

# **The Rhythm of Life eBook**

## **The Rhythm of Life by Alice Meynell**

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## THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

If life is not always poetical, it is at least metrical. Periodicity rules over the mental experience of man, according to the path of the orbit of his thoughts. Distances are not gauged, ellipses not measured, velocities not ascertained, times not known. Nevertheless, the recurrence is sure. What the mind suffered last week, or last year, it does not suffer now; but it will suffer again next week or next year. Happiness is not a matter of events; it depends upon the tides of the mind. Disease is metrical, closing in at shorter and shorter periods towards death, sweeping abroad at longer and longer intervals towards recovery. Sorrow for one cause was intolerable yesterday, and will be intolerable tomorrow; today it is easy to bear, but the cause has not passed. Even the burden of a spiritual distress unsolved is bound to leave the heart to a temporary peace; and remorse itself does not remain—it returns. Gaiety takes us by a dear surprise. If we had made a course of notes of its visits, we might have been on the watch, and would have had an expectation instead of a discovery. No one makes such observations; in all the diaries of students of the interior world, there have never come to light the records of the Kepler of such cycles. But Thomas a Kempis knew of the recurrences, if he did not measure them. In his cell alone with the elements—'What wouldst thou more than these? for out of these were all things made'—he learnt the stay to be found in the depth of the hour of bitterness, and the remembrance that restrains the soul at the coming of the moment of delight, giving it a more conscious welcome, but presaging for it an inexorable flight. And 'rarely, rarely comest thou,' sighed Shelley, not to Delight merely, but to the Spirit of Delight. Delight can be compelled beforehand, called, and constrained to our service—Ariel can be bound to a daily task; but such artificial violence throws life out of metre, and it is not the spirit that is thus compelled. *That* flits upon an orbit elliptically or parabolically or hyperbolically curved, keeping no man knows what trysts with Time.

It seems fit that Shelley and the author of the *Imitation* should both have been keen and simple enough to perceive these flights, and to guess at the order of this periodicity. Both souls were in close touch with the spirits of their several worlds, and no deliberate human rules, no infractions of the liberty and law of the universal movement, kept from them the knowledge of recurrences. *Eppur si muove*. They knew that presence does not exist without absence; they knew that what is just upon its flight of farewell is already on its long path of return. They knew that what is approaching to the very touch is hastening towards departure. 'O wind,' cried Shelley, in autumn,

'O wind,  
If winter comes, can spring be far behind?'

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They knew that the flux is equal to the reflux; that to interrupt with unlawful recurrences, out of time, is to weaken the impulse of onset and retreat; the sweep and impetus of movement. To live in constant efforts after an equal life, whether the equality be sought in mental production, or in spiritual sweetness, or in the joy of the senses, is to live without either rest or full activity. The souls of certain of the saints, being singularly simple and single, have been in the most complete subjection to the law of periodicity. Ecstasy and desolation visited them by seasons. They endured, during spaces of vacant time, the interior loss of all for which they had sacrificed the world. They rejoiced in the uncovenanted beatitude of sweetness alighting in their hearts. Like them are the poets whom, three times or ten times in the course of a long life, the Muse has approached, touched, and forsaken. And yet hardly like them; not always so docile, nor so wholly prepared for the departure, the brevity, of the golden and irrevocable hour. Few poets have fully recognised the metrical absence of their Muse. For full recognition is expressed in one only way—silence.

It has been found that several tribes in Africa and in America worship the moon, and not the sun; a great number worship both; but no tribes are known to adore the sun, and not the moon. For the periodicity of the sun is still in part a secret; but that of the moon is modestly apparent, perpetually influential. On her depend the tides; and she is Selene, mother of Herse, bringer of the dews that recurrently irrigate lands where rain is rare. More than any other companion of earth is she the Measurer. Early Indo-Germanic languages knew her by that name. Her metrical phases are the symbol of the order of recurrence. Constancy in approach and in departure is the reason of her inconstancies. Juliet will not receive a vow spoken in invocation of the moon; but Juliet did not live to know that love itself has tidal times—lapses and ebbs which are due to the metrical rule of the interior heart, but which the lover vainly and unkindly attributes to some outward alteration in the beloved. For man—except those elect already named—is hardly aware of periodicity. The individual man either never learns it fully, or learns it late. And he learns it so late, because it is a matter of cumulative experience upon which cumulative evidence is lacking. It is in the after-part of each life that the law is learnt so definitely as to do away with the hope or fear of continuance. That young sorrow comes so near to despair is a result of this young ignorance. So is the early hope of great achievement. Life seems so long, and its capacity so great, to one who knows nothing of all the intervals it needs must hold—intervals between aspirations, between actions, pauses as inevitable as the pauses of sleep. And life looks impossible to the young unfortunate,



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unaware of the inevitable and unfailing refreshment. It would be for their peace to learn that there is a tide in the affairs of men, in a sense more subtle—if it is not too audacious to add a meaning to Shakespeare—than the phrase was meant to contain. Their joy is flying away from them on its way home; their life will wax and wane; and if they would be wise, they must wake and rest in its phases, knowing that they are ruled by the law that commands all things—a sun's revolutions and the rhythmic pangs of maternity.

### DECIVILISED

The difficulty of dealing—in the course of any critical duty—with decivilised man lies in this: when you accuse him of vulgarity—sparing him no doubt the word—he defends himself against the charge of barbarism. Especially from new soil—transatlantic, colonial—he faces you, bronzed, with a half conviction of savagery, partly persuaded of his own youthfulness of race. He writes, and recites, poems about ranches and canyons; they are designed to betray the recklessness of his nature and to reveal the good that lurks in the lawless ways of a young society. He is there to explain himself, voluble, with a glossary for his own artless slang. But his colonialism is only provincialism very articulate. The new air does but make old decadences seem more stale; the young soil does but set into fresh conditions the ready-made, the uncostly, the refuse feeling of a race decivilising. American fancy played long this pattering part of youth. The New-Englander hastened to assure you with so self-denying a face he did not wear war-paint and feathers, that it became doubly difficult to communicate to him that you had suspected him of nothing wilder than a second-hand dress coat. And when it was a question not of rebuke, but of praise, the American was ill-content with the word of the judicious who lauded him for some delicate successes in continuing something of the literature of England, something of the art of France; he was more eager for the applause that stimulated him to write romances and to paint panoramic landscape, after brief training in academies of native inspiration. Even now English voices, with violent commonplace, are constantly calling upon America to begin—to begin, for the world is expectant. Whereas there is no beginning for her, but instead a continuity which only a constant care can guide into sustained refinement and can save from decivilisation.

But decivilised man is not peculiar to new soil. The English town, too, knows him in all his dailiness. In England, too, he has a literature, an art, a music, all his own—derived from many and various things of price. Trash, in the fulness of its simplicity and cheapness, is impossible without a beautiful past. Its chief characteristic—which is futility, not failure—could not be achieved but by the long abuse, the rotatory reproduction, the quotidian disgrace, of the utterances of Art, especially the utterance by words. Gaiety, vigour, vitality, the organic quality, purity, simplicity, precision—all these

are among the antecedents of trash. It is after them; it is also, alas, because of them. And nothing can be much sadder than such a proof of what may possibly be the failure of derivation.



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Evidently we cannot choose our posterity. Reversing the steps of time, we may, indeed, choose backwards. We may give our thoughts noble forefathers. Well begotten, well born our fancies must be; they shall be also well derived. We have a voice in decreeing our inheritance, and not our inheritance only, but our heredity. Our minds may trace upwards and follow their ways to the best well-heads of the arts. The very habit of our thoughts may be persuaded one way unawares by their antenatal history. Their companions must be lovely, but need be no lovelier than their ancestors; and being so fathered and so husbanded, our thoughts may be intrusted to keep the counsels of literature.

Such is our confidence in a descent we know. But, of a sequel which of us is sure? Which of us is secured against the dangers of subsequent depreciation? And, moreover, which of us shall trace the contemporary tendencies, the one towards honour, the other towards dishonour? Or who shall discover why derivation becomes degeneration, and where and when and how the bastardy befalls? The decivilised have every grace as the antecedent of their vulgarities, every distinction as the precedent of their mediocrities. No ballad-concert song, feign it sigh, frolic, or laugh, but has the excuse that the feint was suggested, was made easy, by some living sweetness once. Nor are the decivilised to blame as having in their own persons possessed civilisation and marred it. They did not possess it; they were born into some tendency to derogation, into an inclination for things mentally inexpensive. And the tendency can hardly do other than continue. Nothing can look duller than the future of this second-hand and multiplying world. Men need not be common merely because they are many; but the infection of commonness once begun in the many, what dulness in their future! To the eye that has reluctantly discovered this truth—that the vulgarised are not *uncivilised*, and that there is no growth for them—it does not look like a future at all. More ballad-concerts, more quaint English, more robustious barytone songs, more piecemeal pictures, more anxious decoration, more colonial poetry, more young nations with withered traditions. Yet it is before this prospect that the provincial overseas lifts up his voice in a boast or a promise common enough among the incapable young, but pardonable only in senility. He promises the world a literature, an art, that shall be new because his forest is untracked and his town just built. But what the newness is to be he cannot tell. Certain words were dreadful once in the mouth of desperate old age. Dreadful and pitiable as the threat of an impotent king, what shall we name them when they are the promise of an impotent people? 'I will do such things: what they are yet I know not.'

## A REMEMBRANCE



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When the memories of two or three persons now upon earth shall be rolled up and sealed with their records within them, there will be no remembrance left open, except this, of a man whose silence seems better worth interpreting than the speech of many another. Of himself he has left no vestiges. It was a common reproach against him that he never acknowledged the obligation to any kind of restlessness. The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, but as he did none there was nothing for it but that the kingdom of heaven should yield to his leisure. The delicate, the abstinent, the reticent graces were his in the heroic degree. Where shall I find a pen fastidious enough to define and limit and enforce so many significant negatives? Words seem to offend by too much assertion, and to check the suggestions of his reserve. That reserve was life-long. Loving literature, he never lifted a pen except to write a letter. He was not inarticulate, he was only silent. He had an exquisite style from which to refrain. The things he abstained from were all exquisite. They were brought from far to undergo his judgment, if haply he might have selected them. Things ignoble never approached near enough for his refusal; they had not with him so much as that negative connexion. If I had to equip an author I should ask no better than to arm him and invest him with precisely the riches that were renounced by the man whose intellect, by integrity, had become a presence-chamber.

