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ARTICLE V.

SHAKESPEARE — THE OLD AND THE NEW CRITICISM ON HIM.

By Rev. Leonard Withington, Newbury.

Sic fautor veterum, ut tabulas peccare vetantes,
 Quas bis quinque viri sanxerunt, foedera regum
 Vel Gabiis vel cum rigidis aequata Sabinis,
 Pontificum libros, annosa volumina vatum,
 Dictitet Albano Mussas in monte locutas.

Horace to Augustus, l. 23—27.

As our discourse will be on criticism, it may be well to begin by asking, What rank it holds in literature, and how the judicious critic compares with the inventing poet. Genius is the quality of the one; judgment of the other. Criticism, though subsequent, has some place in the world of learning. It is secondary to genius as the moon borrows its light from the sun. Very little credit is due to that *recognizing* criticism, which never discovers and can only be directed. Still less is due to the prattle of affectation; the last echo of absurdity. Some seem to have no consciousness of their own. Their very taste is manufactured for them. The cant of criticism is supremely absurd. Dr. Goldsmith has well remarked¹ that "the praise which is every day lavished upon Virgil, Horace and Ovid is often no more than an indirect method the critic takes to compliment his own discernment. Their works have long been considered as models of beauty and to praise them now is only to show the conformity of our taste to theirs; it tends not to advance their reputation but to promote our own. Let us then dismiss for the present the pedantry of panegyric." How much of this self-praising criticism is there in the world! The true meaning is: See what a fine taste I have! My mind is actually in contact with the author, I admire. I am actually a congenial spirit, and you are a barbarian, if you do not agree with me. You may often stop the mouth of such an idolater by just asking him for a little analytic discrimination.

Yet criticism has done an important office in the world. If there were none to judge it would be in vain to write. The truth is, when a work of genius first appears, by its breaking through

¹ Review of Barrett's Translation of Ovid's Epistles.

conventional rules, its own excellence operates against it.¹ The common taste has been formed on different models. All the *diletanteism* of the upper circles is against it; and the people need to have their attention directed to the recondite beauties which they are too idle to pursue and have too little skill to find. Thus Addison held his classic torch before the statue of Milton, and thus every great poet has had his gentleman-usher to introduce him into the saloon of his reputation. That *divining* criticism, which foresees the result of an untried experiment is no mean quality; and is certainly of essential service. When Dr. Bentley, for example, long before the place of Newton was fixed, and who had from his previous studies every temptation to be a pedant to the old philosophy,—when Bentley, I say, so liberally sounded the praises of the new philosophy, he showed as much discernment in this kind of criticism as he ever did in restoring the reading of an ancient manuscript. When Pope received from the booksellers the manuscript copy of Akenside's Pleasures of the Imagination, and told him to offer no mean price, for this was no every day poem; when our Franklin commended Cowper's Task (for never were there two geniuses more different than Franklin and Cowper); when Gifford predicted the success of Byron, it was by a sagacity which was only second to the productive power. To enter the tangled forest and amidst its thick bushes and darkening boughs to discover and point out the infant magnolia, is next in merit to planting the tree. Let no man then despise the original critic; for discerning judgment follows close on the path of inventing genius. While the one weaves the deathless laurel, the other winds it on the deserving brow.

We have of late years had a vast mass of very cheap criticism. It consists in rapturous admiration of what has often been admired before. It looks up to the sun and says—not merely that it is bright—but that there are no spots on it. It places its discernment in having no discrimination. Shakespeare himself, if consciousness ever reaches the tomb or the world beyond it, must blush, I apprehend, at the wholesale praises heaped upon him, which certainly he never attempted to deserve.

A remarkable change has taken place within forty years in the criticism on this author. The critics of the old school allow that he is a great genius and has boundless invention; but they contend that his works are very imperfect; he mixes beauties and

¹ Sometimes at least; there are works, however, which strike the universal heart.

absurdities together; he is a wonder, considering his age; but it would be very strange, if he were an overmatch for the general improvement of the whole mass of society. He had divine impulses, but they sometimes led him wrong. Milton in two lines has involved his character :

“ Or sweetest Shakespeare, fancy’s child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild.¹”

He is Fancy’s child and her sweetest progeny, but then his notes are wild and rustic. Dryden, who had some right to *teach others* in an art in which he so well *excelled* himself, says : “ He was a man of all the moderns and perhaps the ancient poets who had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present to him and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily. When he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation. He was naturally learned ; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature ; he looked inward and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike ; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind. He is many times flat and insipid ; his comic wit degenerating into clinches, his serious swelling into bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him.² No man can say that he ever had a fit subject for his wit and did not raise himself as high above the rest of poets :

Quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi.

