And so, while I would gladly see you familiarize yourselves with the highest and the best in literature, if your tastes lead you by preference to the lesser poets, by all means enjoy them. Indeed, I would recommend to those whose reading in the line of poetry has been limited, to begin with a poet of homely phrase and pleasant thought—some one

> "No singer vast of voice, yet one who leaves
> His native air the sweeter for his song." *

Later on, the poets requiring more concentrated attention and a certain amount of mental discipline for their appreciation, may claim your best thought to advantage.

Be this as it may, I cannot better explain the subject of poetry than by dwelling for a moment, in a manner however scant, upon the three poets that have best caught up and sung to us the message that this century now declining in her last decade would bequeath us. They are all three of them worthy of our attention. Could any remarks of mine lead you to a careful study and just appreciation of them, I would feel well repaid. In their highest and best flights you will find some of the noblest ideals of truth and loveliness ever conceived by human brain.

* William Watson, "On Longfellow's Death." *Wordsworth's Grave and other Poems.* London, p. 69.

IX.

1. WORDSWORTH'S influence upon the thought and character of this century has been strong, deep, and abiding. He it was who fired and moulded the poetic genius of Aubrey de Vere. The poet has left us a charming record of the manner in which he first fell under the influence of his great master from the reading of *Laodamia.* We will let him describe how the reading of that poem weaned him from his extravagant admiration for Byron. "Some strong, calm hand," he says, "seemed to have been laid on my head, and bound me to the spot till I had come to the end. As I read, a new world, hitherto unimagined, opened itself out, stretching far away into serene infinitudes. The region was one to me unknown, but the harmony of the picture attested its reality. Above and around were indeed

> An ampler ether, a diviner air,
> And fields invested with purpureal gleams;

and when I reached the line—

> Calm pleasures there abide—majestic pains,

I felt that no tenants less stately were fit to walk in so lordly a precinct. I had been translated into another planet of song—one with larger movements and a longer year. A wider conception of poetry had become mine, and the Byronian enthusiasm fell from me like a bond broken by being outgrown." *

* *Essays chiefly on Poetry*, vol. ii., pp. 289, 290.

No less true is it—though not so generally known—that Wordsworth helped to mould the character of Thomas Davis. "The ideals he found in Wordsworth," says Justice O'Hagan, "especially the ideal of a pure and exalted love of country, took full possession of him."* His influence upon John Stuart Mill was no less marked. The first reading of Wordsworth's poems was an epoch in that philosopher's life. "What made his poems a medicine for my state of mind," he tells us. "was that they expressed not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling and of thought colored by feeling under the excitement of beauty. I needed to be made to feel that there was real permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with greatly increased interest in, the common feelings and the common destiny of human beings.'† Poetry influencing types of character as distinct as Aubrey de Vere, the poet, Thomas Davis, the patriot, and John Stewart Mill, the philosopher, must indeed contain an element of strength worthy of your serious consideration.

That influence was not cheaply purchased. Its foundations were laid in deep meditation and in life-long study. Wordsworth was a most careful composer. He spared no pains to get the fitting word or strike upon the proper phrase. Caroline Fox, commenting upon what was con-

* *Contemporary Review*, Oct., 1890.

† *Autobiography*, p. 148.

sidered the verbosity of Browning, wrote: "Doth he know that Wordsworth will devote a fortnight or more to the discovery of a single word that is the one fit for his sonnet?"* His was the conscientious work of the conscientious teacher. He was wont to say: "Every great poet is a teacher; I wish to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing." From the first, he believed in his mission; through long and weary years, with but scant recognition, he labored at his mission, and finally his genius shone forth through the clouds of prejudice, and he triumphed in the achievement of that mission as a teacher. And what is the lesson he would convey in his noble lines?—

We should bring to the reading of him a disposition to sit humbly and thoughtfully at his feet, and to receive his lesson in the spirit in which he gives it. And if I can point out to you what you may expect to find, and what not to find, in his poetry, I conceive that I will be making your task all the lighter. But withal, a serious task it is to measure the full length and breadth and height and depth of Wordsworth, and to feel at home in the trains of thought he would evolve. You will meet whole lines, sometimes whole poems, written in a bald and creeping style; you will hit upon the mention of a trivial incident, or the employment of a trivial phrase, apparently marring what you would otherwise call a beautitul conception; and it is out of such barren

* *Handbook to Browning's Works*, p. 11.

plains of expression that rise up some of the noblest passages in our literature.

