and he tells us that he did his utmost—in the art to which his life was a devotion, he may well say: "Nor do I apprehend any more charges of being wilfully obscure, unconscientiously careless, or perversely harsh."* In the long list of his writings, from *Pauline* with its immaturities to *Asolando*, in which the poet for the last time runs his fingers along the various chords of his lyre, and strikes clearly and accurately the diverse notes at his command, there is much—however unwilfully so—that is obscure and unsatisfactory to the ordinary reader; nay, with his friend, biographer, and admirer we may add, that "of all his faults, the worst is that jugglery, that inferior legerdemain, with the elements of the beautiful in verse;" † but after making due allowance for his shortcomings, we can still find much in his poetry that is intensely earnest and suggestive, much that is new, fresh, broadening, and formative. ‡ Browning is one of the great forces in English literature.

Turn we now to an opposite pole from Browning in method of thinking and in form of expression.

* *Selections from Browning.* Dedicatory Letters to Tennyson, 1872.

† William Sharp, *Life of Browning*, p. 205.

‡ Cardinal Wiseman thus concludes his review of Browning's *Men and Women:* "For ourselves, we thank Mr. Browning, sceptical and reckless as he is, for a rare treat in these thoughtful and able volumes. . . . Though much of their matter is extremely offensive to Catholics, yet beneath the surface there is an undercurrent of thought that is by no means inconsistent with our religion." *The Rambler.*, Jan., 1856, p. 71.

XI.

I SHALL not dilate at length upon Tennyson. He has no peer among the world-singers of the day. He is deservedly popular. He has made his art the earnest study of a long life. From the feeble poetic touch of *Oriana* (1830) to the firm artistic grasp of *Rizpah* (1880) the distance in degree of merit far outnumbers the distance in years. But the delicacy and strength and finish in Tennyson's later work came to him after intense labor carried on without intermission for nigh half a century. It is not spontaneous. No poet has been more reserved about himself than has Tennyson. Still, in the comparative study of the various editions of no poet's works can you more clearly trace the development of the poet's mind and the growth in his firmness of artistic touch. You have all grown familiar with his beautiful thoughts, his noble ideals of life, his rare delicacy of expression, his exquisite taste, his conservatism in imagery, in propriety of conduct, and in the use of words. Unlike Browning frequently, and Goethe at times, he carries very few enigmas on his sleeve for the reading world to puzzle over. Unlike Wordsworth, he is reticent about self and very sparing in words. Minds open to his impressions and yield to his influence more easily than to the impressions and the influence of Wordsworth or Browning. Unfortunately, the Tennyson that is known to many readers is a traditional Tennyson, the measure of whose genius is determined by a few of his early

poems of exquisite finish, such as *Locksley Hall*, or *The May-Queen*. Such pieces as these are but the blossomings of a rich and ripe fruitage. The Tennyson that I would have you know is a poet of thought as well as a poet of sentiment.

We will not quarrel with his dramatic poems. They are not without great intrinsic merit. True it is, the author places King Edward the Confessor, Queen Mary, and Becket in a false historical light, in which he shows himself as narrow a bigot as Browning. True also is it that the poet's work is to create characters, and not to reproduce history. And no doubt, Tennyson believes that if he chooses to make Edward inane, and Mary hysterical, and Becket at times maudlin, he is acting within his rights as a poet and taking liberties with history that Shakspere and Walter Scott did not disdain.* Moreover, has he not the accumulated prejudices and distortions of history for three centuries to sustain his action? None the less has he transmitted in the amber of his lines false notions of Catholic historical personages that thousands of heedless readers will accept as true history. In this sense he does us an injustice, and beautified injustice is not and cannot be the measure of literary or artistic merit. Read the *Becket* of Aubrey de Vere by the side of that of Tennyson, and you will

* See *Amy Robsart and the Earl of Leicester:* A Critical Inquiry. By George Adlard, London, 1870. See also *Scribner's Magazine*, December, 1890.

see how a great poet can be historically correct, and at the same time create a noble character.

We will stop at *Maud* only long enough to say that it is a splendid study of a morbid hysterical character; not as Mr. Richard Holt Hutton would have it, a caricature or "an exposure of hysterics," * but the genuine hysterical mood with its screeching falsetto notes ringing through extremes of joy and extremes of sadness, till the hero recovers the equilibrium of his maddened brain.

> "'Tis time, O passionate heart and morbid eye,
> That old hysterical mock-disease should die."

