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SIX GREAT POETS

CHAUCER · POPE · WORDSWORTH
SHELLEY · TENNYSON · THE BROWNINGS

BY
AUBREY DE SÉLINCOURT

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FOREWORD

THE choice of six great poets out of a literature as rich as ours cannot but be somewhat arbitrary. That the six I have chosen are great, nobody is likely to deny, nevertheless I can fancy someone asking, as he rapidly turns over the leaves of this book, 'But why not Shakespeare?' My answer would be simple: I have not written of Shakespeare, because these essays are biographical as well as critical, and I could not write a biography of Shakespeare because the known facts about him are only about half a dozen in number, the rest being inference, or guesswork. As for writing about Shakespeare's poetry, I did not wish to do that, because a thousand people have done so already, and to add to the number calls for either great learning or great impudence—and I have neither.

Another omission which will certainly strike readers of this book is Keats. But the reason for my not including Keats is even simpler than my reason for not including Shakespeare. It is that I wrote of him in another volume of this series, *Six Great Englishmen*. I have, however, in discussing the other poets, constantly referred to Keats by way of illustration or contrast. I have done this deliberately—though indeed I could hardly help it, for, apart from his own poetic genius, Keats was one of the most sensitive *readers* of poetry who ever lived, and anyone who tries to write about poetry today can hardly help being aware, so to speak, of his presence, and of the many casual but inspired comments on the subject which he scattered about in his letters.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

1340 - 1400

SEVERAL poets, amongst them Dryden, Pope and Wordsworth, thought fit to rewrite some of Chaucer's poems in the manner and idiom of their own times, and only a year or two ago a new version of the *Canterbury Tales* appeared.

One is tempted to wish that all these translators and adapters had spared their labour, not only for the general reason that to translate a poem necessarily destroys, or at any rate changes, a large part of its meaning—for much of the 'meaning' of a poem lies within the rhythm and sound and cadence of the actual words it employs—but also for the more particular reason that of all our great poets Chaucer is the easiest to understand and enjoy. His language compared with (say) Shakespeare's is simplicity itself, and any determined reader with his wits about him and a glossary at his elbow can very quickly accustom himself to a turn of phrase which is strange only with the strangeness of a bygone fashion in dress. Scholarship, of course, is another matter; but scholarship is not the first, or even the best, approach to the pleasure of reading. And as for the substance of Chaucer's poetry, in so far as it is separable from the lovely language in which it is clothed, that, indeed, needs no more for its enjoyment than quick senses, a love of the spring sunshine and sympathy with one's fellowmen. In a wise man's hands scholarship is the noblest of weapons; but in the approach to literature it should bide its time.

Poetry is always a sort of inmost essence, or crystalliza-

tion, of the general life of the age in which it appears, and as the pulse of that life beats strongly or languidly, so the poetry which comes from it will be vigorous or faint. Poets, however individual their voices, do not speak for themselves alone; they are like the Aeolian harp which Coleridge was so fond of talking about—silent until the wind blows upon its strings, as the wind itself, until it finds its instrument, is silent too. One looks, therefore, for the finest poetry in those times when great ideas are abroad, or great events afoot, working like a ferment in people's minds and binding them together in a sense of shared excitement, or adventure, or achievement or discovery. One has only to think of Athens under Pericles, of the first Elizabethan age, of the wonderful new flowering of English poetry under the impact of the seminal ideas of the French revolution, to see the truth of what I mean.

Chaucer, too, lived in an age when ideas were stirring and events to match them were already on the march. The intellectual lethargy of the early Middle Ages was already shaken off; government and learning had long been free from exclusively ecclesiastical control; oversea trade was rapidly growing, with its accompanying increase in wealth and the rise of a powerful new class to balance the Church, on the one hand, and the old feudal nobility on the other; the worst recorded plague in history, which ravaged England and killed nearly half the population, took place when Chaucer was about nine years old, and, with its far-reaching economic consequences, led directly to the first open clash between master and man, when, following the dream of John Ball, the peasants marched to London under Wat Tyler to demand an alleviation of their lot. Above all, England during the sixty years of Chaucer's life was growing for the first time to a full sense of nationhood. We nowadays have taught ourselves to deprecate the spirit of nationalism, because, in other nations, it is an inconvenient

thing, and perhaps because we ourselves, having possessed it for so long and put it to such triumphant uses, can afford at last to pretend to forget it; but we know well enough that it is a necessary stage in the growth of any country which is destined to eminence; it binds men together, for good or evil, so that they are able to face the world with confidence in the present and hope for the future.

The fourteenth century Englishman enjoyed fighting; a 'free man of heart and with tongue' as a predecessor of Chaucer described him; 'but the hand is more better and more free than the tongue'. Tough and adventurous as he was, he had ample opportunity, as the Hundred Years War dragged on, to indulge his tastes as he marched with Edward III's levies against the towns and villages of France, or tried, with less success, to repel the raiding French fleets which destroyed so many of our own towns along the Channel shore. And the more he fought, the more he felt himself an Englishman, a 'rough islander' with his own place in the world, strong enough to enrich himself on the spoils of France his former conqueror, or on the ransoms of captured French grandees, and independent enough even, on occasion, to defy the Pope. It was at this epoch, too, that the rough islander first officially acquired his own native speech; for though various dialects of English had been spoken by the people for centuries past, it was not until the middle of the fourteenth century that one of them—the English of London and the East Midlands—became the official language of the court, the law-courts and the schools, and finally ousted the old Norman French.

Gower, a contemporary and friend of Chaucer, wrote many of his poems in Latin and French. Chaucer—and it is one of the greatest gifts he gave us—wrote from the first in the English of London, and by his genius transformed a local dialect into what was to become, in his own hands and

in the hands of his successors, the fitting language of the greatest poetry in the world. He did for the English language what Dante had done a hundred years before for the Italian.

Chaucer's father was a citizen and vintner of London. He evidently prospered in his trade, for a few years before his son was born he was one of a distinguished company which attended Edward III on a journey to Cologne, and thus had some link of service with the royal household, as Chaucer himself was also to have throughout nearly the whole of his life.

John Chaucer lived in Thames Street, and it was presumably here that the poet was born, about the year 1340, and passed the early years of his boyhood. Riverside London in the fourteenth century was no bad place for a boy with his wits about him and a quick eye for the doings of men. Wharves lined the street, and ships from all parts of Europe—broad-beamed, heavy vessels, with their one mast and single great, square sail—would be tied up along them, loading or unloading their cargoes of wine or wool or spices at what was then, as now, one of the greatest seaports of the world; and, as London was still comparatively little in those days, the open country was close at hand for a boy to roam or dream in—as Chaucer undoubtedly did, for he loved solitude only less than he loved the society of his fellows and the rich spectacle afforded by their queerness, their gallantry, their heroism and their absurdity.

There is a pleasant passage in his *Legend of Good Women* (it is a dullish poem on the whole and most of the women were not very good), in which he tells of his happy escape into the fields on May mornings, leaving his books for the pleasure of seeing again the 'flower of all flowers', the humble daisy.

> There is game none [he wrote]
> That from my bookes maketh me to go,

But it be seldom on the holiday,
Save, certainly, when that the month of May
Is come, and that I hear the foules sing,
And that the flowers ginnen for to spring—
Farewell my book and my devotion!
Now have I then such a condition,
That of all the flowers in the mead
Then love I most these flowers white and red,
Such as men callen day's-eyes in our town.
To them have I so great affection
As I said erst, when comen is the May,
That in my bed there dawneth me no day
But I am up and walking in the mead
To see this flower against the sunne spread,
When it upriseth early by the morrow;
That blissful sighte softeneth all my sorrow,
So glad am I, when that I have presence
Of it, to do it alle reverence,
As she that is of alle flowers flower,
Fulfilled all of virtue and honour,
And ever the like fair and fresh of hue.

Does Chaucer, in those charming lines, overstep the modesty of nature and praise something too common to deserve such praise? I do not think so. Early poetry is always much concerned with familiar things. So is all poetry; but early poetry, especially, re-mints for us the tarnished coin of the commonest experience, making us see as for the first time the most ordinary objects of nature or domestic use, of which long familiarity has dulled the brightness. When Chaucer wants to praise a young woman's beauty, he compares her to a silver noble newly forged in the mint, to a pear-tree in bloom, and to the soft wool of a wether; and we are reminded afresh that the brightness, the grace and the softness of these things are indeed worthy of wonder and delight.

The known facts of Chaucer's life are few, and, in them-

selves, dry and uninteresting. Most of them are derived from legal and court documents, in which are recorded certain payments made to him at different periods for public services in war, diplomacy and civil duties. The nature of these services is, however, of the greatest importance and interest, for they show us the quality and breadth of Chaucer's experience of the world—a quality and breadth we should have been bound to assume from his poetry, even if there had been no direct evidence of it.

No sort of knowledge is alien to a great poet; it is all grist to his mill. He differs from the rest of us in that his mind is a sort of philosopher's stone, which changes the coarse metal of experience into gold. The more he knows of the infinitely various goings-on of life, the richer his poetry is likely to be, and perhaps it was a bad day for poetry, and for literature generally, when the writer withdrew from the racket and scramble of a full life in the world, to make a profession of his writing. One likes to remember that Æschylus fought at Marathon, and Sophocles commanded a fleet; that Shakespeare was a busy and successful man of affairs, Spenser and Milton both servants of their country; and perhaps even the poetry of Keats reads the more richly for the few years he spent studying medicine and walking the hospitals.

At the age of seventeen or thereabouts Chaucer was taken into service in the household of the Duke of Clarence. Two years later he saw military service in France, was taken prisoner, and released on the payment of a ransom. While still young he married Philippa Roet a sister of John of Gaunt's third wife, a valuable connection which brought him the patronage of that great and powerful man. Diplomatic missions took him again to France, to Flanders, and on two occasions to Italy, where he may have met Petrarch and Boccaccio, the two greatest living Italian men of letters. In 1374 he was made controller of customs in the port of

London, and in 1386 he sat in parliament as knight of the shire for Kent. During the last ten years of his life he fell into difficulties and debt—his purse was light and (like Catullus') full of cobwebs: 'ye be my life', he addressed it with a smile of wry amusement;

> ye be my hearte's star:
> Queen of comfort and of good company:
> Be heavy again or elles must I die;

but in the year 1399 an additional pension granted him by King Richard's successor, Henry IV, set him up again. But he did not long enjoy his new, though still modest, prosperity—equal to an income of about £700 (untaxed) of our money. He died on October 25, 1400, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

In the course of this full and varied life Chaucer came into intimate contact with all manner of men. In youth, when he would most have enjoyed it, he knew the splendour and pageantry of the royal household, enriched and enlivened by French noblemen and princes taken prisoner in the wars; he knew war itself, perhaps more pitiless and brutal in his day even than in our own, and saw with his own eyes

> The carrion in the bush with throat y-corve

as he marched with the soldiers through the ravaged countryside of France; in the course of his business at the Thames wharves he talked familiarly with the merchants and common sailors not only of England but of all the countries of Europe, listening, no doubt, as his fashion was, with downcast eyes and a smile half-pleased, half-ironic, to their travellers' tales of all the wonders of the sea; himself a traveller, he learnt the ways of men in other lands, and looked with delighted eyes at the cities of France and Flanders and, above all, of Italy, then so far in advance of

England in the splendour of architecture, painting and letters. Then, in his little room in the tower of Aldgate, where he lived for many years, he had his books and his silence—few books indeed, but much loved; amongst them his Vergil, Ovid and Boethius, his Dante and Petrarch and Boccaccio, and such others as, he tells us,

> to read I me delight,
> And to them give I faith and full credence,
> And in my heart have them in reverence.

There is a type of writer who never reveals himself, however brightly he illuminates the world of which he writes. Of this type Shakespeare is the supreme example. Shakespeare could penetrate to the last recesses of human character and passion and make them burn for us upon his page; reading him, we know ourselves and our world, and other worlds separated from ours sometimes by so thin and transparent a veil; but of himself we know nothing. We are aware in his great verse of a mind and a power, but never —not even in his sonnets, with which Wordsworth supposed that he unlocked his heart—are we aware of a man.

There is another kind of writer who, in whatever he writes, builds up, consciously or unconsciously, a portrait of himself. Lamb was such a writer—and so was Chaucer.

What would we not give to know what Shakespeare looked like? His was certainly not the stolid and porcine visage one can see on his tomb at Stratford. Professor Dover Wilson has shown us another portrait which *might* be Shakespeare, and most of us, I fancy, hope that it is so. But . . . we do not know. With Chaucer we are luckier. A friend of his, the poet Occleve, had a drawing of him inserted in the margin of a page in a book he wrote. It is not, perhaps, a very good portrait, but it does, in its general feeling, bear out another, and much more important one: the description, namely, which Chaucer left us of himself.

I spoke a little way back of how Chaucer must have listened, with downcast eyes, to the seamen's tales, 'as his fashion was.' It was not fancy which made me add that phrase; for when, in the *Canterbury Tales,* the landlord of the Tabard Inn comes to call upon Chaucer for a story,

> he looked [Chaucer writes] upon me,
> And sayde thus: 'What man art thou?' quoth he;
> 'Thou lookest as thou wouldest find a hare,
> For ever upon the ground I see thee stare.
> Approache near, and look up merrily.'

Then, turning to the company of riders, the landlord in his bluff way, and without respect of persons, goes on to comment further. 'Look at him!' he cries:

> 'He in the waist is shaped as well as I;
> This were a poppet in the arm to embrace
> For any woman, small, and fair of face
> He seemeth elvish by his countenance.'

'Why,' we exclaim, 'this is exactly as it should be—*of course* Chaucer was like that!' That little, round figure; that shy manner, as if, when people were about him, he were *in* the company but not quite *of* it; the eyes so deceptively fixed upon the ground, yet missing nothing; the puckish expression, not softened but emphasized by the sober-coloured clothes and little grey pointed beard: that is precisely how we (wise after the event) should have imagined Chaucer to look, and we are properly grateful for having our acuteness confirmed by his own words.

In spite of the fact that Chaucer's England, having lain so long under the drums and tramplings of three conquests, was only beginning to feel herself England in our modern sense, Chaucer was one of the most English of our poets. He seems to anticipate just those qualities which, looking back over the accumulated riches of English literature and life, we most jealously claim as the special and peculiar

possession of the English spirit—tolerance, sweetness, and the lambent flame of an all-pervading humorous irony. Other poets, both English and foreign, have surpassed Chaucer in power and depth, but in gusto and sheer enjoyment of the kaleidoscope of human character few have been his equals. In spite of his love, and lovely telling, of old romantic tales, and, on occasion, his light-hearted mocking of them, he was a realist of realists. He saw the world as it was, and saw it whole, with calm, amused, but delighted eyes. That world, full of violence, treachery and avarice, and haunted, as seldom since, by the shadow of disease and death, was nevertheless *his* world, and, as such, to be accepted and enjoyed. Life is a brief sojourn between two endless and mysterious journeys, and it seemed good to Chaucer, while it lasted, to take his ease in his inn, and to relish the fare. 'I hate poetry,' Keats once said, 'that has a palpable design upon us and seems to put its hand into its breeches pocket.' He was thinking of Wordsworth, but there have been other poets, greater even than Wordsworth, who have been, perhaps, too conscious of their burden as prophets and teachers. But Chaucer carried no burden at all; for him life was good enough as it was, and he never felt it his business to argue it different. He never grew hot at the wickedness of men; rather, he turned it off with an ironic smile. To him, an absorbed spectator,

> The smiler with the knife under his cloak

was as integral a part of the human scene as the young wife of the Oxford Carpenter,

> Whose mouth was sweet as bragot or the meed,
> Or store of apples laid in hay or heath;

and the same happiness of temper, the same unperturbed and sunny worldliness enabled him to tell the coarsest of ragamuffin tales, like those of the Miller of Trumpington

and the Carpenter of Oxford, with as much ease and genuine enjoyment of their quality as tales of high romance like that of Palamon and Arcite, or of exquisite tenderness like the Prioress' story of the Christian child who was murdered by the Jews. 'Only be in tune with yourself,' wrote Sterne, 'and you may take it as high or as low as you please.' Chaucer was in tune with himself: that is one of his secrets; and it enabled him to turn with perfect naturalness from grave to gay, and back from rumbustious farce to high and serious brooding upon the transitoriness of mortal things:

> O yonge freshe folkes, he or she,
> In which ay love up-groweth with your age,
> Repaireth home from worldly vanity,
> And of your heart up-casteth the visage
> To th' ilke God that after his image
> You made; and thinketh all is but a faire
> This world, that passeth soon as flowers fair!

Byron (to point a contrast) mixed manners in *Don Juan;* but with him the mixture is often awkward and uncomfortable, as if one element in him were always on the watch to make a fool of the other; but in Chaucer the changes of mood are never awkward, for the simple reason that he was equally himself in all of them. He was 'sincere', in the older (and better) sense of the word—he was not, that is, a cracked pot, but the vessel of his spirit was sound and whole.

One word about how to read Chaucer's verse, so as not to miss the movement and music of it. Usually, but not always, the letter 'e' at the end of a word is to be given the value of a separate, light syllable, as in French verse to-day. This is best done by letting the voice dwell a little longer than usual on the syllable which precedes; this, and the avoidance of hurry before sounding the initial letter of the next word, will allow the merest whisper of a sound to

escape between the two—which is all that the final 'e' should be.

O yonge freshe folkes . . .

Pause a fraction of a second after 'yonge', and the mere physical readjustment of throat and lips to sound the 'f' of the following word, will turn the 'yonge' into the sort of dissyllable which Chaucer meant it to be. It is worth while getting this right; for miss the proper movement of verse and you miss half of its effect, and therefore much of its meaning—and no verse lapses more delicately or falls more sweetly than Chaucer's.

Chaucer was a prolific writer, both in verse and prose. Much of his work was prentice work—

> The life so short, the craft so long to learn,
> The assay so hard, so sharp the conquering——

and of interest chiefly to students, though any student who perseveres with his early poems, most of which are translated or adapted from French originals, will be rewarded by passages, or lines, or flashes of phrase, in which the later mastery of language and music is foreshadowed: for instance the picture of Venus in the *House of Fame*—

> in portraiture
> I saw anon-right her figure
> Naked, fleeting in a sea;
> And also on her head, parde
> Her rose garland white and red,
> And her comb to comb her head

(the Essex oystermen still, to-day, say 'fleet' for 'float') or the noble opening of the address to the Virgin, in his A B C:

> All-mighty and all-merciable Queen,
> To whom that all this world fleeth for succour

with its cunning alliteration and the rush and fervour of

its movement. Of this lesser work, however, I shall have 'namore to seyn', as Chaucer was fond of putting it; for there is space in this short survey only to consider his best, and best-known poems—poems which put him in the company of the great poets of the world.

Most of us tend to be impatient readers nowadays, perhaps because there are too many books to read, quite apart from other forms of entertainment. We gallop through novels, and if we read poems, we like them to be short. This is a pity; for many of the greatest poems, not only in English but in many other languages, are very long indeed. Our ancestors were less impatient than we; they were willing to enter the enchanted country which this poet, or that, created for them, and, once there, to travel through it under his guidance on as long a journey as he cared to take them. It is a kind of submission which we, too, should be well advised to make, if we can bring ourselves to do so, or we shall miss much.

Troilus and Criseyde was Chaucer's first long complete poem: indeed it was also his last, for the *Canterbury Tales* is only a fragment, though a mighty one. He was in his forties when he wrote it, a busy man much occupied still with public duties, in addition to the long continued search for the kind of poem which would really satisfy him and enable him to give expression to the 'God's plenty' (to borrow Dryden's fine description of his work) which he felt was in him. He almost found it in *Troilus,* but not quite; the final discovery had to wait until the idea of his Canterbury pilgrims came into his mind.

The story of *Troilus* he took from his Italian contemporary Boccaccio, who took it from the general stock-pot of part-classical, part-medieval legend into which any writer was at liberty to dip. In the Middle Ages, and indeed for long after, it was thought by no means reprehensible for one author to borrow from another, to translate him whole or

adapt him as convenient, with or without acknowledgement. It was even considered creditable as showing a man's learning and knowledge of literature—the best praise which a contemporary Frenchman could find for Chaucer was to call him 'grand translateur'; and it is worth remembering that even Shakespeare was a great borrower. Originality does not consist in inventing new stories; it consists in what a man makes of given material, wherever it may come from; and Chaucer in *Troilus,* though he has borrowed the story, has embroidered it in his own colours and on his own scale so that the finished poem is a new thing, and wholly his own.

The story is well known: Troilus, son of Priam and prince of Troy, had known nothing of love and had mocked at lovers, until one day at a temple ceremony he saw Criseyde, daughter of the prophet Calchas, the traitor who had deserted to the Greeks. One glance at Criseyde in her widow's weeds—

> Was never seen thing to be praised more dear,
> Nor under blacke cloud so bright a star——

was enough to enslave Troilus for ever. The young warrior's troubles had begun—for it is worth remembering that the notion of love leading to marriage, and, with luck or wisdom, to happiness is a modern one. No English poet before Spenser ever associated love with marriage, and for the ancients it was always looked upon as the Destroyer. Marriage was a social and civil institution for the founding of families and the continuation of the race; love was the Enemy, the irresistible power which not even the gods could escape—though doubtless they wished that they could.

Now Troilus was in love, and, consequently, in torment:

> If no love is, O God, what feel I so?
> And if love is, what thing and which is he?

If love be good, from whence cometh my woe?
If it be wicked, a wonder thinketh me
When every torment and adversity
That cometh of him may to me savoury think;
For aye thirst I the more that I it drink.

So in stanza after stanza of his noble rhyme royal (Chaucer's own measure), like thread after coloured thread woven into a tapestry, the picture of Troilus' love-longing is elaborated, until the next scene in the slow-moving story opens. This is the arrival of Pandarus, who comes in with a jest on his lips, and begs his friend to tell him the cause of his distress. Troilus replies that he is in love. Pandarus is delighted to hear that it is nothing worse and, having extracted from Troilus the name of his beloved, guarantees in his sly and sanguine fashion to arrange everything conveniently for both parties. The great thing, he declares, is to stop lamenting—for what is there to cry about?

For this is not, certain, the beste wise
To win your love, as teachen us the wise,
To wallow and weep like Niobe.

For the character of Pandarus Chaucer owed nothing to Boccaccio or to any predecessor. Pandarus was Chaucer's own invention, and he was a foretaste of what was to come a few years later in the *Canterbury Tales*. He was, moreover, a new thing in medieval literature, which had dealt in the main with personified qualities or types; but Pandarus is not a type: coarse-grained but kindly, at once both stupid and shrewd, garrulous to excess and the unwitting cause of the very disaster he is so confident of averting, he is a person drawn in the round for the first time in English literature. Moreover, Pandarus is a comic character, and the fact that Chaucer was able to sustain him as a principal figure in a long poem of which the general colour is sombre and the feeling predominantly a feeling of tenderness and

gravity, is one mark of that mastery of material and broad sanity of outlook (such as Shakespeare had in a supreme degree), which I have already touched upon. One feels that Chaucer was *looking* for Pandarus; now he had found him, and was well on the way to that inexhaustible creation or God's plenty of human character, which he was to show in his last and greatest work.

By the good offices of Pandarus, Troilus and Criseyde are brought together, and Troilus declares his love——

> O goodly, freshe, free,
> That with the streames of your eyen clear
> Ye woulden friendly sometime look on me——

and for a while the two are happy. Pandarus, however, warns his friend to be on his guard, for luck may change, and Chaucer, remembering Dante, puts into his mouth the solemn words

> . . . of fortune's sharp adversity
> The worste kind of infortune is this:
> A man to have been in prosperity,
> And it remembren when it passed is.

The change soon comes. Greeks and Trojans agree to exchange prisoners, and Calchas persuades the Greeks to ask for Criseyde in exchange for the Trojan Antenor. Before she goes, she swears by the river of Troy to be faithful to her lover:

> And thou, Simois, that as an arrow clear
> Through Troy ay runnest downward to the sea,
> Bear witness of this word that said is here,
> That on the day that I untrue be
> To Troilus, mine owne hearte free,
> That thou returne backward to thy well,
> And I with body and soul sink down to hell!

Troilus, left alone, goes to the empty house where Criseyde used to live:

> O palace desolate,
> O house of houses whilom best y-hight,
> O palace empty and disconsolate,
> O thou lantern of which quenched is the light . . .
>
> O palace, whilom crown of houses all,
> Illumined with sun of all my bliss!
> O ring from which the ruby is out-fall;
> O cause of woe, that cause hast been of blisse!
> Yet, since I may no better, fain would I kiss
> Thy colde doores, durst I for this rout;
> And farewell, shrine, of which the saint is out.

Those lines, with their lovely images of the jewel gone from the ring, the lantern put out, the shrine deserted by its saint, and their solemn music like a distant bell tolling in summer air, Chaucer never surpassed, though he was to equal them again and again.

Once gone to the Greeks, the false Criseyde forgets Troilus and takes Diomed for her lover. When Troilus tells Pandarus of her treachery, and declares his intention of seeking death in battle, Pandarus, hitherto so full of words and easy counsel, is at last struck dumb; confronted by the reality of a passion he could not understand, he stood

> as still as stone; one word he could not say.

Troilus is a tragic poem—yet not, perhaps, wholly tragic. In spite of the theme and the exquisite art with which Chaucer elaborates and embroiders it, he makes us, in his own most subtle and delicate way, feel throughout the long story that he is, in a sense, playing with his reader. 'Look,' he seems to say, 'I have here the prettiest of toys for your delight. You will love it, as indeed I do myself; but—it is only a toy.' And so, at the end, he calls upon all 'young fresh folks', into whose hands his book may come, to forget

his tale of 'pagans' cursed olde rites' and return 'home from worldly vanity'. 'But' (we fancy him to add) 'it was lovely while it lasted.' And indeed it was.

This detachment is an essential quality of Chaucer's art. There is a kind of poetry in which the poet is deeply involved—in which he tries to express a unique and private vision. Wordsworth, for instance, in the thousands of lines which he wrote about 'nature' was not really writing about nature at all: he was writing about himself; or—to put it differently—what he was interested in was his own end of the mutual relationship between himself and it. Wordsworth said that the meanest flower could give him 'thoughts that lie too deep for tears'; Chaucer, on the other hand, writes of the 'flowers stooping on their stalkes low,' or the 'nightingale upon the cedar green', or of his beloved daisies, without any ulterior thought at all. For Wordsworth such things were symbols: symbols of the divine in nature and in the soul of man; for Chaucer they were objects, however delightful. And in the same way, for Chaucer, the story of Troilus was—a story. He was not involved in it; he was not, as Keats was in *Hyperion* or as Shelley was in *Prometheus,* using the old tale as a new vehicle for a deeply-felt personal experience and private vision of ultimate reality and truth. For Chaucer, the tale was the thing, to be made as much of as his art and exuberant fancy would allow. In the former kind of poetry, of which I mentioned Wordsworth's as an example, one might say that the poet is the 'seer'—the *Vates*, or prophet, as the Romans sometimes called him; in the latter kind the poet is not seer but 'maker'—as the Greeks took him to be, when they invented their word for him. *Troilus* is pre-eminently the poem of a 'maker', who, having selected a theme, embroiders and works it up with deliberate and conscious art, until it becomes a thing of beauty. Nearly all Chaucer's poetry is of this kind: it is 'made' poetry, if I may use the

expression without any implication of better or worse; for the difference between seer and maker is one not of value but of kind. One more example, for what it is worth: it would be hard to say of Milton's *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais* which is the better poem. Each is on the same theme, the death of a young poet, and both are supreme works of art; but Milton, when he wrote *Lycidas,* was a 'maker'; Shelley, when he wrote *Adonais,* was a visionary, or 'seer'.

A further reason for this sense of detachment in Chaucer's work is his subtle and all-pervading humour. Chaucer was a humorist *par excellence,* as all who read the *Canterbury Tales* will know; and the humorist, with the delicate perception, the tenderness and sentiment which the name carries with it, is necessarily a little withdrawn from the hurly-burly of things, watching now with a sigh, now with a chuckle, but always with relish, the goings-on of men and women in the world. Thus at the end of *Troilus* Chaucer's call to his young, fresh folks to forget, is a mockery—grave and tender, indeed, but still a mockery—of all that has gone before:

> Lo here, the form of olde clerkes speech
> In poetry, if you their bookes seek!

Troilus and Criseyde is a triumph of Chaucer's mature art; but he was not content with it. It was not the poem which he knew he had it in him to write, and towards which he had always been feeling his way. When he came to write it, he had already perfected his instrument; he had achieved a language of admirable simplicity and vigour, and a verse-music of incomparable harmony, ease and grace. He had the tools, but not yet the material he needed to work upon. What he wanted was a new *sort* of poem, a poem more amply and more loosely constructed, which would give scope not only for his skill as a 'maker' but also for another

power, which Pandarus, if I may so put it, had now told him he possessed: the power, namely, of the dramatist and the novelist to create character.

How Chaucer thought of the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales* we do not know, for he did not tell us. Many people (to show their knowledge of Italian) have suggested that he took a hint from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Perhaps he did; but it is equally likely that, in the mysterious manner of poets and artists, he just thought of it himself. It was a brilliant idea.

A company of about thirty men and women from all walks of life meet in Southwark at the Tabard Inn, where they spend the night before starting on the following day their ride to Canterbury, to pay their respects at the tomb of Thomas à Becket, the 'holy blissful martyr'. The landlord of the inn, when supper is finished, says that he has a plan to propose, which will make the three-days' ride less tedious for all concerned. After all, he declares, there is little fun in riding by the way dumb as a stone; so would it not improve matters, if each member of the company were to tell a story in turn for the entertainment of the rest? Then, to spice his scheme a little, he makes the further proposal that he himself shall be elected Master of Ceremonies to call upon the story-tellers in any order he may please, and to decide, when all are told, which story is the best. The winner is to have a free supper on the return to Southwark. The landlord's proposal is accepted; the journey begins, and the pilgrims tell their tales, not without lively comment and criticism from their hearers.

One beauty of a framework such this was its elasticity. Chaucer could put just as much into it as he chose. His first idea was for a work of inordinate, indeed fantastic, length, each pilgrim (and there are twenty-nine of them) telling two stories on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. Possibly some of us wish that he had

achieved this Marathon of poetry. Dr. Johnson once remarked, with his usual alarming honesty, that nobody ever wished *Paradise Lost* longer than it is, but few people would say the same of the *Canterbury Tales,* once they had had a taste of them. In point of fact, however, Chaucer abandoned them long before this distant goal, glimpsed in the first flush of conception, was reached. A number of his pilgrims do not tell even one story, let alone four.

Another advantage of making story-telling by a mixed company the framework of his poem was that Chaucer could use material which he already had by him; things he had, as well as things he thought of could be fitted in as time and occasion offered: the lovely tale of Palamon and Arcite, for instance, was almost certainly written before the idea of the Pilgrimage was conceived. Finally, the supreme (and obvious) merit of the scheme was the fact that the pilgrims *were* a mixed company: for this offered limitless opportunity for characterization and for Chaucer's strong dramatic gift, not only through the type of story which each person tells, but also through direct narrative of incidents during the ride and, perhaps chiefly, by the talk and cross-talk between members of the party in the intervals of story-telling. The Pilgrimage was a sort of Pandora's box, and into it Chaucer could pack, tightly or loosely as the whim took him, all the fruits of his long and delighted observation of men and women, not to mention an odd story or two for which, at the moment, he had no other use.

In the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer sets the scene and describes the characters—and how rich a harvest of a seeing and ironic eye it is! His England leaps to life as we read it: the knight, travel-stained from the wars and modest as a girl in his demeanour, the Squire fresh as May and 'embroidered' like a meadow full of flowers, the jolly hunting Monk, with no use for St. Augustine's rules of austerity, the lady Prioress earnest to imitate the manners

of high society, the drunken cook, the ribald miller who could split a door with his bullet-head, the rascally churchmen out for gain and a good time, the Dartmouth sailor, the merchant, the lawyer and the parish priest—all these and others are drawn in the round with a few masterly strokes. A lesser writer would have made these people types; but not Chaucer: Chaucer makes them step from the page, so to speak, as persons.

How does he do it? Partly, of course, as all imaginative writers do, by the selection of significant detail and by apt and vivid imagery—as with the Friar's eyes which

> twinkled in his head aright
> As do the starres in a frosty night,

or the monk's smooth crown which 'shone as any glass', or the franklin's beard 'white as a daisy', or the fine stroke in the description of the unspeakable Summoner:

> Of his visage children were afeared.

But the eye for significant detail and the power of image-making Chaucer shares with all good writers; he had another weapon in his armoury which was very specially his own and contributed more perhaps than any other to the livingness of his portraits. This was the subtle and most delicate brand of humour to which I have already often referred. The greater number of Chaucer's pilgrims are either part-scoundrel, or part-hypocrite, or both. But then, if only we were honest about it, which of us is not? Chaucer is superlatively honest about it; and the point is, that his recognition of human failings *is* recognition, and never judgement. This allows him to sketch a character in the round without any ulterior motive, for the sheer pleasure —occasionally, perhaps, a little naughty but never malicious —of seeing him for what he is. 'Why,' he seems to say, 'should you expect a begging friar to be a holy man? And

why, even if he is not, should you conclude that he is not a useful member of his order? Men are men, even if they are friars.' *Unto his order he was a noble post:* a pillar of the Church, in fact; and yet . . . and yet . . .

There is a place in the world for anger, as there is a place in literature for satire and the savage condemnation of wickedness; but anger and satire are far removed from the serene and sunny irony of Chaucer. This irony—or perhaps humour is the better word—is so pervasive in the Prologue, and in much of the *Tales* themselves, and so instinctive an element in Chaucer's way of looking at the world, that without continual watchfulness one is in danger of missing its elusive flame. It is like summer lightning which, flickering all round the horizon, is as often as not behind one's back, so that one wonders if the sense of light upon the eye was a flash indeed, or the memory of a flash. His jest is obvious enough when he says that the Lawyer was the busiest man in England—'and yet he seemed busier than he was'; or of the Merchant who was always talking of his profits, that

> This worthy man full well his wit beset,
> And no-one ever guessed he was in debt;

the flash is more elusive, though still not hard to catch, when he tells us that the Miller, though a thief, was still an admirable miller (and indeed why shouldn't he be?), or when he explains the reason for the Doctor's fondness for medicinal gold; but what are we to say of his 'good' characters? In nearly all of these, except the parish priest, in describing whom Chaucer's smile, if he smiles at all, is one of pure admiration and love, the flicker is there—and is very elusive indeed. The Clerk, for instance—the Oxford student—poor, serious, devoted to learning; a man of few words, but, when he did speak, what words! 'Short and quick and full of high sentence.' Reading that, we seem

to be invited to pause a little, and to speculate . . . Admirable words, certainly, and 'sowning in moral virtue'; but were they not possibly also a trifle tedious? Even the 'very perfect gentle knight' (the one line of Chaucer which everybody knows) begins subtly to change his aspect upon a longer acquaintance. Perfect . . . ? Well, perhaps. In any case, Chaucer was not interested in perfection; he was interested in imperfection, which is much the same as saying that he was interested in human character.

The one member of his company in describing whom he quenches the almost unquenchable twinkle in his eye is the Poor Parson. This famous and inimitable portrait (which Dryden tried to imitate and failed) is amongst the great things in English literature. 'Load every rift with ore,' said Keats, advising Shelley to be 'more of an artist' in his poetry. Sound advice, no doubt; but in the best of Chaucer there is no loading of the rifts at all; the words—and this is the consummation of his art—seem to come in naked simplicity and with unpremeditated ease.

> His preaching much, but more his practice wrought,
> A living sermon of the truths he taught,

wrote Dryden, in his pointed, polished way; but

> Christes lore and his apostles twelve
> He taught, but first he followed it himself,

were Chaucer's words. Only the finest writers can get a powerful effect without any adornment at all. There are no tricks of the trade in the best and purest style: it says what it has to say, no more, no less, and in the words most fitted to the purpose.

The characters introduced, the ride to Canterbury begins. They draw lots ('draw cut', in Chaucer's phrase) to decide who shall tell the first story. The cut falls to the Knight, and without further preliminary he embarks upon his tale of

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

After T. Occleve

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

ALEXANDER POPE

Painting by Jonathan Richardson

chivalry and high romance about the love and rivalry of Palamon and Arcite.

> Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
> There was a duke whose name was Theseus . . .

Once upon a time . . . thus, before men grew impatient, stories used to begin, pleasantly promising a leisurely journey through strange country of fantasy, or adventure, or dream. Perhaps we have forgotten the lure of 'once upon a time' in these more urgent and sophisticated days, when we like our stories to crackle and snap, and deprecate any straying into by-paths. Chaucer's pilgrims were more innocent; all of them, men and women, voted Palamon and Arcite, a 'noble story', and the landlord, having exclaimed that the game was well begun, called upon the Monk to continue it in a fitting manner. The Miller, however, who was too drunk to sit straight on his horse and had evidently had enough of high sentiments, was determined to tell a 'noble story' of his own about a carpenter; and this, in spite of opposition especially from Oswald the reeve who was a carpenter himself, he proceeds to do.

> Whilom there was, dwelling in Oxenford . . .

Once upon a time, again . . . but the familiar phrase, coming from the miller's mouth—'wide as a furnace' and topped by the wart on his nose

> on which there grew a tuft of hairs
> Red as the bristles of a sowes ears

had a very different accent from what it had had on the lips of the knight,

> Who never yet no villainy he said
> In all his life unto no manner wight.

The miller's tale is as full of villainy as a tale can be. It is not to be read aloud in polite drawing-rooms to-day, or even, without a blush, in privacy, unless the reader is well schooled in the true philosophy of impropriety. A little historical

imagination is needed to read properly any literature of a past age; our minds must be cleared of prejudice before we begin; the *Knight's Tale* for instance or *Troilus and Criseyde* could not be read by anyone who expected, or demanded, the point and compression of modern story-telling; for the beauty of those stories does not lie in point and compression, but in something quite different. Similarly, the kind of topics which may, or may not, be introduced into literature varies from age to age by a tacit convention which is moulded by all sorts of subtle influences. Human nature does not change very much, but the idea of society which successive generations conceive changes a great deal, and it is that idea to which the proprieties are fitted. *Jane Eyre,* which every schoolgirl reads to-day, was accused by some contemporary critics of indecency, because Jane, in her unwomanly way, admitted to Rochester that she loved him.

Nevertheless, apart from superficial changes of taste, there is also an absolute sense in which a story can be called indecent, and this is always connected with emphasis and proportion. The savage indecencies of *Gulliver's Travels* are burnt up in the fire of Swift's indignation at the cruelty and baseness of men; and no one, delighting in the gay, youthful and brilliant world of Shakespeare's earliest comedies, would shy at the perpetual innuendo which is so integral a part of them. It is the whole that matters—and it is worth while to remember that 'whole' and 'holy' are connected words. The indecent writer does not, so to speak, use his eyes in daylight; he uses a microscope under a lamp, and what he looks at is usually better without magnification.

Chaucer's scurrility, then, is (like Shakespeare's) one thread in the rich tapestry of his vision of life, and no serious or intelligent reader would deprecate its presence. We should be able, as Wordsworth was,

> Beside the pleasant mill of Trumpington
> To laugh with Chaucer in the hawthorn shade;

but only, I would add, if we are also able to read the rest of his poetry with proper enjoyment of its quality.

All the pilgrims, including apparently the dainty prioress and, less surprisingly, the much-married Wife of Bath, were highly entertained by the miller's ribaldry—all, that is, but one, namely the reeve who, being a carpenter by trade naturally (and rightly) supposed that the miller was getting at him. So, having expressed a hope that the miller might fall off his horse and break his neck, he proceeds to get his own back by telling a story, no less scurrilous, about a miller, who, in an atmosphere of slapstick farce, comes to grief at the hands of two Oxford students called John and Aleyn —a proper 'jape of malice in the dark', as Roger Hogge the cook put it in his delight at the miller's discomfiture.

I have dwelt at some length on the farcical and scurrilous element in the *Canterbury Tales* not only because these stories are brilliantly told, but also because the ability of Chaucer to 'take it as high or as low as he pleased' was of the very essence of his genius. In breadth of human sympathy, though not in depth of passion, Chaucer was Shakespearian, and one is conscious of no inconsistency or jangling of the chimes in passing from his sparkling fooleries to the grave and lovely music of Arcite's dying words:

> What is this life? What asken men to have?
> Now with his love, now in the colde grave
> Alone, withouten any company . . .

or, in the same poem, Theseus' meditation upon mortality:

> Lo the oak, that hath so long a nourishing
> From time that it first beginneth spring,
> And hath so long a life as we may see,
> Yet at the laste wasted is the tree . . .
> The broade river some time waxeth dry;
> The greate townes see we wane and wend,
> Thence may ye see that all this thing hath end . . .

where the commonplace of thought is given a new beauty and majesty by poetry's mysterious and inexplicable power.

There is not space here to follow the rest of the *Canterbury Tales* in detail; but a few scattered remarks must still be made. Not all the stories are of equal merit; one or two, such as the tale of Constance and of the patient Griselda, require of a modern reader a pretty good wind to enable him to stay the course. Others are masterpieces in their kind, like the Pardoner's tale of the three young scallywags who set out to find and punish the villain Death, and perhaps above all the inimitable story of Chantecleer and Pertelot—the Cock and the Hen. This last is of the quintessence of Chaucer; it contains no high poetry, but into its superbly managed couplets, easy as talk and bright as dew-drops, there is packed the art of the story-teller, the harvest of a seeing eye, the wisdom of a man of the world, the knowledge of a student—and all of it dissolved in the light of laughter.

In Chaucer one looks for passion in vain; but high poetry —the poetry of the 'maker'—is there in abundance; and laughter is its close and constant companion. When in the course of the story-telling the landlord calls upon Chaucer himself for a tale, he responds with a travesty of popular romance, the ludicrous ballad of Sir Thopas. But Harry Bailey cuts him short before he has well begun:

> No more of this, for Goddes dignity,
> Quoth oure Host . . .
> My eares achen for thy drasty speech!

'Why so?' Chaucer replies. 'Why shouldn't I be allowed to tell my story as much as anyone else——

> since that it is the beste rhyme I can?'

But the landlord will have no more of it, and Chaucer humbly consents to tell instead a 'little thing in prose', which he is sure the company will approve. The 'little

thing ' turns out to be an immensely long and tedious moral dissertation—the one thing in Chaucer which I, for one, have never been able to get through.

The joke is a somewhat protracted one; but it is a good joke.