Wordsworth invests the material universe with a new dignity by making it, in his own peculiar manner, the companion of man, a something to be communed with in its manifold aspects. He educates the human senses to a keener preception of vision and sound. Indeed, the poet may be said in a measure to have imparted thought to sense and speech to inert matter. He regarded Nature with a spiritual discernment, reading her meanings and her teachings as no other poet had read them. The careful study of his poetry in a spirit of sympathy is in itself an education. Mr. Walter Pater says very aptly: "The constant suggestion of an absolute duality between higher and lower moods, and the work done in them, stimulating one always to look below the surface, makes the reading of Wordsworth an excellent sort of training towards the things of art and poetry. It begets in those who, coming across him in youth, can bear him at all, a habit of reading between the lines, a faith in the effect of concentration and collectedness of mind in the right appreciation of poetry, an expectation of things, in this order, coming to one by means of a right discipline of the temper as well as of the intellect. He meets us with the promise that he has much, and something very peculiar, to give us, if we will follow a certain difficult way, and seems to have the secret of a special and privileged state of mind.

And those who have undergone his influence, and followed this difficult way, are like people who have passed through some initiation, a *disciplina arcani*, by submitting to which they become able constantly to distinguish in art, speech, feeling, manners, that which is organic, animated, expressive, from that which is only conventional, derivative, inexpressive." *

This estimate, deliberate as it is scholarly, will enable you to appreciate the force of Wordsworth's influence upon those who submit to his spell. He is the poet of Nature in a sense distinct from that in which we can apply the same epithet to any other poet. He is unwearied, as so many another poet has been unwearied, in describing every varying shade of expression in his favorite haunts. And these descriptions, unlike those of other poets, are not merely an exhaustive list of what the eye beholds; they are an embodiment of the sentiment that haunts the place he would describe; they express the outcome of a complex variety of impressions when the human spirit grows in sympathetic touch with the animating principle of Nature.

In lifting Nature up to the sphere of companionship with man, Wordsworth introduced a new element into modern poetry. He awakened in man consciousness of the expression of Nature, and imparted to him the sense of interpreting this expression. He initiated man into the moods in which he might best hear and best read

* *Appreciations*, p. 40.

this interpretation. He tells us that he himself learned to view Nature—not as in the hour of thoughtless youth with all its aching joys, and all its dizzy raptures,

"———but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; 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,
And in the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things." *

Let us not become alarmed at some expressions in this magnificent quotation. Wordsworth is no pantheist.† His are Christian feelings, and he thinks in a Christian spirit. The presence he recognizes in Nature is that Supreme Power whom he thus apostrophizes elsewhere:

"———O Power Supreme
Without Whose call this world would cease to breathe,
Who from the fountain of Thy grace dost fill
The veins that branch through every frame of life,
Making man what he is, creature divine,

* *Lines above Tintern Abbey.*

† See Aubrey de Vere's "Recollections of Wordsworth," *Essays*, vol. ii., p. 282.

