THE STUDY OF POETRY

A GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ESSAYS ON

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BY

MATTHEW ARNOLD

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I

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I

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"THE future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the

[1] Published in 1880 as the General Introduction to *The English Poets*, edited by T. H. Ward.

fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry."

Let me be permitted to quote these words of my own, as uttering the thought which should, in my opinion, go with us and govern us in all our study of poetry. In the present work it is the course of one great contributory stream to the world-river of poetry that we are invited to follow. We are here invited to trace the stream of English poetry. But whether we set ourselves, as here, to follow only one of the several streams that make the mighty river of poetry, or whether we seek to know them all, our governing thought should be the same.

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. For finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science"; and what is a countenance without its expression? Again, Wordsworth finely and truly calls poetry "the breath and finer spirit of

all knowledge" : our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now ; our philosophy, pluming itself on its reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being ; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge ? The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously ; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize "the breath and finer spirit of knowledge" offered to us by poetry.

But if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence. We must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to a strict

judgment. Sainte-Beuve relates that Napoleon one day said, when somebody was spoken of in his presence as a charlatan : "Charlatan as much as you please ; but where is there *not* charlatanism ?" — "Yes," answers Sainte-Beuve, "in politics, in the art of governing mankind, that is perhaps true. But in the order of thought, in art, the glory, the eternal honour, is that charlatanism shall find no entrance ; herein lies the inviolableness of that noble portion of man's being." It is admirably said, and let us hold fast to it. In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honour, that charlatanism shall find no entrance ; that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable. Charlatanism is for confusing or obliterating the distinctions between excellent and inferior, sound and

unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true. It is charlatanism, conscious or unconscious, whenever we confuse or obliterate these. And in poetry, more than anywhere else, it is unpermissible to confuse or obliterate them. For in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true, is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance because of the high destinies of poetry. In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criti-

cism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true.

The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, is the most precious benefit which we can gather from a poetical collection such as the present. And yet in the very nature and conduct of such a collection there is inevitably something which tends to obscure in us the consciousness of what our benefit should be, and to distract us from the pursuit of it. We should therefore

steadily set it before our minds at the outset, and should compel ourselves to revert constantly to the thought of it as we proceed.

Yes; constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read. But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to be superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious. A poet or a poem may count to us historically, they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves, and they may count to us really. They may count to us historically. The course of development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry is profoundly interesting; and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticising it; in short, to overrate it. So arises in our poetic judgments the fallacy caused by the estimate which we may call historic. Then, again, a poet or a poem may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance. Here also we overrate the object of our interest, and apply to it a language of praise

which is quite exaggerated. And thus we get the source of a second fallacy in our poetic judgments — the fallacy caused by an estimate which we may call personal.

Both fallacies are natural. It is evident how naturally the study of the history and development of a poetry may incline a man to pause over reputations and works once conspicuous but now obscure, and to quarrel with a careless public for skipping, in obedience to mere tradition and habit, from one famous name or work in its national poetry to another, ignorant of what it misses, and of the reason for keeping what it keeps, and of the whole process of growth in its poetry. The French have become diligent students of their own early poetry, which they long neglected; the study makes many

of them dissatisfied with their so-called classical poetry, the court-tragedy of the seventeenth century, a poetry which Pellisson long ago reproached with its want of the true poetic stamp, with its *politesse stérile et rampante*, but which nevertheless has reigned in France as absolutely as if it had been the perfection of classical poetry indeed. The dissatisfaction is natural; yet a lively and accomplished critic, M. Charles d'Héricault, the editor of Clément Marot, goes too far when he says that "the cloud of glory playing round a classic is a mist as dangerous to the future of a literature as it is intolerable for the purposes of history." "It hinders," he goes on, "it hinders us from seeing more than one single point, the culminating and exceptional point; the summary, fictitious and arbitrary,

of a thought and of a work. It substitutes a halo for a physiognomy, it puts a statue where there was once a man, and hiding from us all trace of the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures, it claims not study but veneration; it does not show us how the thing is done, it imposes upon us a model. Above all, for the historian this creation of classic personages is inadmissible; for it withdraws the poet from his time, from his proper life, it breaks historical relationships, it blinds criticism by conventional admiration, and renders the investigation of literary origins unacceptable. It gives us a human personage no longer, but a God seated immovable amidst His perfect work, like Jupiter on Olympus; and hardly will it be possible for the young student, to whom

such work is exhibited at such a distance from him, to believe that it did not issue ready made from that divine head."

All this is brilliantly and tellingly said, but we must plead for a distinction. Everything depends on the reality of a poet's classic character. If he is a dubious classic, let us sift him; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best (for this is the true and right meaning of the word *classic*, *classical*), then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character. This is what is salutary, this is what is formative; this is the great benefit to be got from

the study of poetry. Everything which interferes with it, which hinders it, is injurious. True, we must read our classic with open eyes, and not with eyes blinded with superstition; we must perceive when his work comes short, when it drops out of the class of the very best, and we must rate it, in such cases, at its proper value. But the use of this negative criticism is not in itself, it is entirely in its enabling us to have a clearer sense and a deeper enjoyment of what is truly excellent. To trace the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships, is mere literary dilettantism unless it has that clear sense and deeper enjoyment for its end. It may be said that the more we know about a classic

the better we shall enjoy him; and, if we lived as long as Methuselah and had all of us heads of perfect clearness and wills of perfect steadfastness, this might be true in fact as it is plausible in theory. But the case here is much the same as the case with the Greek and Latin studies of our schoolboys. The elaborate philological groundwork which we require them to lay is in theory an admirable preparation for appreciating the Greek and Latin authors worthily. The more thoroughly we lay the groundwork, the better we shall be able, it may be said, to enjoy the authors. True, if time were not so short, and schoolboys' wits not so soon tired and their power of attention exhausted; only, as it is, the elaborate philological preparation goes on, but the authors are little known and less enjoyed. So

with the investigator of "historic origins" in poetry. He ought to enjoy the true classic all the better for his investigations; he often is distracted from the enjoyment of the best, and with the less good he overbusies himself, and is prone to overrate it in proportion to the trouble which it has cost him.

The idea of tracing historic origins and historical relationships cannot be absent from a compilation like the present. And naturally the poets to be exhibited in it will be assigned to those persons for exhibition who are known to prize them highly, rather than to those who have no special inclination towards them. Moreover the very occupation with an author, and the business of exhibiting him, disposes us to affirm and amplify his importance. In the present work, therefore, we are sure

of frequent temptation to adopt the historic estimate, or the personal estimate, and to forget the real estimate; which latter, nevertheless, we must employ if we are to make poetry yield us its full benefit. So high is that benefit, the benefit of clearly feeling and of deeply enjoying the really excellent, the truly classic in poetry, that we do well, I say, to set it fixedly before our minds as our object in studying poets and poetry, and to make the desire of attaining it the one principle to which, as the *Imitation* says, whatever we may read or come to know, we always return. *Cum multa legeris et cognoveris, ad unum semper oportet redire principium.*

The historic estimate is likely in especial to affect our judgment and our language when we are dealing with ancient poets; the personal estimate when

we are dealing with poets our contemporaries, or at any rate modern. The exaggerations due to the historic estimate are not in themselves, perhaps, of very much gravity. Their report hardly enters the general ear; probably they do not always impose even on the literary men who adopt them. But they lead to a dangerous abuse of language. So we hear Cædmon, amongst our own poets, compared to Milton. I have already noticed the enthusiasm of one accomplished French critic for "historic origins." Another eminent French critic, M. Vitet, comments upon that famous document of the early poetry of his nation, the *Chanson de Roland*. It is indeed a most interesting document. The *joculator* or *jongleur* Taillefer, who was with William the Conqueror's army at Hastings, marched

before the Norman troops, so said the tradition, singing "of Charlemagne and of Roland and of Oliver, and of the vassals who died at Roncevaux"; and it is suggested that in the *Chanson de Roland* by one Turoldus or Théroulde, a poem preserved in a manuscript of the twelfth century in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, we have certainly the matter, perhaps even some of the words, of the chant which Taillefer sang. The poem has vigour and freshness; it is not without pathos. But M. Vitet is not satisfied with seeing in it a document of some poetic value, and of very high historic and linguistic value; he sees in it a grand and beautiful work, a monument of epic genius. In its general design he finds the grandiose conception, in its details he finds the constant union of simplicity with great-

ness, which are the marks, he truly says, of the genuine epic, and distinguish it from the artificial epic of literary ages. One thinks of Homer; this is the sort of praise which is given to Homer, and justly given. Higher praise there cannot well be, and it is the praise due to epic poetry of the highest order only, and to no other. Let us try, then, the *Chanson de Roland* at its best. Roland, mortally wounded, lays himself down under a pine-tree, with his face turned towards Spain and the enemy —

"De plusurs choses à remembrer li prist,
De tantes teres cume li bers cunquist,
De dulce France, des humes de sun lign,
De Carlemagne sun seignor ki l'nurrit." [1]

[1] "Then began he to call many things to remembrance, — all the lands which his valour conquered, and pleasant France, and the men of his lineage, and Charlemagne his liege lord who nourished him." — *Chanson de Roland*, iii. 939-942.

