side lay the ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

Here is no taint of manner, no pretty posture or habit, but the simplicity of poetry and the simplicity of Nature, something on the yonder side of imagery. It is to be noted that this noble passage is from Tennyson’s generally weakest kind of work—blank verse; and should thus be a sign that the laxity of so many parts of the “Idylls” and other blank verse poems was a quite unnecessary fault. Lax this form of poetry undoubtedly is with Tennyson. His blank verse is often too easy; it cannot be said to fly, for the paradoxical reason that it has no weight; it slips by, without halting or tripping indeed, but also without the friction of the movement of vitality. This quality, which is so near to a fault, this quality of ease, has come to be disregarded in our day. That Horace Walpole overpraised this virtue is not good reason that we should hold it for a vice. Yet we do more than undervalue it; and several of our authors, in prose and poetry, seem to find much merit in the manifest difficulty; they will not have a key to turn, though closely and tightly, in oiled wards; let the reluctant iron catch and grind, or they would even prefer to pick you the lock.



Page 3

But though we may think it time that the quality once over-prized should be restored to a more proportionate honour, our great poet Tennyson shows us that of all merits ease is, unexpectedly enough, the most dangerous. It is not only, with him, that the wards are oiled, it is also that the key turns loosely. This is true of much of the beautiful "Idylls," but not of their best passages, nor of such magnificent heroic verse as that of the close of "A Vision of Sin," or of "Lucretius." As to the question of ease, we cannot have a better maxim than Coventry Patmore's saying that poetry "should confess, but not suffer from, its difficulties." And we could hardly find a more curious example of the present love of verse that not only confesses but brags of difficulties, and not only suffers from them but cries out under the suffering, and shows us the grimace of the pain of it, than I have lighted upon in the critical article of a recent quarterly. Reviewing the book of a "poet" who manifestly has an insuperable difficulty in hacking his work into ten-syllable blocks, and keeping at the same time any show of respect for the national grammar, the critic gravely invites his reader to "note" the phrase "neath cliffs" (apparently for "beneath the cliffs") as "characteristic." Shall the reader indeed "note" such a matter? Truly he has other things to do. This is by the way. Tennyson is always an artist, and the finish of his work is one of the principal notes of his versification. How this finish comports with the excessive ease of his prosody remains his own peculiar secret. Ease, in him, does not mean that he has any unhandsome slovenly ways. On the contrary, he resembles rather the warrior with the pouncet box. It is the man of "neath cliffs" who will not be at the trouble of making a place for so much as a definite article. Tennyson certainly *worked*, and the exceeding ease of his blank verse comes perhaps of this little paradox—that he makes somewhat too much show of the hiding of his art.

In the first place the poet with the great welcome style and the little unwelcome manner, Tennyson is, in the second place, the modern poet who withstood France. (That is, of course, modern France—France since the Renaissance. From medieval Provence there is not an English poet who does not own inheritance.) It was some time about the date of the Restoration that modern France began to be modish in England. A ruffle at the Court of Charles, a couplet in the ear of Pope, a *tour de phrase* from *Mme. de Sevigne* much to the taste of Walpole, later the good example of French painting—rich interest paid for the loan of our Constable's initiative—later still a scattering of French taste, French critical business, over all the shallow places of our literature—these have all been phases of a national vanity of ours, an eager and anxious fluttering or jostling to be foremost and French. Matthew Arnold's essay

Page 4

on criticism fostered this anxiety, and yet I find in this work of his a lack of easy French knowledge, such as his misunderstanding of the word *brutalite*, which means no more, or little more, than roughness. Matthew Arnold, by the way, knew so little of the French character as to be altogether ignorant of French provincialism, French practical sense, and French “convenience.” “Convenience” is his dearest word of contempt, “practical sense” his next dearest, and he throws them a score of times in the teeth of the English. Strange is the irony of the truth. For he bestows those withering words on the nation that has the fifty religions, and attributes “ideas”—as the antithesis of “convenience” and “practical sense”—to the nation that has the fifty sauces. And not for a moment does he suspect himself of this blunder, so manifest as to be disconcerting to his reader. One seems to hear an incurably English accent in all this, which indeed is reported, by his acquaintance, of Matthew Arnold’s actual speaking of French. It is certain that he has not the interest of familiarity with the language, but only the interest of strangeness. Now, while we meet the effect of the French coat in our seventeenth century, of the French light verse in our earlier eighteenth century, and of French philosophy in our later, of the French revolution in our Wordsworth, of the French painting in our nineteenth-century studios, of French fiction—and the dregs are still running—in our libraries, of French poetry in our Swinburne, of French criticism in our Arnold, Tennyson shows the effect of nothing French whatever. Not the Elizabethans, not Shakespeare, not Jeremy Taylor, not Milton, not Shelley were (in their art, not in their matter) more insular in their time. France, by the way, has more than appreciated the homage of Tennyson’s contemporaries; Victor Hugo avers, in *Les Misérables*, that our people imitate his people in all things, and in particular he rouses in us a delighted laughter of surprise by asserting that the London street-boy imitates the Parisian street-boy. There is, in fact, something of a street-boy in some of our late more literary mimicries.

We are apt to judge a poet too exclusively by his imagery. Tennyson is hardly a great master of imagery. He has more imagination than imagery. He sees the thing, with so luminous a mind’s eye, that it is sufficient to him; he needs not to see it more beautifully by a similitude. “A clear-walled city” is enough; “meadows” are enough—indeed Tennyson reigns for ever over all meadows; “the happy birds that change their sky”; “Bright Phosphor, fresher for the night”; “Twilight and evening bell”; “the stillness of the central sea”; “that friend of mine who lives in God”; “the solitary morning”; “Four grey walls and four grey towers”; “Watched by weeping queens”; these are enough, illustrious, and needing not illustration.



Page 5

If we do not see Tennyson to be the lonely, the first, the *one* that he is, this is because of the throng of his following, though a number that are of that throng hardly know, or else would deny, their flocking. But he added to our literature not only in the way of cumulation, but by the advent of his single genius. He is one of the few fountain-head poets of the world. The new landscape which was his—the lovely unbeloved—is, it need hardly be said, the matter of his poetry and not its inspiration. It may have seemed to some readers that it is the novelty, in poetry, of this homely unscenic scenery—this Lincolnshire quality—that accounts for Tennyson’s freshness of vision. But it is not so. Tennyson is fresh also in scenic scenery; he is fresh with the things that others have outworn; mountains, desert islands, castles, elves, what you will that is conventional. Where are there more divinely poetic lines than those, which will never be wearied with quotation, beginning, “A splendour falls”? What castle walls have stood in such a light of old romance, where in all poetry is there a sound wilder than that of those faint “horns of elfland”? Here is the remoteness, the beyond, the light delirium, not of disease but of more rapturous and delicate health, the closer secret of poetry. This most English of modern poets has been taunted with his mere gardens. He loved, indeed, the “lazy lilies,” of the exquisite garden of “The Gardener’s Daughter,” but he betook his ecstatic English spirit also far afield and overseas; to the winter places of his familiar nightingale:-

When first the liquid note beloved of men
Comes flying over many a windy wave;

to the lotus-eaters’ shore; to the outland landscapes of “The Palace of Art”—the “clear-walled city by the sea,” the “pillared town,” the “full-fed river”; to the “pencilled valleys” of Monte Rosa; to the “vale in Ida”; to that tremendous upland in the “Vision of Sin”:-

At last I heard a voice upon the slope
Cry to the summit, Is there any hope?
To which an answer pealed from that high land,
But in a tongue no man could understand.

The Cleopatra of “The Dream of Fair Women” is but a ready-made Cleopatra, but when in the shades of her forest she remembers the sun of the world, she leaves the page of Tennyson’s poorest manner and becomes one with Shakespeare’s queen:-

We drank the Libyan sun to sleep.

Nay, there is never a passage of manner but a great passage of style rebukes our dislike and recalls our heart again. The dramas, less than the lyrics, and even less than the “Idylls,” are matter for the true Tennysonian. Their action is, at its liveliest rather vivacious than vital, and the sentiment, whether in “Becket” or in “Harold,” is not only modern, it is fixed within Tennyson’s own peculiar score or so of years. But that he might have answered, in drama, to a stronger stimulus, a sharper spur, than his time

administered, may be guessed from a few passages of "Queen Mary," and from the dramatic terror of the arrow in "Harold." The line has appeared in prophetic fragments in earlier scenes, and at the moment of doom it is the outcry of unquestionable tragedy:-

Page 6

Sanguelac—Sanguelac—the arrow—the arrow!—Away!

Tennyson is also an eminently all-intelligible poet. Those whom he puzzles or confounds must be a flock with an incalculable liability to go wide of any road—“down all manner of streets,” as the desperate drover cries in the anecdote. But what are streets, however various, to the ways of error that a great flock will take in open country—minutely, individually wrong, making mistakes upon hardly perceptible occasions, or none—“minute fortuitous variations in any possible direction,” as used to be said in exposition of the Darwinian theory? A vast outlying public, like that of Tennyson, may make you as many blunders as it has heads; but the accurate clear poet proved his meaning to all accurate perceptions. Where he hesitates, his is the sincere pause of process and uncertainty. It has been said that Tennyson, midway between the student of material science and the mystic, wrote and thought according to an age that wavered, with him, between the two minds, and that men have now taken one way or the other. Is this indeed true, and are men so divided and so sure? Or have they not rather already turned, in numbers, back to the parting, or meeting, of eternal roads? The religious question that arises upon experience of death has never been asked with more sincerity and attention than by him. If “In Memoriam” represents the mind of yesterday it represents no less the mind of to-morrow. It is true that pessimism and insurrection in their ignobler forms—nay, in the ignoblest form of a fashion—have, or had but yesterday, the control of the popular pen. Trivial pessimism or trivial optimism, it matters little which prevails. For those who follow the one habit to-day would have followed the other in a past generation. Fleeting as they are, it cannot be within their competence to neglect or reject the philosophy of “In Memoriam.” To the dainty stanzas of that poem, it is true, no great struggle of reasoning was to be committed, nor would any such dispute be judiciously entrusted to the rhymes of a song of sorrow. Tennyson here proposes, rather than closes with, the ultimate question of our destiny. The conflict, for which he proves himself strong enough, is in that magnificent poem of a thinker, “Lucretius.” But so far as “In Memoriam” attempts, weighs, falters, and confides, it is true to the experience of human anguish and intellect.

I say intellect advisedly. Not for him such blunders of thought as Coleridge’s in “The Ancient Mariner” or Wordsworth’s in “Hartleap Well.” Coleridge names the sun, moon, and stars as when, in a dream, the sleeping imagination is threatened with some significant illness. We see them in his great poem as apparitions. Coleridge’s senses are infinitely and transcendently spiritual. But a candid reader must be permitted to think the mere story silly. The wedding-guest might rise the morrow morn a sadder but he assuredly did not rise a wiser man.

Page 7

As for Wordsworth, the most beautiful stanzas of “Hartleap Well” are fatally rebuked by the truths of Nature. He shows us the ruins of an aspen wood, a blighted hollow, a dreary place, forlorn because an innocent stag, hunted, had there broken his heart in a leap from the rocks above; grass would not grow there.

This beast not unobserved by Nature fell,
His death was mourned by sympathy divine.

And the signs of that sympathy are cruelly asserted by the poet to be these woodland ruins—cruelly, because the daily sight of the world blossoming over the agonies of beast and bird is made less tolerable to us by such a fiction.

The Being that is in the clouds and air . . . Maintains a deep and reverential care For the unoffending creature whom He loves.

