
 MATTHEW ARNOLD

*From On the Study of Celtic Literature*¹
[The Function of a Professor]

It is clear that the system of professorships in our universities is at the present moment based on no intelligent principle, and does not by any means correspond with the requirements of knowledge. I do not say anyone is to blame for this. Sometimes the actual state of things is due to the wants of another age—as for instance, in the overwhelming preponderance of theological chairs; all the arts and sciences, it is well known, were formerly made to center in theology. Sometimes it is due to mere haphazard, to the accident of a founder having appeared for one study and no founder having appeared for another. Clearly it was not deliberate design which provided Anglo-Saxon with a chair at Oxford, while the Teutonic languages, as a group, have none, and the Celtic languages have none. It is as if we had a chair of Oscan or of Aeolic Greek² before we had a chair of Greek and Latin. The whole system of our university chairs evidently wants recasting, and adapting to the needs of modern science.³

I say, *of modern science*; and it is important to insist on these words. Circumstances at Oxford and Cambridge give special prominence to their function as finishing schools to carry young men of the upper classes of society through a certain limited course of study. But a university is something more and higher than a great finishing school for young gentlemen, however distinguished. A university is a member of a European confraternity for continually enlarging the domain of human knowledge and pushing back in all directions its boundaries. The Statutes of the College of France, drawn up at the best moment of the Renaissance and informed with the true spirit of that generous time, admirably fix for a university professor, or representative of the higher studies of Europe, his aim and duty. The *Lecteur Royal* is left with the amplest possible liberty: only one obligation is imposed on him—to promote and develop to the highest possible pitch the branch of knowledge with which he is charged. In this spirit a university should organize its professorships; in this spirit a professor should use his chair. So that if the Celtic languages are an important object of science, it is no objection to giving them a chair at Oxford or Cambridge, that young men preparing for their degree have no call to study them. The relation of a university chair is with the higher studies of Europe, and not with the young men preparing for their degree. If its occupant has had but five young men at his lectures, or but one young man, or no young man at all, he has done his duty if he has served the higher studies of Europe; or, not to leave out America, let us say, the higher studies of the world. If he has not served these, he has not done his duty, though he had at his lectures five hundred young men. But undoubtedly the most fruitful action of a university chair, even upon the young college student, is produced not by bringing down the university chair to his level, but by beckoning him up to its level. Only in this

1. Originally delivered at Oxford during Arnold's tenure as Professor of Poetry.

2. "Oscan": ancient language of Italy; "Aeolic

Greek": ancient language of Greece.

3. Modern knowledge or learning.

way can that love for the things of the mind, which is the soul of true culture, be generated—by showing the things of the mind in their reality and power. Where there is fire, people will come to be warmed at it; and every notable spread of mental activity has been due, not to the arrangement of an elaborate machinery for schooling but to the electric wind of glowing, disinterested play of mind. “Evidences of Christianity!” Coleridge used to say, “I am weary of the world! make a man feel the want of Christianity.” The young men’s education, we may in like manner say, “I am sick of seeing it organized! make the young men feel the want, the worth, the power of education.”

1867

Stanzas in Memory of the Author of *Obermann*¹

NOVEMBER, 1849

In front the awful Alpine track
Crawls up its rocky stair;
The autumn storm-winds drive the rack,²
Close o’er it, in the air.

5 Behind are the abandoned baths³
Mute in their meadows lone;
The leaves are on the valley paths,
The mists are on the Rhone—

The white mists rolling like a sea!
10 I hear the torrents roar.
—Yes, Obermann, all speaks of thee;
I feel thee near once more!

I turn thy leaves! I feel their breath
Once more upon me roll;
15 That air of languor, cold, and death,
Which brooded o’er thy soul.

Fly hence, poor wretch, whoe’er thou art,
Condemned to cast about,

1. The author of *Obermann* (1804), an epistolary novel, was a French essayist, E. P. de Senancour (1770–1846). The hero is a recluse living in a mountain chalet in the Lake Geneva district of Switzerland. The book’s melancholy reflections and its celebration of Alpine scenery combined to establish its vogue among a select group of readers. When Arnold discovered the book in 1847 it made “an extraordinary impression” on him. In 1869 he published an essay on Senancour, and his poems refer often to *Obermann* as representative of qualities Arnold sometimes admired in writers of the Romantic Movement. In a note of 1868 he wrote: “The influence of Rousseau, and certain affinities with more famous and fortunate authors of his own day—Chateaubriand and Madame de Staël—are everywhere visible in Senancour.” The stir of all the main forces, by which modern life is

and has been impelled, lives in the letters of *Obermann*; the dissolving agencies of the eighteenth century, the fiery storm of the French Revolution, the first faint promise and dawn of that new world which our own time is but now more fully bringing to light—all these are to be felt * * * there. To me, indeed, it will always seem that the impressiveness of this production can hardly be rated too high.” Arnold composed his elegy during a visit to Switzerland in the autumn of 1849. Eighteen years later he stated in a letter that the poem records “my separation of myself, finally, from him [Senancour] and his influence.”

2. Mass of clouds.

3. The Baths of Leuk. This poem was conceived, and partly composed, in the valley going down from the foot of the Gemmi Pass towards the Rhone [Arnold’s note].

- All shipwreck in thy own weak heart,
 20 For comfort from without!
- A fever in these pages burns
 Beneath the calm they feign;
 A wounded human spirit turns,
 Here, on its bed of pain.
- 25 Yes, though the virgin mountain air
 Fresh through these pages blows;
 Though to these leaves the glaciers spare
 The soul of their white snows;
- Though here a mountain murmur swells
 30 Of many a dark-boughed pine;
 Though, as you read, you hear the bells
 Of the high-pasturing kine—
- Yet, through the hum of torrent lone,
 And brooding mountain bee,
 35 There sobs I know not what ground tone
 Of human agony.
- Is it for this, because the sound
 Is fraught too deep with pain,
 That, Obermann! the world around
 40 So little loves thy strain?
- Some secrets may the poet tell,
 For the world loves new ways;
 To tell too deep ones is not well—
 It knows not what he says.
- 45 Yet of the spirits who have reigned
 In this our troubled day,
 I know but two, who have attained,
 Save thee, to see their way.
- By England's lakes, in gray old age,
 50 His quiet home one keeps;
 And one, the strong much toiling sage,
 In German Weimar sleeps.
- But Wordsworth's eyes avert their ken
 From half of human fate;
 55 And Goethe's course few sons of men
 May think to emulate.
- For he pursued a lonely road,
 His eyes on Nature's plan;
 Neither made man too much a God,
 60 Nor God too much a man.

Strong was he, with a spirit free
 From mists, and sane, and clear;
 Clearer, how much! than ours—yet we
 Have a worse course to steer.

65 For though his manhood bore the blast
 Of a tremendous time,
 Yet in a tranquil world was passed
 His tender youthful prime.⁶

But we, brought forth and reared in hours
 70 Of change, alarm, surprise—
 What shelter to grow ripe is ours?
 What leisure to grow wise?

Like children bathing on the shore,
 Buried a wave beneath,
 75 The second wave succeeds, before
 We have had time to breathe.

Too fast we live, too much are tried,
 Too harassed, to attain
 Wordsworth's sweet calm, or Goethe's wide
 80 And luminous view to gain.

And then we turn, thou sadder sage,
 To thee! we feel thy spell!
 —The hopeless tangle of our age,
 Thou too hast scanned it well!

85 Immovable thou sittest, still
 As death, composed to bear!
 Thy head is clear, thy feeling chill,
 And icy thy despair.

Yes, as the son of Thetis⁷ said,
 90 I hear thee saying now:
Greater by far than thou are dead;
Strive not! die also thou!

Ah! two desires toss about
 The poet's feverish blood.
 95 One drives him to the world without,
 And one to solitude.

The glow, he cries, the thrill of life,
Where, where do these abound?—
 Not in the world, not in the strife
 100 Of men, shall they be found.

6. Goethe (1749–1832) lived 40 years before the outbreak of the French Revolution.

7. Achilles. See *Iliad* XXI. 106–13.

He who hath watched, not shared, the strife,
 Knows how the day hath gone.
 He only lives with the world's life,
 Who hath renounced his own.

105 To thee we come, then! Clouds are rolled
 Where thou, O seer! art set;
 Thy realm of thought is drear and cold—
 The world is colder yet!

110 And thou hast pleasures, too, to share
 With those who come to thee—
 Balms floating on thy mountain air,
 And healing sights to see.

How often, where the slopes are green
 On Jaman,⁸ hast thou sate
 115 By some high chalet door, and seen
 The summer day grow late;

And darkness steal o'er the wet grass
 With the pale crocus starred,
 And reach that glimmering sheet of glass
 120 Beneath the piny sward,

Lake Lemman's waters, far below!
 And watched the rosy light
 Fade from the distant peaks of snow;
 And on the air of night

125 Heard accents of the eternal tongue
 Through the pine branches play—
 Listened, and felt thyself grow young!
 Listened and wept—Away!

130 Away the dreams that but deceive
 And thou, sad guide, adieu!
 I go, fate drives me; but I leave
 Half of my life with you.

We, in some unknown Power's employ,
 Move on a rigorous line;
 135 Can neither, when we will, enjoy,
 Nor, when we will, resign.

I in the world must live; but thou,
 Thou melancholy shade!
 Wilt not, if thou canst see me now,
 140 Condemn me, nor upbraid.

8. A mountain on the shores of Lake Geneva.

For thou art gone away from earth,
 And place with those dost claim,
 The Children of the Second Birth,⁹
 Whom the world could not tame;

145 And with that small, transfigured band,
 Whom many a different way
 Conducted to their common land,
 Thou learn'st to think as they.

Christian and pagan, king and slave,
 150 Soldier and anchorite,
 Distinctions we esteem so grave,
 Are nothing in their sight.

They do not ask, who pined unseen,
 Who was on action hurled,
 155 Whose one bond is, that all have been
 Unspotted by the world.

There without anger thou wilt see
 Him who obeys thy spell
 No more, so he but rest, like thee,
 160 Unsoiled!—and so, farewell.

Farewell!—Whether thou now liest near
 That much-loved inland sea,
 The ripples of whose blue waves cheer
 Vevey and Meillerie:¹

165 And in that gracious region bland,
 Where with clear rustling wave
 The scented pines of Switzerland
 Stand dark round thy green grave,

Between the dusty vineyard walls
 170 Issuing on that green place
 The early peasant still recalls
 The pensive stranger's face,

And stoops to clear thy moss-grown date
 Ere he plods on again—
 175 Or whether, by maligner fate,
 Among the swarms of men,

Where between granite terraces
 The blue Seine rolls her wave,
 The Capital of Pleasure sees
 180 The hardly-heard-of grave—

9. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John iii.3).

1. Towns in the Lake Geneva region. Senancour,

as Arnold learned later, had been buried in a suburb of Paris, "The Capital of Pleasure" (line 179).

Farewell! Under the sky we part,
 In this stern Alpine dell.
 O unstrung will! O broken heart!
 A last, a last farewell!

1849

1852

Longing

Come to me in my dreams, and then
 By day I shall be well again!
 For then the night will more than pay
 The hopeless longing of the day.

5 Come, as thou cam'st a thousand times,
 A messenger from radiant climes,
 And smile on thy new world, and be
 As kind to others as to me!

Or, as thou never cam'st in sooth,
 10 Come now, and let me dream it truth;
 And part my hair, and kiss my brow,
 And say: *My love! why sufferest thou?*

Come to me in my dreams, and then
 By day I shall be well again!
 15 For then the night will more than pay
 The hopeless longing of the day.

1852

Requiescat¹

Strew on her roses, roses,
 And never a spray of yew!
 In quiet she reposes;
 Ah, would that I did too!

5 Her mirth the world required;
 She bathed it in smiles of glee.
 But her heart was tired, tired,
 And now they let her be.

Her life was turning, turning,
 10 In mazes of heat and sound.
 But for peace her soul was yearning,
 And now peace laps her round.

1. "May she rest."

Her cabined, ample spirit,
 It fluttered and failed for breath.
 15 Tonight it doth inherit
 The vasty hall of death.

1853

Palladium

Set where the upper streams of Simois¹ flow
 Was the Palladium,² high 'mid rock and wood;
 And Hector was in Ilium, far below,
 And fought, and saw it not—but there it stood!

5 It stood, and sun and moonshine rained their light
 On the pure columns of its glen-built hall.
 Backward and forward rolled the waves of fight
 Round Troy—but while this stood, Troy could not fall.

So, in its lovely moonlight, lives the soul.
 10 Mountains surround it, and sweet virgin air;
 Cold plashing, past it, crystal waters roll;
 We visit it by moments, ah, too rare!