It was by holding session among so many implicit safeguards that he taught, rather than by precepts. Few were these in his speech, but his personality made laws for me. It was a subtle education, for it persuaded insensibly to a conception of my own. How, if he would not define, could I know what things were and what were not worthy of his gentle and implacable judgment? I must needs judge them for myself, yet he constrained me in the judging. Within that constraint and under that stimulus, which seemed to touch the ultimate springs of thoughts before they sprang, I began to discern all things in literature and in life—in the chastity of letters and in the honour of life—that I was bound to love. Not the things of one character only, but excellent things of every character. There was no tyranny in such a method. His idleness justified itself by the liberality it permitted to his taste. Never having made his love of letters further a secondary purpose, never having bound the literary genius—that delicate Ariel—to any kind of servitude, never having so much as permitted himself a prejudice whereby some of his delights should be stinted while others were indulged beyond the sanctions of modest reason, he barely tolerated his own preferences, which lay somewhat on the hither side of full effectiveness of style. These the range of his reading confessed by certain exclusions. Nevertheless it was not of deficiencies that he was patient: he did but respect the power of pause, and he disliked violence chiefly because violence is apt to confess its own limits. Perhaps, indeed, his own fine negatives made him only the more sensible of any lack of those literary qualities that are bound in their full complement to hold themselves at the disposal of the consummate author—to stand and wait, if they may do no more.



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Men said that he led a *dilettante* life. They reproached him with the selflessness that made him somewhat languid. Others, they seemed to aver, were amateurs at this art or that; he was an amateur at living. So it was, in the sense that he never grasped at happiness, and that many of the things he had held slipped from his disinterested hands. So it was, too, in this unintended sense; he loved life. How should he not have loved a life that his living made honourable? How should he not have loved all arts, in which his choice was delicate, liberal, instructed, studious, docile, austere? An amateur man he might have been called, too, because he was not discomposed by his own experiences, or shaken by the discovery which life brings to us—that the negative quality of which Buddhism seems to accuse all good is partaken by our happiness. He had always prayed temperate prayers and harboured probable wishes. His sensibility was extreme, but his thought was generalised. When he had joy he tempered it not in the common way by meditation upon the general sorrow but by a recollection of the general pleasure. It was his finest distinction to desire no differences, no remembrance, but loss among the innumerable forgotten. And when he suffered, it was with so quick a nerve and yet so wide an apprehension that the race seemed to suffer in him. He pitied not himself so tenderly as mankind, of whose capacity for pain he was then feelingly persuaded. His darkening eyes said in the extreme hour: 'I have compassion on the multitude.'

## THE SUN

Nowhere else does the greater light so rule the day, so measure, so divide, so reign, make so imperial laws, so visibly kindle, so immediately quicken, so suddenly efface, so banish, so restore, as in a plain like this of Suffolk with its enormous sky. The curious have an insufficient motive for going to the mountains if they do it to see the sunrise. The sun that leaps from a mountain peak is a sun past the dew of his birth; he has walked some way towards the common fires of noon. But on the flat country the uprising is early and fresh, the arc is wide, the career is long. The most distant clouds, converging in the beautiful and little-studied order of cloud-perspective (for most painters treat clouds as though they formed perpendicular and not horizontal scenery), are those that gather at the central point of sunrise. On the plain, and there only, can the construction—but that is too little vital a word; I should rather say the organism—the unity, the design, of a sky be understood. The light wind that has been moving all night is seen to have not worked at random. It has shepherded some small flocks of cloud afield and folded others. There's husbandry in Heaven. And the order has, or seems to have, the sun for its midst. Not a line, not a curve, but confesses its membership in a design declared from horizon to horizon.

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To see the system of a sky in fragments is to miss what I learn to look for in all achieved works of Nature and art: the organism that is unity and life. It is the unity and life of painting. The Early Victorian picture—the school is still in full career, but essentially it belongs to that triumphal period—is but a dull sum of things put together, in concourse, not in relation; but the true picture is *one*, however multitudinous it may be, for it is composed of relations gathered together in the unity of perception, of intention, and of light. It is organic. Moreover, how truly relation is the condition of life may be understood from the extinct state of the English stage, which resembles nothing so much as a Royal Academy picture. Even though the actors may be added together with something like vivacity (though that is rare), they have no vitality in common. They are not members one of another. If the Church and Stage Guild be still in existence, it would do much for the art by teaching that Scriptural maxim. I think, furthermore, that the life of our bodies has never been defined so suggestively as by one who named it a living relation of lifeless atoms. Could the value of relation be more curiously set forth? And one might penetrate some way towards a consideration of the vascular organism of a true literary style in which there is a vital relation of otherwise lifeless word with word. And wherein lies the progress of architecture from the stupidity of the pyramid and the dead weight of the Cyclopean wall to the spring and the flight of the ogival arch, but in a quasi-organic relation? But the way of such thoughts might be intricate, and the sun rules me to simplicity.

He reigns as centrally in the blue sky as in the clouds. One October of late had days absolutely cloudless. I should not have certainly known it had there been a hill in sight. The gradations of the blue are incalculable, infinite, and they deepen from the central fire. As to the earthly scenery, there are but two 'views' on the plain; for the aspect of the light is the whole landscape. To look with the sun or against the sun—this is the alternative splendour. To look with the sun is to face a golden country, shadowless, serene, noble and strong in light, with a certain lack of relief that suggests—to those who dream of landscape—the country of a dream. The serried pines, and the lighted fields, and the golden ricks of the farms are dyed with the sun as one might paint with a colour. Bright as it is, the glow is rather the dye of sunlight than its luminosity. For by a kind of paradox the luminous landscape is that which is full of shadows—the landscape before you when you turn and face the sun. Not only every reed and rush of the salt marshes, every uncertain aspen-leaf of the few trees, but every particle of the October air shows a shadow and makes a mystery of the light. There is nothing but shadow and sun; colour is absorbed and the landscape



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is reduced to a shining simplicity. Thus is the dominant sun sufficient for his day. His passage kindles to unconsuming fires and quenches into living ashes. No incidents save of his causing, no delight save of his giving: from the sunrise, when the larks, not for pairing, but for play, sing the only virginal song of the year—a heart younger than Spring's in the season of decline—even to the sunset, when the herons scream together in the shallows. And the sun dominates by his absence, compelling the low country to sadness in the melancholy night.

### THE FLOWER

There is a form of oppression that has not until now been confessed by those who suffer from it or who are participants, as mere witnesses, in its tyranny. It is the obsession of man by the flower. In the shape of the flower his own paltriness revisits him—his triviality, his sloth, his cheapness, his wholesale habitualness, his slatternly ostentation. These return to him and wreak upon him their dull revenges. What the tyranny really had grown to can be gauged nowhere so well as in country lodgings, where the most ordinary things of design and decoration have sifted down and gathered together, so that foolish ornament gains a cumulative force and achieves a conspicuous commonness. Stem and petal and leaf—the fluent forms that a man has not by heart but certainly by rote—are woven, printed, cast, and stamped wherever restlessness and insimplicity have feared to leave plain spaces. The most ugly of all imaginable rooms, which is probably the parlour of a farm-house arrayed for those whom Americans call summer-boarders, is beset with flowers. It blooms, a dry, woollen, papery, cast-iron garden. The floor flourishes with blossoms adust, poorly conventionalised into a kind of order; the table-cover is ablaze with a more realistic florescence; the wall-paper is set with bunches; the rigid machine-lace curtain is all of roses and lilies in its very construction, over the muslin blinds an impotent sprig is scattered. In the worsted rosettes of the bell-ropes, in the plaster picture-frames, in the painted tea-tray and on the cups, in the pediment of the sideboard, in the ornament that crowns the barometer, in the finials of sofa and arm-chair, in the finger-plates of the 'grained' door, is to be seen the ineffectual portrait or to be traced the stale inspiration of the flower. And what is this bossiness around the grate but some blunt, black-leaded garland? The recital is wearisome, but the retribution of the flower is precisely weariness. It is the persecution of man, the haunting of his trivial visions, and the oppression of his inconsiderable brain.



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The man so possessed suffers the lot of the weakling—subjection to the smallest of the things he has abused. The designer of cheap patterns is no more inevitably ridden by the flower than is the vain and transitory author by the phrase. But I had rather learn my decoration of the Japanese, and place against the blank wall one pot plain from the wheel, holding one singular branch in blossom, in the attitude and accident of growth. And I could wish abstention to exist, and even to be evident, in my words. In literature as in all else man merits his subjection to trivialities by a kind of economical greed. A condition for using justly and gaily any decoration would seem to be a certain reluctance. Ornament—strange as the doctrine sounds in a world decivilised—was in the beginning intended to be something jocund; and jocundity was never to be achieved but by postponement, deference, and modesty. Nor can the prodigality of the meadows in May be quoted in dispute. For Nature has something even more severe than moderation: she has an innumerable singleness. Her butter-cup meadows are not prodigal; they show multitude, but not multiplicity, and multiplicity is exactly the disgrace of decoration. Who has ever multiplied or repeated his delights? or who has ever gained the granting of the most foolish of his wishes—the prayer for reiteration? It is a curious slight to generous Fate that man should, like a child, ask for one thing many times. Her answer every time is a resembling but new and single gift; until the day when she shall make the one tremendous difference among her gifts—and make it perhaps in secret—by naming one of them the ultimate. What, for novelty, what, for singleness, what, for separateness, can equal the last? Of many thousand kisses the poor last—but even the kisses of your mouth are all numbered.

## UNSTABLE EQUILIBRIUM

It is principally for the sake of the leg that a change in the dress of man is so much to be desired. The leg, completing as it does the form of man, should make a great part of that human scenery which is at least as important as the scenery of geological structure, or the scenery of architecture, or the scenery of vegetation, but which the lovers of mountains and the preservers of ancient buildings have consented to ignore. The leg is the best part of the figure, inasmuch as it has the finest lines and therewith those slender, diminishing forms which, coming at the base of the human structure, show it to be a thing of life by its unstable equilibrium. A lifeless structure is in stable equilibrium; the body, springing, poised, upon its fine ankles and narrow feet, never stands without implying and expressing life. It is the leg that first suggested the phantasy of flight. We imagine wings to the figure that is erect upon the vital and tense legs of man; and the herald Mercury, because of his station, looks new-lighted.

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All this is true of the best leg, and the best leg is the man's. That of the young child, in which the Italian schools of painting delighted, has neither movement nor supporting strength. In the case of the woman's figure it is the foot, with its extreme proportional smallness, that gives the precious instability, the spring and balance that are so organic. But man should no longer disguise the long lines, the strong forms, in those lengths of piping or tubing that are of all garments the most stupid. Inexpressive of what they clothe as no kind of concealing drapery could ever be, they are neither implicitly nor explicitly good raiment. It is hardly possible to err by violence in denouncing them. Why, when a bad writer is praised for 'clothing his thought,' it is to modern raiment that one's nimble fancy flies—fain of completing the beautiful metaphor!