The consideration of this,” continues Dryden, “ made Mr. Hales of Eton say, that there was no subject of which any poet ever writ, but he could produce it much better done in Shakespeare ; and, however others are now generally preferred before him, (i. e. in Charles the Second’s day,) yet the age wherein he lived, which had contemporaries with him Fletcher and Jonson, never equalled them to him in their esteem. And in the late king’s court, when Ben’s reputation was at the highest, Sir John Suckling and with him the greater part of the courtiers, set our Shakespeare far above him.”³

¹ L’Allegro, lines 133, 134.

² Not exactly so ; the great fault of Shakespeare is that he often lurches you on the most solemn occasions. He trifles when you want him to be serious, and after raising your expectation to the highest pitch, presents you with the meanest buffoonery.

³ Essay on Dramatic Poetry ; Dryden’s Works, Vol. I. p. 72.

A little farther on : " If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. Shakespeare was the Homer, or the father of our dramatic poets, Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing ; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare." The last remark is a beautiful touch of natural criticism. There are writers whose artificial beauties we admire by rule ; there are others whose unlabored excellences flash on the heart. Our admiration is ravished from us, before we know how to give it.

Pope says that Shakespeare wrote better and worse than other men, and Dr. Johnson in his antithetic way says :¹ " The work of a correct and regular writer, is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with shades and scented with flowers ; the composition of Shakespeare is a forest in which oaks extend their branches and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and roses, filling the eye with awful pomp and gratifying the mind with endless diversity. Other poets display cabinets of precious rarities, minutely finished, wrought into shape and polished into brightness. Shakespeare opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in inexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals."

Mr. Hume, whose taste was formed on French models, is still more limited in his admiration. " If Shakespeare be considered as a MAN, born in a rude age and educated in the lowest manner, without any instruction either from the world or from books, he may be regarded as a prodigy : if represented as a POET capable of furnishing a proper entertainment to a refined and intelligent audience, we must abate somewhat of this eulogy. In his compositions, we regret that great irregularities and even sometimes absurdities should so frequently disfigure the animated and passionate scenes intermixed with them ; and at the same time, we admire the more these beauties on account of their being surrounded with such deformities. A striking peculiarity of sentiment, he frequently hits as it were by inspiration ; but a reasonable propriety of thought, he cannot for any time uphold. Nervous and picturesque expressions as well as descriptions abound in him ; but it is in vain we look either for continued purity or simplicity of diction. His total ignorance of all theatrical art and

¹ Preface to *Shakespeare*.

conduct, however material a defect; yet, as it affects the spectator rather than the reader, we can more readily excuse, than that want of taste, which often prevails in his productions and which gives way only by intervals to the irradiations of genius. A great and fertile genius he certainly possessed, and one equally enriched with the tragic and comic vein; but he ought to be cited as a proof, how dangerous it is, to rely on these advantages alone for attaining excellence in the finer arts. And there may even remain a suspicion that we overrate, if possible, the greatness of his genius, in the same manner as bodies often appear more gigantic, on account of their being disproportioned and misshapen."¹

Such is the general testimony of the critics of the old school. It is remarkably unanimous. Some of them were not unsuccessful poets themselves. They had a right to speak. The age of artificial raptures and mystified discernment had not yet dawned on the world. There was not then a chorus consisting of a chosen few, ambitious to toss every cloud into a fantastic shape and gild it with borrowed brightness until it became a voluntary image; and having a power of transforming obvious blemishes into recondite beauties as if on purpose to leave the slow sentiments of mankind behind the critic's rapid discrimination. The poet's character then floated on the surface of his works.