The poet offers us as a proof of that “reverential care,” the visible alteration of Nature at the scene of suffering—an alteration we have to dispense with every day we pass in the woods. We are tempted to ask whether Wordsworth himself believed in a sympathy he asks us—on such grounds!—to believe in? Did he think his faith to be worthy of no more than a fictitious sign and a false proof?

Nowhere in the whole of Tennyson’s thought is there such an attack upon our reason and our heart. He is more serious than the solemn Wordsworth.

In Memoriam, with all else that Tennyson wrote, tutors, with here and there a subtle word, this nature-loving nation to perceive land, light, sky, and ocean, as he perceived. To this we return, upon this we dwell. He has been to us, firstly, the poet of two geniuses—a small and an immense; secondly, the modern poet who answered in the negative that most significant modern question, French or not French? But he was, before the outset of all our study of him, of all our love of him, the poet of landscape, and this he is more dearly than pen can describe him. This eternal character of his is keen in the verse that is winged to meet a homeward ship with her “dewy decks,” and in the sudden island landscape,

The clover sod,
That takes the sunshine and the rains,
Or where the kneeling hamlet drains
The chalice of the grapes of God.

It is poignant in the garden-night:-

A breeze began to tremble o’er The large leaves of the sycamore, . . . And gathering freshlier overhead, Rocked the full-foliaged elm, and swung The heavy-folded rose, and flung The lilies to and fro, and said “The dawn, the dawn,” and died away.



His are the exalted senses that sensual poets know nothing of. I think the sense of hearing as well as the sense of sight, has never been more greatly exalted than by Tennyson:-

As from beyond the limit of the world,
Like the last echo born of a great cry.

Page 8

As to this garden-character so much decried I confess that the “lawn” does not generally delight me, the word nor the thing. But in Tennyson’s page the word is wonderful, as though it had never been dull: “The mountain lawn was dewy-dark.” It is not that he brings the mountains too near or ranks them in his own peculiar garden-plot, but that the word withdraws, withdraws to summits, withdraws into dreams; the lawn is aloft, alone, and as wild as ancient snow. It is the same with many another word or phrase changed, by passing into his vocabulary, into something rich and strange. His own especially is the March month—his “roaring moon.” His is the spirit of the dawning month of flowers and storms; the golden, soft names of daffodil and crocus are caught by the gale as you speak them in his verse, in a fine disproportion with the energy and gloom. His was a new apprehension of nature, an increase in the number, and not only in the sum, of our national apprehensions of poetry in nature. Unaware of a separate angel of modern poetry is he who is insensible to the Tennyson note—the new note that we reaffirm even with the notes of Vaughan, Traherne, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake well in our ears—the Tennyson note of splendour, all-distinct. He showed the perpetually transfigured landscape in transfiguring words. He is the captain of our dreams. Others have lighted a candle in England, he lit a sun. Through him our daily suns, and also the backward and historic suns long since set, which he did not sing, are magnified; and he bestows upon us an exalted retrospection. Through him Napoleon’s sun of Austerlitz rises, for us, with a more brilliant menace upon arms and the plain; through him Fielding’s “most melancholy sun” lights the dying man to the setting-forth on that last voyage of his with such an immortal gleam, denying hope, as would not have lighted, for us, the memory of that seaward morning, had our poetry not undergone the illumination, the transcendent vision, of Tennyson’s genius.

Emerson knew that the poet speaks adequately then only when he speaks “a little wildly, or with the flower of the mind.” Tennyson, the clearest-headed of poets, is our wild poet; wild, notwithstanding that little foppery we know of in him—that walking delicately, like Agag; wild, notwithstanding the work, the ease, the neatness, the finish; notwithstanding the assertion of manliness which, in asserting, somewhat misses that mark; a wilder poet than the rough, than the sensual, than the defiant, than the accuser, than the denouncer. Wild flowers are his—great poet—wild winds, wild lights, wild heart, wild eyes!

DICKENS AS A MAN OF LETTERS



Page 9

It was said for many years, until the reversal that now befalls the sayings of many years had happened to this also, that Thackeray was the unkind satirist and Dickens the kind humourist. The truth seems to be that Dickens imagined more evil people than did Thackeray, but that he had an eager faith in good ones. Nothing places him so entirely out of date as his trust in human sanctity, his love of it, his hope for it, his leap at it. He saw it in a woman's face first met, and drew it to himself in a man's hand first grasped. He looked keenly for it. And if he associated minor degrees of goodness with any kind of folly or mental ineptitude, he did not so relate sanctity; though he gave it, for companion, ignorance; and joined the two, in Joe Gargery, most tenderly. We might paraphrase, in regard to these two great authors, Dr. Johnson's famous sentence: "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no joys." Dickens has many scoundrels, but Thackeray has no saints. Helen Pendennis is not holy, for she is unjust and cruel; Amelia is not holy, for she is an egoist in love; Lady Castlewood is not holy, for she too is cruel; and even Lady Jane is not holy, for she is jealous; nor is Colonel Newcome holy, for he is haughty; nor Dobbin, for he turns with a taunt upon a plain sister; nor Esmond, for he squanders his best years in love for a material beauty; and these are the best of his good people. And readers have been taught to praise the work of him who makes none perfect; one does not meet perfect people in trains or at dinner, and this seemed good cause that the novelist should be praised for his moderation; it seemed to imitate the usual measure and moderation of nature.

But Charles Dickens closed with a divine purpose divinely different. He consented to the counsels of perfection. And thus he made Joe Gargery, not a man one might easily find in a forge; and Esther Summerson, not a girl one may easily meet at a dance; and Little Dorrit, who does not come to do a day's sewing; not that the man and the women are inconceivable, but that they are unfortunately improbable. They are creatures created through a creating mind that worked its six days for the love of good, and never rested until the seventh, the final Sabbath. But granting that they are the counterpart, the heavenly side, of caricature, this is not to condemn them. Since when has caricature ceased to be an art good for man—an honest game between him and nature? It is a tenable opinion that frank caricature is a better incident of art than the mere exaggeration which is the more modern practice. The words mean the same thing in their origin—an overloading. But, as we now generally delimit the words, they differ. Caricature, when it has the grotesque inspiration, makes for laughter, and when it has the celestial, makes for admiration; in either case there is a good understanding between the author and the reader, or between the draughtsman and the spectator. We need not, for example,

Page 10

suppose that Ibsen sat in a room surrounded by a repeating pattern of his hair and whiskers on the wallpaper, but it makes us most exceedingly mirthful and joyous to see him thus seated in Mr. Max Beerbohm's drawing; and perhaps no girl ever went through life without harbouring a thought of self, but it is very good for us all to know that such a girl was thought of by Dickens, that he loved his thought, and that she is ultimately to be traced, through Dickens, to God.

But exaggeration establishes no good understanding between the reader and the author. It is a solemn appeal to our credulity, and we are right to resent it. It is the violence of a weakling hand—the worst manner of violence. Exaggeration is conspicuous in the newer poetry, and is so far, therefore, successful, conspicuousness being its aim. But it was also the vice of Swinburne, and was the bad example he set to the generation that thought his tunings to be the finest “music.” For instance, in an early poem he intends to tell us how a man who loved a woman welcomed the sentence that condemned him to drown with her, bound, his impassioned breast against hers, abhorring. He might have convinced us of that welcome by one phrase of the profound exactitude of genius. But he makes his man cry out for the greatest bliss and the greatest imaginable glory to be bestowed upon the judge who pronounces the sentence. And this is merely exaggeration. One takes pleasure in rebuking the false ecstasy by a word thus prim and prosaic. The poet intended to impose upon us, and he fails; we “withdraw our attention,” as Dr. Johnson did when the conversation became foolish. In truth we do more, for we resent exaggeration if we care for our English language. For exaggeration writes relaxed, and not elastic, words and verses; and it is possible that the language suffers something, at least temporarily—during the life of a couple of generations, let us say—from the loss of elasticity and rebound brought about by such strain. Moreover, exaggeration has always to outdo itself progressively. There should have been a Durdles to tell this Swinburne that the habit of exaggerating, like that of boasting, “grows upon you.”

It may be added that later poetry shows us an instance of exaggeration in the work of that major poet, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie. His violence and vehemence, his extremity, are generally signs not of weakness but of power; and yet once he reaches a breaking-point that power should never know. This is where his Judith holds herself to be so smirched and degraded by the proffer of a reverent love (she being devoted to one only, a dead man who had her heart) that thenceforth no bar is left to her entire self-sacrifice to the loathed enemy Holofernes. To this, too, the prim rebuke is the just one, a word for the mouth of governesses: “My dear, you exaggerate.”

It may be briefly said that exaggeration takes for granted some degree of imbecility in the reader, whereas caricature takes for granted a high degree of intelligence. Dickens appeals to our intelligence in all his caricature, whether heavenly, as in Joe Gargery, or

impish, as in Mrs. Micawber. The word “caricature” that is used a thousand times to reproach him is the word that does him singular honour.



Page 11

If I may define my own devotion to Dickens, it may be stated as chiefly, though not wholly, admiration of his humour, his dramatic tragedy, and his watchfulness over inanimate things and landscape. Passages of his books that are ranged otherwise than under those characters often leave me out of the range of their appeal or else definitely offend me. And this is not for the customary reason—that Dickens could not draw a gentleman, that Dickens could not draw a lady. It matters little whether he could or not. But as a fact he did draw a gentleman, and drew him excellently well, in Cousin Feenix, as Mr. Chesterton has decided. The question of the lady we may waive; if it is difficult to prove a negative, it is difficult also to present one; and to the making, or producing, or liberating, or detaching, or exalting, of the character of a lady there enter many negatives; and Dickens was an obvious and a positive man. Esther Summerson is a lady, but she is so much besides that her ladyhood does not detach itself from her sainthood and her angelhood, so as to be conspicuous—if, indeed, conspicuousness may be properly predicated of the quality of a lady. It is a conventional saying that sainthood and angelhood include the quality of a lady, but that saying is not true; a lady has a great number of negatives all her own, and also some things positive that are not at all included in goodness. However this may be—and it is not important—Dickens, the genial Dickens, makes savage sport of women. Such a company of envious dames and damsels cannot be found among the persons of the satirist Thackeray. Kate Nickleby's beauty brings upon her at first sight the enmity of her workshop companions; in the innocent pages of "Pickwick" the aunt is jealous of the niece, and the niece retorts by wounding the vanity of the aunt as keenly as she may; and so forth through early books and late. He takes for granted that the women, old and young, who are not his heroines, wage this war within the sex, being disappointed by defect of nature and fortune. Dickens is master of wit, humour, and derision; and it must be confessed that his derision is abundant, and is cast upon an artificially exposed and helpless people; that is, he, a man, derides the women who miss what a man declared to be their "whole existence."