The human scenery: yes, costume could make a crowd something other than the mass of sooty colour—dark without depth—and the multiplication of undignified forms that fill the streets, and demonstrate, and strike, and listen to the democrat. For the undistinguished are very important by their numbers. These are they who make the look of the artificial world. They are man generalised; as units they inevitably lack something of interest; all the more have they cumulative effect. It would be well if we could persuade the average man to take on a certain human dignity in the clothing of his average body. Unfortunately he will be slow to be changed. And as to the poorer part of the mass, so wretched are their national customs—and the wretchedest of them all the wearing of other men's old raiment—that they must wait for reform until the reformed dress, which the reformers have not yet put on, shall have turned second-hand.

## THE UNIT OF THE WORLD

The quarrel of Art with Nature goes on apace. The painters have long been talking of selecting, then of rejecting, or even, with Mr. Whistler, of supplanting. And then Mr. Oscar Wilde, in the witty and delicate series of inversions which he headed 'The Decay of Lying,' declared war with all the irresponsibility naturally attending an act so serious. He seems to affirm that Nature is less proportionate to man than is architecture; that the house is built and the sofa is made measurable by the unit measure of the body; but that the landscape is set to some other scale. 'I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is absolutely the result of indoor life.' Nevertheless, before it is too late, let me assert that though nature is not always clearly and obviously made to man's measure, he is yet the unit by which she is measurable. The proportion may be far to seek at times, but the proportion is there. Man's farms about the lower Alps, his summer

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pastures aloft, have their relation to the whole construction of the range; and the range is great because it is great in regard to the village lodged in a steep valley in the foot hills. The relation of flower and fruit to his hands and mouth, to his capacity and senses (I am dealing with size, and nothing else), is a very commonplace of our conditions in the world. The arm of man is sufficient to dig just as deep as the harvest is to be sown. And if some of the cheerful little evidences of the more popular forms of teleology are apt to be baffled, or indefinitely postponed, by the retorts that suggest themselves to the modern child, there remains the subtle and indisputable witness borne by art itself: the body of man composes with the mass and the detail of the world. The picture is irrefutable, and the picture arranges the figure amongst its natural accessories in the landscape, and would not have them otherwise.

But there is one conspicuous thing in the world to which man has not served as a unit of proportion, and that one thing is a popularly revered triumph of that very art of architecture in which Mr. Oscar Wilde has confidence for keeping things in scale. Human ingenuity in designing St. Peter's on the Vatican, has achieved this one exception to the universal harmony—a harmony enriched by discords, but always on one certain scale of notes—which the body makes with the details of the earth. It is not in the landscape, where Mr. Oscar Wilde has too rashly looked for contempt and contumely, but in the art he holds precious as the minister to man's egotism, that man's Ego is defied. St. Peter's is not necessarily too large (though on other grounds its size might be liable to correction); it is simply out of relation to the most vital thing on the earth—the thing which has supplied some secret rod to measure the waves withal, and the whales, the sea-wall cliffs, the ears of wheat, the cedar-branches, pines and diamonds and apples. Now, Emerson would certainly not have felt the soft shock and stimulus of delight to which he confesses himself to be liable at the first touch of certain phrases, had not the words in every case enclosed a promise of further truth and of a second pleasure. One of these swift and fruitful experiences visited him with the saying—grown popular through him—that an architect should have a knowledge of anatomy. There is assuredly a germ and a promise in the phrase. It delights us, first, because it seems to recognise the organic, as distinct from the merely constructive, character of finely civilised architecture; and next, it persuades us that Vitruvius had in truth discovered the key to size—the unit that is sometimes so obscurely, yet always so absolutely, the measure of what is great and small among things animate and inanimate. And in spite of themselves the architects of St. Peter's were constrained to take something from man; they refused his height for their scale, but they tried



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to use his shape for their ornament. And so in the blankest dearth of fancy that ever befel architect or builder they imagined human beings bigger than the human beings of experience; and by means of these, carved in stone and inlaid in mosaic, they set up a relation of their own. The basilica was related to the colossal figure (as a church more wisely measured would have been to living man), and so ceased to be large; and nothing more important was finally achieved than transposal of the whole work into another scale of proportions—a scale in which the body of man was not the unit. The pile of stones that make St. Peter's is a very little thing in comparison with Soracte; but man, and man's wife, and the unequal statures of his children, are in touch with the structure of the mountain rather than with that of the church which has been conceived without reference to the vital and fundamental rule of his inches.

Is there no egotism, ministering to his dignity, that man, having the law of the organism of the world written in his members, can take with him, out of the room that has been built to accord with him, into the landscape that stands only a little further away? He has deliberately made the smoking chair and the table; there is nothing to surprise him in their ministrations. But what profounder homage is rendered by the multitudinous Nature going about the interests and the business of which he knows so little, and yet throughout confessing him! His eyes have seen her and his ears have heard, but it would never have entered into his heart to conceive her. His is not the fancy that could have achieved these woods, this little flush of summer from the innumerable flowering of grasses, the cyclic recreation of seasons. And yet he knows that he is imposed upon all he sees. His stature gives laws. His labour only is needful—not a greater strength. And the sun and the showers are made sufficient for him. His furniture must surely be adjudged to pay him but a coarse flattery in comparison with the subjection, yet the aloofness, of all this wild world. This is no flattery. The grass is lumpy, as Mr. Oscar Wilde remarks with truth: Nature is not man's lacquey, and has no preoccupation about his more commonplace comforts. These he gives himself indoors; and who prizes, with any self-respect, the things carefully provided by self-love? But when that *farouche* Nature, who has never spoken to him, and to whom he has never had the opportunity of hinting his wishes or his tastes—when she reveals the suggestions of his form and the desire of his eyes, and amongst her numberless purposes lets him surprise in her the purpose to accord with him, and lets him suspect further harmonies which he has not yet learnt to understand—then man becomes conscious of having received a token from her lowliness, and a favour from her loveliness, compared with which the care wherewith his tailor himself has fitted him might leave his gratitude cool.



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### BY THE RAILWAY SIDE

My train drew near to the Via Reggio platform on a day between two of the harvests of a hot September; the sea was burning blue, and there were a sombreness and a gravity in the very excesses of the sun as his fires brooded deeply over the serried, hardy, shabby, seaside ilex-woods. I had come out of Tuscany and was on my way to the Genovesato: the steep country with its profiles, bay by bay, of successive mountains grey with olive-trees, between the flashes of the Mediterranean and the sky; the country through the which there sounds the twanging Genoese language, a thin Italian mingled with a little Arabic, more Portuguese, and much French. I was regretful at leaving the elastic Tuscan speech, canorous in its vowels set in emphatic *l*'s and *m*'s and the vigorous soft spring of the double consonants. But as the train arrived its noises were drowned by a voice declaiming in the tongue I was not to hear again for months—good Italian. The voice was so loud that one looked for the audience: Whose ears was it seeking to reach by the violence done to every syllable, and whose feelings would it touch by its insincerity? The tones were insincere, but there was passion behind them; and most often passion acts its own true character poorly, and consciously enough to make good judges think it a mere counterfeit. Hamlet, being a little mad, feigned madness. It is when I am angry that I pretend to be angry, so as to present the truth in an obvious and intelligible form. Thus even before the words were distinguishable it was manifest that they were spoken by a man in serious trouble who had false ideas as to what is convincing in elocution.

When the voice became audibly articulate, it proved to be shouting blasphemies from the broad chest of a middle-aged man—an Italian of the type that grows stout and wears whiskers. The man was in *bourgeois* dress, and he stood with his hat off in front of the small station building, shaking his thick fist at the sky. No one was on the platform with him except the railway officials, who seemed in doubt as to their duties in the matter, and two women. Of one of these there was nothing to remark except her distress. She wept as she stood at the door of the waiting-room. Like the second woman, she wore the dress of the shopkeeping class throughout Europe, with the local black lace veil in place of a bonnet over her hair. It is of the second woman—O unfortunate creature!—that this record is made—a record without sequel, without consequence; but there is nothing to be done in her regard except so to remember her. And thus much I think I owe after having looked, from the midst of the negative happiness that is given to so many for a space of years, at some minutes of her despair. She was hanging on the man's arm in her entreaties that he would stop the drama he was enacting. She had wept so hard that her



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face was disfigured. Across her nose was the dark purple that comes with overpowering fear. Haydon saw it on the face of a woman whose child had just been run over in a London street. I remembered the note in his journal as the woman at Via Reggio, in her intolerable hour, turned her head my way, her sobs lifting it. She was afraid that the man would throw himself under the train. She was afraid that he would be damned for his blasphemies; and as to this her fear was mortal fear. It was horrible, too, that she was humpbacked and a dwarf.

Not until the train drew away from the station did we lose the clamour. No one had tried to silence the man or to soothe the woman's horror. But has any one who saw it forgotten her face? To me for the rest of the day it was a sensible rather than a merely mental image. Constantly a red blur rose before my eyes for a background, and against it appeared the dwarf's head, lifted with sobs, under the provincial black lace veil. And at night what emphasis it gained on the boundaries of sleep! Close to my hotel there was a roofless theatre crammed with people, where they were giving Offenbach. The operas of Offenbach still exist in Italy, and the little town was placarded with announcements of *La Bella Elena*. The peculiar vulgar rhythm of the music jiggled audibly through half the hot night, and the clapping of the town's-folk filled all its pauses. But the persistent noise did but accompany, for me, the persistent vision of those three figures at the Via Reggio station in the profound sunshine of the day.