In single or in social eminence,
Above the rest raised infinite ascents
When reason that enables him to be
Is not sequestered." *

"To that Personal God," says Aubrey de Vere, "he paid dutiful reverence in life and song. Had he lost his hold of Religion, he would have lost Nature also, for to him she would have been Nature no longer. As it was, in all her manifestations, whether in shape or in color, in movement or at rest, from the most awe-inspiring of her forms to the most fugitive of her smiles, he recognized divinely-appointed ministers parleying with man's spirit, the quickeners of its finest impulses. How much the human mind conferred upon Nature, and how much Nature conferred upon the human mind, he did not affect to determine; but to each its function came from God, and life below was one long, mystic colloquy between the twin-born powers, whispering together of immortality." † This is a poet's interpretation of the poet to whom he looked up with sympathy and reverence, every line of whose poetry he studied, and every phase of whose genius he explored.

But the Nature that Wordsworth deals with is Nature as ministering to man and influencing him, apart from all the artificial elements that enter into the moulding of his character and the imparting of false tastes and

* *The Prelude*, book x.

† *Essays*, vol. i., p. 105.

false standards of truth, beauty, and excellence. Therefore does he take human life in its lowliest spheres of action, and weave about it a halo of poetry—or rather, draw out and hold up in artistic form, for all time, the ideal belonging to all such life and action, and inherent in the simplest object of creation. This is indeed to bring our views of things nearer to the Divine vision of them. And so the poet deals by preference with the humblest peasant life rooted in the soil—the life that other poets have thought beneath their notice. Browning tells us that the artist "lifts his fellows, with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere, by intensifying the import of details, and rounding the universal meaning," * He grasps the type and leaves the individual; better still, he describes the individual in relation to the type. Beneath the accidents he perceives the substance. This in an especial manner has been Wordsworth's mode of procedure in dealing with human life. His poetic vision sees beneath the ordinary routine of every-day life a whole world of sensation and emotion hidden away from the prosaic observer:

> "Joy spreads, and sorrow spreads; and this whole vale,
> Home of untutored shepherds as it is,
> *Swarms with sensation, as with gleams of sunshine,*
> *Shadows and breezes, scents and sounds.*"

A suppressed glow of warmth, all the more forcible for its being held in check, pervades his lines. They

* *Essay on Shelley.*

thrill with the sensations he breathed into them. Beneath the unruffled routine of peasant life, he feels the peasant's pulse, and reads his every thought and interprets his every sigh. In this respect Wordsworth is not unlike Millet.

The genius of Millet consists wholly in his power of idealizing simple peasant life upon the canvas. And so we find his peasant men and women, with their plain faces and their homely work-a-day clothes, now sowing the seed, now reaping the harvest, now attending to their ordinary indoor and outdoor duties, represented with great naturalness, but also with great dignity. You stand before his masterpiece, *The Angelus*. There you behold nature in her simple and unadorned aspect: the field stretching far, far away into the horizon, the sky into which the clouds are slowly gathering, the spire of the village church in the distance, the wheelbarrow, the fork stuck in the ground, the man, his hat in both hands and his head slightly bent, something peculiarly sturdy and manlike in his attitude, the woman with hands clasped and eyes bent down—both at the sound of the Angelus bell from the distant spire wrapped in prayer, forgetful of each other and of all around them, forgetful of the toil and the heat of the day. That prayerful attitude of those simple peasants idealizes the whole scene. It is no longer the brown earth that is reflected in the sun-burnt features. It is souls. The spiritual world mingles with the material world;

heaven becomes blended with earth, and God's presence is felt.

Even so it is with Wordsworth. In his *We are Seven*, in his sublime *Ode on Immortality*, in his *Michael*, in whole books of *The Excursion*, you perceive beneath the simple narrative a linking of the spiritual with the material, sometimes a nearing of earth to heaven—the whole universe a shell bespeaking communion with its native sea of God's Immensity and Omnipotence; or, putting the image in Wordsworth's own magnificent language:—

——"I have seen
A curious child who dwelt upon a tract
Of inland ground, applying to his ear
The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell;
To which, in silence hushed, his very soul
Listened intensely; and his countenance soon
Brightened with joy; for from within were heard
Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed
Mysterious union with its native sea.
Even such a shell the universe itself
Is to the ear of Faith; and there are times,
I doubt not, when to you it doth impart
Authentic tidings of invisible things;
Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power;
And central peace, subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation." *