That is primitive work, I repeat, with an undeniable poetic quality of its own. It deserves such praise, and such praise is sufficient for it. But now turn to Homer —

Ὣς φάτο· τοὺς δ' ἤδη κατέχεν φυσίζοος αἶα
ἐν Λακεδαίμονι αὖθι, φίλῃ ἐν πατρίδι γαίῃ.[1]

We are here in another world, another order of poetry altogether; here is rightly due such supreme praise as that which M. Vitet gives to the *Chanson de Roland*. If our words are to have any meaning, if our judgments are to have any solidity, we must not heap that supreme praise upon poetry of an order immeasurably inferior.

[1] "So said she; they long since in Earth's soft arms were reposing,
There, in their own dear land, their fatherland, Lacedæmon."
Iliad, iii. 243, 244 (translated by Dr. Hawtrey).

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently. Take the two lines which I have just quoted from Homer, the

poet's comment on Helen's mention of her brothers; — or take his

Ἆ δειλώ, τί σφῶϊ δόμεν Πηλῆϊ ἄνακτι
θνητῷ; ὑμεῖς δ ἐστὸν ἀγήρω τ' ἀθανάτω τε.
ἦ ἵνα δυστήνοισι μετ' ἀνδράσιν ἄλγε' ἔχητον;[1]

the address of Zeus to the horses of Peleus; — or take finally his

Καὶ σέ, γέρον, τὸ πρὶν μὲν ἀκούομεν ὄλβιον εἶναι·[2]

the words of Achilles to Priam, a suppliant before him. Take that incomparable line and a half of Dante, Ugolino's tremendous words —

"Io no piangeva; sì dentro impietrai.
Piangevan elli . . ."[3]

[1] "Ah, unhappy pair, why gave we you to King Peleus, to a mortal? but ye are without old age, and immortal. Was it that with men born to misery ye might have sorrow?" — *Iliad*, xvii. 443–445.

[2] "Nay, and thou too, old man, in former days wast, as we hear, happy." — *Iliad*, xxiv. 543.

[3] "I wailed not, so of stone grew I within; — *they* wailed." — *Inferno*, xxxiii. 39, 40.

take the lovely words of Beatrice to Virgil —

"Io son fatta da Dio, sua mercè, tale,
Che la vostra miseria non mi tange,
Nè fiamma d' esto incendio non m' assale . . ."[1]

take the simple, but perfect, single line —

"In la sua volontade è nostra pace."[2]

Take of Shakespeare a line or two of Henry the Fourth's expostulation with sleep —

"Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge . . ."

and take, as well, Hamlet's dying request to Horatio —

[1] "Of such sort hath God, thanked be His mercy, made me, that your misery toucheth me not, neither doth the flame of this fire strike me." — *Inferno*, ii. 91–93.

[2] "In His will is our peace." — *Paradiso*, iii. 85.

"If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story . . ."

Take of Milton that Miltonic passage —

"Darken'd so, yet shone
Above them all the archangel; but his face
Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care
Sat on his faded cheek . . ."

add two such lines as —

"And courage never to submit or yield
And what is else not to be overcome . . ."

and finish with the exquisite close to the loss of Proserpine, the loss

". . . which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world."

These few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us

from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate.

The specimens I have quoted differ widely from one another, but they have in common this: the possession of the very highest poetical quality. If we are thoroughly penetrated by their power, we shall find that we have acquired a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical quality is present or wanting there. Critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples; — to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed *there*.

They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic. Nevertheless if we are urgently pressed to give some critical account of them, we may safely, perhaps, venture on laying down, not indeed how and why the characters arise, but where and in what they arise. They are in the matter and substance of the poetry, and they are in its manner and style. Both of these, the substance and matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power. But if we are asked to define this mark and accent in the abstract, our answer must be: No, for we should thereby be darkening the question, not clearing it. The mark and accent are as given by the substance and matter of that poetry,

by the style and manner of that poetry, and of all other poetry which is akin to it in quality.

Only one thing we may add as to the substance and matter of poetry, guiding ourselves by Aristotle's profound observation that the superiority of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness (*φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον*). Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, this: that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness. We may add yet further, what is in itself evident, that to the style and manner of the best poetry their special character, their accent, is given by their diction, and, even yet more, by their movement. And though we distinguish between the two characters, the two accents, of superiority, yet they are nevertheless vitally connected one with the other. The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related, and are in steadfast proportion one to the other. So far as high poetic truth and seriousness are wanting to a poet's matter and substance, so far also, we may be sure, will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner. In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness

are absent from his substance and matter.

So stated, these are but dry generalities; their whole force lies in their application. And I could wish every student of poetry to make the application of them for himself. Made by himself, the application would impress itself upon his mind far more deeply than made by me. Neither will my limits allow me to make any full application of the generalities above propounded; but in the hope of bringing out, at any rate, some significance in them, and of establishing an important principle more firmly by their means, I will, in the space which remains to me, follow rapidly from the commencement the course of our English poetry with them in my view.

Once more I return to the early

poetry of France, with which our own poetry, in its origins, is indissolubly connected. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that seed-time of all modern language and literature, the poetry of France had a clear predominance in Europe. Of the two divisions of that poetry, its productions in the *langue d'oil* and its productions in the *langue d'oc*, the poetry of the *langue d'oc*, of southern France, of the troubadours, is of importance because of its effect on Italian literature, — the first literature of modern Europe to strike the true and grand note, and to bring forth, as in Dante and Petrarch it brought forth, classics. But the predominance of French poetry in Europe, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is due to its poetry of the *langue d'oil*, the poetry of northern France

and of the tongue which is now the French language. In the twelfth century the bloom of this romance-poetry was earlier and stronger in England, at the court of our Anglo-Norman kings, than in France itself. But it was a bloom of French poetry; and as our native poetry formed itself, it formed itself out of this. The romance-poems which took possession of the heart and imagination of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are French; "they are," as Southey justly says, "the pride of French literature, nor have we anything which can be placed in competition with them." Themes were supplied from all quarters; but the romance-setting which was common to them all, and which gained the ear of Europe, was French. This constituted for the French poetry, literature, and

language, at the height of the Middle Age, an unchallenged predominance. The Italian Brunetto Latini, the master of Dante, wrote his *Treasure* in French because, he says, "la parleure en est plus délitable et plus commune à toutes gens." In the same century, the thirteenth, the French romance-writer, Christian of Troyes, formulates the claims, in chivalry and letters, of France, his native country, as follows: —

"Or vous ert par ce livre apris,
Que Gresse ot de chevalerie
Le premier los et de clergie;
Puis vint chevalerie à Rome,
Et de la clergie la some,
Qui ore est en France venue.
Diex doinst qu'ele i soit retenue,
Et que li lius li abelisse
Tant que de France n'isse
L'onor qui s'i est arestée!"

"Now by this book you will learn that first Greece had the renown for chivalry and letters; then chivalry and the primacy in letters passed to Rome, and now it is come to France. God grant it may be kept there; and that the place may please it so well, that the honour which has come to make stay in France may never depart thence!"

Yet it is now all gone, this French romance-poetry, of which the weight of substance and the power of style are not unfairly represented by this extract from Christian of Troyes. Only by means of the historic estimate can we persuade ourselves now to think that any of it is of poetical importance.