But a new school has since arisen. It was imported from Germany, and began in England with Mr. Coleridge. They may be called *perfectionists*; they can see no faults in Shakespeare. His perversions of language; his hard metaphors; his incredible plots; his tumid speeches; his mixture of buffonery in his most solemn scenes; his want of decorum; his indelicacies; his puns and clinches, are all right; so many mysterious proofs of his profound knowledge of human nature. That mighty salvo of *imitating nature* (which by the way in most of these things he does not imitate) is a mantle which covers all the multitude of his literary sins;—just as if there were not deformities in nature which ought not to be imitated; just as if there were no such thing as *selection*. Surely it is the duty of the poet, when he imitates nature, to choose its most instructive side.² He must not turn a premis-

¹ History of Great Britain, Vol. 4. Appendix, p. 187, 2d edition, quarto.

² "A play, as I have said, to be like nature is to be set above it; as statues which are placed on high are made greater than the life, that they may descend to the sight in their just proportion."—Dryden's Essay on Dramatic Poetry; Works, p. 91.

And again; "There may be too great a likeness; as the most skilful paint-

eous mirror to a deformed landscape; he must not take the likeness of a man having a cancer on his face with the exactness of the daguerotype. He must make his roses conceal his thorns, and his verdant herbs and waving grass close over the worms and reptiles which crawl beneath them. His business is to give us pleasing, not promiscuous imitation; to move our passions without debasing our hearts.

When so much has been said of his matchless beauties, it cannot be unprofitable to turn our eyes to his forgotten faults. Promiscuous praise is seldom just or enduring. It is corrupting too. It not only gives mortal frailty a dangerous influence over us; but it produces a kind of literary despair. No mortal will be likely to surpass, either in virtue or wisdom, the idol he has been instructed to adore. If the people in Massachusetts should once be persuaded that Princeton-hill is the highest eminence that ever pointed to the sky—the result must be that Teneriffe and Mont Blanc will be forgotten. There may be such a thing as having the imagination shrivelled even by the magnificence of Shakespeare.

In stating a few of the faults of the great poet, I feel I am executing an ungracious task. I expect to be charged with want of perception, want of taste, want of enthusiasm. I shall have the satisfaction, however of uttering my own impressions, and of not being the ninety-ninth repeater of raptures which were never felt.

The first fault which I shall mention, and one which seems to me to be very material in a poet, is, he has no sympathy with moral sublimity; no pictures of sublimé, self-sacrificing goodness; never draws us to the *καλο-κάγαθίαν* of the Greeks; in fact, he has no sympathy with the noblest aspiration of the soul. He sees the beautiful in persons and objects, but he never ascends to the great sea of beauty, *ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ πέλαιος τοῦ καλοῦ*, to which Diotima told Socrates,¹ the philosopher must rise above particular persons and material objects. He has no confidence in human improvement and progression; he never pants after a better state; he never kindles with liberty, nor rises with religion. His poetry is Epicurean throughout, and he loves to sleep on rosy pillows in

etc affirm, that there may be too near a resemblance in a picture; to take every hue and feature is not to make an excellent piece, but to take so much only as will make a beautiful resemblance of the whole."—*Defence of the Essay on Dramatic Poetry; Works, Vol. I.*

¹ See the Symposium, page 206, D., Stallbaum's Plato, Vol. I.

a sensual Elysium. He sees sights of earthly bliss, and hears such sounds ; not like those which broke on Milton's ear, the choral warbling of Heaven, but such

As are those dulcet sounds in break of day,
That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear
And summon him to marriage.

He is peculiarly sarcastic on the democratic principle. He was a narrow conservative ; he bowed to the diadem ; he catered to the taste of a voluptuous aristocracy ; and was at heart, I suspect, a true Epicurean. In his *Julius Caesar*, he introduces the rabble merely to show that they were well worthy of the chains that Antony was about to impose on them. Nor can it be said that he was merely drawing a picture of the degenerate republicans of that degraded age. In *Coriolanus* he has given us the same lesson. In *Jack Cade*, *Henry VI*, he has repeated the picture ; and he seems to delight in heaping ridicule on that hope that has united religion and liberty in one great design, and animated patriots and martyrs when suffering unto death. This is more remarkable, as Shakespeare himself lived in a most fermenting age. All Europe was on fire ; Protestantism was established ; the Netherlands were free ; Germany was awake, and the poet lived down to the year 1617. The Thirty Years' war was already begun. The hero Gustavus Adolphus was already in the germ of his strength. All Europe was bursting into enthusiasm, and the rising sun of a new age was shining on the parting clouds of the old dispensation. Yet our divine poet, with all his myriad-mindedness, never catches one spark of the general flame. He sees the rights of man, the destiny of thrones, the fate of free principles, and the hopes of divine revelation, all trembling in the scale, and yet he never casts in the feeblest make-weight to turn the balance to the right side. It is remarkable that he wrote an historical play on the most exciting period (*Henry the VIII*), and yet he passes entirely over the Protestant religion, the cardinal point in that wonderful reign. His fancy never kindles at this moral beauty ; his heart is cold and dead to all these influences. He never casts his eye on the supreme pattern ; he was never smitten by her form, nor worshipped at her shrine. He never rose with a rising age ; he saw not man's aim and destiny. The only millennium he looked for was such as would have gratified his own Falstaff.