We shall renew the battle in the plain
 Tomorrow—red with blood will Xanthus³ be;
 15 Hector and Ajax will be there again,
 Helen will come upon the wall to see.

Then we shall rust in shade, or shine in strife,
 And fluctuate 'twixt blind hopes and blind despairs,
 And fancy that we put forth all our life,
 20 And never know how with the soul it fares.

Still doth the soul, from its lone fastness high,
 Upon our life a ruling effluence send.
 And when it fails, fight as we will, we die;
 And while it lasts, we cannot wholly end.

1867

The Better Part

Long fed on boundless hopes, O race of man,
 How angrily thou spurn'st all simpler fare!

1. A river near Troy.

2. An ancient statue of the goddess Pallas Athena.
The safety of Troy (Ilium) was thought to depend

upon the statue's being retained in the city.

3. A river near Troy.

“Christ,” someone says, “was human as we are;
No judge eyes us from Heaven, our sin to scan;

5 “We live no more, when we have done our span.”—
“Well, then, for Christ,” thou answerest, “who can care?
From sin, which Heaven records not, why forbear?
Live we like brutes our life without a plan!”

So answerest thou; but why not rather say:
10 “Hath man no second life?—*Pitch this one high!*
Sits there no judge in Heaven, our sin to see?—

*“More strictly, then, the inward judge obey!
Was Christ a man like us? Ah! let us try
If we, then, too, can be such men as he!”*

1867

Shakespeare

Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask—Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge. For the loftiest hill,
Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,

5 Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,¹
Making the heaven of heavens his dwelling place,
Spares but the cloudy border of his base
To the foiled searching of mortality;

And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,
10 Self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honored, self-secure,
Didst tread on earth unguessed at.—Better so!

All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,
Find their sole speech in that victorious brow.

1844

1849

In Harmony with Nature²

TO A PREACHER

“In harmony with Nature?” Restless fool,
Who with such heat dost preach what were to thee,

1. Cf. William Cowper's Olney Hymn 35: “God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform; / He plants his footsteps in the sea, / And rides upon the storm.”

2. Originally entitled: “To an Independent Preacher, who preached that we should be ‘In Harmony with Nature.’”

When true, the last impossibility—
To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool!

5 Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,
And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good.
Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood;
Nature is stubborn, man would fain adore;

Nature is fickle, man hath need of rest;
10 Nature forgives no debt, and fears no grave;
Man would be mild, and with safe conscience blest.

Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends;
Nature and man can never be fast friends.
Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave!

1844(?)

1849

Philomela¹

Hark! ah, the nightingale—
The tawny-throated!
Hark, from that moonlit cedar what a burst!
What triumph! hark!—what pain!

5 O wanderer from a Grecian shore,
Still, after many years, in distant lands,
Still nourishing in thy bewildered brain
That wild, unquenched, deep-sunken, old-world pain—
Say, will it never heal?
10 And can this fragrant lawn
With its cool trees, and night,
And the sweet, tranquil Thames,
And moonshine, and the dew,
To thy racked heart and brain
15 Afford no balm?

Dost thou tonight behold,
Here, through the moonlight on this English grass,
The unfriendly palace in the Thracian wild?
Dost thou again peruse
20 With hot cheeks and seared eyes
The too clear web,² and thy dumb sister's shame?
Dost thou once more assay
Thy flight, and feel come over thee,
Poor fugitive, the feathery change

1. The Greek tale of violence evoked by the song of the nightingale concerned two sisters, Philomela and Procne. In Arnold's version, Philomela was married to a king of Thrace. After learning that her husband had raped Procne and cut out her tongue

to prevent the outrage being discovered, Philomela was transformed into a nightingale.

2. A picture in needlework made by Procne to tell what had happened to her.

- 25 Once more, and once more seem to make resound
 With love and hate, triumph and agony,
 Lone Daulis, and the high Cephissian vale?³
 Listen, Eugenia⁴—
 How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!
 30 Again—thou hearest?
 Eternal passion!
 Eternal pain!

1848

1853

The Forsaken Merman

- Come, dear children, let us away;
 Down and away below!
 Now my brothers call from the bay,
 Now the great winds shoreward blow,
 5 Now the salt tides seaward flow;
 Now the wild white horses play,
 Champ and chafe and toss in the spray.
 Children dear, let us away!
 This way, this way!
- 10 Call her once before you go—
 Call once yet!
 In a voice that she will know:
 “Margaret! Margaret!”
 Children’s voices should be dear
 15 (Call once more) to a mother’s ear;
 Children’s voices, wild with pain—
 Surely she will come again!
 Call her once and come away;
 This way, this way!
 20 “Mother dear, we cannot stay!
 The wild white horses foam and fret.”
 Margaret! Margaret!
- Come, dear children, come away down;
 Call no more!
 25 One last look at the white-walled town,
 And the little gray church on the windy shore,
 Then come down!
 She will not come though you call all day;
 Come away, come away!
- 30 Children dear, was it yesterday
 We heard the sweet bells over the bay?

3. Daulis, a city in Phocis, where Philomela’s transformation took place; the “Cephissian vale”

was a river valley in Phocis.
 4. Unidentified listener.

In the caverns where we lay,
 Through the surf and through the swell,
 The far-off sound of a silver bell?
 35 Sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep,
 Where the winds are all asleep;
 Where the spent lights quiver and gleam,
 Where the salt weed sways in the stream,
 Where the sea beasts, ranged all round,
 40 Feed in the ooze of their pasture ground;
 Where the sea snakes coil and twine,
 Dry their mail and bask in the brine;
 Where great whales come sailing by,
 Sail and sail, with unshut eye,
 45 Round the world for ever and aye?
 When did music come this way?
 Children dear, was it yesterday?

Children dear, was it yesterday
 (Call yet once) that she went away?
 50 Once she sate with you and me,
 On a red gold throne in the heart of the sea,
 And the youngest sate on her knee.
 She combed its bright hair, and she tended it well,
 When down swung the sound of a far-off bell.
 55 She sighed, she looked up through the clear green sea;
 She said: "I must go, for my kinsfolk pray
 In the little gray church on the shore today.
 'Twill be Easter time in the world—ah me!
 And I lose my poor soul, Merman! here with thee."
 60 I said: "Go up, dear heart, through the waves;
 Say thy prayer, and come back to the kind sea-caves!"
 She smiled, she went up through the surf in the bay.
 Children dear, was it yesterday?

Children dear, were we long alone?
 65 "The sea grows stormy, the little ones moan;
 Long prayers," I said, "in the world they say;
 Come!" I said; and we rose through the surf in the bay.
 We went up the beach, by the sandy down
 Where the sea-stocks bloom, to the white-walled town;
 70 Through the narrow paved streets, where all was still,
 To the little gray church on the windy hill.
 From the church came a murmur of folk at their prayers,
 But we stood without in the cold blowing airs.
 We climbed on the graves, on the stones worn with rains,
 75 And we gazed up the aisle through the small leaded panes.
 She sate by the pillar; we saw her clear:
 "Margaret, hist! come quick, we are here!
 Dear heart," I said, "we are long alone;
 The sea grows stormy, the little ones moan."
 80 But, ah, she gave me never a look,
 For her eyes were sealed to the holy book!
 Loud prays the priest; shut stands the door.

Come away, children, call no more!
 Come away, come down, call no more!

85 Down, down, down!
 Down to the depths of the sea!
 She sits at her wheel in the humming town,
 Singing most joyfully.
 Hark what she sings: "O joy, O joy,
 90 For the humming street, and the child with its toy!
 For the priest, and the bell, and the holy well;
 For the wheel where I spun,
 And the blessed light of the sun!"
 And so she sings her fill,
 95 Singing most joyfully,
 Till the spindle drops from her hand,
 And the whizzing wheel stands still.
 She steals to the window, and looks at the sand,
 And over the sand at the sea;
 100 And her eyes are set in a stare;
 And anon there breaks a sigh,
 And anon there drops a tear,
 From a sorrow-clouded eye,
 And a heart sorrow-laden,
 105 A long, long sigh;
 For the cold strange eyes of a little Mermaiden
 And the gleam of her golden hair.

 Come away, away children;
 Come children, come down!
 110 The hoarse wind blows coldly;
 Lights shine in the town.
 She will start from her slumber
 When gusts shake the door;
 She will hear the winds howling,
 115 Will hear the waves roar.
 We shall see, while above us
 The waves roar and whirl,
 A ceiling of amber,
 A pavement of pearl.
 120 Singing: "Here came a mortal,
 But faithless was she!
 And alone dwell forever
 The kings of the sea."

 But, children, at midnight,
 125 When soft the winds blow,
 When clear falls the moonlight,
 When spring tides are low;
 When sweet airs come seaward
 From heaths starred with broom,
 130 And high rocks throw mildly
 On the blanched sands a gloom;
 Up the still, glistening beaches,

Up the creek we will hie,
 Over banks of bright seaweed
 135 The ebb-tide leaves dry.
 We will gaze, from the sand-hills,
 At the white, sleeping town;
 At the church on the hillside—
 And then come back down.
 140 Singing: "There dwells a loved one,
 But cruel is she!
 She left lonely forever
 The kings of the sea."

1849

Thyrsis¹

*A Monody, to Commemorate the Author's Friend,
 Arthur Hugh Clough, Who Died at Florence, 1861*

How changed is here each spot man makes or fills!
 In the two Hinkseys² nothing keeps the same;
 The village street its haunted mansion lacks,
 And from the sign is gone Sibylla's³ name,
 5 And from the roofs the twisted chimney stacks—
 Are ye too changed, ye hills?
 See, 'tis no foot of unfamiliar men
 Tonight from Oxford up your pathway strays!
 Here came I often, often, in old days—
 10 Thyrsis and I; we still had Thyrsis then.

Runs it not here, the track by Childsworth Farm,
 Past the high wood, to where the elm tree crowns
 The hill behind whose ridge the sunset flames?
 The signal-elm, that looks on Ilsley Downs,
 15 The Vale, the three lone weirs, the youthful Thames?—
 This winter eve is warm,
 Humid the air! leafless, yet soft as spring,
 The tender purple spray on copse and briars!
 And that sweet city with her dreaming spires,
 20 She needs not June for beauty's heightening,

1. In the 1840s, at Oxford, Clough had been one of Arnold's closest friends. After the death of this fellow poet twenty years later, Arnold revisited the Thames valley countryside that they had explored together. The familiar scenes prompted him to review the changes wrought by time on the ideals shared in his Oxford days with Clough, ideals symbolized, in part, by a distant elm and by the story of the Scholar Gypsy. The survival of these ideals in the face of the difficulties of modern life is the subject of this elegy. Unlike Tennyson in such elegies as *In Memoriam*, Arnold rarely touches here on other kinds of immortality.

As a framework for his elegy, Arnold draws on

the same Greek and Latin pastoral tradition from which Milton's *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais* were derived. Hence Clough is referred to by one of the traditional names for a shepherd poet, Thyrsis, and Arnold himself as Corydon. The sense of distancing that results from this traditional elegiac mode is reduced considerably by the realism of the setting with its bleak wintry landscape at twilight, a landscape that is brightened, in turn, by evocations of the return of hopeful springtime.

2. The villages of North Hinksey and South Hinksey.

3. Sibylla Kerr had been the proprietress of a tavern in South Hinksey.

Lovely all times she lies, lovely tonight!—
 Only, methinks, some loss of habit's power
 Befalls me wandering through this upland dim.
 Once passed I blindfold here, at any hour;
 25 Now seldom come I, since I came with him.
 That single elm tree bright
 Against the west—I miss it! is it gone?
 We prized it dearly; while it stood, we said,
 Our friend, the Gypsy Scholar, was not dead;
 30 While the tree lived, he in these fields lived on.

Too rare, too rare, grow now my visits here,
 But once I knew each field, each flower, each stick;
 And with the countryfolk acquaintance made
 By barn in threshing time, by new-built rick.
 35 Here, too, our shepherd pipes we first assayed.
 Ah me! this many a year
 My pipe is lost, my shepherd's holiday!
 Needs must I lose them, needs with heavy heart
 Into the world and wave of men depart;
 40 But Thyrsis of his own will went away.⁴

It irked him to be here, he could not rest.
 He loved each simple joy the country yields,
 He loved his mates; but yet he could not keep,^o *stay*
 For that a shadow loured on the fields,
 45 Here with the shepherds and the silly^o sheep. *innocent*
 Some life of men unblest
 He knew, which made him droop, and filled his head.
 He went; his piping took a troubled sound
 Of storms⁵ that rage outside our happy ground;
 50 He could not wait their passing, he is dead.