## POCKET VOCABULARIES

A serviceable substitute for style in literature has been found in such a collection of language ready for use as may be likened to a portable vocabulary. It is suited to the manners of a day that has produced salad-dressing in bottles, and many other devices for the saving of processes. Fill me such a wallet full of 'graphic' things, of 'quaint' things and 'weird,' of 'crisp' or 'sturdy' Anglo-Saxon, of the material for 'word-painting' (is not that the way of it?), and it will serve the turn. Especially did the Teutonic fury fill full these common little hoards of language. It seemed, doubtless, to the professor of the New Literature that if anything could convince him of his own success it must be the energy of his Teutonisms and his avoidance of languid Latin derivatives, fit only for the pedants of the eighteenth century. Literature doubtless is made of words. What then is needful, he seems to ask, besides a knack of beautiful words? Unluckily for him, he has achieved, not style, but slang. Unluckily for him, words are not style, phrases are not style. 'The man is style.' O good French language, cunning and good, that lets me read the sentence in obverse or converse as I will! And I read it as declaring that the whole man, the very whole of him, is his style. The literature

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of a man of letters worthy the name is rooted in all his qualities, with little fibres running invisibly into the smallest qualities he has. He who is not a man of letters, simply is not one; it is not too audacious a paradox to affirm that doing will not avail him who fails in being. 'Lay your deadly doing down,' sang once some old hymn known to Calvinists. Certain poets, a certain time ago, ransacked the language for words full of life and beauty, made a vocabulary of them, and out of wantonness wrote them to death. To change somewhat the simile, they scented out a word—an earlyish word, by preference—ran it to earth, unearthed it, dug it out, and killed it. And then their followers bagged it. The very word that lives, 'new every morning,' miraculously new, in the literature of a man of letters, they killed and put into their bag. And, in like manner, the emotion that should have caused the word is dead for those, and for those only, who abuse its expression. For the maker of a portable vocabulary is not content to turn his words up there: he turns up his feelings also, alphabetically or otherwise. Wonderful how much sensibility is at hand in such round words as the New Literature loves. Do you want a generous emotion? Pull forth the little language. Find out moonshine, find out moonshine!

Take, as an instance, Mr. Swinburne's 'hell.' There is, I fear, no doubt whatever that Mr. Swinburne has put his 'hell' into a vocabulary, with the inevitable consequences to the word. And when the minor men of his school have occasion for a 'hell' (which may very well happen to any young man practising authorship), I must not be accused of phantasy if I say that they put their hands into Mr. Swinburne's vocabulary and pick it. These vocabularies are made out of vigorous and blunt language. 'What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here?' Alas, they are homespuns from the factory, machine-made in uncostly quantities. Obviously, power needs to make use of no such storage. The property of power is to use phrases, whether strange or familiar, as though it created them. But even more than lack of power is lack of humour the cause of all the rankness and the staleness, of all the Anglo-Saxon of commerce, of all the weary 'quaintness'—that quaintness of which one is moved to exclaim with Cassio: 'Hither comes the bauble!' Lack of a sense of humour betrays a man into that perpetual too-much whereby he tries to make amends for a currency debased. No more than any other can a witty writer dispense with a sense of humour. In his moments of sentiment the lack is distressing; in his moments of wit it is at least perceptible. A sense of humour cannot be always present, it may be urged. Why, no; it is the lack of it that is—importunate. Other absences, such as the absence of passion, the absence of delicacy, are, if grievous negatives, still mere negatives. These qualities may or may not be there at call, ready for a summons; we are not



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obliged to know; we are not momentarily aware, unless they ought to be in action, whether their action is possible. But want of power and want of a sense of the ridiculous: these are lacks wherefrom there is no escaping, deficiencies that are all-influential, defects that assert themselves, vacancies that proclaim themselves, absences from the presence whereof there is no flying; what other paradoxes can I adventure? Without power—no style. Without a possible humour,—no style. The weakling has no confidence in himself to keep him from grasping at words that he fancies hold within them the true passions of the race, ready for the uses of his egoism. And with a sense of humour a man will not steal from a shelf the precious treasure of the language and put it in his pocket.

## PATHOS

A fugitive writer wrote but lately on the fugitive page of a minor magazine: 'For our part, the drunken tinker [Christopher Sly] is the most real personage of the piece, and not without some hints of the pathos that is worked out more fully, though by different ways, in Bottom and Malvolio.' Has it indeed come to this? Have the Zeitgeist and the Weltschmerz and the other things compared to which 'le spleen' was gay, done so much for us? Is there to be no laughter left in literature free from the preoccupation of a sham real-life? So it would seem. Even what the great master has not shown us in his work, that your critic convinced of pathos is resolved to see in it. By the penetration of his intrusive sympathy he will come at it. It is of little use now to explain Snug the joiner to the audience: why, it is precisely Snug who stirs their emotions so painfully. Not the lion; they can see through that: but the Snug within, the human Snug. And Master Shallow has the Weltschmerz in that latent form which is the more appealing; and discouraging questions arise as to the end of old Double; and Argan in his nightcap is the tragic figure of Monomania; and human nature shudders at the petrification of the intellect of Mr. F.'s aunt. *Et patati, et patata.*

It may be only too true that the actual world is 'with pathos delicately edged.' For Malvolio living we should have had living sympathies: so much aspiration, so ill-educated a love of refinement; so unarmed a credulity, noblest of weaknesses, betrayed for the laughter of a chambermaid. By an actual Bottom the Weaver our pity might be reached for the sake of his single self-reliance, his fancy and resource condemned to burlesque and ignominy by the niggard doom of circumstance. But is not life one thing and is not art another? Is it not the privilege of literature to make selection and to treat things singly, without the after-thoughts of life, without the troublous completeness of the many-sided world? Is not Shakespeare, for this reason, our refuge? Fortunately unreal is his world when he will have it



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so; and there we may laugh with open heart at a grotesque man: without misgiving, without remorse, without reluctance. If great creating Nature has not assumed for herself she has assuredly secured to the great creating poet the right of partiality, of limitation, of setting aside and leaving out, of taking one impression and one emotion as sufficient for the day. Art and Nature are separate, complementary; in relation, not in confusion, with one another. And all this officious cleverness in seeing round the corner, as it were, of a thing presented by literary art in the flat—(the borrowing of similes from other arts is of evil tendency; but let this pass, as it is apt)—is but another sign of the general lack of a sense of the separation between Nature and the sentient mirror in the mind. In some of his persons, indeed, Shakespeare is as Nature herself, all-inclusive; but in others—and chiefly in comedy—he is partial, he is impressionary, he refuses to know what is not to his purpose, he is an artist. And in that gay, wilful world it is that he gives us—or used to give us, for even the world is obsolete—the pleasure of *oubliance*.

Now this fugitive writer has not been so swift but that I have caught him a clout as he went. Yet he will do it again; and those like-minded will assuredly also continue to show how much more completely human, how much more sensitive, how much more responsible, is the art of the critic than the world has ever dreamt till now. And, superior in so much, they will still count their superior weeping as the choicest of their gifts. And Lepidus, who loves to wonder, can have no better subject for his admiration than the pathos of the time. It is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun. 'Tis a strange serpent; and the tears of it are wet.

## THE POINT OF HONOUR

Not without significance is the Spanish nationality of Velasquez. In Spain was the Point put upon Honour; and Velasquez was the first Impressionist. As an Impressionist he claimed, implicitly if not explicitly, a whole series of delicate trusts in his trustworthiness; he made an appeal to the confidence of his peers; he relied on his own candour and asked that the candid should rely upon him; he kept the chastity of art when other masters were content with its honesty, and when others saved artistic conscience he safeguarded the point of honour. Contemporary masters more or less proved their position, and convinced the world by something of demonstration; the first Impressionist simply asked that his word should be accepted. To those who would not take his word he offers no bond. To those who will, he grants the distinction of a share in his responsibility. Somewhat unrefined, in comparison to his lofty and simple claim to be believed on a suggestion, is the commoner painter's production of his credentials, his appeal to the sanctions of ordinary experience,

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his self-defence against the suspicion of making irresponsible mysteries in art. 'You can see for yourself,' the lesser man seems to say to the world, 'thus things are, and I render them in such manner that your intelligence may be satisfied.' This is an appeal to average experience—at the best the cumulative experience; and with the average, or with the sum, art cannot deal without derogation. The Spaniard seems to say: 'Thus things are in my pictorial sight. Trust me, I apprehend them so.' We are not excluded from his counsels, but we are asked to attribute a certain authority to him, master of the craft as he is, master of that art of seeing pictorially which is the beginning and not far from the end—not far short of the whole—of the art of painting. So little indeed are we shut out from the mysteries of a great Impressionist's impression that Velasquez requires us to be in some degree his colleagues. Thus may each of us to whom he appeals take praise from the praised: He leaves my educated eyes to do a little of the work. He respects my responsibility no less—though he respects it less explicitly—than I do his. What he allows me would not be granted by a meaner master. If he does not hold himself bound to prove his own truth, he returns thanks for my trust. It is as though he used his countrymen's courteous hyperbole and called his house my own. In a sense of the most noble hostship he does me the honours of his picture.

Because Impressionism is so free, therefore is it doubly bound. Because there is none to arraign it, it is a thousand times responsible. To undertake this art for the sake of its privileges without confessing its obligations—or at least without confessing them up to the point of honour—is to take a vulgar freedom: to see immunities precisely where there are duties, and an advantage where there is a bond. A very mob of men have taken Impressionism upon themselves in this our later day. It is against all probabilities that more than a few among these have within them the point of honour. In their galleries we are beset with a dim distrust. And to distrust is more humiliating than to be distrusted. How many of these landscape-painters, deliberately rash, are painting the truth of their own impressions? An ethical question as to loyalty is easily answered; truth and falsehood as to fact are, happily for the intelligence of the common conscience, not hard to divide. But when the *dubium* concerns not fact but artistic truth, can the many be sure that their sensitiveness, their candour, their scruple, their delicate equipoise of perceptions, the vigilance of their apprehension, are enough? Now Impressionists of late have told us things as to their impressions—as to the effect of things upon the temperament of this man and upon the mood of that—which should not be asserted except on the artistic point of honour. The majority can tell ordinary truth, but they should



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not trust themselves for truth extraordinary. They can face the general judgment, but they should hesitate to produce work that appeals to the last judgment, which is the judgment within. There is too much reason to divine that a certain number of those who aspire to derive from the greatest of masters have no temperaments worth speaking of, no point of view worth seizing, no vigilance worth awaiting, no mood worth waylaying. And to be, *de parti pris*, an Impressionist without these! O Velasquez! Nor is literature quite free from a like reproach in her own things. An author, here and there, will make as though he had a word worth hearing—nay, worth over-hearing—a word that seeks to withdraw even while it is uttered; and yet what it seems to dissemble is all too probably a platitude. But obviously, literature is not—as is the craft and mystery of painting—so at the mercy of a half-imposture, so guarded by unprovable honour. For the art of painting is reserved that shadowy risk, that undefined salvation. May the gods guard us from the further popularising of Impressionism; for the point of honour is the simple secret of the few.