In these lines have we the key to the whole poem. The language is not the language of a well-balanced mind—and as such it must needs be imperfect, irregular, and at times unrhythmic.

Nor will we do more than touch upon another poem that has been greatly misunderstood, and scarcely appreciated at its full value; I mean *The Princess*. It is an exquisite contribution, in playful mock-heroic style, to the vexed and ever-growing problem of woman's place in the modern world. She certainly holds the right place in Tennyson's own heart. And we all of us must feel indebted to the poet, and we must greatly cherish the poem in which we find so beautifully interpreted our deepest thoughts regarding that being whom every man

* *Essays Theological and Literary*, vol. ii., p. 308.

tenderly cherishes in his heart of hearts—the fond mother:—

> ——"One
> Not learned, save in gracious household ways,
> Not perfect, nay, but full of tender wants;
> No angel, but a dearer being all dipt
> In angel instincts, breathing paradise,
> Interpreter between the gods and men,
> Who looked all native to her place, and yet
> On tiptoe seemed to touch upon a sphere
> Too gross to tread, and all male minds perforce
> Swayed to her from their orbits as they moved,
> And girdled her with music. Happy he
> With such a mother! Faith in womankind
> Beats with his blood, and trust in all things high
> Comes easy to him, and, though he trip and fall,
> He shall not blind his soul with clay." *

Assuredly, our literature is all the richer for so noble a passage. But we must not tarry.

There is, however, one caution that I would give you in reading Tennyson. It is that you do not mistake the exquisite simplicity of his language for poverty of expression or barrenness of thought. Language is for him the graceful drapery every fold of which all the more distinctly reveals the body of thought which it clothes. The words are so simple, and the rhythm is so musical, you are easily beguiled into the illusion that upon a first reading you have grasped the whole meaning of the

* *The Princess.*

poem. Not so, however. All great art leaves unsaid more than it expresses, and its influence is in proportion to its power of suggesting or evoking the unsaid things. It may be that occasionally, in his desire for artistic finish, the poet stops short of the word or the line that would remove a certain vagueness which readers of culture feel after the study of some of his philosophical poems. Even the genius of a Goethe—infinitely suggestive though he be, and great word-master that he was—does not always satisfy the student of his deeper poems. We must also bear in mind that the poetical treatment is distinct from the philosophical treatment of a subject. Especially is it to be remembered when reading *In Memoriam*. This is one of the most representative poems of our age. Its sentiments, its gropings, its aspirations, its questionings, all find a voice in language as simple and delicate as ever clothed profound thought. The poem is not simply the utterings of a soul bewailing a dear departed friend; it is much more for those who would fathom its whole meaning; it is the cry of a soul weighed down with the problems of the day, and in the presence of death wrestling with the doubts and philosophical shadows that hover over the mystery of the grave—struggling and groping and passing from the darkness of scepticism into the light of Christian revelation.

In like manner, the *Idylls of the King*, as they now stand completed in their unity of plan and grandeur of design,

are more than mere transcripts from Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*. From out of this romance, and from the Chronicle of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and from the *Mabinogion* as translated by Lady Guest,* the poet had taken the old material and therewith erected unto himself an altogether new temple of song, having a new meaning and significance—

> "New-old and shadowing sense at war with soul,
> Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost,
> Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain-peak,
> And cleaves to Cairn and Cromlech still." †

The poem shadows forth the soul's moral struggles through all stages of life, from that of unsuspecting youth to that of experienced old age.

And here I would dwell a moment upon the central poem containing the central thought of the *Idylls*. Though the poet has breathed a modern spirit into his poem, still he could not if he would separate the subject from its Catholic groundwork. He has therefore retained the Holy Grail as the central idea of the structure, even as it was the central point of the older Arthurian cycle of romances. ‡

* Professor Rhuys of Oxford is now completing a new edition of the *Mabinogion*, giving the full text in the original Welsh, and in the accompanying translation supplying the numerous passages omitted by Lady Guest:

† *Idylls of the King:* Dedication to the Queen.

‡ I have explained the meaning of the Holy Grail in *Philosophy of Literature*, sixth edition, pp. 90–96.