So, some tempestuous morn in early June,
 When the year's primal burst of bloom is o'er,
 Before the roses and the longest day—
 When garden walks and all the grassy floor
 55 With blossoms red and white of fallen May
 And chestnut flowers are strewn—
 So have I heard the cuckoo's parting cry,
 From the wet field, through the vexed garden trees,
 Come with the volleying rain and tossing breeze:
 60 *The bloom is gone, and with the bloom go I!*

Too quick despairer, wherefore wilt thou go?
 Soon will the high Midsummer pomps come on,
 Soon will the musk carnations break and swell,
 Soon shall we have gold-dusted snapdragon,
 65 Sweet-William with his homely cottage-smell,

4. Arnold left Oxford out of the necessity for earning a living; Clough left as a matter of principle when in 1848 he resigned a fellowship rather than

subscribe to the doctrines of the Church of England.
 5. Religious and political controversies.

And stocks in fragrant blow;
 Roses that down the alleys shine afar,
 And open, jasmine-muffled lattices,
 And groups under the dreaming garden trees,
 70 And the full moon, and the white evening star.

He hearkens not! light comer, he is flown!
 What matters it? next year he will return,
 And we shall have him in the sweet spring days,
 With whitening hedges, and uncrumpling fern,
 75 And bluebells trembling by the forest ways,
 And scent of hay new-mown.
 But Thyr sis never more we swains shall see,
 See him come back, and cut a smoother reed,
 And blow a strain the world at last shall heed—
 80 For Time, not Corydon, hath conquered thee!

Alack, for Corydon no rival now!—
 But when Sicilian shepherds lost a mate,
 Some good survivor with his flute would go,
 Piping a ditty sad for Bion's fate;⁶
 85 And cross the unpermitted ferry's flow,⁷
 And relax Pluto's brow,
 And make leap up with joy the beauteous head
 Of Proserpine, among whose crownèd hair
 Are flowers first opened on Sicilian air,⁸
 90 And flute his friend, like Orpheus,⁹ from the dead.

O easy access to the hearer's grace
 When Dorian shepherds¹ sang to Proserpine!
 For she herself had trod Sicilian fields,
 She knew the Dorian water's gush divine,
 95 She knew each lily white which Enna² yields,
 Each rose with blushing face;
 She loved the Dorian pipe, the Dorian strain.
 But ah, of our poor Thames she never heard!
 Her foot the Cumner cowslips never stirred;
 100 And we should tease her with our plaint in vain!

Well! wind-dispersed and vain the words will be,
 Yet, Thyr sis, let me give my grief its hour
 In the old haunt, and find our tree-topped hill!
 Who, if not I, for questing here hath power?
 105 I know the wood which hides the daffodil,
 I know the Fyfield tree,

6. Moschus, a Greek poet, composed a pastoral elegy upon the death of the poet Bion in Sicily.

7. The river Styx across which the dead were ferried to the underworld.

8. Pluto ruled the underworld with his queen, Proserpine. In spring, Proserpine's returning above ground in Sicily would cause the flowers to blossom.

9. His music enabled him to enter the "unpermitted"

realms of the dead and to bring his wife, Eurydice, back with him to the land of the living.

1. Greeks who colonized Sicily, the home of pastoral poetry.

2. From a meadow near the Sicilian town of Enna, Proserpine had been carried off to the underworld by Pluto (or Dis).

I know what white, what purple fritillaries³
 The grassy harvest of the river fields,
 Above by Ensham, down by Sandford, yields,
 110 And what sedged brooks are Thames's tributaries;

I know these slopes; who knows them if not I?—
 But many a dingle⁴ on the loved hillside,
 With thorns once studded, old, white-blossomed trees,
 Where thick the cowslips grew, and far descried
 115 High towered the spikes of purple orchises,
 Hath since our day put by
 The coronals of that forgotten time;
 Down each green bank hath gone the plowboy's team,
 And only in the hidden brookside gleam
 120 Primroses, orphans of the flowery prime.

Where is the girl, who by the boatman's door,
 Above the locks, above the boating throng,
 Unmoored our skiff when through the Wytham flats,
 125 Red loosestrife⁵ and blond meadowsweet among
 And darting swallows and light water-gnats,
 We tracked the shy Thames shore?
 Where are the mowers, who, as the tiny swell
 Of our boat passing heaved the river grass,
 Stood with suspended scythe to see us pass?—
 130 They all are gone, and thou art gone as well!

Yes, thou art gone! and round me too the night
 In ever-nearing circle weaves her shade.
 I see her veil draw soft across the day,
 I feel her slowly chilling breath invade
 135 The cheek grown thin, the brown hair sprent^o *sprinkled*
 with grey;
 I feel her finger light
 Laid pausefully upon life's headlong train;
 The foot less prompt to meet the morning dew,
 The heart less bounding at emotion new,
 140 And hope, once crushed, less quick to spring again.

And long the way appears, which seemed so short
 To the less practiced eye of sanguine youth;
 And high the mountaintops, in cloudy air,
 The mountaintops where is the throne of Truth,
 145 Tops in life's morning sun so bright and bare!
 Unbreachable the fort
 Of the long-battered world uplifts its wall;
 And strange and vain the earthly turmoil grows,
 And near and real the charm of thy repose,
 150 And night as welcome as a friend would fall.

3. Flowers commonly found in moist meadows.

4. Small deep valley.

5. Flowers that grow on banks of streams.

But hush! the upland hath a sudden loss
 Of quiet!—Look, adown the dusk hillside,
 A troop of Oxford hunters going home,
 As in old days, jovial and talking, ride!
 155 From hunting with the Berkshire hounds they come.
 Quick! let me fly, and cross
 Into yon farther field!—'Tis done; and see,
 Backed by the sunset, which doth glorify
 The orange and pale violet evening sky,
 160 Bare on its lonely ridge, the Tree! the Tree!

I take the omen! Eve lets down her veil,
 The white fog creeps from bush to bush about,
 The west unflushes, the high stars grow bright,
 And in the scattered farms the lights come out.
 165 I cannot reach the signal-tree tonight,
 Yet, happy omen, hail!
 Hear it from thy broad lucent Arno vale⁶
 (For there thine earth-forgetting eyelids keep
 The morningless and unawakening sleep
 170 Under the flowery oleanders pale),

Hear it, O Thyrsis, still our tree is there!—
 Ah, vain! These English fields, this upland dim,
 These brambles pale with mist engarlanded,
 That lone, sky-pointing tree, are not for him;
 175 To a boon southern country he is fled,
 And now in happier air,
 Wandering with the great Mother's train divine⁷
 (And purer or more subtle soul than thee,
 I trow, the mighty Mother doth not see)
 180 Within a folding of the Apennine,⁸

Thou hearest the immortal chants⁹ of old!—
 Putting his sickle to the perilous grain
 In the hot cornfield of the Phrygian king,¹
 For thee the Lityerses song again
 185 Young Daphnis with his silver voice doth sing;
 Sings his Sicilian fold,
 His sheep, his hapless love, his blinded eyes—
 And how a call celestial round him rang,

6. Clough was buried in Florence, which is situated in the valley of the Arno River.

7. Followers of Demeter (whose name may mean Earth Mother), who was worshiped as the goddess of agriculture.

8. Mountains near Florence.

9. Sung in Demeter's honor.

1. Daphnis, the ideal Sicilian shepherd of Greek pastoral poetry, was said to have followed into Phrygia his mistress Piplea, who had been carried off by robbers, and to have found her in the power of the king of Phrygia, Lityerses. Lityerses used to make strangers try a contest with him in reaping corn, and to put them to death if he overcame them. Hercules

arrived in time to save Daphnis, took upon himself the reaping contest with Lityerses, overcame him, and slew him. The Lityerses song connected with this tradition was, like the Linus song, one of the early plaintive strains of Greek popular poetry, and used to be sung by corn reapers. Other traditions represented Daphnis as beloved by a nymph who exacted from him an oath to love no one else. He fell in love with a princess, and was struck blind by the jealous nymph. Mercury, who was his father, raised him to heaven, and made a fountain spring up in the place from which he ascended. At this fountain the Sicilians offered yearly sacrifices [from Servius's commentary on Virgil's *Eclogues*; Arnold's note].

190 And heavenward from the fountain brink he sprang,
 And all the marvel of the golden skies.

 There thou art gone, and me thou leavest here
 Sole in these fields! yet will I not despair.
 Despair I will not, while I yet descry
 'Neath the mild canopy of English air
 195 That lonely tree against the western sky.
 Still, still these slopes, 'tis clear,
 Our Gypsy Scholar haunts, outliving thee!
 Fields where soft sheep from cages pull the hay,
 Woods with anemones in flower till May,
 200 Know him a wanderer still; then why not me?

 A fugitive and gracious light he seeks,
 Shy to illumine; and I seek it too.
 This does not come with houses or with gold,
 With place, with honor, and a flattering crew;
 205 'Tis not in the world's market bought and sold—
 But the smooth-slipping weeks
 Drop by, and leave its seeker still untired;
 Out of the heed of mortals he is gone,
 He wends unfollowed, he must house alone;
 210 Yet on he fares, by his own heart inspired.

 Thou too, O Thyrsis, on like quest wast bound;
 Thou wanderdst with me for a little hour!
 Men gave thee nothing; but this happy quest,
 If men esteemed thee feeble, gave thee power,
 215 If men procured thee trouble, gave thee rest.
 And this rude Cumner ground,
 Its fir-topped Hurst, its farms, its quiet fields,
 Here cam'st thou in thy jocund youthful time,
 Here was thine height of strength, thy golden prime!
 220 And still the haunt beloved a virtue yields.

 What though the music of thy rustic flute
 Kept not for long its happy, country tone;
 Lost it too soon, and learnt a stormy note²
 Of men contention-tossed, of men who groan,
 225 Which tasked thy pipe too sore, and tired thy throat—
 It failed, and thou wast mute!
 Yet hadst thou always visions of our light,
 And long with men of care thou couldst not stay,
 And soon thy foot resumed its wandering way,
 230 Left human haunt, and on alone till night.

 Too rare, too rare, grow now my visits here!
 'Mid city noise, not, as with thee of yore,
 Thyrsis! in reach of sheep-bells is my home.

2. Clough's poetry often dealt with contemporary religious problems.

—Then through the great town's harsh,
 heart-wearing roar,
 235 Let in thy voice a whisper often come,
 To chase fatigue and fear:
Why faintest thou? I wandered till I died.
Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,
 240 *Our Scholar travels yet the loved hillside.*

1866

To a Friend

Who prop, thou ask'st in these bad days, my mind?—
 He much, the old man,¹ who, clearest-souled of men,
 Saw The Wide Prospect, and the Asian Fen,
 And Tmolus hill, and Smyrna bay, though blind.

5 Much he, whose friendship I not long since won,
 That halting slave, who in Nicopolis
 Taught Arrian,² when Vespasian's brutal son³
 Cleared Rome of what most shamed him. But be his

My special thanks, whose even-balanced soul,
 10 From first youth tested up to extreme old age,
 Business could not make dull, nor passion wild;

Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole;
 The mellow glory of the Attic stage,
 Singer of sweet Colonus,⁴ and its child.

1848

1849

Isolation. To Marguerite

We were apart; yet, day by day,
 I bade my heart more constant be.
 I bade it keep the world away,
 And grow a home for only thee;
 5 Nor feared but thy love likewise grew,
 Like mine, each day, more tried, more true.

1. Homer, who was reputed to have been born in Smyrna, a seaport of what is now Turkey. From Smyrna he saw across the sea to Europe ("The Wide Prospect") as well as to the nearby marshes ("Fen") and mountain ranges ("Tmolus hill") of Asia Minor.
 2. Epictetus, a lame philosopher who was exiled to Nicopolis where he taught Stoicism to Arrian, a

Greek historian.

3. I.e., Emperor Domitian (81–96). Because the philosophers had "shamed" him, he had ordered their expulsion from Rome.

4. Sophocles (496–406 B.C.E.), a native of Colonus, sang of his town in his *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The fault was grave! I might have known,
 What far too soon, alas! I learned—
 The heart can bind itself alone,
 10 And faith may oft be unreturned.
 Self-swayed our feelings ebb and swell—
 Thou lov'st no more—Farewell! Farewell!

Farewell!—and thou, thou lonely heart,
 Which never yet without remorse
 15 Even for a moment didst depart
 From thy remote and spherèd course
 To haunt the place where passions reign—
 Back to thy solitude again!

Back with the conscious thrill of shame
 20 Which Luna felt, that summer night,
 Flash through her pure immortal frame,
 When she forsook the starry height
 To hang over Endymion's sleep
 Upon the pine-grown Latmian steep.
 25 Yet she, chaste queen, had never proved
 How vain a thing is mortal love,
 Wandering in Heaven, far removed.
 But thou hast long had place to prove
 This truth—to prove, and make thine own:
 30 "Thou hast been, shalt be, art, alone."