### COMPOSURE

Tribulation, Immortality, the Multitude: what remedy of composure do these words bring for their own great disquiet! Without the remoteness of the Latinity the thought would come too close and shake too cruelly. In order to the sane endurance of the intimate trouble of the soul an aloofness of language is needful. Johnson feared death. Did his noble English control and postpone the terror? Did it keep the fear at some courteous, deferent distance from the centre of that human heart, in the very act of the leap and lapse of mortality? Doubtless there is in language such an educative power. Speech is a school. Every language is a persuasion, an induced habit, an instrument which receives the note indeed but gives the tone. Every language imposes a quality, teaches a temper, proposes a way, bestows a tradition: this is the tone—the voice—of the instrument. Every language, by counter-change, replies to the writer's touch or breath his own intention, articulate: this is his note. Much has always been said, many things to the purpose have been thought, of the power and the responsibility of the note. Of the legislation and influence of the tone I have been led to think by comparing the tranquillity of Johnson and the composure of Canning with the stimulated and close emotion, the interior trouble, of those writers who have entered as disciples in the school of the more Teutonic English.

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For if every language be a school, more significantly and more educatively is a part of a language a school to him who chooses that part. Few languages offer the choice. The fact that a choice is made implies the results and fruits of a decision. The French author is without these. They are of all the heritages of the English writer the most important. He receives a language of dual derivation. He may submit himself to either University, whither he will take his impulse and his character, where he will leave their influence, and whence he will accept their education. The Frenchman has certainly a style to develop within definite limits; but he does not subject himself to suggestions tending mainly hitherwards or thitherwards, to currents of various race within one literature. Such a choice of subjection is the singular opportunity of the Englishman. I do not mean to ignore the necessary mingling. Happily that mingling has been done once for all for us all. Nay, one of the most charming things that a master of English can achieve is the repayment of the united teaching by linking their results so exquisitely in his own practice, that words of the two schools are made to meet each other with a surprise and delight that shall prove them at once gayer strangers, and sweeter companions, than the world knew they were. Nevertheless there remains the liberty of choice as to which school of words shall have the place of honour in the great and sensitive moments of an author's style: which school shall be used for conspicuousness, and which for multitudinous service. And the choice being open, the perturbation of the pulses and impulses of so many hearts quickened in thought and feeling in this day suggests to me a deliberate return to the recollectedness of the more tranquil language. 'Doubtless there is a place of peace.'

A place of peace, not of indifference. It is impossible not to charge some of the moralists of the last century with an indifference into which they educated their platitudes and into which their platitudes educated them. Addison thus gave and took, until he was almost incapable of coming within arm's-length of a real or spiritual emotion. There is no knowing to what distance the removal of the 'appropriate sentiment' from the central soul might have attained but for the change and renewal in language, which came when it was needed. Addison had assuredly removed eternity far from the apprehension of the soul when his Cato hailed the 'pleasing hope,' the 'fond desire;' and the touch of war was distant from him who conceived his 'repulsed battalions' and his 'doubtful battle.' What came afterwards, when simplicity and nearness were restored once more, was doubtless journeyman's work at times. Men were too eager to go into the workshop of language. There were unreasonable raptures over the mere making of common words. 'A hand-shoe! a finger-hat! a foreword! Beautiful!' they cried; and for the love of German

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the youngest daughter of Chrysale herself might have consented to be kissed by a grammarian. It seemed to be forgotten that a language with all its construction visible is a language little fitted for the more advanced mental processes; that its images are material; and that, on the other hand, a certain spiritualising and subtilising effect of alien derivations is a privilege and an advantage incalculable—that to possess that half of the language within which Latin heredities lurk and Romanesque allusions are at play is to possess the state and security of a dead tongue, without the death.

But now I spoke of words encountering as gay strangers, various in origin, divided in race, within a master's phrase. The most beautiful and the most sudden of such meetings are of course in Shakespeare. 'Superfluous kings,' 'A lass unparalleled,' 'Multitudinous seas:' we needed not to wait for the eighteenth century or for the nineteenth to learn the splendour of such encounters, of such differences, of such nuptial unlikeness and union. But it is well that we should learn them afresh. And it is well, too, that we should not resist the rhythmic reaction bearing us now somewhat to the side of the Latin. Such a reaction is in some sort an ethical need for our day. We want to quell the exaggerated decision of monosyllables. We want the poise and the pause that imply vitality at times better than headstrong movement expresses it. And not the phrase only but the form of verse might render us timely service. The controlling couplet might stay with a touch a modern grief, as it ranged in order the sorrows of Canning for his son. But it should not be attempted without a distinct intention of submission on the part of the writer. The couplet transgressed against, trespassed upon, shaken off, is like a law outstripped, defied—to the dignity neither of the rebel nor of the rule. To Letters do we look now for the guidance and direction which the very closeness of the emotion taking us by the heart makes necessary. Shall not the Thing more and more, as we compose ourselves to literature, assume the honour, the hesitation, the leisure, the reconciliation of the Word?

### **DR. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES**

It is good to go, now and again—let the American phrase be permitted—'back of' some of our contemporaries. We never desired them as coevals. We never wished to share an age with them; we share nothing else with them. And we deliver ourselves from them by passing, in literature, into the company of an author who wrote before their time, and yet is familiarly modern. To read Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, then, is to go behind the New Humorist—into a time before he was, or his Humour. Obviously we go in like manner behind many another, but the funny writer of the magazines is suggested because in reference to him our act has a special significance. We connect him with Dr. Holmes by a reluctant ancestry, by an

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impertinent descent. It may be objected that such a connection is but a trivial thing to attribute, as a conspicuous incident, to a man of letters. So it is. But the triviality has wide allusions. It is often a question which of several significant trivialities a critic shall choose in his communication with a reader who does not insist that all the grave things shall be told him. And, by the way, are we ever sufficiently grateful for that reader, whom the last few years have given to us, or to whom we have been given by the last few years? A trivial connexion has remote and negative issues. To go to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes's period is to get rid of many things; to go to himself is especially to get rid of the New Humour, yet to stand at its unprophetic source. And we love such authors as Dickens and this American for their own sake, refusing to be aware of their corrupt following. We would make haste to ignore their posterity, and to assure them that we absolve them from any fault of theirs in the bastardy.

Humour is the most conspicuous thing in the world, which must explain why the little humour in *Elsie Venner* and the *Breakfast Table* series is not only the first thing the critic touches but the thing whereby he relates this author to his following and to the world. The young man John, Colonel Sprowle with his 'social entertainment,' the Landlady and her daughter, and the Poor Relation, almost make up the sum of the comic personages, and fifty per cent. of the things they say—no more—are good enough to remain after the bloom of their vulgarity has worn off. But that half is excellent, keen, jolly, temperate; and because of that temperance—the most stimulating and fecundating of qualities—the humour of it has set the literature of a hemisphere to the tune of mirth. Like Mr. Lowell's it was humour in dialect—not Irish dialect nor negro, but American; and it made New England aware of her comedy. Until then she had felt within herself that there was nothing to laugh at. 'Nature is in earnest when she makes a woman,' says Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. Rather, she takes herself seriously when she makes the average spiritual woman: as seriously as that woman takes herself when she makes a novel. And in a like mood Nature made New England and endowed her with purpose, with mortuary frivolities, with long views, with energetic provincialism.

If we remember best *The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay*, we do so in spite of the religious and pathetic motive of the greater part of Dr. Holmes's work, and of his fancy, which should be at least as conspicuous as his humour. It is fancy rather than imagination; but it is more perfect, more definite, more fit, than the larger art of imagery, which is apt to be vague, because it is intellectual and adult. No grown man makes quite so definite mental images as does a child; when the mind ages it thinks stronger thoughts in vaguer pictures. The young mind of Dr. Holmes



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has less intellectual imagination than intelligent fancy. For example: 'If you ever saw a crow with a king-bird after him, you will get an image of a dull speaker and a lively listener. The bird in sable plumage flaps heavily along his straightforward course, while the other sails round him, over him, under him, leaves him, comes back again, tweaks out a black feather, shoots away once more, never losing sight of him, and finally reaches the crow's perch at the same time the crow does;' but the comparison goes on after this at needless length, with explanations. Again: 'That blessed clairvoyance which sees into things without opening them: that glorious licence which, having shut the door and driven the reporter from the keyhole, calls upon Truth, majestic Virgin! to get off from her pedestal and drop her academic *poses*.' And this, of the Landlady: 'She told me her story once; it was as if a grain that had been ground and bolted had tried to individualise itself by a special narrative.' 'The riotous tumult of a laugh, which, I take it, is the mob-law of the features.' 'Think of the Old World—that part of it which is the seat of ancient civilisation! . . . A man cannot help marching in step with his kind in the rear of such a procession.' 'Young folk look on a face as a unit; children who go to school with any given little John Smith see in his name a distinctive appellation.' And that exquisitely sensitive passage on the nervous outward movement and the inward tranquillity of the woods. Such things are the best this good author gives us, whether they go gay with metaphor, or be bare thoughts shapely with their own truth.

Part of the charm of Dr. Holmes's comment on life, and of the phrase wherein he secures it, arises from his singular vigilance. He has unpreoccupied and alert eyes. Strangely enough, by the way, this watchfulness is for once as much at fault as would be the slovenly observation of an ordinary man, in the description of a horse's gallop, 'skimming along within a yard of the ground.' Who shall trust a man's nimble eyes after this, when habit and credulity have taught him? Not an inch nearer the ground goes the horse of fact at a gallop than at a walk. But Dr. Holmes's vigilance helps him to somewhat squalid purpose in his studies of New England inland life. Much careful literature besides has been spent, after the example of *Elsie Venner* and the *Autocrat*, upon the cottage worldliness, the routine of abundant and common comforts achieved by a distressing household industry, the shrillness, the unrest, the best-parlour emulation, the ungraceful vanity, of Americans of the country-side and the country-town; upon their affections made vulgar by undemonstrativeness, and their consciences made vulgar by demonstrativeness—their kindness by reticence, and their religion by candour.



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As for the question of heredity and of individual responsibility which Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes proposes in *Elsie Venner*, it is strange that a man whom it had sincerely disquieted should present it—not in its own insolubility but—in caricature. As though the secrets of the inherited body and soul needed to be heightened by a bit of burlesque physiology! It is in spite of our protest against the invention of Elsie's horrible plight—a conception and invention which Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes should feel to be essentially frivolous—that the serpent-maiden moves us deeply by her last 'Good night,' and by the gentle phrase that tells us 'Elsie wept.' But now, if Dr. Holmes shall succeed in proposing the question of separate responsibility so as to convince every civilised mind of his doubts, there will be curiously little change wrought thereby in the discipline of the world. For Dr. Holmes incidentally lets us know that he cherishes and values the instinct of intolerance and destructiveness in presence of the cruel, the self-loving, and the false. Negation of separate moral responsibility, when that negation is tempered by a working instinct of intolerance and destructiveness, will deal with the felon, after all, very much in the manner achieved by the present prevalent judicialness, unscientific though it may be. And to say this is to confess that Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes has worked, through a number of books, to futile purpose. His books are justified by something quite apart from his purpose.

### JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

The United States have produced authors not a few; among some names not the most famous, perhaps, on the popular tongue, are two or three names of their poets; but they have hardly given to the world more than one man of letters—judicious, judicial, disinterested, patient, happy, temperate, delighted. The colonial days, with the 'painful' divines who brought the parish into the wilderness; the experimental period of ambition and attempts at a literature that should be young as the soil and much younger than the race; the civil-war years, with a literature that matched the self-conscious and inexperienced heroism of the army;—none of these periods of the national life could fitly be represented by a man of letters. And though James Russell Lowell was the contemporary of the 'transcendentalists,' and a man of middle age when the South seceded, and though indeed his fame as a Yankee humourist is to be discerned through the smoke and the dust, through the gravity and the burlesque, of the war, clear upon the other side, yet he was virtually the child of national leisure, of moderation and education, an American of the seventies and onwards. He represented the little-recognised fact that in ripeness, not in rawness, consists the excellence of Americans—an excellence they must be content to share with contemporary nations, however much it may cost them to abandon

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we know not what bounding ambitions which they have never succeeded in definitely describing in words. Mr. Lowell was a refutation of the fallacy that an American can never be American enough. He ranked with the students and the critics among all nations, and nothing marks his transatlantic conditions except, perhaps, that his scholarliness is a little anxious and would not seem so; he enriches his phrases busily, and yet would seem composed; he makes his allusions tread closely one upon another, and there is an assumed carelessness, and an ill-concealed vigilance, as to the effect their number and their erudition will produce upon the reader. The American sensitiveness takes with him that pleasantest of forms; his style confesses more than he thinks of the loveable weakness of national vanity, and asks of the stranger now and again, 'Well, what do you think of my country?'

Declining, as I do, to separate style in expression from style in the thought that informs it—for they who make such a separation can hardly know that style should be in the very conception of a phrase, in its antenatal history, else the word is neither choice nor authentic—I recognise in Mr. Lowell, as a prose author, a sense of proportion and a delicacy of selection not surpassed in the critical work of this critical century. Those small volumes, *Among My Books* and *My Study Windows*, are all pure literature. A fault in criticism is the rarest thing in them. I call none to mind except the strange judgment on Dr. Johnson: 'Our present concern with the Saxons is chiefly a literary one. . . . Take Dr. Johnson as an instance. The Saxon, as it appears to me, has never shown any capacity for art,' and so forth. One wonders how Lowell read the passage on Iona, and the letter to Lord Chesterfield, and the Preface to the Dictionary without conviction of the great English writer's supreme art—art that declares itself and would not be hidden. But take the essay on Pope, that on Chaucer, and that on one Percival, a writer of American verse of whom English readers are not aware, and they prove Lowell to have been as clear in judging as he was exquisite in sentencing. His essay 'On a Certain Condensation in Foreigners' is famous, but an equal fame is due to 'My Garden Acquaintance' and 'A Good Word for Winter.' His talk about the weather is so full of wit that one wonders how prattlers at a loss for a topic dare attempt one so rich. The birds that nest in his syringas seem to be not his pensioners only, but his parishioners, so charmingly local, so intent upon his chronicle does he become when he is minded to play White of Selborne with a smile. And all the while it is the word that he is intent upon. You may trace his reading by some fine word that has not escaped him, but has been garnered for use when his fan has been quick to purge away the chaff of commonplace. He is thus fastidious and alert in many languages. You wonder at the delicacy



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of the sense whereby he perceives a choice rhyme in the Anglo-Norman of Marie de France or a clang of arms in the brief verse of Peire de Bergerac, or touches sensitively a word whereby Dante has transcended something sweet in Bernard de Ventadour, or Virgil somewhat noble in Homer. In his own use, and within his own English, he has the abstinence and the freshness of intention that keep every word new for the day's work. He gave to the language, and did not take from it; it gained by him, and lost not. There are writers of English now at work who almost convince us of their greatness until we convict them on that charge: they have succeeded at an unpardonable cost; they are glorified, but they have beggared the phrases they leave behind them.

Nevertheless Lowell was no poet. To accept his verse as a poet's would be to confess a lack of instinct, and there is no more grievous lack in a lover of poetry. Reason, we grant, makes for the full acceptance of his poems, and perhaps so judicial a mind as his may be forgiven for having trusted to reason and to criticism. His trust was justified—if such justification avails—by the admiration of fairly educated people who apparently hold him to have been a poet first, a humourist in the second place, and an essayist incidentally. It is hard to believe that he failed in instinct about himself. More probably he was content to forego it when he found the ode, the lyric, and the narrative verse all so willing. They made no difficulty, and he made none; why then are we reluctant to acknowledge the manifest stateliness of this verse and the evident grace of that, and the fine thought finely worded? Such reluctance justifies itself. Nor would I attempt to back it by the cheap sanctions of prophecy. Nay, it is quite possible that Lowell's poems may live; I have no commands for futurity. Enough that he enriched the present with the example of a scholarly, linguistic, verbal love of literature, with a studiousness full of heart.

### DOMUS ANGUSTA

The narrow house is a small human nature compelled to a large human destiny, charged with a fate too great, a history too various, for its slight capacities. Men have commonly complained of fate; but their complaints have been of the smallness, not of the greatness, of the human lot. A disproportion—all in favour of man—between man and his destiny is one of the things to be taken for granted in literature: so frequent and so easy is the utterance of the habitual lamentation as to the trouble of a 'vain capacity,' so well explained has it ever been.

'Thou hast not half the power to do me harm  
That I have to be hurt,'



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discontented man seems to cry to Heaven, taking the words of the brave Emilia. But inarticulate has been the voice within the narrow house. Obviously it never had its poet. Little elocution is there, little argument or definition, little explicitness. And yet for every vain capacity we may assuredly count a thousand vain destinies, for every liberal nature a thousand liberal fates. It is the trouble of the wide house we hear of, clamorous of its disappointments and desires. The narrow house has no echoes; yet its pathetic shortcoming might well move pity. On that strait stage is acted a generous tragedy; to that inadequate soul is intrusted an enormous sorrow; a tempest of movement makes its home within that slender nature; and heroic happiness seeks that timorous heart.

We may, indeed, in part know the narrow house by its inarticulateness—not, certainly, its fewness of words, but its inadequacy and imprecision of speech. For, doubtless, right language enlarges the soul as no other power or influence may do. Who, for instance, but trusts more nobly for knowing the full word of his confidence? Who but loves more penetratingly for possessing the ultimate syllable of his tenderness? There is a 'pledging of the word,' in another sense than the ordinary sense of truth and promise. The poet pledges his word, his sentence, his verse, and finds therein a peculiar sanction. And I suppose that even physical pain takes on an edge when it not only enforces a pang but whispers a phrase. Consciousness and the word are almost as closely united as thought and the word. Almost—not quite; in spite of its inexpressive speech, the narrow house is aware and sensitive beyond, as it were, its poor power.

But as to the whole disparity between the destiny and the nature, we know it to be general. Life is great that is trivially transmitted; love is great that is vulgarly experienced. Death, too, is a heroic virtue; and to the keeping of us all is death committed: death, submissive in the indocile, modest in the fatuous, several in the vulgar, secret in the familiar. It is destructive because it not only closes but contradicts life. Unlikely people die. The one certain thing, it is also the one improbable. A dreadful paradox is perhaps wrought upon a little nature that is incapable of death and yet is constrained to die. That is a true destruction, and the thought of it is obscure.

Happy literature corrects all this disproportion by its immortal pause. It does not bid us follow man or woman to an illogical conclusion. Mrs. Micawber never does desert Mr. Micawber. Considering her mental powers, by the way, an illogical conclusion for her would be manifestly inappropriate. Shakespeare, indeed, having seen a life whole, sees it to an end: sees it out, and Falstaff dies. More than Promethean was the audacity that, having kindled, quenched that spark. But otherwise the grotesque man in literature



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is immortal, and with something more significant than the immortality awarded to him in the sayings of rhetoric; he is preducible because he is not completed. His humours are strangely matched with perpetuity. But, indeed, he is not worthy to die; for there is something graver than to be immortal, and that is to be mortal. I protest I do not laugh at man or woman in the world. I thank my fellow-mortals for their wit, and also for the kind of joke that the French so pleasantly call *une joyeuseté*; these are to smile at. But the gay injustice of laughter is between me and the book.

That narrow house—there is sometimes a message from its living windows. Its bewilderment, its reluctance, its defect, show by moments from eyes that are apt to express none but common things. There are allusions unawares, involuntary appeals, in those brief glances. Far from me and from my friends be the misfortune of meeting such looks in reply to pain of our inflicting. To be clever and sensitive and to hurt the foolish and the stolid—wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world? Not I, by this heavenly light.

## REJECTION

Simplicity is not virginal in the modern world. She has a penitential or a vidual singleness. We can conceive an antique world in which life, art, and letters were simple because of the absence of many things; for us now they can be simple only because of our rejection of many things. We are constrained to such a vigilance as will not let even a master's work pass unfanned and unpurged. Even among his phrases one shall be taken and the other left. For he may unawares have allowed the habitualness that besets this multitudinous life to take the pen from his hand and to write for him a page or a word; and habitualness compels our refusals. Or he may have allowed the easy impulse of exaggeration to force a sentence which the mere truth, sensitively and powerfully pausing, would well have become. Exaggeration has played a part of its own in human history. By depreciating our language it has stimulated change, and has kept the circulating word in exercise. Our rejection must be alert and expert to overtake exaggeration and arrest it. It makes us shrewder than we wish to be. And, indeed, the whole endless action of refusal shortens the life we could desire to live. Much of our resolution is used up in the repeated mental gesture of adverse decision. Our tacit and implicit distaste is made explicit, who shall say with what loss to our treasury of quietness? We are defrauded of our interior ignorance, which should be a place of peace. We are forced to confess more articulately than befits our convention with ourselves. We are hurried out of our reluctances. We are made too much aware. Nay, more: we are tempted to the outward activity of destruction; reviewing becomes almost inevitable. As for the spiritual life—O weary, weary act of refusal! O waste but necessary



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hours, vigil and wakefulness of fear! 'We live by admiration' only a shortened life who live so much in the iteration of rejection and repulse. And in the very touch of joy there hides I know not what ultimate denial; if not on one side, on the other. If joy is given to us without reserve, not so do we give ourselves to joy. We withhold, we close. Having denied many things that have approached us, we deny ourselves to many things. Thus does *il gran rifiuto* divide and rule our world.