The advice which M. Rodin received in his youth from Constant—"Learn to see the other side; never look at forms only in extent; learn to see them always in relief"—is the contrary of the counsel proper for a reader of Dickens. That counsel should be, "Do not insist upon seeing the immortal figures of comedy 'in the round.' You are to be satisfied with their face value, the face of two dimensions. It is not necessary that you should seize Mr. Pecksniff from beyond, and grasp the whole man and his destinies." The hypocrite is a figure dreadful and tragic, a shape of horror; and Mr. Pecksniff is a hypocrite, and a bright image of heart-easing comedy. For comic

Page 12

fiction cannot exist without some such paradox. Without it, where would our laugh be in response to the generous genius which gives us Mr. Pecksniff's parenthesis to the mention of sirens ("Pagan, I regret to say"); and the scene in which Mr. Pecksniff, after a stormy domestic scene within, goes as it were accidentally to the door to admit the rich kinsman he wishes to propitiate? "Then Mr. Pecksniff, gently warbling a rustic stave, put on his garden hat, seized a spade, and opened the street door, as if he thought he had, from his vineyard, heard a modest rap, but was not quite certain." The visitor had thundered at the door while outcries of family strife had been rising in the house. "It is an ancient pursuit, gardening. Primitive, my dear sir; for, if I am not mistaken, Adam was the first of the calling. My Eve, I grieve to say, is no more, sir; but' (and here he pointed to his spade, and shook his head, as if he were not cheerful without an effort) 'but I do a little bit of Adam still.' He had by this time got them into the best parlour, where the portrait by Spiller and the bust by Spoker were." And again, Mr. Pecksniff, hospitable at the supper table: "'This,' he said, in allusion to the party, not the wine, 'is a Mingling that repays one for much disappointment and vexation. Let us be merry.' Here he took a captain's biscuit. 'It is a poor heart that never rejoices; and our hearts are not poor. No!' With such stimulants to merriment did he beguile the time and do the honours of the table." Moreover it is a mournful thing and an inexplicable, that a man should be as mad as Mr. Dick. None the less is it a happy thing for any reader to watch Mr. Dick while David explains his difficulty to Traddles. Mr. Dick was to be employed in copying, but King Charles the First could not be kept out of the manuscripts; "Mr. Dick in the meantime looking very deferentially and seriously at Traddles, and sucking his thumb." And the amours of the gentleman in gaiters who threw the vegetable-marrows over the garden wall. Mr. F.'s aunt, again! And Augustus Moddle, our own Moddle, whom a great French critic most justly and accurately brooded over. "Augustus, the gloomy maniac," says Taine, "makes us shudder." A good medical diagnosis. Long live the logical French intellect!

Truly, Humour talks in his own language, nay, his own dialect, whereas Passion and Pity speak the universal tongue.

It is strange—it seems to me deplorable—that Dickens himself was not content to leave his wonderful hypocrite—one who should stand imperishable in comedy—in the two dimensions of his own admirable art. After he had enjoyed his own Pecksniff, tasting him with the "strenuous tongue" of Keats's voluptuary bursting "joy's grapes against his palate fine," Dickens most unfairly gives himself the other and incompatible joy of grasping his Pecksniff in the third dimension, seizes him "in the round," horsewhips him out of all keeping, and finally kicks him out of a splendid art of fiction into a sorry art of "poetical justice," a Pecksniff not only defeated but undone.



Page 13

And yet Dickens's retribution upon sinners is a less fault than his reforming them. It is truly an act denoting excessive simplicity of mind in him. He never veritably allows his responsibility as a man to lapse. Men ought to be good, or else to become good, and he does violence to his own excellent art, and yields it up to his sense of morality. Ah, can we measure by years the time between that day and this? Is the fastidious, the impartial, the non-moral novelist only the grandchild, and not the remote posterity, of Dickens, who would not leave Scrooge to his egoism, or Gradgrind to his facts, or Mercy Pecksniff to her absurdity, or Dombey to his pride? Nay, who makes Micawber finally to prosper? Truly, the most unpardonable thing Dickens did in those deplorable last chapters of his was the prosperity of Mr. Micawber. "Of a son, in difficulties"—the perfect Micawber nature is respected as to his origin, and then perverted as to his end. It is a pity that Mr. Peggotty ever came back to England with such tidings. And our last glimpse of the emigrants had been made joyous by the sight of the young Micawbers on the eve of emigration; "every child had its own wooden spoon attached to its body by a strong line," in preparation for Colonial life. And then Dickens must needs go behind the gay scenes, and tell us that the long and untiring delight of the book was over. Mr. Micawber, in the Colonies, was never again to make punch with lemons, in a crisis of his fortunes, and "resume his peeling with a desperate air"; nor to observe the expression of his friends' faces during Mrs. Micawber's masterly exposition of the financial situation or of the possibilities of the coal trade; nor to eat walnuts out of a paper bag what time the die was cast and all was over. Alas! nothing was over until Mr. Micawber's pecuniary liabilities were over, and the perfect comedy turned into dulness, the joyous impossibility of a figure of immortal fun into cold improbability.

There are several such late or last chapters that one would gladly cut away: that of Mercy Pecksniff's pathos, for example; that of Mr. Dombey's installation in his daughter's home; that which undeceives us as to Mr. Boffin's antic disposition. But how true and how whole a heart it was that urged these unlucky conclusions! How shall we venture to complain? The hand that made its Pecksniff in pure wit, has it not the right to belabour him in earnest—albeit a kind of earnest that disappoints us? And Mr. Dombey is Dickens's own Dombey, and he must do what he will with that finely wrought figure of pride. But there is a little irony in the fact that Dickens leaves more than one villain to his orderly fate for whom we care little either way; it is nothing to us, whom Carker never convinced, that the train should catch him, nor that the man with the moustache and the nose, who did but weary us, should be crushed by the falling house. Here the end holds good in art, but the art was not good from the first. But then, again, neither does Bill Sikes experience a change of heart, nor Jonas Chuzzlewit; and the end of each is most excellently told.

Page 14

George Meredith said that the most difficult thing to write in fiction was dialogue. But there is surely one thing at least as difficult—a thing so rarely well done that a mere reader might think it to be more difficult than dialogue; and that is the telling *what happened*. Something of the fatal languor and preoccupation that persist beneath all the violence of our stage—our national undramatic character—is perceptible in the narrative of our literature. The things the usual modern author says are proportionately more energetically produced than those he tells. But Dickens, being simple and dramatic and capable of one thing at a time, and that thing whole, tells us what happened with a perfect speed which has neither hurry nor delays. Those who saw him act found him a fine actor, and this we might know by reading the murder in *Oliver Twist*, the murder in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the coming of the train upon Carker, the long moment of recognition when Pip sees his guest, the convict, reveal himself in his chambers at night. The swift spirit, the hammering blow of his narrative, drive the great storm in *David Copperfield* through the poorest part of the book—Steerforth's story. There is surely no greater gale to be read of than this: from the first words, "Don't you think that, I said to the coachman, 'a very remarkable sky?'" to the end of a magnificent chapter. "Flying clouds tossed up into most remarkable heaps, suggesting greater heights in the clouds than there were depths below them. . . There had been a wind all day; and it was rising then with an extraordinary great sound . . . Long before we saw the sea, its spray was on our lips . . . The water was out over the flat country, and every sheet and puddle lashed its banks, and had its stress of little breakers. When we came within sight of the sea, the waves on the horizon, caught at intervals above the boiling abyss, were like glimpses of another shore, with towers and buildings. . . The people came to their doors all aslant, and with streaming hair." David dreams of a cannonade, when at last he "fell—off a tower and down a precipice—into the depths of sleep." In the morning, "the wind might have lulled a little, though not more sensibly than if the cannonading I had dreamed of had been diminished by the silencing of half a dozen guns out of hundreds." "It went from me with a shock, like a ball from a rifle," says David in another place, after the visit of a delirious impulse; here is the volley of departure, the shock of passion vanishing more perceptibly than it came.

Page 15

The tempest in *David Copperfield* combines Dickens's dramatic tragedy of narrative with his wonderful sense of sea and land. But here are landscapes in quietness: "There has been rain this afternoon, and a wintry shudder goes among the little pools in the cracked, uneven flag-stones. . . . Some of the leaves, in a timid rush, seek sanctuary within the low-arched cathedral door; but two men coming out resist them, and cast them out with their feet:" The autumn leaves fall thick, "but never fast, for they come circling down with a dead lightness." Again, "Now the woods settle into great masses as if they were one profound tree." And yet again, "I held my mother in my embrace, and she held me in hers; and among the still woods in the silence of the summer day there seemed to be nothing but our two troubled minds that was not at peace." Yet, with a thousand great felicities of diction, Dickens had no *body* of style.

Dickens, having the single and simple heart of a moralist, had also the simple eyes of a free intelligence, and the light heart. He gave his senses their way, and well did they serve him. Thus his eyes—and no more modern man in anxious search of "impressions" was ever so simple and so masterly: "Mr. Vholes gauntly stalked to the fire, and warmed his funereal gloves." "'I thank you,' said Mr. Vholes, putting out his long black sleeve, to check the ringing of the bell, 'not any.'" Mr. and Mrs. Tope "are daintily sticking sprigs of holly into the carvings and sconces of the cathedral stalls, as if they were sticking them into the button-holes of the Dean & Chapter." The two young Eurasians, brother and sister, "had a certain air upon them of hunter and huntress; yet withal a certain air of being the objects of the chase rather than the followers." This phrase lacks elegance—and Dickens is not often inelegant, as those who do not read him may be surprised to learn—but the impression is admirable; so is that which follows: "An indefinable kind of pause coming and going on their whole expression, both of face and form." Here is pure, mere impression again: "Miss Murdstone, who was busy at her writing-desk, gave me her cold finger-nails." Lady Tippins's hand is "rich in knuckles." And here is vision with great dignity: "All beyond his figure was a vast dark curtain, in solemn movement towards one quarter of the heavens."

With that singleness of sight—and his whole body was full of the light of it—he had also the single hearing; the scene is in the Court of Chancery on a London November day: "Leaving this address ringing in the rafters of the roof, the very little counsel drops, and the fog knows him no more." "Mr. Vholes emerged into the silence he could scarcely be said to have broken, so stifled was his tone." "Within the grill-gate of the chancel, up the steps surmounted loomingly by the fast-darkening organ, white robes could be dimly seen, and one feeble voice, rising and



Page 16

falling in a cracked monotonous mutter, could at intervals be faintly heard . . . until the organ and the choir burst forth and drowned it in a sea of music. Then the sea fell, and the dying voice made another feeble effort; and then the sea rose high and beat its life out, and lashed the roof, and surged among the arches, and pierced the heights of the great tower; and then the sea was dry and all was still." And this is how a listener overheard men talking in the cathedral hollows: "The word 'confidence,' shattered by the echoes, but still capable of being pieced together, is uttered."

Wit, humour, derision—to each of these words we assign by custom a part in the comedy of literature; and (again) those who do not read Dickens—perhaps even those who read him a little—may acclaim him as a humourist and not know him as a wit. But that writer is a wit, whatever his humour, who tells us of a member of the Tite Barnacle family who had held a sinecure office against all protest, that "he died with his drawn salary in his hand." But let it be granted that Dickens the humourist is foremost and most precious. For we might well spare the phrase of wit just quoted rather than the one describing Traddles (whose hair stood up), as one who looked "as though he had seen a cheerful ghost." Or rather than this:-

He was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer that he might be expected—if his development received no untimely check—to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months.

Or rather than the incident of the butcher and the beef-steak. He gently presses it, in a cabbage leaf, into Tom Pinch's pocket. "'For meat,' he said with some emotion, 'must be humoured, not drove.'"