Nor can it be said that such subjects are not suited to the dra-

ma. We have a most striking picture of stern endurance under hated tyranny in the *ΠΡΟΜΗΘΕΥΣ ΒΙΝΟΥΣ* of *Æschylus*.

Ἐγὼ δὲ ταῦθ' ἅπαντ' ἠπισάμην
Ἐκὼν ἐκὼν ἡμαρτιῶν, οὐκ ἀνήσομαι,
Θνητοῖς δ' ἀρήγων, ἀντὶς ἐβόηην κύνους. — lines 265--267.

Cornelle, in a servile age, touched the same note. It was the inspiring genius of Schiller's song. Could Shakespeare have written the scene between the Marquis Posa and the King in *Don Carlos*? —

The poor and purblind rage
Of innovation, that but aggravates
The weight of th' fetters which it cannot break,
Will never heat *my* blood. The Century
Admits not my ideas: I live a citizen
Of those that are to come. Sire, can a picture
Break your rest?

And again:

Look round and view God's lordly universe:
On Freedom it is founded, and how rich
It is with Freedom! He the great Creator
Has given the very worm its sev'ral dew-drop;
Even in the moulding spaces of Decay,
He leaves Free-will the pleasures of a choice.
This world of *yours*! How narrow and how poor!
The rustling of a leaf alarms the lord
Of Christendom. You quake at every virtue;
He not to mar the glorious form of Freedom,
Suffers the hideous host of Evil
Should still run riot in his fair creation.
Him, the Maker, we behold not; calm
He hides himself in everlasting laws;
Which and not him, the skeptic seeing, exclaims
"Wherefore a God? The world itself is God."
And never did a Christian's adoration
So praise him as this skeptic's blasphemy.¹

If this is not the individualism and conformity to the downright nature of the English poet, it is something better. If it is not human, it is celestial.

Shakespeare has been so often praised for his almost miraculous development of character, that it may move the spleen of his admirers even to suggest that he ever falls short of perfection in this citadel of his strength. Yet, as he often writes with more haste

¹ Schiller's *Don Carlos*, Act III, Scene 10, Carlyle's Translation; *Life of Schiller*, p. 94.

than skill, it is not to be wondered if he has sometimes fallen into inconsistencies, and given us pictures of which the originals were never found in nature. It is really laughable to see what the perfectionists make of the character of Hamlet. One tells us it is a delineation of intense goodness; another, of one's meditation; Goethe thinks it is the exhibition of man whose destiny is too mighty for him; he sinks under it, as the root of the plant may burst the vase in which it grows; one reader I have found, who thought it was a delineation of revenge; especially as he did not kill his father-in-law at prayers, because he wished to destroy his soul as well as his body;¹ and sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, by a forged commission, to their final doom, and yet say:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
They are not near my conscience.²

Now though the *perfectionists* tell us that the reason of this difference is, that the poet is so profound that he hides his purpose so deeply that no critic can find it,³ yet it is a much more natural conclusion, where so many wise men differ, to suppose that Shakespeare, like other mortals, has failed in a province where he is generally so strong.

He has surely little skill in the purely pathetic. I am aware that some of the critics, even of the old school, have claimed this for him. Pope tells us, in his preface, that "the power over our passions was never possessed in a more eminent degree, or displayed in so different instances. Yet all along there is seen no labor, no pains to seize them; no preparation to guide our guess to the effect, or be perceived to lead toward it; but the heart swells and tears burst out, just at the proper places."⁴ Though we have often been told that he is equally master of the tragic and comic vein, yet no man can be argued out of his perception. That part of tragedy which consists in a mind torn by ambition, darkened by misanthropy, rushing to murder, or sinking in remorse; in depicting these agitations, I grant he leaves almost every other poet out of sight and remembrance. When he opens the superstitious world on us, when he dives to the tomb and recalls the dead, we shudder at his mystic power. But for simple pity he is not eminent. He is always counteracting his own purpose. There can be no mistake here in any reader, who has not

¹ Hamlet, Act III, Scene 3.