But in the fourteenth century there comes an Englishman nourished on this poetry, taught his trade by this poetry,

getting words, rhyme, metre from this poetry; for even of that stanza which the Italians used, and which Chaucer derived immediately from the Italians, the basis and suggestion was probably given in France. Chaucer (I have already named him) fascinated his contemporaries, but so too did Christian of Troyes and Wolfram of Eschenbach. Chaucer's power of fascination, however, is enduring; his poetical importance does not need the assistance of the historic estimate; it is real. He is a genuine source of joy and strength, which is flowing still for us and will flow always. He will be read, as time goes on, far more generally than he is read now. His language is a cause of difficulty for us; but so also, and I think in quite as great a degree, is the language of Burns. In Chaucer's case,

as in that of Burns, it is a difficulty to be unhesitatingly accepted and overcome.

If we ask ourselves wherein consists the immense superiority of Chaucer's poetry over the romance-poetry — why it is that in passing from this to Chaucer we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world — we shall find that his superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry. His superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life, — so unlike the total want, in the romance-poets, of all intelligent command of it. Chaucer has not their helplessness ; he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human, point of view. We have only to call to mind the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. The

right comment upon it is Dryden's : "It is sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that *here is God's plenty*." And again, "He is a perpetual fountain of good sense." It is by a large, free, sound representation of things, that poetry, this high criticism of life, has truth of substance ; and Chaucer's poetry has truth of substance.

Of his style and manner, if we think first of the romance-poetry and then of Chaucer's divine liquidness of diction, his divine fluidity of movement, it is difficult to speak temperately. They are irresistible, and justify all the rapture with which his successors speak of his "gold dew-drops of speech." Johnson misses the point entirely when he finds fault with Dryden for ascribing to Chaucer the first refinement of our numbers, and says that Gower also can

show smooth numbers and easy rhymes. The refinement of our numbers means something far more than this. A nation may have versifiers with smooth numbers and easy rhymes, and yet may have no real poetry at all. Chaucer is the father of our splendid English poetry; he is our "well of English undefiled," because by the lovely charm of his diction, the lovely charm of his movement, he makes an epoch and founds a tradition. In Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, we can follow the tradition of the liquid diction, the fluid movement, of Chaucer; at one time it is his liquid diction of which in these poets we feel the virtue, and at another time it is his fluid movement. And the virtue is irresistible.

Bounded as is my space, I must yet find room for an example of Chaucer's

virtue, as I have given examples to show the virtue of the great classics. I feel disposed to say that a single line is enough to show the charm of Chaucer's verse; that merely one line like this —

"O martyr souded[1] in virginitee!"

has a virtue of manner and movement such as we shall not find in all the verse of romance-poetry; but this is saying nothing. The virtue is such as we shall not find, perhaps, in all English poetry, outside the poets whom I have named as the special inheritors of Chaucer's tradition. A single line, however, is too little if we have not the strain of Chaucer's verse well in our memory; let us take a stanza. It is from *The Prioress's Tale*, the story of the Christian child murdered in a Jewry —

[1] The French *soudé*: soldered, fixed fast.

"My throte is cut unto my nekke-bone
Saidè this child, and as by way of kinde
I should have deyd, yea, longè time agone;
But Jesu Christ, as ye in bookès finde,
Will that his glory last and be in minde,
And for the worship of his mother dere
Yet may I sing *O Alma* loud and clere."

Wordsworth has modernised this Tale, and to feel how delicate and evanescent is the charm of verse, we have only to read Wordsworth's first three lines of this stanza after Chaucer's —

"My throat is cut unto the bone, I trow,
Said this young child, and by the law of kind
I should have died, yea, many hours ago."

The charm is departed. It is often said that the power of liquidness and fluidity in Chaucer's verse was dependent upon a free, a licentious dealing with language, such as is now impossible; upon a liberty, such as Burns too enjoyed, of making words like *neck*,

bird, into a dissyllable by adding to them, and words like *cause*, *rhyme*, into a dissyllable by sounding the *e* mute. It is true that Chaucer's fluidity is conjoined with this liberty, and is admirably served by it; but we ought not to say that it was dependent upon it. It was dependent upon his talent. Other poets with a like liberty do not attain to the fluidity of Chaucer; Burns himself does not attain to it. Poets, again, who have a talent akin to Chaucer's, such as Shakespeare or Keats, have known how to attain to his fluidity without the like liberty.

And yet Chaucer is not one of the great classics. His poetry transcends and effaces, easily and without effort, all the romance-poetry of Catholic Christendom; it transcends and effaces all the English poetry contemporary with

it, it transcends and effaces all the English poetry subsequent to it down to the age of Elizabeth. Of such avail is poetic truth of substance, in its natural and necessary union with poetic truth of style. And yet, I say, Chaucer is not one of the great classics. He has not their accent. What is wanting to him is suggested by the mere mention of the name of the first great classic of Christendom, the immortal poet who died eighty years before Chaucer, — Dante. The accent of such verse as

"In la sua volontade è nostra pace . . ."

is altogether beyond Chaucer's reach; we praise him, but we feel that this accent is out of the question for him. It may be said that it was necessarily out of the reach of any poet in the England of that stage of growth. Possibly;

but we are to adopt a real, not a historic, estimate of poetry. However we may account for its absence, something is wanting, then, to the poetry of Chaucer, which poetry must have before it can be placed in the glorious class of the best. And there is no doubt what that something is. It is the σπουδαιότης, the high and excellent seriousness, which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry. The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness. Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare's has it. It is this chiefly which gives to our spirits what they can rest upon; and with the increasing demands of our modern ages upon poetry, this virtue

of giving us what we can rest upon will be more and more highly esteemed. A voice from the slums of Paris, fifty or sixty years after Chaucer, the voice of poor Villon out of his life of riot and crime, has at its happy moments (as, for instance, in the last stanza of *La Belle Heaulmière*[1]) more of this im-

[1] The name *Heaulmière* is said to be derived from a head-dress (helm) worn as a mark by courtesans. In Villon's ballad, a poor old creature of this class laments her days of youth and beauty. The last stanza of the ballad runs thus —

"Ainsi le bon temps regretons
Entre nous, pauvres vieilles sottes,
Assises bas, à croppetons,
Tout en ung tas comme pelottes;
A petit feu de chenevottes
Tost allumées, tost estainctes.
Et jadis fusmes si mignottes!
Ainsi en prend à maintz et maintes."

"Thus amongst ourselves we regret the good time, poor silly old things, low-seated on our

portant poetic virtue of seriousness than all the productions of Chaucer. But its apparition in Villon, and in men like Villon, is fitful; the greatness of the great poets, the power of their criticism of life, is that their virtue is sustained.

To our praise, therefore, of Chaucer as a poet there must be this limitation; he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics, and therewith an important part of their virtue. Still, the main fact for us to bear in mind about Chaucer is his sterling value according to that real estimate which we firmly adopt for all poets. He has poetic truth of substance, though he has not

heels, all in a heap like so many balls; by a little fire of hemp-stalks, soon lighted, soon spent. And once we were such darlings! So fares it with many and many a one."

high poetic seriousness, and corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner. With him is born our real poetry.

For my present purpose I need not dwell on our Elizabethan poetry, or on the continuation and close of this poetry in Milton. We all of us profess to be agreed in the estimate of this poetry; we all of us recognise it as great poetry, our greatest, and Shakespeare and Milton as our poetical classics. The real estimate, here, has universal currency. With the next age of our poetry divergency and difficulty begin. An historic estimate of that poetry has established itself; and the question is, whether it will be found to coincide with the real estimate.

The age of Dryden, together with our whole eighteenth century which fol-

lowed it, sincerely believed itself to have produced poetical classics of its own, and even to have made advance, in poetry, beyond all its predecessors. Dryden regards as not seriously disputable the opinion "that the sweetness of English verse was never understood or practised by our fathers." Cowley could see nothing at all in Chaucer's poetry. Dryden heartily admired it, and, as we have seen, praised its matter admirably; but of its exquisite manner and movement all he can find to say is that "there is the rude sweetness of a Scotch tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect." Addison, wishing to praise Chaucer's numbers, compares them with Dryden's own. And all through the eighteenth century, and down even into our own times, the stereotyped phrase of appro-

bation for good verse found in our early poetry has been, that it even approached the verse of Dryden, Addison, Pope, and Johnson.