A generation, between his own and the present, thought Dickens to be vulgar; if the cause of that judgement was that he wrote about people in shops, the cause is discredited now that shops are the scenes of the novelist's research. "High life" and most wretched life have now given place to the little shop and its parlour, during a year or two. But Dr. Brown, the author of *Rab and His Friends*, thought that Dickens committed vulgarities in his diction. "A good man was Robin" is right enough; but "He was a good man, was Robin" is not so well, and we must own that it is Dickensian; but assuredly Dickens writes such phrases as it were dramatically, playing the cockney. I know of but two words that Dickens habitually misuses, and Charles Lamb misuses one of them precisely in Dickens's manner; it is not worth while to quote them. But for these his English is admirable; he chooses what is good and knows what is not. A little representative collection of the bad or foolish English of his day might be made by gathering up what Dickens forbore and what he derided; for instance, Mr. Micawber's portly phrase, "gratifying emotions of no common



Page 17

description,” and Littimer’s report that “the young woman was partial to the sea.” This was the polite language of that time, as we conclude when we find it to be the language that Charlotte Bronte shook off; but before she shook it off she used it. Dickens, too, had something to throw off; in his earlier books there is an inflation—rounded words fill the inappropriate mouth of Bill Sikes himself—but he discarded them with a splendid laugh. They are charged upon Mr. Micawber in his own character as author. See him as he sits by to hear Captain Hopkins read the petition in the debtors’ prison “from His Most Gracious Majesty’s unfortunate subjects.” Mr. Micawber listened, we read, “with a little of an author’s vanity, contemplating (not severely) the spikes upon the opposite wall.” It should be remembered that when Dickens shook himself free of everything that hampered his genius he was not so much beloved or so much applauded as when he gave to his cordial readers matter for facile sentiment and for humour of the second order. His public were eager to be moved and to laugh, and he gave them Little Nell and Sam Weller; he loved to please them, and it is evident that he pleased himself also. Mr. Micawber, Mr. Pecksniff, Mrs. Nickleby, Mrs. Chick, Mrs. Pipchin, Mr. Augustus Moddle, Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Plornish, are not so famous as Sam Weller and Little Nell, nor is Traddles, whose hair looked as though he had seen a cheerful ghost.

We are told of the delight of the Japanese man in a chance finding of something strange-shaped, an asymmetry that has an accidental felicity, an interest. If he finds such a grace or disproportion—whatever the interest may be—in a stone or a twig that has caught his ambiguous eye at the roadside, he carries it to his home to place it in its irregularly happy place. Dickens seems to have had a like joy in things misshapen or strangely shapen, uncommon or grotesque. He saddled even his heroes—those heroes are, perhaps, his worst work, young men at once conventional and improbable—with whimsically ugly names; while his invented names are whimsically perfect: that of Vholes for the predatory silent man in black, and that of Tope for the cathedral verger. A suggestion of dark and vague flight in Vholes; something of old floors, something respectably furtive and musty, in Tope. In Dickens, the love of lurking, unusual things, human and inanimate—he wrote of his discoveries delightedly in his letters—was hypertrophied; and it has its part in the simplest and the most fantastic of his humours, especially those that are due to his child-like eyesight; let us read, for example, of the rooks that seemed to attend upon Dr. Strong (late of Canterbury) in his Highgate garden, “as if they had been written to about him by the Canterbury rooks and were observing him closely in consequence”; and of Master Micawber, who had a remarkable head voice—“On looking at Master Micawber again I saw that he had



Page 18

a certain expression of face as if his voice were behind his eyebrows"; and of Joe in his Sunday clothes, "a scarecrow in good circumstances"; and of the cook's cousin in the Life Guards, with such long legs that "he looked like the afternoon shadow of somebody else"; and of Mrs. Markleham, "who stared more like a figure-head intended for a ship to be called the Astonishment, than anything else I can think of." But there is no reader who has not a thousand such exhilarating little sights in his memory of these pages. From the gently grotesque to the fantastic run Dickens's enchanted eyes, and in Quilp and Miss Mowcher he takes his joy in the extreme of deformity; and a spontaneous combustion was an accident much to his mind.

Dickens wrote for a world that either was exceedingly excitable and sentimental, or had the convention or tradition of great sentimental excitability. All his people, suddenly surprised, lose their presence of mind. Even when the surprise is not extraordinary their actions are wild. When Tom Pinch calls upon John Westlock in London, after no very long separation, John, welcoming him at breakfast, puts the rolls into his boots, and so forth. And this kind of distraction comes upon men and women everywhere in his books—distractions of laughter as well. All this seems artificial to-day, whereas Dickens in his best moments is the simplest, as he is the most vigilant, of men. But his public was as present to him as an actor's audience is to the actor, and I cannot think that this immediate response was good for his art. Assuredly he is not solitary. We should not wish him to be solitary as a poet is, but we may wish that now and again, even while standing applauded and acclaimed, he had appraised the applause more coolly and more justly, and within his inner mind.

Those critics who find what they call vulgarisms think they may safely go on to accuse Dickens of bad grammar. The truth is that his grammar is not only good but strong; it is far better in construction than Thackeray's, the ease of whose phrase sometimes exceeds and is slack. Lately, during the recent centenary time, a writer averred that Dickens "might not always be parsed," but that we loved him for his, *etc.*, *etc.* Dickens's page is to be parsed as strictly as any man's. It is, apart from the matter of grammar, a wonderful thing that he, with his little education, should have so excellent a diction. In a letter that records his reluctance to work during a holiday, the word "wave" seems to me perfect: "Imaginary butchers and bakers wave me to my desk." In his exquisite use of the word "establishment" in the following phrase, we find his own perfect sense of the use of words in his own day; but in the second quotation given there is a most beautiful sign of education. "Under the weight of my wicked secret" (the little boy Pip had succoured his convict with his brother-in-law's provisions) "I pondered



Page 19

whether the Church would be powerful enough to shield me . . . if I divulged to that establishment.” And this is the phrase that may remind us of the eighteenth-century writers of prose, and among those writers of none so readily as of Bolingbroke: it occurs in that passage of Esther’s life in which, having lost her beauty, she resolves to forego a love unavowed. “There was nothing to be undone; no chain for him to drag or for me to break.”

If Dickens had had the education which he had not, his English could not have been better; but if he had had the *usage du monde* which as a young man he had not, there would have been a difference. He would not, for instance, have given us the preposterous scenes in *Nicholas Nickleby* in which parts are played by Lord Frederick Verisopht, Sir Mulberry Hawke, and their friends; the scene of the hero’s luncheon at a restaurant and the dreadful description of the mirrors and other splendours would not have been written. It is a very little thing to forgive to him whom we have to thank for—well, not perhaps for the “housefull of friends” for the gift of whom a stranger, often quoted, once blessed him in the street; we may not wish for Mr. Feeder, or Major Bagstock, or Mrs. Chick, or Mrs. Pipchin, or Mr. Augustus Moddle, or Mr. F.’s aunt, or Mr. Wopsle, or Mr. Pumblechook, as an inmate of our homes. Lack of knowledge of the polite world is, I say, a very little thing to forgive to him whom we thank most chiefly for showing us these interesting people just named as inmates of the comedy homes that are not ours. We thank him because they are comedy homes, and could not be ours or any man’s; that is, we thank him for his admirable art.

SWINBURNE’S LYRICAL POETRY

The makers of epigrams, of phrases, of pages—of all more or less brief judgements—assuredly waste their time when they sum up any one of all mankind; and how do they squander it when their matter is a poet! They may hardly describe him; nor shall any student’s care, or psychologist’s formula, or man-of-letters’ summary, or wit’s sentence define him. Definitions, because they must not be inexact or incomprehensive, sweep too wide, and the poet is not held within them; and out of the mere describer’s range and capture he may escape by as many doors as there are outlets from a forest. But much ready-made platitude brings about the world’s guesses at a poet, and false and flat thought lies behind its epigrams. It is not long since the general guess-work assigned melancholy, without authority, to a poet lately deceased. Real poets, it was said, are unhappy, and this was one exceptionally real. How unhappy must he, then, certainly have been! And the blessed Blake himself was incidentally cited as one of the company of depression and despair! It is, perhaps, a liking for symmetry that prompts these futile syllogisms; perhaps, also, it is the fear of human mystery.

Page 20

The biographer used to see “the finger of God” pat in the history of a man; he insists now that he shall at any rate see the finger of a law, or rather of a rule, a custom, a generality. Law I will not call it; there is no intelligible law that, for example, a true poet should be an unhappy man; but the observer thinks he has noticed a custom or habit to that effect, and Blake, who lived and died in bliss, is named at ignorant random, rather than that an example of the custom should be lost.

But it is not only such a platitude of observation, such a cheap generality, that is silenced in the presence of the poet whose name is at the head of these pages. For if ever Nature showed us a poet in whom our phrases, and the judgements they record, should be denied, defeated, and confused, Swinburne is he. We predicate of a poet a great sincerity, a great imagination, a great passion, a great intellect; these are the master qualities, and yet we are compelled to see here—if we would not wilfully be blind or blindfold—a poet, yes, a true poet, with a perfervid fancy rather than an imagination, a poet with puny passions, a poet with no more than the momentary and impulsive sincerity of an infirm soul, a poet with small intellect—and thrice a poet.

And, assuredly, if the creative arts are duly humbled in the universal contemplation of Nature, if they are accused, if they are weighed, if they are found wanting; if they are excused by nothing but our intimate human sympathy with dear and interesting imperfection; if poetry stands outdone by the passion and experience of an inarticulate soul, and painting by the splendour of the day, and building by the forest and the cloud, there is another art also that has to be humiliated, and this is the art and science of criticism, confounded by its contemplation of such a poet. Poor little art of examination and formula! The miracle of day and night and immortality are needed to rebuke the nobler arts; but our art, the critic’s, mine to-day, is brought to book, and its heart is broken, and its sincerity disgraced, by the paradoxes of the truth. Not in the heavens nor in the sub-celestial landscape does this minor art find its refutation, but in the puzzle between a man and his gift; and in part the man is ignoble and leads us by distasteful paths, and compels us to a reluctant work of literary detection. Useful is the critical spirit, but it loses heart when (to take a very definite instance) it has to ask what literary sincerity—what value for art and letters—lived in Swinburne, who hailed a certain old friend, in a dedication, as “poet and painter” when he was pleased with him, and declared him “poetaster and dauber” when something in that dead man’s posthumous autobiography offended his own self-love; when, I say, criticism finds itself called upon, amid its admiration, to do such scavenger work, it loses heart as well as the clue, and would gladly go out into the free air of greater arts, and, with them, take exterior Nature’s nobler reprobation.



Page 21

I have to cite this instance of a change of mind, or of terms and titles, in Swinburne's estimate of art and letters, because it is all-important to my argument. It is a change he makes in published print, and, therefore, no private matter. And I cite it, not as a sign of moral fault, with which I have no business, but as a sign of a most significant literary insensibility—insensibility, whether to the quality of a poetaster when he wrote “poet,” or to that of a poet when he wrote “poetaster,” is of no matter.

Rather than justify the things I have ventured to affirm as to Swinburne's little intellect, and paltry degree of sincerity, and rachitic passion, and tumid fancy—judgement-confounding things to predicate of a poet—I turn to the happier task of praise. A vivid writer of English was he, and would have been one of the recurring renewers of our often-renewed and incomparable language, had his words not become habitual to himself, so that they quickly lost the light, the breeze, the breath; one whose fondness for beauty deserved the serious name of love; one whom beauty at times favoured and filled so visibly, by such obvious visits and possessions, favours so manifest, that inevitably we forget we are speaking fictions and allegories, and imagine her a visiting power exterior to her poet; a man, moreover, of a less, not more, than manly receptiveness and appreciation, so that he was entirely and easily possessed by admirations. Less than manly we must call his extraordinary recklessness of appreciation; it is, as it were, ideally feminine; it is possible, however, that no woman has yet been capable of so entire an emotional impulse and impetus; more than manly it might have been but for the lack of a responsible intellect in that impulse; had it possessed such an intellectual sanction, Swinburne's admiration of Victor Hugo, Mazzini, Dickens, Baudelaire, and Theophile Gautier might have added one to the great generousities of the world.