Simplicity is worth the sacrifice; but all is not sacrifice. Rejection has its pleasures, the more secret the more unmeasured. When we garnish a house we refuse more furniture, and furniture more various, than might haunt the dreams of decorators. There is no limit to our rejections. And the unconsciousness of the decorators is in itself a cause of pleasure to a mind generous, forbearing, and delicate. When we dress, no fancy may count the things we will none of. When we write, what hinders that we should refrain from Style past reckoning? When we marry—. Moreover, if simplicity is no longer set in a world having the great and beautiful quality of fewness, we can provide an equally fair setting in the quality of refinement. And refinement is not to be achieved but by rejection. One who suggests to me that refinement is apt to be a mere negative has offered up a singular blunder in honour of robustiousness. Refinement is not negative, because it must be compassed by many negations. It is a thing of price as well as of value; it demands immolations, it exacts experience. No slight or easy charge, then, is committed to such of us as, having apprehension of these things, fulfil the office of exclusion. Never before was a time when derogation was always so near, a daily danger, or when the reward of resisting it was so great. The simplicity of literature, more sensitive, more threatened, and more important than other simplicities, needs a guard of honour, who shall never relax the good will nor lose the good heart of their intolerance.

### THE LESSON OF LANDSCAPE

The landscape, like our literature, is apt to grow and to get itself formed under too luxurious ideals. This is the evil work of that *little more* which makes its insensible but persistent additions to styles, to the arts, to the ornaments of life—to nature, when unluckily man becomes too explicitly conscious of her beauty, and too deliberate in his arrangement of it. The landscape has need of moderation, of that fast-disappearing grace of unconsciousness, and, in short, of a return towards the ascetic temper. The English way of landowning, above all, has made for luxury. Naturally the country is fat. The trees are thick and round—a world of leaves; the hills are round; the forms are all blunt; and the grass is so deep as to have almost the effect of snow in smoothing off all points and curving



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away all abruptness. England is almost as blunt as a machine-made moulding or a piece of Early-Victorian cast-iron work. And on all this we have, of set purpose, improved by our invention of the country park. There all is curves and masses. A little more is added to the greenness and the softness of the forest glade, and for increase of ornament the fat land is devoted to idleness. Not a tree that is not impenetrable, inarticulate. Thick soil below and thick growth above cover up all the bones of the land, which in more delicate countries show brows and hollows resembling those of a fine face after mental experience. By a very intelligible paradox, it is only in a landscape made up for beauty that beauty is so ill achieved. Much beauty there must needs be where there are vegetation and the seasons. But even the seasons, in park scenery, are marred by the *little too much*: too complete a winter, too emphatic a spring, an ostentatious summer, an autumn too demonstrative.

‘Seek to have less rather than more.’ It is a counsel of perfection in *The Imitation of Christ*. And here, undoubtedly, is the secret of all that is virile and classic in the art of man, and of all in nature that is most harmonious with that art. Moreover, this is the secret of Italy. How little do the tourists and the poets grasp this latter truth, by the way—and the artists! The legend of Italy is to be gorgeous, and they have her legend by rote. But Italy is slim and all articulate; her most characteristic trees are those that are distinct and distinguished, with lines that suggest the etching-point rather than a brush loaded with paint. Cypresses shaped like flames, tall pines with the abrupt flatness of their tops, thin canes in the brakes, sharp aloes by the road-side, and olives with the delicate acuteness of the leaf—these make keen lines of slender vegetation. And they own the seasons by a gentle confession. Rather than be overpowered by the clamorous proclamation of summer in the English woods, we would follow June to this subtler South: even to the Campagna, where the cycle of the seasons passes within such narrow limitations that insensitive eyes scarcely recognise it. In early spring there is a fresher touch of green on all the spaces of grass, the distance grows less mellow and more radiant; by the coming of May the green has been imperceptibly dimmed again; it blushes with the mingled colours of minute and numberless flowers—a dust of flowers, in lines longer than those of ocean billows. This is the desert blossoming like a rose: not the obvious rose of gardens, but the multitudinous and various flower that gathers once in the year in every hand’s-breadth of the wilderness. When June comes the sun has burnt all to leagues of harmonious seed, coloured with a hint of the colour of harvest, which is gradually changed to the lighter harmonies of winter. All this fine chromatic scale passes within such modest boundaries that it



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is accused as a monotony. But those who find its modesty delightful may have a still more delicate pleasure in the blooming and blossoming of the sea. The passing from the winter blue to the summer blue, from the cold colour to the colour that has in it the fire of the sun, the kindling of the sapphire of the Mediterranean—the significance of these sea-seasons, so far from the pasture and the harvest, is imperceptible to ordinary senses, as appears from the fact that so few stay to see it all fulfilled. And if the tourist stayed, he would no doubt violate all that is lovely and moderate by the insistence of his descriptions. He would find adjectives for the blue sea, but probably he would refuse to search for words for the white. A white Mediterranean is not in the legend. Nevertheless it blooms, now and then, pale as an opal; the white sea is the flower of the breathless midsummer. And in its clear, silent waters, a few days, in the culmination of the heat, bring forth translucent living creatures, many-shaped jelly-fish, coloured like mother-of-pearl.

But without going so far from the landscape of daily life, it is in agricultural Italy that the *little less* makes so undesignedly, and as it were so inevitably, for beauty. The country that is formed for use and purpose only is immeasurably the loveliest. What a lesson in literature! How feelingly it persuades us that all except a very little of the ornament of letters and of life makes the dulness of the world. The tenderness of colour, the beauty of series and perspective, and the variety of surface, produced by the small culture of vegetables, are among the charms that come unsought, and that are not to be found by seeking—are never to be achieved if they are sought for their own sake. And another of the delights of the useful laborious land is its vitality. The soil may be thin and dry, but man's life is added to its own. He has embanked the hill to make little platforms for the growth of wheat in the light shadows of olive leaves. Thanks to the metayer land-tenure, man's heart, as well as his strength, is given to the ground, with his hope and his honour. Louis Blanc's 'point of honour of industry' is a conscious impulse—it is not too much to say—with most of the Tuscan contadini; but as each effort they make for their master they make also for the bread of their children, it is no wonder that the land they cultivate has a look of life. But in all colour, in all luxury, and in all that gives material for picturesque English, this lovely scenery for food and wine and raiment has that *little less* to which we desire to recall a rhetorical world.

### MR. COVENTRY PATMORE'S ODES



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To most of the great poets no greater praise can be given than praise of their imagery. Imagery is the natural language of their poetry. Without a parable she hardly speaks. But undoubtedly there is now and then a poet who touches the thing, not its likeness, too vitally, too sensitively, for even such a pause as the verse makes for love of the beautiful image. Those rare moments are simple, and their simplicity makes one of the reader's keenest experiences. Other simplicities may be achieved by lesser art, but this is transcendent simplicity. There is nothing in the world more costly. It vouches for the beauty which it transcends; it answers for the riches it forbears; it implies the art which it fulfils. All abundance ministers to it, though it is so single. And here we get the sacrificial quality which is the well-kept secret of art at this perfection. All the faculties of the poet are used for preparing this naked greatness—are used and fruitfully spent and shed. The loveliness that stands and waits on the simplicity of certain of Mr. Coventry Patmore's Odes, the fervours and splendours that are there, only to be put to silence—to silence of a kind that would be impossible were they less glorious—are testimonies to the difference between sacrifice and waste.

But does it seem less than reasonable to begin a review of a poet's work with praise of an infrequent mood? Infrequent such a mood must needs be, yet it is in a profound sense characteristic. To have attained it once or twice is to have proved such gift and grace as a true history of literature would show to be above price, even gauged by the rude measure of rarity. Transcendent simplicity could not possibly be habitual. Man lives within garments and veils, and art is chiefly concerned with making mysteries of these for the loveliness of his life; when they are rent asunder it is impossible not to be aware that an overwhelming human emotion has been in action. Thus *Departure, If I were Dead, A Farewell, Eurydice, The Toys, St. Valentine's Day*—though here there is in the exquisite imaginative play a mitigation of the bare vitality of feeling—group themselves apart as the innermost of the poet's achievements.

Second to these come the Odes that have splendid thought in great images, and display—rather than, as do the poems first glanced at, betray—the beauties of poetic art. Emotion is here, too, and in shocks and throes, never frantic when almost intolerable. It is mortal pathos. If any other poet has filled a cup with a draught so unalloyed, we do not know it. Love and sorrow are pure in *The Unknown Eros*; and its author has not refused even the cup of terror. Against love often, against sorrow nearly always, against fear always, men of sensibility instantaneously guard the quick of their hearts. It is only the approach of the pang that they will endure; from the pang itself,



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dividing soul and spirit, a man who is conscious of a profound capacity for passion defends himself in the twinkling of an eye. But through nearly the whole of Coventry Patmore's poetry there is an endurance of the mortal touch. Nay, more, he has the endurance of the immortal touch. That is, his capacity for all the things that men elude for their greatness is more than the capacity of other men. He endures therefore what they could but will not endure and, besides this, degrees that they cannot apprehend. Thus, to have studied *The Unknown Eros* is to have had a certain experience—at least the impassioned experience of a compassion; but it is also to have recognised a soul beyond our compassion.

What some of the Odes have to sing of, their author does not insist upon our knowing. He leaves more liberty for a well-intentioned reader's error than makes for peace and recollection of mind in reading. That the general purpose of the poems is obscure is inevitable. It has the obscurity of profound clear waters. What the poet chiefly secures to us is the understanding that love and its bonds, its bestowal and reception, does but rehearse the action of the union of God with humanity—that there is no essential man save Christ, and no essential woman except the soul of mankind. When the singer of a Song of Songs seems to borrow the phrase of human love, it is rather that human love had first borrowed the truths of the love of God. The thought grows gay in the three *Psyche* odes, or attempts a gaiety—the reader at least being somewhat reluctant. How is it? Mr. Coventry Patmore's play more often than not wins you to but a slow participation. Perhaps because some thrust of his has left you still tremulous.

But the inequality of equal lovers, sung in these Odes with a Divine allusion, is a most familiar truth. Love that is passionate has much of the impulse of gravitation—gravitation that is not falling, as there is no downfall in the precipitation of the sidereal skies. The love of the great for the small is the passionate love; the upward love hesitates and is fugitive. St. Francis Xavier asked that the day of his ecstasy might be shortened; Imogen, the wife of all poetry, 'prays forbearance;' the child is 'fretted with sallies of his mothers kisses.' It might be drawing an image too insistently to call this a centrifugal impulse.