Are Dryden and Pope poetical classics? Is the historic estimate, which represents them as such, and which has been so long established that it cannot easily give way, the real estimate? Wordsworth and Coleridge, as is well known, denied it; but the authority of Wordsworth and Coleridge does not weigh much with the young generation, and there are many signs to show that the eighteenth century and its judgments are coming into favour again. Are the favourite poets of the eighteenth century classics?

It is impossible within my present limits to discuss the question fully. And what man of letters would not shrink

from seeming to dispose dictatorially of the claims of two men who are, at any rate, such masters in letters as Dryden and Pope; two men of such admirable talent, both of them, and one of them, Dryden, a man, on all sides, of such energetic and genial power? And yet, if we are to gain the full benefit from poetry, we must have the real estimate of it. I cast about for some mode of arriving, in the present case, at such an estimate without offence. And perhaps the best way is to begin, as it is easy to begin, with cordial praise.

When we find Chapman, the Elizabethan translator of Homer, expressing himself in his preface thus: "Though truth in her very nakedness sits in so deep a pit, that from Gades to Aurora and Ganges few eyes can sound her, I hope yet those few here will so discover

and confirm that, the date being out of her darkness in this morning of our poet, he shall now gird his temples with the sun," — we pronounce that such a prose is intolerable. When we find Milton writing : "And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he, who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem," — we pronounce that such a prose has its own grandeur, but that it is obsolete and inconvenient. But when we find Dryden telling us : "What Virgil wrote in the vigour of his age, in plenty and at ease, I have undertaken to translate in my declining years ; struggling with wants, oppressed with sickness, curbed in my genius, liable to be misconstrued in all I write," — then we exclaim that here at last we have

the true English prose, a prose such as we would all gladly use if we only knew how. Yet Dryden was Milton's contemporary.

But after the Restoration the time had come when our nation felt the imperious need of a fit prose. So, too, the time had likewise come when our nation felt the imperious need of freeing itself from the absorbing preoccupation which religion in the Puritan age had exercised. It was impossible that this freedom should be brought about without some negative excess, without some neglect and impairment of the religious life of the soul ; and the spiritual history of the eighteenth century shows us that the freedom was not achieved without them. Still, the freedom was achieved; the preoccupation, an undoubtedly baneful and retarding one if it had continued,

was got rid of. And as with religion amongst us at that period, so it was also with letters. A fit prose was a necessity; but it was impossible that a fit prose should establish itself amongst us without some touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul. The needful qualities for a fit prose are regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. The men of letters, whose destiny it may be to bring their nation to the attainment of a fit prose, must of necessity, whether they work in prose or in verse, give a predominating, an almost exclusive, attention to the qualities of regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. But an almost exclusive attention to these qualities involves some repression and silencing of poetry.

We are to regard Dryden as the puissant and glorious founder, Pope as the

splendid high priest, of our age of prose and reason, of our excellent and indispensable eighteenth century. For the purposes of their mission and destiny their poetry, like their prose, is admirable. Do you ask me whether Dryden's verse, take it almost where you will, is not good?

"A milk-white Hind, immortal and unchanged,
Fed on the lawns and in the forest ranged."

I answer: Admirable for the purposes of the inaugurator of an age of prose and reason. Do you ask me whether Pope's verse, take it almost where you will, is not good?

"To Hounslow Heath I point, and Banstead Down;
Thence comes your mutton, and these chicks my own."

I answer: Admirable for the purposes of the high priest of an age of prose

and reason. But do you ask me whether such verse proceeds from men with an adequate poetic criticism of life, from men whose criticism of life has a high seriousness, or even, without that high seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom, insight, benignity? Do you ask me whether the application of ideas to life in the verse of these men, often a powerful application, no doubt, is a powerful *poetic* application? Do you ask me whether the poetry of these men has either the matter or the inseparable manner of such an adequate poetic criticism; whether it has the accent of

"Absent thee from felicity awhile . . ."

or of

"And what is else not to be overcome . . ."

or of

"O martyr souded in virginitee!"

I answer: It has not and cannot have them; it is the poetry of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification, Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose.

Gray is our poetical classic of that literature and age; the position of Gray is singular, and demands a word of notice here. He has not the volume or the power of poets who, coming in times more favourable, have attained to an independent criticism of life. But he lived with the great poets, he lived, above all, with the Greeks, through perpetually studying and enjoying them; and he caught their poetic point of view for regarding life, caught their poetic manner. The point of view and the manner are

not self-sprung in him, he caught them of others; and he had not the free and abundant use of them. But whereas Addison and Pope never had the use of them, Gray had the use of them at times. He is the scantiest and frailest of classics in our poetry, but he is a classic.

And now, after Gray, we are met, as we draw towards the end of the eighteenth century, we are met by the great name of Burns. We enter now on times where the personal estimate of poets begins to be rife, and where the real estimate of them is not reached without difficulty. But in spite of the disturbing pressures of personal partiality, of national partiality, let us try to reach a real estimate of the poetry of Burns.

By his English poetry Burns in gen-

eral belongs to the eighteenth century, and has little importance for us.

"Mark ruffian Violence, distain'd with crimes,
Rousing elate in these degenerate times;
View unsuspecting Innocence a prey,
As guileful Fraud points out the erring way;
While subtle Litigation's pliant tongue
The life-blood equal sucks of Right and Wrong!"

Evidently this is not the real Burns, or his name and fame would have disappeared long ago. Nor is Clarinda's love-poet, Sylvander, the real Burns either. But he tells us himself: "These English songs gravel me to death. I have not the command of the language that I have of my native tongue. In fact, I think that my ideas are more barren in English than in Scotch. I have been at *Duncan Gray* to dress it in English, but all I can do is desper-

ately stupid." We English turn naturally, in Burns, to the poems in our own language, because we can read them easily; but in those poems we have not the real Burns.

The real Burns is of course in his Scotch poems. Let us boldly say that of much of this poetry, a poetry dealing perpetually with Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, a Scotchman's estimate is apt to be personal. A Scotchman is used to this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners; he has a tenderness for it; he meets its poet half way. In this tender mood he reads pieces like the *Holy Fair* or *Halloween*. But this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners is against a poet, not for him, when it is not a partial countryman who reads him; for in

itself it is not a beautiful world, and no one can deny that it is of advantage to a poet to deal with a beautiful world. Burns's world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, is often a harsh, a sordid, a repulsive world; even the world of his *Cotter's Saturday Night* is not a beautiful world. No doubt a poet's criticism of life may have such truth and power that it triumphs over its world and delights us. Burns may triumph over his world, often he does triumph over his world, but let us observe how and where. Burns is the first case we have had where the bias of the personal estimate tends to mislead; let us look at him closely, he can bear it.

Many of his admirers will tell us that we have Burns, convivial, genuine, delightful, here—

"Leeze me on drink! it gies us mair
Than either school or college;
It kindles wit, it waukens lair,
It pangs us fou o' knowledge.
Be 't whisky gill or penny wheep
Or ony stronger potion,
It never fails, on drinking deep,
To kittle up our notion
By night or day."

There is a great deal of that sort of thing in Burns, and it is unsatisfactory, not because it is bacchanalian poetry, but because it has not that accent of sincerity which bacchanalian poetry, to do it justice, very often has. There is something in it of bravado, something which makes us feel that we have not the man speaking to us with his real voice; something, therefore, poetically unsound.

With still more confidence will his admirers tell us that we have the

genuine Burns, the great poet, when his strain asserts the independence, equality, dignity, of men, as in the famous song *For a' that and a' that*—

"A prince can mak' a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, and a' that;
But an honest man's aboon his might,
Guid faith he mauna fa' that!
For a' that, and a' that,
Their dignities, and a' that,
The pith o' sense, and pride o' worth,
Are higher rank than a' that."

Here they find his grand, genuine touches; and still more, when this puissant genius, who so often set morality at defiance, falls moralising—

"The sacred lowe o' weel-placed love
Luxuriantly indulge it;
But never tempt th' illicit rove,
Tho' naething should divulge it.

I waive the quantum o' the sin,
The hazard o' concealing,
But och! it hardens a' within,
And petrifies the feeling."