We are inclined to complain of such an objection to Swinburne's poetry as was prevalent at his earlier appearance and may be found in criticisms of the time, before the later fashion of praise set in—the obvious objection that it was as indigent in thought as affluent in words; for, though a truth, it is an inadequate truth. It might be affirmed of many a verse-writer of not unusual talent and insignificance, whose affluence of words was inselective and merely abundant, and whose poverty of thought was something less than a national disaster. Swinburne's failure of intellect was, in the fullest and most serious sense, a national disaster, and his instinct for words was a national surprise. It is in their beauty that Swinburne's art finds its absolution from the obligations of meaning, according to the vulgar judgement; and we can hardly wonder.

Page 22

I wish it were not customary to write of one art in the terms of another, and I use the words “music” and “musical” under protest, because the world has been so delighted to call any verse pleasant to the ear “musical,” that it has not supplied us with another and more specialised and appropriate word. Swinburne is a complete master of the rhythm and rhyme, the time and accent, the pause, the balance, the flow of vowel and clash of consonant, that make the “music” for which verse is popular and prized. We need not complain that it is for the tune rather than for the melody—if we must use those alien terms—that he is chiefly admired, and even for the jingle rather than for the tune: he gave his readers all three, and all three in perfection. Nineteen out of twenty who take pleasure in this art of his will quote you first

When the hounds of Spring are on winter's traces
The Mother of months, in meadow and plain,

and the rest of the buoyant familiar lines. I confess there is something too obvious, insistent, emphatic, too dapper, to give me more than a slight pleasure; but it is possible that I am prejudiced by a dislike of English anapaests (I am aware that the classic terms are not really applicable to our English metres, but the reader will understand that I mean the metre of the lines just quoted.) I do not find these anapaests in the Elizabethan or in the seventeenth-century poets, or most rarely. They were dear to the eighteenth century, and, much more than the heroic couplet, are the distinctive metre of that age. They swagger—or, worse, they strut—in its lighter verse, from its first year to its last. Swinburne's anapaests are far too delicate for swagger or strut; but for all their dance, all their spring, all their flight, all their flutter, we are compelled to perceive that, as it were, they *perform*. I love to see English poetry move to many measures, to many numbers, but chiefly with the simple iambic and the simple trochaic foot. Those two are enough for the infinite variety, the epic, the drama, the lyric, of our poetry. It is, accordingly, in these old traditional and proved metres that Swinburne's music seems to me most worthy, most controlled, and most lovely. *There* is his best dignity, and therefore his best beauty. For even beauty is not to be thrust upon us; she is not to solicit us or offer herself thus to the first comer; and in the most admired of those flying lyrics she is thus immoderately lavish of herself. “He lays himself out,” wrote Francis Thompson in an anonymous criticism, “to delight and seduce. The great poets entice by a glorious accident . . . but allurements, in Mr. Swinburne's poetry, is the alpha and omega.” This is true of all that he has written, but it is true, in a more fatal sense, of these famous tunes of his “music.” Nay, delicate as they are, we are convinced that it is the less delicate ear that most surely takes much pleasure in them, the dull ear that chiefly they delight.



Page 23

Compare with such luxurious canterings the graver movement of this “Vision of Spring in Winter”:

Sunrise it sees not, neither set of star,
Large nightfall, nor imperial plenilune,
Nor strong sweet shape of the full-breasted noon;
But where the silver-sandalled shadows are,
Too soft for arrows of the sun to mar,
Moves with the mild gait of an ungrown moon.

Even more valuable than this exquisite rhymed stanza is the blank verse which Swinburne released into new energies, new liberties, and new movements. Milton, it need hardly be said, is the master of those who know how to place and displace the stress and accent of the English heroic line in epic poetry. His most majestic hand undid the mechanical bonds of the national line and made it obey the unwritten laws of his genius. His blank verse marches, pauses, lingers, and charges. It feels the strain, it yields, it resists; it is all-expressive. But if the practice of some of the poets succeeding him had tended to make it rigid and tame again, Swinburne was a new liberator. He writes, when he ought, with a finely appropriate regularity, as in the lovely line on the forest glades

That fear the faun’s and know the dryad’s foot,

in which the rule is completely kept, every step of the five stepping from the unaccented place to the accented without a tremor. (I must again protest that I use the word “accent” in a sense that has come to be adapted to English prosody, because it is so used by all writers on English metre, and is therefore understood by the reader, but I think “stress” the better word.) But having written this perfect English-iambic line so wonderfully fit for the sensitive quiet of the woods, he turns the page to the onslaught of such lines—heroic lines with a difference—as report the short-breathed messenger’s reply to Althea’s question by whose hands the boar of Calydon had died:

A maiden’s and a prophet’s and thy son’s.

It is lamentable that in his latest blank verse Swinburne should have made a trick and a manner of that most energetic device of his by which he leads the line at a rush from the first syllable to the tenth, and on to the first of the line succeeding, with a great recoil to follow, as though a rider brought a horse to his haunches. It is in the same boar hunt:

And fiery with invasive eyes,
And bristling with intolerable hair,
Plunged;—



Sometimes we may be troubled with a misgiving that Swinburne's fine narrative, as well as his descriptive writing of other kinds, has a counterpart in the programme-music of some now bygone composers. It is even too descriptive, too imitative of things, and seems to out-run the province of words, somewhat as that did the province of notes. But, though this hunting, and checking, and floating, and flying in metre may be to strain the arts of prosody and diction, with

Page 24

how masterly a hand is the straining accomplished! The spear, the arrow, the attack, the charge, the footfall, the pinion, nay, the very stepping of the moon, the walk of the wind, are mimicked in this enchanting verse. Like to programme-music we must call it, but I wish the concert-platform had ever justified this slight perversion of aim, this excess—almost corruption—of one kind of skill, thus miraculously well.

Now, if Swinburne's exceptional faculty of diction led him to immoderate expressiveness, to immodest sweetness, to a jugglery, and prestidigitation, and conjuring of words, to transformations and transmutations of sound—if, I say, his extraordinary gift of diction brought him to this exaggeration of the manner, what a part does it not play in the matter of his poetry! So overweening a place does it take in this man's art that I believe the words to hold and use his meaning, rather than the meaning to compass and grasp and use the word. I believe that Swinburne's thoughts have their source, their home, their origin, their authority and mission in those two places—his own vocabulary and the passion of other men. This is a grave charge.

First, then, in regard to the passion of other men. I have given to his own emotion the puniest name I could find for it; I have no nobler name for his intellect. But other men had thoughts, other men had passions; political, sexual, natural, noble, vile, ideal, gross, rebellious, agonising, imperial, republican, cruel, compassionate; and with these he fed his verses. Upon these and their life he sustained, he fattened, he enriched his poetry. Mazzini in Italy, Gautier and Baudelaire in France, Shelley in England, made for him a base of passionate and intellectual supplies. With them he kept the all-necessary line of communication. We cease, as we see their active hearts possess his active art, to think a question as to his sincerity seriously worth asking; what sincerity he has is so absorbed in the one excited act of receptivity. That, indeed, he performs with all the will, all the precipitation, all the rush, all the surrender, all the wholehearted weakness of his subservient and impetuous nature. I have not named the Greeks, nor the English Bible, nor Milton, as his inspirers. These he would claim; they are not his. He received too partial, too fragmentary, too arbitrary an inheritance of the Greek spirit, too illusory an idea of Milton, of the English Bible little more than a tone;—this poet of eager, open capacity, this poet who is little more, intellectually, than a too-ready, too-vacant capacity, for those three august seventies has not room enough.



Page 25

Charged, then, with other men's purposes—this man's Italian patriotism; this man's love of sin (by that name, for sin has been denied, as a fiction, but Swinburne, following Baudelaire, acknowledges it to love it); this man's despite against the Third Empire or what not; this man's cry for a political liberty granted or gained long ago—a cry grown vain; this man's contempt for the Boers—nay, was it so much as a man, with a man's evil to answer for, that furnished him here; was it not rather that less guilty judge, the crowd?—this man's—nay, this boy's—erotic sickness, or his cruelty—charged with all these, Swinburne's poetry is primed; it explodes with thunder and fire. But such sharing is somewhat too familiar for dignity; such community of goods parodies the Franciscans. As one friar goes darned for another's rending, having no property in cassock or cowl, so does many a poet, not in humility, but in a paradox of pride, boast of the past of others. And yet one might rather choose to make use of one's fellow-men's old shoes than to put their old secrets to usufruct, and dress poetry in a motley of shed passions, twice corrupt. Promiscuity of love we have heard of; Pope was accused, by Lord Hervey's indignation and wit, of promiscuity of hatred, and of scattering his disfavours in the stews of an indiscriminate malignity; and here is another promiscuity—that of memories, and of a licence partaken.

But by the unanimous poets' splendid love of the landscape and the skies, by this also was Swinburne possessed, and in this he triumphed. By this, indeed, he profited; here he joined an innumerable company of that heavenly host of earth. Let us acknowledge then his honourable alacrity here, his quick fellowship, his agile adoption, and his filial tenderness—nay, his fraternal union with his poets. No tourist's admiration for all things French, no tourist's politics in Italy—and Swinburne's French and Italian admirations have the tourist manner of enthusiasm—prompts him here. Here he aspires to brotherhood with the supreme poets of supreme England, with the sixteenth century, the seventeenth, and the nineteenth, the impassioned centuries of song. Happy is he to be admitted among these, happy is he to merit by his wonderful voice to sing their raptures. Here is no humiliation in ready-made lendings; their ecstasy becomes him. He is glorious with them, and we can imagine this benign and indulgent Nature confounding together the sons she embraces, and making her poets—the primary and the secondary, the greater and the lesser—all equals in her arms. Let us see him in that company where he looks noble amongst the noble; let us not look upon him in the company of the ignoble, where he looks ignobler still, being servile to them; let us look upon him with the lyrical Shakespeare, with Vaughan, Blake, Wordsworth, Patmore, Meredith; not with Baudelaire and Gautier; with the poets of the forest and the sun, and not with those of the alcove. We can make peace with him for love of them; we can imagine them thankful to him who, poor and perverse in thought in so many pages, could yet join them in such a song as this:

Page 26

And her heart sprang in Iseult, and she drew
With all her spirit and life the sunrise through,
And through her lips the keen triumphant air
Sea-scented, sweeter than land-roses were,
And through her eyes the whole rejoicing east
Sun-satisfied, and all the heaven at feast
Spread for the morning; and the imperious mirth
Of wind and light that moved upon the earth,
Making the spring, and all the fruitful might
And strong regeneration of delight
That swells the seedling leaf and sapling man.

He, nevertheless, who was able, in high company, to hail the sea with such fine verse, was not ashamed, in low company, to sing the famous absurdities about “the lilies and languors of virtue and the roses and raptures of vice,” with many and many a passage of like character. I think it more generous, seeing I have differed so much from the Nineteenth Century’s chorus of excessive praise, to quote little from the vacant, the paltry, the silly—no word is so fit as that last little word—among his pages. Therefore, I have justified my praise, but not my blame. It is for the reader to turn to the justifying pages: to “A Song of Italy,” “Les Noyades,” “Hermaphroditus,” “Satia te Sanguine,” “Kissing her Hair,” “An Interlude,” “In a Garden,” or such a stanza as the one beginning

O thought illimitable and infinite heart
Whose blood is life in limbs indissolute
That all keep heartless thine invisible part
And inextirpable thy viewless root
Whence all sweet shafts of green and each thy dart
Of sharpening leaf and bud resundering shoot.

It is for the reader who has preserved rectitude of intellect, sincerity of heart, dignity of nerves, unhurried thoughts, an unexcited heart, and an ardour for poetry, to judge between such poems and an authentic passion, between such poems and truth, I will add between such poems and beauty.