Chaucer has often been called the Father of English poetry; but the title is hardly a happy one, unless it is taken merely to refer to his precedence in time. There is nothing primitive about Chaucer. His work at its best is polished, cultivated, masterly. He was heir to the great European tradition of literature and philosophy, which, having inherited, he laid out for his own purposes—and for ours. He was a poet of Christendom, in spite of the fact that he spoke with so English a voice. Apart from his exquisite and intensely individual genius (if indeed one can make the separation) his particular gift to English letters was in the field of language and metre: he established his chosen dialect as the basis of literary English, and he improved almost beyond recognition the four- and five-beat syllabic verse, which has remained ever since the basis of English prosody. He was not the first English poet to use syllabic verse, but he was the first to develop its potentialities, especially in the five-beat rhymed couplet. Before Chaucer, the commonest form of verse was alliterative stress-verse—*I cannot rhymen rum, ram, ruff,* as Chaucer makes his Parson say in the *Canterbury Tales*—of which the most familiar example is *Piers Plowman,* written by a number of Chaucer's contemporaries.

There is one other sense, however, besides mere precedence in time, in which fatherhood might reasonably be attributed to Chaucer; for there lie in his work, especially in the *Canterbury Tales,* certain seeds which in subsequent centuries were to sprout and grow mightily. These are the seeds, first, of the drama, secondly, of the novel. Had Chaucer been a contemporary of Shakespeare, he might

well have written plays; had he been a contemporary of Fielding, he might well have written novels. The power for both is implicit in the *Canterbury Tales,* and adds richness to that incomparable work. Throughout the *Tales* there is not only creation, but interplay and clash of character; the pilgrims, brilliantly pointed for us in the Prologue, are developed and elaborated, some more, some less, as the poem proceeds, and always with a beautiful consistency: there is the mutual disparagement between the miller and the reeve, between the summoner and the friar; the attempt of the pardoner to make capital out of his story and his vigorous repulse by the landlord; the wife of Bath in the immensely garrulous and entertaining dissertation upon marriage, which precedes her story, reveals herself as a full-length comedy character, and satisfies, incidentally, the curiosity of the reader as to why he was casually told, in the Prologue, that she was deaf in one ear; the knight (perfect and gentle) finds the monk's catalogue of historical disasters unspeakably tedious; the merchant, having heard the tale of patient Griselda, is driven to bewail the very different temper of his own two-months' wife; Harry Bailey the landlord and self-appointed master of ceremonies, by comment and criticism, and a full flow of highly personal remarks, dominates the company, and grows in stature and solidity as the work proceeds. By means of these passages of narrative and comment between the tales Chaucer keeps his characters alive, each one being aware of the rest, so that the tales themselves, though they are in fact the main body of the work, are yet but an incident in the whole.

In Chaucer's pages the men and women of fourteenth century England pass before our eyes in their habit as they lived: more than that, his pages hold a picture of humanity itself. All great writers transcend their age; and under the queer garments of Chaucer's people, their wimples, habergeons, volupers, courtepies and semicopes, we are

aware of what might well be our own contemporaries, intelligible as the man next door, to be laughed at, or laughed with, like our own enemies or friends.

There are no problems in Chaucer; and that is one reason why it is a refreshment to read him in an age as hag-ridden as ours is by anxiety and doubt. There is grief for the transience of mortal things—the *lacrimæ rerum* of Vergil—and vivid awareness of the darkness and cruelty in nature and the heart of men. But—he seems to say—the world is what it is, and nothing we can do will make it different—much as poor Jane Nightwork 'could not choose but be old'. And beyond the world are the Everlasting Arms. In Chaucer's poetry there is no anguish—and no aspiration: it was for a later age to beat in the void its luminous wings in vain. His world, for all its infinite variety of good and evil was un-complex and innocent. Chaucer had no axe to grind, as later and perhaps even greater poets had; he felt no need, as Milton did, to justify the ways of God to man, or to fashion, as Spenser professed to do, the pattern in his poetry of the perfect Gentleman, or to cry like Shelley, 'If only you would see the truth, you could bring heaven down to earth.' It was enough for Chaucer to watch the world as it was, and to let heaven wait—and watch it he did, with relish and understanding, the light of laughter always ready to gleam behind his deceptively serious eyes.

Most of the great English poets have been one of a group; Chaucer stood alone. There was only one other notable poem of his time: *The Vision of Piers Plowman*; but the authors of that work, interesting though it is, were not in any way comparable with Chaucer. In the century which followed his death he had his imitators, both Scottish and English, but they were small men. Before another great poet came, England had to wait a hundred and seventy years, for Spenser and the *Faery Queene*.

ALEXANDER POPE
1688 - 1744

No poet is the sole author of his own poem. The kind of poem he writes is conditioned by all sorts of imponderable influences in the atmosphere of the time, by ways of thinking, by the current attitude to politics and religion, by the social conventions of the class of people amongst whom the poet may expect to find his readers. Poets write to be read, and they will not be read unless what they have to say, and their manner of saying it, is in tune with the times. Sometimes poets are, or appear to be, one jump ahead of their readers, as the poets of the Romantic Revival were; but the appearance is really illusory, for what those poets were doing was to give expression to certain deep-seated and vaguely-felt dissatisfactions and aspirations which were already abroad in society at large, though imperfectly understood. Language, after all, is a convention, and one can talk only to somebody who has accepted the convention. Wordsworth was laughed at for a few years, because men are, upon the whole, a lazy lot and suspicious of novelty; but they discovered, before he was fifty, that they did, in fact, *need* the queer things which he had got to say, as they came, not long afterwards, to need the still queerer things which were said by Shelley and Keats. Indeed, they would have said them themselves, had they possessed the gift of speech. But the gift of speech is the poet's prerogative.

Pope spoke for his age more intimately and precisely than

any of the other poets of whom I have written in this book. He was able to do this for two reasons: first, because his readers formed a comparatively small and homogeneous society; and, secondly, because those readers had a very definite idea of what poetry should be. They knew what they wanted, and Pope supplied it.

That people should know what they want of poetry may sound like a commonplace; in point of fact, however, such knowledge is rare. We to-day, for instance, do not possess it. The men of Shakespeare's England did not possess it either; to be sure they recognized poetry when they heard it, and, when it burst upon them in all the glory of a garden in the first warm week of June, they received it with delight as something both marvellous and familiar. But they had no theories about what it should be, or how it should comport itself. The readers of the Romantic Revival knew even less what poetry should be—until the poets told them. All they knew was that they were sick of the old and, at the same time, afraid of the new; that they were weary of monotony and yet suspicious of change. But at the time when Pope began to write, in the opening years of the eighteenth century, the position was different: then, readers knew exactly what they wanted of poetry, insisted upon getting it—and got it. And from no poet did they get it of better quality than from Pope. Pope had, so to speak, learnt his lesson; he was no innovator, or voyager upon strange seas of thought and art, as Wordsworth and the other Romantics were to be. He did not invent a mode of poetry, but perfected one already invented and therefore familiar. John Dryden, who died when Pope was twelve, had already prepared the way. Dryden was a writer of great originality and power, both in verse and prose; he found the gorgeous and flowering garden of Elizabethan literature already gone, or rapidly going, to seed, and the task he set himself, and triumphantly achieved, was to clear it up, weed, prune

it and reduce it to order again, so that when, in the reign of Queen Anne, Pope and his fellow Augustans, Addison, Swift, Bolingbroke, Gay, Arbuthnot and others, came to take over his work, there was hardly a weed to be seen. Indeed so tidy was it that some of us to-day, when we visit that garden, sigh for a thistle or two, or untamed convolvulus, or naughty celandine. Order, however (as Pope was to write in another context), is heaven's first law; and we must try to see the beauty of it.

The history of thought is, as everyone knows, a tricky business, and the attempt to describe how people thought and felt a couple of centuries ago is apt to lead one into all kinds of over-simplifications and slippery generalities. Nevertheless, in the first four decades of the eighteenth century there were, amongst cultivated people, certain attitudes towards life—and therefore towards art—which are pretty clear to us, and which must be understood, if we are to understand and enjoy Pope's poetry. I say amongst cultivated people; for the first thing to realize is, that though the life of England was as various and unpredictable in that age as in any other, the educated minority, amongst whom—and amongst whom only—were to be found the readers of books, did form a small and compact body with similar tastes and feelings. They and the men who wrote for them—the 'wits'—and who always hoped to be admitted to their society and friendship, were almost like a separate family within the nation: an exceedingly quarrelsome family, to be sure, but still a family, bound together by a certain community of taste and feeling.

The great political and religious struggles which had torn the previous century to bits were over. The limits of monarchy were defined. Before Queen Anne was dead, danger of foreign invasion seemed to have passed. England was victorious, settled, prosperous and safe. The rich were very rich indeed, and as for the poor, they could be left to

Providence, who was, after all, the best provider. How had this happy state of things come about? Obviously—or so it seemed to those now privileged to enjoy it—by the triumph of reasonable men acting, like themselves, in a reasonable way, and avoiding all dangerous or absurd extremes of passion or passionate adventure. Science had made great strides during the previous century, and was now firmly enthroned. Science explained things: it took a candle into dark rooms which once the fancy peopled with alarming presences. It cleared up mysteries. Bacon had started experimental science upon its road; and as for Newton—'God said: Let Newton be, and all was light.' All? Well, nearly all: at any rate, quite enough to go on with. Reason had become the popular, and fashionable, goddess. There was no problem which reason could not solve. 'Enthusiasm' (which means possession by God) became a term of reproach, almost of contempt. The world of nature and man, once so vast and mysterious, stretching back to the

> dark backward and abysm of time,

and filled with powers and agencies beneficent or malign, but all inscrutable and tremendous, had been emptied of awe, and had contracted, it seemed, to a much cosier and more manageable size. Unlike King Lear, people no longer felt the need to

> take upon's the mystery of things,
> As if we were God's spies;

for the mystery of things had largely vanished. Man was supreme in the universe, as Reason was supreme in man.

It was a comfortable creed, and in many ways a gracious one—it enabled people to push out of the way life's darkest and most disturbing problems and to live at ease in an intelligible world, governed, indeed, by a remote and tolerantly

accepted Christian God, but where money and rank had proper consideration, and any gentleman could, without straining his capacity unduly, read philosophy and literary criticism in the urbane pages of the *Tatler* or *Spectator,* and discuss the burning questions of party politics or the scurrility of the latest opposition pamphlet at White's or Wills' or Button's, over the

> Coffee which makes the politician wise
> And see through all things with his half-shut eyes.

It was an age when, the major battles of the spirit being won (or abandoned), it was possible to concentrate upon form and elegance and the fine flower of life in this world. To live in town was, for well-conditioned people, preferable to living in the country, which, to be tolerable, had to be tamed by the exquisite art of the landscape gardener and brought within the bounds of taste, much as Dryden had rewritten (as he supposed) in soberer and more tasteful form the two finest of Shakespeare's plays, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*—and as a friend of Pope proposed to him the polishing and pruning of that rugged masterpiece of Milton's, the *Samson Agonistes.* Excesses were taboo; or, if they were to be tolerated, they had to be disguised, like the savage hatred in Swift's *Gulliver,* under an urbane and concentrated irony. Men liked the edges of their thoughts to be clear and hard, and not to shade off into regions of dim and dangerous speculation, and they were comforted by the fact that their favourite philosopher, John Locke, traced all knowledge to sense experience, without any nonsense about innate ideas or semi-mystical intuitions. Deism, with its denial of revelation, was a popular creed, and Pope himself, though he was brought up a Catholic, slipped into it more or less by accident, and greatly to his own alarm, in his *Essay on Man.* The good taste of the time is admirably expressed in its domestic architecture—'Queen Anne'—

and the lovely household furniture of the period, clean-lined, elegant and severe. In fact, the old Greek adage of 'nothing too much' would apply none too badly to the taste of the period—the only exception to it being in the matter of strong drink and gambling, in which the grandees in their fine houses indulged as freely as the labouring classes in their squalid and poisonous dens.

The men who wrote for the delectation of this highly cultivated and exclusive society formed amongst themselves a family group hardly less exclusive and narrow. These were the 'wits'—a full-flavoured eighteenth-century term which connoted a mixture of strong commonsense, knowledgeableness and mental agility. There were distinguished men of letters—Pope's friend Bolingbroke, for instance—amongst the nobility; but the great majority of them belonged to the middle classes or lower—Pope himself (like John Gilpin) was the son of a linen-draper—and strove perpetually, and often with success, to be admitted by virtue of their writings, or by the usefulness of their political pamphleteering, to the society and friendship of their betters. This, as might be expected, hardly conduced to family affection and good temper: on the contrary, the struggle for patronage, inflamed by political rivalries, led to quarrels and personal abuse of an absurd and indecent malignancy, which might to us seem comic, were it not for its darker and more tragic side. Of such abuse Pope was both perpetrator and victim in a pre-eminent degree—and it is not the pleasantest aspect of his life-story.

The general spirit of the age being what it was, the most natural medium for literary expression was prose, and the prose writings of such men as Addison, Steele, Swift and Defoe, to name only a few, have never been surpassed before or since for ease, lucidity and grace. One could find no better way of feeling the change of tone and sentiment which came in with the Age of Reason than by reading at

random a page of the old Norwich doctor, Sir Thomas Browne, whose life, as he told us when he wrote his confession of faith, had been 'a miracle of thirty years', and then a page of *Robinson Crusoe* or *Gulliver*—or perhaps by remembering the story of the Irish bishop who, after finishing *Gulliver*, flung the book down with the angry comment: 'It's a pack of lies, and I don't believe a word of it.' But, though the age was rich in prose of superlative quality and perennial charm, it was rich in poetry too, but in poetry of a very special and peculiar kind. The proper enjoyment of it is probably an acquired taste; but, as with other things of high flavour and pungency, the taste is worth acquiring.

In attempting to describe the nature of the poetry of the period, it is convenient to begin by saying what it was not. Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, quoted an Italian saying to the effect that 'none deserve the name of Creator, except God and the Poet.' Again, in the same essay: 'the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness . . . Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet.' These noble affirmations, so easily intelligible to us, would have appeared to Pope and his contemporaries like the ravings of a lunatic. For them, inspiration (whatever that might be) had nothing whatever to do with the production of poetry. What the poet required was, on the contrary, sound sense and cunning craftsmanship, combined with a knowledge of the rules. Precisely what the rules were, nobody was overanxious to say; but there was a general sense that, first, Aristotle had either stated, or ought to have stated, them in his *Poetics*, and, secondly, that nobody who was familiar

with what Horace had to say on the matter in his *Art of Poetry*, could go far wrong. The Latin classics, in fact, were their model, and they hoped to reproduce in their own poetry the economy of language, the chiselled perfection of phrase, the sense of form, and the 'decency' of comportment to be found in the Latin classics, especially in their admired and beloved Horace. Vergil was beyond their range. Poetry, for them, was not a great autonomous art, as it had been in previous generations, and was to be again in the following century; it was a craft, and within the range of any cultivated person with a gift for letters. There were, of course, good poets and bad; but any writer of ability—any of the 'wits'—was expected to be able to turn his hand to verse as easily as to prose. Throughout the eighteenth century it was common practice for a man to offer his verses for correction and improvement to a friend. Johnson added some verses to Goldsmith's *Traveller*, and corrected others; Burke (who was not even a poet) suggested improvements in the early poems of Crabbe; and Pope himself, while he was still almost a boy, polished up the poems of the aged Wycherley to such effect that the poor old man was filled with consternation. This suggests an attitude towards poetry very different from that with which we ourselves are familiar: one would be surprised, to say the least of it, to hear that Mr. Eliot had asked Mr. Day Lewis to propose some improvements in the *Four Quartets*.

The poets of the period were essentially townsmen. Pope himself, in spite of his early years in Windsor Forest and his villa at Twickenham, felt London to be his spiritual home. London was the centre of the intellectual life of the nation, and no man of letters could be out of it, if he was to succeed. Part of Swift's tragedy was his banishment from London, to brood and go mad in his Irish deanery. The poets were all poets of urban life, and when they wrote, as they often did, of nature, it was of nature as seen, or as

fancied, by the city-dweller—nature prettyfied and conventionalised. Their pastoral poetry was an elegant game, or a sort of fancy-dress dance, which called for no direct or personal knowledge of country scenes. Almost with their tongues in their cheeks, and with one eye upon Theocritus and his Latin imitators, they painted their little coloured pictures of groves and fountains, nymphs and swains, dryads and naiads, feigning the pleasure of escape from the wicked but beloved city to a paradise which had no existence either upon earth or in heaven.

The most characteristic form of their poetry was the satire—in which, once again, Horace was the model. The satire—the personal commentary, often, but not necessarily, 'satirical' in our modern sense, upon contemporary life and manners—was the most natural and favoured medium of the city's wits. 'Quicquid agunt homines'—all the things men do—said Juvenal, 'is the theme of my verse—and what a hotch-potch it is!' Pope and his contemporaries said much the same. Their theme was Man—and, of course, Woman; but it was of Man as a social being that they wrote, not, as the Romantics did in the succeeding age, of man as an individual, and lonely, soul. Thus the poetry of this period whispers no secrets; it makes no revelations; it has no business with

> The light which never was on sea or land;
> The consecration and the poet's dream;

it does not explore the dark passages which, as Keats said, lead from the Chamber of Maiden Thought to regions of experience as yet unknown. Rather one looks to it for the expression of the best common thought of the age, since what the poets thought fit to write of was the *shared* experience of their fellows. Being interested primarily in Man in his relation to society, they felt that the business of literature was to present human nature in its resemblances rather than

in its differences. Pope, for example, might well have felt, as Keats felt, in a moment of solitude and exultation, that

> Life, fame and beauty are intense indeed,
> But death intenser. Death is life's high meed;

but he would never have dreamed of putting into his verse a sentiment so intensely individual and odd—quite apart from the fact that the language in which it is expressed is logically indefensible, and the effect of the lines lies (for us) not so much in the statement as in the suggestion, which was a thing the classic spirit of the eighteenth century abhorred. The dark places of the soul and its secret aspirations were not a theme for eighteenth-century literature. 'Presume not God to scan,' as Pope wrote in one of his best-known aphorisms,

> The proper study of mankind is man.

Alexander Pope, the only child of middle-aged parents, was born on May 21, 1688, the year of the Revolution. His father was a devout Catholic, and about the time of the child's birth, retired from his draper's business in London to the village of Binfield, nine miles from Windsor, where the future poet was destined to live, whenever he was not upon a visit to London, for the next twenty-eight years. He was a small and sickly infant, and, probably as the result of an accident in early childhood, grew up with a crooked back. Though he lived for fifty-six years (four years longer than Shakespeare) his health remained constantly bad, and his physical weakness was extreme. He was so little that, to bring him level with a dinner-table, it was necessary to raise his seat. In middle life he was 'so weak' (in Dr. Johnson's words) 'as to stand in perpetual need of female attendance; extremely sensible of cold, so that he wore a kind of fur doublet, under a shirt of a very coarse warm linen with fine sleeves. When he rose, he was invested in a bodice made of

stiff canvas, being scarcely able to hold himself erect, till they were laced, and he then put on a flannel waistcoat. One side was contracted. His legs were so slender, that he enlarged their bulk with three pairs of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid; for he was not able to dress or undress himself, and neither went to bed nor rose without help.' He suffered from constant headaches, and would make himself ill by over-indulgence in highly-seasoned food. By early middle-age he was bald. In a poem of his own he refers to his life as 'a long disease'. To these physical disabilities must be added what was, no doubt, partly the result of them, an extreme and pathological sensitiveness, always instant to take offence, and hot for revenge. These facts must be borne in mind, if one is not to do Pope an injustice as a human being. One should remember, too, that as a child his mind was preternaturally precocious and alert; that he had two adoring parents in whose eyes he could do no wrong; that there were no boys of his own age within reach of his country home with whom he might have rubbed shoulders and played the fool in a manner suitable to childhood. Too weak for much walking or natural sports, he spent all his hours in study, constantly reading or writing. Finally (though this is less important) he was a Catholic, and England after 1688 was not a good country for Catholics; the social disabilities under which they suffered were many and harsh, and Pope as he grew up may well have felt that to be a member of this oppressed Church was one more burden for him to bear. Perhaps fortunately, he took his religious duties lightly.

It is necessary to remember this long list of misfortunes, for unless they are taken into account, certain aspects of his character—his spite, his lying, the inextricable involvements of his trickery, his invincible egotism—are bound to appear repulsive and even incredible. What is one to say, for instance, of a man who, wishing in middle life, and already

famous, to publish his letters, but not wishing to incur the ridicule which might have fallen upon him had he done so openly, not only arranged for them to be 'stolen' from a nobleman's library, where he had deposited them for safe-keeping, but garbled and altered the original text, changing dates and the names of the recipients, in order to present himself in a more flattering light? Or what is one to say of a man who once professed himself a passionate admirer of a certain society lady, and then, having quarrelled with her, introduced her, under the flimsiest disguise, into one of his poems, in a couplet too savagely indecent to be quoted here? Or, again, of a man who could put Bentley, of all people—Richard Bentley, by far the most distinguished scholar of the age—amongst the Dunces in his *Dunciad*, simply because he had once remarked (under pressure) that Pope's translation of the *Iliad* was 'a pretty poem—but not Homer'?

Many people have written about Pope. A few—very few—have tried to defend him; but they have found it up-hill work. That he was a liar and an egomaniac is not possible to deny—but he had much to bear. His best defence is to remember that to one woman at any rate, in spite of his vile behaviour to others, he remained faithful throughout his life; that he was a dutiful and most affectionate son, and that three or four of the finest spirits of the age, most notably Swift, Gay (the author of *The Beggar's Opera*) and Arbuthnot (the physician and man of letters about whom, in that age of back-biting and malice, no single derogatory word has come down to us) never ceased to love him, or he them.

Few details of Pope's childhood have survived. The sweetness of his voice is said to have earned him the nickname of the Little Nightingale. He was taught the rudiments of Greek and Latin by a priest, and afterwards attended two schools, where he learned as little (one may

guess) as most poets. At one of them he got into trouble—for he began early—by writing a lampoon upon his master, and dressed up a play out of scenes from Ogilby's translation of the *Iliad*, adding verses of his own, and got his schoolfellows to perform it, with the help of the gardener. His private studies were continuous and exacting, and before he was in his teens he had decided, with the warm approval of his father, to be a poet. 'Why did I write?' he was to exclaim with mock exasperation in a famous poem,

> Why did I write? What sin to me unknown
> Dipped me in ink, my parents' or my own?
> As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
> I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came.

The answer to his question is obvious enough: Pope wrote because he loved writing. Poetry was his passion, and from his earliest years he gave himself to it with a devotion seldom, if ever, surpassed by any other writer. He read hungrily—all of English poetry, much of Latin (of Greek he knew little); and without intermission he practised his art. He wrote an epic and a comedy (as Tennyson also did) at the age of ten. One of his childish pieces, written (he said) at the age of twelve, he afterwards published, and it is a model of grace and polish, though the theme is trite and borrowed from the Latin.

The precocious boy soon made friends in the neighbourhood. One of the earliest of his friendships was with the Blounts of Mapledurham, a house on the river near Reading and only a few miles from Binfield. Teresa and Martha Blount, the daughters of the family, were of Pope's age, and he became deeply attached to both of them. Within a few years he quarrelled fiercely with Teresa, and thereafter hated her, but Martha he continued to love until he died. It was, perhaps—if one discounts his affection for his parents—the one wholly pure and disinterested relationship

of his life. The portraits of Martha Blount show her as a pretty and lively girl; Pope found her beautiful, and continued to find her no less beautiful after her face, in middle age, had been ravaged by small-pox. If he ever wished to marry her, no one knows; but Pope was never fit for marriage. He needed a nurse rather than a wife; and Martha, or anyone else, had Pope asked her to marry him, would have been a brave girl to accept. Moreover, his opinion of women in general was not such as to encourage a prospective wife. It was mean, malicious and ignorant. 'Most women,' he declared in a poem addressed to Martha, 'have no characters at all;' and further on in the same poem occurs the chivalrous couplet:

> Men, some to business, some to pleasure take,
> But every woman is at heart a rake.

Poor Martha must have smiled a little wryly as she read these words.

Another friend was Sir William Trumbull, a retired diplomat of sixty with a taste for literature. The old man of the world and the brilliant boy spent much time together, riding about the Forest and talking of poetry. It was Trumbull who first suggested to Pope that he should translate Homer. The dropped seed germinated; and years later the grown plant was to make Pope's fortune. He was already ambitious for fame, and two other acquaintances, in these boyhood years at Binfield, helped him on his way: one was William Walsh, a minor poet but a considerable critic, who delighted Pope by praise of his verses. 'Knowing Walsh,' he recorded in his autobiographical poem *Prologue to the Satires*, -

> Knowing Walsh would tell me I could write.

Walsh also recommended his young protégé to 'study correctness' in his writing—whatever that may mean. The advice has become famous, but few people appear to have

been able to understand it. If to be correct in poetry means to achieve by untiring industry perfection within the limits of a given form, Pope was certainly correct.

The other acquaintance who helped Pope along his road to success was a somewhat unsavoury old rake called Henry Cromwell. Of Henry Cromwell 'I have learned nothing particular,' wrote Dr. Johnson in his amiable way, 'save that he rode a-hunting in a tie-wig.' It appears, however, that it was through Cromwell that Pope got his first introduction to literary London, and thus his foot upon the first rung of the ladder to fame. Of Wycherley, author of some of the coarsest comedies ever seen on the English stage, I have already spoken. Pope, proud of their friendship, corresponded freely with both him and Cromwell. In the years of his fame he was ashamed of his youthful adulation of such second-rate men.

Pope wrote his *Pastorals* when he was sixteen. Four years later they were published by the bookseller Tonson in a volume of miscellanies, which also contained another set of pastoral poems by Ambrose Philips (whose name gave rise to our nursery adjective namby-pamby). Few people could read Pope's *Pastorals* with much pleasure to-day, except as a brilliant exercise in verse-making. The pastoral as a form was, by the time Pope wrote, as dead as mutton; it had lived in the past only through a vivid sense of country things, a sense possessed by no eighteenth-century poet before Thomson, and it was not to be revived until Shelley in *Adonais* breathed into the poor old bones a new and marvellous life. I would not mention these youthful poems except for the fact that their appearance together with the pastorals of Philips led to Pope's first literary squabble.

It so happened that Philips was a member of the literary clique which, led by Addison, was in the habit of meeting at Button's coffee house to gossip and talk books. Pope, too, had succeeded in gaining admission there. Philips' poems

were praised by members of the set, and some laudatory essays upon them appeared in Addison's *Spectator*. Of Pope's poems no mention was made. Pope was furious, and at once determined on revenge. He wrote a paper ridiculing Philips' work and praising his own, and sent it to Steele, unsigned, for insertion in the *Guardian*. The essay was cleverly contrived, and Steele, who read it carelessly, evidently failed to grasp its true purport. At any rate he published it. Philips' rage was more savage even than Pope's. He hung up a birch in the coffee-house, and swore to use it upon Pope next time he ventured in. The two men never made it up, and, needless to say, Philips figures in the *Dunciad*.

A more important poem of Pope's early period led to a more important quarrel. This was with an old bear of a dramatist and critic called John Dennis. This time, Pope was but little to blame, and suffered cruelly. In the *Essay on Criticism*, speaking of authors who cannot take advice, he had, impertinently perhaps in a boy of twenty referring to a man of fifty, but mildly enough for that age of mud-slinging and personal abuse, mentioned Dennis by way of illustration. 'He reddens,' Pope wrote, 'at each word you speak,'

> And stares tremendous with a threatening eye,
> Like some fierce tyrant in old tapestry.

Dennis immediately replied by publishing a pamphlet in which he spiced his criticism of Pope's *Essay* with brutal comments upon his physical deformity. 'Inquire,' he wrote, 'between Sunninghill and Oakenham for a young, short, squab gentleman, the very bow of the god of love, and tell me whether he be a proper author to make personal reflections? . . . Let the person of a gentleman of his parts be never so contemptible, his inward man is ten times more ridiculous; it being impossible that his outward form,

though it be that of downright monkey, should differ so much from human shape, as his unthinking, immaterial part does from human understanding.'

It was a lash cruelly applied and Pope never forgot the sting of it. Some people have attributed the embittering of Pope's character (he was said to have been a sweet-tempered child) wholly to this public reference to his crooked back and diminutive size, much as the tradition grew up that his foul abuse of Lady Mary Wortley Montague was occasioned solely by the burst of laughter with which that celebrated blue-stocking greeted his declaration of love. Sensitiveness on the score of his personal deficiencies was doubtless a contributory cause of his subsequent bitterness; but it can hardly be taken as an excuse. Pope himself was as apt as anyone to mock an enemy for physical shortcomings—or for poverty.

The *Essay on Criticism* is an astonishing work for so young a man. The substance of it is not of great value today: possibly of less value than Horace's *Ars Poetica* upon which it was founded. It contains the stock-in-trade of Augustan criticism, a branch of literature in which the Augustans were not strong. Nevertheless perfection of phrase can have the odd effect of exalting a commonplace into something like a discovery; and in mastery of that sort the poem is rich.

> True wit is nature to advantage dressed,
> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed

(the Augustan conception of poetry lies wholly within that second line);

> A perfect judge will read each work of wit
> With the same spirit that its author writ;
>
> Words are like leaves; and where they most abound
> Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.

Such admirable apophthegms are scattered throughout the piece; and most of us like to remember the passage (which made Dr. Johnson turn up his nose) about the sound in poetry echoing the sense:

> Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
> And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
> But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
> The hoarse, rough verse should, like the torrent, roar.

That Pope could already be a 'poet' (in our modern sense) as well as a 'wit' can be seen in his *Windsor Forest*, a poem begun in boyhood and greatly expanded a number of years later. Much of the description is generalized and conventional after the manner of the time; but, every now and again, the poet *sees*; and that sudden vision, combined with the exquisite sense of words and movement of which Pope was always a master, results in rare beauty.

> See! from the brake the whirring pheasant springs:
> And mounts exulting on triumphant wings:
> Short is his joy; he feels the fiery wound,
> Flutters in blood, and panting beats the ground.
> Ah! what avail his glossy, varying dyes,
> His purple crest and scarlet-circled eyes,
> The vivid green his shining plumes unfold,
> His painted wings, and breast that flames with gold?

In those lines—as in the lines about the murdered larks which

> fall, and leave their little lives in air——

the bird is not only seen, but seen with love. The feeling in passages like these, and in the fine prophetic vision of universal peace with which the poem ends, is not diminished but enhanced by the trim measure, the meticulous *good breeding* of the style. Within the self-imposed limits of the closed couplet, Pope learned to move with marvellous free-

dom and grace. The restriction of form is, after all, essential to every art; and, as Pope said elsewhere, 'those move easiest who have learned to dance.'

When Pope was twenty-four, he wrote a poem which was, and has remained, unique in the English language: a poem of such lightness, grace, beauty and delicate laughter, that many people who admire him would spare any of his other works rather than this. A certain Lord Petre ('of small stature,' said Warton, 'who afterwards married a great heiress') was on intimate terms with the family of Miss Arabella Fermor, and one day, in a fit of ill-considered gallantry, he snipped a lock of hair from Miss Arabella's head. The liberty was resented, and a coolness between the two families ensued. Caryll, a mutual friend of both, and also of Pope, proposed to Pope that he should write a poem on the incident, and dissolve the quarrel in laughter. The *Rape of the Lock* was the result.

The poem is a mock-heroic: that is, it puts on the dress of the epic—of the grand Homeric tales——

> What dire offence from amorous causes springs,
> What mighty contests rise from trivial things,
> I sing:——

and thus, incongruously clad, dances to the lightest and daintiest measure amongst the fopperies and fripperies of society beaux and belles. In this poem, and in no other, there is love in Pope's laughter. It is the only poem he wrote, of which pure gaiety is the soul. The first version of it he dashed off in a fortnight: 'merum sal'—pure Attic Salt—Addison called it. Later he expanded it, adding, by a brilliant afterthought, the 'sylphs', the invisible spirits of air who guard and guide the destinies of young women, as the Olympians in Homer guide and guard the destinies of the warriors fighting for Troy. Some of Pope's loveliest and most ethereal poetry is woven out of these 'denizens of air';

Some to the sun their insect wings unfold,
Waft on the breeze, or sink in clouds of gold;
Transparent forms, too fine for mortal sight,
Their fluid bodies half-dissolved in light.
Loose to the wind their airy garments flew,
Their glittering textures of the filmy dew,
Dipped in the richest tinctures of the skies,
Where light disports in ever-mingling dyes,
While every beam new transient colours flings,
Colours that change when e'er they wave their wings.

It became the fashion in the succeeding century, under the influence of Coleridge and Wordsworth, to doubt if Pope was a poet, in the true sense, at all. We have settled the doubt. Keats, who said of Pope and his school that they 'swayed about upon a rocking-horse, and thought it Pegasus,' though he wrote much which for depth and richness Pope could not have attained, wrote nothing more intrinsically beautiful than the lines I have just quoted. They, like the sylphs they celebrate, are dissolved in light. They have the purity and brilliance of some gay tune of Mozart's.

It is hard to choose passages for quotation from this delightful poem: one wants the whole of it. But here are a few more. First, the lady's toilet:

And now, unveil'd, the toilet stands displayed,
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,
With head uncover'd, the cosmetic powers.
A heavenly image in the glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
Th' inferior priestess, at her altar's side,
Trembling begins the sacred rites of pride.
Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here
The various offerings of the world appear . . .
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.

The tortoise here and elephant unite,
Transform'd to combs, the specked and the white . . .
Now awful beauty puts on all its arms;
The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.

How comment without pedantry? Part of the effect comes, no doubt, from the application of solemn terms to a trivial act—'mystic order,' 'adores,' 'priestess,' 'awful beauty'—or doesn't it? For Belinda's toilet *is* (surely) a solemn thing—for Belinda. And what a happy dignity is conferred upon the scent-bottle and combs by the associations—the elephant's ivory, the perfumes of Arabia—fetched from so far, yet with perfect propriety and truth.

Then, the omens of disaster: a passage more mocking in tone, more deliberately ironic, yet still with no touch of malice:

This day black omens threat the brightest fair
That e'er deserved a watchful spirit's care . . .
Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,
Or some frail china jar receive a flaw;
Or stain her honour, or her new brocade;
Forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade;
Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball . . .

Or the pack of cards:

Behold, four kings in majesty reserved,
With hoary whiskers and a forky beard;
And four fair queens whose hands sustain a flower;
The expressive emblem of their softer power;
Four knaves in garbs succinct, a trusty band,
Caps on their heads, and halberts in their hand;
And parti-coloured troops, a shining train,
Draw forth to combat on the velvet plain.

Again, who could forget the fatal scissors, and how the bad Baron

> extends
> The little engine on his fingers' ends,

to do the deed:

> The peer now spreads the glittering forfex wide,
> To inclose the lock; now joins it, to divide.
> Ev'n then, before the fatal engine closed,
> A wretched sylph too fondly interposed.
> Fate urged the shears, and cut the sylph in twain
> (But airy substance soon unites again);
> The meeting points the sacred hair dissever
> From the fair head, for ever, and for ever!

Lastly—to quote no more—there is Sir Plume:

> Sir Plume, of amber snuff-box justly vain,
> And the nice conduct of a clouded cane.

Pope has mirrored his age—or one aspect of it—in those two lines as clearly as Chaucer has mirrored his in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*.

After the cutting of the lock, the gay heroic nonsense ends with a battle royal in which ladies' eyes and a pinch of snuff deal the severest wounds, and a frantic search for the missing hair. The search is vain; for the lock has ascended into heaven, to inscribe Belinda's name amongst the stars.

The *Rape of the Lock* was Pope's 'farewell to mirth'—like Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. There was to be more laughter in his later poems, but of a different tone and quality: angry, malicious, or demonish—a dark laughter. The old innocence never returned, except once, perhaps, in the charming verses, written a few years afterwards, in which he commiserates with Patty and Theresa Blount on their leaving town after the coronation of the King. The poor girls must go to

plain-work, and to purling brooks,
Old fashioned halls, dull aunts, and croaking rooks,

with nothing for either to do to speed the heavy hours, but

Divert her eyes with pictures in the fire,
Hum half a tune, tell stories to the squire;
Up to her godly garret after seven,
There starve and pray, for that's the way to heaven.

The poems I have mentioned, together with the sombre and beautiful *Eloisa to Abelard*, a poem which stands apart in kind from everything else Pope wrote, and one or two other minor pieces, complete the first of the three periods into which it is convenient to divide his work. The work of his second period was the translation of Homer—and the edition of Shakespeare; that of his third and last consisted of the moral and satirical poems which—though not necessarily his best—were his most characteristic work.

I have mentioned Pope's quarrel with Philips, and his bitterer quarrel with John Dennis. A word must now be said about yet another, the most famous of all—and probably the most pointless. This time the quarrel was with Addison, and it was brought to a head by the translation of Homer. Pope's relationship with Addison's group of admirers, the 'little senate' which was in the habit of assembling at Button's Coffee House, had become somewhat strained as a result of Ambrose Philips and his birch-rod. Nevertheless Pope's regard for Addison himself continued for a while unimpaired. It so happened, however, that Addison's play *Cato*, for which Pope had written a prologue, was attacked by Dennis, and Pope, coming to the support of his friend, published an abusive pamphlet which he called *Narrative of the Frenzy of John Dennis*. (What fun it would be if literary criticism indulged in these gambols nowadays! Or wouldn't it?) No doubt Pope's motive in publishing this

squib was not entirely vicarious; but the mere fact that it was in part self-regarding, and gave him a chance for a shrewd thrust at his old enemy, did nothing to diminish his resentment when he found that Addison, who (he supposed) should have been grateful, was nothing of the kind. This was unfortunate for Pope, but worse was to come.

When the fifth volume of Pope's *Iliad* was issued, in June 1715, there appeared at the same time a translation of Book I by Tickell, a member of the Addison set. There would seem, on the face of things, to be nothing very sinister about this; but Pope at once took it for a conspiracy against him. Addison, though scrupulously fair to Pope's version, admired Tickell's too. This looked black—so black, indeed, that Pope seems to have persuaded himself that Tickell's translation was actually the work of Addison, who had written it, and was now praising it, with the single purpose of discrediting Pope. Again, Addison who had admired the original version of the *Rape of the Lock*, had failed to admire the passages, added later, about the sylphs and gnomes. Why? There could be but one reason—or so it seemed to Pope: and that was that Addison was jealous, and wished by any means in his power to belittle Pope's reputation. Lastly, Pope later got hold of a story, unlikely to be true, that Addison had persuaded a scribbler called Gildon to publish a libel upon him. All this is, one must admit, somewhat absurd; but it did not appear absurd to Pope, with his suspicious mind and morbid sense that the world was in perpetual conspiracy against him. One would gladly pass over all of it in silence, were it not for the fact that the quarrel (if quarrel it was, for it seems to have been almost all upon one side) led directly to Pope's famous 'character' of Addison. These lines have been justly admired ever since they were first printed a few years after Addison's death. Brilliant, like all Pope's satirical portraits, they are not (for once) spoiled by malice; behind the criti-

cism and barbed shafts there is a sense of Addison's true greatness. These are the lines:

> . . . but were there one whose fires
> True genius kindles, and fair fame inspires;
> Blest with each talent and each art to please,
> And born to write, converse, and live with ease;
> Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
> Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne,
> View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
> And hate for arts that caused himself to rise;
> Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
> And, without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;
> Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,
> Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike;
> Alike reserved to blame or to commend,
> A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend;
> Dreading e'en fools, by flatterers besieged,
> And so obliging that he ne'er obliged;
> Like Cato, give his little senate laws,
> And sit attentive to his own applause;
> While wits and templars every sentence raise,
> And wonder with a foolish face of praise:——
> Who but must laugh, if such a man there be?
> Who would not weep, if Atticus were he?

Pope's translation of the *Iliad* was published, in six volumes, during the years 1715 to 1720. It enjoyed a resounding success. He made over £5000 out of it, and another £4000 out of the *Odyssey*, which was not, however, finished before 1726. 'Thanks to Homer,' he wrote

> I can live and thrive,
> Indebted to no prince or peer alive.

£9000 was, indeed, a large sum in those days, equivalent to over £50,000 of present-day money, and untaxed at that. Pope was enabled by it to buy his villa at Twickenham, whither after the death of his father in 1718 he moved from

the house at Chiswick which had been the family's home for a couple of years, following the sale of the property at Binfield. The Twickenham villa, always associated with his name, was to be Pope's home for the rest of his life.

Pope's translation of the *Iliad* is one of the most important poems in the history of English literature. It is also, nowadays, unreadable. It is important because, having dazzled contemporary readers by its brilliance and virtuosity, it set the standard of English versification for the rest of the century—and thus led directly to the great revolt of the Romantics. Had the tyranny of Pope's genius been less absolute, the subsequent explosion would have been less violent, and the work of the Romantic revival might have lost some of its most valuable characteristics. The translation is unreadable, because our attitude to translation has, since Pope's time, fundamentally changed. The principles of verse translation are something of a puzzle in any case, and a good deal of nonsense is talked about reproducing the 'spirit' of the original; actually it is probably true to say that no poet, translating another poet, can do anything but write in the manner which is natural to himself, without regard to whether or not that manner is in tune with his original. Nevertheless it will be a better translation, though not necessarily a better poem, if the poetic styles of translator and translated are in some sort of harmony. Indeed, we demand that harmony, or something as near to it as can be reasonably hoped for, nowadays. In Pope's Homer we do not get it. The whole manner, dress and deportment of Pope's verse is as remote from Homer's as anything could possibly be. Homer's verse is a river flowing unchecked, now deep and sombre, now shallow and rippling, sometimes in sunshine, sometimes in shade; Pope's jewelled couplets are a string of bright beads. They are each of them a step in his courtly dance, through which he moves with as nice a precision as Sir Plume with his clouded cane. One instance

must suffice: Helen, in Troy, has been commenting upon the absence from the Greek army of her brothers, not knowing that they were already dead. 'Thus she spoke' (writes Homer), 'but already the life-giving earth covered them, there in Lacedaemon, in their dear country.' These two lines, so moving in their naked simplicity, Pope translates by four:

> So spoke the fair, nor knew her brothers' doom;
> Wrapt in the cold embraces of the tomb;
> Adorned with honours in their native shore,
> Silent they slept, and heard of wars no more.

Only the greatest poets can afford to dispense with all adornment: 'Goodnight, sweet prince'; 'pray you, undo this button'; 'I kissed thee ere I killed thee.'

The discrepancy of accent and feeling between Homer's poetry and his own did not worry Pope, who, indeed, could hardly read Homer in the original Greek at all, but depended for his sense mainly upon other translations. Nor did it worry the great majority of his contemporaries. The popularity of his version is suggested by the story of a certain nobleman who, entering the drawing-room of a friend, noticed a copy of the *Iliad*, in Greek, lying on a table. 'Ah!' he remarked with a smile, '*Homer's* "Iliad", I see. Well—they say it is still the best.' Dr. Johnson, writing some forty years later, declared that Pope's version 'may be said to have tuned the English tongue.'