Or, if not quite alone, yet they
 Which touch thee are unmating things—
 Ocean and clouds and night and day;
 Lorn autumns and triumphant springs;
 35 And life, and others' joy and pain,
 And love, if love, of happier men.

Of happier men—for they, at least,
 Have *dreamed* two human hearts might blend
 In one, and were through faith released
 40 From isolation without end
 Prolonged; nor knew, although not less
 Alone than thou, their loneliness.

1849

1851

To Marguerite—Continued

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
 With echoing straits between us thrown,
 Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
 We mortal millions live *alone*.
 5 The islands feel the enclaspings flow,
 And then their endless bounds they know.

But when the moon their hollows lights,
 And they are swept by balms of spring,
 And in their glens, on starry nights,
 10 The nightingales divinely sing;
 And lovely notes, from shore to shore,
 Across the sounds and channels pour—

Oh! then a longing like despair
 Is to their farthest caverns sent;
 15 For surely once, they feel, we were
 Parts of a single continent!
 Now round us spreads the watery plain—
 Oh might our marges meet again!

Who ordered that their longing's fire
 20 Should be, as soon as kindled, cooled?
 Who renders vain their deep desire?—
 A God, a God their severance ruled!
 And bade betwixt their shores to be
 The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.

1849

1852

Memorial Verses

April 1850

Goethe in Weimar sleeps, and Greece,
 Long since, saw Byron's struggle cease.
 But one such death remained to come;
 The last poetic voice is dumb—
 5 We stand today by Wordsworth's tomb.

When Byron's eyes were shut in death,
 We bowed our head and held our breath.
 He taught us little; but our soul
 Had *felt* him like the thunder's roll.
 10 With shivering heart the strife we saw
 Of passion with eternal law;
 And yet with reverential awe
 We watched the fount of fiery life
 Which served for that Titanic strife.
 15 When Goethe's death was told, we said:
 Sunk, then, is Europe's sagest head.
 Physician of the iron age,
 Goethe has done his pilgrimage.
 He took the suffering human race,
 20 He read each wound, each weakness clear;
 And struck his finger on the place,
 And said: *Thou ailest here, and here!*
 He looked on Europe's dying hour
 Of fitful dream and feverish power;

25 His eye plunged down the weltering strife,
 The turmoil of expiring life—
 He said: *The end is everywhere,*
Art still has truth, take refuge there!
 And he was happy, if to know
 30 Causes of things, and far below
 His feet to see the lurid flow
 Of terror, and insane distress,
 And headlong fate, be happiness.

And Wordsworth!—Ah, pale ghosts, rejoice!
 35 For never has such soothing voice
 Been to your shadowy world conveyed,
 Since erst, at morn, some wandering shade
 Heard the clear song of Orpheus come
 Through Hades, and the mournful gloom.
 40 Wordsworth has gone from us—and ye,
 Ah, may ye feel his voice as we!
 He too upon a wintry clime
 Had fallen—on this iron time
 Of doubts, disputes, distractions, fears.
 45 He found us when the age had bound
 Our souls in its benumbing round;
 He spoke, and loosed our heart in tears.
 He laid us as we lay at birth
 On the cool flowery lap of earth,
 50 Smiles broke from us and we had ease;
 The hills were round us, and the breeze
 Went o'er the sunlit fields again;
 Our foreheads felt the wind and rain.
 Our youth returned; for there was shed
 55 On spirits that had long been dead,
 Spirits dried up and closely furled,
 The freshness of the early world.

Ah! since dark days still bring to light
 Man's prudence and man's fiery might,
 60 Time may restore us in his course
 Goethe's sage mind and Byron's force;
 But where will Europe's latter hour
 Again find Wordsworth's healing power?
 Others will teach us how to dare,
 65 And against fear our breast to steel;
 Others will strengthen us to bear—
 But who, ah! who, will make us feel?
 The cloud of mortal destiny,
 Others will front it fearlessly—
 70 But who, like him, will put it by?

Keep fresh the grass upon his grave
 O Rotha, with thy living wave!
 Sing him thy best! for few or none
 Hears thy voice right, now he is gone.

Growing Old¹

What is it to grow old?
 Is it to lose the glory of the form,
 The luster of the eye?
 Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?
 5 —Yes, but not this alone.

Is it to feel our strength—
 Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?
 Is it to feel each limb
 Grow stiffer, every function less exact,
 10 Each nerve more loosely strung?

Yes, this, and more; but not
 Ah, 'tis not what in youth we dreamed 'twould be!
 'Tis not to have our life
 Mellowed and softened as with sunset glow,
 15 A golden day's decline.

'Tis not to see the world
 As from a height, with rapt prophetic eyes,
 And heart profoundly stirred;
 And weep, and feel the fullness of the past,
 20 The years that are no more.

It is to spend long days
 And not once feel that we were ever young;
 It is to add, immured
 In the hot prison of the present, month
 25 To month with weary pain.

It is to suffer this,
 And feel but half, and feebly, what we feel.
 Deep in our hidden heart
 Festers the dull remembrance of a change,
 30 But no emotion—none.

It is—last stage of all—
 When we are frozen up within, and quite
 The phantom of ourselves,
 To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
 35 Which blamed the living man.

1867

1. This poem may have been prompted as a rejoinder to Browning's enthusiastic picture of old age in *Rabbi Ben Ezra* (1864).

*From Maurice de Guérin*¹

[A DEFINITION OF POETRY]

The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power; by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them. When this sense is awakened in us, as to objects without us, we feel ourselves to be in contact with the essential nature of those objects, to be no longer bewildered and oppressed by them, but to have their secret, and to be in harmony with them; and this feeling calms and satisfies us as no other can. Poetry, indeed, interprets in another way besides this; but one of its two ways of interpreting, of exercising its highest power, is by awakening this sense in us. I will not now inquire whether this sense is illusive, whether it can be proved not to be illusive, whether it does absolutely make us possess the real nature of things; all I say is, that poetry can awaken it in us, and that to awaken it is one of the highest powers of poetry. The interpretations of science do not give us this intimate sense of objects as the interpretations of poetry give it; they appeal to a limited faculty, and not to the whole man.* * *

I have said that poetry interprets in two ways; it interprets by expressing, with magical felicity, the physiognomy and movement of the outward world, and it interprets by expressing, with inspired conviction, the ideas and laws of the inward world of man's moral and spiritual nature. In other words, poetry is interpretative both by having *natural magic* in it, and by having *moral profundity*. In both ways it illuminates man; it gives him a satisfying sense of reality; it reconciles him with himself and the universe. Thus Aeschylus's "drásanti pathein"² and his "anérithmon gélasma"³ are alike interpretative. Shakespeare interprets both when he says,

Full many a glorious morning have I seen,
Flatter the mountaintops with sovereign eye;⁴

and when he says,

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them as we will.⁵

These great poets unite in themselves the faculty of both kinds of interpretation, the naturalistic and the moral. But it is observable that in the poets who unite both kinds, the latter (the moral) usually ends by making itself the master. In Shakespeare the two kinds seem wonderfully to balance one another; but even in him the balance leans; his expression tends to become too little sensuous and simple, too much intellectualized. The same thing may be yet more strongly affirmed of Lucretius and of Wordsworth. In Shelley there is not a balance of the two gifts, nor even a coexistence of them, but there is a passionate straining after them both, and this is what makes Shelley, as a man, so interesting; I will not now inquire how much Shelley achieves as a poet, but whatever he achieves, he in general fails to achieve natural magic in his expression;

1. Minor French poet (1810–1839). The essay was included in *Essays in Criticism: First Series*.

2. The doer must suffer (Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*, line 313).

3. Countless laughter (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, line 90).

4. Shakespeare, *Sonnets* 33.1–2.

5. *Hamlet* 5.2.10–11.

in Mr. Palgrave's charming *Treasury*⁶ may be seen a gallery of his failures.⁷ But in Keats and Guérin, in whom the faculty of naturalistic interpretations is overpoweringly predominant, the natural magic is perfect; when they speak of the world they speak like Adam naming by divine inspiration the creatures; their expression corresponds with the thing's essential reality.

1863, 1865

*From Wordsworth*¹

* * *

Wordsworth has been in his grave for some thirty years, and certainly his lovers and admirers cannot flatter themselves that this great and steady light of glory as yet shines over him. He is not fully recognized at home; he is not recognized at all abroad. Yet I firmly believe that the poetical performance of Wordsworth is, after that of Shakespeare and Milton, of which all the world now recognizes the worth, undoubtedly the most considerable in our language from the Elizabethan age to the present time. Chaucer is anterior; and on other grounds, too, he cannot well be brought into the comparison. But taking the roll of our chief poetical names, besides Shakespeare and Milton, from the age of Elizabeth downwards, and going through it—Spenser, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Goldsmith, Cowper, Burns, Coleridge, Scott, Campbell, Moore, Byron, Shelley, Keats (I mention those only who are dead)—I think it certain that Wordsworth's name deserves to stand, and will finally stand, above them all. Several of the poets named have gifts and excellences which Wordsworth has not. But taking the performance of each as a whole, I say that Wordsworth seems to me to have left a body of poetical work superior in power, in interest, in the qualities which give enduring freshness, to that which any one of the others has left.

But this is not enough to say. I think it certain, further, that if we take the chief poetical names of the Continent since the death of Molière, and, omitting Goethe, confront the remaining names with that of Wordsworth, the result is the same. Let us take Klopstock, Lessing, Schiller, Uhland, Rückert, and Heine for Germany; Filicaja, Alfieri, Manzoni, and Leopardi for Italy; Racine, Boileau, Voltaire, André Chénier, Béranger, Lamartine, Musset, M. Victor Hugo (he has been so long celebrated that although he still lives I may be permitted to name him) for France. Several of these, again, have evidently gifts and excellences to which Wordsworth can make no pretension. But in real poetical achievement it seems to me indubitable that to Wordsworth, here again, belongs the palm.* * *

This is a high claim to make for Wordsworth. But if it is a just claim, if Wordsworth's place among the poets who have appeared in the last two or three

6. Francis Palgrave's anthology of poems, *The Golden Treasury*, was first published in 1861.

7. Compare, for example, his *Lines Written in the Euganean Hills*, with Keats's *Ode to Autumn*. . . . The latter piece *renders* Nature; the former *tries to render* her. I will not deny, however, that Shelley has natural magic in his rhythm; what I deny is, that he has it in his language. It always seems to me that the right sphere for Shelley's genius was the sphere of music, not of poetry; the medium of sounds he can master, but to master the more difficult medium of words he has neither intellectual

force enough nor sanity enough [Arnold's note].

1. In one of his letters to Clough, Arnold remarked that those who cannot read Greek literature "should read nothing but Milton and parts of Wordsworth: the state should see to it." The following essay, which served as the introduction to a volume of Wordsworth's poems selected by Arnold, demonstrates the reasons for this admiration. A further tribute to Wordsworth is expressed in Arnold's poem *Memorial Verses*. The opening paragraphs of the essay, which are omitted here, review the history of Wordsworth's reputation.

centuries is after Shakespeare, Molière, Milton, Goethe, indeed, but before all the rest, then in time Wordsworth will have his due. We shall recognize him in his place, as we recognize Shakespeare and Milton; and not only we ourselves shall recognize him, but he will be recognized by Europe also. Meanwhile, those who recognize him already may do well, perhaps, to ask themselves whether there are not in the case of Wordsworth certain special obstacles which hinder or delay his due recognition by others, and whether these obstacles are not in some measure removable.

The *Excursion* and the *Prelude*, his poems of greatest bulk, are by no means Wordsworth's best work. His best work is in his shorter pieces, and many indeed are there of these which are of first-rate excellence. But in his seven volumes the pieces of high merit are mingled with a mass of pieces very inferior to them; so inferior to them that it seems wonderful how the same poet should have produced both. Shakespeare frequently has lines and passages in a strain quite false, and which are entirely unworthy of him. But one can imagine him smiling if one could meet him in the Elysian Fields and tell him so; smiling and replying that he knew it perfectly well himself, and what did it matter? But with Wordsworth the case is different. Work altogether inferior, work quite uninspired, flat, and dull, is produced by him with evident unconsciousness of its defects, and he presents it to us with the same faith and seriousness as his best work. Now a drama or an epic fill the mind, and one does not look beyond them; but in a collection of short pieces the impression made by one piece requires to be continued and sustained by the piece following. In reading Wordsworth the impression made by one of his fine pieces is too often dulled and spoiled by a very inferior piece coming after it.