The *Idylls* deal with Catholic times and are rooted in Catholic customs. Comments upon them are numerous enough. But why cannot they be made without casting slurs upon our religion? Why cannot mediæval times be alluded to without identifying them with superstition? Superstition there was then and superstition there is still. Here is an author who, speaking in 1878 of the allegorical and mystical thread running through the *Idylls*, among many good and beautiful things to which we can subscribe, says of the Holy Grail: "It shows us how our poor fallen humanity—inwardly conscious of its own partial degradation and failure, and yet in its sin-born blindness feeling after higher things with but feeble and uncertain touch—seeks, indeed, to still the cravings of its soul with Religion; but lowers and degrades that sacred form by confounding her with the fantastic shape of her counterfeit sister, Superstition. . . . In this aspect the poem cuts at the root of all those countless undisciplined and extravagant growths borne by the fair tree of Religion when suffered to run wild." And amongst these growths so cut at the author instances "the whole system of monasticism." * Now, does this author know the whole meaning of the Holy Grail? Does he know that in the original intention of the first poet who gave it a place in legend and story, it is an emblem of the Holy Eucharist and an allegory prefiguring spiritual perfection? Is it superstition for Galahad

* Henry Elsdale, *Studies in the Idylls*, pp. 58, 59.

and Percivale to break with their present life and seek the higher spiritual perfection? We fear there are more things in the Holy Grail than are dreamt of in Mr. Elsdale's philosophy.

Again, in an admirable and suggestive book recently issued on the poetry of Tennyson, I find the beautiful Catholic meaning of the poem ignored and a wholly foreign meaning imposed upon it. "*The Holy Grail*," says the author, "shows us the strife between superstition, which is a sensual religion, and true faith, which is spiritual. . . . Out of the mystical twilight which envelops the action this truth emerges: that those knights who thought of the Grail only as an external wonder, a miracle which they fain would see because others had seen it, 'followed wandering fires;' while those to whom it became a symbol of inward purity and grace, like Galahad and Percivale, and even the dull, honest, simple-minded Bors and the sin-tormented Launcelot, finally attained unto the vision." * This is decidedly an un-Catholic interpretation. It is an interpretation that the poem will not bear and that the poet would not sanction. It is not superstition that concealed the vision from Launcelot in the hall; it is Launcelot's sin—

> "His honor rooted in dishonor stood,
> And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true" †——

It is not simply because the Grail was "a symbol of

* Henry Van Dyke: *The Poetry of Tennyson*, p. 184.
† Elaine.

purity and grace" to Galahad and Percivale that these noble knights had the vision of it, it is because purity and grace dwelt in their unsullied hearts and innocent lives. The light of God's grace descends upon these men of prowess and courtly demeanor, and the fire of God's love becomes enkindled in their souls, and forthwith those amongst them who are pure of heart, and those amongst them who are repentant at heart, leave the gayeties of joust and tournament, and the excitements of knightly adventure, and kingly approval, and lady's smile, to follow the superior spiritual life typified in the quest of the Holy Grail. Nothing can hold them back. Not the cynical sneers of a Modred; not the practical common-sense reasoning of an Arthur. They lose themselves that they may save their souls. Whither the Spirit of God directs them, thither flee they, heedless of obstacles. They get shrived of their sins; by prayer and fasting and humiliation and the annihilation of self and incessant struggle with half-maddening passions, as in the case of Launcelot, they prepare themselves to comprehend and to live that spiritual life which they had hitherto neglected. This is the meaning I read in that magnificent poem. And when I go back to the poem as it exists in earlier forms than those from which Tennyson drew, I find this meaning confirmed. "The Voice instructs Joseph of Arimathea as follows: 'Place a cloth upon the greensward. Let thy people seat themselves around. When they shall

be ready to eat, tell thy son Joseph to take the vase and to make therewith a circuit three times. Forthwith those who are pure of heart shall be replenished with all possible sweets. . . . But from the moment that they yield them to the wicked sin of luxury they shall lose the grace whence come to them so many delights.'. . . The repast finished, Joseph replaced the Graal as it had been before."* Surely, it were worth men's while to know whereof they write before putting pen to paper. And here we must part with Tennyson, leaving his lyric sweetness, his studies in the real—witness *The Northern Farmer*—his genuine humor, his deep scorn, and many other aspects of his poetic greatness untouched.