The villa at Twickenham was pulled down at the beginning of the present century. Old prints show it as a small, square house, well fenced with trees, with grounds running down to the river. It was near enough to London for Pope to have the society which he needed and loved, and sufficiently removed to give him the quiet which was necessary for his work. Pope was never a countryman, despite his years at Binfield, and no doubt he would have spent more

time in London society than he did, had his health allowed it. It amused him in early manhood to pretend to a recklessness and rakishness beyond the powers of his frail little body:

> The gayest valetudinaire
> Most thinking rake alive,

he calls himself in a set of verses written to lament his forced return to Binfield, where 'Homer (damn him!) calls.' But Twickenham gave him the best of both worlds. Having now a little money to spend, he at once set about designing and laying out the five acres of gardens and grounds, and constructing his notorious 'grotto'. A road ran through the grounds, and a tunnel having been dug underneath it to connect the two parts, it occurred to Pope that the tunnel might be made ornamental as well as useful. The grotto was the result. Such was Pope's subsequent fame that the grotto became famous too, and minute descriptions of it were compiled (and have survived) for the delectation of posterity. Taste, however, changes; and probably in this case, as in so many others, the most satisfactory comment is Dr. Johnson's: 'A grotto (he wrote) is not often the wish or pleasure of an Englishman, who has more frequent need to solicit than exclude the sun; but Pope's excavation was requisite as an entrance to his garden, and as some men try to be proud of their defects, he extracted an ornament from an inconvenience, and vanity produced a grotto where necessity enforced a passage.' From this 'place of silence and retreat,' Johnson added, 'he endeavoured to persuade his friends and himself that cares and passions could be excluded.'

> There my retreat [wrote Pope] the best companions grace,
> Chiefs out of war and statesmen out of place;
> There St. John mingles with my friendly bowl
> The feast of reason and the flow of soul.

We may fancy that the soul flowed more freely than the wine, for Pope was a somewhat narrow and cautious host. According to Swift, he was once entertaining a couple of friends, and, when four glasses had been drunk from a pint bottle, he rose from the table, saying, 'Gentlemen, I leave you to your wine.' However, he was by no means wholly ungenerous, for out of a total income of about £800 a year he was able (or so he said) to spare £100 for charity. Nor would he consent to sell his political independence for money, but refused the offer of a pension out of public funds.

When the last volume of his *Iliad* was published, Pope was thirty-two years of age and the acknowledged leader of English letters. During the previous ten years his circle of acquaintances had greatly expanded, and now included most of the eminent men of both political parties. He was never a party man. Literature was his sole mistress, and unlike his friend Swift, who hoped for preferment as well as for literary fame, he was unaffected by the ins and outs of Whigs and Tories. Lord Bolingbroke, the Jacobite, was amongst his closest friends, and he was on terms, at the same time, with Sir Robert Walpole. He enjoyed his fame, and he enjoyed complaining of the irritations and interruptions which it brought him. Every maudlin poetess or rhyming peer, he exclaimed in his verse letter to Arbuthnot, flew to 'Twitnam' for his advice or commendation:

> Shut, shut the door, good John! Fatigued, I said;
> Tie up the knocker, say I'm sick, or dead . . .
> What walls can guard me, or what shades can hide?
> They pierce my thickets, through my grot they glide;
> By land, by water, they renew the charge;
> They stop the chariot, and they board the barge.
> No place is sacred, not the church is free;
> Even Sunday shines no Sabbath day to me.

The *Iliad* was no sooner off Pope's hands than he began

the laborious task of editing Shakespeare. He was not well equipped for work of this sort, as his enemies were quick to perceive. One of them, Theobald, said so in no uncertain terms, and produced a rival, and superior, edition himself. The effect of this upon Pope may be imagined. Pope did, however, suggest one brilliant emendation in the text of *Twelfth Night*: in the lines

> Oh it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
> That breathes upon a bank of violets,
> Stealing and giving odour

he proposed to read 'south' for 'sound'.

Before the *Shakespeare* was out, Pope had begun the translation of the *Odyssey*. This time he collaborated with two other men, Broome and Fenton, who translated twelve of the twenty-four books between them. Pope acknowledged their assistance only in five. One happy result of his *Odyssey* was his friendship with Spence, who was then prelector of poetry at Oxford. Spence criticized the work intelligently and without malice—a rare sort of criticism in those days —and Pope was pleased with his remarks. The two men became firm friends and Spence in his *Anecdotes* left a record of Pope's conversation of great interest to posterity. The result of Theobald's criticism of the *Shakespeare* ('piddling Tibbald', Pope called him) was very different, as I shall show.

Having finished his ten years of labour as translator and commentator, Pope, unwearied in activity and at the height of his power and fame, turned his attention to the sort of writing now most closely associated with his name. This was satire which, interrupted only by the *Essay on Man*, was in one form or another to occupy him for the rest of his life. Some years previously Pope, together with a group of friends of whom Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot and Atterbury were

the chief, had amused himself with the formation of the Scribblerus Club, the object of which was to make fun by means of miscellaneous pamphlets and essays of the most conspicuously dreary literature of the day. Gay, for instance, wrote parodies of Ambrose Philips' pastorals, Swift (soaring far beyond the narrow bounds of the club) produced his tremendous *Gulliver*, and Pope, amongst other ephemeral scraps, contributed an essay upon Bathos—or the Art of Sinking in Poetry. During the year 1726 Swift, on his last visit to England, spent some months with Pope at Twickenham, and out of this association of the two old friends arose the idea of one of Pope's most celebrated poems, the *Dunciad*.

The *Dunciad* was the grown tree of which the Bathos was the seed. In this famous poem, in some ways the most repulsive as well as the most powerful of its kind in English, or in any, literature, Pope gave free rein to his spite, his malice and his spleen—and also, oddly enough, to his imagination. The abuse of persons it contains is mainly childish, and one cannot but wonder that a great man—for Pope was, in his way, a great man—should have found it worth his while to perpetuate so many names so utterly unimportant either to his own times or to posterity; one cannot but regret that a mind as brilliant as Pope's should have felt satisfaction in jeering at obscure rhymesters for being too poor to pay for a night's lodging; one cannot but grieve that one of the finest writers in our language should have descended, as Pope did in Part II of this poem, to what, in substance, is nothing better than mere schoolboy smut—yet one reads the *Dunciad:* one reads it with a kind of rueful wonder. Style, after all, is a mighty and magical thing: nobody cares a pin now if Settle was a good poet or a bad, but a thrill of pleasure goes through the dullest reader, when he reads that after the Lord Mayor's show, when night descended,

the proud scene was o'er,
But lived in Settle's numbers one day more;

or again, when he reads of Colley Cibber:

Swearing and supperless the hero sate,
Blasphemed his gods, the dice, and damned his fate;
Then gnawed his pen, then dashed it on the ground,
Sinking from thought to thought a vast profound.
Plunged for his sense, but found no bottom there,
Yet wrote and floundered on in mere despair;

or of 'the sons of Margaret and Clare-hall',

Where Bentley late tempestuous wont to sport
In troubled waters, but now sleeps in port.

In these things one yields to Pope's spell; overborne by the sheer brilliance of style, by the exquisite precision and wit, one hardly bothers to remember that Cibber, for instance, was in reality a very accomplished and charming person, whose *Autobiography* still gives pleasure to thousands, or that Bentley was one of the most distinguished scholars of Europe. It is not, however, only for the passages of brilliant mockery and invective that one reads the poem. These are incidental only; the theme of the poem is the re-establishment of the Empire of Dulness—of the Chaos and Old Night of the intellect—over the world:

Gross as her sire, and as her mother grave,
Laborious, heavy, busy, bold, and blind,
She ruled, in native anarchy, the mind.

So it was once; and now, Pope tells us, she is resuming her reign, and one by one the lights of the intellectual life are going out again. It is a conception not without grandeur, and Pope treated it with power. In the finest passages there is a kind of dark fire, like the flames in Milton's hell: or (to

quote Professor Wilson Knight, who borrowed for the purpose a phrase of Flecker's) ' a kind of monstrous beauty like the hind quarters of an elephant.'

> In vain, in vain—the all-composing hour
> Resistless falls: the muse obeys the power.
> She comes! She comes! the sable throne behold
> Of Night primeval and of Chaos old!
> Before her, fancy's gilded clouds decay,
> And all its varying rainbows die away.
> Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,
> The meteor drops, and in a flash expires . . .
> As Argus' eyes by Hermes' wand opprest
> Closed one by one to everlasting rest;
> Thus at her felt approach, and secret might,
> Art after art goes out, and all is night . . .
> Lo! Thy dread empire, Chaos, is restored;
> Light dies before thy uncreated word;
> Thy hand, great Anarch, lets the curtain fall,
> And universal darkness buries all.

In lines like these, with their heavy movement, their dark and smouldering force, Pope the poet rises far above Pope the satirist. Anyone who compares that passage with the lines I quoted about the sylphs from the *Rape of the Lock*, will realise how great a range and variety of colour and movement Pope could get out of his Couplets—a measure which some people have supposed monotonous.

Pope wanted a ' hero ' for his *Dunciad*—a King to reign over the new Empire of Dulness: a crowned and omnipotent Dunce. In the first version of his poem, this privileged person was Theobald—the man who had unfavourably criticized the *Shakespeare*. In the final, and much expanded, version, it was the amiable and excellent Colley Cibber. Why? Because Pope, in collaboration with Gay and Arbuthnot, had produced an unsuccessful farce, and Cibber had subsequently poked a little fun at it. How-

ever, one should try (I suppose) not to grow hot at the littleness of men—especially the littleness of great men.

In 1733 and the following year appeared what Pope intended to be his most ambitious work, the *Essay on Man,* which he undertook at the instigation of Lord Bolingbroke his 'guide, philosopher and friend', who some ten years previously had returned to England from his exile in France. Pope the poet now appeared as Pope the philosopher, and, in the opening paragraph of his new poem, claimed (adapting Milton's words) to

> Vindicate the ways of God to man.

It was a large claim, and, needless to say, Pope, who for all his brilliance was no philosopher at all, failed to substantiate it. The central idea of the poem is contained in the words: 'whatever is, is right'—a questionable assertion, to say the least of it. But the fact is that the poem has not really any central thought at all. It is a rag-bag of apophthegms—a string of commonplaces. But, having said that, one must hasten to add that for the past two hundred years it has been read by sensible people with pleasure, and is still read with pleasure to-day. That is one more proof, if proof were needed, of the might and mystery of Style.

As I have constantly suggested throughout this chapter, one does not go to Pope, or to any of his contemporaries, for the music which charms

> Magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn;

nor does one go to him for the truth which is the 'hieroglyphical and shadowed lesson' of all the highest poetry. One goes to him for pleasure of a very different quality: what one looks for in Pope is 'wit', that seasoned, salty world-wisdom of the adult educated man, who has acquired it by his intercourse with an enlightened society, and has

learned to communicate it with point, precision and polish: 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.' Of that the *Essay on Man* has a good share. To be sure, many of its pronouncements will hardly stand examination. They must not be brooded over, as one broods over many a fine, rapt, cloudy passage in Keats or Wordsworth, until it quickens in the mind, and grows. They must be taken as one takes good conversation—lightly, and with an ear apt for the telling phrase, and a mind ready and willing to pass on to the next topic.

> For forms of government let fools contest:
> That which is best administered is best.

Neatly said: but reflection suggests that governments of a quite appalling badness may be administered with dreadful efficiency. Again, in the following two lines:

> For modes of faith let graceless Zealots fight;
> His cant be wrong whose life is in the right:——

another telling point, suggesting a large and kindly tolerance; but (one wonders) is a man really right in believing that the world (say) is supported in space by a tortoise, simply because he lives virtuously? Or is there really so close —or indeed any—connection between philosophical principles and conduct? Yet such is Pope's power, so great the fertility of image and aptness of phrase in his jewelled and glittering lines, that he charms us into finding novelty in platitude, wisdom in commonplace, and even, sometimes, sense in nonsense.

For the sheer pleasure of reading it once again I quote the well known lines about the poor Indian and his hopes of heaven:

> Lo the poor Indian, whose untutored mind
> Sees God in clouds or hears him in the wind;

His soul, proud science never taught to stray
Far as the solar walk or milky way;
Yet simple nature to his hope has given,
Behind the cloud-topped hill, an humbler heaven;
Some safer world in depths of wood embraced,
Some happier island in the watery waste,
Where slaves once more their native land behold,
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.
To be, contents his natural desire,
He asks no angel's wing, no seraph's fire;
But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,
His faithful dog shall bear him company.

The *Essay on Man* is (to repeat the old joke) as full of quotations as *Hamlet*: 'guide, philosopher and friend', 'Cromwell damned to everlasting fame', 'an honest man's the noblest work of God', 'the proper study of mankind is man', to mention only a few out of hundreds. Each time the arrowy phrase goes straight to the mark. When the poem first appeared, it was attacked by a Catholic priest named Crousaz on the score of doctrine; and indeed it requires no very subtle reader to see that the view of religion which it sets out is hardly orthodox Christianity. Pope who, as I said before, was no philosopher, was deeply perturbed by the attack, which he had apparently in no way expected. Warburton, afterwards Bishop of Gloucester, came to his rescue, and published a commentary upon the poem, a piece of work more ingenious than honest, in which he defended Pope, who was so grateful that he told Warburton that he understood his meaning far better than he understood it himself. How far Pope understood his own meaning is suggested by a correction he made in a passage at the beginning of the *Essay*. Originally he wrote:

Expatiate freely o'er the scene of man,
A mighty maze of walks without a plan,

and subsequently altered this to:

> Expatiate free o'er all this scene of man,
> A mighty maze! but not without a plan.

The difference is considerable.

The last ten years of Pope's life were occupied with the revision and expansion of the *Dunciad* and the composition of the *Moral Essays* and *Satires*. Pope had perfected his instrument, and these poems are, in point of style and technique, the most accomplished of all his work—always with the exception of the *Rape of the Lock*, which is beyond criticism and stands alone. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, they are probably the least attractive to a modern reader. Castigations of vice, homilies upon the dangers of ambition and the misuse of riches, are apt to be somewhat frigid affairs, except in the mouth of a prophet. A prophet Pope was not. He enjoyed the use of his weapon—a Damascus blade—and was undoubtedly grateful for as many opportunities as possible to use it. He used it mightily, and pretended to believe it sacred:

> A sacred weapon, left for truth's defence,
> Sole dread of folly, vice, and insolence;

and he flattered himself that his victims shrank from its cut and thrust:

> Yes, I am proud [he cried]; I must be proud to see
> Men not afraid of God afraid of me.

Possibly they were less afraid than he fancied. Sometimes they retaliated in kind. After the quarrel with Lady Mary Montague, she and Lord Hervey, the favourite of Queen Caroline, published a squib called *A Pop upon Pope*, a set of verses full in the tradition of uninhibited personal abuse. Pope, however, had the last word, and he spoke it pretty freely in the *Prologue to the Satires*, the autobiographical

poem which also contains the admirable portrait of Addison. The portrait of Hervey (whom he calls Sporus) is less admirable: it is outrageous and disgusting, but exceedingly clever. In the portrait of Addison there is both truth and restraint; in that of Hervey there is neither. It is a scream of rage and revenge, controlled only by the knowledge of where to hit in order to give most pain. Few of us would much wish to defend Lord Hervey; but many of us would wish to defend Pope—if we could.

It is a hard thing to be fair to any man alive, knowing, as we must, so little about him; it is much harder to be fair to any man dead, for we know even less. A recent writer on Pope went to the trouble of counting, throughout the whole body of his work, the number of people whom he mentioned in complimentary terms and the number he mentioned in abusive terms. The former, he found, exceed the latter by eight. Exactly what inference should be drawn from these statistics I do not know. That Pope had friends was never in doubt; but if a man had innumerable friends, and but one enemy, and spoke of that enemy in the sort of terms which Pope employed against a hundred, it would be hard to admire him for largeness of mind and benevolence of heart, just as it would be hard to attribute courage and integrity to a man who (as Pope did) wrote a brilliant and damaging satirical portrait, showed it—or so the story goes—to two women, and told each that it represented the other; or, finally, to attribute common honesty to a man who—again, as Pope did—constantly antedated his early poems in order to give an impression of youthful precocity, put it about, quite falsely, that his father belonged to the family of the Earls of Downe, and systematically falsified his letters before publishing them in order to obscure incidents in his past of which he had come to be ashamed.

Nevertheless, when all that is said, there were times when

Pope, the most industrious of authors (he would jot down a line or a couplet at any hour of the day or night on scraps of paper or the backs of envelopes) was *not* writing: there were times when he was not engaged in seeking out the latest scandals of London life and the follies or misdemeanours of the great, or in enjoying the 'feast of reason and the flow of soul' with his fellow wits in the Twickenham grotto—a place, as one biographer has remarked, more suitable for frogs than for civilized men: and at such times one must endeavour to picture this restless, moody, suspicious, morbidly sensitive, most unhappy man as laying aside, for the moment, all his public and private quarrels under the natural and benignant influence of domestic affection. His mother lived with him until her death at the age of over ninety:

> Me let the tender office long engage
> To rock the cradle of declining age,
> With lenient arts extend a mother's breath,
> Make languor smile and smooth the bed of death;
> Explore the thought, explain the asking eye,
> And keep awhile one parent from the sky.

The lines are tender and beautiful. 'Whatever was his pride,' Dr. Johnson wrote of Pope's relationship with his parents, 'to them he was obedient; whatever was his irritability, to them he was gentle. Life has, among its soothing and quiet comforts, few things better to give than such a son.'

In the spring of 1744 Pope's feeble body began rapidly and finally to break up. Friends were constantly with him, especially Bolingbroke, whom he had loved for thirty years. Martha Blount was with him to the last. 'Here I am,' he said, 'dying of a hundred good symptoms.' The long disease was nearly over. A Catholic friend asked if he would send for a priest. 'I do not suppose it is essential,'

Pope replied, 'but it will look right, and I heartily thank you for putting me in mind of it.' The priest was fetched, and next day, May 30, 1744, Pope died. He was buried, as he had asked to be, in Twickenham church, near the monument which he had erected to his parents.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

1770 - 1850

OF all the Romantic poets Wordsworth is at once the most simple and the most difficult. He is the most simple in that he says, in his best verse, exactly what he means in the barest and most economical language; and the most difficult in that his meaning lies more often than not within a region of experience unfamiliar to people differently constituted from himself. Evidence of this difficulty can be found in the odd variety of ways in which his poetry has been, and is, regarded. Like the other great poets of his period—all except Byron, whom Wordsworth himself considered insane—he was subjected, when his early work was published, either to neglect or, which was worse, to the angry contempt of the critical Reviews. That, however, may go without saying; for the unfamiliar, in literature as in life, always tends to alarm. What is more interesting is the fact that, after his fame was securely established (say by the fourth decade of the nineteenth century) there was still much difference of opinion upon what, precisely, it ought to be based. Some hailed him as a profound philosopher; others denied that he had any philosophy at all. Many came near to worship of him as the founder of a new Religion of Nature. Many again, continued to regard him (as Byron had regarded him) as a solemn bore. Nowadays Wordsworthian criticism, playing a tricky but amusing game, tends to treat him as a psychological 'case', out of the involutions of which the analyst produces, like a rabbit from a hat, ten years of fine

poetry and forty more of mediocre verse. Here and there is found a humble reader who is happy (as Wordsworth's sister Dorothy was) to murmur over to himself

> Oh listen, for the vale profound
> Is overflowing with the sound,

and to marvel, not without gratitude, at the discovery, perpetually renewed, that in the incantation of verse there lies a mystery which is, in the proper sense, ultimate. One can explain a great deal *about* poetry, but not poetry itself. It is, quite simply, *there*.

Wordsworth would turn in his grave if he could read the books which have been written about him in the past thirty years. He disliked researches, under any circumstances, into the private lives of men of letters; 'our business is with their books,' he wrote, 'to understand and to enjoy them. And, of poets more especially, it is true—that if their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished.' Up to a point Wordsworth was right: indeed, if he was not, our relishing and comprehension of, say, Homer or Shakespeare would be sadly inadequate. Yet curiosity is both strong and legitimate, and, in addition to the almost universal wish to know as much as we can about the people who interest us, there is, in most lovers of literature, a powerful interest in the conditions out of which it arises. We understand *poetry* better, even if we do not more keenly enjoy *the poem*, when we have learned of the series of crushing griefs which preceded, for instance, the composition of Keats' *Ode to Autumn*, that tranquil anthem of praise which is so much richer and lordlier than the songs of spring. And perhaps, too, we can better understand the mysterious process of poetry, when we know that Wordsworth, who from his mountain hermitage at Grasmere wrote with such calm exaltation of the mind

married to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion

was, up to the age of twenty-five or so, the black sheep of a very able family: wild, restless, idle; without a penny in his pocket or any will to earn one, and a cause of grave anxiety to his elder relatives, who hoped, as elder relatives will, to see him safely established in Holy Orders, with a Fellowship at Cambridge. He was to write, when he was twenty-six, in one of his loveliest poems, of those blessed moments when,

with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things;

but he was not born with that power. Far from it; he was to win to it—if indeed he ever really did so—only when the turbulence of youth and young manhood, accompanied by bitter remorse and a sense of folly and failure, had been surmounted, or sublimated, or subdued.

William Wordsworth was born on April 17, 1770, at Cockermouth in Cumberland, the second child of a family of five—four brothers and a sister. His father was an attorney-at-law and law-agent to the future Earl of Lonsdale. By descent he was a Yorkshireman, with a full share of the hardihood, determination, canniness and reserve of that race of men. As a child he was moody and violent, and recalled in his old age how once, 'some indignity having been put upon him,' he went into the attic of his grandfather's house with the intention of killing himself with a rapier, which he knew to be kept there. On another occasion together with his elder brother Richard he was whipping tops in the drawing-room. Suddenly he glanced up at one of the old family portraits on the wall. 'Dare you,' he said, 'strike your whip through that old lady's petticoat?'

'No.'

'Then here goes,' cried William. The deed was done, and

punishment duly followed. William, however, did not care. He had become hardened to chastisement.

His mother both hoped and feared for him, and declared that he would one day be remarkable either for good or for evil.

In the year of his mother's death, which occurred when he was eight years old, he was sent to the Grammar School at Hawkshead, a small town at the head of Esthwaite, and continued to attend the school for the next nine years. It was a happy time. The great Public Schools may have made many men, but if they have made poets, it has been despite themselves. One thinks of poor Cowper at Westminster, of Shelley at Eton, of Coleridge trying to dispel the gloom of Christ's Hospital by the uncertain light of the neo-Platonists. Wordsworth was luckier; the little school at Hawkshead, situated in country which was not only to remain his home throughout his long life, but was destined to become an extension, as it were, of his own breath and being, was always affectionately remembered. Attended mostly by farmers' sons destined for the Church, it had none of the uglier aspects which until very recently blotted the fame of the great schools: the callow pack-hunting of the odd and the solitary, the absurd traditional enmity between masters and boys (at Hawkshead there was only the headmaster, helped by a single usher), the segregation from all warm and homely pleasures. The boarders boarded in neighbouring cottages and shared the cottage life. School work ended at four in the winter and five in the summer, and the evenings were free—the long summer evenings without law or supervision or restriction of movement. Three miles away was Windermere; six miles to the North were Grasmere and Rydal, with Helvellyn beyond, and a day's ride to the westward was the sea. Wordsworth learned little Latin at Hawkshead, but he learned something else which, for one of his temperament, was infinitely more precious.

He was a tough little boy, with a strong animal vitality and a mind already inclined to solitude and brooding. Fond of fairy-tales and books of adventure, he was fonder still of physical sports, and his amusements at Hawkshead were the normal amusements of any healthy boy—hunting (on foot), bird-snaring, bird-nesting, rowing, riding, skating. Such things, together with immense walks, summer and winter, day or night, over the fells and along the lake-sides, he enjoyed with an almost physical appetite, rejoicing even in utter fatigue at a day's end. An undisciplined little savage, happy in his 'glad animal movements', self-centred and with slight need of companionship, he moved through his childhood, outwardly so ordinary for a country-bred boy, in a sort of intense and vivid dream; for in addition to his tough young body and boyish hunger for sport and adventure, he was preternaturally sensitive to the influences of place and environment, and apt—so it seems—suddenly, in the very heat of active employment, to lose himself and the sense of his own identity in the breathing of the wind, the light of the immeasurable sky, the slopes and swellings of the hills. He once told a queer story of his boyhood, how, walking over the mountains immersed in his dreams, he would sometimes be impelled to stop for a moment and touch some object, a tree or a stone, to assure himself that it was *there*—that it existed independently of himself, and was not a creature of his own mind.

But one must be cautious in writing of these things. Wordsworth in the early books of the *Prelude* left a record of his childhood fuller and more fascinating than any other poet has done; nevertheless, lovely as this is—and wholly convincing—perhaps 'record' is not the word to describe it. Few men really remember their childhood—possibly Richard Jefferies in *Bevis* is an exception; most men do not so much remember as interpret it in the light of later experience; and this Wordsworth did when, in his early

manhood, he began the *Prelude,* seeking the stuff out of which his adult consciousness of the world was formed, and finding the rude material of it in experiences, at the time shadowy and formless, but since grown sharply defined and significant, which he had lived through many years before. They lay below his conscious thought, ready, when their time should come, to

> leap
> From hiding-places ten years deep,

and be moulded into his finest poetry. Thus his account of his unconstrained and happy childhood, the 'fair seed-time of his soul,' has a profound imaginative truth; and the importance which Wordsworth attached to the experiences of his early years can be seen by the title of the poem in which he described them—the *Prelude: or the Growth of a Poet's Mind.* The twelve books of the *Prelude* took him to his twenty-third year, and the whole, long work was intended to be the introductory chapter to another, the chief work of his life, in which he was to embody his mature visions of man, of nature and of human life. But—and this is the point—these visions would not be intelligible without a knowledge of the germ from which they grew. The child, for Wordsworth, was the father of the man.

That Wordsworth was a 'nature' poet, everybody knows; but he was a nature poet of a peculiar and unusual kind. To point an obvious contrast, the nature poetry of his younger contemporary John Clare rested for its effect upon faithful and minute observation—dew on the bents, the spider's 'silk thread glittering in the sun', trotty Wagtail nimbling in the water-pudge, or whatever it might be that took his eye; but Wordsworth was not a close observer, except, perhaps, when his sister Dorothy was by, to point things out to him. He was not interested primarily in the minute and particular, in the 'black ash-buds in the front

of March ' or the million emeralds breaking from the ' ruby-budded lime ' which, for instance, delighted Tennyson; he was interested, on the contrary, not so much in facts but in effects; Nature, for him, was not a spectacle but a power, and his constant preoccupation was first to understand and then to communicate how that power, external to himself, could—and did—operate upon and mysteriously mould his mind and spirit.

There are passages in the *Prelude* which Wordsworth never surpassed, and many, perhaps most, of them are about his childhood, when Nature spoke to him ' remember-able things.' Some of those things came to him through beauty, as when by the water-side he mimicked the hooting of the owls and, as he paused for the reply which did not come, suddenly, in that moment of intent listening,

> a gentle shock of mild surprise
> Has carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
> Into the bosom of the steady Lake;

Or when he remembered the river Derwent, which

> lov'd
> To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
> And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
> And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
> That flowed along my dreams;

or, again, in his recollection of an evening on Windermere with other children, when they left one of the party upon an islet with his flute, and, pushing off in the boat, listened to the notes of it coming over the lake:

> Oh! then the calm
> And dead still water lay upon my mind

> Even with a weight of pleasure, and the sky
> Never before so beautiful sank down
> Into my heart, and held me like a dream.

Often, too, the 'rememberable things' came to him through fear in the presence of the immense and inexplicable: the awfulness of the wind, for instance, and of the remote and immeasurable clouds when, as he wrote,

> I have hung
> Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
> And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
> But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
> Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
> Shouldering the naked crag: oh! at that time
> While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
> With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
> Blow through my ears! The sky seemed not a sky
> Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!

Again, like the old myth-makers who invented Pan to explain the panic fear which lurks in the silent woods at noon, he was aware amongst the hills of presences, alive with a life only half alien and therefore the more dreadful. Going to visit his snares one night on the fells, he stole the woodcock from a snare not his own, and

> When the deed was done [he wrote]
> I heard among the solitary hills
> Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
> Of undistinguishable motion, steps
> Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

And anyone who knows anything of Wordsworth will remember his account of how one summer evening he borrowed, without leave, a boat which he found tied up on the shore of Esthwaite, and in it rowed out on to the lake. Rejoicing in his stolen pleasure, and lustily dipping his oars, he kept his eyes fixed upon a ridge which bounded the

horizon, when suddenly, as the boat advanced further from the shore, from behind the ridge

> a huge cliff,
> As if with voluntary power instinct,
> Uprear'd its head. I struck and struck again,
> And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
> Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
> With measur'd motion, like a living thing,
> Strode after me.

Terrified, he turned the boat and rowed back to the place from which he had taken it; and for days afterwards, he said,

> my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts
> There was a darkness, call it solitude
> Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
> Of hourly objects, images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty Forms, that do not live
> Like living men, mov'd slowly through the mind
> By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

Yet Wordsworth came to believe that the fear—the darkness, the solitude, the blank desertion—was, like the beauty, a sort of benediction; for it bound him more closely to the heart of things and helped to establish that sense of communion and shared life between himself and nature, which was the breath of his being, until, with advancing years, it began to fade. It is worth noticing that in all scraps I have quoted Wordsworth makes it clear that the revelation of nature's power, whether through beauty or fear, came to him at a moment of heightened feeling, or expectancy: while listening intently for the answering call of the owls; or when touched by the music of the flute coming across

the quiet water; or in the grip of fear as he hung on the cliff-face above the raven's nest; or in moments of anxiety and guiltiness as when he stole the woodcock or borrowed the boat. This connection between his own feelings and his awareness of nature was doubly important to Wordsworth: it deepened the impress on his mind and spirit of nature's forms—carried, as he put it, *far* into his heart, the majesty of mountain and lake, of cataracts and clouds; and, at the same time, it gave dignity to those feelings themselves by establishing the bond or, as he himself put it, the familiar scenes of his childhood were, as he grew older,

> by invisible links
> Allied to the affections.

Most people, I suppose, however sensitive they may be to the beauty and grandeur of the physical universe, nevertheless look upon it as something apart from themselves, as the setting in which their own lives are played out. But Wordsworth did not feel in this way; for him his relationship with Nature was a reciprocal one: each, he seemed to feel, by a mysterious contact and interpenetration, lived in the other, and moulded the other:

> an auxiliar light [he wrote]
> Came from my mind which on the setting sun
> Bestowed new splendour, the melodious birds,
> The gentle breezes, fountains that ran on,
> Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obey'd
> A like dominion; and the midnight storm
> Grew darker in the presence of my eye.

What he saw in nature his eye 'half created and half perceived'; and this queer mutuality was possible because he, a man, shared the same life which animates everything—including the so-called inanimate—in the created universe.

> In all things now
> I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.

This sense of mutuality between himself and Nature, and of the one 'power' which, dwelling in ocean and air and the mind of man, impels not only 'all thinking things' but also 'all objects of all thought,' together with his tendency to connect his sense of the majesty of Nature's forms with states of heightened feeling in himself, led Wordsworth to the curious belief (if, indeed, 'belief' is the right word to describe it) that good and evil, and morality itself, were to be learned, not from contact with men or the clash of mind upon mind in the workaday world of human sympathy, or strife, or aspiration, but from Nature, and his solitary communion with her,

> well pleased to recognize
> In Nature and the language of the sense
> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
> The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
> Of all my moral being.

I suggested that belief was not, perhaps, the word to describe this attitude of Wordsworth's; and it was, in fact, something much less formal. Primarily, it was not a belief, in the intellectual sense, at all, but an experience: that, during his early years, was, quite simply, how Wordsworth felt. It was an experience, mystical in quality, of union, of atonement, with nature, and as such was the source of much of his loveliest verse. Unfortunately, however, he did try, again and again, to transform the experience into belief, and to make statements about it which have irritated many, including Coleridge, his close friend and fervent admirer. Any profound experience, faithfully realized and embodied in the language of poetry, has its truth, as when, for instance, Wordsworth says that the midnight storm 'grew darker in the presence of his eye'; but an inference from that experi-

ence, or an attempt to generalize from it or to comment upon it, is a very different thing. When Wordsworth wrote:

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> Can teach me more of man,
> Of moral evil and of good
> Than all the sages can,

he came perilously near to nonsense. It is a statement in which Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas à Kempis —and, to admit poets into the ranks of sages—Dante and Shakespeare, are hardly given their due. Wordsworth's besetting sin as a poet was his attempt to give an intellectual basis to what is not the intellect's concern. As a singer he was supreme; as a moraliser he was often tedious and occasionally absurd. Nevertheless his dismissal of the 'sages' is, in its way, revealing; for Wordsworth did, in fact, take less from other writers than any other great poet has done. He was well read in both English and European literature, but he was never, even in youth, intoxicated by other men's poetry as Keats, for instance, was by the poetry of Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, or as Shelley was by the Greek dramatists and Plato, or as Byron was by the *Prometheus* of Æschylus. Other men's poetry, other men's wisdom never passed into Wordsworth's blood and being. He remained alone in austere isolation; and this was a main source both of his weakness and of his strength.

When Wordsworth was fourteen, his father died and the family was scattered. For Wordsworth the worst deprivation this caused was the temporary loss of his sister Dorothy, whom he deeply loved. In 1787 he entered St. John's College, Cambridge, where, in a desultory and somewhat futile way, he pursued his studies for four years—or perhaps it might be better to say that his studies pursued him, faintly and without success. 'I was the Dreamer, they the Dream.' His heart was otherwhere, and as for examinations,

things they were which then
I did not love, nor do I love them now.

Perhaps he was wise; at least he knew what was *not* for him in this world, and in those days there was no compulsion upon an undergraduate to study. He did, indeed, glance at geometry with a moment's quickening of interest, and he did on one occasion, which he records in the *Prelude* in his most circumlocutory manner (reserved for what does not interest him) drink too much wine, so that he was late for chapel; but there were few other positive achievements of his Cambridge days, most of which were

Pilfered away by what the Bard who sang
Of the Enchanter Indolence hath called
'Good-natured lounging.'

He would escape from the city when he could, to roam the fields alone or with a book of his own choosing, laughing with Chaucer, or watching

Sweet Spenser moving through his clouded heaven
With the moon's radiance and the moon's soft pace,

and conscious, all the time, of

A feeling that I was not for that hour
Nor for that place.

What was his hour, and where his place, this undisciplined and somewhat arrogant young man already knew, though he might not have been able to give a precise answer, had he been questioned on the subject. But the knowledge was there, deep in his heart. There is a passage in Book IV of the *Prelude*, in which he has told us—not, indeed, precisely, but with the profounder truth of imaginative realization. It was during a summer vacation from Cambridge, and he had been dancing all night at a house two miles from his home. Dawn had broken when he started on his walk home-

ward—a glorious morning, the laughing sea visible far away, clouds and mountains flushed red and drenched in light, the sweetness of dawn on the dewy meadows beneath, the singing of birds, and labourers already going to work in the fields. Needless to say, he was happy. 'To the brim,' he wrote,

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

It was his silent promise to be faithful to the joy which had found him out, and to pay it back, in poetry, to those 'natural hearts', however few, which were willing to share it.

In 1791 Wordsworth took his degree and went down from the University. Apparently—though it sounds oddly after his own description of his undergraduate days—there was some thought of his trying for a Fellowship, but the idea was happily abandoned—according to Dorothy Wordsworth, because he refused to persevere in his study of mathematics, but more probably because a Fellowship would have entailed ordination, and his religious beliefs, at this time of a pantheistic sort, were very far from orthodox Christianity. Most probably of all, he abandoned it because he knew, as surely as anyone ever has known, that he was already dedicated to a different kind of service. Nevertheless, dedication or no dedication, Wordsworth had, somehow, to earn his bread, and at the moment no satisfactory means of doing so presented itself. 'All professions,' as he wrote, in his solemn way, to his friend Mathews, 'are attended with great inconveniences.' How right he was.

After leaving Cambridge, Wordsworth was in London for four months, unemployed; then, after a walking tour in Wales with a friend, in whose company he had, the previous year, made a tour through France to Switzerland, he sud-

denly, in November, returned to France, this time alone. The possibility of having to adopt a profession, inconvenient as it was, had to be faced, and a knowledge of French might be of assistance to him, should he decide, however unwillingly, to enter journalism or find work as a tutor. However, apart from practical advantage, France at this time drew Wordsworth strongly. It was two years since the Bastille had fallen, and he was already conscious of a stir of excitement in the presence of great events. He passed through Paris and went on to Orleans, where, in the course of looking for lodgings, he met a certain Paul Vallon and his sister Annette. Annette, a young woman of five and twenty, gave him French lessons, and the two fell in love. Staying in the same lodgings as Wordsworth were a number of French officers, amongst them Michel Beaupuis, an old aristocrat with strong republican sympathies. Wordsworth warmed to the old man, and in the course of talk with him the stir of excitement over the events of the revolution deepened, and soon burst out in a fire of enthusiasm, until Wordsworth, like many another young and ardent spirit in those times of change, seemed to see the future in the instant, with

> France standing on the top of golden hours
> And human nature seeming born again.

Deeply in love and caught up in the turmoil of revolutionary politics, the brooding solitary of Hawkshead and Cambridge days was indeed in a different world.

On December 15, 1792, Annette gave birth at Orleans to a daughter, Ann Caroline. Wordsworth was in Paris at the time, and immediately after receiving the news returned to England. He was short of money, and possibly in some danger for his life, owing to the connection he had formed with the Girondists; in any case, his intention was to return to France at the earliest opportunity, and Annette, as her two surviving letters show, expected the separation to be

brief. But barely more than a month after Wordsworth reached England, France declared war. Communication between the two countries was stopped.

Nevertheless, Wordsworth made one more attempt, a courageous one, to see his lover. In the autumn of 1793 he was in the Isle of Wight with his friend William Calvert. As well it might be, his heart was heavy with foreboding. Looking one sullen evening across the water to Spithead, he could see the English fleet at anchor. The sunset gun was fired—

> That voice, ill requiem! seldom heard by me
> Without a spirit overcast by dark
> Imaginations, sense of woes to come,
> Sorrow for human kind, and pain of heart.

Then, suddenly, he made his dash across the Channel, and travelled, we can only guess with what difficulty and danger, through a hostile country to Paris. Carlyle in his *Reminiscences* stated that Wordsworth had told him that he had witnessed the execution, in Paris, of the Girondist deputy, Gorsas. This took place on October 7, 1793. Had Carlyle not recorded this, we might never have known of Wordsworth's strange adventure. Unhappily, he could get no farther than Paris, and was forced to return to England without seeing Annette and his child. And the war was to drag on for nine years.

Wordsworth was an honourable man; he was also (we have Dorothy's word for it) a man of violent feelings—brooding, turbulent, self-centred. What the effect upon him of his year in France was, is matter for conjecture, for he never referred to it directly. Without doubt it was shattering. There are hints of it in the *Prelude*, but only hints, and even these are veiled: the queer story, for instance, of *Vandracour and Julia*, not without parallel to his own, with Vandracour's frustrated love and 'viperous remorse'; and

the fearfully vivid lines in which he describes his memories of the Terror—the ghastly visions, the implements of death,

> And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
> Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice
> Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
> Of treachery and desertion in the place
> The holiest that I knew of, my own soul.

The old happy days when Wordsworth

> with the breeze
> Had played, a green leaf on the blessed tree

of his beloved country, had gone indeed. That country (treacherously, as he believed) was now at war with France, and revolutionary France was not only in his belief the hope of the world—it was also the home of Annette and Caroline. He had deserted both.

There followed a period of misery and nightmare indecision. He had no settled home and no money. He plunged into the study of the revolutionary writers—Rousseau, Godwin, Tom Paine. He planned to start a journal to spread revolutionary beliefs; but the plan came to nothing. Restlessly he moved from place to place, knowing he must work if only to live, but unable to submit to the discipline which work entailed; frustrated in his passion for Annette, and torn between love and hate of his own country, whose attitude to France was monstrous in his eyes. There was only one person who could bring him peace again; his sister, Dorothy.

That Wordsworth was able to make a home with his sister was due to a legacy of £900 from Raisley Calvert, the brother of the William Calvert with whom Wordsworth had been in the Isle of Wight before his last visit to Paris. In 1795 he and Dorothy took a lease of a house at Racedown in Dorset. Here, too, Coleridge (whom Wordsworth had already met) visited them, and a friendship which was to

prove the most fruitful of any in the history of English letters began. From the moment of settling at Racedown a new life began for Wordsworth. He was at home again.

It has become fashionable amongst recent writers on Wordsworth to argue that his deliberate suppression and concealment, from all but his family and closest friends, of his love for Annette Vallon amounted to a fundamental hypocrisy and a deep division of his nature, which had—somehow—to be healed, or compensated, in his subsequent poetry. That is as it may be; but it is perhaps wiser merely to observe, so far as one can, what actually happened, and not try to confine the wayward and mysterious spirit of man within the neat compass of a clinical theory. What happened was that Wordsworth rediscovered with Dorothy's help the life which was truly his own, and, in the course of time, the interlude of his adventures in France—natural enough to a young man of his violent and smouldering temperament—came to assume its just proportions. He forgot Annette. Some hint that the forgetting was painful may possibly be seen in the fact that he never again—though his subsequent marriage was happy and enduring—'fell in' love; and—alone of the great poets of England and of Europe—he wrote, with the exception of a few lines in *Vandracour and Julia*, no love poetry. In all Wordsworth's best poetry there is deep passion; but he wrote no poetry of sexual love. That may be why the young tend to approach him with diffidence.

Wordsworth was a man of very strong family affections; but of all the members of his family it had always been his sister whom he had chiefly loved. For years the two had been separated by circumstances. Now they were reunited; and the reunion was a turning point in the poet's life. Dorothy was two years younger than her brother, whom she adored. She was a person of excessive emotional sensibility and great charm. 'Her face,' wrote De Quincey, 'was of an

Egyptian brown. Her eyes were wild and startling, and hurried in their motion. Her manner was warm and even ardent . . . and some subtle fire of impassioned intellect apparently burned within her.' She understood her brother as no one else did, and her quick sympathy was the best medicine for his distress. She loved nature and she loved books—though 'content' (to quote De Quincey again) 'to be ignorant of many things; but what she knew and had really mastered lay where it could not be disturbed: in the temple of her own most fervid heart.' Had anyone told her she was a writer too, she would have refused the compliment with an incredulous smile; yet she had a seeing eye, and a control of exact and delicate terms to match it, which anyone might envy. Her letters and journals give us a sense of Wordsworth's life, in the years just before and just after his marriage, warmer and more actual than we have of any other great writer of the past. Wordsworth was not, on the whole, generous in acknowledging the debts he owed to other people; but he never grudged expression of gratitude to Dorothy, his 'dear, dear friend,' in whose voice, as he wrote in *Tintern Abbey,*

> I catch
> The language of my former heart, and read
> My former pleasures in the shooting lights
> Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
> May I behold in thee what I was once,
> My dear, dear sister! and this prayer I make,
> Knowing that nature never did betray
> The heart that loved her.