Imagery is a great part of poetry; but out, alas! vocabulary has here too the upper hand. For in what is still sometimes called the magnificent chorus in “Atalanta” the words have swallowed not the thought only but the imagery. The poet’s grievance is that the pleasant streams flow into the sea. What would he have? The streams turned loose all over the unfortunate country? There is, it is true, the river Mole in Surrey. But I am not sure that some foolish imagery against the peace of the burrowing river might not be due from a poet of facility. I am not censuring any insincerity of thought; I am complaining of the insincerity of a paltry, shaky, and unvisionary image.



Having had recourse to the passion of stronger minds for his provision of emotions, Swinburne had direct recourse to his own vocabulary as a kind of “safe” wherein he stored what he needed for a song. Claudius stole the precious diadem of the kingdom from a shelf and put it in his pocket; Swinburne took from the shelf of literature—took with what art, what touch, what cunning, what complete skill!—the treasure of the language, and put it in his pocket.



Page 27

He is urgent with his booty of words, for he has no other treasure. Into his pocket he thrusts a hand groping for hatred, and draws forth “blood” or “Hell”—generally “Hell,” for I have counted many “Hells” in a quite short poem. In search of wrath he takes hold of “fire”; anxious for wildness he takes “foam,” for sweetness he brings out “flower,” much linked, so that “flower-soft” has almost become his, and not Shakespeare’s. For in that compound he labours to exaggerate Shakespeare, and by his insistence and iteration goes about to spoil for us the “flower-soft hands” of Cleopatra’s rudder-maiden; but he shall not spoil Shakespeare’s phrase for us. And behold, in all this fundamental fumbling Swinburne’s critics saw only a “mannerism,” if they saw even thus much offence.

One of the chief pocket-words was “Liberty.” O Liberty! what verse is committed in thy name! Or, to cite Madame Roland more accurately, O Liberty, how have they “run” thee!

Who, it has been well asked by a citizen of a modern free country, is thoroughly free except a fish? *Et encore*—even the “silent and footless herds” may have more inter-accommodation than we are aware. But in the pocket of the secondary poet how easy and how ready a word is this, a word implying old and true heroisms, but significant here of an excitable poet’s economies. Yes, economies of thought and passion. This poet, who is conspicuously the poet of excess, is in deeper truth the poet of penury and defect.

And here is a pocket-word which might have astonished us had we not known how little anyway it signified. It occurs in something customary about Italy:

Hearest thou,
Italia? Tho’ deaf sloth hath sealed thine ears,
The world has heard thy children—and God hears.

Was ever thought so pouched, so produced, so surely a handful of loot, as the last thought of this verse?

What, finally, is his influence upon the language he has ransacked? A temporary laying-waste, undoubtedly. That is, the contemporary use of his vocabulary is spoilt, his beautiful words are wasted, spent, squandered, *gaspilles*. The contemporary use—I will not say the future use, for no critic should prophesy. But the past he has not been able to violate. He has had no power to rob of their freshness the sixteenth-century flower, the seventeenth-century fruit, or by his violence to shake from either a drop of their dews.

At the outset I warned the judges and the pronouncers of sentences how this poet, with other poets of quite different character, would escape their summaries, and he has indeed refuted that maxim which I had learned at illustrious knees, “You may not dissociate the matter and manner of any of the greatest poets; the two are so fused by

integrity of fire, whether in tragedy or epic or in the simplest song, that the sundering is the vainest task of criticism." But I cannot read Swinburne and not be compelled



Page 28

to divide his secondhand and enfeebled and excited matter from the successful art of his word. Of that word Francis Thompson has said again, "It imposes a law on the sense." Therefore, he too perceived that fatal division. Is, then, the wisdom of the maxim confounded? Or is Swinburne's a "single and excepted case"? Excepted by a thousand degrees of talent from any generality fitting the obviously lesser poets, but, possibly, also excepted by an essential inferiority from this great maxim fitting only the greatest?

CHARLOTTE AND EMILY BRONTE

The controversy here is with those who admire Charlotte Bronte throughout her career. She altered greatly. She did, in fact, inherit a manner of English that had been strained beyond restoration, fatigued beyond recovery, by the "corrupt following" of Gibbon; and there was within her a sense of propriety that caused her to conform. Straitened and serious elder daughter of her time, she kept the house of literature. She practised those verbs, to evince, to reside, to intimate, to peruse. She wrote "communicating instruction" for teaching; "an extensive and eligible connexion"; "a small competency"; "an establishment on the Continent"; "It operated as a barrier to further intercourse"; and of a child (with a singular unfitness with childhood) "For the toys he possesses he seems to have contracted a partiality amounting to affection." I have been already reproached for a word on Gibbon written by way of parenthesis in the course of an appreciation of some other author. Let me, therefore, repeat that I am writing of the corrupt following of that apostle and not of his own style. Gibbon's grammar is frequently weak, but the corrupt followers have something worse than poor grammar. Gibbon set the fashion of "the latter" and "the former." Our literature was for at least half a century strewn with the wreckage of Gibbon. "After suppressing a competitor who had assumed the purple at Mentz, he refused to gratify his troops with the plunder of the rebellious city," writes the great historian. When Mr. Micawber confesses "gratifying emotions of no common description" he conforms to a lofty and a distant Gibbon. So does Mr. Pecksniff when he says of the copper-founder's daughter that she "has shed a vision on my path refulgent in its nature." And when an author, in a work on "The Divine Comedy," recently told us that Paolo and Francesca were to receive from Dante "such alleviation as circumstances would allow," that also is a shattered, a waste Gibbon, a waif of Gibbon. For Johnson less than Gibbon inflated the English our fathers inherited; because Johnson did not habitually or often use imagery, whereas Gibbon did use habitual imagery, and such use is what deprives a language of elasticity, and leaves it either rigid or languid, oftener languid. Encumbered by this drift and refuse of English, Charlotte Bronte yet achieved the miracle of her vocabulary. It is less wonderful that she should have appeared out of such a parsonage than that she should have arisen out of such a language.



Page 29

A re-reading of her works is always a new amazing of her reader who turns back to review the harvest of her English. It must have been with rapture that she claimed her own simplicity. And with what a moderation, how temperately, and how seldom she used her mastery! To the last she has an occasional attachment to her bonds; for she was not only fire and air. In one passage of her life she may remind us of the little colourless and thrifty hen-bird that Lowell watched nest-building with her mate, and cutting short the flutterings and billings wherewith he would joyously interrupt the business; Charlotte's nesting bird was a clergyman. He came, lately affianced, for a week's visit to her parsonage, and she wrote to her friend before his arrival: "My little plans have been disarranged by an intimation that Mr.—is coming on Monday"; and afterwards, in reference to her sewing, "he hindered me for a full week."

In alternate pages *Villette* is a book of spirit and fire, and a novel of illiberal rancour, of ungenerous, uneducated anger, ungentle, ignoble. In order to forgive its offences, we have to remember in its author's favour not her pure style set free, not her splendour in literature, but rather the immeasurable sorrow of her life. To read of that sorrow again is to open once more a wound which most men perhaps, certainly most women, received into their hearts in childhood. For the *Life of Charlotte Bronte* is one of the first books of biography put into the hands of a child, to whom *Jane Eyre* is allowed only in passages. We are young when we first hear in what narrow beds "the three are laid"—the two sisters and the brother—and in what a bed of living insufferable memories the one left lay alone, reviewing the hours of their death—alone in the sealed house that was only less narrow than their graves. The rich may set apart and dedicate a room, the poor change their street, but Charlotte Bronte, in the close captivity of the fortunes of mediocrity, rested in the chair that had been her dying sister's, and held her melancholy bridals in the dining room that had been the scene of terrible and reluctant death.

But closer than the conscious house was the conscious mind. Locked with intricate wards within the unrelaxing and unlapsing thoughts of this lonely sister, dwelt a sorrow inconsolable. It is well for the perpetual fellowship of mankind that no child should read this life and not take therefrom a perdurable scar, albeit her heart was somewhat frigid towards childhood, and she died before her motherhood could be born.



Page 30

Mistress of some of the best prose of her century, Charlotte Bronte was subject to a Lewes, a Chorley, a Miss Martineau: that is, she suffered what in Italian is called *soggezione* in their presence. When she had met six minor contemporary writers—by-products of literature—at dinner, she had a headache and a sleepless night. She writes to her friend that these contributors to the quarterly press are greatly feared in literary London, and there is in her letter a sense of tremor and exhaustion. And what nights did the heads of the critics undergo after the meeting? Lewes, whose own romances are all condoned, all forgiven by time and oblivion, who gave her lessons, who told her to study Jane Austen? The others, whose reviews doubtless did their proportionate part in still further hunting and harring the tired English of their day? And before Harriet Martineau she bore herself reverently. Harriet Martineau, albeit a woman of masculine understanding (we may imagine we hear her contemporaries give her the title), could not thread her way safely in and out of two or three negatives, but wrote—about this very Charlotte Bronte: “I did not consider the book a coarse one, though I could not answer for it that there were no traits which, on a second leisurely reading, I might not dislike.” Mrs. Gaskell quotes the passage with no consciousness of anything amiss.

As for Lewes’s vanished lesson upon the methods of Jane Austen, it served one only sufficient purpose. Itself is not quoted by anyone alive, but Charlotte Bronte’s rejoinder adds one to our little treasury of her incomparable pages. If they were twenty, they are twenty-one by the addition of this, written in a long-neglected letter and saved for us by Mr. Shorter’s research, for I believe his is the only record: “What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—that Miss Austen ignores.”

When the author of *Jane Eyre* faltered before six authors, more or less, at dinner in London, was it the writer of her second-class English who was shy? or was it the author of the passages here to follow?—and therefore one for whom the national tongue was much the better? There can be little doubt. The Charlotte Bronte who used the English of a world long corrupted by “one good custom”—the good custom of Gibbon’s Latinity grown fatally popular—could at any time hold up her head amongst her reviewers; for her there was no sensitive interior solitude in that society. She who covered was the Charlotte who made Rochester recall “the simple yet sagacious grace” of Jane’s first smile; she who wrote: “I looked at my love; it shivered in my heart like a suffering child in a cold cradle”; who wrote: “To see what a heavy lid day slowly lifted, what a wan glance she flung upon the hills, you would have thought the

Page 31

sun's fire quenched in last night's floods." This new genius was solitary and afraid, and touched to the quick by the eyes and voice of judges. In her worse style there was no "quick." Latin-English, whether scholarly or unscholarly, is the mediate tongue. An unscholarly Latin-English is proof against the world. The scholarly Latin-English wherefrom it is disastrously derived is, in its own nobler measure, a defence against more august assaults than those of criticism. In the strength of it did Johnson hold parley with his profounder sorrows—hold parley (by his phrase), make terms (by his definition), give them at last lodging and entertainment after sentence and treaty.

And the meaner office of protection against reviewers and the world was doubtless done by the meaner Latinity. The author of the phrase "The child contracted a partiality for his toys" had no need to fear any authors she might meet at dinner. Against Charlotte Bronte's sorrows her worse manner of English never stands for a moment. Those vain phrases fall from before her face and her bared heart. To the heart, to the heart she took the shafts of her griefs. She tells them therefore as she suffered them, vitally and mortally. "A great change approached. Affliction came in that shape which to anticipate is dread; to look back on, grief. My sister Emily first declined. Never in all her life had she lingered over any task that lay before her, and she did not linger now. She made haste to leave us." "I remembered where the three were laid—in what narrow, dark dwellings." "Do you know this place? No, you never saw it; but you recognize the nature of these trees, this foliage—the cypress, the willow, the yew. Stone crosses like these are not unfamiliar to you, nor are these dim garlands of everlasting flowers. Here is the place." "Then the watcher approaches the patient's pillow, and sees a new and strange moulding of the familiar features, feels at once that the insufferable moment draws nigh." In the same passage comes another single word of genius, "the sound that so wastes our strength." And, fine as "wastes," is the "wronged" of another sentence—"some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird."