Wordsworth composed verses during a space of some sixty years; and it is no exaggeration to say that within one single decade of those years, between 1798 and 1808, almost all his really first-rate work was produced. A mass of inferior work remains, work done before and after this golden prime, imbedding the first-rate work and clogging it, obstructing our approach to it, chilling, not unfrequently, the high-wrought mood with which we leave it. To be recognized far and wide as a great poet, to be possible and receivable as a classic, Wordsworth needs to be relieved of a great deal of the poetical baggage which now encumbers him.² * * *

* * *

To exhibit this body of Wordsworth's best work, to clear away obstructions from around it, and to let it speak for itself, is what every lover of Wordsworth should desire. Until this has been done, Wordsworth, whom we, to whom he is dear, all of us know and feel to be so great a poet, has not had a fair chance before the world. When once it has been done, he will make his way best, not by our advocacy of him, but by his own worth and power. . . . Yet at the outset, before he has been duly known and recognized, we may do Wordsworth a service, perhaps, by indicating in what his superior power and worth will be found to consist, and in what it will not.

Long ago, in speaking of Homer, I said that the noble and profound application of ideas to life is the most essential part of poetic greatness. I said that a great poet receives his distinctive character of superiority from his application, under the conditions immutably fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and

2. The next four paragraphs, here omitted, criticize Wordsworth's system of classifying his poems.

poetic truth, from his application, I say, to his subject, whatever it may be, of the ideas

On man, on nature, and on human life,³

which he has acquired for himself. The line quoted is Wordsworth's own; and his superiority arises from his powerful use, in his best pieces, his powerful application to his subject, of ideas "on man, on nature, and on human life."

Voltaire, with his signal acuteness, most truly remarked that "no nation has treated in poetry moral ideas with more energy and depth than the English nation." And he adds: "There, it seems to me, is the great merit of the English poets." Voltaire does not mean, by "treating in poetry moral ideas," the composing moral and didactic poems—that brings us but a very little way in poetry. He means just the same thing as was meant when I spoke above "of the noble and profound application of ideas to life"; and he means the application of these ideas under the conditions fixed for us by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth. If it is said that to call these ideas *moral* ideas is to introduce a strong and injurious limitation, I answer that it is to do nothing of the kind, because moral ideas are really so main a part of human life. The question, *how to live*, is itself a moral idea; and it is the question which most interests every man, and with which, in some way or other, he is perpetually occupied. A large sense is of course to be given to the term *moral*. Whatever bears upon the question, "how to live," comes under it.

Nor love thy life, nor hate; but, what thou liv'st,
Live well; how long or short, permit to heaven.⁴

In those fine lines Milton utters, as everyone at once perceives, a moral idea. Yes, but so too, when Keats consoles the forward-bending lover on the Grecian Urn, the lover arrested and presented in immortal relief by the sculptor's hand before he can kiss, with the line,

Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair,⁵

he utters a moral idea. When Shakespeare says that

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep,⁶

he utters a moral idea.

Voltaire was right in thinking that the energetic and profound treatment of moral ideas, in this large sense, is what distinguishes the English poetry. He sincerely meant praise, not dispraise or hint of limitation; and they err who suppose that poetic limitation is a necessary consequence of the fact, the fact being granted as Voltaire states it. If what distinguishes the greatest poets is their powerful and profound application of ideas to life, which surely no good critic will deny, then to prefix to the term ideas here the term moral makes hardly any difference, because human life itself is in so preponderating a degree moral.

It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application

3. Wordsworth, *The Recluse*, line 754.

4. *Paradise Lost* 11.553–554.

5. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, line 20.

6. *The Tempest* 4.1.156–158.

of ideas to life—to the question: How to live. Morals are often treated in a narrow and false fashion; they are bound up with systems of thought and belief which have had their day; they are fallen into the hands of pedants and professional dealers; they grow tiresome to some of us. We find attraction, at times, even in a poetry of revolt against them; in a poetry which might take for its motto Omar Khayyám's words: "Let us make up in the tavern for the time which we have wasted in the mosque." Or we find attractions in a poetry indifferent to them: in a poetry where the contents may be what they will, but where the form is studied and exquisite. We delude ourselves in either case; and the best cure for our delusion is to let our minds rest upon that great and inexhaustible word *life*, until we learn to enter into its meaning. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards *life*.

Epictetus had a happy figure for things like the play of the senses, or literary form and finish, or argumentative ingenuity, in comparison with "the best and master thing" for us, as he called it, the concern, how to live. Some people were afraid of them, he said, or they disliked and undervalued them. Such people were wrong; they were unthankful or cowardly. But the things might also be overprized, and treated as final when they are not. They bear to life the relation which inns bear to home. "As if a man, journeying home, and finding a nice inn on the road, and liking it, were to stay forever at the inn! Man, thou hast forgotten thine object; thy journey was not *to* this, but *through* this. 'But this inn is taking.' And how many other inns, too, are taking, and how many fields and meadows! but as places of passage merely. You have an object, which is this: to get home, to do your duty to your family, friends, and fellow-countrymen, to attain inward freedom, serenity, happiness, contentment. Style takes your fancy, arguing takes your fancy, and you forget your home and want to make your abode with them and to stay with them, on the plea that they are taking. Who denies that they are taking? but as places of passage, as inns. And when I say this, you suppose me to be attacking the care for style, the care for argument. I am not; I attack the resting in them, the not looking to the end which is beyond them."

Now when we come across a poet like Théophile Gautier⁷ we have a poet who has taken up his abode at an inn, and never got farther. There may be inducements to this or that one of us, at this or that moment, to find delight in him, to cleave to him; but after all, we do not change the truth about him—we only stay ourselves in his inn along with him. And when we come across a poet like Wordsworth, who sings

Of truth, of grandeur, beauty, love, and hope,
And melancholy fear subdued by faith,
Of blessed consolations in distress,
Of moral strength and intellectual power,
Of joy in widest commonalty spread⁸—

then we have a poet intent on "the best and master thing," and who prosecutes his journey home. We say, for brevity's sake, that he deals with *life*, because he deals with that in which life really consists. * * *

7. French poet (1811–1872), whose preoccupation with "literary form and finish" and indifference toward edification in literature made him an important exponent of art for art's sake in France, like D. G. Rossetti in England. Arnold often deplored

his fellow Victorians' fondness for the stunning phrasemaking of such poets as Tennyson, Keats, and Rossetti.

8. *The Recluse*, lines 767–771.

No Wordsworthian will doubt this. Nay, the fervent Wordsworthian will add, as Mr. Leslie Stephen does, that Wordsworth's poetry is precious because his philosophy is sound; that his "ethical system is as distinctive and capable of exposition as Bishop Butler's"; that his poetry is informed by ideas which "fall spontaneously into a scientific system of thought."⁹ But we must be on our guard against the Wordsworthians, if we want to secure for Wordsworth his due rank as a poet. The Wordsworthians are apt to praise him for the wrong things, and to lay far too much stress upon what they call his philosophy. His poetry is the reality, his philosophy—so far, at least, as it may put on the form and habit of "a scientific system of thought," and the more that it puts them on—is the illusion. Perhaps we shall one day learn to make this proposition general, and to say: Poetry is the reality, philosophy the illusion. But in Wordsworth's case, at any rate, we cannot do him justice until we dismiss his formal philosophy.

The *Excursion* abounds with philosophy and therefore the *Excursion* is to the Wordsworthian what it never can be to the disinterested lover of poetry—a satisfactory work. "Duty exists," says Wordsworth, in the *Excursion*; and then he proceeds thus—

. . . Immutably survive,
For our support, the measures and the forms,
Which an abstract Intelligence supplies,
Whose kingdom is, where time and space are not.¹

And the Wordsworthian is delighted, and thinks that here is a sweet union of philosophy and poetry. But the disinterested lover of poetry will feel that the lines carry us really not a step farther than the proposition which they would interpret; that they are a tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage, alien to the very nature of poetry.

* * *

Even the "intimations" of the famous *Ode*, those cornerstones of the supposed philosophic system of Wordsworth—the idea of the high instincts and affections coming out in childhood, testifying of a divine home recently left, and fading away as our life proceeds—this idea, of undeniable beauty as a play of fancy, has itself not the character of poetic truth of the best kind; it has no real solidity. The instinct of delight in Nature and her beauty had no doubt extraordinary strength in Wordsworth himself as a child. But to say that universally this instinct is mighty in childhood, and tends to die away afterwards, is to say what is extremely doubtful. In many people, perhaps with the majority of educated persons, the love of nature is nearly imperceptible at ten years old, but strong and operative at thirty. In general we may say of these high instincts of early childhood, the base of the alleged systematic philosophy of Wordsworth, what Thucydides says of the early achievements of the Greek race: "It is impossible to speak with certainty of what is so remote; but from all that we can really investigate, I should say that they were no very great things."

Finally, the "scientific system of thought" in Wordsworth gives us at least such poetry as this, which the devout Wordsworthian accepts—

O for the coming of that glorious time
When, prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth

9. From an essay on "Wordsworth's Ethics" in *Hours in a Library* by Leslie Stephen (1832–1904).

1. *The Excursion* 4.73–76.

And best protection, this Imperial Realm,
 While she exacts allegiance, shall admit
 An obligation, on her part, to *teach*
 Them who are born to serve her and obey;
 Binding herself by statute to secure,
 For all the children whom her soil maintains,
 The rudiments of letters, and inform
 The mind with moral and religious truth.²

Wordsworth calls Voltaire dull, and surely the production of these un-Voltairian lines must have been imposed on him as a judgment! One can hear them being quoted at a Social Science Congress; one can call up the whole scene. A great room in one of our dismal provincial towns; dusty air and jaded afternoon daylight; benches full of men with bald heads and women in spectacles; an orator lifting up his face from a manuscript written within and without to declaim these lines of Wordsworth; and in the soul of any poor child of nature who may have wandered in thither, an unutterable sense of lamentation, and mourning, and woe!

“But turn we,” as Wordsworth says, “from these bold, bad men,”³ the haunters of Social Science Congresses. And let us be on our guard, too, against the exhibitors and extollers of a “scientific system of thought” in Wordsworth’s poetry. The poetry will never be seen aright while they thus exhibit it. The cause of its greatness is simple, and may be told quite simply. Wordsworth’s poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it.

The source of joy from which he thus draws is the truest and most unfailing source of joy accessible to man. It is also accessible universally. Wordsworth brings us word, therefore, according to his own strong and characteristic line, he brings us word

Of joy in widest commonalty spread.⁴

Here is an immense advantage for a poet. Wordsworth tells of what all seek, and tells of it at its truest and best source, and yet a source where all may go and draw for it.

Nevertheless, we are not to suppose that everything is precious which Wordsworth, standing even at this perennial and beautiful source, may give us. Wordsworthians are apt to talk as if it must be. They will speak with the same reverence of *The Sailor’s Mother*, for example, as of *Lucy Gray*. They do their master harm by such lack of discrimination. *Lucy Gray* is a beautiful success; *The Sailor’s Mother* is a failure. To give aright what he wishes to give, to interpret and render successfully, is not always within Wordsworth’s own command. It is within no poet’s command; here is the part of the Muse, the inspiration, the God, the “not ourselves.” In Wordsworth’s case, the accident, for so it may almost be called, of inspiration, is of peculiar importance. No poet, perhaps, is so evidently filled with a new and sacred energy when the inspiration is upon him; no poet, when it fails him, is so left “weak as is a breaking wave.”⁵ I remember hearing him say that “Goethe’s poetry was not inevitable enough.” The remark is striking and

2. *The Excursion* 9:293–302.

3. *To the Lady Fleming*.

4. *The Recluse*, line 771.

5. Wordsworth, *A Poet’s Epitaph*, line 58.

true; no line in Goethe, as Goethe said himself, but its maker knew well how it came there. Wordsworth is right, Goethe's poetry is not inevitable; not inevitable enough. But Wordsworth's poetry, when he is at his best, is inevitable, as inevitable as Nature herself. It might seem that Nature not only gave him the matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him. He has no style. He was too conversant with Milton not to catch at times his master's manner, and he has fine Miltonic lines; but he has no assured poetic style of his own, like Milton. When he seeks to have a style he falls into ponderosity and pomposity. In the *Excursion* we have his style, as an artistic product of his own creation; and although Jeffrey⁶ completely failed to recognize Wordsworth's real greatness, he was yet not wrong in saying of the *Excursion*, as a work of poetic style: "This will never do." And yet magical as is that power, which Wordsworth has not, of assured and possessed poetic style, he has something which is an equivalent for it.