At Racedown, however, there was not only Dorothy; there was Coleridge—Coleridge still in his exuberant and wonderful youth, before the

> Stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief
> Which finds no natural outlet, no relief
> In word or sigh or tear,

had fallen upon him, as it was to fall so soon. At twenty-three he was the Coleridge whose 'genius,' as Hazlitt said, 'had angelic wings, and fed on manna.' The most precious gift he gave to Wordsworth was the gift of immediate and profound admiration. All writers need praise; but Wordsworth, at this crisis of his life, needed it more than most, and as much as he needed his sister's healing gift of love. He received both in generous measure. 'Wordsworth,' Coleridge wrote to his publisher, 'has written a tragedy' (it was *The Borderers*). 'I speak with heartfelt sincerity and (I think) unblinded judgment, when I tell you that I feel myself a little man by his side, and yet do not think myself the less man than I formerly thought myself. His drama is absolutely wonderful.' And on all occasions amongst his friends he continued to sing Wordsworth's praises.

The two men took such pleasure in each other's society that Wordsworth and his sister decided to leave Racedown and to settle within reach of Nether Stowey in Somerset, where Coleridge was then living. Accordingly they took a house (it is now a hotel) at Alfoxden, about four miles away, at the foot of the Quantocks. For the next few years Coleridge and the Wordsworths were constantly together, reading their poems to each other, walking, talking—endlessly talking—on the subject which filled both their minds, and was nothing less than the reanimation of English poetry. And Wordsworth, as he talked, and thought, and wrote with ever increasing absorption and confidence, found the disturbing image of Annette, and with it his attachment to the principles of revolutionary France, growing fainter and fainter in his mind, so that little by little his life fell into the tranquil shape which it was to keep for the remainder of his long life.

It was from the intercourse of Coleridge and Wordsworth at Alfoxden and Nether Stowey that the *Lyrical Ballads* sprang. Coleridge was to contribute to the joint work poems

in which the incidents and agents should be, in part at least, supernatural—as in his *Ancient Mariner*; Wordsworth (to quote Coleridge's words) 'was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes that see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.' The little book was published in 1798. It caused no stir at the time; but its subsequent influence on English poetry has been incalculable.

At the end of 1799, a few days before Christmas, Wordsworth and Dorothy moved to Dove Cottage at Grasmere, where they remained for some eight years. The period at Dove Cottage coincided with the very height of Wordsworth's achievement as a poet; his best work was done there, and for that reason it is more intimately associated with his memory even than Rydal Mount, which was to be the long home of his rising fame and declining power. Dove Cottage was (and is, for it still stands) very small, lonely and secluded, built of local stone and looking, as cottages ought to look, as if it had grown naturally from the 'little domestic slip of mountain' on which it stood. For the first few days brother and sister were, as Wordsworth wrote, 'overhead in confusion, painting the rooms, mending the doors, and heaven knows what.' They paid a woman two shillings a week to work for them two or three hours a day—'we could have had this attendance,' said Wordsworth, 'for eighteen pence, but we added the sixpence for the sake of the poor woman, who is made happy by it.' The following April Coleridge came to stay, and Wordsworth's sailor brother, John.

At this time, at the turn of the century, Wordsworth was

thirty years old. What was he like in personal appearance? Several people who knew him have left vivid descriptions, and there are one or two painted portraits. He was of average height (five foot ten), with sloping shoulders, narrowish chest and, according to De Quincey, a brilliant observer who liked to spice his observations with malice, a pair of legs which though useful (for Wordsworth was a tremendous walker) were 'certainly not ornamental'. De Quincey was walking one day with Dorothy, and Wordsworth, with another friend, was striding along ahead; so they continued 'for three miles or more; during which time at intervals Miss Wordsworth would exclaim, in a tone of vexation, 'Is it possible—can that be William? How very mean he looks!' Wordsworth's head, on the contrary, was a noble one, his face 'fine and sombre' in complexion, resembling that of a 'Venetian senator or a Spanish monk.' The light in his eyes seemed to come from unfathomed depths, the expression in them 'the most solemn and spiritual that it is possible for the human eye to wear.' 'The nose (De Quincey goes on) a little arched, is large; which ... has always been accounted an unequivocal expression of animal appetites organically strong. The mouth, and the whole circumjacencies of the mouth, compose the strongest feature in Wordsworth's face.' Other writers have remarked upon his eyes: Hazlitt noted a fire in them 'as if he saw something in objects more than outward appearance'; and Leigh Hunt described them as 'supernatural': 'they were like fires half burning, half smouldering, with a sort of acrid fixture of regard and seated at the farther end of two caverns. One might imagine Ezekiel or Isaiah to have had such eyes.' Hazlitt also mentions 'a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face,' and also the deep, gutteral intonation of his voice, 'with a strong tincture of the northern burr like the crust on wine.'

When he read his verses aloud, as he did often and with pleasure—he once read the *Leech Gatherer* to the astonished barber who came to Dove Cottage to cut his hair—he used to read, De Quincey says, 'as if he were crying.'

These descriptions are valuable, because they carry a clear implication of character: the sensual mouth, the strong, hooked nose, the smouldering eyes, the suggestion of a certain wildness (a 'convulsive inclination to laughter') kept under vigilant control, all tend to fill out the picture which one has already formed in outline from the records and descriptions of Wordsworth the wayward and violent child, who would one day be remarkable 'either for good or for evil.' Just after his return from France, Dorothy—a little prejudiced, perhaps, by her love—adds a softer touch: he had, she wrote, 'a sort of violence of Affection if I may so term it, which demonstrates itself every moment of the Day when the Objects of his affection are present with him, in a thousand almost imperceptible attentions to their wishes, in a sort of restless watchfulness which I know not how to describe, a Tenderness that never sleeps.' One is glad to hear of that tenderness; for possibly no one but Dorothy was ever aware of it in this mighty poet, but, on the whole, somewhat harsh and unloveable man.

For two years brother and sister lived alone together in Dove Cottage their busy, frugal life, Wordsworth writing hard, Dorothy copying his verses for him, and both engaged in innumerable small tasks about the house and garden and walking their endless miles over the hills. It was a happy time; the stormy interlude in France was fading into the past: or, if not fading—for no intense experience is ever lost—it was at least beginning to assume its right proportions in Wordsworth's life. He was doing the work he was made for, in the place where his roots lay deep, with a loved companion. Did he ever recall a sentence he had written to his friend Mathews in 1794, when he wanted (or thought he

wanted) to write politics for the press: 'I begin to wish much to be in Town. Cataracts and mountains are good occasional society, but they will not do for constant companions'? If he did, he must have smiled.

His habit at this time (and indeed always, when possible) was to compose out of doors, in his head, and to write down the verses when he came in. The physical act of writing he hated with an almost pathological hatred—and his script was atrocious—worse than Shelley's. 'During the last three years,' he wrote to Sir George Beaumont, 'I have never had a pen in my hand for five minutes, before my whole frame becomes one bundle of uneasiness; a perspiration starts out all over me and my chest is oppressed in a manner which I cannot describe;' and again and again in her Journals Dorothy notes that 'poor Wm' has made himself ill writing a poem. It was never the composition which distressed him: he worked laboriously and lovingly over all his poems, continually revising, correcting, improving (occasionally *not* improving); it was the penmanship. Odd that this dour and powerful North-countryman should be overcome by the weight of a feather.

In the autumn of 1802 Wordsworth was married to his cousin, Mary Hutchinson. They had been childhood companions at a dame's school in Cumberland. Before the marriage Wordsworth and Dorothy crossed to Calais, where they spent the month of August with Annette and Caroline, then a little girl of ten. Dorothy gave a page of her journal to the visit, but she recorded nothing of what passed between her brother and Annette. For Wordsworth it was the turning of a page in his book of life, the closing of a volume which had ceased to interest him—or was it, just possibly, the final locking and double-locking of a chamber in his mind which contained an uneasy ghost? He was to see Annette once again, at Paris in 1820, when he introduced her to his wife. Caroline, who in 1816 became Mme

Baudouin, he visited, also in Paris, when on his way to Italy in 1837. In 1849, a year before his death, he was talking to an American admirer, when the talk touched upon France, 'which seemed very near his heart . . .' At the time of the September massacres he was in Orleans. Addressing Mrs. Wordsworth he said, 'I wonder how I came to stay there so long, and at a period so exciting?' Why indeed? It is not an agreeable story; but Wordsworth could be both hard and callous, as he showed in the treatment of not a few of his friends, notably De Quincey and Coleridge: of Coleridge, when there was a prospect of his going to live with the Montagues, Wordsworth said that he was 'a perfect nuisance to any household,' and had rotted himself with drink and drugs. Coleridge, indeed, *was* a nuisance once he had yielded to his drugs and his misery; but it was a harsh saying in the mouth of a friend who had once loved him and received from him so much. Coleridge, to whom the words were repeated, was heart-broken. With De Quincey, Wordsworth severed a long-standing friendship on account of his disapproval of De Quincey's illegitimate children by the woman whom he subsequently married.

After Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson—that 'phantom of delight', as he recalled her from their childhood days, and now the

> perfect woman; nobly planned
> To warn, to comfort and command——

life at Dove Cottage went on much as before. 'Perfect woman nobly planned' is not the way in which most lovers would choose to describe their beloveds; the phrase is a little stately, perhaps, and too reminiscent of the language of the Leechgatherer,

> such as grave livers do in Scotland use;

but that Mary was in truth a noble woman there is no doubt

at all. She accepted without demur the continued presence of Dorothy in the household, and gave her husband and children her entire and selfless devotion. Wordsworth loved his wife; but had his marriage involved the loss of his sister, a part of his heart would have been torn away. He was fortunate, as few men have been fortunate, in the love of these two women.

Dorothy's journal was continued for another three months after her brother's marriage; then she wrote a long account of a tour in Scotland which they all made together. After that the journal was not resumed. Though the even tenor of life in the little cottage was outwardly unchanged, Dorothy had lost something very dear to her in her brother's exclusive companionship. Nevertheless she welcomed Mary as generously as Mary accepted her, and loved the children when they came hardly less than Mary did. Her pleasure in them is recorded in some of the most charming letters ever written. Another grief for Dorothy was the gradual estrangement from Coleridge, whom she also loved; her early journals, especially those written at Alfoxden, are full of her delight in his companionship, and many a phrase, casually dropped ('the horned moon', 'the stars dim" 'the night cloudy but not dark') recalls the *Ancient Mariner* or *Christabel,* as if in writing those poems Coleridge had had glimpses through Dorothy's eyes as well as his own. It is easy to believe that Dorothy had a hand, or at least the tip of a finger, in Coleridge's most magical poems, as she most certainly had in many of Wordsworth's. Again and again with her dwelling eye and quick response to every minutest detail of light and colour and movement in the scene about her, she played Ariel to his Prospero, fetching up for him the midnight dew from the 'still-vexed Bermoothes' or riding on the curled clouds before his glance. 'I wandered lonely as a cloud . . .' wrote Wordsworth; but he was not, in fact, alone. Dorothy was with him when he saw the 'host

of golden daffodils', and her description of the sight is as beautiful in her quiet prose, as Wordsworth's poem is. She it was, wrote De Quincey, that 'first couched his eye to the sense of beauty, humanized him by the gentler charities, and engrafted . . . those graces upon the ruder growths of his nature which have since clothed the forest of his genius with a foliage corresponding in loveliness to the strength of its boughs and the massiveness of its trunks.'

In 1805 the *Prelude,* that 'song divine,' as Coleridge described it,

> of high and passionate thoughts
> To their own music chaunted,

was finished, though to the end of his life Wordsworth was to continue to work at it and alter it. In the same year an event occurred which had a profound effect on Wordsworth's life, and consequently upon his poetry. The Wordsworth family, scattered though it had been by the early death of both parents, had always been bound by ties of close affection. Of the bond between the poet and Dorothy enough has already been said; of his brothers the favourite was John. John Wordsworth had gone to sea as a boy, and for fourteen years the poet never saw him; but when in 1800 he came to stay at Dove Cottage for two periods, amounting in all to some eight months, the blood-tie, already strong, between the two brothers and their sister, was further cemented by a warm personal affection, and a communion of tastes. Thinking of John's years at sea, 'Nature there,' Wordsworth wrote,

> Was with thee; she, who loved us both, she still
> Was with thee; and even so didst thou become
> A silent Poet; from the solitude
> Of the vast sea didst bring a watchful heart . .
> And an eye practised like a blind man's touch.

But in February, 1805, John Wordsworth, in command of the East India Company's ship *Earl of Abergavenny,* was drowned when the ship was lost on the Shambles Bank off Portland. The blow was, for William and Dorothy, a shattering one. John had been admired hardly less than he had been loved: 'He had not one vice of his profession. I never heard an oath from him in my life; his modesty was equal to that of the purest woman. In prudence, in meekness, in self denial, in fortitude, he was all that could be wished for in man . . . thinking of, and living only for others . . .' 'I will work for you,' John had told his brother 'and you shall attempt to do something for the world. Could I but see you with a green field of your own and a cow or two, I should be happy.' He treasured his brother's poetry, and never, Wordsworth wrote, had he written a line without John in his mind, and the hope of giving him pleasure. The news of the disaster was sent to Grasmere from London by Richard Wordsworth, the lawyer brother. 'God keep the rest of us together,' William wrote in reply, 'the set is now broken.'

One consequence for Wordsworth of John's death was the beginning of a gradual but profound change in his religious beliefs. He had suffered previously no comparable grief. The separation from Annette had caused him anguish and remorse and bewilderment; but for grief—the deep grief which lays its finger, quiet and cold, upon the inmost heart, he had had to wait until the loss of his brother John. Then the 'set' was broken: a part of himself was torn away, and he was left with a sense of emptiness, of mutilated life, and of a kind of impotence in face of the injustice and cruelty of things. The wound which had been inflicted by his unhappy passion for Annette had been cured by his return to the scenes and influences amongst which he had found, from his earliest years, his deepest comfort and inspiration. Though he had heard the 'still, sad music of

humanity,' and had come, by gathered experience, to feel in nature

> a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
> And the round ocean and the living air,

yet that very Nature, though richer now, and more mysterious than in his boyhood, and more significant of an indwelling divinity, was still his 'all in all,' and the return to it was healing and benediction to his hurt and bewildered heart. But now it was not so; now he could no longer find in 'nature and the language of the sense' the anchor of his purest thoughts, the soul of all his moral being. Another need was forced upon him—the need to justify in his thoughts a scheme of things which could involve the death of the young, the brave and the beloved.

So it was that we find Wordsworth, a month after he received the news of the shipwreck, writing a letter which he could not have written before that news came. 'A thousand times (he wrote) I have asked myself, "Why was he taken away?" . . . Why have we a choice and a will, and a notion of justice and injustice, enabling us to be moral agents? Why have we sympathies that make the best of us so afraid of inflicting pain and sorrow, which yet we see dealt about so lavishly by the supreme governor? Why should our notions of right towards each other . . . differ so widely from what appears to be His notion and rule, if everything were to end here? Would it not be blasphemy to say that, upon the supposition of the thinking principle being destroyed by death, however inferior he may be to the great Cause and Ruler of things, we have *more of love* in our nature than He has? The thought is monstrous; and yet how to get rid of it, except upon the supposition of *another* and a *better world*, I do not see.'

Wordsworth, in fact, had already taken the first and

decisive step towards the orthodox Christianity in the shelter of which the remainder of his long life was to be lived. Already, now that his French adventure was buried in the dark backward of time, his republicanism was dead, and was to turn and harden as time went on into its opposite. The days of waywardness were over, and he was already on the road to becoming what he was to be in the long evening of his life: the staunch supporter of Church and State, the venerable sage of Rydal Mount, Poet Laureate and an object of pilgrimage.

Many have lamented the change which came over Wordsworth in middle life, amongst them Shelley, who grieved that his voice no longer in 'honoured poverty'

> did weave
> Songs consecrate to truth and liberty;

and it is undoubtedly a fact that Wordsworth's best work was done in the eight or ten years from 1798 onward. But even a poet must grow old, and it is ungrateful as well as foolish to lament that it should be so. There have been a few poets—Sophocles, for instance, and Milton, and Robert Bridges—who have written their best poems in late middle life or even old age; but they have all been poets whose power derived from *thought,* however much illumined by feeling. Wordsworth was not a poet of this kind; Wordsworth's finest poetry proceeded (though he himself denied it) not from thought, but from feeling, and from feeling of a peculiarly intense and highly individual kind; and it is the power to feel which fades with advancing years.

'I see by glimpses now' (he wrote at the end of the *Prelude*)

> When age come on,
> May scarcely see at all.

The words were prophetic. He continued to write poetry

almost to his death; some of it is noble verse, but after the great decade was past, he never again recovered the old magic and the old splendour.

Wordsworth was more conscious than most poets are of his intentions in poetry; helped, no doubt, by those eager talkings 'about it and about' with Coleridge at Alfoxden, he formulated very precise views of what poetry in general, and his own poetry in particular, should do, and of how it should do it. The fullest expression of these views is contained in the preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. There is not space here to discuss in detail that very interesting and highly controversial essay; but a word must be said on the famous campaign against what Wordsworth called 'poetic diction.' Wordsworth began as an eighteenth century poet. The influence of Pope, who died only twenty-five years before Wordsworth was born, was still paramount when Wordsworth's earliest verses were written, and Dr. Johnson (who died when Wordsworth was fourteen) was still one of the great masters of critical opinion. Now Pope was a poet of exquisite skill, but he was a bad model for lesser men to imitate; he was a bad model precisely because he was easy to imitate in the external dress and fashion of his verse. Clothes, however, do not make the man, and there was something more than mere contempt when Kent, in *King Lear,* said to Oswald, 'a tailor made thee.' Thus it happened that amongst the lesser poets of the second half of the eighteenth century certain turns of phrase, habitual images, conventional circumlocutions ('bright Phoebus,' 'finny tribes,' 'feathered flocks' and what not) had so worked themselves into the texture of the verse, that they came to be looked upon as *constituting* poetry. Poetry was as inconceivable without them as Oswald would have been without his courtier's clothes. Not that such phrases are in themselves offensive: Shakespeare himself calls the sun 'bright Phoebus.' All of them were valid once—when, that

is, they first appeared as the expression (or incarnation, as Wordsworth would say) of something directly seen, or directly felt, by the poet. For poetry must never cheat: indeed, it never can—without being found out. It must be first-hand ('original'), or nothing. Blake put the case precisely in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell:* he was writing of religion, but what he said is equally apposite to poetry: 'The ancient Poets (he wrote) animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountain, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive . . . Till a system was formed which some took advantage of by attempting to abstract the mental deities from their objects. Thus began the Priesthood. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things.'

It was this current coin, or small change, of poetry—these accepted and conventional turns of phrase, abstracted from experience as the pagan gods, according to Blake, had been abstracted from the objects which they represented, and given an existence in their own right—against which Wordsworth, with Coleridge's support, set out to wage war. Poetry, Wordsworth declared, should be written in 'a selection of the language really used by men;' between the language of prose, or of common speech, and the language of poetry there should be no essential difference whatever.

In this contention, the effect of which has been immense, and wholly beneficial in almost all poetry up to the present day, Wordsworth was both right and wrong. He was right in that he detected the vice in contemporary taste, and in the fact that no great poetry, in any age, has employed a special or peculiar language distinct from that of prose; nevertheless, in what sense can the simplest passage of verse, if it be good verse, be described as the 'real language' of men?

No motion has she now, no force,
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees——

in that stanza of Wordsworth's, apart from one small inversion in the first line, there is not a word, not a turn of phrase, which is not appropriate to the commonest and most homely speech; yet the effect of the whole is neither homely nor common; it rings upon the inward ear like a solemn bell; it is an incantation. There is more in language than turns of phrase—or than mere words; for through the words comes the spell of rhythm and tune, and the beat of wings, and this (which makes the poetry) is not, and can never be, the 'real language of men.' The poet Hopkins was nearer the mark when he said that poetry must use 'the current language—*heightened*.'

Again, Wordsworth declared that a principle object of his poems was to illustrate incidents and situations from common, or rustic, life, in the belief that in simple countrymen, uncorrupted by the vices of an artificial society, the 'essential passions of the heart' are to be found in the greatest purity. As a general statement this is, no doubt, somewhat absurd; but its relevance to Wordsworth's own poetry is obvious. Wordsworth's poetry was concerned with Nature —primarily with his own response to Nature; so whenever he needed incidents or persons for the framework of a poem, it was inevitable that he should choose incidents from the lives of persons who were in close and vital contact with the forces he wished to portray. This choice of rustic character and homely incident ('the feeling,' Wordsworth wrote of his poems, 'gives importance to the action, and not the action to the feeling') was also a valuable corrective to the prevailing taste in country-poetry, the writers of which, with a few honourable exceptions, never seem to have *looked* at the country at all; far from seeing and 'sing-

ing (as Keats wrote) by their own eyes inspired,' they inclined to take Nature as a picturesque and fanciful background to urban life, finding their way through her charms less by the guidance of their senses than by the convenience of their rhymes, streams leading them to beams, loves to groves, mountains to fountains, and glades to shades. True seeing, on the other hand, was Wordsworth's aim, and true feeling, together with unaffected language to clothe them in.

One further point: Wordsworth declared in his *Preface*, and continued to believe throughout his life, that every poem he wrote was written with a *purpose:* either, that was, to illustrate the way the mind works under given circumstances, or to propound, or suggest, some moral truth. Here we are on much more debatable ground. 'Every great Poet,' Wordsworth wrote to Lady Beaumont, 'is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing.' Again, in another letter, he stated his conviction that the destiny of his poems was 'to console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous; this is their office, which I trust they will faithfully perform long after we (that is, all that is mortal of us) are mouldered in our graves.' That is a high claim for a man to make for his own work; however—and one is almost tempted, in view of its manner, to add *unfortunately*—it is true. Here again, as in his claim to employ in his poetry the real language of men, Wordsworth is both right and wrong; in a sense every true poet is a teacher, for poetry opens windows for us upon a world of thought and experience otherwise hidden. The poet sees, and helps us to see; knows, and communicates his knowledge; feels, and allows us to share his feeling, creates, and shows for our delight the thing he has made. But all this he does or ought to do, with-

out any thought for us at all. What 'purpose' had Shakespeare when he wrote *King Lear,* or Ariel's songs? Beyond the play, and beyond the singing, none whatever; yet we are wiser and happier for both. The lessons of poetry are implicit in itself, not explicit in the poet's intention. Moreover the very fact that Wordsworth *saw himself* as a teacher is responsible for the ill success of some of his work. Keats, whose sensitiveness to poetry was snailhorn in its delicacy, was well aware of this; no one honoured the real greatness of Wordsworth more than Keats, yet, on a longer acquaintance with the *Excursion,* 'Are we,' he wrote, 'for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, to be bullied into a certain philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist? Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself.' Wordsworth was often in danger of deceiving himself, and of valuing even his best poems for the wrong reason. An instance of this is the *Leech Gatherer.* This beautiful poem was not, as it happened, greatly enjoyed by Wordsworth's sister-in-law, Sara Hutchinson, and Wordsworth, learning of her disapproval, wrote her an indignant letter, in which, after commenting upon the poem at some length, he ended: 'It is of the utmost importance that you should have had pleasure from contemplating the fortitude, independence, persevering spirit, and the general moral dignity of this old man's character.' Wordsworth, that is to say, supposed that the value of this poem lay in the lesson it conveyed: namely that the spectacle of meek endurance of hardship may at times strengthen the faint-hearted. No doubt it may; and the lesson is neither new nor difficult; but to fancy that the power of this poem lies in anything so obvious and banal, is of course absurd. The power of the poem is not in thought at all, but wholly in imagination: it lies in the evocation of the Old Man's figure, a figure more intense and vivid than

dreams, coming suddenly upon the mind's eye, charmed, as it has been, by the gay *actualities* (the sunshine after rain, the hare 'running races' and raising a mist of water-drops from the plashy earth) at the beginning of the poem, and appearing an integral part, as it were, of the desolate moor, or emanation from the tarn:

> the lonely place,
> The old man's shape, and speech, all troubled me;
> In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace
> About the weary moors continually,
> Wandering about alone and silently . . .

Those lines are the heart of this celebrated poem, which is not, in the final count, about the Leech Gatherer at all—it is about the moors, the immense and desolate moors, which in the cunningly contrived weak endings of the two last lines I have quoted, seem to die into distance and recede beyond sight. The moors, and Wordsworth's response to them are what make the poem: yet he named it *Resolution and Independence*. What a title!

A similar comment might be made upon almost any of Wordsworth's most famous poems. Their 'purpose' is mere fiddle-de-dee. Who needs to be told that things seen or heard with passion dwell in the mind, and modify it, for ever after? Yet to tell us precisely that was Wordsworth's 'purpose' in the *Highland Reaper* and *Daffodils*. He might have spared himself the trouble; *we* know why those poems are beautiful: they are beautiful for the communication in magical words of an unique experience—not for the application of that experience to the illustration of some general (and possibly tedious) truth of psychology.

> A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
> In springtime from the cuckoo bird,
> Breaking the silence of the seas
> Beyond the farthest Hebrides:

that is the incantation of verse, the beating within language of divine wings; and again and again, in his great years, Wordsworth achieved it. If he does, indeed, help the young of every age—and the old too—' to become more actively and securely virtuous,' he does it not by doctrine or precept, but by the much more potent instrument of beauty. In that he is securely in the company of all the great poets and artists of the world.

I have said that Wordsworth is a difficult poet in that his meaning often lies within a realm of experience unfamiliar to people differently constituted from himself, and that his feeling for nature was of a peculiar and highly individual kind. The root of that feeling, from which his finest poetry sprang, was the rapt response to his surroundings of a preternaturally sensitive *child.* Now a child cannot write poetry; so Wordsworth's poetry, when it came, was, so to speak, a continual *remembrance,* a probing back into that state of being when (in Thomas Traherne's words) the ' corn was orient and immortal wheat,' and (in Wordsworth's own) there was splendour in the grass and glory in the flower. His most characteristic poetry took its rise from an emotion recollected not merely 'in tranquillity,' but after a long lapse of years. It was in his childhood that Wordsworth ' knew;' and he knew with that absolute and intuitive knowledge which only children and mystics possess. It is the property of a child to lose himself in the thing he gazes at, or in the sound he hears; to find ' the instant made eternity;' to feel distinctions between outward and inward blur and fade. A child sees with a rapt intensity and singleness of vision impossible for the adult, whose mind is distracted by a thousand gathered associations and irrelevant experiences. The child's eye is on the object, and the object, for the moment, is the whole world—and itself.

This, then, is the sort of seeing which, together with the passion of delight and gratitude inevitably associated with

it, informs Wordsworth's most beautiful verse. The power of thus seeing (and of thus feeling, for the two things were inseparable) remained with Wordsworth longer than is the case with most people, and the memory of it longer still. But even the memory had, one day, to fail. Again and again he tries to express it, to find words for that sense of absolute communion with the world about him (like the mystic's sense of absolute communion with God), for that 'blessed mood' in which

> we are laid asleep
> In body and become a living soul.

The solid world seems to melt away, only to become endued with a more potent reality within his own rapt contemplation. He is both perceiver and creator: he *makes* the world, with all its beauty and power and strangeness, because its life is within him; he thanks God for the

> obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things,
> Fallings from us, vanishings,

as if outward and inward were one; the sky holds him 'like a dream;' he forgets that he had

> bodily eyes, and what I saw
> Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
> A prospect in my mind;

or, walking along the public road,

> what pictures now [he cries]
> Rose in harmonius imagery—they rose
> As from a distant region of my soul
> And came along like dreams.

The dream imagery constantly recurs; it is the very spirit of the passionate communion-in-solitude with Nature, out of which his loveliest poetry sprang: it is as in dream that he 'wanders lonely as a cloud,' or listens

to the mountain flood
Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves;

it is as in dream that Lucy (that shadowy figure) leans her ear

In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face;

and it was a tranced and dreaming eye which saw 'the workings of one mind' in

the immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls . . .
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them.

Wordsworth could not but know that this source of power in him would run dry. He drank of it greedily and thirstily —and to the eternal honour of English literature—before it should be too late. The *Immortality* ode is, in a sense, his farewell to it. Everyone knows this famous poem; but not all, I think, are aware of its deep sadness. Wordsworth wrote it in reply to Coleridge's *Ode to Dejection,* intending to counter the despair of that poem by declaring his faith that in him the old, instinctive rapture, faded with the years, was replaced by a deeper and graver knowledge. No doubt it was; but for Wordsworth the coming of the 'philosophic mind' was not a real compensation for what had gone. The poem is a knocking on the gate of the lost garden of childhood.

I do not know if it would be fanciful to assign to this same *sort* of sensibility a very different quality in much of Wordsworth's poetry: I mean the excessive insistence upon

matters of fact. Facts, sometimes, seem to have an almost hallucinatory power over Wordsworth: they are, as it were, elements of the dream (to keep the metaphor)—but whether or not they are to prove elements of a *poem* is another matter. The facts of a dream, related upon waking, may sound grievously pointless and uninteresting. Sometimes Wordsworth manages his factual detail with triumphant success—the Single Tree, for instance, in the *Immortality* ode; at other times the effect can be ludicrous, as with the 'little muddy pond' (in *The Thorn*):

> I've measured it [he gravely declared] from side to side;
> It's three feet long and two feet wide.

Crabb Robinson once, having read the poem, boldly suggested to Wordsworth that the public would not relish those lines. 'They *ought* to be relished,' was Wordsworth's reply. However, in later editions, they were altered.

Wordsworth wrote a great deal, and I do not pretend that what I have tried to describe was the only source of his power: but there is no doubt that it was the source of what is most lovely and most characteristic in his work. Coleridge pointed to the sanity of his sentiments, the truth of nature in his images and descriptions, his meditative pathos—all, indeed, to be found in Wordsworth's work, but to be found, perhaps as much, in many another poet besides. The most characteristic and essential Wordsworth is not in these things: it is in those poems, and passages of poems, where 'lulled asleep in body' he seems to pass into what he contemplates, and *sings* of that ecstatic communion in a music which is inalienably his own. Such poetry is 'religious' in a deeper sense than the specifically Christian poetry of his later years.

Coleridge's admiration of the *Prelude*, that 'Orphic song,' led him to declare that Wordsworth was the poet who should write the 'first and only true philosophic poem.'

Wordsworth was of the same mind, and laboured hard to prove it. In 1814 he published the *Excursion*, the first part of what he intended to be his main life's work. To his bitter disappointment Coleridge did not like it—and said so. In Coleridge's view it was neither philosophy nor poetry. Coleridge was right, as he nearly always was. Wordsworth was not a philosopher: he was a contemplative; his mind was a brooding mind, impassioned, deep, but narrow. He knew himself, but with men as men he had little sympathy. Nevertheless the *Excursion* is a noble work, and English literature would be poorer without it; it has many memorable scenes, and passages of the highest poetry scattered over its vast surface like oases in the desert. It is in these passages that we must look for wisdom—that

> harvest of a quiet eye
> That broods and sleeps on his own heart

—and not to the explicit doctrine which Wordsworth laboured to convey. This doctrine, if I understand it, seems to suggest that the only road to wisdom and virtue is peddling buttons and laces amongst the Westmorland hills.

In 1808 the Wordsworths left Dove Cottage and, after a brief interval, settled at Rydal Mount, where Wordsworth was to remain until his death in 1850. There is little that need be said of these long and quiet years. Wordsworth continued to produce poetry almost to the end, much of it rich with a sober and autumnal light; but the glory was gone. His fame grew steadily, and so did his fortune. Materially he was always a lucky man: I have mentioned the small legacy from Calvert, and not long afterwards a debt owed by Lord Lonsdale to Wordsworth's father was repaid to the family by his successor; then, in 1814, Wordsworth was made Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland and Cumberland, an office which brought him about £1000 a year, and various other legacies fell in from time to time. In 1842 he

resigned his Government appointment, and received a pension from the Crown of £300 a year. Poverty was soon merely a memory, and he was able to bring up in a fitting manner his three sons and one surviving daughter. Though he hated, or claimed to hate, letter-writing, he was an industrious correspondent, and the great bulk of his published letters (and of Dorothy's—though Dorothy's letters ceased when, about 1838, her mind failed) is the best source to go to for a general picture of the last forty years of his life. It was an uneventful time. Apart from one or two trips abroad, he stayed mostly at home, much absorbed in his family—always his strongest emotional bond. Occasionally, old and famous, he went to London to be lionized: 'He has been holding his court,' wrote Elizabeth Barrett in 1842 'royally in London—breakfasting five or six times every morning . . . His wife bent over his chair, as Mr. Kenyon stood by some evenings ago, and said, stroking his "sublime grey hairs" gently: "Ah William, you are tiring yourself!"'

In 1839 he received from Oxford University the degree of D.C.L; in 1843 he was made Poet Laureate, in succession to Southey. In 1845 he was presented to the Queen—borrowing the necessary clothes (so the story goes) from the poet Rogers, and a sword from somebody else.

In the last ten years of his life, though his health was good, his eyesight began to fail. He spent more and more time sitting over the fire, silent and withdrawn. He read little—not only from lack of sight, but also, he told a friend, from lack of interest. But the vitality of his powerful and brooding mind never failed. In his later letters a touch of dour humour—so conspicuously absent from all his early work, except the *Waggoner*—creeps in. 'I have a feeling,' he writes to Miss Fenwick, 'that everything in this letter has been told you before.' And on the marriage of his beloved daughter Dora to Edward Quillinan, he is reported to have

said: 'I am satisfied with the marriage, but I really don't see why I should. For my son-in-law is a Roman Catholic—and an Irishman—and a widower—and the father of a family —and a beggar.' He died on 23 April, 1850, and was buried in the churchyard at Grasmere. Both his wife and his sister survived him.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

1792 - 1822

A FULL and just estimate of the character of any human being is impossible. Our own passions and prejudices get in the way. Consciously or unconsciously we distort the picture to support a theory, to flatter a feeling, to bolster a convention, or to illustrate some private sense of values, and with these and other such objects in view (or out of view, for we are not always aware of them) we magnify this and minify that, which may be equally characteristic, in order to complete the portrait to our satisfaction. This happens even with our friends and contemporaries; much more—obviously—with people we never saw, who lived a long time ago.

All this is just as it should be. We live in our relationships, and a man in isolation is nothing. Moreover a man *is* different in his relationship with A from what he is in his relationship with B; like the chameleon he changes his colour, though he maintains his form. What the form is, could, I suppose, be determined only by the sum of all his relationships—a very hard sum indeed, even if we had the figures to go upon.

Shelley is a peculiarly interesting example of this chameleon quality, both as a poet and as a man. Nobody has been more fiercely argued about, for and against. He has been violently denigrated, contemptuously ignored, praised—almost canonised—quite apart from his poetry as philosopher and saint. Since he became known at all, say in the last hundred years, he has played the part of the catfish

amongst critics and moralisers, allowing them no rest. How amused he would be, if he could revisit this earth and read the books which have been written about him, desperately chasing the eternal through some small accident of the temporal and particular.

Byron, who knew Shelley well and loved him as far as he could love anybody, described him once to a friend in these terms: 'He was the most gentle, most amiable, and *least* worldly-minded person I ever met; full of delicacy, disinterested beyond all other men, and possessing a degree of genius, joined to a simplicity, as rare as it is admirable. He had formed to himself a *beau ideal* of all that is fine, high-minded and noble, and he acted up to this ideal to the very letter. He had a most brilliant imagination, but a total want of world-wisdom. I have seen nothing like him, and never shall, I am certain.'

Other descriptions of him are: 'Windy phenomenon' (Carlyle); 'sun-treader' (Browning); 'ineffectual angel' (Matthew Arnold); 'elfin spirit in a man's form' (Hervegh, a German poet); 'a titan's spirit in a girl's form' (Carducci, an Italian poet); 'mild and amiable, but full of life and fun' (Edward Williams); 'a mad viper' (his father's solicitor); 'at times almost a blackguard' (T. S. Eliot); 'a self-absorbed homosexual' (Herbert Read—despite the fact that Shelley had two wives, five children and several lovers); 'gold-dusty with tumbling amid the stars' (I apologise for this one—it is Francis Thompson's); 'with his love of pistol-shooting, riding, yachting, billiards, and his knowledge of hare-hunting and fox-hunting besides the business of the farm, it—i.e. his acceptance of a large bet with Byron—shows him as a competent country squire' (a casual comment by Edmund Blunden, his best biographer). An old Italian boatman thought he was like Jesus Christ, and Bernard Shaw, who did not care overmuch for poetry, found him an acute reasoner on politics and sociology.

Clearly, then, the gossip-writers, the diarists the talkers and the literary critics have had a lot of fun with Shelley: sometimes, perhaps, rather angry fun, though they all seem to have enjoyed it.

An odd parallel with these conflicting opinions about Shelley's character is to be found in the fact that there has been almost as much disagreement over his personal appearance. His body as well as his spirit has proved strangely elusive. The portrait by Miss Curran which everybody knows because it stands as frontispiece to many editions of his collected poems, was rejected as unsatisfactory by his wife and friends. A bust was made of him by Leigh Hunt's wife, and an engraving made from the bust; the face here depicted is not recognizable as belonging to the same person. Shelley himself once referred to his 'little turn-up' nose: the nose in both the bust and the painting is firm and strong, and not turned up. One acquaintance of his is on record as mentioning his receding chin and protuberant larynx (Byron's nickname for him was Snake); neither feature is apparent in the portraits. Trelawny's first impression of his face is of its being 'feminine and artless'; Leigh Hunt's son described it as having 'firmness and hardness'. Shelley's son became a keen amateur photographer; it is a pity that photography did not come in a generation earlier; it might have resolved our doubts.

Shelley, then, has been something of a puzzle. The best thing we can do in this difficult situation is, first, to read his poetry, which is amongst the chief glories of English literature, and, secondly, to get acquainted with the facts of his strange career, so far as time and curiosity have revealed them—keeping always, as much as may be, a cool and open mind, and remembering that character is something more than a bundle of qualities. Yet even facts are slippery eels, and many a biographer has found that an inconvenient one may wriggle away, while he pretends not to be watching it.

Percy Bysshe Shelley belonged to the younger branch of an old family which can be traced back with certainty to the fifteenth century. The family had long owned property in the South of England. The poet's grandfather, Bysshe Shelley, was born in New Jersey and came as a boy to England with his parents, and built up a fortune. His son, Timothy, settled, after his marriage, at Field Place, a low, rambling, damp but charming house near Horsham in Sussex, where, on August 4, 1792, Shelley was born—the eldest of seven children. His family were Whig aristocrats in politics, supporting the popular cause. Timothy Shelley was M.P. for Horsham from 1790 to 1792, and again from 1802 to 1818. In 1806 Bysshe Shelley was made a baronet, and on his death nine years later his son Timothy succeeded to the title. The poet was then twenty-three, and already for several years past had been a thorn in the family's side. Nineteenth-century country squires, of long lineage and substantial possessions, were not likely to breathe with comfort the rarefied air of a passionate idealism, or to approve in their children revolutionary opinions in religion and politics; and Sir Timothy was no exception. Good man though he was, and kindly master to his dependents, tending to their bodily needs by generous gifts of food and clothing when times were hard, he was rooted firmly in tradition, and, if he wanted progress, wanted it to be gradual and in accord with common sense; and, like most fathers, he hoped that his son would feel as he did, and play a similar part in a decent, ordered and wisely progressive world. He was to be disappointed.

Sir Timothy, the future being yet hid, determined to bring up his son in a way to fit him for his responsibilities as country gentleman, landowner and politician. At the age of six the young Shelley (Bit, as he was called in the family) was sent to a neighbouring clergyman to learn Latin—which, having a mind as keen and flexible as a Damascus

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WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

From a drawing (1805) by H. Eldridge

Picture Post Library

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Crayon drawing by Miss Curran

blade, he learned rapidly. At ten he went as a boarder to Sion House Academy at Isleworth, and in 1804, just before his twelfth birthday, to Eton.

Meanwhile at home during holidays he began to learn, young as he was, the elements of farming and estate management, taking pleasure in riding with the bailiff round his father's acres and beyond, his pockets full of such coin as he could collect, which with the reckless generosity which was never to desert him he would distribute amongst any who seemed to him to need it. All the stories of his boyhood point to his sweetness of temper, gaiety and selflessness; to his sisters he was the beloved elder brother, playing with them constantly, inventing adventures for them about the park and grounds, which he peopled for their delight and fear with an imaginary giant tortoise and an ancient snake, to match the old alchemist who, he would tell them, lived in a disused attic at the top of the house with his crucibles and quicksilver and magic powders, to transmute base metal into silver and gold. Everybody loved him, especially women; they loved him for his sunny and chivalrous nature, for his perfect manners (which Byron, again, was to comment upon after he was dead), and for the child-like assurance which assumed that goodwill and kindliness would necessarily awaken a similar response in others. At a dance one day, while he was still a schoolboy, a girl was present who everyone knew had been seduced; Shelley, who would be expected, as eldest son of Field Place, to take the hand of some *grande dame* of a neighbouring family, went straight to the unfortunate girl and handed her out as if no one else in the room deserved his attention.

At Sion House, to his astonishment and rage, the boys bullied him. It was his first taste of the inexplicable cruelty of the world. He withdrew from their attacks into the solitude of his own thoughts and imaginings, which already ranged beyond the fantastic world of ghosts and demons

and ruined piles which were matter for the favourite reading of the young in those days—and not for the young only, as Jane Austen has told us in *Northanger Abbey*, where she gleefully and delicately mocks at Mrs. Radcliffe and her peers. Even now, child as he was, he was aware of some shadow which coming events had cast before them. Ghosts and goblins (he was soon to be writing mystery stories of his own, foolish stuff to amuse himself and others) were fancied and pursued not only for the pleasurable thrill of fear, but already with a queer ulterior purpose, not commonly to be found in the young. He hoped that they might tell him some of the secrets of life and death—for this odd child was already beginning to inhabit a world far removed from the secure and comfortable one which a position in society and the prospect of an ample fortune promised him. He had begun to *question*.

> While yet a boy [he wrote later] I sought for ghosts,
> and sped
> Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin
> And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
> Hopes of high talk with the departed dead . . .

His hopes were disappointed, and he saw no ghosts—until, a day or two before his death, he saw his own; nevertheless he did see something else, of much greater significance. When it was, he did not say, but surely the spring morning when the vision came to him was before his schooldays were over.