Or in a higher strain —

"Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us;
He knows each chord, its various tone;
Each spring, its various bias.
Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's *done* we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted."

Or in a better strain yet, a strain, his admirers will say, unsurpassable —

"To make a happy fire-side clime
To weans and wife,
That's the true pathos and sublime
Of human life."

There is criticism of life for you, the admirers of Burns will say to us; there is the application of ideas to life! There

is, undoubtedly. The doctrine of the last-quoted lines coincides almost exactly with what was the aim and end, Xenophon tells us, of all the teaching of Socrates. And the application is a powerful one; made by a man of vigorous understanding, and (need I say?) a master of language.

But for supreme poetical success more is required than the powerful application of ideas to life; it must be an application under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Those laws fix as an essential condition, in the poet's treatment of such matters as are here in question, high seriousness; — the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity. The accent of high seriousness, born of absolute sincerity, is what gives to such verse as

"In la sua volontade è nostra pace . . ."

to such criticism of life as Dante's, its power. Is this accent felt in the passages which I have been quoting from Burns? Surely not; surely, if our sense is quick, we must perceive that we have not in those passages a voice from the very inmost soul of the genuine Burns; he is not speaking to us from these depths, he is more or less preaching. And the compensation for admiring such passages less, from missing the perfect poetic accent in them, will be that we shall admire more the poetry where that accent is found.

No; Burns, like Chaucer, comes short of the high seriousness of the great classics, and the virtue of matter and manner which goes with that high seriousness is wanting to his work. At moments he touches it in a profound

and passionate melancholy, as in those four immortal lines taken by Byron as a motto for *The Bride of Abydos*, but which have in them a depth of poetic quality such as resides in no verse of Byron's own —

"Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met, or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted."

But a whole poem of that quality Burns cannot make; the rest, in the *Farewell to Nancy*, is verbiage.

We arrive best at the real estimate of Burns, I think, by conceiving his work as having truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent or the poetic virtue of the highest masters. His genuine criticism of life, when the sheer poet in him speaks, is ironic; it is not —

"Thou Power Supreme, whose mighty scheme
These woes of mine fulfil,
Here firm I rest, they must be best
Because they are Thy will!"

It is far rather: *Whistle owre the lave o't!* Yet we may say of him as of Chaucer, that of life and the world, as they come before him, his view is large, free, shrewd, benignant, — truly poetic, therefore; and his manner of rendering what he sees is to match. But we must note, at the same time, his great difference from Chaucer. The freedom of Chaucer is heightened, in Burns, by a fiery, reckless energy; the benignity of Chaucer deepens, in Burns, into an overwhelming sense of the pathos of things; — of the pathos of human nature, the pathos, also, of non-human nature. Instead of the fluidity of Chaucer's manner, the manner of

Burns has spring, bounding swiftness. Burns is by far the greater force, though he has perhaps less charm. The world of Chaucer is fairer, richer, more significant than that of Burns; but when the largeness and freedom of Burns get full sweep, as in *Tam o' Shanter*, or still more in that puissant and splendid production, *The Jolly Beggars*, his world may be what it will, his poetic genius triumphs over it. In the world of *The Jolly Beggars* there is more than hideousness and squalor, there is bestiality; yet the piece is a superb poetic success. It has a breadth, truth, and power which make the famous scene in Auerbach's Cellar, of Goethe's *Faust*, seem artificial and tame beside it, and which are only matched by Shakespeare and Aristophanes.

Here, where his largeness and free-

dom serve him so admirably, and also in those poems and songs where to shrewdness he adds infinite archness and wit, and to benignity infinite pathos, where his manner is flawless, and a perfect poetic whole is the result, — in things like the address to the mouse whose home he had ruined, in things like *Duncan Gray, Tam Glen, Whistle and I'll come to you my Lad, Auld Lang Syne* (this list might be made much longer), — here we have the genuine Burns, of whom the real estimate must be high indeed. Not a classic, nor with the excellent σπουδαιότης of the great classics, nor with a verse rising to a criticism of life and a virtue like theirs; but a poet with thorough truth of substance and an answering truth of style, giving us a poetry sound to the core. We all of

us have a leaning towards the pathetic, and may be inclined perhaps to prize Burns most for his touches of piercing, sometimes almost intolerable, pathos; for verse like —

> "We twa hae paidl't i' the burn
> From mornin' sun till dine;
> But seas between us braid hae roar'd
> Sin auld lang syne . . ."

where he is as lovely as he is sound. But perhaps it is by the perfection of soundness of his lighter and archer masterpieces that he is poetically most wholesome for us. For the votary misled by a personal estimate of Shelley, as so many of us have been, are, and will be, — of that beautiful spirit building his many-coloured haze of words and images

> "Pinnacled dim in the intense inane" —

no contact can be wholesomer than the contact with Burns at his archest and soundest. Side by side with the

"On the brink of the night and the morning
My coursers are wont to respire,
But the Earth has just whispered a warning
That their flight must be swifter than fire . . ."

of *Prometheus Unbound*, how salutary, how very salutary, to place this from *Tam Glen* —

"My minnie does constantly deave me
And bids me beware o' young men;
They flatter, she says, to deceive me;
But wha can think sae o' Tam Glen?"

But we enter on burning ground as we approach the poetry of times so near to us — poetry like that of Byron, Shelley, and Wordsworth — of which the estimates are so often not only personal, but personal with passion.

For my purpose, it is enough to have taken the single case of Burns, the first poet we come to of whose work the estimate formed is evidently apt to be personal, and to have suggested how we may proceed, using the poetry of the great classics as a sort of touchstone, to correct this estimate, as we had previously corrected by the same means the historic estimate where we met with it. A collection like the present, with its succession of celebrated names and celebrated poems, offers a good opportunity to us for resolutely endeavouring to make our estimates of poetry real. I have sought to point out a method which will help us in making them so, and to exhibit it in use so far as to put any one who likes in a way of applying it for himself.

At any rate the end to which the

method and the estimate are designed to lead, and from leading to which, if they do lead to it, they get their whole value, — the benefit of being able clearly to feel and deeply to enjoy the best, the truly classic, in poetry, — is an end, let me say it once more at parting, of supreme importance. We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature; that such readers do not want and could not relish anything better than such literature, and that to provide it is becoming a vast and profitable industry. Even if good literature entirely lost currency with the world, it would still be abundantly worth while to continue to enjoy it by oneself. But it never will lose currency with the world, in spite of momentary appear-

ances; it never will lose supremacy. Currency and supremacy are insured to it, not indeed by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper, — by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity.

II

A GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

II

A GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

PEOPLE repeat, till one is almost tired of hearing it, the story of the French Minister of Instruction who took out his watch and said complacently to a foreigner, that at that moment, in all the public grammar-schools of France, all boys of the same class were saying the same lesson. In England the story has been eagerly used to disparage State-meddling with schools. I have never been able to see that it was in itself so very lamentable a thing that all these French boys should be saying the same lesson at

the same time. Everything, surely, depends upon what the lesson was. Once secure what is excellent to be taught, and you can hardly teach it with too much insistence, punctuality, universality. The more one sees of the young, the more one is struck with two things: how limited is the amount which they can really learn, how worthless is much of what goes to make up this amount now. Mr. Grant Duff, misled by his own accomplishments and intelligence, is, I am convinced, far too encyclopædic in his requirements from young learners. But the heart-breaking thing is, that what they *can* be taught and *do* learn is often so ill-chosen. "An apple has a stalk, peel, pulp, core, pips, and juice; it is odorous and opaque, and is used for making a pleasant drink called

cider." There is the pedant's fashion of using the brief lesson-time, the soon tired attention, of little children. How much, how far too much, of all our course of tuition, early and late, is of like value!

For myself, I lament nothing more in our actual instruction than its multiformity,—a multiformity, too often, of false direction and useless labour. I desire nothing so much for it as greater uniformity, — but uniformity in good. Nothing is taught well except what is known familiarly and taught often. The Greeks used to say: Δὶς ἢ τρὶς τὰ καλά,— Give us a fine thing two and three times over! And they were right.