Everyone who has any sense for these things feels the subtle turn, the heightening, which is given to a poet's verse by his genius for style. We can feel it in the

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well⁷—

of Shakespeare; in the

. . . though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues⁸—

of Milton. It is the incomparable charm of Milton's power of poetic style which gives such worth to *Paradise Regained*, and makes a great poem of a work in which Milton's imagination does not soar high. Wordsworth has in constant possession, and at command, no style of this kind; but he had too poetic a nature, and had read the great poets too well, not to catch, as I have already remarked, something of it occasionally. We find it not only in his Miltonic lines; we find it in such a phrase as this, where the manner is his own, not Milton's—

the fierce confederate storm
Of sorrow barricadoed evermore
Within the walls of cities;⁹

although even here, perhaps, the power of style which is undeniable, is more properly that of eloquent prose than the subtle heightening and change wrought by genuine poetic style. It is style, again, and the elevation given by style, which chiefly makes the effectiveness of *Laodameia*. Still the right sort of verse to choose from Wordsworth, if we are to seize his true and most characteristic form of expression, is a line like this from *Michael*—

And never lifted up a single stone.

There is nothing subtle in it, no heightening, no study of poetic style, strictly so called, at all; yet it is expression of the highest and most truly expressive kind.

Wordsworth owed much to Burns, and a style of perfect plainness, relying for effect solely on the weight and force of that which with entire fidelity it utters, Burns could show him.

The poor inhabitant below
Was quick to learn and wise to know,

6. Francis Jeffrey (1773–1850), contributor to the *Edinburgh Review*.

7. *Macbeth* 3.2.23.

8. *Paradise Lost* 7.25–26.

9. *The Recluse*, lines 831–833.

And keenly felt the friendly glow
 And softer flame;
 But thoughtless follies laid him low
 And stained his name.¹

Everyone will be conscious of a likeness here to Wordsworth; and if Wordsworth did great things with this nobly plain manner, we must remember, what indeed he himself would always have been forward to acknowledge, that Burns used it before him.

Still Wordsworth's use of it has something unique and unmatched. Nature herself seems, I say, to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power. This arises from two causes: from the profound sincerity with which Wordsworth feels his subject, and also from the profoundly sincere and natural character of his subject itself. He can and will treat such a subject with nothing but the most plain, first-hand, almost austere naturalness. His expression may often be called bald, as, for instance, in the poem of *Resolution and Independence*; but it is bald as the bare mountaintops are bald, with a baldness which is full of grandeur.

Wherever we meet with the successful balance, in Wordsworth, of profound truth of subject with profound truth of execution, he is unique. His best poems are those which most perfectly exhibit this balance. I have a warm admiration for *Laodameia* and for the great *Ode*; but if I am to tell the very truth, I find *Laodameia* not wholly free from something artificial, and the great *Ode* not wholly free from something declamatory. If I had to pick out poems of a kind most perfectly to show Wordsworth's unique power, I should rather choose poems such as *Michael*, *The Fountain*, *The Highland Reaper*.² And poems with the peculiar and unique beauty which distinguishes those, Wordsworth produced in considerable number; besides very many other poems of which the worth, although not so rare as the worth of these, is still exceedingly high.

* * *

I have spoken lightly of Wordsworthians; and if we are to get Wordsworth recognized by the public and by the world, we must recommend him not in the spirit of a clique, but in the spirit of disinterested lovers of poetry. But I am a Wordsworthian myself. I can read with pleasure and edification *Peter Bell*, and the whole series of *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, and the address to Mr. Wilkinson's spade, and even the *Thanksgiving Ode*—everything of Wordsworth, I think, except *Vaudracour and Julia*. It is not for nothing that one has been brought up in the veneration of a man so truly worthy of homage; that one has seen him and heard him, lived in his neighborhood, and been familiar with his country. No Wordsworthian has a tenderer affection for this pure and sage master than I, or is less really offended by his defects. But Wordsworth is something more than the pure and sage master of a small band of devoted followers, and we ought not to rest satisfied until he is seen to be what he is. He is one of the very chief glories of English Poetry; and by nothing is England so glorious as by her poetry. Let us lay aside every weight which hinders our getting him recognized as this, and let our one study be to bring to pass, as widely as possible and as truly as possible, his own word concerning his poems: "They will cooperate

1. Burns, *A Bard's Epitaph*.

2. I.e., *The Solitary Reaper*.

with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier.”³

1879

*From The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*¹

Many objections have been made to a proposition which, in some remarks of mine on translating Homer,² I ventured to put forth; a proposition about criticism, and its importance at the present day. I said: “Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.” I added, that owing to the operation in English literature of certain causes, “almost the last thing for which one would come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires—criticism”; and that the power and value of English literature was thereby impaired. More than one rejoinder declared that the importance I here assigned to criticism was excessive, and asserted the inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort. And the other day, having been led by a Mr. Shairp’s excellent notice of Wordsworth³ to turn again to his biography, I found, in the words of this great man, whom I, for one, must always listen to with the profoundest respect, a sentence passed on the critic’s business, which seems to justify every possible disparagement of it. Wordsworth says in one of his letters:

The writers in these publications (the Reviews), while they prosecute their inglorious employment, cannot be supposed to be in a state of mind very favorable for being affected by the finer influences of a thing so pure as genuine poetry.

And a trustworthy reporter of his conversation quotes a more elaborate judgment to the same effect:

Wordsworth holds the critical power very low, infinitely lower than the inventive; and he said today that if the quantity of time consumed in writing critiques on the works of others were given to original composition, of whatever kind it might be, it would be much better employed; it would make a man find out sooner his own level, and it would do infinitely less

3. Wordsworth’s letter to Lady Beaumont, May 21, 1807.

1. This essay served as an introduction to *Essays in Criticism* (1865). As a declaration of intentions it can serve as a standard for measuring his total accomplishment in criticism. The essay makes us aware that criticism, for Arnold, meant a great deal more than casual book reviewing or mere censoriousness. He was not a Utilitarian, yet his object in this essay is to show that good criticism is useful. Creative writers, he argues, can profit in a special way from good criticism, but all of us can also derive from it benefits of the greatest value. In particular, we may develop a civilized attitude of mind in which to examine the social, political, aesthetic, and religious problems that confront us.

2. *On Translating Homer* (1861).

3. J. C. Shairp’s essay *Wordsworth: The Man and the Poet* was published in 1864. Arnold comments in a footnote: “I cannot help thinking that a practice, common in England during the last century, and still followed in France, of printing a notice of this kind—a notice by a competent critic—to serve as an introduction to an eminent author’s works, might be revived among us with advantage. To introduce all succeeding editions of Wordsworth, Mr. Shairp’s notice might, it seems to me, excellently serve, it is written from the point of view of an admirer, nay, of a disciple, and that is right; but then the disciple must be also, as in this case he is, a critic, a man of letters, not, as too often happens, some relation or friend with no qualification for his task except affection for his author.”

mischievous. A false or malicious criticism may do much injury to the minds of others; a stupid invention, either in prose or verse, is quite harmless.

It is almost too much to expect of poor human nature, that a man capable of producing some effect in one line of literature, should, for the greater good of society, voluntarily doom himself to impotence and obscurity in another. Still less is this to be expected from men addicted to the composition of the "false or malicious criticism" of which Wordsworth speaks. However, everybody would admit that a false or malicious criticism had better never have been written. Everybody, too, would be willing to admit, as a general proposition, that the critical faculty is lower than the inventive. But is it true that criticism is really, in itself, a baneful and injurious employment; is it true that all time given to writing critiques on the works of others would be much better employed if it were given to original composition, of whatever kind this may be? Is it true that Johnson had better have gone on producing more *Irenes*⁴ instead of writing his *Lives of the Poets*; nay, is it certain that Wordsworth himself was better employed in making his Ecclesiastical Sonnets than when he made his celebrated Preface⁵ so full of criticism, and criticism of the works of others? Wordsworth was himself a great critic, and it is to be sincerely regretted that he has not left us more criticism; Goethe was one of the greatest of critics, and we may sincerely congratulate ourselves that he has left us so much criticism. Without wasting time over the exaggeration which Wordsworth's judgment on criticism clearly contains, or over an attempt to trace the causes—not difficult, I think, to be traced—which may have led Wordsworth to this exaggeration, a critic may with advantage seize an occasion for trying his own conscience, and for asking himself of what real service, at any given moment, the practice of criticism either is or may be made to his own mind and spirit, and to the minds and spirits of others.

The critical power is of lower rank than the creative. True; but in assenting to this proposition, one or two things are to be kept in mind. It is undeniable that the exercise of a creative power, that a free creative activity, is the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man's finding in it his true happiness. But it is undeniable, also, that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art; if it were not so, all but a very few men would be shut out from the true happiness of all men. They may have it in well-doing, they may have it in learning, they may have it even in criticizing. This is one thing to be kept in mind. Another is, that the exercise of the creative power in the production of great works of literature or art, however high this exercise of it may rank, is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible; and that therefore labor may be vainly spent in attempting it, which might with more fruit be used in preparing for it, in rendering it possible. This creative power works with elements, with materials; what if it has not those materials, those elements, ready for its use? In that case it must surely wait till they are ready. Now, in literature—I will limit myself to literature, for it is about literature that the question arises—the elements with which the creative power works are ideas; the best ideas on every matter which literature touches, current at the time. At any rate we may lay it down as certain that in modern literature no manifestation of the creative power not working

4. *Irene* is the name of a clumsy play by Samuel Johnson.

5. The preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). "The

Ecclesiastical Sonnets" are a sonnet sequence by Wordsworth, usually regarded as minor verse.

with these can be very important or fruitful. And I say *current* at the time, not merely accessible at the time; for creative literary genius does not principally show itself in discovering new ideas, that is rather the business of the philosopher. The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations—making beautiful works with them, in short. But it must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely; and these it is not so easy to command. This is why great creative epochs in literature are so rare, this is why there is so much that is unsatisfactory in the productions of many men of real genius; because, for the creation of a masterwork of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment; the creative power has, for its happy exercise, appointed elements, and those elements are not in its own control.

Nay, they are more within the control of the critical power. It is the business of the critical power, as I said in the words already quoted, “in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.” Thus it tends, at last, to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail. Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature.

Or, to narrow our range, and quit these considerations of the general march of genius and of society—considerations which are apt to become too abstract and impalpable—everyone can see that a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived affair. This is why Byron’s poetry had so little endurance in it, and Goethe’s so much; both Byron and Goethe had a great productive power, but Goethe’s was nourished by a great critical effort providing the true materials for it, and Byron’s was not; Goethe knew life and the world, the poet’s necessary subjects, much more comprehensively and thoroughly than Byron. He knew a great deal more of them, and he knew them much more as they really are.

It has long seemed to me that the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of this century, had about it in fact something premature; and that from this cause its productions are doomed, most of them, in spite of the sanguine hopes which accompanied and do still accompany them, to prove hardly more lasting than the productions of far less splendid epochs. And this prematureness comes from its having proceeded without having its proper data, without sufficient materials to work with. In other words, the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety. Wordsworth cared little for books, and disparaged Goethe. I admire Wordsworth, as he is, so much that I cannot wish him different; and it is vain, no doubt, to imagine such a man different from what he

is, to suppose that he *could* have been different. But surely the one thing wanting to make Wordsworth an even greater poet than he is—his thought richer, and his influence of wider application—was that he should have read more books, among them, no doubt, those of that Goethe whom he disparaged without reading him.

But to speak of books and reading may easily lead to a misunderstanding here. It was not really books and reading that lacked to our poetry at this epoch: Shelley had plenty of reading, Coleridge had immense reading. Pindar and Sophocles—as we all say so glibly, and often with so little discernment of the real import of what we are saying—had not many books; Shakespeare was no deep reader. True; but in the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, in the England of Shakespeare, the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power; society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive. And this state of things is the true basis for the creative power's exercise, in this it finds its data, its materials, truly ready for its hand; all the books and reading in the world are only valuable as they are helps to this. Even when this does not actually exist, books and reading may enable a man to construct a kind of semblance of it in his own mind, a world of knowledge and intelligence in which he may live and work. This is by no means an equivalent to the artist for the nationally diffused life and thought of the epochs of Sophocles or Shakespeare; but, besides that it may be a means of preparation for such epochs, it does really constitute, if many share in it, a quickening and sustaining atmosphere of great value. Such an atmosphere the many-sided learning and the long and widely combined critical effort of Germany formed for Goethe, when he lived and worked. There was no national glow of life and thought there as in the Athens of Pericles⁶ or the England of Elizabeth. That was the poet's weakness. But there was a sort of equivalent for it in the complete culture and unfettered thinking of a large body of Germans. That was his strength. In the England of the first quarter of this century there was neither a national glow of life and thought, such as we had in the age of Elizabeth, nor yet a culture and a force of learning and criticism such as were to be found in Germany. Therefore the creative power of poetry wanted, for success in the highest sense, materials and a basis; a thorough interpretation of the world was necessarily denied to it.