> I saw them not [the poem goes on]
> When, musing deeply on the lot
> Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
> All vital things that wake to bring
> News of birds and blossoming,
> Sudden, thy shadow fell on me . .

The shadow—'the awful shadow of some unseen Power'—was the shadow of beauty, which, in the fleeting moments

when eye and mind are aware of it, can alone give 'grace and truth to life's unquiet dream'.

> I vowed [he continued] that I would dedicate my powers
> To thee and thine: have I not kept the vow?

It is fair to say that Shelley did keep it. It was at once his glory and his bane.

There is another remembrance of his schooldays in the *Dedication* of the *Revolt of Islam*. Here, too, Shelley recalls a moment of vision; but this time it is not the vision of beauty, which he was to come to believe in as the soul of all nature's forms, but the vision of man's cruelty to man:

> a fresh May-dawn it was
> When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,
> And wept, I knew not why; until there rose
> From the near schoolroom voices, that, alas,
> Were but one echo from a world of woes—
> The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes;

and, immediately, he knew that in his boy's mind was the longing to combat it by all means in his power:

> I will be wise,
> And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies
> Such power; for I grow weary to behold
> The selfish and the strong still tyrannise
> Without reproach or check.

That was a boy's revolt against boys' cruelty to each other; but, such as it was, it came from Shelley's inmost heart. In that he never changed; his hatred of tyranny, cruelty and oppression, and fervid championship of liberty in all its forms grew stronger, not weaker, as he went through life and saw, or thought he saw, half humanity writhing in the fetters of oppressive government, or in the crueller chains of false beliefs. Liberty is always a noble ideal; the trouble is that it is an exceedingly difficult thing to define, and most

of us discover sooner or later that a number of things which appear to restrict it are means to its realization—much as the free movement and music of verse are to be realized only through the restriction of its form.

The bullying which Shelley came in for at Sion House was repeated at Eton, where 'Shelley-baiting' became a recognized pastime. With his odd notions, his instinctive quixotry, his sensibilities and perceptions far beyond the range of ordinary schoolboys' understanding, he was fair game for the toughs. Again, his reaction to his tormentors was astonishment and rage; they could make him go white with fury, but they could not crush him. 'Fagging,' in his view, was an ignoble tyranny—so he refused to fag. Nevertheless his Eton days were not wholly unhappy; he made friends, and his enemies, who called him 'mad Shelley', perhaps came to use the term not without a touch of affection. The country in the neighbourhood of the school, and the comparative freedom which the boys enjoyed to explore it, he always loved. His mind was rapidly expanding; set lessons caused him little trouble, and apart from them the beginning of his life-long interest in science, especially in the mysteries of electricity and astronomy, date from his time at Eton. Nor had he yet forgotten his ghosts and demons, for before he left for Oxford he had written and published a frantic romance called *Zastrozzi*, and arranged for the publication of its successor. He is said to have got £40 for *Zastrozzi*, and to have spent it gloriously on a feast for eight of his friends at school.

For some reason Shelley left Eton rather before his time. 'His unconventional spirit, penetrating, sincere, and demanding the justice of things,' wrote Leigh Hunt in after days, 'was found to be inconvenient.' It was to be found inconvenient at Oxford too—and also, one fancies, by Harriet, the daughter of a Sussex family, the Groves, between whom and Shelley an affection had been growing. Shelley's

parents would have approved the match; but Harriet sheered off, to find a less unconventional husband.

Shelley was entered at University College, Oxford, in April 1810, and went up as a freshman the following October. He was eighteen. The late Head Porter of the college published a book of reminiscences a year or two ago, and finding occasion to mention Shelley as a distinguished former member, remarked that 'it must have been terrible for his scout'. Knowledge of Shelley at Oxford is derived chiefly from his friend T. J. Hogg, whose lively and amusing pictures certainly suggest that Shelley's domestic habits were not orderly. He had brought with him the electrical machine with which he used to experiment at Eton—and not that only: 'Books, boots, papers, shoes, philosophical instruments, clothes, pistols, linen, crockery, ammunition, and phials innumerable, with money, stockings, prints, crucibles, bags and boxes, were scattered on the floor. An electrical machine, an air-pump, the galvanic trough, a solar microscope, and large glass jars and receivers, were conspicuous amidst the mass of matter'. The interest in physics was still strong, as it was to remain throughout his life. For Shelley, science was a key to the great mystery—and a better key than the hope of high talk with the departed dead. Reading Hogg's description of his undergraduate's room, one thinks of his own description of himself, a dozen years later, sitting 'like some weird Archimage' in his friend Reveley's workshop in Italy, where, with Shelley's help and fervid encouragement, a steam engine was being designed and built for a vessel which, they hoped, would one day ply along the Mediterranean coast. One thinks, too, of many images and passionate imaginings in *Prometheus* and elsewhere, which lift science into the realm of high poetry. Shelley's mind, unlike that of most poets, was friendly to scientific speculation, and if he were alive to-day he would be the one poet fitted to bridge the gap between the familiar world and that

other world, which, as knowledge of it so swiftly and alarmingly grows, seems to the majority of us, who do not understand it, more and more remote, inexplicable and cold. Shelley would have seized upon the splitting of the atom with a rapture of imaginative delight.

Shelley's father had asked his bookseller Slatter to indulge the young man's 'printing freaks'; and Slatter did so, Shelley putting out during his first term a number of pamphlets and skits in verse of no great importance. In the Christmas vacation, however, he had another idea: it had occurred to him that belief in God was inconsistent with logic, and, at the same time, that organized religion had been responsible for much suffering and persecution. He wrote accordingly, at great speed, a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*. Believing in action as well as in logic, he sent copies of the pamphlet to all heads of houses in Oxford and Cambridge and to every bishop in the kingdom, and filled with others the window and counters of Slatter's shop in High Street. This 'printing freak', unlike the previous ones, had consequences. The bishops, evidently, were not logical men; and the University authorities were compelled to take action. Shelley and Hogg—who had played a part in the 'freak'—were brought up for questioning before the Master and Fellows of the college, and publicly expelled. Shelley's Oxford career was over: it had lasted barely six months.

So Shelley's 'passion for reforming the world' (a phrase he later used of himself), which had begun while he was a small boy at school, now for the first time had practical expression. Nowadays, no doubt, such a thing would pass without comment; but, foolish though it was, it *belonged* to Shelley. The fact that it is silly to think that logic can prove or disprove the existence of God does not matter. It did not seem silly, at that moment, to Shelley. He was accustomed to think in large generalities, and in sending his

pamphlet to the bishops he was only doing what he continued, in other forms, to do throughout his short and tempestuous life—indulging, that is, his conviction that *if only* men and women in this wicked world would strip the blinkers from their eyes and see what he saw with such brilliant clarity, their lives, and the life of society, would be transformed. Such a conviction is apt to be dangerous for those who hold it: it leads away from the living particular, which is all we can truly know, to the shadowy universal, stripped of the inconsistencies, contradictions and irrelevancies which are the stuff of human life and character. 'You know,' Shelley wrote ~~wrote~~ to Peacock in later years, 'I always seek in what I see the manifestation of something beyond the present and tangible object.' The search has its perils. Some men, possibly the wisest, have seen that 'something' without consciously seeking it. Coleridge once said of Wordsworth that 'his genius was not a spirit that descended to him through the air; it sprang out of the ground like a flower, or unfolded itself from a green spray on which the goldfinch sang.' Perhaps that is true of all the very greatest poetry; in the best of Wordsworth, and in the best of Coleridge himself—sometimes in Shelley too, but not often—it is as if the poet had looked at the *thing itself*, in its minute particular, so long and so lovingly that he had seen its 'soul.' And that soul *is* the thing itself:

> For soul is form and doth the body make.

Shelley's genius, on the other hand, did 'descend to him through the air.' He seems to see, and to delight in, the beauty of the world not as a denizen, but as a visitant. 'I think one is always in love with something or other,' he wrote on another occasion; 'the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is, perhaps, eternal.' Seeking again! That restless search of

the ideal, for which some have mocked him, others admired him, was the defect of his quality. Perhaps it was the defect of the Romantic Revival generally. Discontent even in poets is not necessarily divine.

But this is a far cry from the essay on atheism, which Shelley himself was soon to be sufficiently ashamed of.

Shelley's father did his best to persuade him, after his expulsion from Oxford, to take a voyage to the Ionian sea: a change of scene, he hoped, might distract his mind from speculations unsuitable to a Sussex squire. But Shelley, who had a good share of youthful arrogance and egotism, refused; the world, he thought (and his father belonged to it) was an old fool, and must be taught sense; so he proceeded to look around for converts who would help him rouse it to shake off the chains of superstition and dead conventions. This led him to an escapade far more serious in its result that his expulsion from Oxford.

Harriet Westbrook, a pretty girl of sixteen, was at school with Shelley's sisters, Helen and Margaret. Shelley met her, and talked to her. Though alarmed by the subject of the talk, she listened to the voice and watched the face of the talker with pleasure. The following term she was made unhappy at school by gibes at her new acquaintance. She wrote Shelley letters, and gradually it became apparent that she was in love with him. The discovery at once aroused the essential quixotry of Shelley's nature. His reading of the works of the philosopher Godwin had turned him theoretically against marriage; but—here was a fellow human being to be rescued from wretchedness. Plans were laid; Harriet made her escape, and drove with Shelley to Edinburgh, where they were married. Shelley was nineteen years old—so both of them were little more than children.

The next few years were spent in restless and continual movement in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, Shelley dreaming his philosophical dreams and tilting at many

windmills—one tilt was in the form of an Address to the Irish people, which should restore the liberty and happiness of that oppressed country—and Harriet, no doubt, wishing that he would spare more time to play with her in a manner suited to her age.

Three years later, in the summer of 1814, after the birth of two children, a boy and a girl, Shelley met Godwin's daughter, Mary Wollestonecraft, and instantly fell in love with her. She was eighteen years old, beautiful, cool-natured, and highly intelligent. She returned Shelley's love, and within a month or two the pair eloped to Switzerland. Shelley wrote to Harriet, inviting her to join them, but she treated this strange letter, as well she might, merely as an added insult. Lack of money soon drove them back to England, but in 1816 they returned to Switzerland accompanied, as on the previous journey, by Godwin's other daughter, Claire Clairmont, and settled for a time by the lake of Geneva, where they met Byron. Shelley and Byron liked and respected each other at sight—Shelley's almost excessive admiration of Byron's poetry is well known, and a mutual friend was to write in after years that Shelley was the only man to whom he had ever heard Byron *defer*. The summer was a comparatively happy one, with much talk in Byron's villa and constant sailing on the Lake, a pastime which Shelley must have loved in some previous existence, so deeply had it entered into his spirit:

> My soul is an enchanted boat
> Which like a sleeping swan doth float
> Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing . . .

The imagery of boats constantly recurs in Shelley's poetry, just as drawings of them decorate the blank spaces and margins of his note-books. 'Like the Indian palms,' Trelawny wrote, 'Shelley never flourished far from water.'

One by-product of the talks in Byron's villa was Mary

Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The three had decided each to compose a mystery story. *Frankenstein* was Mary's contribution. She was only nineteen when she wrote it, the first of her numerous novels. The cinema has made it better known to-day than it would otherwise have been.

In England disaster was waiting for Shelley and Mary. Soon after their return that autumn they had the news that Harriet had been found drowned. The details of Shelley's relationship with Harriet after the first two comparatively care-free years have never been cleared up. There are hints that she was unfaithful to Shelley before he met Mary: even that she went on the streets after her abandonment. It is not even certain whether or not the cause of her death was suicide. But perhaps it does not matter: Shelley married the poor child out of a quixotic impulse and without love. Even quixotry must—or at least will—give way to love; and it is easy in this complex world to be kind only to be cruel.

At the end of the year Shelley and Mary were married, and went to live at Marlow in Buckinghamshire. A further blow was the case which came on in the Chancery Court to decide upon the custody of Harriet's children. Shelley wished to keep them, but Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, gave judgement against him on the ground both of his heretical writings and of his personal conduct.

Up to now I have said little of Shelley as a poet; nevertheless, he had been writing verses ever since his childhood, diligently practising the art which he knew would one day be his own, in spite of his youthful absorption in wild schemes of revolution and reform. Some of his early verses he showed to Leigh Hunt, himself a poet and already an established critic and man of letters.

Hunt, though he recognized Shelley's quality, advised him not to be in a hurry to publish, and Shelley had the sense to take the advice. The most remarkable production of his

boyhood was *Queen Mab,* which was finished and printed for private circulation when he was eighteen. This queer poem, though it was not actually published until several years later—and even then without Shelley's consent—was one of the 'heretical writings' to which Lord Eldon had objected. It was an attack upon Christian practices, and proclaimed Necessity as the only God. Shelley soon came to think of it as a boyish squib, and declared that it contained no poetry. But it does—though the poetry is almost stifled by crude ethical lecturing. What is worth noticing here is the form of the poem, a form which no one in the world but Shelley would have thought of. He had a 'message' to deliver: how, then, should he deliver it? Directly? or by means of dialogue between living men? Not at all: he imagines the spirit of a girl separated from her body in sleep, and rapt into the heaven of heavens by Queen Mab, herself a spirit, who then proceeds to harangue at length upon the wickedness and absurdity of conventional religious beliefs. As Shelley once remarked on a later occasion, 'You may as well try to wring blood from a stone as expect anything human or earthly from me.' *Queen Mab* was much admired by Bernard Shaw; not, perhaps, the strongest recommendation.

Settled at Marlow, in the Thames valley which he loved, Shelley enjoyed for nearly two years a measure of tranquillity and happiness. The house was large, with plenty of room for friends who constantly visited him. The Hunts came, with their growing family; Peacock, who was to delight Shelley with his caricature of him in his novel *Nightmare Abbey,* was a frequent visitor; so was Hogg; so was the stockbroker Horace Smith, in whom

> wit and sense,
> Virtue and human knowledge—all that might
> Make this dull world a business of delight

were, in Shelley's affectionate thoughts of him, combined. Godwin used to come too—that most abominable man who, having railed at Shelley for seducing his daughter, sponged upon him for money in the hopeless attempt to extricate himself from debt. Shelley gave it him unsparingly, for by now his extreme poverty was past and since his grandfather's death in 1815 he had an income of £1000 a year. Most of it, however, was dissipated in charity. Later on, in Italy, Mary took charge of the money, for 'Percy,' she said, 'is not to be trusted with it.' His own physical wants were non-existent; his life of the barest simplicity. Hunt said that at Marlow his habit was to rise early, walk and read before his scanty breakfast, work throughout the morning, dine upon vegetables, then talk (his great delight) with his friends, walk again, and, finally, read to Mary until ten. Walks of thirty miles, with bread in one pocket and a book in the other, were not unusual; and he had a boat for rowing and sailing on the river. Nor was his charity confined to major gifts to such men as Godwin or Hunt or Peacock; it was also his particular pleasure to distribute money, food and blankets to his poor neighbours, taking care, with that strong streak of practical sense which never left him, to have his name printed large upon the blankets, to make it harder for the recipients to sell them.

During many days throughout the summer he used the boat as his study; and either in her, or in the woods, or on the banks of the river, he wrote his first long poem of mature splendour and power, *The Revolt of Islam*. This tale in twelve cantos, written in Spenser's stanza—'a measure,' Shelley called it, 'inexpressibly beautiful'—is hardly more human or earthly than *Queen Mab*, but in its beautiful flight it outsoars that work as a rocket outsoars a squib. It is shot through with the colours of sunrise, the crowding, swift and evanescent imagery bathed in a light that 'never was on sea or land.' It does, indeed, tell a story;

but the story—of Laon and his lover Cythna, who go to battle for freedom against the tyrants and haters of the world, and find triumph in their deaths—is only a veil for Shelley's own searching and impassioned idealism. Keats, whose power as a poet was no less, but of a very different quality and texture from Shelley's, having read the poem advised Shelley to 'curb his magnanimity a little, and be more of an artist.' Nothing that Keats ever said about poetry was without value and truth; but the fact remains that 'magnanimity' was an essential part of Shelley's mind, and the glories, as well as the defects, of his poetry are due to it. He could argue closely (sometimes from false premisses) in prose, and in many of the affairs of daily life he had more commonsense and ability than is usually ascribed to him; but the wings of his verse once spread, they carried him irresistibly up into the empyrean, peopled not by men and women but by spirits, or essences, or absolutes, bright emblems of his aspiring thought. The recurrent imagery of his poetry is the imagery of light and motion, and of those forms in nature which most suggest them: waves (indeed, the sea in all its aspects), wind, clouds, wings, running water. One of the central themes of *The Revolt of Islam* is the liberation of women from the position of inferiority imposed upon them by Society:

> Can man be free if woman be a slave?

he makes his Cythna cry, and in this Shelley spoke from the heart. He never awoke from his dream of the Perfect Companion, as Mary knew to her cost.

The *Revolt of Islam* was written in friendly rivalry with Keats, who at the same time was engaged upon *Endymion*. Keats' poem was greeted by the reviews with abuse and contempt; Shelley's was more or less ignored. The public felt more comfortable with Tom Moore's *Lalla Rookh* and with Byron's *Corsair* and other piratical romances

('written for the women,' as he put it). But time brings his revenges.

In the autumn of 1817 Mary gave birth to her second child, a daughter. For some time she had been neither very well nor very content; perhaps she was lonely; perhaps she was bored with Marlow; for unlike her husband she was by nature sociable. Shelley, too, was ailing, and consumption was suspected. The cure for consumption in those days was Italy—for those who could afford to go there; so Shelley and Mary decided once again to pull up their roots, which had never anywhere struck very deep, and Albion House in Marlow was advertised *To Let*. In the following February they left, much regretted by their poorer neighbours, for London, where they stayed a month before leaving England for the last time. In London Shelley saw his friends, amongst the best loved of whom were always Hunt and Horace Smith—'He writes poetry and pastoral dramas,' he exclaimed of this unusual stockbroker, 'and yet knows how to make money, and does make it, and is still generous!' —and, no less important, went often to the opera to hear Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Figaro*. If we did not know that Shelley delighted in music, we should have had to assume it even from the *Revolt of Islam,* but far more from his later poem *Prometheus Unbound,* the final act of which comes as near to the essential quality of music as words can, while still preserving a diamond core of impassioned thought.

Shelley, who had already lost two children by the action of the law, was to lose two more by death. Clara, the baby, died soon after his arrival in Italy, whither he travelled with Mary and Claire Claremont (still their companion) overland by way of Lyons, and thence to Milan and Pisa. The Italian sunshine, in spite of private grief, was beneficial to Shelley's health, and the Italian scene, as his letters show, was a fresh inspiration to him. He was coming now to his full maturity

as an artist. The *Revolt of Islam,* though bright as air and dyed (as he said of Keats' *Endymion*) with all the colours of the sunrise, was a poem of still youthful and undisciplined genius; henceforward a new mastery was to appear in his verse.

At this time Byron was living in Venice and Shelley was able to renew acqaintance with him; indeed, it was forced upon him by one of those complicated personal involvements which haunted Shelley throughout his life. This time it concerned the care and disposal of Claire's and Byron's daughter Allegra, whom Byron demanded, against Claire's wishes, to have under his control. Shelley was the go-between, and played his part with his usual sweet temper and selflessness. He had his reward, for he took keen pleasure in Byron's companionship, or rather in the flash of contact between Byron's mind and his own; for of Byron's way of life he had little but contempt. Byron's genius, on the other hand, he adored with a passion of self-abasement. It seems odd to us, who are inclined to admire Byron for his wit, his indolent power and his occasional soaring flight into high poetry, that for Shelley, who in so many ways was his superior, he should have been beyond all comparison the master spirit of the age, the 'tempest-cleaving Swan' whose sojourn in Venice would be remembered when all the glories of that city were dust. Writers are notoriously envy-bitten; but there was never a trace of jealousy in Shelley, though in his lifetime he had no recognition whatever and Byron was a 'best seller.'

Perhaps the intercourse with Byron hastened in Shelley the development of a new vein of poetry which had been hardly apparent before his final departure from England, though there is a hint of it here and there in *Rosalind and Helen*: this was his deliberate appearance in poetry as a man amongst men—almost as if, for the moment at least, he had taken Keats' advice to 'curb his magnanimity,' and to

give his friends a taste of verse which was, for once, both earthly and human. The first poem he wrote in this manner was *Julian and Maddalo*: those parts of it, that is, which do not concern the story of the madman, a dreadful tale which reads like veiled and nightmare autobiography, or frightful projection of some inward canker of the mind. Elsewhere, however, the tone of the verse is that of a man talking amongst friends—though Shelley's own angelical accent is never lost:

> to me
> It was delight to ride by the lone sea;
> And then, the town is silent—one may write
> Or read in gondolas by day or night,
> Having the little brazen lamp alight,
> Unseen, uninterrupted. Books are there,
> Pictures, and casts from all those statues fair
> Which were twin-born with poetry, and all
> We seek in towns, with little to recall
> Regrets for the green country.

In those lines about Venice, it is as if Shelley had laid aside his magic mantle, as Prospero did when he told Miranda the story of how they came to the Island; yet in their sinuous movement, strong and mysterious as the movement of a serpent on a rock, there is another magic, hardly less admirable. Shelley could talk as well as sing.

The finest of his conversation poems is the *Letter to Maria Gisborne,* from which I have already quoted the lines about Horace Smith. Sometimes, too, during these last years in Italy Shelley tried his hand at burlesque, in *Peter Bell the Third* and *Swellfoot the Tyrant.* The theme of the latter (the enquiry into the conduct of Queen Caroline) is too remote from us to-day and too ephemeral to give much pleasure, but no one, I think, knows Shelley as he should be known, who is ignorant of the song of the Gadfly (rumour) which comes into it, and begins:

Hum! Hum! Hum!
From the lakes of the Alps, and the cold gray scalps
of the mountains I come!
Hum! Hum! Hum!
From Morocco and Fez, and the high palacés
of golden Byzantium;
From the temples divine of old Palestine,
From Athens and Rome
With a ha! and a hum!
I come, I come!

This is comic verse with a difference—or perhaps what the best comic verse always is: the product of a richly imaginative mind which scatters over the absurd the broken lights of beauty.

In the autumn of 1818 Shelley left the neighbourhood of Venice for the south, visiting Florence and Rome, and spending the winter at Naples. Italian skies and Italian architecture were a perpetual joy to him, as his letters testify—immense, enthusiastic letters to friends at home, who, one feels, while admiring the gorgeous tapestry of their prose (for Shelley wrote prose as only poets can), must have sighed a little for those humbler themes and 'familiar matter of to-day' which are the proper stuff of letter-writing and make the letters of, say, Lamb and Keats so precious and delightful. Shelley did not reveal himself in his letters. The best letters are, so to speak, a reciprocal effort: the recipient is present at the writer's elbow, and helps to determine the tone and matter of the talk—for talk it is; but Shelley when he writes a letter seems to be always alone. Yet perhaps these splendid letters of his are, after all, revealing in their way: perhaps it is true that Shelley, for all his eager and faithful friendships and his many loves, was never really close to anyone. And perhaps that, in its turn, was one reason for his growing unhappiness.

The improvement in his health had not been maintained.

He was in constant physical pain. A dismissed servant was spreading malicious gossip about him, and early in the following summer his three-year-old son William died. Many of the poems he wrote at this time he concealed from Mary, lest they should distress her. Mary thought, or pretended to think, when she found them after his death, that sickness was sufficient reason for their despondent tone. But there was surely a deeper cause . . .

> Lift not the painted veil which those who live
> Call Life,

he had written, and then:

> I knew one who had lifted it—he sought,
> For his lost heart was tender, things to love,
> But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
> The world contains, the which he could approve.
> Through the unheeding many he did move
> A splendour among shadows, a bright blot
> Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove
> For truth, and like the Preacher found it not.

The sense of growing isolation and of failure; haunting images from the past—perhaps of Harriet—which he could never forget; the picture of himself (as he was to paint it later in one of his most famous and beautiful poems) as

> A herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter's dart:

all this was the reverse side of his impassioned intellectual idealism. Perhaps

> The desire of the moth for the star
> Of the night for the morrow,
> The devotion to something afar
> From the sphere of our sorrow,

though it has produced noble poetry, is, after all, a disease of the human spirit. It is a modern disease, and it may be

that the ancients were wiser in that they found plenty to approve in what this wicked world contains.

Nevertheless in spite of the moments, increasingly numerous, when Shelley's 'lost heart, too soon grown old,' yielded to disappointment or grief, he was at the same time meditating, and beginning to write, his grandest poems. At Naples he wrote the first act of *Prometheus Unbound,* and at Rome in the spring of the following year, 1819, he added the second and third, and then immediately, in the intervals of his study and translations of the Spanish poet Calderon, began work upon his potent but horrific drama, *The Cenci.* Then followed the *Mask of Anarchy,* one of the world's great revolutionary songs, which Shelley was moved to write by the news of the 'massacre of Peterloo.' With the drumbeat of its solemn march, it is a call to the workers of England to

> Rise like Lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number;
> Shake your chains to earth like dew
> Which in sleep had fallen on you—
> Ye are many—they are few;

and its true Shelleyan quality lies in the fact that though it calls for rebellion it does not call for blood:

> With folded arms and steady eyes
> And little fear, and less surprise,
> Look upon them as they slay
> Till their rage has died away.

The same belief, the same ultimate trust that the only way to conquer evil is by good, runs through his other great visionary poem of revolution, the *Revolt of Islam.* As he was to write in *Prometheus*:

> Revenge and wrong bring forth their kind,
> The foul cubs like their parents are;

Their den is in the guilty mind,
And conscience feeds them with despair.

It was one of the deepest certainties of Shelley's mind.

The *Ode to the West Wind* belongs to this time, and, finally, the last act, added as a triumphant afterthought, of *Prometheus.*

Shelley knew that *Prometheus* was his best poem—and expressed the opinion that twenty people, if so many, would buy a copy of it. The estimate was not far wrong. The poem was brought out by the publisher Ollier in 1820.

Shelley, like Byron, had known and loved from his school-days the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus. The figure of the Titan chained to the rock by a vengeful God as punishment for befriending mankind, would naturally have appealed to him: it was, for Shelley, the perfect symbol of the patient endurance of suffering, the proud acceptance of pain, the refusal to yield to power for personal advantage, which he always believed were the only weapons against the world's cruelty and hate. He had travelled far from his undergraduate days when he thought (or imagined) that he could convert the bishops to atheism by a simple syllogism; but he still believed, as he had believed then, that good was the only enemy of evil, and that if ever, in some future unimaginably remote, men and women were to grow to the full stature of their humanity and live in peace, it could be only by a change in their own hearts. Shelley knew, like Macbeth, that 'blood will have blood;' his 'atheism' was never far from the lofty command to love one's enemies; and he knew that the only escape from hell was

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change nor falter nor repent;

This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.

One can hardly say that he was wrong.

It would be a mistake to assume from what I have just written that the *Prometheus,* or any other of Shelley's poems, is a lecture upon morals. Shelley himself told us, though we did not need to be told, that he abhorred didactic poetry. The *Prometheus* argues nothing, proves nothing. It is Shelley's vision of the divinity in man, and the vision is justified, as all poems are justified, by its beauty and power. Yet all visions proceed from, or are conditioned by, a way of thinking, or some habitual attitude towards life; and it is a part of criticism—and an element, therefore, in the enjoyment of poetry—to turn sometimes from the vision to the commoner substance from which it sprang. Moreover, a fine poem works in the mind like a beater in a wood and starts all manner of speculative hares, as Keats knew when he wrote to Reynolds: 'I had an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner—let him on a certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose, and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it, until it becomes stale—but when will it do so? Never. When man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect, any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-post towards all the " two-and-thirty palaces." ' There are plenty of starting-posts in Shelley's vision of the power and grandeur of the spirit of man. Edmund Blunden notes in his biography of Shelley that, at the same time as Shelley was writing *Prometheus,* Beethoven was engaged upon the Choral Symphony.

In the summer of 1820 Shelley heard through his friends the Gisbornes that Keats was ill with consumption and was not expected to recover. He at once wrote to invite him to

spend the winter with Mary and himself at Pisa. Keats again refused—as he had previously refused Shelley's invitation to Marlow. It was not ordained that these two poets should be friends. Shelley would have welcomed the friendship; he wanted to show Keats Italy and to teach him Greek; but Keats held off. He seemed always to have felt that closer companionship with Shelley held a sort of threat for him: 'I wish,' he had written concerning the invitation to Marlow, 'to keep my own unfettered scope.' Perhaps the ichor in Shelley's veins made him uncomfortable: it was too different from the blood which beat in his own. Yet had these two men really talked together, and had there been a Boswell to listen and record, what a feast for posterity it would have been. Shelley has left in a couple of sentences the most illuminating comment upon *Endymion* which exists, and he believed that Keats, had he lived, would have far surpassed him as a poet.

A number of the lyrics which Shelley had been writing in Italy were addressed to, or inspired by, a young woman, Sophia Stacey, whom he met in Florence and with whom he was reading Italian; and now, in Pisa, another young girl became the occasion of a poem which has, not unnaturally, given trouble to his biographers. One can fancy Matthew Arnold, that suave but penetrating critic, reading it and, as he settled the fingers of his kid gloves, murmuring 'What a set!'

The new acquaintance, Emilia Viviani, was confined by her mother in a convent, a circumstance quite enough by itself to arouse Shelley's indignation and sympathy. She was also beautiful. For six months she was the new lode-star of Shelley's life, and another thorn in Mary's flesh. The poem in which Shelley expressed his adoration (an apter word than love) was *Epipsychidion*. It is a strange poem. The movement of Shelley's verse is habitually swift, but the couplets of *Epipsychidion*—a measure of which Shelley

was by now an absolute master—seem to stream along with an almost breathless speed. The pulse of the poem beats at fever pitch, between waking and sleeping. It is as if the poet knew that he was in the grip of dream, and prayed in a sort of desperation—and how vainly—that, like Adam, he might awake and find it truth. After the veiled autobiography of the opening passages, in which he describes in images some lovely, some dreadful, the failure of his search to find a living embodiment of that

> Being whom my spirit oft
> Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,
> In the clear golden prime of my youth's dawn,

he declares that he has found it at last; and the rest of the poem, beautiful as only Shelley's poetry can be, describes in colours like

> an air-dissolved star
> Mingling light and fragrance

the island

> under Ionian skies
> Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise

whither he wishes to take his lover. There in that island

> Earth and Ocean seem
> To sleep in one another's arms, and dream
> Of waves, flowers, clouds, woods, rocks, and all
> that we
> Read in their smiles, and call reality.

Call reality: what, for Shelley, *was* reality? It is a question one is continually forced to ask of this strange man, whom so many loved and none, who knew him, ever hated —of this brilliant young aristocrat who could ride and shoot and sail a boat; of this scholar who, having mastered the languages and literatures of Europe, began

upon Arabic, and could 'crush through' a thick volume on geology or chemistry in the course of a morning, and present the essence of it in a few clear sentences; of this modest young man whom the haughty and egotistical Byron instinctively recognized as his moral and intellectual superior, and to whose dictates (as Thornton Hunt recorded) all who approached him showed a tendency to yield. Gifted as few men have been gifted, loved as few have been loved, Shelley might, it seems, have had the world within his grasp. Yet it slipped through his fingers—or, rather, melted like a dream before his eyes. For Shelley's eyes were fixed elsewhere, upon a reality which only he could see, or think he saw. This world, in which

> We find our happiness, or not at all,

was never the ultimate reality for him; and though he found in it moments of rapture, he found no warm or abiding home. For him it was like the shadows on the wall of Plato's Cave. Shelley planned to write a 'systematical history' of what appeared to him to be the genuine elements of human society: it would have been an exalted and exalting work—but it would have omitted to include as genuine elements many small follies and innocent wickednesses such as make life so delightful in this imperfect world. There is a story of Shelley's undergraduate days in Oxford: walking across Magdalen Bridge, and meeting a woman carrying a baby, he stopped her and said: 'Can your baby tell us anything of pre-existence, Madam?' There is a story of Charles Lamb in similar circumstances: anxiously running his hand down the child's long clothes, 'Good gracious, Madam,' he stammered, 'wh-where does it stop?' It is not difficult to understand why Lamb, who met Shelley but once, was ill at ease in his company—or even why, superb critic though he was, he found Shelley's poetry 'thin sown with profit or delight.' This world was very much Lamb's home; he never

sought for ghosts in the hope of ' high talk with the departed dead '; on the contrary: ' Can a ghost laugh,' he wrote, ' and shake his gaunt sides when we are merry with him? ' The contrast between the two men, for anyone who cares for both of them, is illuminating.

During his stay at Pisa Shelley also wrote the drama *Hellas* and, when he had heard of Keats' death in Rome in February, 1821, the elegy *Adonais,* that most noble tribute not only to the dead poet but to poetry itself, and the life beyond life of which poets are assured:

> He is a portion of the loveliness
> Which once he made more lovely . . .

That life beyond life was becoming more and more the subject of Shelley's brooding, as it had been of Keats' too, and as perhaps it is of most poets. In passionate thought all opposites are reconciled; awareness of life involves awareness of death, and without pain pleasure would not exist. Keats had spoken of death as ' life's high mead ', and had found it ' rich to die ' when the nightingale was singing; for him death had appeared as a fulfilment, but for Shelley it appeared as an escape and a liberation, more and more desired. The concluding lines of *Adonais,* with their exultant sense of the melting away of the mortal body under the fire of the Love which created and sustains the universe and is itself the only reality, are at once an aspiration and a prophecy.

> My spirit's bark is driven
> Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
> Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
> The massy earth and sphered skies are riven.
> I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
> Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
> The soul of Adonais, like a star,
> Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

Only a year later Shelley set sail from Leghorn, in threatening weather, in the little yawl *Don Juan*, for the last time.

Nevertheless the bonds which bound Shelley to earth were by no means yet broken; indeed during the last year of his life he was glady to submit to fresh ones. At Pisa he made the acquaintance of Edward Williams and his wife, Jane. Williams was an ex-naval officer with a taste for literature, and Shelley's brief friendship with him was amongst the happiest he had; Jane he came to love, and this love for the Magnetic Lady, as he called her in one well-known lyric, was also, possibly, amongst his happiest: he wrote no Epipsychidion for her, but he did write, amongst other poems, the famous one which accompanied his gift to her of a guitar:

> Ariel to Miranda: Take
> This slave of music, for the sake
> Of him who is the slave of thee:

a poem of exquisite lightness, gaiety and grace, in which he stole from Catullus and thereby proved, if proof were needed, that a poet's thefts, far from being an injury, are the subtlest form of understanding and praise. Trelawny said of the manuscript of this poem that 'it might have been taken for a sketch of a marsh overgrown with bulrushes, and the blots for wild ducks'. Byron, too, had now left Venice and, after a stay in Ravenna, settled in Pisa, to Shelley's deep satisfaction. The interminable talks on poetry, prolonged into the morning hours, were happily resumed.

Another new friend of a very different sort now appeared. This was Edward J. Trelawny, an eccentric young man (he was not yet thirty) of romantic aspect, who had roamed over most of the world, married a couple of wives, and undergone a number of other even stranger adventures, which he enjoyed relating with more effect than veracity.

Mary took to him at once, and he, in his turn, was fascinated by Shelley. Many years afterwards he was to write his memories of Shelley, and his book, *Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author*, though not always reliable, gives the most entertaining picture of certain aspects of Shelley's character which exists. Trelawny took Shelley in hand: he made him visit the docks at Leghorn and drink peach brandy on an American ship; and he tried to teach him to swim. The first of these experiments was not an entire success, and the second nearly ended in disaster. 'Why *can't* I swim?' Shelley had asked. 'You can if you think you can,' Trelawny replied. 'Dive in from this rock, and you'll see.' Shelley dived in, went straight to the bottom, and lay there like a conger-eel, apparently content. When Trelawny pulled him out, Shelley remarked, in some disappointment, that in a minute he might have found himself in another planet.

The last chain which bound Shelley to life in this world was a more enchanting one even than the acquisition of new friends: this was the boat, *Don Juan*.

In the late spring of 1822 the Shelleys with Edward and Jane Williams, and still accompanied by Claire (whose child, Allegra, had just died) left Pisa and settled at Casa Magni, a lonely house which stood and still stands (though built in now by modern houses and passed by a bus route) on the very verge of the sea in the desolate bay of Lerici. Mary hated the new home, but for Shelley, with the sea, and the clear Italian sky, and the pine-woods behind, it was all that could be desired. Shortly after the move, the boat arrived. A certain Captain Roberts, a friend of Trelawny, had been commissioned to supervise her building at Leghorn, at the same time as that of a larger vessel, the schooner *Bolivar*, for Byron. The *Don Juan* was an undecked boat of perhaps thirty feet in length and (to go by the only drawing of her I have seen, which may or may not be accurate)

yawl rigged, with a long bowsprit. Trelawny, who had experience of these things, said she was fast, weatherly, but somewhat cranky. She carried three and a half tons of ballast in iron pigs. For Shelley the new toy was an exquisite pleasure; and indeed it does not take a poet to delight in the movement of a sailing boat in fair weather over a calm sea, a movement more magical than any other yet devised by the wingless creature Man. For Mary the boat was an added cause of anxiety and distress; she had no love for the sea under any circumstances; she was expecting another child (of which she miscarried), and for reasons not difficult to understand a sense of loneliness had for a long time past been growing upon her. Moreover from the moment of their arrival at Casa Magni she had been oppressed by premonitions of disaster. A number of queer incidents increased her sense of foreboding: Shelley saw the ghost of Allegra riding on a wave of the sea, smiling and beckoning to him; he saw too the phantom of himself, who uttered the words 'How long will you endure?'; and Jane Williams saw him pass under the windows of the house at a moment when she knew he was far away.

How long, indeed, was Shelley to endure? Had he known the answer, he would have welcomed it, in spite of Jane and the *Don Juan*. Mary seldom smiled in these days, and he had lost the sense, once so warm, of coming home to her. Trelawny records, in his somewhat insensitive way, how he told Shelley a story of a jealous wife, and how Shelley burst out in answer: 'Jealousy is gross selfishness; it looks upon everyone who approaches as an enemy; it's the idolatry of self, and, like canine madness, incurable.' 'His eyes,' Trelawny continues, 'flashed as he spoke. I did not then know that the green-eyed monster haunted his own house.' Surely Trelawny might have guessed.

But meanwhile there was the boat. Every day and all day Shelley and Williams were in her, sailing about the bay and

along the coast to Leghorn; Trelawny was often with them, advising and criticizing, and once they amused him by declaring that only the Atlantic would be spacious enough to test their quality.

Towards the end of June news came that Leigh Hunt had arrived in Italy in accordance with a plan previously made by him and Byron to collaborate in a new literary journal, to be called *The Liberal*; and on the first of July Shelley, happy in the prospect of seeing again one of his oldest and dearest friends, set out from Lerici in *Don Juan*, accompanied by Williams and a young paid hand, on the fifty-mile trip to Leghorn, where he was to meet him. Mary was ill, and haunted by increasing fears. Three times she called her husband back before she would let him go down to the boat.

Don Juan made a fast passage to Leghorn. The two friends met, and both were moved to tears by the pleasure of their reunion. Business with Byron in Pisa delayed the start of the voyage home, but on July 8 all was ready. There had been a thunderstorm in the morning, but by noon the weather had cleared and the wind was fair for Lerici. Captain Roberts, however, thought that more bad weather was on the way, and advised them to postpone their start. But Williams was anxious to be off, and Shelley was willing enough. The *Don Juan* got under way. Captain Roberts watched her with misgiving; then with his telescope he went up into the tower at the end of the harbour-mole, and had a glimpse of her ten miles off-shore. Her crew were stowing the topsail. Then the haze blotted her out.

For several days Mary and Jane Williams tried to stifle their intolerable anxiety by listening to the surmise that the boat might have been driven across to Corsica in the squall; and it was not until nearly a fortnight had passed that they were compelled to give up hope. The body of Williams was found first, then the boy Vivian's, and finally Shelley's—

washed ashore near Via Reggio. In one pocket of Shelley's jacket was a volume of Sophocles, in the other a copy of Keats' last poems, lent him by Hunt in Leghorn, and folded back as if it had been hastily thrust there in the act of reading. The quarantine laws made it necessary that the bodies should be buried where they lay, and quicklime was thrown into the graves. Later, however, permission was obtained for a more fitting funeral, and on August 16 in the presence of Hunt, Byron, Trelawny and a few others, what remained of Shelley's body was burned on the beach at Via Reggio. The same ceremony had been performed for Williams on the previous day. Shelley's ashes—all but his heart, which was not consumed, and which Trelawny snatched from the fire and gave to Hunt, who gave it to Mary—were buried in the Protestant cemetery in Rome, where his son William, and Keats, already lay. On the grave were inscribed the words *Cor Cordium*—heart of hearts—and the lines from Ariel's song in the *Tempest*:

> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.

The boat, *Don Juan*, was salvaged later by Roberts and Trelawny. The planks and timbers of her starboard quarter were found to be stove-in, a fact which makes it almost certain that she was run down by a native felucca during the squall. Shelley had £50 in cash on board, and a story got about that a felucca was seen to leave Leghorn immediately after *Don Juan*. The sinking may have been a deliberate act of piracy; but the full story can never be known.

Shelley's father, Sir Timothy, lived on to the age of ninety, and on his death the title passed to Shelley's son, Percy Florence. Field Place was let and the family settled in Boscombe, where Sir Percy, busy with his hobbies of

amateur theatricals, photography and yachting, became a popular and respected public figure.

Matthew Arnold tells a story about Percy Florence: when he was still a boy, Mary asked a friend's advice about a school for him. 'Oh,' said the friend, 'send him somewhere where they will teach him to think for himself.' 'Teach him to think for himself?' Mary replied. 'Oh my God, teach him rather to think like other people!' It was a cry from the heart, and it would be a dull man who presumed to treat it with ridicule.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

1809 - 1892

'YOUR poems, I cannot forget them. I cannot put them away from my thoughts; the persons and the scenes they represent haunt me. I have read them all over and over . . .'

These words were written in a letter to Tennyson in 1849, the year before he published *In Memoriam*, by Samuel Bamford, a 'great, gaunt, stalwart Lancashire man' (as Mrs. Gaskell described him) 'formerly a hand-loom weaver, age nearly seventy.' Tennyson, who declared that the old man's admiration was the highest honour he had ever received, had sent him a copy of his poems, signed, as a gift.