In literature we have present, and waiting ready to form us, the best which has been thought and said in

the world. Our business is to get at this best and to know it well. But even to understand the thing we are dealing with, and to choose the best in it, we need a guide, a clue. The literature most accessible to all of us, touching us most nearly, is our own literature, English literature. To get at the best in English literature and to know that best well, nothing can be more helpful to us than a guide who will show us, in clear view, the growth of our literature, its series of productions, and their relative value. If such a guide is good and trustworthy, his instructions cannot be too widely brought into use, too diligently studied, too thoroughly fixed in the mind.

But to deserve such universal acceptance and such heedful attention our guide ought to have special qualifications. He ought to be clear. He ought to be brief, — as brief as is consistent with not being dry. For dry he must not be; but we should be made to feel, in listening to him, as much as possible of the power and charm of the literature to which he introduces us. His discourse, finally, ought to observe strict proportion and to observe strict sobriety. He should have one scale and should keep to it. And he should severely eschew all violence and exaggeration; he should avoid, in his judgments, even the least appearance of what is arbitrary, personal, fantastic.

Mr. Stopford Brooke has published a little book entitled *A Primer of English Literature*. I have read it with the most lively interest and pleasure. I have just been saying

how very desirable is a good guide to English literature, and what are a good guide's qualifications. Mr. Stopford Brooke seems to me to possess them all. True, he has some of them in a higher degree than others. He is never dry, never violent; but occasionally he might, I think, be clearer, shorter, in more perfect proportion, more thoroughly true of judgment. To say this is merely to say that in a most difficult task, that of producing a book to serve as a guide to English literature, a man does not reach perfection all at once. The great thing was to produce a primer so good as Mr. Stopford Brooke's. It is easy to criticise it when it has once been produced, easy to see how in some points it might have been made better. To produce it at all, so

good as it is, was not easy. On the whole, and compared with other workmen in the same field, Mr. Stopford Brooke has been clear, short, interesting, observant of proportion, free from exaggeration and free from arbitrariness. Yet with the book lying before one as a whole, one can see, I think, that with respect to some of these merits the work might be brought to a point of excellence higher than that at which it now stands. Mr. Stopford Brooke will not, I am sure, take it amiss if an attentive and gratified reader of his book, convinced of the great importance of what it attempts, convinced of its merits, desirous to see it in every one's hands,— he will not take it ill, I say, if such a reader asks his leave to go rapidly through the book with him, to point out what

seem imperfections, to suggest what might bring his book yet nearer towards the ideal of what such a book should be.

I will begin at the beginning, and will suggest that Mr. Stopford Brooke should leave out his first two pages, the pages in which he lays down what literature is, and what its two main divisions (as he calls them), prose and poetry, are. His primer is somewhat long, longer than most primers. It is a gain to shorten it by expunging anything superfluous. And the reader does not require to be told what literature is, and what prose and poetry are. For all practical purposes he knows this sufficiently well already. Or even if he were in doubt about it, Mr. Stopford Brooke's two pages would not

make the matter much clearer to him; they are a little embarrassed themselves, and tend to embarrass the attentive reader. And a primer, at any rate, should be above all things quite plain and clear; it should contain nothing to embarrass its reader, nothing not perfectly thought out and lucidly laid down. So I wish Mr. Stopford Brooke would begin his primer with what is now the fourth section: "The history of English literature is the story of what English men and women thought and felt, and then wrote down in good prose or beautiful poetry in the English language. The story is a long one. It begins about the year 670 and it is still going on in the year 1875. Into this little book, then, is to be put the story of 1,200 years." Nothing can be better.

The sentence which follows is questionable:—

"No people that have ever been in the world can look back so far as we English can to the beginnings of our literature; no people can point to so long and splendid a train of poets and prose-writers, no nation has on the whole written so much and so well."

The first part of this sentence makes an assertion of very doubtful truth; the second part is too much to the tune of *Rule Britannia*. Both parts offend against sobriety. The four cardinal virtues which are, as I have said, to be required in the writer of a primer of English literature are these: clearness, brevity, proportion, sobriety. Sobriety needs to be insisted upon, perhaps, the most, because in things meant, and rightly meant, to be popular, there is such danger of

sinning against it. Anything of questionable and disputed truth, even though we may fairly hold it and in a longer performance might fairly lay it down and defend it, is out of place in a primer. It is an offence against sobriety to insert it there. And let Mr. Stopford Brooke ask himself what foreigner, or who except an Englishman, would admit that "no people can point to so long and splendid a train of poets and prose-writers as the English people, no nation has on the whole written so much and so well"? Nay, it is not every Englishman who, with Greece before his eyes, would admit it. What follows is in a truer strain, in the right strain for a guide to take:—

"Every English man and woman has good reason to be proud of the work done by their

forefathers in prose and poetry. Every one who can write a good book or a good song may say to himself: 'I belong to a great company which has been teaching and delighting men for more than a thousand years.' And that is a fact in which those who write and those who read ought to feel a noble pride."

This is unquestionable, and it is sufficient.

Nothing, in a task like Mr. Stopford Brooke's, is more difficult than the start, and it was natural, therefore, that his first page or two should be peculiarly open to criticism. Once started, Mr. Stopford Brooke proceeds safely and smoothly, and page after page is read with nothing but acquiescence. His first chapter is excellent, and has that great merit for which his primer is, as I have said, conspicuous: the merit of so touching men and works of which the young reader, and

the general reader, knows and can be expected to know very little, as to make them cease to be mere names; — as to give a real sense of their power and charm. His manner of dealing with Cædmon and Bede is a signal instance of this. I shall not quote the passage, because I wish to quote presently another passage with the like merit, in which Mr. Stopford Brooke is even happier: the passage where he treats of Chaucer.

In the second chapter there is in several places a want of clearness, due to a manner of writing which leaves something to be filled out and completed by the reader himself. This task should not be thrown upon readers of a primer. "The last memoranda of the Peterborough Chronicle

are of the year 1154, the last English Charter can scarcely be earlier than 1155." Mr. Stopford Brooke gives these words as a quotation, but it is not fully clear how they relate themselves to the context, or exactly what is to be deduced from them. In another instance, the want of clearness arises from an attempt to give a piece of information by the way, and because the piece of information seems to be a part of the argument, but is not. "The first friars were foreigners, and they necessarily used many French words in their English teaching, and Normans as well as English now began to write religious works in English." The point to be made out is that English came into greater use because even foreigners had for certain purposes to adopt it.

Mr. Stopford Brooke wishes to inform by the way his young reader, that the foreigners in doing so used many French words. But the manner in which he throws this in must cause puzzle; for the young reader imagines it to lead up somehow to the main point that English came into more general use, and it does not. Or the want of clearness arises from something being put forward, about which Mr. Stopford Brooke, after he has put it forward, feels hesitation. "The poem marks the close of the religious influence of the friars. They had been attacked before in a poem of 1320; but in this poem there is not a word said against them. It is true, the author living far in the country may not have been thrown much with them." Mr. Stopford Brooke means

here, so far as I understand him, to imply that there not being a word said against the friars in the poem in question marks the close of their religious influence. That is rather a subtle inference for a young reader to follow. Mr. Stopford Brooke, however, seems to feel (for I am really not quite sure that I understand him) that he may have been too subtle; and he adds: "It is true, the author living far in the country may not have been thrown much with them." That is to say: "If you consider the thing more subtly, perhaps you had better not make the inference I have suggested." A subtlety requiring immediately to be relieved by another subtlety, is rather too much for a young reader. The writer of a primer should attempt to convey nothing but what can be

conveyed in a quite plain and straightforward fashion.

But presently we come to Layamon's *Brut*, and here we see how admirably Mr. Stopford Brooke understands his business. It is not difficult to be dull in speaking of Layamon's *Brut*, or even in quoting from it. But what Mr. Stopford Brooke says of Layamon and his work is just what every one will feel interested in hearing of them; and what he quotes is exactly what will complete and enhance this feeling of interest: —

"'There was a priest in the land,' Layamon writes of himself, 'whose name was Layamon; he was son of Leovenath; may the Lord be gracious unto him! He dwelt at Earnley, a noble church on the bank of Severn, near Radstone, where he read books. It came in mind to him and in his chiefest thought that

he would tell the noble deeds of England, what the men were named, and whence they came, who first had English land.'"