² Hamlet, Act V, Scene 2.

³ See Schlegel's Lectures, L. XXIII, p. 360.

⁴ Pope's Preface to Shakespeare.

wrought himself into an artificial state, and is willing to surrender himself to his own feelings. What is pathos? It is always an abstraction; it is always idealism; and it is no paradox to say that our images and groupings may be *too natural* to be pathetic. You must show innocence and simplicity suffering, and pure innocence is not found on earth. You must not be *too true* to nature; you must not throw in those abatements, which are always found in real life. You must hide those circumstances which mar the picture and check the tear, by a contrary power, just as it begins to flow. No doubt, Clarissa Harlow, (if she ever had a prototype in real life,) had many follies and faults which would abate our sympathy. But Richardson was too wise to bring them forward. He makes her a suffering angel. Shakespeare always blabs out the whole secret. Thus Romeo is deeply in love, and at first sight; because he is so inflammable. He passes from Rosaline to Juliet with scarce a moment's pause, and dying for each. Now I have no doubt that this may be nature (for love is more owing to susceptibility, than to excellence in the objective), but it is very little calculated to increase the pathos. Nor is this the worst. In the most pathetic scenes (so intended), where the whole energy of the fable seems to force him and his readers to be serious; when aged imbecility is persecuted with ingratitude, and disappointed love weeps over the tomb, he thrusts in some contemptible joke, which loses its power by having wandered from its place. It is as if Harlequin should break into a room where there was a dead corpse and attempt to dance, in his motley coat, over the coffin. Thus when Juliet hears of her lover's death as she supposes, the poor, afflicted girl breaks out into these dignified and natural lamentations:

[But first the simple reader must understand the beautiful allusion:—the word *aye*, in former times, was pronounced like the pronoun *I*; and both, of course, like the word *eye*; so that we have here a triple pun.]

Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but *I* [aye]
 And that bare vowel *I* shall poison more
 Than the death-darting *eye* of cockatrice:
 I am not *I*, if there be such an *I* [aye].

But her lover is not a whit wiser; no wonder, they were enamoured; for they were certainly well matched. For Romeo laments his banishment in such strains as these:

¹ Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 2.

Heaven is here,
Where Juliet lives ; and every cat, and dog,
And little mouse, every unworthy thing,
Live here in heaven, and may look on her,
But Romeo may not.

After this pathetic mentioning of cats and dogs, he goes on to flies. They may light on her, and he cannot.—

*Flies may do this, when I from this must fly.*¹

Such is the pathos of Shakespeare.

He often lurches us, too, in the very scenes where he has raised the greatest expectation. When Juliet is found dead in her bed, (as the family suppose,) and the whole circle is thrown into confusion, (if ever he wished to touch our pity, it was then,) he has introduced his nurse thus lamenting :

O woe ! O woful, woful, woful day !
Most lamentable day ! Most woful day,
That ever, ever, I did yet behold !
O day ! O day ! O day ! O hateful day !
Never was seen so black a day as this :
O woful day, O woful day !²

In Hamlet, no scene is more important than the play in which the young prince expects to detect the guilt of the king ; he confines Horatio to observe him *even with the very comment of his soul* ; and our expectations are wrought up to the highest pitch :—we wonder what Hamlet is going to say ; when, lo ! his feelings evaporate in this wise speech :

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself ; and now reigns here
A very, very—peacock.³

When king Lear, oppressed by his daughters, is turned out into the storm and all nature seems to sympathize with him, the heavens dart their fires ; the tempest blows and the poor dis-crowned king feels as if all the elements were combined against a head

— so old and white as this.

In this scene, when if ever a poet was called to select the images which elevate the sublime and deepen the pathetic, it was on such a solemn occasion, we have a fool who regularly mixes his

¹ Romeo and Juliet, Act IV, Scene 3.

² Act IV, Scene 5.