At first sight it seems strange that out of the immense stir of the French Revolution and its age should not have come a crop of works of genius equal to that which came out of the stir of the great productive time of Greece, or out of that of the Renaissance, with its powerful episode the Reformation. But the truth is that the stir of the French Revolution took a character which essentially distinguished it from such movements as these. These were, in the main, disinterestedly intellectual and spiritual movements; movements in which the human spirit looked for its satisfaction in itself and in the increased play of its own activity. The French Revolution took a political, practical character. The movement, which went on in France under the old *régime*, from 1700 to 1789, was far more really akin than that of the Revolution itself to the movement of the Renaissance; the France of Voltaire and Rousseau told far more powerfully upon the mind of Europe than the France of the Revolution. Goethe reproached this last expressly with having "thrown quiet culture back." Nay, and the true key

6. Pericles (d. 429 B.C.), the leading statesman of Athens during a period of the city's most outstanding achievements in art, literature, and politics.

to how much in our Byron, even in our Wordsworth, is this!—that they had their source in a great movement of feeling, not in a great movement of mind. The French Revolution, however—that object of so much blind love and so much blind hatred—found undoubtedly its motive power in the intelligence of men, and not in their practical sense; this is what distinguishes it from the English Revolution of Charles the First's time. This is what makes it a more spiritual event than our Revolution, an event of much more powerful and worldwide interest, though practically less successful; it appeals to an order of ideas which are universal, certain, permanent. 1789 asked of a thing, Is it rational? 1642 asked of a thing, Is it legal? or, when it went furthest, Is it according to conscience? This is the English fashion, a fashion to be treated, within its own sphere, with the highest respect; for its success, within its own sphere, has been prodigious. But what is law in one place is not law in another; what is law here today is not law even here tomorrow; and as for conscience, what is binding on one man's conscience is not binding on another's. The old woman who threw her stool at the head of the surpliced minister in St. Giles's Church at Edinburgh⁷ obeyed an impulse to which millions of the human race may be permitted to remain strangers. But the prescriptions of reason are absolute, unchanging, of universal validity; *to count by tens is the easiest way of counting*—that is a proposition of which everyone, from here to the Antipodes, feels the force; at least I should say so if we did not live in a country where it is not impossible that any morning we may find a letter in the *Times* declaring that a decimal coinage is an absurdity.⁸ That a whole nation should have been penetrated with an enthusiasm for pure reason, and with an ardent zeal for making its prescriptions triumph, is a very remarkable thing, when we consider how little of mind, or anything so worthy and quickening as mind, comes into the motives which alone, in general, impel great masses of men. In spite of the extravagant direction given to this enthusiasm, in spite of the crimes and follies in which it lost itself, the French Revolution derives from the force, truth, and universality of the ideas which it took for its law, and from the passion with which it could inspire a multitude for these ideas, a unique and still living power; it is—it will probably long remain—the greatest, the most animating event in history. And as no sincere passion for the things of the mind, even though it turn out in many respects an unfortunate passion, is ever quite thrown away and quite barren of good, France has reaped from hers one fruit—the natural and legitimate fruit though not precisely the grand fruit she expected: she is the country in Europe where *the people* is most alive.

But the mania for giving an immediate political and practical application to all these fine ideas of the reason was fatal. Here an Englishman is in his element: on this theme we can all go on for hours. And all we are in the habit of saying on it has undoubtedly a great deal of truth. Ideas cannot be too much prized in and for themselves, cannot be too much lived with; but to transport them abruptly into the world of politics and practice, violently to revolutionize this world to their bidding—that is quite another thing. There is the world of ideas and there is the world of practice; the French are often for suppressing the one and the English the other; but neither is to be suppressed. A member

7. In 1637 rioting broke out in Scotland against a new kind of church service prescribed by Charles I. The riot was started by an old woman hurling a stool at a clergyman.

8. In 1863 a proposal in Parliament to introduce

the French decimal system for weights and measures had provoked articles in the *Times* defending the English system (of ounces and pounds or inches and feet) as more practical.

of the House of Commons said to me the other day: "That a thing is an anomaly, I consider to be no objection to it whatever." I venture to think he was wrong; that a thing is an anomaly is an objection to it, but absolutely and in the sphere of ideas: it is not necessarily, under such and such circumstances, or at such and such a moment, an objection to it in the sphere of politics and practice. Joubert⁹ has said beautifully: "*C'est la force et le droit qui règlent toutes choses dans le monde; la force en attendant le droit.*"—"Force and right are the governors of this world; force till right is ready." *Force till right is ready*; and till right is ready, force, the existing order of things, is justified, is the legitimate ruler. But right is something moral, and implies inward recognition, free assent of the will; we are not ready for right—*right*, so far as we are concerned, is *not ready*—until we have attained this sense of seeing it and willing it. The way in which for us it may change and transform force, the existing order of things, and become, in its turn, the legitimate ruler of the world, should depend on the way in which, when our time comes, we see it and will it. Therefore for other people enamored of their own newly discerned right, to attempt to impose it upon us as ours, and violently to substitute their right for our force, is an act of tyranny, and to be resisted. It sets at nought the second great half of our maxim, *force till right is ready*. This was the grand error of the French Revolution; and its movement of ideas, by quitting the intellectual sphere and rushing furiously into the political sphere, ran, indeed a prodigious and memorable course, but produced no such intellectual fruit as the movement of ideas of the Renaissance, and created, in opposition to itself, what I may call an *epoch of concentration*. The great force of that epoch of concentration was England; and the great voice of that epoch of concentration was Burke.¹ It is the fashion to treat Burke's writings on the French Revolution as superannuated and conquered by the event; as the eloquent but unphilosophical tirades of bigotry and prejudice. I will not deny that they are often disfigured by the violence and passion of the moment, and that in some directions Burke's view was bounded, and his observation therefore at fault. But on the whole, and for those who can make the needful corrections, what distinguishes these writings is their profound, permanent, fruitful, philosophical truth. They contain the true philosophy of an epoch of concentration, dissipate the heavy atmosphere which its own nature is apt to engender round it, and make its resistance rational instead of mechanical.

But Burke is so great because, almost alone in England, he brings thought to bear upon politics, he saturates politics with thought. It is his accident that his ideas were at the service of an epoch of concentration, not of an epoch of expansion; it is his characteristic that he so lived by ideas, and had such a source of them welling up within him, that he could float even an epoch of concentration and English Tory politics with them. It does not hurt him that Dr. Price² and the Liberals were enraged with him; it does not even hurt him that George the Third and the Tories were enchanted with him. His greatness is that he lived in a world which neither English Liberalism nor English Toryism is apt to enter—the world of ideas, not the world of catchwords and party habits. So far is it from being really true of him that he "to party gave up what

9. Joseph Joubert (1754–1824), French moralist about whom Arnold wrote one of his *Essays in Criticism*.

1. Edmund Burke (1729–1797), prominent statesman and author of *Reflections on the French Rev-*

lution (1790), which expressed the conservative opposition to revolutionary theories.

2. Richard Price (1723–1791), a prerevolutionary clergyman who was an opponent of Burke's.

was meant for mankind,"³ that at the very end of his fierce struggle with the French Revolution, after all his invectives against its false pretensions, hollowness, and madness, with his sincere convictions of its mischievousness, he can close a memorandum on the best means of combating it, some of the last pages⁴ he ever wrote—the *Thoughts on French Affairs*, in December 1791—with these striking words:

The evil is stated, in my opinion, as it exists. The remedy must be where power, wisdom, and information, I hope, are more united with good intentions than they can be with me. I have done with this subject, I believe, forever. It has given me many anxious moments for the last two years. *If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope will forward it; and then they who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.*

That return of Burke upon himself has always seemed to me one of the finest things in English literature, or indeed in any literature. That is what I call living by ideas: when one side of a question has long had your earnest support, when all your feelings are engaged, when you hear all round you no language but one, when your party talks this language like a steam engine and can imagine no other—still to be able to think, still to be irresistibly carried, if so it be, by the current of thought to the opposite side of the question, and, like Balaam,⁵ to be unable to speak anything *but what the Lord has put in your mouth*. I know nothing more striking, and I must add that I know nothing more un-English.

For the Englishman in general is like my friend the Member of Parliament, and believes, point-blank, that for a thing to be an anomaly is absolutely no objection to it whatever. He is like the Lord Auckland of Burke's day, who, in a memorandum on the French Revolution, talks of certain "miscreants, assuming the name of philosophers, who have presumed themselves capable of establishing a new system of society." The Englishman has been called a political animal, and he values what is political and practical so much that ideas easily become objects of dislike in his eyes, and thinkers, "miscreants," because ideas and thinkers have rashly meddled with politics and practice. This would be all very well if the dislike and neglect confined themselves to ideas transported out of their own sphere, and meddling rashly with practice; but they are inevitably extended to ideas as such, and to the whole life of intelligence; practice is everything, a free play of the mind is nothing. The notion of the free play of the mind upon all subjects being a pleasure in itself, being an object of desire, being an essential provider of elements without which a nation's spirit, whatever compensations it may have for them, must, in the long run, die of inanition, hardly enters into an Englishman's thoughts. It is noticeable that the word *curiosity*, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man's nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake—it is noticeable, I say, that this word has

3. From Oliver Goldsmith's poem *Retaliation* (1774).

4. Arnold was mistaken; Burke continued to write for another six years after 1791. According to

Arnold's editor, R. H. Super, the mistake was caused by misunderstanding a passage in one of Burke's letters.

5. Cf. Numbers 22.38.

in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever. This is an instinct for which there is, I think, little original sympathy in the practical English nature, and what there was of it has undergone a long benumbing period of blight and suppression in the epoch of concentration which followed the French Revolution.

But epochs of concentration cannot well endure forever; epochs of expansion, in the due course of things, follow them. Such an epoch of expansion seems to be opening in this country. In the first place all danger of a hostile forcible pressure of foreign ideas upon our practice has long disappeared; like the traveler in the fable, therefore, we begin to wear our cloak a little more loosely.⁶ Then, with a long peace, the ideas of Europe steal gradually and amiably in, and mingle, though in infinitesimally small quantities at a time, with our own notions. Then, too, in spite of all that is said about the absorbing and brutalizing influence of our passionate material progress, it seems to me indisputable that this progress is likely, though not certain, to lead in the end to an apparition of intellectual life; and that man, after he has made himself perfectly comfortable and has now to determine what to do with himself next, may begin to remember that he has a mind, and that the mind may be made the source of great pleasure. I grant it is mainly the privilege of faith, at present, to discern this end to our railways, our business, and our fortune-making; but we shall see if, here as elsewhere, faith is not in the end the true prophet. Our ease, our traveling, and our unbounded liberty to hold just as hard and securely as we please to the practice to which our notions have given birth, all tend to beget an inclination to deal a little more freely with these notions themselves, to canvass them a little, to penetrate a little into their real nature. Flutterings of curiosity, in the foreign sense of the word, appear amongst us, and it is in these that criticism must look to find its account. Criticism first; a time of true creative activity, perhaps—which, as I have said, must inevitably be preceded amongst us by a time of criticism—hereafter, when criticism has done its work.

It is of the last importance that English criticism should clearly discern what rule for its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rule may be summed up in one word—*disinterestedness*.⁷ And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called “the practical view of things”; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its business is to do this with inflexible honesty, with due ability; but its business

6. See Aesop's fable of the wind and the sun.

7. This key word in Arnold's argument connotes independence and objectivity of mind. It should

not be confused, as it often is, with mere lack of interest.

is to do no more, and to leave alone all questions of practical consequences and applications, questions which will never fail to have due prominence given to them. Else criticism, besides being really false to its own nature, merely continues in the old rut which it has hitherto followed in this country, and will certainly miss the chance now given to it. For what is at present the bane of criticism in this country? It is that practical considerations cling to it and stifle it. It subserves interests not its own. Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first thing and the play of mind the second; so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is wanted. An organ like the *Revue des Deux Mondes*,⁸ having for its main function to understand and utter the best that is known and thought in the world, existing, it may be said, as just an organ for a free play of the mind, we have not. But we have the *Edinburgh Review*, existing as an organ of the old Whigs, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the *Quarterly Review*, existing as an organ of the Tories, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the *British Quarterly Review*, existing as an organ of the political Dissenters, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the *Times*, existing as an organ of the common, satisfied, well-to-do Englishman, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that. And so on through all the various fractions, political and religious, of our society; every fraction has, as such, its organ of criticism, but the notion of combining all fractions in the common pleasure of a free disinterested play of mind meets with no favor. Directly this play of mind wants to have more scope, and to forget the pressure of practical considerations a little, it is checked, it is made to feel the chain. We saw this the other day in the extinction, so much to be regretted, of the *Home and Foreign Review*.⁹ Perhaps in no organ of criticism in this country was there so much knowledge, so much play of mind; but these could not save it. The *Dublin Review* subordinates play of mind to the practical business of English and Irish Catholicism, and lives. It must needs be that men should act in sects and parties, that each of these sects and parties should have its organ, and should make this organ subserve the interests of its action; but it would be well, too, that there should be a criticism, not the minister of these interests, not their enemy, but absolutely and entirely independent of them. No other criticism will ever attain any real authority or make any real way towards its end—the creating a current of true and fresh ideas.