Freshness of touch, a treatment always the very opposite of the pedant's treatment of things, make the great charm of Mr. Stopford Brooke's work. He owes them, no doubt, to his genuine love for nature and poetry: —

"In 1300 we meet with a few lyric poems, full of charm. They sing of spring-time with its blossoms, of the woods ringing with the thrush and nightingale, of the flowers and the seemly sun, of country work, of the woes and joy of love, and many other delightful things."

No such secret of freshness as delight in all these "delightful things" and in the poetry which tells of them!

This second chapter, giving the

history of English literature from the Conquest to Chaucer, is admirably proportioned. The personages come in due order, the humblest not without his due word of introduction; the chief figures pause awhile and stand clear before us, each in his due degree of prominence. To do justice to the charm of Mr. Stopford Brooke's primer, let the reader turn to the pages on Chaucer. Something I must quote from them; I wish I could quote all!

"Chaucer's first and great delight was in human nature, and he makes us love the noble characters in his poems, and feel with kindliness towards the baser and ruder sort. He never sneers, for he had a wide charity, and we can always smile in his pages at the follies and forgive the sins of men. He had a true and chivalrous regard for women, and his wife and he must have been very happy if they ful-

filled the ideal he had of marriage. He lived in aristocratic society, and yet he thought him the greatest gentleman who was 'most vertuous alway, Privé and pert (open), and most entendeth aye To do the gentil dedes that he can.' He lived frankly among men, and, as we have seen, saw many different types of men, and in his own time filled many parts as a man of the world and of business. Yet with all this active and observant life, he was commonly very quiet and kept much to himself. The Host in the Tales japes at him for his lonely, abstracted air. 'Thou lookest as thou wouldest find a hare, And ever on the ground I see thee stare.' Being a good scholar, he read morning and night alone, and he says that after his office-work he would go home and sit at another book as dumb as a stone, till his look was dazed. While at study and when he was making of songs and ditties, 'nothing else that God had made' had any interest for him. There was but one thing that roused him then, and that too he liked to enjoy alone. It was the beauty of the morning and the fields, the woods, the streams, the

flowers, and the singing of the little birds. This made his heart full of revel and solace, and when spring came after winter, he rose with the lark and cried, 'Farewell my book and my devotion.' He was the first who made the love of nature a distinct element in our poetry. He was the first who, in spending the whole day gazing alone on the daisy, set going that lonely delight in natural scenery which is so special a mark of our later poets. He lived thus a double life, in and out of the world, but never a gloomy one. For he was fond of mirth and good-living, and when he grew towards age was portly of waist, 'no poppet to embrace.' But he kept to the end his elfish countenance, the shy, delicate, half-mischievous face which looked on men from its grey hair and forked beard, and was set off by his light grey-coloured dress and hood. A knife and inkhorn hung on his dress, we see a rosary in his hand, and when he was alone he walked swiftly."

I could not bring myself to make the quotation shorter, although Mr. Stop-

ford Brooke may ask me, indeed, why I do not observe in a review the proportion which I demand in a primer.

The third and fourth chapters bring us to the Renascence and the Elizabethan age. Spenser is touched by Mr. Stopford Brooke almost as charmingly as Chaucer. The pages on Shakspeare are full of interest, and the great poet gains by the mode in which we are led up to him. Mr. Stopford Brooke has remembered that Shakspeare is, as Goethe said, not truly seen when he is regarded as a great single mountain rising straight out of the plain; he is truly seen when seen among the hills of his *Riesen-Heimath*, his giant home, — among them, though towering high above them. Only one or two sentences I could

wish otherwise. Mr. Stopford Brooke says of Shakspeare's last plays: —

> "All these belong to and praise forgiveness, and it seems, if we may conjecture, that looking back on all the wrong he had suffered and on all that he had done, Shakspeare could say in the forgiveness he gave to men and in the forgiveness he sought of heaven the words he had written in earlier days: *The quality of mercy is not strained.*"

Perhaps that might not be out of place in a volume of lectures on Shakspeare. But it is certainly somewhat far-fetched and fanciful; — too fanciful for our primer. Nor is it quite sound and sober criticism, again, to say of Shakspeare: "He was altogether, from end to end, an artist, and the greatest artist the modern world has known." Or again: "In the unchangeableness of pure art-power Shakspeare stands entirely

alone." There is a peculiarity in Mr. Stopford Brooke's use of the words *art, artist.* He means by an artist one whose aim in writing is not to reveal himself, but to give pleasure; he says most truly that Shakspeare's aim was to please, that Shakspeare "made men and women whose dramatic action on each other and towards a catastrophe was intended to please the public, not to reveal himself." This is indeed the true temper of the artist. But when we call a man emphatically *artist,* a *great artist,* we mean something more than this temper in which he works; we mean by art, not merely an aim to please, but also, and more, a law of pure and flawless workmanship. As living always under the sway of *this* law, and as, therefore, a perfect artist,

we do not conceive of Shakspeare. His workmanship is often far from being pure and flawless.

"Till that Bellona's bridegroom, lapp'd in proof,
Confronted him with self-comparisons — "

There is but one name for such writing as that, if Shakspeare had signed it a thousand times, — it is detestable. And it is too frequent in Shakspeare. In a book, therefore, where every sentence should be sure, simple, and solid, not requiring mental reservations nor raising questions, we ought not to speak of Shakspeare as "altogether, from end to end, an artist"; as "standing entirely alone in the unchangeableness of pure art-power." He is the richest, the most wonderful, the most powerful, the most delightful of poets; he is not altogether, nor even eminently, an artist.

In the fifth chapter we reach Milton. Mr. Stopford Brooke characterises Milton's poems well, when he speaks of "their majestic movement, their grand style, and their grave poetry." But I wonder at his designating Milton *our greatest poet.* Nor does the criticism of *Paradise Lost* quite satisfy me. I do not think that "as we read the great epic, we feel that the lightness and grace of Milton's youthful time are gone." True, the poet of *Paradise Lost* differs from the poet of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso;* but the feeling raised by *Paradise Lost* is not a feeling that lightness and grace are gone. That would be a negative feeling, a feeling of disappointment; and the feeling raised by *Paradise Lost* is far other. Yet neither is it a feeling which justifies Mr. Stopford Brooke in

saying that "at last all thought and emotion centre round Adam and Eve, until the closing lines leave us with their lonely image in our minds." The personages have no growing, absorbing interest of this kind; when we finish the poem, it is not with our minds agitated by them and full of them. The power of *Paradise Lost* is to be sought elsewhere. Nor is it true to say that Milton "summed up in himself all the higher influences of the Renascence." The disinterested curiosity, the *humanism* of the Renascence, are not characteristics of Milton, — of Milton, that is to say, when he is fully formed and has taken his ply. Nor again can it rightly be said that Milton "began that pure poetry of natural description which has no higher examples to show in Words-

worth, or Scott, or Keats, than his *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*." *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are charming, but they are not pure poetry of natural description in the sense in which the *Highland Reaper* is, or the *Ode to Autumn*. The poems do not touch the same chords or belong to the same order. Scott is altogether out of place in the comparison. His natural description in verse has the merits of his natural description in prose, which are very considerable. But it never has the grace and felicity of Milton, or the natural magic of Wordsworth and Keats. As poetical work, it is not to be even named with theirs.

Shakspeare and Milton are such prominent objects in a primer of English literature that one dwells on

them, strives to have them presented quite aright. After Milton we come to a century whose literature has no figures of this grandeur. The literary importance of the eighteenth century lies mainly in its having wrought out a revolution begun in the seventeenth, — no less a revolution than the establishment of what Mr. Stopford Brooke well calls "the second period of English prose, in which the style is easy, unaffected, moulded to the subject, and the proper words are put in their proper places." With his strong love of poetry, Mr. Stopford Brooke could not, perhaps, feel the same sympathy and delight in dealing with this prose century as in dealing with the times of Chaucer or Elizabeth. Still his account of its writers does not fail in interest, and is in general just. But

his arrangement is here not quite satisfactory. The periods of time covered by his chapters should be literary periods, not merely periods in political history. His sixth chapter has for its title: *From the Restoration to George III.* The period from the Restoration to George the Third is a period in political history only. George the Third has nothing to do with literature; his accession marks no epoch in our civilisation or in our literature, such as is marked by the Conquest or by the reign of Elizabeth. I wish that Mr. Stopford Brooke would change the title of this chapter, and make it: *From the Restoration to the Death of Pope and Swift.* Pope died in 1744, Swift in 1745. The following chapter should be: *From* 1745 *to the French Revolution.* The next and

last: *From the French Revolution to the Death of Scott.*

These are real periods in our literature. Mr. Stopford Brooke enumerates, at the beginning of his seventh chapter, causes which from the early part of the eighteenth century were at work to influence literature.