Such an incident could never have happened to Tennyson's great contemporary, Browning. Browning's poetry was not read with rapture by septuagenarian weavers; for all its fame, the splendour beneath its crusty and corrugated surface was detected and enjoyed only by a comparatively small class of readers, the intellectual élite, and the slightly larger class of earnest people, which is usually present to follow its lead. Tennyson, on the other hand, became, after the initial period of neglect which every great writer has to suffer, by far the most popular poet of the Victorian age, or indeed of any age in the history of English literature. That he was also a poet of superb achievement furnishes a comment upon the Victorian age not without interest. To-day there are no popular poets; there is no public for poetry. There may be poets to-day not less finely equipped than

Tennyson, but the temper of the times drives them in upon themselves; they write for each other, or for the critics: not for the public, who would not understand them. Perhaps we should look back, if not with envy, at least with a certain humility, to those periods in history which had popular poets. There are not many of them: Shakespeare was a popular poet; so was Euripides; and so was Tennyson. Of Tennyson's predecessors only Byron had approached his fame—and, it might be added, made money from his verse to a comparable degree. Byron, however, was something of a lone wolf; he was a renegade aristocrat and expatriate; he bore the mark of Cain, and a faint savour of forbidden fruit was one element, at least, in the sumptuous dish which he provided for the delectation of his readers. Tennyson, on the other hand, was (to borrow the proud boast of Queen Elizabeth I) 'mere English'; he was in touch with the general movement of thought of the age in which he lived, in politics, in science, in religion, and representative of it no less in his doubts than in his affirmations. Moreover, he was never a difficult poet; he was not forced, as the great Romantics were, to conquer a new territory for poetry: he inherited their conquests. He dwelt, if one may put it so, in his father's house, and, though he altered the furniture of it to suit his taste, left it essentially unchanged—the ancestral mansion, dignified, noble, belonging to the English soil. He was fond of domestic themes; he was patriotic; he distrusted excess. For these reasons amongst others he was able to speak for the great new middle class which had just come into prominence, and was glad to be during his lifetime as the national poet, in a sense which no English poet has ever been since Shakespeare. A personal friend of the Queen, he was the first Englishman to be honoured with a peerage for his services to literature, and his death was mourned as the death of a great national figure since Nelson. Times and tastes changed;

and, as was to be expected, his fame in the decades after his death rapidly declined, and for a brief period between the two World Wars was almost totally eclipsed. To-day, when we are far enough from him to see his work with an impartial eye, he is back amongst the great. Where he belongs. His faults—and he had many—can be known for what they are: spots upon the sun of his genius.

Alfred Tennyson was born on August 6th, 1809, in his father's rectory at Somersby, a pastoral hamlet on the lower slope of a Lincolnshire wold, between Horncastle and Spilsby. He was the fourth child of a family of twelve all of them, girls and boys, as remarkable for the quality of their minds as for their personal appearance. The man as the Master of Trinity remarked when he first saw Tennyson come into Hall for dinner—the tall figure with the slouching gait, the swarthy complexion and long black hair, the intense and inward look in the short-sighted eyes —'that man must surely be a poet.'

The Tennysons were of Danish origin and had been settled for many generations in the country north of the Humber. The poet's father, George Clayton Tennyson, was the elder son of George Tennyson of Bayons Manor, a local squire of very considerable property, who decided upon an inexplicable whim to disinherit his elder son in favour of his brother Charles, whom he considered to be better fitted to represent the family interests. Charles, on the strength of a supposed connection with the old Norman family of d'Eyncourt, assumed, on his succession to the property, the name of Tennyson d'Eyncourt, while George Clayton, the rightful heir, was compelled by his father to take orders, a profession for which he was by no means constitutionally fitted, and presented with the livings of Somersby and Bag Enderby. At Somersby the rector brought up his large family. He was a man of considerable intellectual power and great charm, and a conscientious clergyman, but for

the rest of his life the injustice he had suffered rankled deeply and preyed upon his health and spirits, and no doubt helped to accentuate the tendency to moodiness and introspection which was characteristic of all his children, including Alfred. Two of Alfred's brothers had mental breakdowns so serious that their sanity was feared for; another became for a time an addict to opium, and of yet another the story used to be told that visitors to the house where he was staying would find him stretched full-length upon the floor, from which he would rise, and, slowly approaching with outstretched hand, say in solemn tones, 'How do you do—I am Septimus, the most morbid of the Tennysons.' One of Tennyson's own early poems, *The Two Voices*, is a dialogue between himself and his soul upon the merits of suicide.

At seven years old Tennyson was sent to a school in Louth, where the headmaster being a bully and addicted to flogging, he was miserable and learned little. 'The only good I ever got from it,' he said in later life, 'was the memory of the words *sonus desilientis aquae*, and of an old wall covered with wild weeds opposite the school windows.' Four years afterwards he was taken home, to continue his education under his father. Life at Somersby was on the whole happy—though it is foolish to generalize too glibly, when everyone knows that any sensitive and intelligent child, whatever his surroundings, feels joy and grief, and both of them intensely. At any rate it was a good life for a child who was to become a poet. Apart from lessons with his father (lessons strictly conducted, and none the worse for that) it was free, vigorous and natural, and—an inestimable boon—shared with numerous brothers and sisters with kindred tastes and comparable abilities. Dr. Tennyson (as he was called) was a kindly father and proud of his children; Mrs. Tennyson was a type of woman now, unhappily, extinct: intelligent, cultivated and pious, she required no

pleasure beyond what she found in her duty towards husband and children. The family fortunes might crumble, Dr. Tennyson might, as the years went on, be driven to drink and almost to insanity by his resentment of injustice and the growing difficulties of life in the small and crowded rectory; but Mrs. Tennyson remained loving and serene, the rock of selfless devotion upon which the family life was founded.

The freedom of the Tennyson children involved not only the freedom to play and to roam the countryside at will, but also the freedom to work and read. If there is one thing more than another which surprises us to-day, when we read of family life a century or a century and a half ago, it is the precocity of the children—of those children, I mean, who were later to distinguish themselves. Shelley at Sion House was already dreaming of emancipating the world, and at Eton was deep in scientific and philosophical speculation; Browning was writing verses almost as soon as he could speak; Elizabeth Barrett wrote an epic in her early teens; Tennyson, in his turn, wrote another, six thousand lines in length, at the age of eleven, and by the time he was fourteen had completed his *Armageddon* (a poem he afterwards worked up and extended for his University prize poem, *Timbuctoo*) and two plays in blank verse, much of it an extraordinarily skilful imitation of the Elizabethan. At the same time, led by his own desire and without any external pressure, he was familiar with such writers as Milton, Rabelais, Swift, Cervantes, Bunyan and Buffon. The reason for this precocity is not, perhaps, far to seek. All intelligent children are hungry for knowledge and experience, and they will feed upon the pastures nearest to hand. Nowadays those pastures, such as they are, are all too abundant and accessible. In a thousand ways children are catered for—not always wisely, but assuredly too well, whereas a few generations ago they were not catered for at

all. They had, in consequence, to find their own amusements, and as for reading (because read they must) they were forced to exercise their teeth on some pretty tough meat. They did so with a will; and no doubt they were all the better for it.

Most of the Tennyson children wrote stories and verses from the cradle onwards, though Alfred soon became story-teller-in-chief. Like the Brontë children, they had a family magazine, the contributions being put on the dinner-table under a vegetable dish, to be read aloud when the meal was over. Dr Tennyson used to copy such verses as he judged fit into a manuscript book, which he bound in leather with his own hands.

Alfred, also loved his solitude, and in this respect one side of his character was not unlike Wordsworth's. A moody and introspective child, he liked to lose himself under the immense Lincolnshire skies, walking all day over the wold, standing on the ridge of dunes 'as if on the backbone of the world', or roaming along the coast by Mablethorpe, where great rollers broke interminably on the flat beach of sand and stones—the grandest sea in all England, as he used to maintain in later years. Often he would walk all night, hardly conscious of his body, and rapt in the mystery of darkness and starred sky. After one such walk he met a Mablethorpe fisherman at four in the morning and wished him good-day; 'Thou poor fool,' the man replied, 'thou doesn't know whether it be day or night.' Water he always loved, his poetry is full of it. There was the brook at the bottom of the parson's field, beyond the rectory garden—the steep-banked, swiftly-flowing stream which he never forgot, and about which he wrote one of his loveliest lyrics:

Flow down, cold rivulet, to the sea,
Thy tribute wave deliver:
No more by thee my steps shall be,
For ever and for ever.

Flow, softly flow, by lawn and lea,
A rivulet then a river:
Nowhere by thee my steps shall be,
For ever and for ever.

But here will sigh thine alder tree,
And here thine aspen shiver;
And here by thee will hum the bee
For ever and for ever.

A thousand suns will stream on thee,
A thousand moons will quiver;
But not by thee my steps shall be,
For ever and for ever.

I quote the little poem in full, because there is so much both of the child and of the man in it: of the child who (as Tennyson recorded in old age) could never hear the words *far, far away* without emotion, and at the same time dwelt with a passion of love upon the familiar things in the country about his home; and of the man who throughout his life could always turn memory into haunting music, finding with an exquisite sureness of touch the tune to fit the mood. And there was the sea, the delight of his boyhood as of his old age, about which he has written more finely and truly than any other English poets except Shakespeare and Swinburne.

So, with much scribbling of verse (in Greek and Latin as well as in English) much reading of poetry, philosophy and such scientific books as he could come by, and much solitary brooding and interminable tramps by hill and dale and sea, Tennyson's life at Somersby slipped by, until in the early spring of 1828 he and his brother Charles matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge, where their elder brother Frederick was already a distinguished scholar. On first coming up to Cambridge, Tennyson was wretchedly lonely and homesick for his beloved wold and sea. 'I feel isolated here,' he wrote, 'in the midst of society. The country is so dis-

gustingly level, the revelry of the place so monotonous, the studies of the University so uninteresting . . . None but dry-headed, calculating, angular little gentlemen can take much delight in them.' Fortunately, however, there happened at the time to be in Cambridge a group of men of unusual distinction, and it was not long before Tennyson, who for all his shyness and fits of black depression had the warmest of hearts and a real genius for friendship, began to be welcomed amongst them. He was an early member of the 'Apostles', the club which was founded by John Sterling (Carlyle's friend) and F. D. Maurice for the informal discussion of all sorts of subjects, literary, scientific, religious or social. The members, who included such men as Monckton Milnes, later to be the first biograhper of Keats, Spedding, the biographer of Bacon, and Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's best loved friend, met constantly in one another's rooms to drink coffee and smoke tobacco to the accompaniment of such talk as was then, and possibly still is, one of the most precious elements in a University education. Tennyson, it appears, was mainly silent at these meetings, sitting by the hearth and smoking furiously (shag tobacco in a clay pipe), and dropping now and then some brief word of comment; on one occasion, however, he is said to have propounded the then startling theory that men might have evolved from the lowest forms of invertebrate life. This would not be worth mentioning but for the fact that it illustrates Tennyson's lifelong interest (which he shared with Shelley) in scientific speculation and research. There is a story of how, in middle age, he went to Spithead to watch a demonstration of the newly invented torpedo, and of the horror of foreboding which it caused him; and throughout his life he was divided, in the face of rapidly advancing scientific invention, between hope and fear: hope for the benefits it might bring to the world, and fear for its menace of destruction and the growing materialism which

seemed inevitably to accompany it. Everyone knows his Wellsian prophecy of how he

> Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rained
> a ghastly dew
> From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central
> blue.

Such a vision must have seemed to a reader of the eighteen-thirties as fantastic as the hope of a 'Parliament of Man' and a 'Federation of the World'.

Tennyson got little or nothing from Cambridge in the way of formal teaching—he went down without a degree and considerably in debt—but he got much from his friendships; and throughout his three years of residence he continued assiduously to practise his art. In 1830 his first volume of poems was published—the *Poems by Two Brothers*, issued three years before in collaboration with Charles Tennyson, need not be remembered. The 1830 volume was followed by another in 1832, and in 1842 the publisher Moxon (friend of Charles Lamb and publisher of Browning) issued a two-volume collection, which contained a number of the old poems much elaborated and revised in addition to fresh ones. These early poems, highly praised by a few discerning friends, were roughly handled by the professional critics, especially by Wilson ('Christopher North') in *Blackwood*. 'Alfred is as an owl,' he jovially remarked; 'all that he wants is to be shot, stuffed and stuck into a glass case, to be made immortal in a museum.' Poets in those days were all too much accustomed to reckless denigration and slapstick buffoonery, and Tennyson, until he was past forty, had his full share of it. It is a curious comment upon the literary convention of the times that the most distinguished critical journals would give a dozen pages simply to calling a new poet a jackass. So extended a notice seems an odd way to assert that the poet in question is not

worth noticing. Of course the professional critics missed the point of these early poems, which Tennyson's friends—amongst them Hallam and Edward Fitzgerald—were quick to perceive. In these poems there was no luxuriating in beauty for beauty's sake, as in Keats' before his wings were grown, no passionate plea for

> ten years, that I may overwhelm
> Myself in poesy,

or high visions of poetry itself as the 'supreme of power', or 'might half-slumbering on his own right arm'; there was nothing of the intense lyrical rapture of Shelley, or high adventuring of the soul; no attempt such as Browning professed to make in *Pauline* to strip bare his mind: the poems were, on the contrary, highly conscious and carefully wrought works of art. In all his best poetry, both in these early days and afterwards, Tennyson was not 'seer' but 'maker'—if I may use once again the distinction which I suggested in the first chapter of this book. He was an extremely careful and conscientious artist, as is proved, if proof were needed, by his habit of working over, elaborating, altering, expanding certain poems in successive editions of his books. Shelley, one feels, was compelled to the theme of *Alastor* or *The Revolt of Islam*, as Keats was compelled to the theme of *I Stood Tiptoe* or *Sleep and Poetry*, and as Wordsworth was compelled by his inner daemon to the intense and dreaming self-analysis of the *Prelude*; Tennyson, on the other hand, chose the themes of his early verse—indeed of all his verse—coolly and deliberately, and then proceeded to clothe them in an exquisitely delicate harmony of phrase and music, to match his mood. In reading his great predecessors one is conscious, always, of a *man*; in reading Tennyson's best and most characteristic verse, especially his early verse, one is conscious not so much of a man as of a mood. 'Poets,' said Shelley, 'are the trumpets

that sing to battle; they are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' But nothing could have been further from Tennyson's thoughts than that he was a trumpet singing to battle; never did he wish, at any rate in his earlier days, to be a legislator of the world. His was a very different object: it was, quite simply, to fashion some small thing which should be beautiful.

Tennyson brought to his 'making' a richly imaginative and brooding mind, a trained and accurate eye, and a very fine ear for verbal music. The subtlety and variety of his 'tunes' were unequalled by any of his great predecessors except Shelley. That his tunes were something new in English poetry is proved by the surprising fact that Coleridge, who knew more about poetry than any man then living, failed to catch them.

> How may full-sailed verse express,
> How may measured words adore
> The full-flowing harmony
> Of thy swanlike stateliness,
> Eleanore?

To a modern ear that is no puzzle: the rippling, light syllables of the third and fourth lines, with only the slightest pause and stress on 'harmony' and 'stateliness'—with what almost impish artistry they suggest the movement of a swan on water! Poets, said the old adage, are born not made; yet Horace, who knew what he was talking about, advised them to wait nine years before giving a newly-written poem to the world. Tennyson may not have waited as long as that, but he knew, as few other poets have known, the value of the file, and patiently elaborated, polished and improved, until he had reached the greatest perfection of which he was capable.

Tennyson did not become popular, in the full sense, before the publication of four of the *Idylls of the King* in 1859; but with the appearance of the two 1842 volumes he

was recognized by a growing number of perceptive people as the first poet of the age. Many of them, and amongst them Tennyson's close friend Fitzgerald, thought that in his subsequent work he never equalled these early poems, and it was a judgment with which one can sympathize, even if one cannot wholly accept it. Tennyson later was greatly to extend his range and to bring a wider humanity into his poetry; but the fact remains that in the best of these early poems, *The Lady of Shalott, The Lotos Eaters, Ulysses*, and a few small songs like the Owl songs (which *Blackwood* jeered at) or 'A spirit haunts the year's last hours', there is a magic of music and phrase which Tennyson may have afterwards equalled, but certainly never surpassed.

It is almost as difficult to explain why one enjoys the *Lady of Shalott* as to explain one's pleasure in the smell of a particular flower. In either case the thing is simply there. Most people who care for poetry could explain pretty well why they admire Keats' *Nightingale*: they could discourse cheerfully enough upon the marriage of thought to feeling, and of both to music in that poem, and perhaps make themselves understood; but what is the thought and what the feeling in the *Lady of Shalott*? What string in the complicated instrument of our sensibilities does it set vibrating? A. E. Housman, commenting upon Shakespeare's song 'Take Oh take those lips away', remarked, 'That is nonsense—but it is ravishing poetry.' *The Lady of Shalott* is ravishing poetry too—and almost nonsense. Perhaps it suggests to us that it is a bad thing to live among shadows, and not to hear Sir Lancelot sing tirra-lirra by the river, or to watch how

> All in the blue unclouded weather
> Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
> The helmet and the helmet-feather
> Burned like one burning flame together
> As he rode down to Camelot;

but we knew this already, and who cares if the poem tells it us again or not? There have been spells of old, and enchantments to bind the senses and lull the too curious mind asleep, and dreams may live upon the eye more vividly than the waking world. The meaning of a song is in the singing, and jesting Pilate is not the only man who has asked what truth is. The spell of *far far away* had returned from childhood upon Tennyson when he wrote these verses of pure romance, and brought to embellish them the harvest of his dwelling eye—the airy uplands, breezes that dusk and shiver on the stream, long fields of barley running up to meet the sky, the bearded meteor trailing light—while his inward-listening ear caught the very music for his mood. It is the same with the *Lotos Eaters*, though this is a poem of ampler harmonies, and in it the luxury of dreaming is stirred by a touch or two from the wings of thought, but only lightly, and the dream is not broken. In no other poem is Tennyson's almost impudent artistry of verbal music more triumphant—

> Music that gentlier on the spirit lies
> Than tired eyelids upon tired eyes;
> Music that brings sweet sleep down from the
> blissful skies——

in which by his cunning liquids and falling rhythms he *makes* the very thing he speaks of. Or, again,

> Through every hollow cave and alley lone
> Round and round the spicy downs the yellow
> Lotos-dust is blown:—

where the thing itself takes form in the softly-swirling movement of the lines, and the sound of them is as secret as the noiseless noise of summer, which Dorothy Wordsworth heard on the Westmorland hills. Tennyson worked at his poetic effects with the absorbed patience and loving care of a medieval painter compounding his colours. Sometimes his skill led him into excess, as it did—later—in *The Princess*,

where the theme cannot bear such rich embroidery; but in these poems I have mentioned, and in the exquisite classical idylls, *Tithonus, Oenone, Ulysses* (this last a poem through which the winds blow with a freer breath), the technique, the poetic legerdemain, the infinitely skilful evocation of a mood by sound and colour, are themselves the theme, and the reader asks for nothing beyond them. Keats in his *Hyperion*, describing the doomed Titan, presented him in memorable images of a gloomy and tempestuous dawn; most lovers of poetry, remembering Hyperion, how

> All along a dismal wrack of clouds
> Between the boundaries of day and night
> He stretched himself in grief and radiance faint,

will remember, too, that other Dawn in *Tithonus*:

> A soft air fans the clouds apart; there comes
> A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.
> Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals
> From thy pure brows . . .

Tennyson, too, could play the myth-maker. Those verses, lighter, cooler, more pellucid than Keats', are no less beautiful.

It is hardly surprising that Tennyson's friends and first admirers wished that he would write for ever poems of the same kind and quality as these magical early ones; nor is it any more surprising that he either could not, or would not, do so. He had to leave the 'lordly pleasure-house' which he had built (as he says in the *Palace of Art*) for his soul to dwell in for ever at ease; for from that isolation and withdrawal he feared that corruption would come. Beauty alone was not enough, divorced from her sisters, Goodness and Knowledge; and

> He that shuts Love out, in turn shall be
> Shut out from Love, and on her threshold lie
> Howling in outer darkness.

In other words, Tennyson was impelled to extend the scope of his poetry to include themes of common life. The poet must also be a man amongst men.

How delightfully Tennyson the poet could move as a man amongst men can be seen in a couple of his early poems, too—*Amphion* and *Will Waterproof's Monologue*. These poems have not received nearly enough recognition. They are of a class apart, and perfect in their kind. Tennyson, during his visits to London in the 1840's—visits which he greatly enjoyed, preferring, as he used to say, the 'central roar' of Fleet Street and the Strand to the neater and quieter neighbourhood of the West End—used often to dine with friends at the Cock tavern near Temple Bar, his favourite dinner ('all fine-natured men,' he would remark, 'are greedy') being a beef-steak, a potato, a cut of cheese and a pint of port, followed by a pipe, or several pipes, of shag tobacco. *Will Waterproof* was his song of thanksgiving to this favoured tavern. It is light verse at its very best, alive with geniality and humour, touched with the glancing lights of imagination, as rich as the port it celebrates, and much more digestible. Few things in humorous verse (a *genre* in which English literature is rich) are as neat or as charming as the passage which glances from the 'plump head-waiter' and the sign of the Cock at the tavern door to the myth of Ganymede and his eagle:

> The Cock was of a larger egg
> Than modern poultry drop,
> Stept forward on a firmer leg
> And cramm'd a plumper crop;
> Upon an ampler dunghill trod,
> Crowed lustier, late and early,
> Sipt wine from silver praising God,
> And raked in golden barley.
> A private life was all his joy,
> Till in a court he saw

A something-pottle-bodied boy
That knuckled at the taw;
He stooped and clutched him, fair and good,
Flew over roof and casement:
His brothers of the weather stood
Stock-still for sheer amazement.

But he, by farmstead, thorpe and spire,
And follow'd with acclaims,
A sign to many a staring shire
Come crowing over Thames.
Right down by smoky Paul's they bore,
Till, where the street grows straiter,
One fix'd for ever at the door,
And one became head-waiter.

Tennyson in his old age was given a tankard from the Cock tavern as a memento. He must have chuckled with pleasure over the gift. The best light verse—like this, and like Shelley's 'Gadfly' song—lies close on the borderland of poetry. The nonsense and the laughter always threaten, so to speak, to quiver and tremble into beauty.

Amphion is as delightful a piece of gay-hearted nonsense as *Will Waterproof,* and plays with as full a fancy and as delicate a wit with the old legend of the music-maker who could make trees follow his music:

The linden broke her ranks and rent
The woodbine wreaths that bind her,
And down the middle, buzz! she went
With all her bees behind her,

while the gouty oak floundered into hornpipes, and shock-head willows danced a gallop on the river bank. So it was, the poet mourns, in old time, but how in this brassy age when Botanic Treatises have taken the place of magic music, is he to plant his barren park and clothe his waste garden in beauty?

I must work through months of toil
  And years of cultivation,
Upon my proper patch of soil
  To grow my own plantation.
I'll take the showers as they fall,
  I will not vex my bosom:
Enough if at the end of all
  A little garden blossom.

It is always the best poets who write the best humorous verse, just as it is the best musicians who write the gayest tunes—like Beethoven's scherzos. A gaiety and charm similar to the gaiety and charm of these verses can be found to-day in Walter de la Mare's *Peacock Pie*, or in Alfred Noyes' *Forty Singing Seamen*.

In 1831 Tennyson's father died, and four years later came the death of his grandfather. Though the bulk of his grandfather's property went to Charles, the younger son, the poet's family was not entirely neglected. They remained poor, but not intolerably so. Tennyson himself came into about £1000, which he invested in a scheme for carving wood by a mechanical process (ominously called 'pyroglyphs'), and lost every penny of it. In the year of his grandfather's death, Tennyson's brother Charles married Louisa Sellwood, and Tennyson fell in love with her sister Emily. In 1839 he became formally engaged to her. By that time, however, Charles had taken to opium and separated from his wife, and this, added to the fact that Alfred was earning no money, scared the Sellwoods from any further connection with the Tennyson family. The poet's engagement was broken off, and he and Emily were forbidden to correspond. Tennyson was no rebel as Shelley was, nor did he live, like Keats, who was humbly born, only on the outer fringe of society. He belonged wholly to the great and growing middle class, and—however unconventional he may have been, and was, in minor matters—he accepted its laws in all

major concerns of morality and conduct. How painful to him the separation was, can be seen in his *Love and Duty* a poem of (for him) unusually direct personal feeling:

> O then like those, who clench their nerves to rush
> Upon their dissolution, we two rose,
> There—closing like an individual life—
> In one blind cry of passion and of pain,
> Like bitter accusation even to death,
> Caught up the whole of love and uttered it,
> And bade adieu for ever.

Happily, it was not, in fact, for ever. Tennyson's fortunes were to change, but his love was not to change. Over thirty years of happily married life lay ahead of him.

Tennyson was always a companionable man, loving (unlike Wordsworth) to 'season his fireside with personal talk,' on all manner of subjects, grave and gay. He was a great story-teller, and an amusing mimic. 'He used to do the sun coming out from a cloud,' wrote Fitzgerald, 'and retiring into one again, with a gradual opening and shutting of the eyes, and with a great fluffing up of his hair into full wig and elevation of cravat and collar.' Jowett, the Master of Balliol, and for nearly forty years his friend, said that he 'lived in an attitude of humour,' though at any moment in company his talk (like all good talk) would drop without warning into high eternal themes. For all his sensitiveness to criticism, and black moods, he was the least self-conscious of men.

His circle of friends expanded rapidly after the publication of his 1842 volumes, and soon included the old banker-poet Rogers, Dickens and Carlyle. Carlyle loved him, as he loved Browning, and was almost persuaded to admire his poetry, though he professed to believe that all poetry was a waste of time and talent. 'A life guardsman spoilt by poetry' was his description of Tennyson. Nevertheless Tennyson won over the embittered and irascible old man,

who came to admire as well as to love him for his fine understanding, his warm heart, and—perhaps—for his fellowly addiction to strong tobacco. In 1845 Tennyson met Wordsworth, who was gracious to him beyond his wont, and even told him that *Dora* was a kind of idyll he had always himself been trying to write but without success. In point of fact, his own *Michael* was incomparably the better poem.

That Tennyson's reputation was swiftly growing, at any rate amongst those who had real knowledge of literature, is shown by the fact that in this same year (1845) he was granted a Civil List pension of £200.

Two years later *The Princess* was published. Most of Tennyson's friends, Fitzgerald especially, disliked the poem, and it was unfavourably noticed in the reviews. 'My book is out, and I hate it,' Tennyson wrote to Fitzgerald, 'and so no doubt will you. Never mind, you will like me none the worse.' One can sympathize with Fitzgerald. The poem, apart from the incidental lyrics, which were added later and are amongst the loveliest things which Tennyson wrote, is a brilliant *tour de force,* and little more. Tennyson had long since determined to leave his 'Palace of Art', his lordly pleasure-house of far romantic dream, and had, indeed, already done so in many fine poems. In *The Princess,* however, he seems to enter a sort of Crystal Palace in its stead, much less satisfying to either soul or sense. The theme of the poem, the spiritual equality of men and women, was beginning to be talked (or dreamt) of, and was a vital one; but Tennyson's treatment of it was artificial—even arch—to a degree. His notion of a women's university, invaded by four young men at the risk of their lives, is ingenious enough; but Tennyson had not the faculty to make any of his persons come to life, and the jewelled exquisiteness of style and language with which he describes their highly improbable doings, kills them deader than ever. Princess Ida herself is the worst prig in English literature, and one likes

her no better for her late, and expected, discovery that it is a good thing, after all, for a woman to get a husband. Reading this frigid and glittering poem set neither in a world of reality nor in a world of imagination, but coldly glistening in a sort of limbo of make-believe, one sighs to let Aristophanes loose in it, if only for the sake of a pulse of human blood and a few honest guffaws. But the lyrics in it are wonderful. 'Tears, idle tears' and 'Come down, O maid' will live as long as the English language. Of the former a pleasant story is told: Tennyson chanced to remark to a group of friends that the pipe he best enjoyed was the first one he smoked in the morning. 'Ah yes,' came the answer; 'the earliest pipe of half-awakened *bards*, I suppose.' Tennyson was less amused than he might have been, as this was his own favourite lyric, and he felt that it ought not to be made fun of. In one edition of the poem the line

> And followed by a hundred airy does

was printed in error

> And followed by a hundred *hairy* does.

'I was with the unlucky author,' wrote Frederick Locker-Lampson, 'when the proof reached him. He gazed at it with horror and gave a very prolonged and remarkable groan.'

In spite, however, of the tepid reception of this work by his admirers and by the critics, it began gradually to make its way, and was reprinted the following year.

The year 1850 was an important one for Tennyson. His brother Charles, having broken himself of drug-taking, was reunited with his wife, and *In Memoriam* was published-and had an instant and immense success. Thus both the barriers against Tennyson's own marriage were simultaneously removed. His love for Emily Sellwood had suffered no diminution from the eleven years of waiting, nor hers for

him. They were married quietly at Shiplake on June 13th. The cake and the dresses arrived too late for the ceremony, which made Tennyson say, to the amusement of his friends, that it was the 'nicest wedding' he had ever been at. In after years (his son recorded) he said: 'The peace of God came into my life before the altar when I wedded her.' Emily Tennyson was both beautiful and accomplished; 'one of the most beautiful,' wrote Jowett, 'the purest, the most innocent, the most disinterested person whom I have ever known.' She was also, he added, the best critic of her husband's work, and the one whose authority he most willingly recognized.

In November of this same year, Wordsworth having died some months previously, Tennyson was made Poet Laureate —and, like Wordsworth (oddly enough) squeezed into Rogers' court suit for the presentation ceremony at the Palace.

In Memoriam, Tennyson's most celebrated and perhaps his finest poem, had been dwelling in his mind for the past seventeen years, and throughout that time he had irregularly worked at it, pieced it together, polished and at last perfected it. Everyone knows its origin. Arthur Hallam, a little younger than Tennyson, was his beloved friend at Cambridge. He was a young man of brilliant promise in literature, and of unusual charm of person and manner. A frequent visitor to the rectory at Somersby, he became engaged to Tennyson's sister Emily, thus further cementing the bond of friendship between the two men. In September, 1833, while on a visit with his father to Vienna, Hallam was found dead in his chair at the hotel where they were staying. He had been, apparently, in perfect health; death was, in all probability, due to a blood-clot on the brain. The blow to Tennyson was shattering. For a time he seems not to have cared whether he lived or died. Something of his anguish is recorded in *The Two Voices*.

But youth and vitality will master grief, or (which is better) turn it to the uses of a deeper life. So it was with Tennyson. The long poem in memory of his friend is a record of that process. Asked what he thought of the Christian religion, 'You will find it all,' Tennyson replied, 'in *In Memoriam*.' The poem is not a 'philosophical' poem —if such a thing exists: it is made up of a succession of lyrics, 'short swallow-flights of song,' all of them in the same measure now inalienably associated with Tennyson's name—a measure which Tennyson supposed himself to have invented, until he discovered it had been used by Lord Herbert of Cherbury—and each expressing, as Tennyson's best poetry always does express, some overmastering mood: grief, desolation, despair; doubt, the dawning of hope, the sense of an ultimate assurance, of the everlasting arms. Tennyson was far from being a dogmatic Christian; religious doubt, as was to be expected in the age of Darwin, Tyndall and Herbert Spencer, was very much a part of the intellectual climate of the time, and Tennyson was as sensitive to it as any man. All his life he followed the progress of scientific thought with passionate interest and deep understanding, welcoming its achievements as much as he dreaded the possible misuse of them. With him, however, as perhaps with all profoundly imaginative men, the advance of science into the nature of the physical world served not to diminish but to deepen the mystery of life. Like most poets Tennyson was essentially religious; he had the faith of the mystic that Reason, in spite of all her triumphs, if trusted home and taken as the sole guide to truth, might

> push beyond her mark, and be
> Procuress to the Lords of Hell.

All his doubt is in this poem, and all his ultimate belief. He reveals his groping after 'the Power in darkness whom we

guess', his sympathy with those whose faith

> has centre everywhere,
> Nor cares to fix itself in form,

his sense of the blind waste and inexorable cruelty of nature 'red in tooth and claw with ravin', and of the littleness of the individual life in the vast impersonal scheme of the universe. Yet love and grief—two mysteries, 'likest God within the soul'—had taught him at last to transcend his doubts and to rest in the belief, necessary to his very life, in the reality of the self, its survival after death, freedom of the will, and a personal God guiding Nature to some infinitely remote but harmonious consummation. It is a compliment to the poem that the scientists who read it hailed Tennyson as one of themselves; but it is true to say that there is in it no less of religious mysticism and essentially Christian thinking.

The tone of *In Memoriam* is quieter and more subdued than that of the majority of Tennyson's major poems, the language and imagery less highly wrought; yet it contains more

> jewels five words long
> That on the stretch'd forefinger of old Time
> Sparkle for ever

than anything else he wrote. No one could forget the exquisite and faithful observation of nature which it contains—the silent snow which possesses the earth, the blasts that blow the poplars white, the chestnut pattering to the ground through the faded leaf, the rooks blown about the skies, the thousand waves of wheat that ripple round the lonely grange, the white kine glimmering through the doubtful dusk, the ice making daggers at the sharpened eaves, and much more to make up the 'harvest of his quiet eye'; or the evocative passages which ring like a solemn bell in the inward ear

His heavy-shotted hammock-shroud
Drops in his vast and wandering grave;

or how in the dawn twilight

the trees
Laid their dark arms about the field;

or the sense of the unimaginable changes of time in the lines:

There where the long street roars hath been
The stillness of the central sea.

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go;

the poignancy of doubt in the lines:

What am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry;

or the stillness of grief in:

Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
These leaves that redden to the fall;
And in my heart, if calm at all,
If any calm, a calm despair.

In Memoriam was first privately printed and copies were distributed amongst Tennyson's friends; then it was published, but without the author's name. It was instantly hailed as a great poem, and though Tennyson still had to wait another nine years before, with the first *Idylls of the King*, he became in the full sense a popular poet, he was now, for the first time, recognized by all who had a feeling for literature as the leading English poet. Doubtless it was the deep humanity of the poem which, apart from its beauty

(if one can make such a distinction) is characteristic of it, that won so many willing readers. Incidentally, it was much admired by Prince Albert and the Queen, and it was their admiration which led, at any rate in part, to the offer, later in the year, of the Laureateship. Such a consideration had more weight a hundred years ago than it would have to-day —and the office itself held more honour then than now.

After their marriage the Tennysons set about looking for somewhere to live. Their first choice was an old farm-house near Horsham—Shelley's country. Unfortunately, however, on the night of their arrival the bedroom wall was blown in by a gale of wind. Moreover the house, which had once been occupied by a gang of thieves and murderers, was haunted and had a most evil reputation in the neighbourhood. Also there was no postal service and provisions were hard to come by. Other househunters might have informed themselves beforehand of some at least of these drawbacks. The Tennysons did not. They left in a hurry, and, after spending some months at Coniston in the Lakes, settled, more successfully this time, at Twickenham, in Chapel House, Montpelier Row.

In the summer of 1851 they made one of their rare trips abroad, visiting Florence where Tennyson's eldest brother Frederick was living, and returning through Paris, where they met the Brownings, who were on their way back to Italy. The following winter Tennyson went alone to the East coast to revisit old haunts and old friends, writing, as his custom was, long journal-letters to his wife to describe the passage of his days. Back at Twickenham, he settled down to work—or would have done, had it not been for the constant stream of visitors. Tennyson loved his friends, as his friends, who were legion, loved him; he was the most companionable of men; nevertheless, though friendship is the spice of life, it is also a great consumer of time in a busy day. For this reason more than any other Tennyson

decided to leave London and find some retreat where the visits of friends could at least be controlled by invitation. Before he left, Hallam, his elder son and first biographer, was born. 'On the third day of his life,' Tennyson wrote, 'I found him lying alone, and while I was looking at him, I saw him looking at me with such apparently earnest wide-open eyes, I felt as awe-struck as if I had seen a spirit.' The first letter of congratulation he received was from Mrs. Browning. Two years later the second son, Lionel, was born. Most poets, I guess, have loved their children; Tennyson was no exception. He was very far from the Victorian father of fiction—and, indeed, of fact. His boys from babyhood were his constant companions. 'Make the lives of children,' he used to say, 'as beautiful and happy as possible;' and he played his part in the making. Over his own children he exercised the discipline of love. Hallam Tennyson recorded that the most serious punishment (and even that light enough) which he ever received from his father was for some act of discourtesy to a servant. With all his servants Tennyson's relationship was one of mutual affection and esteem; an old shepherd who in later years looked after the Farringford flock was always invited to dine at the house before the master and mistress left for any protracted visit elsewhere. These are small things, but they reveal character—and, possibly, throw some light upon an age that is gone for ever.

It was in November 1853, that the Tennysons took Farringford, the fine old grey house near Freshwater in the Isle of Wight, at the foot of the bare chalk down on whose summit the granite pillar now stands in the poet's memory. On their first visit they crossed the Solent to Yarmouth in a rowing boat: it was a still evening, and as the men laboured at the oars 'one dark heron flew over the sea'. A glance at the house decided them. They loved it for its remoteness and peace, for the nearness of the sea, whose

voice could always be heard, and for the splendid prospect of downland and coast from the drawing-room windows. Tennyson was still a poor man when he took the lease of Farringford; his books were bringing him £500 a year; but in those days that was enough. Many friends have described the little attic room at Farringford in which Tennyson worked, his hard, high-backed chair, and the two 'sacred pipes'—half an hour after breakfast and half an hour after dinner—the smoking of which no one might disturb, as it was then that his best thoughts came to him.

In the Isle of Wight, as everywhere else where he happened to be, Tennyson spent much time in walking. He was as tremendous a walker as Wordsworth or Shelley, and the country round Farringford was soon familiar with the tall, slouching figure, the broad-brimmed hat, the flying cloak and shabby clothes, the fine, swarthy face—'I wouldna be as black as 'ee for somat,' as a Lincolnshire peasant had once remarked. Tennyson was a powerful man, healthy (but for hay-fever) and as strong as an ox. Once he surprised some guests by picking up a pony in his arms. 'It's not fair,' a friend said to him, 'that you should be Hercules as well as Apollo.'

His first work after settling at Farringford was *Maud*. When it was published, Fitzgerald was, once again, uneasy. However, as Tennyson had prophesied when he sent him *The Princess*, he continued to love the poet as much as before. Carlyle had once described Tennyson, in his search for remote or romantic themes, as 'sitting on a dung-heap amongst innumerable dead dogs.' He had come off the dung-heap (more or less) with *The Princess*; with *Maud* he was off it in good earnest. The theme of *Maud* is anything but remote or romantic; it is almost violently contemporary. It is an odd poem; once more, one can a little sympathize with Fitzgerald's uneasiness. Perhaps some of the poem's oddity is due to the fact that it was written backwards.

Having written the lyric 'Oh that 'twere possible,' Tennyson found that a preliminary piece was needed to elucidate it—and then that another was needed to elucidate *that*, and so on to the beginning. The hero of the poem, who tells his own story, is a hysterical creature whose father has killed himself after losing his money. He struggles vainly against his love for the beautiful daughter of the new master of the Hall, kills her brother in a duel, loses his lover by death, goes crazy, and finally saves his soul by going to fight in the Crimea. What a tale! All tales, however, are in the telling, and there are passages in this 'lyrical monodrama' which quiver and glow with Tennyson's very own unmatchable beauty of verse.

> All night have the roses heard
> The flute, violin, bassoon;
> All night has the casement jessamine stirred
> To the dancers dancing in tune;
> Till a silence fell with the waking bird,
> And a hush with the setting moon . . .

The whole lovely section in which those lines occur, 'Oh that 'twere possible,' and 'I have led her home' will never be forgotten. One lights upon them in the course of a somewhat feverous journey through the poem with a sense of homecoming. This—one exclaims—is what Tennyson can do: this most delicate music, this deeply felt but half-muted melody of song.

Tennyson had an eye for what was going on in the world; alive to social evils, he had nothing but scorn for the worship of money and the growing materialism of the age. There are some strong lines upon the subject in *Maud*:

> . . . who but a fool would have faith in a tradesman's
> ware or his word?
> Is it peace or war? Civil war, as I think, and that
> of a kind
> The viler, as underhand, not openly bearing the sword.

Strong lines—and interesting lines; for Tennyson was never a recluse in an ivory tower. But they are not quite poetry. The idea in them comes from the head only; but true poetry has a deeper and more complex source.

A good many people besides Fitzgerald were made uneasy by *Maud*. One reviewer suggested that a vowel might be omitted from the title—and that it wouldn't matter which. But the Brownings admired it; so did Ruskin. It was, and remained, one of Tennyson's own favourites. To the end of his life, when asked to read a poem aloud he would read *Maud* with passionate intensity and (his son has told us) great dramatic power. The poem sold well, and with the proceeds Tennyson was enabled to buy Farringford. With the completion of the purchase, the remainder of his books and furniture were sent for from Twickenham, and one afternoon, when the whole ground floor of the house was strewn with crates and boxes, there was a knock upon the front door. It was Prince Albert, come from Osborne to pay a call.

For a number of years past Tennyson (like Milton) had meditated a poem on the Arthurian legend, and had actually written his *Morte d'Arthur* as long ago as 1834. He knew the west country well, and had spent a considerable time in the summer of 1848 walking the haunted Cornish coast, where under every stone there is a story, and listening to the local lore of the Rev. S. Hawker, the rector of Morwenstow. The Arthurian legend appealed to him partly for its romance, partly because he felt that he could turn it to allegorical uses and preach from it a sermon on the abuses of the times. For it should never be forgotten that Tennyson, as I have already suggested, was very much a man of his age; unlike his predecessors Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, whose major poems were timeless, and unlike his friend Browning in whose work there was little or no awareness of the contemporary scene, Tennyson, once his period of pure

romance was over, wrote much which bore directly upon contemporary events and contemporary problems. During his long life (nearly the whole of the nineteenth century) he witnessed, with the industrial revolution, changes in English life almost as great as those which have been lived through by a man of fifty to-day; he saw the rise of a powerful new middle class, men who made fortunes from cotton-mills and coal-mines, to challenge the supremacy of the old landed aristocracy; he saw the coming of railways, steamships and the telegraph; and these things, together with the swift advance of physical science, the Darwinian theory of evolution, and the rationalist criticism of the Bible, brought changes of thought which were hardly less revolutionary. To all these things, and the problems arising from them, Tennyson was alive and sensitive. Intellectually, he was in sympathy with speculative thought, in the same way as he approved, in theory, of the progress of democratic ideas; but emotionally he was conservative. Devoted to his country, he clung with passion to the old traditional virtues of loyalty, patriotism, service and faith, and he was haunted, despite himself, by the fear that the new scientific materialism might lead to the supersession of these virtues by a sceptical and self-regarding cynicism. The expression of this fear was more and more to occupy his poetry as he grew older.