The art that utters an intellectual action so courageous, an emotion so authentic, as that of Mr. Coventry Patmore's poetry, cannot be otherwise than consummate. Often the word has a fulness of significance that gives the reader a shock of appreciation. This is always so in those simplest odes which we have taken as the heart of the author's work. Without such wonderful rightness, simplicity of course is impossible. Nor is that beautiful precision less in passages of description, such as the landscape lines in *Amelia* and elsewhere. The words

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are used to the uttermost yet with composure. And a certain justness of utterance increases the provocation of what we take leave to call unjust thought in the few poems that proclaim an intemperate scorn—political, social, literary. The poems are but two or three; they are to be known by their subjects—we might as well do something to justify their scorn by using the most modern of adjectives—and call them topical. Here assuredly there is no composure. Never before did superiority bear itself with so little of its proper, signal, and peculiar grace—reluctance.

If Mr. Patmore really intends that his Odes shall be read with *minim*, or *crochet*, or *quaver rests*, to fill up a measure of beaten time, we are free to hold that he rather arbitrarily applies to liberal verse the laws of verse set for use—*cradle verse* and *march-marking verse* (we are, of course, not considering verse set to music, and thus compelled into the musical time). Liberal verse, dramatic, narrative, meditative, can surely be bound by no time measures—if for no other reason, for this: that to prescribe pauses is also to forbid any pauses unprescribed. Granting, however, his principle of *catalexis*, we still doubt whether the irregular metre of *The Unknown Eros* is happily used except for the large sweep of the flight of the Ode more properly so called. *Lycidas*, the *Mrs. Anne Killigrew*, the *Intimations*, and Emerson's *Threnody*, considered merely for their versification, fulfil their laws so perfectly that they certainly move without checks as without haste. So with the graver Odes—much in the majority—of Mr. Coventry Patmore's series. A more lovely dignity of extension and restriction, a more touching sweetness of simple and frequent rhyme, a truer impetus of pulse and impulse, English verse could hardly yield than are to be found in his versification. And what movement of words has ever expressed flight, distance, mystery, and wonderful approach, as they are expressed in a celestial line—the eighth in the ode *To the Unknown Eros*? When we are sensible of a metrical cheek it is in this way: To the English ear the heroic line is the unit of metre, and when two lines of various length undesignedly add together to form a heroic line, they have to be separated with something of a jerk. And this adding—as, for instance, of a line of four syllables preceding or following one of six—occurs now and then, and even in such a masterly measure of music as *A Farewell*. It is as when a sail suddenly flaps windless in the fetching about of a boat. In *The Angel in the House*, and other earlier poems, Mr. Coventry Patmore used the octosyllabic stanza perfectly, inasmuch as he never left it either heavily or thinly packed. Moreover those first poems had a composure which was the prelude to the peace of the Odes. And even in his slightest work he proves himself the master—that is, the owner—of words that, owned by him, are unprofaned, are as though they had never been profaned; the capturer of an art so quick and close that it is the voice less of a poet than of the very Muse.



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### INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

I shall not ask the commentators whether Blake used these two words in union or in antithesis. They assuredly have an inseverable union in the art of literature. The songs of Innocence and Experience are for each poet the songs of his own separate heart and life; but to take the cumulative experiences of other men, and to use these in place of the virginal fruit of thought—whereas one would hardly consent to take them for ordering even the most habitual of daily affairs—is to forego Innocence and Experience at once and together. Obviously, Experience can be nothing except personal and separate; and Innocence of a singularly solitary quality is his who does not dip his hands into other men's histories, and does not give to his own word the common sanction of other men's summaries and conclusions. Therefore I bind Innocence and Experience in one, and take them as a sign of the necessary and noble isolation of man from man—of his uniqueness. But if I had a mind to forego that manner of personal separateness, and to use the things of others, I think I would rather appropriate their future than their past. Let me put on their hopes, and the colours of their confidence, if I must borrow. Not that I would burden my prophetic soul with unjustified ambitions; but even this would be more tolerable than to load my memory with an unjustifiable history.

And yet how differently do the writers of a certain kind of love-poetry consider this matter. These are the love-poets who have no reluctance in adopting the past of a multitude of people to whom they have not even been introduced. Their verse is full of ready-made memories, various, numerous, and cruel. No single life—supposing it to be a liberal life concerned with something besides sex—could quite suffice for so much experience, so much disillusion, so much *deception*. To achieve that tone in its fulness it is necessary to take for one's own the *praeterita* (say) of Alfred de Musset and of the men who helped him—not to live but—to have lived; it is necessary to have lived much more than any man lives, and to make a common hoard of erotic remembrances with all kinds of poets.

As the Franciscans wear each other's old habits, and one Friar goes about darned because of another's rending, so the poet of a certain order grows cynical for the sake of many poets' old loves. Not otherwise will the resultant verse succeed in implying so much—or rather so many, in the feminine plural. The man of very sensitive individuality might hesitate at the adoption. The Franciscan is understood to have a fastidiousness and to overcome it. But these poets so triumph over their repugnance that it does not appear. And yet, if choice were, one might wish rather to make use of one's fellowmen's old shoes than put their old secrets to use, and dress one's art in a motley of past passions.



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Moreover, to utilise the mental experience of many is inevitably to use their verse and phrase. For the rest, all the traits of this love-poetry are familiar enough. One of them is the absence of the word of promise and pledge, the loss of the earliest and simplest of the impulses of love: which is the vow. 'Till death!' 'For ever!' are cries too simple and too natural to be commonplace, and in their denial there is the least tolerable of banalities—that of other men's disillusionings.

Perfect personal distinctness of Experience would be in literature a delicate Innocence. Not a passage of cheapness, of greed, of assumption, of sloth, or of any such sins in the work of him whose love-poetry were thus true, and whose *pudeur* of personality thus simple and inviolate. This is the private man, in other words the gentleman, who will neither love nor remember in public.

### PENULTIMATE CARICATURE

There has been no denunciation, and perhaps even no recognition, of a certain social immorality in the caricature of the mid-century and earlier. Literary and pictorial alike, it had for its notice the vulgarising of the married woman. No one now would read Douglas Jerrold for pleasure, but it is worth while to turn up that humourist's serial, *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures*, which were presumably considered good comic reading in the *Punch* of that time, and to make acquaintance with a certain ideal of the grotesque. Obviously to make a serious comment on anything which others consider or have considered humorous is to put one's-self at a disadvantage. He who sees the joke holds himself somewhat the superior of the man who would see it, such as it is, if he thought it worth his eyesight. The last-named has to bear the least tolerable of modern reproaches; but he need not always care. Now to turn over Douglas Jerrold's monologues is to find that people in the mid-century took their mirth principally from the life of the *arriere boutique*. On that shabby stage was enacted the comedy of literature. Therefore we must take something of the vulgarity of Jerrold as a circumstance of the social ranks wherein he delighted. But the essential vulgarity is that of the woman. There is in some old *Punch* volume a drawing by Leech—whom one is weary of hearing named the gentle, the refined—where the work of the artist has vied with the spirit of the letter-press. Douglas Jerrold treats of the woman's jealousy, Leech of her stays. They lie on a chair by the bed, beyond description gross. And page by page the woman is derided, with an unflinching enjoyment of her foolish ugliness of person, of manners, and of language. In that time there was, moreover, one great humourist; he bore his part willingly in vulgarising the woman; and the part that fell to him was the vulgarising of the act of maternity. Woman spiteful, woman suing man at the law for evading her fatuous companionship, woman incoherent, woman abandoned without restraint to violence and temper, woman feigning sensibility—in none of these ignominies is woman so common, foul, and foolish for Dickens as she is in child-bearing.



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I named Leech but now. He was, in all things essential, Dickens's contemporary. And accordingly the married woman and her child are humiliated by his pencil; not grossly, but commonly. For him she is moderately and dully ridiculous. What delights him as humorous is that her husband—himself wearisome enough to die of—is weary of her, finds the time long, and tries to escape her. It amuses him that she should furtively spend money over her own dowdiness, to the annoyance of her husband, and that her husband should have no desire to adorn her, and that her mother should be intolerable. It pleases him that her baby, with enormous cheeks and a hideous rosette in its hat—a burlesque baby—should be a grotesque object of her love, for that too makes subtly for her abasement. Charles Keene, again—another contemporary, though he lived into a later and different time. He saw little else than common forms of human ignominy—indignities of civic physique, of stupid prosperity, of dress, of bearing. He transmits these things in greater proportion than he found them—whether for love of the humour of them, or by a kind of inverted disgust that is as eager as delight—one is not sure which is the impulse. The grossness of the vulgarities is rendered with a completeness that goes far to convince us of a certain sensitiveness of apprehension in the designer; and then again we get convinced that real apprehension—real apprehensiveness—would not have insisted upon such things, could not have lived with them through almost a whole career. There is one drawing in the *Punch* of years ago, in which Charles Keene achieved the nastiest thing possible to even the invention of that day. A drunken citizen, in the usual broadcloth, has gone to bed, fully dressed, with his boots on and his umbrella open, and the joke lies in the surprise awaiting, when she awakes, the wife asleep at his side in a nightcap. Every one who knows Keene's work can imagine how the huge well-fed figure was drawn, and how the coat wrinkled across the back, and how the bourgeois whiskers were indicated. This obscene drawing is matched by many equally odious. Abject domesticity, ignominies of married life, of middle-age, of money-making; the old common jape against the mother-in-law; ill-dressed men with whisky—ill-dressed women with tempers; everything that is underbred and decivilised; abominable weddings: in one drawing a bridegroom with shambling sidelong legs asks his bride if she is nervous; she is a widow, and she answers, 'No, never was.' In all these things there is very little humour. Where Keene achieved fun was in the figures of his schoolboys. The hint of tenderness which in really fine work could never be absent from a man's thought of a child or from his touch of one, however frolic or rowdy the subject in hand, is absolutely lacking in Keene's designs; nevertheless, we acknowledge that here is humour. It is also in some of his clerical figures



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when they are not caricatures, and certainly in 'Robert,' the City waiter of *Punch*. But so irresistible is the derision of the woman that all Charles Keene's persistent sense of vulgarity is intent centrally upon her. Never for any grace gone astray is she bantered, never for the social extravagances, for prattle, or for beloved dress; but always for her jealousy, and for the repulsive person of the man upon whom she spies and in whom she vindicates her ignoble rights. If this is the shopkeeper the possession of whom is her boast, what then is she?

This great immorality, centring in the irreproachable days of the Exhibition of 1851, or thereabouts—the pleasure in this particular form of human disgrace—has passed, leaving one trace only: the habit by which some men reproach a silly woman through her sex, whereas a silly man is not reproached through his sex. But the vulgarity of which I have written here was distinctively English—the most English thing that England had in days when she bragged of many another—and it was not able to survive an increased commerce of manners and letters with France. It was the chief immorality destroyed by French fiction.