It is easy to gather such words, more difficult to separate the best from such a mingled page as that on "Imagination": "A spirit, softer and better than human reason, had descended with quiet flight to the waste"; and "My hunger has this good angel appeased with food sweet and strange"; and "This daughter of Heaven remembered me to-night; she saw me weep, and she came with comfort; 'Sleep,' she said, 'sleep sweetly—I gild thy dreams.'" "Was this feeling dead? I do not know, but it was buried. Sometimes I thought the tomb unquiet."

Perhaps the most "eloquent" pages are unluckily those wherein we miss the friction—friction of water to the oar, friction of air to the pinion—friction that sensibly proves the use, the buoyancy, the act of language. Sometimes an easy eloquence resembles the easy labours of the daughters of Danaus. To draw water in a sieve is an easy art, rapid and relaxed.



Page 32

But no laxity is ever, I think, to be found in her brief passages of landscape. “The keen, still cold of the morning was succeeded, later in the day, by a sharp breathing from the Russian wastes; the cold zone sighed over the temperate zone and froze it fast.” “Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work would he fold the wings whose waft was thunder, the tremor of whose plumes was storm.” “The night is not calm: the equinox still struggles in its storms. The wild rains of the day are abated: the great single cloud disappears and rolls away from Heaven, not passing and leaving a sea all sapphire, but tossed buoyant before a continued, long-sounding, high-rushing moonlight tempest. . . No Endymion will watch for his goddess to-night: there are no flocks on the mountains.” See, too, this ocean: “The sway of the whole Great Deep above a herd of whales rushing through the livid and liquid thunder down from the frozen zone.” And this promise of the visionary Shirley: “I am to be walking by myself on deck, rather late of an August evening, watching and being watched by a full harvest moon: something is to rise white on the surface of the sea, over which that moon mounts silent, and hangs glorious. . . I think I hear it cry with an articulate voice. . . I show you an image fair as alabaster emerging from the dim wave.”

Charlotte Bronte knew well the experience of dreams. She seems to have undergone the inevitable dream of mourners—the human dream of the Labyrinth, shall I call it? the uncertain spiritual journey in search of the waiting and sequestered dead, which is the obscure subject of the “Eurydice” of Coventry Patmore’s Odes. There is the lately dead, in exile, remote, betrayed, foreign, indifferent, sad, forsaken by some vague malice or neglect, sought by troubled love astray.

In Charlotte Bronte’s page there is an autumnal and tempestuous dream. “A nameless experience that had the hue, the mien, the terror, the very tone of a visitation from eternity. . . Suffering brewed in temporal or calculable measure tastes not as this suffering tasted.” Finally, is there any need to cite the passage of *Jane Eyre* that contains the avowal, the vigil in the garden? Those are not words to be forgotten. Some tell you that a fine style will give you the memory of a scene and not of the recording words that are the author’s means. And others again would have the phrase to be remembered foremost. Here, then, in *Jane Eyre*, are both memories equal. The night is perceived, the phrase is an experience; both have their place in the reader’s irrevocable past. “Custom intervened between me and what I naturally and inevitably loved.” “Jane, do you hear that nightingale singing in the wood?” “A waft of wind came sweeping down the laurel walk, and trembled through the boughs of the chestnut; it wandered away to an infinite distance. . . The nightingale’s voice was then the only voice of the hour; in listening I again wept.”



Page 33

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Whereas Charlotte Bronte walked, with exultation and enterprise, upon the road of symbols, under the guidance of her own visiting genius, Emily seldom went out upon those far avenues. She was one who practised imagery sparingly. Her style had the key of an inner prose which seems to leave imagery behind in the way of approaches—the apparelled and arrayed approaches and ritual of literature—and so to go further and to be admitted among simple realities and antitypes.

Charlotte Bronte also knew that simple goal, but she loved her imagery. In the passage of *Jane Eyre* that tells of the return to Thornfield Hall, in ruins by fire, she bespeaks her reader's romantic attention to an image which in truth is not all golden. She has moments, on the other hand, of pure narrative, whereof each word is such a key as I spoke of but now, and unlocks an inner and an inner plain door of spiritual realities. There is, perhaps, no author who, simply telling what happened, tells it with so great a significance: "Jane, did you hear that nightingale singing in the wood?" and "She made haste to leave us." But her characteristic calling is to images, those avenues and temples oracular, and to the vision of symbols.

You may hear the poet of great imagery praised as a great mystic. Nevertheless, although a great mystical poet makes images, he does not do so in his greatest moments. He is a great mystic, because he has a full vision of the mystery of realities, not because he has a clear invention of similitudes.

Of many thousand kisses the poor last,
and
Now with his love, now in the colde grave
are lines on the yonder side of imagery. So is this line also:
Sad with the promise of a different sun,
and
Piteous passion keen at having found,
After exceeding ill, a little good.

Shakespeare, Chaucer and Patmore yield us these great examples. Imagery is for the time when, as in these lines, the shock of feeling (which must needs pass, as the heart beats and pauses) is gone by:



Thy heart with dead winged innocence filled,
Even as a nest with birds,
After the old ones by the hawk are killed.

I cite these lines of Patmore's because of their imagery in a poem that without them would be insupportably close to spiritual facts; and because it seems to prove with what a yielding hand at play the poet of realities holds his symbols for a while. A great writer is both a major and a minor mystic, in the self-same poem; now suddenly close to his mystery (which is his greater moment) and anon making it mysterious with imagery (which is the moment of his most beautiful lines).

The student passes delighted through the several courts of poetry, from the outer to the inner, from riches to more imaginative riches, and from decoration to more complex decoration; and prepares himself for the greater opulence of the innermost chamber. But when he crosses the last threshold he finds this mid-most sanctuary to be a hypaethral temple, and in its custody and care a simple earth and a space of sky.



Page 34

Emily Bronte seems to have a nearly unparalleled unconsciousness of the delays, the charms, the pauses and preparations of imagery. Her strength does not dally with the parenthesis, and her simplicity is ignorant of those rites. Her lesser work, therefore, is plain narrative, and her greater work is no more. On the hither side—the daily side—of imagery she is still a strong and solitary writer; on the yonder side she has written some of the most mysterious passages in all plain prose. And with what direct and incommunicable art! “Let me alone, let me alone,” said Catherine. ‘If I’ve done wrong, I’m dying for it. You left me too . . . I forgive you. Forgive me!’ ‘It is hard to forgive, and to look at those eyes and feel those wasted hands,’ he answered. ‘Kiss me again, and don’t let me see your eyes! I forgive what you have done to me. I love my murderer—but *yours*! How can I?’ They were silent, their faces hid against each other, and washed by each other’s tears.” “So much the worse for me that I am strong,” cries Heathcliff in the same scene. “Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be when you—Oh God, would you like to live with your soul in the grave?”

Charlotte Bronte’s noblest passages are her own speech or the speech of one like herself acting the central part in the dreams and dramas of emotion that she had kept from her girlhood—the unavowed custom of the ordinary girl by her so splendidly avowed in a confidence that comprised the world. Emily had no such confessions to publish. She contrived—but the word does not befit her singular spirit of liberty, that knew nothing of stealth—to remove herself from the world; as her person left no pen-portrait, so her “I” is not heard here. She lends her voice in disguise to her men and women; the first narrator of her great romance is a young man, the second a servant woman; this one or that among the actors takes up the story, and her great words sound at times in paltry mouths. It is then that for a moment her reader seems about to come into her immediate presence, but by a fiction she denies herself to him. To a somewhat trivial girl (or a girl who would be trivial in any other book, but Emily Bronte seems unable to create anything consistently meagre)—to Isabella Linton she commits one of her most memorable passages, and one which has the rare image, one of a terrifying little company of visions amid terrifying facts: “His attention was roused, I saw, for his eyes rained down tears among the ashes. . . The clouded windows of hell flashed for a moment towards me; the fiend which usually looked out was so dimmed and drowned.” But in Heathcliff’s own speech there is no veil or circumstance. “I’m too happy; and yet I’m not happy enough. My soul’s bliss kills my body, but does not satisfy itself.” “I have to remind myself to breathe, and almost to remind my heart to beat.” “Being alone, and conscious two yards of loose earth was



Page 35

the sole barrier between us, I said to myself: 'I'll have her in my arms again.' If she be cold, I'll think it is this north wind that chills me; and if she be motionless, it is sleep." What art, moreover, what knowledge, what a fresh ear for the clash of repetition; what a chime in that phrase: "I dreamt I was sleeping the last sleep by that sleeper, with my heart stopped, and my cheek frozen against hers."

Emily Bronte was no student of books. It was not from among the fruits of any other author's labour that she gathered these eminent words. But I think I have found the suggestion of this action of Heathcliff's—the disinterment. Not in any inspiring ancient Irish legend, as has been suggested, did Emily Bronte find her incident; she found it (but she made, and did not find, its beauty) in a mere costume romance of Bulwer Lytton, whom Charlotte Bronte, as we know, did not admire. And Emily showed no sign at all of admiration when she did him so much honour as to borrow the action of his studio-bravo.

Heathcliff's love for Catherine's past childhood is one of the profound surprises of this unparalleled book; it is to call her childish ghost—the ghost of the little girl—when she has been a dead adult woman twenty years that the inhuman lover opens the window of the house on the Heights. Something is this that the reader knew not how to look for. Another thing known to genius and beyond a reader's hope is the tempestuous purity of those passions. This wild quality of purity has a counterpart in the brief passages of nature that make the summers, the waters, the woods, and the windy heights of that murderous story seem so sweet. The "beck" that was audible beyond the hills after rain, the "heath on the top of Wuthering Heights" whereon, in her dream of Heaven, Catherine, flung out by angry angels, awoke sobbing for joy; the bird whose feathers she—delirious creature—plucks from the pillow of her deathbed ("This—I should know it among a thousand—it's a lapwing's. Bonny bird; wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds had touched the swells and it felt rain coming"); the only two white spots of snow left on all the moors, and the brooks brim-full; the old apple-trees, the smell of stocks and wallflowers in the brief summer, the few fir-trees by Catherine's window-bars, the early moon—I know not where are landscapes more exquisite and natural. And among the signs of death where is any fresher than the window seen from the garden to be swinging open in the morning, when Heathcliff lay within, dead and drenched with rain?

None of these things are presented by images. Nor is that signal passage wherewith the book comes to a close. Be it permitted to cite it here again. It has taken its place, it is among the paragons of our literature. Our language will not lapse or derogate while this prose stands for appeal: "I lingered . . . under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells, listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth."



Page 36

Finally, of Emily Bronte's face the world holds only an obviously unskilled reflection, and of her aspect no record worth having. Wild fugitive, she vanished, she escaped, she broke away, exiled by the neglect of her contemporaries, banished by their disrespect outlawed by their contempt, dismissed by their indifference. And such an one was she as might rather have pronounced upon these the sentence passed by Coriolanus under sentence of expulsion; she might have driven the world from before her face and cast it out from her presence as he condemned his Romans: "I banish you."

CHARMIAN

"She is not Cleopatra, but she is at least Charmian," wrote Keats, conscious that his damsel was not in the vanward of the pageant of ladies. One may divine that he counted the ways wherein she was not Cleopatra, the touches whereby she fell short of and differed from, nay, in which she mimicked, the Queen.