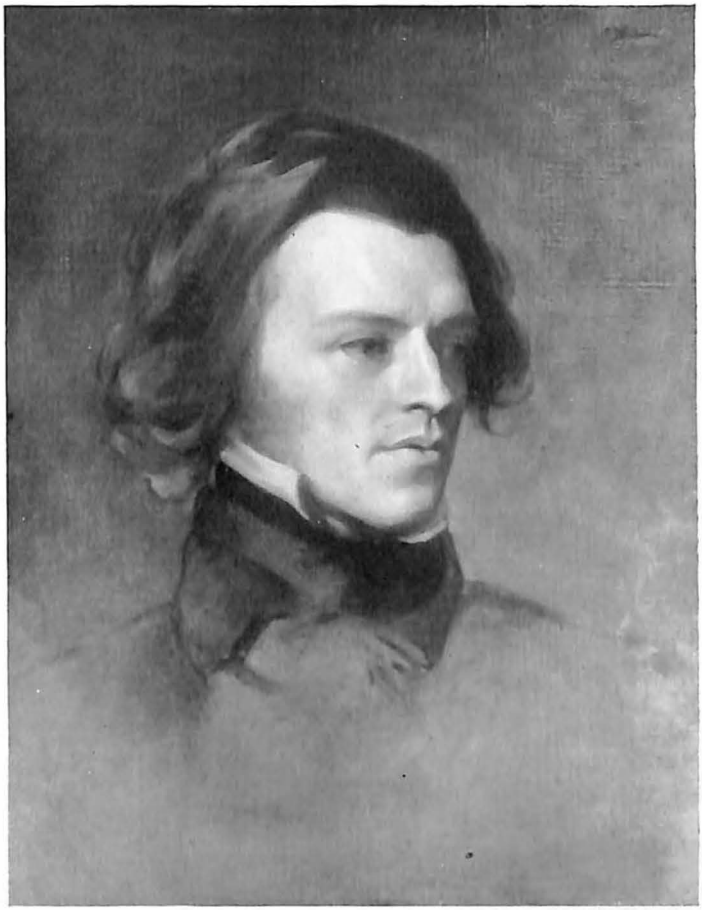
Meanwhile, there were the *Idylls of the King*. These famous poems (ten thousand copies of the 1859 volume were sold in the first month) surpassed in popularity anything else that Tennyson wrote. Nowadays most readers approach them somewhat gingerly. The weakness of the character drawing, the too patent didacticism, the unreality of the central symbol of the 'blameless king', and the fact that the whole scene, like the scene of the *Princess*, is set in a world of make-believe: all this tends to jar upon a modern reader. Yet one of the chief ways to the enjoyment of

poetry is to be able to enter imaginatively into the poetic conventions of another age, and only a very dull reader should be unable to pass beyond the obvious faults of the *Idylls* to the countless beauties they contain, or to feel the essential nobility of the ideals of patriotism and domestic honour which they symbolize. The *Passing of Arthur* is one of the most splendid poems in our language. One of the few men of note to regret the 'make-believe' in the *Idylls* was John Ruskin. Prince Albert asked Tennyson to sign a copy for him. Most of his friends urged him to continue them—as, of course, he did. The blank verse of the *Idylls* is, as always with Tennyson, exquisitely contrived; subtly varied in movement, it is at once mellow and light, like a blackbird's song. Blank verse, being so easy to write badly, is a great test of a poet. After Milton's (Shakespeare one never mentions in the same breath with other poets) and Shelley's, Tennyson's is the most accomplished and musical in the English language. He wrote slowly: lines would come to him not only in his 'fumitory', as he called it, as he smoked his sacred pipes, but as he worked in his Farringford garden, digging or sweeping leaves, and it was his custom to murmur them aloud as they came. This habit, contracted in boyhood, once caused a Somersby servant to exclaim: 'What's Master Awlfred always a-prayin' for?'

Soon after the death of Prince Albert in the December of 1861 Tennyson was summoned by the Queen, who had found great consolation in *In Memoriam*, to visit her at Osborne. 'I am a shy beast,' he wrote to the Duke of Argyll, 'and like to keep my burrow. Two questions: what sort of salutation to make on entering her private room? and whether to retreat backward? or sidle out as I may?' It was the first of many meetings. The mutual respect and affection between the Queen and the poet was to grow, and one guesses that Sir Max Beerbohm's caricature, though bril-

liant and delightful as always, nevertheless misinterprets the relationship between them, which was essentially both chivalrous and romantic.

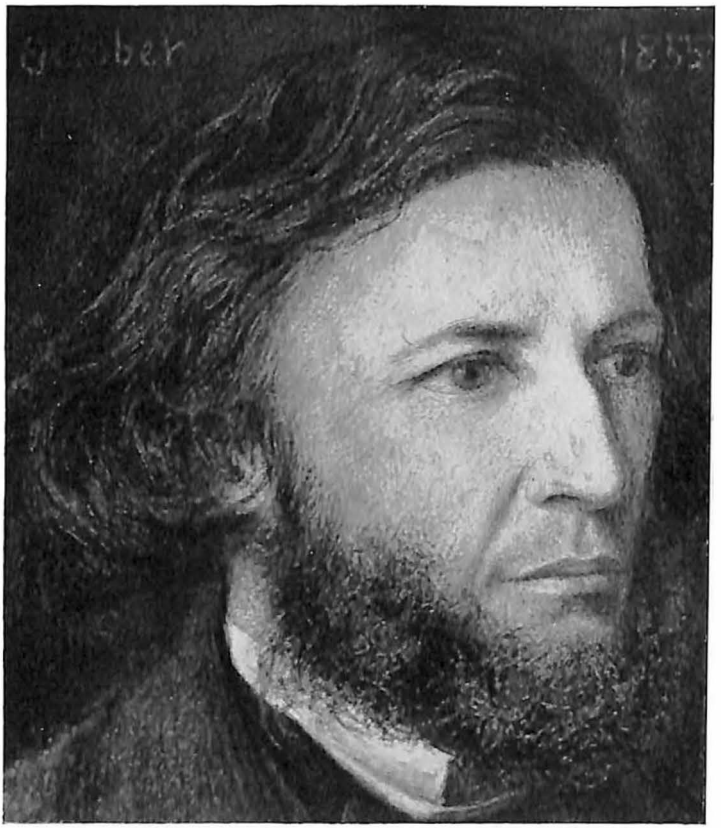
A couple of years later Garibaldi visited Farringford and planted a tree in the garden, as he had also done for the Seelys at Brook House nearby. Tennyson by this time had become a national figure, in a way that no previous English poet had ever been. His circle of friends, already great, was to continue to grow up to the end of his life, and to include pretty well everyone of eminence in politics, learning and the arts. It was an unusual fate for a poet, and a further indication, if such were needed, that Tennyson's poetry, both in its weakness and in its strength, was a faithful diminishing-mirror of the general temper of his times. He spoke for the English conscience of the Victorian age. It is an indication also of the breadth of his sympathies. Asked by an agnostic friend why, after a meeting of the Metaphysical Society, he had shown such deference to Cardinal Manning, 'Because,' Tennyson replied, 'he is a distinguished head of a great Church.' Incidentally, an amusing story is told of Tennyson and the Cardinal. It was at the time when an illustrated edition of the poems was being considered, and Manning chanced to visit Farringford. Tennyson, entering the drawing-room, saw him sitting there but failed, for the moment, to recognize him. He rushed out in excitement. 'I have found,' he cried 'the very model we were looking for. A noble face—but ravaged by every evil passion!' No sincerely-held belief was alien to Tennyson. He was no dogmatist either in politics or religion, but always willing (as Keats recommended) to avoid assertion and argument and 'whisper results' to his neighbour. His poetry, wrote James Martineau, did much to release religious belief from imprisonment within tight propositions which seek to define the infinite. Tennyson himself once remarked that the general English view of God was 'as of an immeasur-



National Portrait Gallery

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

Painting by S. Laurence



Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

ROBERT BROWNING

Painting by D. G. Rossetti

able clergyman.' His own overmastering sense of the reality of the Unseen he was perpetually seeking to express in his later poetry. He felt that he had best succeeded in *The Holy Grail.*

Tennyson's increasing fame brought so many sight-seers to Farringford in the hope of getting a glimpse of the poet, that during the holiday season the chief charm of the place, its isolation, was impaired. Accordingly Tennyson, who was now, with the publication of the *Idylls* and of the equally successful *Enoch Arden* volume, a comparatively rich man, bought a piece of land near Haslemere, and set about building his new house, Aldworth, whither he was to move regularly each year for a few months after the end of June. The turf for the new lawns was all brought from Farringford, which continued to remain his real, and best-loved home. The remainder of his long life was outwardly uneventful, and there is little more that needs to be recorded here. In 1873 he was offered a baronetcy, but refused it; ten years later came the offer of a barony, which after much hesitation he accepted. Gladstone, through whom the offer came, was very anxious that he should accept, for the honour of literature as well as for his own—and remarked to Hallam Tennyson that his only fear was that the poet, once ennobled, would insist upon wearing his wide-awake hat in the House of Lords. In 1886 he suffered the greatest bereavement of his life in the death of his younger son Lionel. His last twenty years were as rich as ever in work and friendship, and he died at Aldworth, in the early morning of October 6th, 1892. 'Lord Tennyson,' said the old clergyman of Lurgashall, as he stood by the bed, 'God has taken you, who made you a prince of men.' Hallam put his father's copy of *Cymbeline* into the coffin, which was taken to Westminster Abbey, where Tennyson was finally laid to rest in front of the Chaucer monument and next to Browning.

Tennyson has been fortunate in his biographers, and fortunate, also, in escaping them. Most of our great men of letters who lived during the past couple of centuries have come in for rough treatment at the hands of literary men (and women) who learned their technique of interpretation from Freud and the psychoanalysts. Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Dickens, Thackeray and Browning have all been explained to us (if that is the word) by reference to some single trait of inherited character, or some single instance of emotional conflict in early life, elaborately and selectively traced out through the remainder of their careers, usually to their disadvantage as human beings. It is a favourite modern literary game. But Tennyson has escaped this treatment. His first biographer, his son Hallam, wrote with love and understanding, and his delightful book has been recently supplemented by Sir Charles Tennyson, the poet's grandson, who supplied, in particular, much valuable information about the poet's family and early years, thus greatly increasing our understanding of the morbidity and moodiness which were characteristic of him throughout his life, and lay like a shadow upon his otherwise sweet and sunlit disposition. The fact is, Tennyson, in spite of his black moods and his melancholy, was, unlike the majority of poets, a happy man. He was happily married beyond the fortune of most men—certainly beyond the fortune of most poets; he loved his children and was loved by them in return; he had a host of friends (more men than women); and he was successful beyond any poet's dreams. These facts undoubtedly present a tough problem to the modern iconoclast or psychological biographer.

But though Tennyson has to a great extent escaped the biographers, many of his most intimate and distinguished friends wrote after his death brief accounts of their recollections of him. All of them stress the nobility and sweetness of his character. It was easy, wrote Swinburne's friend

Watts-Dunton, to find the cause of Tennyson's charm: it lay in a 'great veracity of soul,' in 'a simple single-mindedness.' 'Artist and man,' wrote Palgrave (whose *Golden Treasury* was submitted to Tennyson for final approval) 'he was invariably true to himself, his nature and his poetry being harmonious aspects of the same soul.' Tennyson was less of an egotist than many—possibly most—poets have been, and he never seems to have laid himself out to make an impression in company. When he talked—and he talked freely—it was because the subject gripped him. He was naturally shy, though not diffident; and no man, once he felt himself at ease, was readier to open his mind on any matter and in any company; and no man was readier to listen to the views of others. Sensitive to criticism—'thin-skinned,' he called himself—he was yet indifferent to praise. Though he knew his own power, his modesty was genuine and deep. The fact that his old friend Carlyle, for instance, had no use for poetry did not in any way diminish Tennyson's affection and respect for him. He had no professional jealousy whatever. His unconventionality could be disconcerting: often he would greet a stranger in his house with a bare word or a nod. On one occasion (the tale goes) he found himself in the summerhouse with a young lady who earnestly hoped to hear some treasure of wisdom from the great man's lips. For a long time there was silence; then, 'Your stays creak,' said the poet. The young lady fled, and the poet, suddenly contrite, pursued her. 'It wasn't your stays,' he growled. 'It was my braces.' Nature in all its forms he loved with a poet's passion and knew with a scientist's exactitude. He loved dogs and children. His grandson has recorded his friendship in late middle age with the little daughter of his friends the Thompsons. He took keen pleasure in the child's company, walking with her about London and sometimes reading his verses to her. One such reading was from *Maud,* and, in the middle of it, it

became apparent to the poet that the child's attention was, not unnaturally, wandering. 'You are not listening,' he said severely. 'You are thinking that I smell of tobacco-smoke.' 'Well of course you do,' the child replied—and the reading continued without further interruption. A friend accounted for the popularity of Tennyson's poetry by saying that it was the most 'human' ever written. Possibly it was; but the word could be applied with more assurance of truth to the poet than to his poetry. There is no poet of the last two hundred years with the one exception of Keats, who (one feels) would be a better companion on a country walk, at dinner at the Cock, or in some little 'fumitory' like his own at Farringford, where twenty or thirty blackened pipes stood in a row, and all the drawers were crammed with tobacco of various sorts.

Tennyson was lucky in his wife—if, indeed, lucky is the word; for a good husband is apt to have a good wife, the goodness being, in the main, a mutual affair. Emily Tennyson was of the same race of selfless women as Tennyson's mother. She was friend as well as lover; confidante as well as wife. She was her husband's bulwark against the encroachments of the world, to which all famous men are subject; she acted, until her health failed, as his secretary and amanuensis, dealing with the mass of letters which came for him daily, and copying his poems. All the business of the two estates of Farringford and Aldworth was in her hands. Her mind was at once naif and profound; for everything he wrote Tennyson took her opinion as a touchstone. I have mentioned Jowett's admiration of her: I might add the judgement of another friend, Mrs. Julia Cameron: 'Emily Tennyson,' she declared, 'was in her way as great as her husband.'

One or two things remain to be said about Tennyson's poetry; for he continued to write until the very end of his life, and with little decline of power. He did indeed as he

grew older write more poems which to-day we are willing to forget; but whenever he found a theme which belonged, as it were, to the true inward spirit of his poetry, he still showed the old magic and the old mastery. Like all the great Romantics he tried his hand at drama, but succeeded no better than his friend Browning. Poetic drama seems to have been a sort of Holy Grail to all the poets of that period: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Shelley joined in the pursuit, and Keats (apart from *Otho,* which was intended only as a money-maker) declared his ambition to write 'two or three fine plays' before he died. Perhaps it was the omnipotent ghost of Shakespeare that beckoned them on—Shakespeare who by Coleridge and the Germans had been for the first time revealed as master poet as well as master playwright. In almost every case he led them astray, and though most of them produced some fine dramatic poetry, not one could manage poetic drama. Tennyson was no exception. Newcomers to Tennyson would do well to leave *Becket* and *Harold* and *Queen Mary* to the last, and few lovers of Tennyson, I guess, find themselves re-reading those plays. The fact is, Tennyson had little sense of character; he had not the power, possessed supremely by Shakespeare, of imaginative metamorphosis into a spirit alien to his own—if, indeed, to Shakespeare anything was alien. He had not the Protean magic of Ariel 'to dive, to swim, to ride on the curled clouds,' to burn like St. Elmo's fire upon the masts and yards, to lead the prince to his love by music in the air, or wicked lords to repentance by the warning of invisible lips. Tennyson remained inalienably himself, and the true business of his poetry was to express that self through its varying moods.

The mood of foreboding, not for himself but for the future of the world, grew upon him in his later years. In this he was a truer prophet than he has generally been credited with being. Whither was the advance of scientific material-

ism to lead? It was a question which pressed upon him continually.

> Let knowledge grow from more to more
> But more of reverence in us dwell,
> That mind and soul according well
> May make one music as before,

he had written in *In Memoriam,* and increasingly he was to feel that without the 'reverence'—without the clinging to certain ultimate truths of the spirit; without a faith, which, though beyond any possibility of demonstration or proof, was somehow necessary if human life was to be anything but a hollow sham—there would soon be nothing left for the world but a sort of Lucretian nihilism and despair, nothing for man but a

> Poor little life that toddles half an hour
> Crown'd with a flower or two, and there an end.

So he clung to his faith in the reality of the Unseen, never dogmatising or attempting to define, but sure, beneath all doubts, of the presence of the Everlasting Arms. Only that certainty could render life tolerable in an age where

> Doubt is the lord of the dunghill and crows to the sun and the moon,
> Till the Sun and the Moon of our science are both of them turned into blood,
> And Hope will have broken her heart, running after a shadow of good.

Tennyson's faith, not reasoned but instinctive, in the immortality of the soul and the goodness of God, in that

> one far off, divine event
> To which the whole creation moves,

gave gravity and weight to all the poetry of his middle and later years, and was one of the reasons which made for his

immense popularity and influence. It opened his poetry to a wider audience than could be hoped for by, for instance, the sceptical and agnostic Swinburne, whose poetical gift was as great, or perhaps greater, than Tennyson's own. Nevertheless it is not this element in Tennyson's poetry which, in the final count, is most precious to us to-day. It is not for his beliefs that Tennyson has taken his place amongst the English poets: not for his religious mysticism, his large-hearted humanity, his noble ideals of patriotism and of family life; not even for the call, which echoes through his later verse, to the Young Mariner to

> Launch your vessel,
> And crowd your canvas,
> And, ere it vanishes
> Over the margin,
> After it, follow it,
> Follow the Gleam.

We can be grateful to Tennyson for these things, as we can be grateful to Shelley for his hatred of tyranny and cant, and contempt of the 'tomes of reasoned wrong, glozed on by ignorance,' and as we can be grateful to Wordsworth for a purer and deeper sense of the influence of nature upon human life. Nevertheless the real power of these poets over us—indeed the real power of all poets over us—lies never in the lessons which they directly teach. The deepest lessons may be learned from poetry; but only indirectly, when the poem has dwelt in the mind, and fermented there, and started trains of thought far removed, it may be, from the apparent theme. The real power of poetry over us is in something more mysterious than a doctrine, or a set of moral values. Shelley, in his famous ode, calls upon the West Wind to carry his words into the hearts of men 'by the incantation of this verse.' For Shelley knew that without the spell, the incantation, there could be no message. That spell, that secret and indefinable beauty of words and

tune, is the essence of all poetry, from one of Burns' songs to *King Lear* and *The Tempest.*

This pure, lyrical gift (one may call it so, for all poetry, including epic and dramatic, has its lyrical element) Tennyson possessed in an eminent degree, and it is by virtue of it that he is amongst the great English poets. Most evident in his early work, it continues, though fitfully, right through to the end, a magical utterance, haunting, sometimes, and apparently as unconsidered as bird-song, as in 'Break, break, break,' at other times wrought out and meditated with all the cunning of the supreme artificer—the very dandyism of poetry, as in the famous lines which end 'Come down, O maid.'

> Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
> The moan of doves in immemorial elms
> And murmuring of innumerable bees;

or the line in *Boadicea*:

> Roar as when the roaring breakers boom and blanch
> on the precipices,

where the onset of the wave, its defeat, and withdrawal in the hiss of foam is marvellously suggested in the narrowing vowels of the last six words. This mastery of verbal music is characteristic of Tennyson in all his best work; it is moreover a varied music, for he was almost as cunning a metrist and inventor of tunes as Shelley was, as can be seen by a glance at his youthful 'girl' poems, his management of the long eight-footers of the two *Locksley Halls* or *Vastness,* the grand irregular harmonies of *The Revenge* or the Wellington *Ode,* the wholly original nine-beat couplets of *To Vergil,* the rippling delicacy of the lyrics in *The Brook,* the Horatian dignity and charm of the two lovely poems of invitation, *To F. D. Maurice* and *To Mary Boyle.*

Tennyson is remarkable amongst poets in that he kept his lyrical gift right up to the time of 'sunset and evening star.' Less constant than in his youth and middle years, the old music, sometimes in graver harmonies, remained upon his lips to the end. *Crossing the Bar,* which he wrote in his eighty-first year ('it came to me in a moment,' he said) is, with the beautiful fidelity and *truth* of its sea-images, as fine as anything he ever wrote. His grandson, Sir Charles Tennyson, tells in his biography a moving story about this poem. Tennyson had been seriously ill, and had become deeply attached to the old nurse who looked after him. As he recovered health, he would often growl at her in his impatience at confinement. 'My Lord,' the nurse said, 'you should not complain; you should write a hymn of thanksgiving for recovery.' Tennyson said nothing; but later, when he had written down the poem, he showed it to her. 'How will this do, old woman?' he said. The nurse read it, and, without a word, hurried from the room. It seemed to her that he had written his death-warrant.

When Hallam Tennyson read the lines, 'This,' he said to his father, 'is the crown of your life's work.'

THE BROWNINGS

1812 - 1889

BROWNING'S poetry is, I fancy, little read nowadays, though a few tags from it, and one or two short lyrics, are still part of the mental stock-in-trade of everyone who cares for literature. Different ages require of poetry different things, though certain fundamental qualities in it remain constant. 'Poetry,' wrote Keats, who was one of the subtlest judges of it who ever lived, 'should be great but unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject. How beautiful are the retired flowers! how would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway, crying out: "Admire me, I am a violet! Dote upon me, I am a primrose!"'

Now Browning was a man of genius, but not his most fervid admirer could call his poetry a retired flower. It is highly mannered, rhetorical and exclamatory, and not seldom cries out upon the reader to dote upon it. In the latter years of his life, once his fame was established, many readers did dote upon it, as is evident by the fact that a Browning Society—which Browning sometimes visited—was formed for its elucidation and enjoyment, and by the other, much more impressive, fact that he was buried in Westminster Abbey. A modern reader is not likely to be put off by mere oddity, accustomed as he is to all sorts of oddities in contemporary poetry. Browning's manner, with its daringly colloquial crackers and fireworks, its accent of a

man talking—loudly, emphatically, brilliantly, sometimes bemusingly—a modern reader may accept without much difficulty, knowing, besides, that all breakings of poetic convention are good in their time and season, and that fresh winds not only do, but must, blow over the waters of poetry now and again, to keep them bright and moving, and to open the way for future voyagers. After all, if Browning had not written, 'Gr-r-r, you swine!' in the *Spanish Cloister,* Masefield might never have ventured upon:

> You closhy put! you bloody liar!

in the *Everlasting Mercy,* and English poetry would have been, not, necessarily, better, but at any rate different. Nor, again, is Browning's notorious obscurity likely to surprise, though it may still bewilder, a submissive reader to-day; for in this, too, he will have had plenty of practice in the poetry of the last thirty years. No; the modern reader, case-hardened to mannerism and obscurity, will have to find a different reason to explain his reluctance to return to Browning. This reason lies in the fact that the characteristic *matter* of Browning's poetry we are accustomed to look for nowadays not in poetry at all, but in novels and short stories. Apart from a handful (a large handful) of songs and lyrics, some beautful, some horrific, and all of them instinct with energy and power, and from his first mature poem *Paracelsus,* Browning's poetry is discursive and analytical. It takes a case, and argues it; it states an apparent weakness in human character, and justifies it on speculative or psychological grounds; it propounds a certain type of mental or spiritual conflict (more usually Browning's own), and grinds it up, like the mills of God, exceeding small. All this may be, and frequently is, both interesting and instructive, but it has come to be done nowadays—and, we believe, better done—by the novel, the scope and technique of which have made great advances of late years. We look

to poetry not for discourse or analysis, but for revelation. What the poet reveals may well be the result of a lifetime's speculation and seeking; but that, we feel, is his business, not ours: what he gives to us should be not the seeking but the thing found, not the speculation but the fruit of it. We do not ask him to say 'Look how,' but 'Lo here!'

It is time, however, to break off this somewhat fractious introduction, and to begin the story of Browning's life—joined, as it must always be, with the story of Elizabeth Barrett, that other poet and most extraordinary woman, who became his wife.

Robert Browning was born at Rainbow Cottage in Camberwell, then a village some three miles from London, on May 7, 1812—the year in which Shelley began *Queen Mab*. Both his parents were remarkable. His father, a clerk in the Bank of England, was by nature, though not by training, a scholar of wide and miscellaneous attainments, a bibliophile, a draughtsman of ability, and a writer of verse. Nature, having filled him with so much of the inflammable material which goes to make a creative artist, grudged him the one small spark which was needed to set it alight, so that he was compelled to seek those 'seven or eight hours a day of regular occupation,' which an unkind acquaintance was later to suggest would have been so good for his son. Of a mild and submissive temperament, leaving the direction of his household wholly in the hands of his capable and dominant wife, he was at the same time a generous father, and from the first welcomed with delight and fostered by all material means in his power the creative genius of his son.

Browning's mother, Sarah Anna Wiedemann, was of mixed German and Scottish descent. She was a woman of deep and simple piety, with no intellectual interests; her chief concern, apart from music and the management of her family, was with the Congregational church in Wal-

worth, whither she took for worship her husband, her son Robert, and her two daughters, Sarianna and Christiana. Browning adored her. He appears to have been dependent upon her beyond the measure of most sons, looking to her as much for emotional support as for material comfort. Until he was over thirty he could not sleep without her goodnight kiss, and his bedroom was next to hers with the door open between. He was a somewhat sickly youth, suffering from constant headaches, which he would try to cure by walking; his letters to Elizabeth Barrett before their marriage are full of his headaches—and of his mother's headaches; and Miss Barrett perceived, and gently rallied him upon, the apparent fact that the headaches in mother and son regularly coincided in point of time, so close was the bond of sympathy between them.

Browning gave early proof of a restless and brilliant intellect. Taught at first by his father, he was sent subsequently to school—to two schools in quick succession; but he hated both, learned, in consequence, nothing at either, and returned promptly to the shelter of home. Tutors in French and Italian were engaged for him, and a music master. Under these circumstances he drank knowledge as a cat laps milk, and became an accomplished pianist in his teens. He developed very early a passion for drawing which, like his love of music, remained with him through life. But the real basis of his education was his father's library, in which he was given full liberty to browse. He browsed with a vengeance—gorged, rather, with a voracious appetite, a 'wolfish hunger' for knowledge, and astonishing powers of digestion. The *Biographie Universelle* was dainty meat to him, and it was in his father's library that, still a boy, he made his first acqaintance with Dante—and with Dante's Beatrice, the all-wise and all-pure, 'looking upon the sun: never did eagle so fix himself upon it.' It was an image which was to haunt him for many years.

When he was sixteen, his father entered him at London University, then newly opened. But, like the two schools, the University would not do. Browning was bored; after a single term he ceased to attend, and hurried back to the warmth and security of home.

The elder Mr. Browning, though he welcomed with joy the signs of literary power in his son (he wished to publish his boyish collection of verse—*Incondita*—but the manuscript was destroyed) nevertheless hoped that Robert, as he grew older, would turn his thoughts to preparing himself to earn a living. Mr. Browning was a poor man and his wife had no fortune. The law was suggested as a possible career for his brilliant son; but to no purpose. For Browning (as for Wordsworth) 'all professions had their inconveniences:' indeed, they were more than inconvenient; they were insufferable, even to think of. Browning always fancied—no doubt rightly—that, even though his poetry should produce no money, he could, if ever the necessity arose, turn his *talents* (with which he was richly endowed) to material account. Meanwhile, however, the necessity had not arisen —and it was never to arise thereafter. Accordingly, the sheltered life in Camberwell continued, the young poet barricaded from the harsh demands of the workaday world, and wholly dependent upon two indulgent parents. Until he was over thirty, it is said, he was never able to pack his own bag or enter a shop for a necessary purchase. Outwardly it was an idle life—but which of us is justified in calling a poet idle, even a poet whose wings are not yet grown? In later years Miss Barrett was to reassure him on this subject—not that he much needed reassurance. The hedger and ditcher, Miss Barrett wrote, thinks the clerk idle, the clerk the manager, and all of them the artist. Intellectually, at any rate, Browning was far from idle. His avid mind was beating 'as fast as millwheels strike,' and ranging over speculative realms far removed from the

ordinary interests of boyhood and early youth—and far removed, also, from the doctrine which he heard preached as he sat by his mother's side in Walworth Congregational Church. He was 'made up,' as he wrote in *Pauline,* 'of an intensest life;' conscious of his own unique selfhood, a self

> Most potent to create and rule and call
> Upon all things to minister to it,

and driven by a fury of restlessness

> Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel all;

to prove upon his pulses what he had already—from earliest childhood, he tells us—glimpsed in the pages of 'wisest ancient books,' while he himself

> went with the tale—a god
> Wandering after beauty, or a giant
> Standing vast in the sunset—an old hunter
> Talking with gods, or a high-crested chief
> Sailing with troops of friends to Tenedos.

Thus already, in his precocious boyhood, Browning wanted two incompatible things: adventure and security; on the one hand he hungered for knowledge and experience; on the other he was bound by his deep need for the emotional security of his home. The situation is not unusual; it became uncomfortable in Browning's case simply because of the intensity of the two needs; for Browning was a poet, and poets by their very nature take things hard. They are not normal men.

Browning in his youth had little use for what he contemptuously called 'young ladies.' They seem to have embarrassed him. His early adorations, of which there were several, were all of women much older than himself. The first of them, the two Flower sisters, he was made aquainted with when he was fourteen. Sarah and Eliza Flower were

then respectively twenty-two and twenty-four years old; both were handsome and intelligent, fond of music and of poetry, and they made much of the brilliant boy. Browning responded with fervour; their affection was, for him, a sudden widening of horizons, a setting out upon a sea vast, mysterious and alluring, and at the same time not dangerous. He could imagine love, and still remain a child. At the age of thirty-four he described to Miss Barrett his 'great delight in the prolonged relation of childhood'; and his loves, in a sense, helped him to prolong it. This was true even of his marvellous courtship and marriage; for though, in this, he took an almost heroic risk, and was successful beyond the lot of most men, he nevertheless took the risk, so to put it, upon terms—and they were hard terms for his Elizabeth, whose heart was wiser than his, to accept. Miss Barrett was his senior by six years; and Browning in all his love for her demanded that she should be, not only his wife, but the guardian angel of his mind and spirit. His great adventure of love had to be made under the protection of those wings. Few women care to be the guardian angels of their lovers; most would prefer the relationship reversed, and Miss Barrett in her letters to Browning before their marriage often protested against his continual self-annulment. 'You will idealize me,' she wrote, 'into a mist'; and chid him for playing the woman in his courtship. 'I will assert,' he answered, 'my masculine prerogative, which is to demand—that *you* should think for me.'

When Browning was sixteen, a cousin gave him a volume of Shelley's poems, which included *Alastor* and *Queen Mab*. The effect upon him was like that of a spark in a powder-barrel. His mind exploded, and for a few dazzling years each particle of it glowed with an intenser light. The poet in him rushed to meet that radiant verse, and here, for his intellectual thirst, was a headier wine than his 'wisest ancient books' could provide. The vision of Shelley—poet,

philosopher, revolutionary—was surely the vision which would transform the world through power and love. Shelley for him was the brave adventurer on strange seas of thought, never afraid to follow wherever truth should lead him; he was the prophet of a new dawn. Browning was intoxicated by the poetry, and filled with reverence for what he felt to be the integrity of Shelley's thought: guided solely by his passion for truth as he saw it, Shelley pierced through the errors of convention, without regard for calumny; he spoke his mind out *whole,* and what he preached, that he practised. The young Browning at once took him as his hero and guide; he adopted his anti-religious and revolutionary doctrines; he lived for two years (as he supposed Shelley had lived) on 'raw cresses and water'; and he vowed that his own life should be guided in all things by Shelley's star: 'I was vowed to liberty,' he wrote in *Pauline,*

> Men were to be as gods, and earth as heaven,
> And I—ah, what a life was mine to prove!
> My whole soul rose to meet it.

Browning wrote *Pauline* when he was twenty. It is a most curious and puzzling poem. In it he professes to 'strip bare' his mind, though most readers will feel that he has left a number of garments still upon it, some of them pretty thick. One element in it—apart from the paean of praise to Shelley the Sun-Treader—is, however, clear: a sense of bitter remorse and failure. 'Remember me,' he cries,

> remember me, who flung
> All honour from my soul.

What did he mean? What was this act of shame, this 'great refusal?' He never told us, though there are hints, later on, in his letters to Miss Barrett, and the admission of failure was to be made again, and much more powerfully, in the

most terrible of his poems, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*. That he was haunted from his youth by a sense of betrayal there is no doubt—but what was it that he felt he had betrayed? His latest biographer* suggests that to follow what one half of him felt to be the truth in the speculative idealism of Shelley meant that he must deny what the other half desired in the protective warmth and naif piety of his Camberwell home, presided over by the spirit of the mother whom he deeply loved; and that this produced in him the necessity of a cruel choice. He could not have both; either spiritual adventure or emotional security had to be sacrificed, and he chose to sacrifice the former. But the choice was not without anguish; for Browning was born a poet, and he believed profoundly in the mission of the poet—of the *vates*, the seer—to proclaim the truth, and all the truth, that was in him. '*My* poetry,' he was to write to Miss Barrett, 'is far from the "completest expression of my being"—I hate to refer to it, or I could tell you why . . . *prove* how imperfect (for a mild word) it must of necessity be.' Perhaps he did tell Miss Barrett, after she had become his wife. Us he never told; so we are left to guess. But the fact remains that his cry of distress in *Pauline* reverberates again and again in his mature work: one catches the echo of it in his preoccupation with a certain type of character—the half-hypocrite, half-worldling; in the almost pathological intensity of the macabre in such poems as the *Laboratory* and *The Heretic's Tragedy*; in the suppressed hatred of the *Spanish Cloister*, and in the dreadful outburst of loathing in *Numpholeptos*. It was Chesterton's shrewd eye which detected in Browning 'something very queer and dangerous.'

A copy of *Pauline* came into the hands of W. J. Fox, the editor of the *Monthly Repository*, and a man who for many years was to be a good friend to Browning. Fox saw

* Betty Miller in *Robert Browning: a Portrait*, 1952.

the promise in the poem and sent a copy to John stuart Mill, in the hope that he might review it in the *Examiner*. Mill did not review it, but he left certain comments upon it: in his opinion the poem was involved and obscure and instinct with an 'intense and morbid self-consciousness'. The comments were shown—rather cruelly—to Browning, who, as any young poet would, shrank under the lash and determined never again to attempt in a poem the direct portrayal of himself. He kept to his resolve: the whole vast bulk of his subsequent work, lyric, dramatic or narrative, is, as Browning himself described it, 'dramatic in principle'—the thought it contains, that is to say, being put into the mouth of some imaginary character. Browning has often been admired for the true dramatic gift; for the power, namely, to enter into the diversity of human character and to *become* what is not himself, as Shakespeare *became* both Imogen and Iago; but it is doubtful if he had this power in any eminent degree. The great majority of Browning's 'characters' are projections of certain aspects of himself.

Though it was Shelley who first revealed to Browning what poetry might be, the immediate occasion of his writing *Pauline,* his first published poem, was his seeing a performance by the actor Kean in *Richard III*. The effect of this upon him (he was twenty years old) was hardly less explosive that the effect of *Queen Mab* four years previously. He went home from the theatre in a sort of delirium, intoxicated with a sense of his own latent powers, and determined, if he could, to storm the citadel of every art, to be not only poet, but artist, musician, playwright, and actor too. By the fevour of this aspiration may be measured the shattering effect of Mill's comment upon *Pauline*.

But Browning was young, and the pulse of his life was vigorous and strong. Too resilient to be checked by one reverse, he was a man, as he told us in what is possibly the most generally remembered of his poems, who 'marched

breast forward' (as, in point of fact, most of us do) and 'never doubted clouds would break.' The clouds of youth can be the blackest of all; nevertheless, break they did. He went off on a journey to St. Petersburg, and, back at home again, wrote his next poem, *Paracelsus*.

Paracelsus, the most remarkable poem by a twenty-one year old poet in English literature (Keats was twenty-two when he wrote *Endymion*), had, unlike *Pauline*, a fair measure of success. The poem is in dramatic form and consists of a series of scenes, or rather conversations, between Paracelsus, the medieval quack doctor with a reputation for great learning, and two friends, Festus and his wife Michal. But the poem is in no sense a drama; it is a brooding representation, part lyrical, part discursive, of a man's search for his own soul. The man is, in reality, Browning himself. Paracelsus, like Browning, sets out with a 'wolfish hunger' for knowledge, but finds the attainment of it ashes in the mouth without its complement, love. God himself is Power and Love; and the union of the two in man is man's only glory. It is a conception fundamental to Browning's thought; one finds it in one of the very last, dry poems of his old age:

> I have faith such end shall be:
> From the first, Power was—I knew.
> Life has made clear to me
> That, strive but for closer view,
> Love were as plain to see.

Browning was a magnificent craftsman; his blank verse, always muscular and sinewy, has, in *Paracelsus*, a certain sweetness and glow—a beauty—which became rarer and rarer in his later work:

> all passions,
> All soft emotions, from the turbulent stir
> Within a heart fed with desires like mine,

> To the last comfort shutting the tired lids
> Of him who sleeps the sultry noon away
> Beneath the tent-tree by the wayside well;
> And this in language as the need should be . . .
> This done, to perfect and consummate all,
> Even as a luminous haze links star to star,
> I would supply all chasms with music, breathing
> Mysterious motions of the soul . . .

So he makes the poet Aprile speak for him—Aprile who would 'love infinitely and be loved,' but is nevertheless only a shadow, because he had not the wisdom to seek for

> love preceding
> Power, and with much power, always much more love;
> Love still too straitened in his present means,
> And earnest for new power to set love free.

Soon after the publication of *Paracelsus* Browning met the actor, William Macready, who proposed that the young poet should write a play for him. Browning leapt at the suggestion, and *Strafford*, his first play, was rapidly completed. It was not a success; nor were Browning's other stage plays, of which he wrote some half dozen. All of them contain impressive and vigorous verse; but Browning's stage characters have a way of talking *at* you, or at each other, in a perpetual tension of moral crisis very fatiguing for the reader, and still more fatiguing (I should guess) for the spectator. The plays made no money and did not increase his reputation. The best thing which came out of Browning's somewhat uneasy friendship with Macready was the *Pied Piper of Hamelin*, that nursery classic of permanent and deserved fame. It was written to amuse Macready's little son, Willie, when he was ill.

Before he wrote *Strafford*, Browning had begun another long poem of which the theme, like that of *Paracelsus*, was to be a man's search for his soul. This was the notorious

Sordello—a poem which Tennyson declared to contain only two intelligible lines: the first—'who will, may hear Sordello's story told'—and the last—'who would, has heard Sordello's story told'—'and both of them lies.' Browning is said to have read thirty books of Italian medieval history to equip himself for this work; and he apparently assumed that his readers would be sure to have done the same. Most of them, however, have not—or, at any rate, not the *same* books. The result is bewildering, and the best-intentioned reader, hoping, but in vain, that each succeeding line may illuminate what has gone before, will sympathise with Mrs. Carlyle, who pettishly remarked, after going through the poem, that she did not know if Sordello was a city, a man, or a book. Meredith was accused by Andrew Lang of erecting an impenetrable zareba in front of his novels, but Meredith's zareba cannot compare in prickliness and density with Browning's in *Sordello*. Nevertheless, what a poet Browning could be—even in *Sordello*! Technically the verse is superb; no poet except Shelley had a greater mastery of the 'resolved' heroic couplet than Browning: his couplets move like an anaconda in their muscularity and power, and there are passages in the poem, if one has the patience to look for them, of great beauty—like that in which Sordello (the minstrel) wins a prize for his song:

> On flew the song, a giddy race,
> After the flying story; word made leap
> Out word, rhyme—rhyme; the lay could barely keep
> Pace with the action visibly rushing past;

and, when it was done,

> He seemed to shrink
> Into a sleepy cloud, just at whose brink
> One sight withheld him. There sat Adelaide,
> Silent; but at her knees the very maid

Of the North Chamber, her red lips as rich,
The same pure fleecy hair, one weft of which,
Golden and great, quite touched his cheek as o'er
She leant, speaking some six words and no more.
He answered something—anything; and she
Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily
Upon him, her neck's warmth and all. Again
Moved the arrested magic; in his brain
Noises grew, and a light that turned to glare,
And greater glare, until the intense flare
Engulfed him, shut the whole scene from his sense.
And when he woke 'twas many a furlong thence,
At home; the sun shining his ruddy wont;
The customary birds'-chirp; but his front
Was crowned—was crowned!

Poor Browning's front, however, was not crowned as a result of this poem, which took him seven years to complete. The critics jeered at it, and left him profoundly depressed. While he was engaged upon it, he went, in 1838, to Italy for the first time, visiting Venice, Verona and, in particular, the little town of Asolo, with which he incontinently fell in love, and used later for the setting of *Pippa*.

This first visit to Italy, which was to be his home throughout the fifteen years of his married life, was a happy one. Six years later, when *Sordello* had been published and condemned, he returned thither in a very different mood.

This time he visited the places associated with Shelley—bringing home a violet from his grave. He also called upon Trelawny, the old pirate, in the hope of talk about his idol; but the meeting was a failure: neither man warmed to the other, and they parted with nothing said. Back in England again, his mood of depression grew darker; his health was not good, and he felt that he had failed. Then, at the end of the year 1844, he chanced to look into two volumes of

poems which he found on the table at his home: they were the poems of Elizabeth Barrett. Having begun, he read on with growing interest and delight in their 'fresh strange music,' and 'exquisite pathos and new true brave thought'; that thought, moreover, was a woman's, that music the music of a woman's tongue. Browning had listened before to the music of a woman's tongue; but he had been a boy then, and the music itself had been of a very different quality. This was a mature voice, and he thrilled in response to it. Then turning the pages, he came upon the lines:

> Or from Browning some 'Pomegranate,' which if
> cut deep down the middle
> Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined
> humanity.

Never since his discovery of Shelley had a book touched him so upon the quick. The reading of it was heavy with destiny, and Browning knew it. 'I love these books with all my heart,' he wrote to Miss Barrett; 'and I love you too.'

Elizabeth Barrett was at this time a woman of thirty-nine, brilliant, witty, of great personal charm, a celebrated poet—and an invalid. She had known Browning's work for some years and warmly admired it, especially his beautiful *Pippa Passes*, the first of the series which he strangely entitled *Bells and Pomegranates*. She had also heard of him from their mutual friend (and her own distant cousin) John Kenyon, the friend of Wordsworth and Lamb, himself a small poet but a man of large understanding and still larger heart. But that she should ever meet Browning—that he should ever penetrate the almost fantastic seclusion in which she lived—was very far from her thoughts.