It is because criticism has so little kept in the pure intellectual sphere, has so little detached itself from practice, has been so directly polemical and controversial, that it has so ill accomplished, in this country, its best spiritual work, which is to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things. A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the better to secure it against attack; and clearly this is narrowing and baneful for them. If they were reassured on the practical side, speculative considerations of ideal perfection they might be brought to entertain, and their spiritual horizon

8. An international magazine of exceptionally high quality, founded in Paris in 1829.

9. A liberal Catholic periodical, founded in 1862, which ceased publication in 1864.

would thus gradually widen. Sir Charles Adderley¹ says to the Warwickshire farmers:

Talk of the improvement of breed! Why, the race we ourselves represent, the men and women, the old Anglo-Saxon race, are the best breed in the whole world. . . . The absence of a too enervating climate, too unclouded skies, and a too luxurious nature, has produced so vigorous a race of people, and has rendered us so superior to all the world.

Mr. Roebuck² says to the Sheffield cutlers:

I look around me and ask what is the state of England? Is not property safe? Is not every man able to say what he likes? Can you not walk from one end of England to the other in perfect security? I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it? Nothing. I pray that our unrivaled happiness may last.

Now obviously there is a peril for poor human nature in words and thoughts of such exuberant self-satisfaction, until we find ourselves safe in the streets of the Celestial City.

*Das wenige verschwindet leicht dem Blicke
Der vorwärts sieht, wie viel noch übrig bleibt*—³

says Goethe; “the little that is done seems nothing when we look forward and see how much we have yet to do.” Clearly this is a better line of reflection for weak humanity, so long as it remains on this earthly field of labor and trial.

But neither Sir Charles Adderley nor Mr. Roebuck is by nature inaccessible to considerations of this sort. They only lose sight of them owing to the controversial life we all lead, and the practical form which all speculation takes with us. They have in view opponents whose aim is not ideal, but practical; and in their zeal to uphold their own practice against these innovators, they go so far as even to attribute to this practice an ideal perfection. Somebody has been wanting to introduce a six-pound franchise, or to abolish church-rates,⁴ or to collect agricultural statistics by force, or to diminish local self-government. How natural, in reply to such proposals, very likely improper or ill-timed, to go a little beyond the mark and to say stoutly, “Such a race of people as we stand, so superior to all the world! The old Anglo-Saxon race, the best breed in the whole world! I pray that our unrivaled happiness may last! I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it?” And so long as criticism answers this dithyramb by insisting that the old Anglo-Saxon race would be still more superior to all others if it had no church-rates, or that our unrivaled happiness would last yet longer with a six-pound franchise, so long will the strain, “The best breed in the whole world!” swell louder and louder, everything ideal and refining will be lost out of sight, and both the assailed and their critics will remain in a sphere, to say the truth, perfectly unvital, a sphere in which spiritual progression is impossible. But let criticism leave church-rates and the franchise alone, and in the most candid spirit, without a single lurking thought of practical innovation, confront with our

1. Conservative politician and wealthy landowner (1814–1905).

2. John Arthur Roebuck (1801–1879), radical politician and representative in Parliament for the industrial city of Sheffield.

3. Goethe, *Iphigenie auf Tauris* 1.2.91–92.

4. Taxes supporting the Church of England. “Six-pound franchise”: a radical proposal to extend the right to vote to anyone owning land worth £6 annual rent.

dithyramb this paragraph on which I stumbled in a newspaper immediately after reading Mr. Roebuck:

A shocking child murder has just been committed at Nottingham. A girl named Wragg left the workhouse there on Saturday morning with her young illegitimate child. The child was soon afterwards found dead on Mapperly Hills, having been strangled. Wragg is in custody.

Nothing but that; but, in juxtaposition with the absolute eulogies of Sir Charles Adderley and Mr. Roebuck, how eloquent, how suggestive are those few lines! “Our old Anglo-Saxon breed, the best in the whole world!”—how much that is harsh and ill-favored there is in this best! *Wragg!* If we are to talk of ideal perfection, of “the best in the whole world,” has anyone reflected what a touch of grossness in our race, what an original shortcoming in the more delicate spiritual perceptions, is shown by the natural growth amongst us of such hideous names—Higginbottom, Stiggins, Bugg! In Ionia and Attica they were luckier in this respect than “the best race in the world”; by the Ilissus⁵ there was no Wragg, poor thing! And “our unrivaled happiness”—what an element of grimness, bareness, and hideousness mixes with it and blurs it; the workhouse, the dismal Mapperly Hills⁶—how dismal those who have seen them will remember—the gloom, the smoke, the cold, the strangled illegitimate child! “I ask you whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it?” Perhaps not, one is inclined to answer; but at any rate, in that case, the world is very much to be pitied. And the final touch—short, bleak and inhuman: *Wragg is in custody*. The sex lost in the confusion of our unrivaled happiness; or (shall I say?) the superfluous Christian name lopped off by the straightforward vigor of our old Anglo-Saxon breed! There is profit for the spirit in such contrasts as this; criticism serves the cause of perfection by establishing them. By eluding sterile conflict, by refusing to remain in the sphere where alone narrow and relative conceptions have any worth and validity, criticism may diminish its momentary importance, but only in this way has it a chance of gaining admittance for those wider and more perfect conceptions to which all its duty is really owed. Mr. Roebuck will have a poor opinion of an adversary who replies to his defiant songs of triumph only by murmuring under his breath, *Wragg is in custody*; but in no other way will these songs of triumph be induced gradually to moderate themselves, to get rid of what in them is excessive and offensive, and to fall into a softer and truer key.

It will be said that it is a very subtle and indirect action which I am thus prescribing for criticism, and that, by embracing in this manner the Indian virtue of detachment and abandoning the sphere of practical life, it condemns itself to a slow and obscure work. Slow and obscure it may be, but it is the only proper work of criticism. The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them. On these inadequate ideas repose, and must repose, the general practice of the world. That is as much as saying that whoever sets himself to see things as they are will find himself one of a very small circle; but it is only by this small circle resolutely doing its own work that adequate ideas will ever get current at all. The rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator, and tend to draw him into its vortex; most of all will this be the case where that life is so powerful as it is in England.

5. A stream in Attica, Greece.

6. Adjacent to the coal-mining and industrial area

of Nottingham (later associated with the writings of D. H. Lawrence).

But it is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the practical man, that the critic can do the practical man any service, and it is only by the greatest sincerity in pursuing his own course, and by at last convincing even the practical man of his sincerity, that he can escape misunderstandings which perpetually threaten him.

For the practical man is not apt for fine distinctions, and yet in these distinctions truth and the highest culture greatly find their account. But it is not easy to lead a practical man—unless you reassure him as to your practical intentions, you have no chance of leading him—to see that a thing which he has always been used to look at from one side only, which he greatly values, and which, looked at from that side, quite deserves, perhaps, all the prizing and admiring which he bestows upon it—that this thing, looked at from another side, may appear much less beneficent and beautiful, and yet retain all its claims to our practical allegiance. Where shall we find language innocent enough, how shall we make the spotless purity of our intentions evident enough, to enable us to say to the political Englishman that the British Constitution itself, which, seen from the practical side, looks such a magnificent organ of progress and virtue, seen from the speculative side—with its compromises, its love of facts, its horror of theory, its studied avoidance of clear thoughts—that, seen from this side, our august Constitution sometimes looks—forgive me, shade of Lord Somers!⁷—a colossal machine for the manufacture of Philistines?⁸ How is Cobbett⁹ to say this and not be misunderstood, blackened as he is with the smoke of a lifelong conflict in the field of political practice? how is Mr. Carlyle to say it and not be misunderstood, after his furious raid into this field with his *Latter-day Pamphlets*? how is Mr. Ruskin, after his pugnacious political economy?¹ I say, the critic must keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere if he wants to make a beginning for that more free speculative treatment of things, which may perhaps one day make its benefits felt even in this sphere, but in a natural and thence irresistible manner.

* * *

If I have insisted so much on the course which criticism must take where politics and religion are concerned, it is because, where these burning matters are in question, it is most likely to go astray. I have wished, above all, to insist on the attitude which criticism should adopt towards things in general; on its right tone and temper of mind. But then comes another question as to the subject matter which literary criticism should most seek. Here, in general, its course is determined for it by the idea which is the law of its being; the idea of a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas. By the very nature of things, as England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English growth, must be foreign; by the nature of things, again, it is just this that we are least likely to know, while English thought is streaming in upon us from all sides, and takes

7. John Somers (1651–1716), statesman responsible for formulating the Declaration of Rights.

8. The unenlightened middle classes, whose opposition to the defenders of culture is parallel to the biblical tribe that fought against the people of Israel, “the children of light.” Arnold’s repeated use of this parallel has established the term in our language.

9. William Cobbett (1762–1835), vehement reformer whose political position anticipated that of Dickens.

1. Reference to *Unto this Last* (1862), in which Ruskin shifted from art criticism to an attack on traditional theories of economics.

excellent care that we shall not be ignorant of its existence. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought, and with particular heed on any part of it, which, while significant and fruitful in itself, is for any reason specially likely to escape him. Again, judging is often spoken of as the critic's one business, and so in some sense it is; but the judgment which almost insensibly forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one; and thus knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge, must be the critic's great concern for himself. And it is by communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgment pass along with it—but insensibly, and in the second place, not the first, as a sort of companion and clue, not as an abstract lawgiver—that the critic will generally do most good to his readers. Sometimes, no doubt, for the sake of establishing an author's place in literature, and his relation to a central standard (and if this is not done, how are we to get at our *best in the world?*) criticism may have to deal with a subject matter so familiar that fresh knowledge is out of the question, and then it must be all judgment; an enunciation and detailed application of principles. Here the great safeguard is never to let oneself become abstract, always to retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth of what one is saying, and, the moment this fails us, to be sure that something is wrong. Still under all circumstances, this mere judgment and application of principles is, in itself, not the most satisfactory work to the critic; like mathematics, it is tautological, and cannot well give us, like fresh learning, the sense of creative activity.

But stop, some one will say; all this talk is of no practical use to us whatever; this criticism of yours is not what we have in our minds when we speak of criticism; when we speak of critics and criticism, we mean critics and criticism of the current English literature of the day; when you offer to tell criticism its function, it is to this criticism that we expect you to address yourself. I am sorry for it, for I am afraid I must disappoint these expectations. I am bound by my own definition of criticism: *a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world*. How much of current English literature comes into this "best that is known and thought in the world"? Not very much I fear; certainly less, at this moment, than of the current literature of France or Germany. Well, then, am I to alter my definition of criticism, in order to meet the requirements of a number of practicing English critics, who, after all, are free in their choice of a business? That would be making criticism lend itself just to one of those alien practical considerations, which, I have said, are so fatal to it. One may say, indeed, to those who have to deal with the mass—so much better disregarded—of current English literature, that they may at all events endeavor, in dealing with this, to try it, so far as they can, by the standard of the best that is known and thought in the world; one may say, that to get anywhere near this standard, every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better. But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with—the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, the criticism which, throughout Europe, is at the present day meant, when so much stress is laid on the importance of criticism and the critical spirit—is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result, and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another. Special, local, and temporary advantages being put out of account, that modern nation will in the intellectual and spiritual sphere

make most progress, which most thoroughly carries out this program. And what is that but saying that we too, all of us, as individuals, the more thoroughly we carry it out, shall make the more progress?

There is so much inviting us!—what are we to take? what will nourish us in growth towards perfection? That is the question which, with the immense field of life and of literature lying before him, the critic has to answer; for himself first, and afterwards for others. In this idea of the critic's business the essays brought together in the following pages have had their origin; in this idea, widely different as are their subjects, they have, perhaps, their unity.

I conclude with what I said at the beginning: to have the sense of creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge. Then it may have, in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation. And at some epochs no other creation is possible.

Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature we must never forget that. But what true man of letters ever can forget it? It is no such common matter for a gifted nature to come into possession of a current of true and living ideas, and to produce amidst the inspiration of them, that we are likely to underrate it. The epochs of Aeschylus and Shakespeare make us feel their pre-eminence. In an epoch like those is, no doubt, the true life of literature; there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon. That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.

1864, 1865