In like manner many of us have for some years past boasted of our appreciation of the inferior beauty, the substitute, the waiting gentlewoman of corrupt or corruptible heart; Keats confessed, but did not boast. It is a vaunt now, an emulation, who shall discover her beauty, who shall discern her.

She is most conspicuous in the atmosphere in smoke "effects," in the "lurid," the "mystery"; such are the perfervid words. But let us take the natural and authentic light as our symbol of Cleopatra, her sprightly port, her infinite jest, her bluest vein, her variety, her laugh. "O Eastern star!"

Men in cities look upward not much more than animals, and these—except the dog when he bays the moon—look skyward not at all. The events of the sky do not come and go for the citizens, do not visibly approach and withdraw, threaten and pardon; they merely happen. And even when the sun so condescends as to face them at the level of their own horizon (say from the western end of the Bayswater Road), when he searches out the eyes that have neglected him all day, finds a way between their narrowing lids, looks straight into their unwelcoming pupils, explores the careful wrinkles, singles and numbers the dull hairs, even, I say, to sudden sunset in our dim climate, the Londoner makes no reply; he would rather look into puddles than into the pools of light among clouds.

Yet the light is as characteristic of a country as is its landscape. So that I would travel for the sake of a character of early morning, for a quality of noonday, or a tone of afternoon, or an accident of moonrise, or a colour of dusk, at least as far as for a mountain, a cathedral, rivers, or men. The light is more important than what it illuminates. When Mr. Tomkins—a person of Dickens's earliest invention—calls his fellow-boarders from the breakfast-table to the window, and with emotion shows them

the effect of sunshine upon the left side of a neighbouring chimney-pot, he is far from cutting



Page 37

the grotesque figure that the humourist intended to point out to banter. I am not sure that the chimney-pot with the pure light upon it was not more beautiful than a whole black Greek or a whole black Gothic building in the adulterated light of a customary London day. Nor is the pleasure that many writers, and a certain number of painters, tell us they owe to such adulteration anything other than a sign of derogation—in a word, a pleasure in the secondary thing.

Are we the better artists for our preference of the waiting-woman? It is a strange claim. The search for the beauty of the less-beautiful is a modern enterprise, ingenious in its minor pranks, insolent in its greater. And its chief ignobility is the love of marred, defiled, disordered, dulled, and imperfect skies, the skies of cities.

Some will tell us that the unveiled light is too clear or sharp for art. So much the worse for art; but even on that plea the limitations of art are better respected by natural mist, cloudy gloom of natural rain, natural twilight before night, or natural twilight—Corot's—before day, than by the artificial dimness of our unlovely towns. Those, too, who praise the “mystery” of smoke are praising rather a mystification than a mystery; and must be unaware of the profounder mysteries of light. Light is all mystery when you face the sun, and every particle of the innumerable atmosphere carries its infinitesimal shadow.

Moreover, it is only in some parts of the world that we should ask for even natural veils. In California we may, not because the light is too luminous, but because it is not tender. Clear and not tender in California, tender and not clear in England; light in Italy and in Greece is both tender and clear.

When one complains of the ill-luck of modern utilities, the sympathetic listener is apt to agree, but to agree wrongly by denouncing the electric light as something modern to be deplored. But the electric light is the one success of the last century. It is never out of harmony with natural things—villages, ancient streets of cities, where it makes the most beautiful of all street-lighting, swung from house to opposite house in Genoa or Rome. With no shock, except a shock of pleasure, does the judicious traveller, entering some small sub-alpine hamlet, find the electric light, fairly, sparingly spaced, slung from tree to tree over the little road, and note it again in the frugal wine-shop, and solitary and clear over the church portal.

Yet, forsooth, if yielding to the suggestions of your restless hobby, you denounce, in any company, the spoiling of your Italy, the hearer, calling up a “mumping visnomy,” thinks he echoes your complaint by his sigh, “Ah, yes—the electric light; you meet it everywhere now; so modern, so disenchanting.” It is, on the contrary, enchanting. It is as natural as lightning. By all means let all the waterfalls in all the Alps be “harnessed,”



Page 38

as the lamentation runs, if their servitude gives us electric light. For thus the power of the waterfall kindles a lovely lamp. All this to be done by the simple force of gravitation—the powerful fall of water. “Wonderful, all that water coming down!” cried the tourist at Niagara, and the Irishman said, “Why wouldn’t it?” He recognised the simplicity of that power. It is a second-rate passion—that for the waterfall, and often exacting in regard to visitors from town. “I trudged unwillingly,” says Dr. Johnson, “and was not sorry to find it dry.” It was very, very second-rate of an American admirer of scenery to name a waterfall in the Yosemite Valley (and it bears the name to-day) the “Bridal Veil.” His Indian predecessor had called it, because it was most audible in menacing weather, “The Voice of the Evil Wind.” In fact, your cascade is dearer to every sentimentalist than the sky. Standing near the folding-over place of Niagara, at the top of the fall, I looked across the perpetual rainbow of the foam, and saw the whole further sky deflowered by the formless, edgeless, languid, abhorrent murk of smoke from the nearest town. Much rather would I see that water put to use than the sky so outraged. As it is, only by picking one’s way between cities can one walk under, or as it were in, a pure sky. The horizon in Venice is thick and ochreous, and no one cares; the sky of Milan is defiled all round. In England I must choose a path alertly; and so does now and then a wary, fortunate, fastidious wind that has so found his exact, uncharted way, between this smoke and that, as to clear me a clean moonrise, and heavenly heavens.

There was an ominous prophecy to Charmian. “You shall outlive the lady whom you serve.” She has outlived her in every city in Europe; but only for the time of setting straight her crown—the last servility. She could not live but by comparison with the Queen.

THE CENTURY OF MODERATION

After a long literary revolt—one of the recurrences of imperishable Romance—against the eighteenth-century authors, a reaction was due, and it has come about roundly. We are guided back to admiration of the measure and moderation and shapeliness of the Augustan age. And indeed it is well enough that we should compare—not necessarily check—some of our habits of thought and verse by the mediocrity of thought and perfect propriety of diction of Pope’s best contemporaries. If this were all! But the eighteenth century was not content with its sure and certain genius. Suddenly and repeatedly it aspired to a “noble rage.” It is not to the wild light hearts of the seventeenth century that we must look for extreme conceits and for extravagance, but to the later age, to the faultless, to the frigid, dissatisfied with their own propriety. There were straws, I confess, in the hair of the older poets; the eighteenth-century men stuck straws in their periwigs.



Page 39

That time—surpassing and correcting the century then just past in “taste”—was resolved to make a low leg to no age, antique or modern, in the chapter of the passions—nay, to show the way, to fire the nations. Addison taught himself, as his hero “taught the doubtful battle,” “where to rage.” And in the later years of the same literary century Johnson himself summoned the lapsed and alien and reluctant fury. Take such a word as “madded”—“the madded land”; there indeed is a word created for the noble rage, as the eighteenth century understood it. Look you, Johnson himself could lodge the fury in his responsible breast:

And dubious title shakes the madded land.

There is no author of that time of moderation and good sense who does not thus more or less eat a crocodile. It is not necessary to go to the bad poets; we need go no lower than the good.

And gasping Furies thirst for blood in vain,

says Pope seriously (but the sense of burlesque never leaves the reader). Also

There purple vengeance bath'd in gore retires.

In the only passage of the *Dunciad* meant to be poetic and not ironic and spiteful, he has “the panting gales” of a garden he describes. Match me such an absurdity among the “conceits” of the age preceding!

A noble and ingenious author, so called by high authority but left anonymous, pretends (it is always pretending with these people, never fine fiction or a frank lie) that on the tomb of Virgil he had had a vision of that deceased poet:

Crowned with eternal bays my ravished eyes
Beheld the poet's awful form arise.

Virgil tells the noble and ingenious one that if Pope will but write upon some graver themes,

Envy to black Cocytus shall retire
And howl with furies in tormenting fire.

“Genius,” says another authoritative writer in prose, “is caused by a furious joy and pride of soul.”

If, leaving the great names, we pass in review the worse poets we find, in Pope's essay “On the Art of Sinking in Poetry,” things like these, gathered from the grave writings of his contemporaries:



In flaming heaps the raging ocean rolls,
Whose livid waves involve despairing souls;
The liquid burnings dreadful colours shew,
Some deeply red, and others faintly blue.

And a war-horse!

His eye-balls burn, he wounds the smoking plain,
And knots of scarlet ribbon deck his mane.

And a demon!

Provoking demons all restraint remove.

Here is more eighteenth-century “propriety”:

The hills forget they’re fixed, and in their fright
Cast off their weight, and ease themselves for flight.
The woods, with terror winged, out-fly the wind,
And leave the heavy, panting hills behind.

Again, from Nat Lee’s *Alexander the Great*:



Page 40

When Glory, like the dazzling eagle, stood
Perched on my beaver in the Granic flood;
When Fortune's self my standard trembling bore,
And the pale Fates stood 'frighted on the shore.

Of these lines, with another couplet, Dr. Warburton said that they “contain not only the most sublime but the most judicious imagery that poetry could conceive or paint.” And here are lines from a tragedy, for me anonymous:

Should the fierce North, upon his frozen wings,
Bear him aloft above the wondering clouds,
And seat him in the Pleiads' golden chariot,
Thence should my fury drag him down to tortures.

Again:

Kiss, while I watch thy swimming eye-balls roll,
Watch thy last gasp, and catch thy springing soul.

It was the age of common-sense, we are told, and truly; but of common-sense now and then dissatisfied, common-sense here and there ambitious, common-sense of a distinctively adult kind taking on an innocent tone. I find this little affectation in Pope's word “sky” where a simpler poet would have “skies” or “heavens.” Pope has “sky” more than once, and always with a little false air of simplicity. And one instance occurs in that masterly and most beautiful poem, the “Elegy on an Unfortunate Lady”:

Is there no bright reversion in the sky?

“Yes, my boy, we may hope so,” is the reader's implicit mental aside, if the reader be a man of humour. Let me, however, suggest no disrespect towards this lovely elegy, of which the last eight lines have an inimitable greatness, a tenderness and passion which the “Epistle of Eloisa” makes convulsive movements to attain but never attains. And yet how could one, by an example, place the splendid seventeenth century in closer—in slighter yet more significant—comparison with the eighteenth than thus? Here is Ben Jonson:

What beckoning ghost, besprent with April dew,
Hails me so solemnly to yonder yew?

And this is Pope's improvement:

What beckoning ghost along the moonlight shade
Invites my steps, and points to yonder glade?



But Pope follows this insipid couplet with two lines as exquisitely and nobly modulated as anything I know in that national metre:

'Tis she! but why that bleeding bosom gored,
Why dimly gleams the visionary sword?

That indeed is “music” in English verse—the counterpart of a great melody, not of a tune.

The eighteenth century matched its desire for wildness in poetry with a like craving in gardens. The symmetrical and architectural garden, so magnificent in Italy, and stately though more rigid and less glorious in France, was scorned by the eighteenth-century poet-gardeners. Why? Because it was “artificial,” and the eighteenth century must have “nature”—nay passion. There seems to be some plan of passion in Pope’s grotto, stuck with spar and little shells.

Page 41

Truly the age of the "Rape of the Lock" and the "Elegy" was an age of great wit and great poetry. Yet it was untrue to itself. I think no other century has cherished so persistent a self-conscious incongruity. As the century of good sense and good couplets it might have kept uncompromised the dignity we honour. But such inappropriate pranks have come to pass in history now and again. The Bishop of Hereford, in merry Barnsdale, "danced in his boots"; but he was coerced by Robin Hood.