Wordsworth—Tennyson—Browning:—all three gave a long and laborious life to their art and to the maturing of their ideas; all three built upon a philosophical foundation; all three made the poetic art subservient to spiritual life; all three tower above their contemporaries as the highest and best representatives of English poetry. But each supplements the other two. Wordsworth and Tennyson have the roots of their sympathies deeply planted in English soil; Browning is cosmopolitan. Wordsworth deals with the humble and the commonplace, teaches us how to make a companion of the material universe, and in his treatment of persons and

* Paulin Paris, *Les Romans de la Table Ronde*, t. i., Le Saint-Graal, p. 198.

things possesses, in the words of his friend and admirer, "the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew-drops."* Tennyson, with exquisite art, interprets the comforts and customs and proprieties of respectable English life, and the decorous and the fitting in the present order of things. Poverty and distress and humble living do not inspire him as they do Wordsworth; he has no social theories with which to revolutionize the world like Shelley; no private grievance to air before the public, like Byron; the present order suits him. To be a member of the Establishment in religion with rather Broad-Church views, an English gentleman, respectable in society and conservative in politics,—this is his ideal of life. Browning has naught to do with the external frame-work of society. His business is with souls—souls happy in their innocence and ignorance of the world, as the beautiful soul of Pippa; souls disintegrating; souls petrifying in inaction; souls restless and running to ruin and wreck; souls blooming into life and action beneath the rays of true love; sordid souls defending their sordidness; callous souls steeped in sin and crime; souls chafing under their entanglements and yet unable to clear themselves from the meshes—remember that

* Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 206.

plaintive cry of the great painter when he finds his inspiration passing beyond recall under the evil influence of an unworthy wife:

> "But all the play, the insight, and the stretch
> Out of me, out of me" *—

souls distorted and souls beautiful; souls strong and souls weak; souls loving their sins and souls loathing them—souls, souls, always souls; for, says Browning, "little else is worth study." †

Poetry in its highest and most enduring form is not a matter of mere receptivity of impression, the mere submission of the soul to the luxury of musical sound and bright imagery. The *Paradise* of Dante is not so mastered. Nor can you upon a single reading, or a single witnessing of a play of Shakspere's, fathom the meaning of that play. If Shakspere or Dante possessed no other thought than that which a mere surface gleaning could gather, they could never have become the great influencing agencies in literature that they now are. Their meaning runs deeper than a Mother-Goose story or a modern novel. Every great poet can say with Browning: "I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game at dominoes to an idle man." ‡ I heard Mr. Henry Morley tell a class in London, that it was only after thirty-five read-

* *Andrea del Sarto.* † *Sordello,* Dedication.

‡ Sharp's *Life of Browning,* p. 180.

ings of *Julius Cæsar*, the central thought of that masterpiece dawned upon him. Think you that his pains were not well repaid by this insight into the underlying principle that gave life and meaning to every line in that play? —Henceforth, to him and to those who heard his interpretation, every additional reading brings with it new light and a deeper source of pleasure. But just here a serious reflection occurs: If one of our most widely read English scholars found it such a task to penetrate to the life-giving principle of what is not by any means the most complex of Shakspere's dramatic pieces, how can we pretend to an understanding of that wonderful master of the human heart upon one or two hasty readings?— And from this reflection let us take home to ourselves the lesson that it behooves us to bring to poetry in its highest forms our closest attention and our best thoughts if we would learn the whole message it would impart.

XII.

It is only within the present century that English-speaking Catholics have begun to build up a distinctively Catholic literature.—During the past two centuries our English and Irish missionaries found it difficult to live. The hardships and privations they endured were most exhausting. And yet their pens were not idle. Their people needed plain and solid instruction, and they met the want. They placed in their hands the

Rheims-Douay version of the Sacred Scriptures. Bishop Challoner wrote his *Catholic Christian Instructed;* Bishop Hay was led into the Church by the reading of an anonymous pamphlet, *Papists Represented and Misrepresented*, and afterwards put out those beautiful works of doctrine, *The Pious Christian*, *The Devout Christian*, *The Sincere Christian;* Bishop Hornihold explained the Commandments and Sacraments; Dr. Husenbeth wrote on the Creed; Bishop Milner wrote his admirable *End of Controversy;* Alban Butler left us that great monument of erudition and repository of learning, his *Lives of the Saints*. Bishop Walmesley was a man of vast scientific attainments, and was one of the mathematicians employed to regulate the calendar preparatory to the adoption of the New Style in 1752.* This was the nature of the work done by our clergy in the eighteenth century It was not brilliant, but it was solid, useful, and necessary work. These men did not cultivate style. They were obliged to study abroad, and after spending years on the Continent, they returned to England with foreign accents ringing in their ears and foreign idioms slipping into their writings.