"The long peace after the accession of the House of Hanover had left England at rest and given it wealth. The reclaiming of waste tracts, the increased wealth and trade, made better communication necessary; and the country was soon covered with a network of highways. The leisure gave time to men to think and write; the quicker interchange between the capital and the country spread over England the literature of the capital, and stirred men everywhere to write. The coaching services and the post carried the new book and the literary criticism to the villages. Communication with the Continent

had increased during the peaceable times of Walpole."

By the middle of the century, by a time well marked by the death of Pope and Swift, these influences had been in operation long enough to form a second period in the eighteenth century, sufficiently distinguishable from the period of Addison and Pope, and lasting down to a period of far more decisive change, the period of the French Revolution.

Prose and poetry, within these periods, should not have each their separate chapter; it is unnecessary, and leads to some confusion. Sir Walter Scott is at present noticed in one of Mr. Stopford Brooke's chapters as a poet, in another as a prose writer. And the limits of each period should be observed; authors and works should

not be mentioned out of their order of date. At present Mr. Stopford Brooke mentions the *Rivals* and *School for Scandal* of Sheridan in his sixth chapter, a chapter which professes to go from the Restoration to the accession of George the Third. At the very beginning of the following chapter, which goes from 1760 to 1837, he introduces his mention of the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Post*, the *Herald*, and the *Times*, of the *Edinburgh*, and the *Quarterly Review*, and of *Blackwood's Magazine*. By being freed from all such defects in lucid and orderly arrangement, the primer would gain in clearness.

It would gain in brevity and proportion by ending with the death of Scott in 1832. I wish I might prevail upon Mr. Stopford Brooke to bring his

primer to an end with Scott's death in that year. I wish he would leave out every word about his contemporaries, and about publications which have appeared since 1832. The death of Sir Walter Scott is a real epoch; it marks the end of one period and the beginning of another,—of the period in which we are ourselves now living. No man can trust himself to speak of his own time and his own contemporaries with the same sureness of judgment and the same proportion as of times and men gone by; and in a primer of literature we should avoid, so far as we can, all hindrances to sureness of judgment and to proportion. The readers of the primer, also, are not likely to hear too little of contemporary literature, if its praises are unrehearsed in their primer; they are

certain, under all circumstances, to hear quite enough of it, probably too much.

> "Charlotte Brontë revived in *Jane Eyre* the novel of Passion, and Miss Yonge set on foot the religious novel in support of a special school of theology. Miss Martineau and Mr. Disraeli carried on the novel of political opinion and economy, and Charles Kingsley applied the novel to the social and theological problems of our own day."

Let Mr. Stopford Brooke make a clean sweep of all this, I entreat him. And if his date of 1832 compels him to include Rogers and his poetry, let him give to them, not a third part of a page, but one line. I reckon that these reductions would shorten the last part of the primer by five pages. A little condensation in the judgments on Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley

would abridge it by another page; the omission of the first pages of the volume by two more. Our primer shortened by eight pages! no small gain in a work of this character.

The last three chapters of the book, therefore, I could wish recast, and one or two phrases in his criticism Mr. Stopford Brooke might perhaps revise at the same time. He says most truly of Addison that his *Spectator* "gave a better tone to manners and a gentler one to political and literary criticism." He says truly, too, of Addison's best papers: "No humour is more fine and tender; and, like Chaucer's, it is never bitter." He has a right to the conclusion, therefore, that "Addison's work was a great one, lightly done." But to say of Addison's style, that "in its varied

cadence and subtle ease it has never been surpassed," seems to me to be going a little too far. One could not say more of Plato's. Whatever his services to his time, Addison is for us now a writer whose range and force of thought are not considerable enough to make him interesting; and his style cannot equal in varied cadence and subtle ease the style of a man like Plato, because without range and force of thought all the resources of style, whether in cadence or in subtlety, are not and cannot be brought out.

Is it an entirely accurate judgment, again, on the poems of Gray and Collins, to call them "exquisite examples of perfectly English work wrought in the spirit of classic art"? I confess, this language seems to me to be too strong. Much as I admire

Gray, one feels, I think, in reading his poetry never quite secure against the false poetical style of the eighteenth century. It is always near at hand, sometimes it breaks in; and the sense of this prevents the security one enjoys with truly classic work, the fulness of pleasure, the cordial satisfaction.

"Thy joys no glittering female meets —"

or even things in the *Elegy*: —

"He gave to misery all he had — a tear;
He gain'd from Heaven ('twas all he wish'd)
a friend —"

are instances of the sort of drawback I mean. And the false style, which here comes to the surface, we are never very far from in Gray. Therefore, to call his poems "exquisite examples of perfectly English work

wrought in the spirit of classic art" seems to me an exaggeration.

Mr. Stopford Brooke's Cowper is excellent, but again there seems to me to be some want of sobriety in the praise given. Philanthropy, no doubt, animated Cowper's heart and shows itself in his poetry. But it is too much to say of the apparition of Cowper and of his philanthropy in English poetry: "It is a wonderful change, a change so wonderful that it is like a new world. It is, in fact, the concentration into our retired poet's work of all the new thought upon the subject of mankind which was soon to take so fierce a form in Paris." Cowper, with his morbid religion and lumbering movement, was no precursor, as Mr. Stopford Brooke would thus make him, of Byron and Shelley. His true

praise is, that by his simple affections and genuine love of Nature he was a precursor of Wordsworth.

Of Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature Mr. Stopford Brooke draws out, I think, a more elaborate account than we require in a primer. No one will be much helped by Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature, as a scheme in itself and disjoined from his poems. Nor shall we be led to enjoy the poems the more by having a philosophy of Nature abstracted from them and presented to us in its nakedness. Of the page and a quarter which Mr. Stopford Brooke has given to Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature, all might with advantage, perhaps, be dropped but this:—

"Nature was a person to Wordsworth, distinct from himself, and capable of being loved. He could brood on her character, her ways, her words, her life. Hence arose his minute and loving observation of her, and his passionate description of all her forms."

There might be some condensation, too, in the criticism of Byron as the poet of *Don Juan* and as the poet of Nature. But some touches in the criticism of Byron are admirable. "We feel naturally great interest in this strong personality, put before us with such obstinate power; but it wearies at last. *Finally it wearied himself.*" Or again: "It is his colossal power and the ease which comes from it, in which he resembles Dryden, that marks him specially." Nothing could be better.

On Shelley, also, Mr. Stopford Brooke has an excellent sentence. He says of his lyrics: "They form

together the most sensitive, the most imaginative, and the most musical, but the least tangible lyrical poetry we possess." But in the pages on Shelley, yet more than in those on Byron, condensation is desirable. Shelley is a most interesting and attractive personage; but in a work of the dimensions of this primer, neither his *Queen Mab*, nor his *Alastor*, nor his *Revolt of Islam*, nor his *Prometheus Unbound*, deserve the space which Mr. Stopford Brooke gives to them. And finally, as the sentence which I have last quoted is just a sentence of the right stamp for a primer, so a passage such as the following is just of the sort which is unsuitable:—

"Shelley wants the closeness of grasp of nature which Wordsworth and Keats had, but he had the power in a far greater degree than they of describing a vast landscape melting into indefinite distance. In this he stands first among English poets, and is in poetry what Turner was in landscape painting. Along with this special quality of vastness his colour is as true as Scott's, but truer in this that it is full of half tones, while Scott's is laid out in broad yellow, crimson, and blue, in black and white."

Very clever, but also very fantastic; and at all events quite out of place in a primer!

Mr. Stopford Brooke will forgive me for my plain-speaking. It comes from my hearty esteem and admiration for his primer, and my desire to clear it of every speck and flaw, so that it may win its way into every one's hands. I hope he will revise it, and then I shall read it again with a fresh pleasure. But indeed, whether he revises it or no, I shall read it again: δὶς ἢ τρὶς τὰ καλά.