³ Hamlet, Act III, Scene 2.

buffoonery with his master's sorrows, as if the one could not subsist without the other. With regard to this, Schiller has the conscience to say: "When I first, at a very early age, became acquainted with this poet, I felt indignant at his coldness, his hardness of heart, which permitted him in the most melting pathos to utter jests; to mar, by the introduction of a fool, the soul-searching scenes of Hamlet, Lear and other pieces; which now kept him still when my sensibilities hastened forward, now drove him carelessly onward, when I would so gladly have lingered. . . . He was the object of my reverence and zealous study for years before I could love him. I was not yet capable of comprehending nature at first hand."¹ No doubt, the German poet was natural in his first impressions; thousands have felt exactly so. But was he right in his efforts to conquer them? Did he reach nature by art? "What we call seeking after our duty," says bishop Butler, "is often nothing else but explaining it away."²

It is vain to say here that this method is a close adherence to nature. Surely Shakespeare himself, has *some* principle of selection; and was instinctively drawn to pursue *the beautiful* even in his utmost devotion to that which is *true*. I do not object at all, to his passing from the homely and the comic, in the same drama, to the tragic and sublime. I am inclined to think that our smiles prepare the way for our tears; such a drama is, no doubt, a more faithful picture of life. But what I object to, is throwing contrary weights, at the same moment, into the mental balance and thus counteracting the very design the author has in view. If a lion and monkey appear on the ground together, depend on it the sympathy of the spectators will be with the monkey; the ludicrous will overpower the sublime. Not even the high name of Shakespeare can make such mixtures either right or pleasing. If you doubt it I appeal to a kindred art. Mr. Burke tells us of a painter, who delineating the Last Supper,³ placed under the table, beneath Christ and his apostles, a dog gnawing a bone, and he severely censures the bad taste which could join so homely an event with so solemn a scene. Every reader must agree with him; and what is wrong in the painter cannot be right in the poet; for our sentiments in each case are precisely the same.

The fact is, that Shakespeare's love of homely nature led him

¹ See Carlyle's Life of Schiller, p. 14, note.

² Butler's Sermons, Sermon VII. Vol. I.

³ Hints for an Essay on the Drama, Burke's Works, Vol. V. p. 351, Boston edition, 1813.

away from those beautiful combinations in which pathos must consist. It is folly to heap inconsistent praises on the same man. There can be no mistake here. If Otway, Southern, Richardson, Rowe, Mackenzie, Talford in *Ion*, are pathetic, Shakespeare is not; at least it is not his discriminating excellence. For myself, I must confess (be it shame or truth) I have never had a heartier laugh than at some of his *tragic* scenes.

He selects very improper subjects for representation. He wants decorum; his ladies are immensely indelicate, and permit such language before them as marks and can scarcely be justified by even a semi-civilized age. It is one of Schlegel's paradoxes that the English had reached the very height of true refinement in queen Elizabeth's day. "With regard to the tone of society in Shakespeare's day, it is necessary to remark, that there is a wide difference between true mental cultivation and what is called polish. That artificial polish which puts an end to everything like free original communication, and subjects all intercourse to the insipid uniformity of certain rules, was undoubtedly wholly unknown to the age of Shakespeare, as in a great measure it still is at the present day in England. It possessed on the other hand, a fulness of healthy vigor, which showed itself always with boldness, and sometimes with petulance. The spirit of chivalry was not yet wholly extinct, and a queen, who was far more jealous of exacting homage to her sex than her throne, and who with her determination, wisdom and magnanimity, was in fact well qualified to inspire the minds of her subjects with an ardent enthusiasm, inflamed that spirit to the noblest love of glory and renown."¹ Her majesty's care in exacting homage to her sex, was seen in pulling off her shoe and throwing it at the head of one courtier; in swearing at another; in being chased into her bed-chamber by a third; in allowing one bishop to tell her publicly that she was an "untamed heifer," and another to describe the whole sex in the following strain: "Women," said bishop Aylmer in a sermon at court, "are of two sorts. Some of them are wiser, better learned, discreeter and more constant, than a number of men; but another and a worse sort of them, and the MOST PART, are fond, foolish, wanton flibbergibs, tattlers, triflers, wavering, witless, without counsel, feeble, careless, rash, proud, dainty, nice, tale-bearers, eves-droppers, rumor-raisers, evil-tongued, worse-minded, and in every wise doltified with the dregs of the devil's