English classical literature, since the days of Spenser and Shakspere, has been Protestant. The authors who have helped to build up our language; the authors from

* See Allibone's *Dictionary of Authors* for a list of his religious and scientific books in Latin, French, and English. Several of his MSS. were burned in the anti-Catholic riots of 1780.

whom we cull those expressions that have become part and parcel of our daily thinking; the authors to whose pages we refer for the allusions in which the writings of the day abound, are, with few exceptions, in spirit and tone Protestant. And yet it is a surprise and a happiness to know that outside the domain of history, which has been shamefully perverted by the Burnets, the Robertsons, the Gibbons, the Humes, the Macaulays, and the Froudes, a Catholic can take home to himself a goodly portion of this literature, without having his Catholic instincts wounded or his moral sense blunted. I have strayed into many fields of literature, and culled flowers in many languages, and I can bear witness that, whilst there are certain works in other languages which I appreciate more highly than works of the same grade in our own tongue, still, taking the literature of various countries as a whole, there is none of less objectionable character and of more elevating tone than is English literature, in its grand roll of authors from Widsith, the old English gleeman of the fourth century, down to the present laureate. But for this boon we are not to thank the Protestantism of England. It is rather due to the fact that the roots of English literature struck deep in Catholic soil, and the conservative character of the English people kept up the Catholic spirit and the Catholic traditions long after the very name of Catholic had become offensive. That Catholic spirit still lingers in the cloistered aisles and corridors of Oxford. It hovers

over the vacant tomb of Edward the Confessor within the hallowed walls of Westminster Abbey. It speaks in tower and pillared dome throughout the land, "of which every arch has its scroll teaching Catholic wisdom, and every window represents some canonized saint." * It breathes through the Catholic prayers still preserved in *The Book of Common Prayer*. It has become transfused into some of the noblest passages in *Paradise Lost;* the Arianism and the Protestantism are Milton's own; but his magnificent lines clothe many a sentiment of tenderness and sublimity culled from the pages of Cædmon, St. Avitus, Andreini, the Catholic mediæval miracle plays, and *Lucifer*, the Catholic drama of Vondel, the great Catholic and national poet of Holland. † It lurks in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, as much of it as John Bunyan chose to spell out of the prose translation of the original *Pilgrim's Progress, Le Pélérinage de l'Homme* of the Cistercian monk Guillaume de Deguilleville.‡ It is our Catholic heritage of thought and sentiment that has inspired the

* Kenelm Digby: *Mores Catholici*, vol. i., p. 22.

† Francis Junius introduced Milton to Cædmon; Roger Williams, of Rhode Island, taught him the language of Vondel. See Looten: *Étude littéraire sur le poète néerlandais Vondel.* Bruxelles, 1889.

‡ Not *The Wandering Knight* of Jean de Carthenay, as has been recently asserted; not even, perhaps, the complete copy of the *Pilgrimage of the Lyf of the Manhode*, which I have before me; but an abridgment of it, which, Mr. Wright tells us, was copied and circulated in MS. in the seventeenth century (*Pilgrimage of the Lyf of the Manhode*, preface, p. x.). John Lydgate made a poetical translation of the original poem in 1426. There are two copies of his translation in the British Museum, the best of which is in the Cottonian Collection (Vitellius, c. xiii., fol. 2–308).

sublimest passages in our Wordsworths and Tennysons, our Longfellows and Lowells. And whatever Shakspere may have been in practice, the whole spirit of his immortal plays is Catholic. Even Carlyle regards him as the flowering of mediæval Catholicism. * "Indeed," says Digby, "a book might be composed on the latent Catholicism of many natives of this country, where everything solid and valuable is, after all, either a remnant or a revival of Catholic thinking or institution." †

VIII.

1. All honor, then, to those who at many and great sacrifices, and actuated by the pure love of God and their religion, have sought to wrest back for us a portion of our Catholic heritage in English literature. There are names connected with Catholic literature in America that we should ever hold in honor and benediction. Such is the name of Orestes A. Brownson. ‡ Do we realize all the greatness covered by that name? America has produced no more powerful intellect than Brownson's. There was no problem, social, political, religious, or philosophical, that he did not grapple with and find an answer for. After trying creed upon creed to find out

* *French Revolution*, b. i., ch. i.

† *Mores Catholici*, vol. i., p. 25. Mr. P. O'Shea has made American Catholics his debtors by the publication of this magnificent work, hitherto so long out of print, hard to procure, and expensive. It is a great Catholic classic. The more it is read, the better it will be appreciated.

‡ Died, April 17, 1876, æt. 73.