As Millet carries the spectator from outward appearances to something beyond, so does Wordsworth bear his reader along the majestic flow of his verse, till the

* *The Excursion*, book iv.

reader has entered into sympathy, not only with the humble cottagers, but with the domestic animals that share their cares, and the scenes in which they live. He has shown how dignity and human tenderness are to be found among the squalid poor:—

——"There I heard,
From mouths of men obscure and lowly, truths
Replete with honor; sounds in unison
With loftiest promises of good and fair." *——

He has shown how human impulse and human passion, tears and laughter, commingle with the caring of sheep and the cultivation of the soil. He has shown how meekness and humility, and simple ways and the steady pursuit of duty, are the roads to true greatness. He has shown how strength is not passion, or impulse, or waywardness—

"Meekness is the cherished bent
Of all the truly great and all the innocent—" †

but rather that it lies in the subduing, and controlling, and directing of these things.

We are now in position to understand how difficult it is for one in full sympathy with the poetry of Wordsworth to continue to admire Byron. The methods, the point of view, the temper of soul of each can be brought together only to be contrasted. You follow Byron upon his pilgrimage through Southern Europe. You are at once impressed with the magnificent swing of his

* *Prelude*, book xiii. † *Works*, p. 729.

lines, the ease and vigor with which he grasps and interprets a splendid scene or a great work of art, the vividness and directness of his descriptions, the power with which he gives out the impressions that he receives. You are compelled to respect his faculty of observation and his accuracy of description. But his soul vibrates only to the great, the tragic, the magnificent in nature and art. Rome, Venice, Waterloo; the haunts or homes of men whom he holds in admiration, such as Dante, Rousseau, Voltaire; gigantic structures, such as St. Peter's and the Coliseum; grand or sublime scenery, such as the Alps, the ocean, Lake Leman; the scenes of a tragic story, such as Chillon, or the Palace of the Doges: these are the themes to which

"He struck his harp, and nations heard entranced." *

All Europe fell for awhile under the spell of his genius. Even at this hour, you cannot read his finer descriptive passages without feeling your soul thrill. But he was lacking besides in many of all those qualities that go to make up true greatness. He had no steadiness of purpose; he had no moral consistency. His philosophy was the musings of a misanthrope. He had the morbidness of Leopardi, without the literary polish or the intellectual consistency of the great poet of Pessimism. Those staying qualities that come of severe study and calm meditation were not his; and therefore, in spite of his great natural endowments, and the fitful lights that

* Pollock, *Course of Time.*

flash through his lurid genius, he has ceased to be an influencing power in literature. He is the poet of wild unrest. On the other hand, Wordsworth is the poet of the simple, the lowly, the commonplace, and the spiritual in Nature and in human life. His ideals are those of repose, cheerfulness, and contentment.

Wordsworth, though a High-Church Tory, abounding in strong anti-Catholic prejudices, was not aggressive towards the Church in his poetry. Several of his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* are very Catholic. There is a pathos in the tenderness with which he alludes to the old abbeys. Feeling that he recorded their fall "untouched by due regret," he finally exclaims:

"Once ye were holy, ye are holy still;
Your spirit freely let me drink, and live!"

Catholicity will always be at home wherever there is genuine poetical inspiration. Aubrey de Vere, giving his personal recollections of the poet, says: "Wordsworth was . . . in his prose mind, strongly anti-Roman Catholic, largely on political grounds; but that it was otherwise as regards his mind poetic is obvious from many passages in his Christian poetry, especially those which refer to the monastic system and the Schoolmen, and his sonnet on the Blessed Virgin. . . . He used to say that the idea of one who was both Virgin and Mother had sunk so deep into the heart of humanity, that there it must ever remain fixed." *

* *Essays*, vol. ii., p. 283.