Elizabeth's father, Edward Moulton Barrett, had made a fortune in the West Indies, and upon settling in England had built himself a house, Hope End, in Herefordshire,

where Elizabeth, the eldest of his large family, spent most of her childhood. Though a little creature (she once told how she hid from authority in a hat-box) she was by no means an invalid in her early years, but passionately devoted to riding, walking, wild weather and all country things, and something of a tomboy. But at the age of fourteen or so she hurt her spine in an accident with a pony, and later, as the years went on, began to develop a weakness in chest and lungs. This was bad enough, but both troubles, even in those days of medical ignorance, might have been remediable, had it not been for the extraordinary behaviour of Elizabeth's father. Mr. Barrett was a tyrant of the very worst kind; for his tyranny masqueraded under the disguise of benevolence and love. He could not endure the least sign of independence in any of his numerous children, sons or daughters. The news that a daughter had thoughts of marriage threw him once into an ungovernable rage—the poor girl was his, and his she should remain. When Elizabeth fell sick, it is hardly unfair to say that he welcomed her sickness with a kind of unholy joy, because it set the seal upon her final and absolute dependence. He laid her, so to speak, once for all upon her sofa, and watched her languish there with his ruthlessly tender and tyrannic eye, praying with her nightly, mourning over her, secretly rejoicing in his grief. It was horrible; yet, strange to say, Elizabeth loved him.

When some loss of fortune compelled Mr. Barrett to sell Hope End, the family lived for a time in Devonshire, then moved to London, and finally settled at No. 50 Wimpole Street. In this house, now so famous in literary history, within a room behind double doors, the windows sealed at the edges for eight months of the year with strips of paper ('the spiders have grown tame,' Elizabeth wrote to Miss Mitford; 'Flush eschews walking under the bed'), shut off completely from the outside world and hardly conscious of

the passage of time, the invalid lay for years, with hardly more movement than from bed to sofa and from sofa to bed again, receiving a few privileged visitors, endlessly reading, constantly writing, nearly dead in body, but in mind vividly and passionately alive, deep in communion with Greek poetry (she was a good scholar) and with all the moderns from Chaucer to her own day, and listening, always listening, for the postman's knock. She was a tremendous, and most entertaining, letter-writer, and the letters she received were brought to her bed by Flush, the golden cocker Miss Mitford had given her, and whom she fed lovingly but not wisely upon macaroons. Elizabeth expected death, but did not fear it; it had become a familiar presence; perhaps, since the death by drowning of her beloved brother Edward, even a friendly presence. She was resigned to it, as she was resigned, in a degree hardly conceivable in these more liberal days, to the hideous selfishness and dreadful domination of her father.

'I love these books, my dear Miss Barrett, with all my heart—and I love you too . . .' Letters came thick for Miss Barrett by every post, but hardly letters like this; her heart must have missed a beat before she smiled to herself, a little ruefully, and took up her pen to reply. She replied lightly, gracefully, impersonally—as one poet to another. Browning wrote again, and yet again, and before long was asking to be admitted to see her. 'There is nothing to see in me,' she answered, 'nor to hear in me. If my poetry is worth anything to any eye, it is the flower of me, I have lived most and been most happy in it, and so it has all my colours; the rest of me is a root, fit for the ground and the dark.'

But with every postponement Browning grew more urgent. Reading her verses he had fallen in love with her image, and the presentiment was strong upon him that he was destined to fall in love with herself. He was right; but Elizabeth was frightened. As a poet she had long admired,

even exalted and romanticized, him: he lived with his genius full in the sunshine of the free, gay world with everything before him and within his grasp; she, on the other hand, was no longer even young—her beauty, once delicate and flowerlike, had faded in the long years of sickness and sorrow and acquaintance with death. Browning might love her image in his mind, but surely—she felt—he would recoil from that wasted physical presence, that dreadful house heavy and darkened with sickness and gloom. For months she put him off, refusing to see him, lest the little they already had might be spoiled. But Browning was insistent, and on May 20, 1845, they met. A few months later he proposed marriage.

The effect of this proposal, in the extraordinary circumstances of the Barrett household, can be guessed at in the light of a remark of Elizabeth's in a letter: 'I will tell you,' she wrote, 'what I once said in jest: if a prince of El Dorado should come with a pedigre of lineal descent from some signory in the moon in one hand, and a ticket of good behaviour from the nearest Independent chapel in the other —"why, even *then*," said my sister Arabel, "it would not *do*." And she was right; we all agreed she was right.' So much for Mr. Barrett, and the likelihood of his giving his consent to his daughter's marriage with a still obscure poet. And, even apart from Mr. Barrett's insane possessive fury, it was a fact that all Elizabeth's family and friends, and all her doctors, were convinced that she was an incurable and hopeless invalid. Only Browning himself refused to believe it: 'You shall laugh at east winds yet, as I do,' he wrote. And, once again, Browning was right. Not that Elizabeth ever fully recovered her health; but she was to have fifteen years of married life, she was to walk five miles at a stretch, to be carried up Italian mountains on donkey-back, and to bear a son.

The visits to Wimpole Street continued, with every pre-

caution to conceal them from Mr. Barrett. Elizabeth, with a sort of incredulity and profound gratitude, soon found herself returning Browning's love. The story of the development of their love and of the elopement in which it culminated is contained in the long series of letters—daily letters, sometimes two a day—which passed between them for more than a year. To read these letters—delightful letters, especially Elizabeth's, which show a deeper life-wisdom and sense of reality than Browning's, and are shot through with a light of most delicate wit conspicuously absent from his—is to be admitted to a privacy which, possibly, we have no right to enter. Modern psychological biographers have had their fun with them, as no doubt they could have, if they wished, with any love letters that have ever been written. Selective evidence can prove most things. Nevertheless it is not difficult to detect, on Browning's side, the recurrence in this, the first and last great love of his life, of a certain familiar pattern. Browning could love, as he himself put it, only 'from beneath—far beneath;' love for him had to be synonymous with self-abasement, and the worship of a star; he needed to know, in his inmost being, that the person he loved was above him, exalted in some far region of impregnable wisdom and goodness—a saint to be adored. Thus, as a romantic boy, he had adored his Eliza and her sister, despising, as he grew to manhood, all 'young ladies,' to whom (to borrow a phrase of Keats') he would rather have given a sugar-plum than his time. Thus too, though now with the full power of his manhood, he adored Elizabeth. He would be content, he told her, to be no more to her than one of her brothers, if only he had the right, as her husband, to pass his life by her sick-bed and to serve her. For him she was the all-wise and all-pure, his Beatrice, his guardian angel—the 'anchor of his purest thoughts,' as Nature was to Wordsworth, and soul of his moral being. Even to her opinions he felt bound to submit: once when

Elizabeth expressed surprise that he should have defended the custom of duelling, he promptly recanted—to her considerable distress.

Elizabeth, for all her love, could not but be alarmed at this idealization. Moreover, she had a great capacity for hero-worship herself, and would have wished, as possibly most women would have wished, to reverse the position. Apart from the appalling responsibility of being credited with perfection, she did quite genuinely believe that she was unworthy of Browning's love; for her, after the long years of sickness and grief, it was a miracle to be loved at all, and a greater miracle to be loved by this man whose mind she had long admired, and who seemed to have the world at his feet—this 'guest for queens to social pageantries,' as she wrote in a sonnet,

> With gazes from a hundred brighter eyes
> Than tears even can make mine.

But for all her pleading, half humorous, half rueful, but at bottom serious enough, Browning would not, or could not, allow her to step down from her pedestal and mount it in her place. Through hundreds of letters a sort of seraphic wrangling goes on upon the subject of worth and precedence, like a comedy in heaven, and it is to the credit of Elizabeth's wisdom that she came to realize that it was she who must give way, or at least pretend to give way, if she was not to brush off what was, in actual fact, the very bloom upon the wings of Browning's love. 'I have just so much logic,' she wrote, 'as to be able to see (though I am a woman) that for *me* to be too good for *you*, and for *you* to be too good for *me*, cannot be true at once, both ways.'

Miraculously (for it remains a miracle, however well we understand these things nowadays) Elizabeth's health began to improve. She walks unsupported from bed to sofa; she goes downstairs to the drawing-room; sometimes she does

not even ask one of her brothers to carry her up again; she drives out in the carriage with her sister Arabel and Flush; she visits the Botanical Gardens: 'What I most enjoy to see,' she wrote, 'is the green under the green . . . where the grass stretches under the trees. That is something unspeakable to me, in the beauty of it. And to stand under a tree and feel the green shadow of the tree! I never knew before the difference of the *sensation* of a green shadow and a brown one. I seemed to feel that green shadow through and through me, till it went out at the soles of my feet and mixed with the other green below.' The old delights, long buried and almost forgotten, were coming back again. She was turning her face towards the light.

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove:
'Guess now who holds thee?' 'Death,' I said, but there
The silver answer rang,—'Not death, but Love.'

So she wrote in the first of her *Sonnets from the Portuguese,* in the early days of her love. There were to be forty-four of these sonnets, and she did not show them to Browning until nearly two years after their marriage. Then, one morning after breakfast, at Casa Guidi in Florence, she pushed the manuscript into the pocket of his coat, and hurried from the room.

How Browning was ever to marry his Ba (as he called

Elizabeth, adopting her family nickname) was a more difficult problem than arranging their meetings in Wimpole Street. Fortunately lack of money was no barrier; for though Browning had not a penny, and was averse, in spite of protestations, from taking steps to earn one, Elizabeth possessed some £400 a year of her own. But there was Mr. Barrett, and to get Mr. Barrett's consent was, Elizabeth knew too well, an absolute impossibility. It is not easy to believe in Mr. Barrett: few romancers would have dared to invent him; but he was real, none the less—dreadfully real. Sometime in the year 1845 Elizabeth's doctors had declared that she must winter in Italy or die: Mr. Barrett refused to let her go, on the ground that one of her brothers would have to accompany her, and he preferred to keep his family about him. A few years before, when Elizabeth was at Torquay desperately ill, she begged that her favourite brother Edward might be allowed to stay on with her: 'keep him if you like,' was Mr. Barrett's reply; 'but I looked for greater self-sacrifice from you.' Edward stayed—and was drowned. Elizabeth never forgot it: it was a burden on her heart until she died. Yet she loved this strange man, and the thought of deceiving him was painful to her. Nevertheless he had to be deceived.

The opportunity arose from an action of Mr. Barrett's own, one of those sudden and peremptory decrees which he was accustomed to issue, when the whim took him, to his submissive family. For many months past Browning had been urging Elizabeth to make her decision, and Elizabeth had temporized: 'At the summer's end,' she would promise, 'if I am well, and the weather is kind.' To her, the reality of her love was clear enough; but marriage was a different matter: placed as she was, and had been for so long, she could not but feel that so tremendous a change, so utter a breaking of her many bonds, was a kind of dream. What she wanted was that her lover should assume absolute con-

trol—take her by force—cease to ask for her consent. But Browning continued to beg: with increasing urgency, indeed, but still with the undertone of submission to her will —'what *you* desire, *I* desire,' was his constant refrain; and poor Elizabeth could but echo his words. 'If you think you are not to have your share of responsibility,' she said, 'that you are not to consider and arrange and decide, you are as much mistaken as ever *I* was.'

Summer's end came, and there was still no decision. Then, suddenly, in the second week of September, Mr. Barrett ordered his entire family off to Kent for a month, in order to have the house in Wimpole Street cleaned and decorated. They were to go, Elizabeth told Browning, almost certainly within five days. It was now or never.

Browning made his decision. 'If you *do* go on Monday,' he wrote, 'our marriage will be impossible for another year. We must be married directly and go to Italy. I will go for a licence today and we can be married on Saturday.' He had 'arranged and decided' at last.

On Saturday, therefore, 12th September, 1846, Elizabeth, accompanied by her faithful maid Wilson, stole in a sort of stupor from the house in Wimpole Street, and, pale as death, met her lover at Marylebone Church, where they were married. After the ceremony each returned to their respective homes. A week passed in making final arrangements for their escape to Italy—arrangements undertaken, but sadly bungled, by Browning, who looked out the wrong boats and the wrong trains, and had to be guided by the greater practical sense of his wife. But at last all was ready, and Mrs. Browning, with Wilson and Flush, crept once more from the tomblike house, which, this time, they were never to enter together again. A few days later they were all in Pisa. What, precisely, Mr. Barrett felt or said, when he found his daughter's room empty, can only be guessed. No one, fortunately, has recorded it. But he never saw

Elizabeth again, and all the letters she wrote him he left unread.

At the time of his marriage Browning was thirty-four. He had written a good deal—many of the *Dramatic Lyrics* in addition to the plays and long poems which I have mentioned. But apart from a few discerning people (amongst whom were Dickens and his future biographer Forster) he had not yet won any recognition. The whole series of *Bells and Pomegranates*—eight small, cheaply produced books—had been published at the expense of his father, and had sold poorly. Except for Browning's old friend W. J. Fox, the critics in general dismissed his poetry as grotesque and unintelligible. Up to a point they were justified, though the notorious 'difficulty' of Browning's poetry has been much exaggerated. *Sordello* was a freak, and Browning never recurred to that sort of Humpty-Dumptyish impenetrability. His best poetry, whether early or late, is not difficult; the difficulties creep in (mostly in the later poems) only when he begins to indulge his passion for fine-spun casuistical argumentation, such as is not really at home in poetry at all. And even this might be called fatiguing rather than difficult. One wonders, for instance, if the subject of *Fifine at the Fair*—the justification of an intellectual Don Juan who feels a momentary thrill of excitement in the presence of a gipsy girl—really deserves, or needs, so many thousands of lines of intricate argument and exposition. When the rabbit does, at last, come out of the hat, it is a very ordinary rabbit after all.

But Browning's best work is a different matter (it is a question that should be asked in Heaven: why do nearly all poets *write too much?*) There are passages of great beauty in *Pippa Passes*. The poem is nobly conceived and finely executed. The theme is an extension of the theme of *Paracelsus*; for the 'love' which Paracelsus spent his life to find is already unconsciously possessed by Pippa, the little silk-

winder of Asolo who, on her one day of holiday in the year, turns by her innocent songs the current of the lives of others from evil to good. No lover of poetry should be ignorant of the splendid, and deeply original, description of sunrise with which the poem opens (Browning was a skilful metrist and experimenter in metre), or of the fine scene between the guilty lovers—one of the few passages in which Browning wrote directly of physical passion—or of Pippa's charming song, which might almost have found a place in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*:

> The year's at the spring
> And day's at the morn;
> Morning's at seven;
> The hill-side's dew-pearled;
> The lark's on the wing,
> The snail's on the thorn:
> God's in his heaven—
> All's right with the world!

It is odd to think how often those lines have been taken for an expression of Browning's own easy optimism. They are not; on the contrary, for Browning himself all was by no means right with the world, as can be seen by his constant preoccupation, which increased as he grew older, with sordid themes (the *Inn Album; Red Cotton Nightcap Country*), his analyses of hypocrisy and self-deception (brilliantly carried out in such poems as *Bishop Blougram* and *Mr. Sludge the Medium*), the macabre and savage lyrics which (like *Porphyria's Lover* or the *Confessional*) would suddenly drop from his pen, and the fact that many of the love poems, even of those written during the earliest and happiest years of his marriage, are, like *Two in the Campagna* or *Any Wife to Any Husband*, songs of bewilderment and doubt. Browning loved life, he had a zest for living and an immense physical and intellectual vitality; but he

was not a happy man. Poets are seldom happy men. That he was an optimist, as he is almost universally reputed to have been, is perhaps true: but he was not an optimist in little Pippa's sense—which was not optimism but innocence. If he was an optimist at all, it was because he felt that the game of life, however hard and bitter it might be, was yet worth the candle, and because even in evil, if one looks deep enough, there is some soul of goodness to be found.

The imputation of grotesqueness in Browning's poetry came from a reason similar to that which made early readers fail to see beauty in the poetry of Wordsworth. Browning, like Wordsworth, was an innovator and a breaker of poetic convention; and he went further than Wordsworth, for whereas Wordsworth adopted in poetry (or claimed to adopt) the '*language* ordinarily used by men,' Browning adopted not the language—not the words only—of common educated speech, but also the *idiom*. When Wordsworth was writing, as he often but by no means always did, according to his professed theory, his words were colloquial, not literary; but Browning's idiom and turn of phrase were constantly colloquial too. Pippa's song is an example: no poet before Browning (and few after him, until recent times) would have allowed himself those contractions (year's, day's, morning's, etc.) which occur in every single line. That is not how poets wrote: but it *is* how men talked. So it is in that pleasant poem *A Toccata of Galuppi's* (Browning always did his damnedest to alienate readers by his titles)—a poem which tells of the pictures of old Venice called up by Galuppi's music, and ends thus:

> As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
> Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop;
> What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

'Dust and ashes!' So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.

Colloquial words, colloquial idiom . . . these things, and their similars and opposites, are entertaining and instructive to observe in poetry; but they do not *make* poetry. The poetry if it is there, merely shines through them, as the spirit through the flesh. No poet is to be judged by his technical devices; he is to be judged only by the use he makes of them. Browning often made triumphant use of his oddities and innovations; sometimes, on the other hand, they are merely tiresome—as in the line from *Rabbi Ben Ezra*:

> Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

Talking of titles, one thinks of another poem, very light, amusing and clever, such as could not incongruously appear in *Punch* to-day, which he called *Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis.*

From Pisa the Brownings went to Florence where they settled at Casa Guidi, which became their home for the rest of their married lives. During the fifteen years they lived together Browning wrote comparatively little—the portrait sketches in the series *Men and Women,* a few lyrics, and *Mr. Sludge the Medium* (which he did not show to his wife) being pretty well all. It did not seem that he could settle to poetry, and he would spend hours a day for months, to his wife's regret, and even alarm, modelling copies of heads in clay. Mrs. Browning, on the other hand, wrote much, notably her long political poem *Casa Guidi Windows* and her still longer 'novel in verse,' *Aurora*

Leigh. Her reputation, already great, was increasing both in England and America, and on the death of Wordsworth in 1850 she was considered for the office of Poet Laureate. Browning rejoiced in her success. He believed honestly, though erroneously, that her poetry was better than his own: '*She* was the poet,' he wrote after her death, 'and I the clever person by comparison.' Nevertheless, in spite of his generous pleasure in Elizabeth's fame, the continued neglect in which he found himself must have been galling. He was playing second fiddle—a thing which, indeed, in a sense he always longed to do, and sought to do, but which, at the same time, frustrated what was best in him. It might be said, and with truth, that the best in him was his love for his wife; nevertheless that love, profound and sincere though it was, was not compatible with that adventure of the spirit which the poet in him demanded. He bowed before his 'moon of poets,' and one part of him struggled against the bonds which the other part had so willingly and so eagerly imposed. Elizabeth, in her turn, was perfectly aware that, for all their mutual love, she was—and could not, under the circumstances, help being—a weight upon him. It had been her chief fear before their marriage, and she expressed it again and again in her letters; now, as his wife, though she knew his need of her, she knew also that the old fear was not without foundation. She knew that one part of him, however deeply hidden, however anxiously repressed, was dragging at the chain:

> I would that you were all to me,
> You that are just so much, no more,
> Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!
> Where does the fault lie? What the core
> O' the wound, since wound must be?

Both knew well enough, being poets, what the core of the wound was—and both knew too that the fault lay nowhere.

During the early years at Florence Browning's care for his wife was almost exaggerated in its tenderness. All their friends noted and commented upon it with wonder. He never left her side, and when she was ill, as she still frequently was, he nursed her with more than womanly gentleness and patience. Often, she said, when letters came from home, she had to ask him to go out of the room and 'leave her alone for ten minutes.' When she rose from her chair to cross the floor, he rose too and walked by her side.

When they had been married nearly three years, their son (Penini, or Pen) was born and christened Robert Wiedeman. Browning, who did not care for children, was nevertheless much moved when he laid his son for the first time in his wife's arms. Unhappily, however, a week after his child's birth, news came that old Mrs. Browning had died. Browning was prostrated with grief, sitting hour after hour, day after day, in a corner of the drawing room, doing nothing, and unable to eat or sleep. The new-born life was no compensation for the loss of the old, and so deep was his distress that he could take no natural pleasure in the child. In later years he was to prove a conscientious and kindly father, but never a sympathetic or understanding one. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was enraptured by motherhood, writing innumerable letters to her family and friends in praise of her baby (a Gesu bambino, his nurse called him) and buying the first thimble she had possessed since girlhood, to sew his clothes for him. As Pen grew, Elizabeth spoiled him deplorably: she dressed him like a girl and let him sleep in her room until she died; and, just as Flush had too many macaroons, so Pen had a constant excess of huggings and kissings.

Yet it would be a harsh man who should blame Elizabeth too severely: for her, who until so recently had expected nothing but death, motherhood must have been more of a

miracle even than it is to most women. But poor Pen had to suffer for it.

Five years passed before the Brownings revisited England. For both of them it was an overcast and sorrowful time; Browning could hardly bring himself to enter his old home, now that his mother was no longer there, and upon Elizabeth the shadow of Mr. Barrett's unrelenting anger lay dark and heavy. She sent Pen frequently to the house in Wimpole Street, that her brothers and sisters might see him, and even, on one or two occasions, ventured into it herself. But she had to creep in like a thief, and it must have been bitter for her. Once, when she was with her sister Arabel, she heard her father coming up the stairs, then going down again, and his laugh in the hall below. Both husband and wife were glad to be back in Italy again—that 'Paradise of exiles.' Elizabeth was to visit England only once more.

As Pen grew older, Browning busied himself with his education. It is amusing to speculate upon these lessons—the little, spoilt boy averse to discipline, confronted with the swift, powerful but not over-sensitive mind of the father, to whom all learning had come only too easily. Browning was better with old men than with children: Carlyle loved him and listened to him; and during these days in Italy he brought comfort to the formidable Landor, who, at eighty-five, was still violently quarrelling with his wife and family. Landor had escaped from home and taken refuge in Casa Guidi. His wife, pursuing him, knocked at the door. 'Let her in,' cried the old man, 'and I throw myself out of the window.' 'The best thing he could do,' replied his wife. Only Browning could calm him, and he arranged for the old poet to be looked after in lodgings by Wilson, Elizabeth's maid, who was now married to an Italian husband.

Elizabeth was a great admirer of Louis Napoleon. Browning, true to his liberal principles, hated and despised him;

moreover he was puzzled and distressed by his wife's determined championship of the Emperor. But what seemed to Browning a more serious aberration on Elizabeth's part was her interest in spiritualism. Elizabeth had first allowed herself to be drawn to a belief in spiritualism during a visit to Rome and had accepted its dubious revelation and its paraphernalia of table-rappings and trances with an almost childlike credulity. The robuster mind of Browning rejected the whole thing with scorn; moreover, being, as he was, a great stickler for the social conventions, he disliked the sort of people who were associated with it, just as he had disliked the sort of people whom he and Elizabeth had encountered some years previously in Paris paying their court to the novelist George Sand. Then, about the year 1857, Home, the celebrated medium, visited Florence, and held seances which both Browning and his wife attended. Elizabeth implicitly believed in Home's good faith; Browning declared he had caught him cheating. The scene at the seance is well known and sufficiently absurd; while they sat round the table in semi-darkness, a wreath of flowers, which had been placed upon it, rose into the air, travelled towards Mrs. Browning, and settled on her head. Mrs. Browning appears to have been pleased with this mark of favour; but Browning was disgusted, swore that Home was a swindler and forbade his wife to have anything more to do with him.

This incident, combined with the difference of opinion about the Emperor, was more painful for Browning than it would have been for most men, because it struck deeper. It struck deeper because of Browning's need to respect his wife's intellect and understanding. Love her he always did; but an element in his love was the adoration of a being greater and better than himself in every way. 'Look down on you, my Ba?' he had written just before their marriage; 'never . . . I look *up*—always up. When I indulge my deepest luxury, I make you *stand* . . . do you

know that? I sit, and my Ba chooses to let me sit, and stands by—understanding all the same how the relation really is between us—how I would, and do, kiss her feet—my queen's feet.' And throughout the seraphic wrangle about precedence, which fills so much of their letters, Browning is constantly humbling himself before her wisdom, her 'radiant intellectuality.' He believed in it, and needed to believe in it; but what could he say of it now that he found her taking as gospel the miserable hocus-pocus of Dunglass Home, and blindly trusting that Louis Napoleon would prove the saviour of her (and his) beloved Italy? Elizabeth, on her side, had always feared his idealization of her: 'I thought,' she wrote, referring to the early days of their acquaintance, 'you did not love *me* at all—you loved out into the air, I thought—a love *a priori*, as the philosophers might say, and not *by induction* anywise!' He did, to be sure, convince her of his love; but the fear, or the shadow of it, remained. And now that she knew that she had disappointed him, that she had proved guilty of what was, to him, a folly of which he had never believed her capable, the fear was redoubled. She was still a sick woman, and her husband was in the prime of his vitality and strength, liked by men and adored by women. It is not surprising if, for all their love, she began to feel that she was a drag upon him.

It was at this period that Browning wrote the most terrible of all his poems, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. It is a poem of defiance in the face of failure, powerful and moving as Browning's best verse always is, and with just a touch of the theatrical, to make it his own:

> . . . noise was everywhere: it tolled
> Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears
> Of all the lost adventurers, my peers,—
> How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
> And such was fortunate, yet each of old

Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.
There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
And blew. "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*"

Coming with the other 'lost adventurers' to his Dark Tower, Browning seems to echo, though in deeper tones, the boyish cry to Pauline, a quarter of a century before, with which he begged her to remember him who 'flung all honour from his soul.'

To this time or a little earlier belongs also the most beautiful of all Browning's lyrics, *A Woman's Last Word*—

Let's contend no more, Love,
Strive nor weep:
All be as before, Love,
——Only sleep!

a poem with more tenderness and sweetness than any other that he wrote, and with a delicate, inward and uncomplex music, without parallel in the rest of his work.

Browning, who during the first years in Italy had been unable ever to leave his wife's side, now began to go into society. Elizabeth encouraged him, thankful to see him happy and occupied; for he was still writing very little, except for the few poems I have mentioned, and the beginning of another long one, which he did not show to Elizabeth. This was *Mr. Sludge the Medium,* and was occasioned by his disturbing intercourse with Home. Soon he was going out almost every evening dining and dancing, sometimes not returning until the early hours, while Elizabeth stayed at home in Casa Guidi with Pen. Her health was deteriorating; she was coughing, and spitting blood,

and often very weak. 'I know my place,' she wrote to Browning's sister Sarianna; 'I am only fit for a drag chain.'

In June 1861 Elizabeth grew suddenly much worse. Browning, as always when she was ill, nursed her day and night with the utmost tenderness. For a few days each thought it was only one of her familiar attacks and that she would recover; but, on the twenty-ninth of the month, she died in Browning's arms. Her death is said to have been hastened by grief for the death of her sister, and of the great Italian statesman Cavour. Browning had still in front of him twenty-eight years of vigorous and productive life.

The fifteen years of marriage were the centre and core of Browning's long life; but it would be a shallow person who resented the statement that they were not necessarily his happiest years. Happiness is one of the greater of life's mysteries, and the poet Blake was right when he told us that

> Joy and woe are woven fine,
> A clothing for the soul divine.

Both Browning and his wife were poets, and capable therefore of deeper intensities and harsher frustrations than those of commoner mould. Elizabeth was always the clearer sighted of the two in what affected their mutual relationship: she knew where the danger lay better than he did. Sometimes it crept very close, as one sees in the mood of *Childe Roland;* and the beast's eyes glare again in the queer and horrible poem called *Numpholeptos*, which Browning wrote fifteen years after Elizabeth's death. [To recur, by the way, to the rebarbative nature of Browning's *titles*: even 'Nympholeptus, as others spell it, is trying enough—but Numpholeptos! He had a way, too, of calling Olympus Olumpos, rather as if he were anxious

to tell us that he knew Greek. Try as I will, I cannot but feel, however, that a numph is a less attractive being than a nymph.]

Browning in 1861 was a man of fair fortune and by no means the penniless dependent he had been at the time of his marriage. Apart from his wife's money, he had £11,000 which had been left to him and Elizabeth by John Kenyon, always their most loyal and generous friend. Elizabeth's *Aurora Leigh,* too, had gone into five or six editions and made no inconsiderable sum, and, lastly, Browning himself, after the publication of *Men and Women,* though still far from popular, was beginning at long last to be recognized as a poet of importance.

He had now two chief objects in mind: the education of Pen, and the writing of a certain long poem which he had been brooding over for several years, and which Elizabeth, to his chagrin, had refused to take the least interest in. The first object, Pen's education, he set about with inconceivable clumsiness, though with the best intentions. Four days after Elizabeth's death he cropped Pen's ringlets short, stripped off his fancy clothes and dressed him in trousers; then, immediately on their removal to England, he engaged a tutor for him, forbade the use of the Italian language to which Pen was accustomed, and did everything in his power to turn him from the Italianate child, the pampered pet of his mother, into a common and hearty English boy. No doubt the transformation was desirable, and even possible—in time; but it was not possible in five minutes. Poor little Pen suffered severely; and Browning who, apart from his gross ignorance of a child's needs, was a kind father and genuinely anxious for his son's good, ought not to have been surprised when Pen turned out not to be good for much. He was excessively idle and had two illegitimate children before he was nineteen.

The second object was, for posterity, more important; for the poem was *The Ring and the Book*, Browning's most ambitious and, in some respects, his finest work. It took him five years to write, and made him famous. Recognized at once as a great poem, it put Browning at last, after his thirty-five years of obscurity, on a level in public estimation with Tennyson, his great contemporary, rival, and friend.

Browning's eye, as he passed one day through the booths, or open-air junk-shops, of a square in Florence, had been taken by a certain battered old book, lying amongst a heap of miscellaneous rubbish. But let him describe the incident in his own slap-dash, duck-and-punch, urgent, muscular, and extraordinarily vivid and vigorous verse:

> Do you see this square old yellow book [he wrote] I toss
> I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about
> By the crumpled vellum covers—pure crude fact
> Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
> And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since?
> Examine it yourselves! I found this book,
> Gave a *lira* for it, eightpence English just,
> (Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,
> Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,
> One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,
> Across a square in Florence, crammed with booths,
> Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market-time . . .
> This book . . .
> 'Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames
> White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,
> Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests . . .
> Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
> Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry
> Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts
> In baked earth (broken, Providence be praised!) . . .

and so on, till he saw the Book,

One glance at the lettered back of which,
And 'Stall!' cried I: a *lira* made it mine.

The book—'pure crude fact'—was the record of a murder trial which had taken place in Rome in 1698. Out of this crude fact Browning made his poem—as the goldsmiths mixed metal and alloy to fashion a ring, and, the work done, dispersed the alloy with acid and left the ring pure gold. The plan, brilliantly original, of the poem is to retell the story of the crime successively from the points of view of the people involved in it and of the indifferent society of the time, thus building up a composite picture of human motive and passion of great subtlety and depth. The underlying theme of the poem—the 'pure gold' of which the ring is made after the 'alloy' of crude fact has been dispersed—is Browning's characteristic belief that evil, like good, is never in the world absolute: a belief which furnishes both grounds for hope and room for endeavour. Chesterton, in his sparkling but erratic study of Browning, points out an interesting parallel between the moral problem which, in the poem, confronts the young priest who rescues Pompilia from her brutal husband, and the crisis in Browning's own life, when, in his courtship and secret marriage, he was compelled to act a lie for the sake of virtue.

The poem is nobly conceived and, in the main, powerfully executed: it is a massive poem, like a mountain ridge or a valley of rocks, hard, harsh and forbidding, which draw the traveller by their majesty and dark grandeur. The blank verse, very loose technically, is at once cramped and headlong, like a runaway horse with the rider jerking violently at the reins. When it pauses, it seems to pause for rest—breathless. It has all Browning's characteristic tricks: interjections, exclamation marks, huge parentheses, remorselessly split infinitives, cropped prepositions, detail for de-

tail's sake, local allusions innumerable; yet the power and passion behind it all carry the reader along, sometimes faint but always pursuing. Like all Browning's long poems, it is *too* long; and one book, the speech of the lawyer for the prosecution, is, it must be confessed, with its tags of lawyer's Latin and finical pedantic argumentation, inexpressibly tedious. One view of art is that it consists in the knowledge of what to leave out. Browning, the older he got, showed less and less that he possessed this knowledge. 'Once fairly on the wing' he cried in *Fifine at the Fair*, 'let me flap far and wide.' He flapped much too far and much too wide in giving us the speech of Dominus Hyacinthus de Arcangelis. Yet the *Ring and the Book* is a great poem, and Chesterton was right when he called it the great (and only) modern epic.

After Elizabeth's death and his removal from Florence, Browning settled in London with his sister Sarianna at No. 19, Warwick Crescent, where his home was to be for the next twenty-five years. A new life had begun for him. Almost immediately after his return to England, the long neglect from which he had suffered as a poet began to give way. He was offered the editorship of the *Cornhill* magazine; a new edition of his poems was planned by the publisher Chapman, and a volume of selections from his works, with a laudatory preface, was edited by Forster and Barry Cornwall (the friend and biographer of Lamb). He began to write again, with immense verve and energy, and, within a couple of years, was making many new friends and going much into society. The most intimate of his friends were women—amongst them Isa Blagden, who had also known and loved Elizabeth in the Italian days, and Julia Wedgewood, niece of Charles Darwin, and a fervent admirer of Elizabeth's work. The publication of the final volumes of the *Ring and the Book* raised him to the highest eminence amongst

contemporary poets; the *Athenaeum* called it 'the supremest poetical achievement of our time', and (with some exaggeration) 'the most precious spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare.' All the other critical reviews, which had treated his early work with contempt, now joined in the praise; and in the spring of the same year (1869) Browning was summoned, with his old friend Carlyle, to a personal interview with the Queen. Browning who, like all sensible men, enjoyed success, was delighted at this new turn of things; his one distress was the continued idleness and incompetence of Pen, who, having been refused admission into Balliol, had matriculated at Christ Church, but, after two successive failures to satisfy the examiners, was requested to remove his name from the books of the college. Browning was bitterly disappointed; but he was a generous father and continued to do all he possibly could for his unsatisfactory son. One thing which he did for him led to the single almost wholly comic incident in Browning's career—his proposal of marriage to Lady Ashburton. Lady Ashburton was a dark-haired, statuesque beauty, and very rich. Browning was staying at her Scottish home, Loch Luichart. She admired Browning, as women always did, possibly even loved him. One day, Browning proposed marriage. Unfortunately, however, the form of his proposal was not acceptable: 'My heart,' he said in effect, 'is buried in Florence; but our marriage would be an excellent thing for Pen.' Lady Ashburton was not amused, and poor Browning left Loch Luichart in confusion. One is reminded by this incident of Elizabeth's story of how Browning tried to pay some woman a magnificent compliment, 'and, as always, failed tremendously.'

Any brief sketch, such as this, of Browning's life should really end with the publication of the *Ring and the Book*. He still had another twenty years to live, and throughout

that time he continued to write enormously, nearly doubling the already vast bulk of his published work. Such was his reputation that each new volume as it appeared was admired and praised; but we, who come later and can consider his work dispassionately, must regretfully admit that, after the *Ring and the Book,* the glory of Browning's poetry departed. The voice grows louder, the tongue more garrulous; the fist thumps harder upon the table; the mannerisms increase; there is less to say, and more words to say it in. Tennyson, who admired Browning profoundly, was not the only one who could 'make nothing' of *Fifine at the Fair;* the *Inn Album* and *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* both very long and sordid tales, have neither of them the inward fire of a poetic *idea* which made the *Ring and the Book* (which was also a sordid tale) an imaginative work of superb quality. The translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is a failure: the Greek of Aeschylus is difficult but gorgeous; Browning's English is difficult and dull. Sometimes, as in *Pachiarotto,* he quite frankly plays the fool—Chesterton, himself, who could find nothing really disparaging to say of Browning, calls it the 'horse-play of literature.' Even the famous *Epilogue* ('greet the unseen with a cheer . . . .') has a loud and somewhat theatrical note to modern ears, making us bless the wisdom of Keats, who told us that 'poetry should be great but unobtrusive,' and that unless 'it comes as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.' In a sense, even in these late years, poetry came naturally to Browning: perhaps too naturally. In any case he could not stop it. But the gleams of the old splendour grew fainter and fainter; he began to lecture and declaim in more and more uncouth and bludgeoning verse; and, as the fount of true poetry dried, so the outward shell of the man himself hardened and thickened. All who knew him in his last years point to this conclusion;

the 'poet-boy' whom Eliza Flower once petted and admired, the epitome, which Elizabeth Barrett recognized and adored, of all the singers of the past, the poet in whom 'their shining fronts, their songs, their splendours' met, became the 'loud, sound, normal, hearty presence, all so assertive and so whole, all bristling with prompt responses and expected opinions and usual views.' Even his old worship of Shelley turned to comtempt.

Nothing happened to Browning after he was sixty-five or so; the poet dead, or almost dead, in him, he became the member of society, top-hatted, dandified—there was always a touch of the dandy in him: on a sea-voyage once from England to Trieste he never appeared upon deck without his yellow kid gloves—and dining out—endlessly dining out. 'I should never be surprised,' said Tennyson's son, 'if Mr. Browning expired in a white choker at a dinner party.' Occasionally he would read aloud some poem of his youth, and a friend recorded that, when he did so, he seemed to be reading the work of another man.

In the last year of his life Browning went to stay with two friends, Mrs. Bronson and her daughter, at Asolo, the little town which, save for one brief visit, he had not seen since, half a century before, it had so captivated him and fired his imagination. In November he moved to Venice, where Pen, now married to a rich American wife, was living at the Rezzonico palace. Browning intended to stay no more than a week or two, but he caught a chill, which rapidly developed into bronchitis. On December 12, 1889, he died. A few hours before his death a telegram came from London to tell him that his last volume of poems, *Asolando*, which had just been issued, had been favourably reviewed in all the papers, and that the first edition was nearly exhausted.

On the 31st of the month Browning's body was buried

in the South transept of Westminster Abbey, to be joined three years later by that of Tennyson.

Browning's poetry was called by Walter Savage Landor 'the most individual voice of the century.' Landor was right; not a line which Browning wrote could have been written by another man; he stamped his image upon every word as indelibly and unmistakeably as his friend Carlyle. The form and themes of the great bulk of his poetry were as individual as the manner; but it is not by his major poems that he is most likely to be remembered. It is not for his great monologues, *Bishop Blougram's Apology, Mr. Sludge the Medium, Fra Lippo Lippi* (the finest of them all); not for his speculative and philosophical poems like *Fifine at the Fair*; not, even, for the craggy splendour of the *Ring and the Book,* in spite of all their brilliance and originality, that we most honour Browning to-day. These, and others like them, were the poems which made Browning's name; but with the passing of time they have lost something of their original freshness and impact; they are magnificent, we are inclined to say, but are they poetry? The fact is, as I suggested at the beginning, that the province of these poems, the particular region of experience in which they move, has been taken over, and successfully taken over, by the novel. For the subtly reasoned, delicately analytical exposition of character we look nowadays to the novel. Poetry, we feel, should not argue or analyse, but reveal: it should 'whisper results.'

It is for his lyrics that Browning will be chiefly remembered, and chiefly, amongst those, for his lyrics of love. Browning's love poetry is quite different in accent and quality from that of his great predecessors. Not less profoundly felt, it is less direct, more subdued and more allusive. Physical passion—so nobly celebrated by Shelley in the *Revolt of Islam* and some of the choruses in

Prometheus—he seldom touched, though when he did, his words could burn, as in the first scene of *Pippa,* where the lovers remember what has passed, or in some of the earlier stanzas of the *Confessional,* or (surprisingly) in the lines beginning:

> Not with my Soul, love!—bid no Soul like mine
> Lap thee around, nor leave the poor Sense room!

a lyric which he wrote when he was over seventy. He preferred, on the contrary, the method of suggestion or allusion, the backward glance rather than the direct look, choosing more often than not some moment of the failure or passing of love, and making it poignantly recall what is gone, as in *The Lost Mistress,* or *Any Wife to Any Husband:*

> Love so then, if thou wilt! Give all thou canst
> Away to the new faces—disentranced,
> (Say it and think it) obdurate no more:
> Re-issue looks and words from the old mint,
> Pass them afresh, no matter whose the print
> Image and superscription once they bore!
>
> Re-coin thyself and give it them to spend,—
> It all comes to the same thing at the end,
> Since mine thou wast, mine art and mine shall be,
> Faithful or faithless, sealing up the sum
> Or lavish of my treasure, thou must come
> Back to the heart's place here I keep for thee!;

or in *Two in the Campagna,* with its deep longing for the old assurance:

> How say you? Let us, O my dove,
> Let us be unashamed of soul,
> As earth lies bare to heaven above!
> How is it under our control
> To love or not to love?

or, again, in the famous and beautiful *Last Ride Together*. In all these poems, and many others of the same quality, with their highly original and delicate rhythms, their plain-spoken colloquial idiom, the tumult of passion is felt, as it were, from afar, but not, on that account, less poignantly. It is like the sullen breaking on the beach of rollers after a tempest. A similar effect Browning sometimes gets by lyrics like the *Statue and the Bust* and *Youth and Art*, the theme of which is, in both cases, the loss of love by failure to seize the moment when it came.

'She was the poet, I the clever person by comparison . . .' Browning wrote those words to Isa Blagden in bitterness; but there was just a grain of truth in them. Browning was an incomparably finer poet than his wife; nevertheless it was the 'clever person' in him, which spoiled much of his work and made it (at any rate for us to-day) irritating and tedious. In poem after poem he cannot escape from his fatal facility in rhyming—his ingenuity in double or treble rhyme is as great as W. S. Gilbert's. There is a place for such ingenuity, and Gilbert knew what the place was. Browning did not. By the exercise of it he made almost intolerable a number of otherwise vivid and picturesque verses—for instance the *Flight of the Duchess*. It is one of his many affectations: another is his fondness for hortatory parentheses ('Look!' 'See!' 'Speak truth!'), by which he contrives to spoil even his charming and well-known lyric 'Is she not pure gold, my mistress?'

These are flies in the ointment. Nevertheless the ointment is precious. Few poets have had a keener or more joyful eye for *things* than Browning—for the sights and sounds of the country, and the sights and sounds of the city streets. He packs his pages with the colour and movement of life. Few poets have linked poetry so closely with the other arts, especially with music, painting and sculpture, as Browning did. No poet, so far as I know, saw,

as Browning saw when he wrote *The Grammarian's Funeral*, the nobility of all obscure and humble endeavour, or found a happier image to express the innermost secret of art than when he told, in *Abt Vogler*, how the musician frames out of three sounds, 'not a fourth sound—but a star.'

Browning's best work, then (apart, once more, from the *Ring and the Book*) is in his lyrics; but it would perhaps be true to say that his most characteristic work is in the monologues, those brilliant, casuistical, complex expositions of character and motive—the sceptical bishop who yet half believes, the scoundrelly medium who, despite himself, has lived his lies into truth, and all the rest of them. Oscar Wilde once remarked of Meredith's novels: 'Meredith is a prose Browning—so is Browning.' Wilde, in spite of his fondness for epigram and paradox, was a good critic. No doubt, when he let off that squib, he was thinking of the monologues, and all the pulpitry of Browning's latter years. He chose, at the moment, to forget the lyrics.