¹ Lectures on Dramatic Literature, Lect. XXII. p. 349, Black's Translation.

dunghill.”¹ After such a specimen of courtly refinement, we can scarcely wonder that the poet, equal to his age, should make a rich and noble father address his daughter in such language as the following :

Mistress minion, you,
Thank me no thankings and proud me no prouds,
But settle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next,
To go with Paris to St. Peter's church,
Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither.
Out, you green-sickness carrion ! out you baggage !
You tallow face !²—

Or that two queens should address each other in such an imperial style as the following :

Elinor. Come to thy grandam, child.
Constance. Do, child, go to it' grandam, child ;
Give grandam kingdom, and it' grandam will
Give it a plum, a cherry, and a fig :
There's a good grandam.³

Now though we have no doubt that a determined critic, who is himself a perfect rarity, may discover some profound beauty here, some exquisite imitation of nature ; yet for our humble selves, who are always content to admire poetry on its surface, we must be permitted to avow that our first impressions will conquer our last—namely, that nothing but the sacred name of Shakespeare can rescue such ineffable nonsense from eternal contempt.

He is often very unskilful in making the marvellous, probable ; most of his plots turn on incidents which tempt our disgust by destroying our belief. *Incredulus odi.* Here he differs immensely from Walter Scott, who always makes the wonderful credible by explaining some natural reason for supernatural appearances. There is profound truth also in the remark of Hume, already quoted, there “ may even remain a suspicion that we overrate if possible, the greatness of his genius in the same manner as bodies often appear more gigantic on account of their being disproportioned and misshapen.” The similitude is true whatever you may say of the thing it illustrates. It is said, that most spectators see St. Peter's church at Rome, for the first time, with feelings of great disappointment ; at least with an inadequate conception of its beauty. Everything is so well proportioned, so finished, so grad-

¹ See Neal's Puritans, Vol. I. c. 8. p. 571.

² Romeo and Juliet, Act III. Scene 5.

³ King John, Act II, Scene 1.

ual, so uniform, no break on the eye; no contracted imperfection, that (as the Platonists say, God left the seeds of chaos in creation that we might see better the germs of order) the spectator forgets particular beauties in the matchless effect of the whole. I am inclined to think that we are most unjust to the most finished poets. We praise the judgment of Virgil; we talk of his art, we depreciate his genius and call him a cold inventor of harmonious perfection. Yet Macrobius has justly said, after all his art and all his imitations, he drank his creating excellence from the fountain of nature. *Videsne eloquentiam omni varietate distinctam? quam quidem mihi videtur Virgilius non sine quodam praesagio, quo se omnium profectibus praeparat, de industria sua permiscuisse: idque non mortali, sed divino ingenio praevidisse; atque adeo non alium ducem secutus, quam ipsam rerum omnium matrem naturam, hanc praetexerit velut in musica concordiam dissonorum.*¹ This is saying of the polished Virgil exactly what we are taught to say of the irregular Shakespeare.

I hope I shall not be regarded as a perfect barbarian if I add, that even his knowledge of nature is not universal. Why should the worst part of human nature be put for the whole? Why should knowing grog-shops, harlots' gaming-houses, bar-rooms, and brothels, be called knowing mankind? Has not every house its parlor as well as sink; and has not the bush its rose as well as thorn? From all his characters, in all their motives, I believe I may say, religion never emerges. He has never drawn a CHRISTIAN. I do not attribute this so much to the impulse of his genius or defect of observation, as that Christian piety is not a very theatrical virtue. Yet Coleridge and Talfourd¹ have both proved that it is possible to show to a weeping audience the *spirit* of religion without its terminology.

Thus I have endeavored to show how our admiration of beauty leads us to deformity, when our idolatrous homage tempts us to push excellence up to perfection. I am altogether of the old school. Nothing can be more disgusting than the assumed superiority of the new critics. Their new discerned beauties are only some false visions seen by blindness. What! Milton, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Hume, the very countrymen of the poet, drinking in the vernacular language, to yield to Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, and Schlegel! My reason for engaging in this ungracious task,

¹ Saturnalia, Lib. V. c. 1.

¹ In the Tragedies, Remorse and Ion.

is a sincere conviction that both our taste and morals must suffer, if we are taught to read so powerful an author without DISCRIMINATION. He is a great genius; but his faults and merits are so blended that, if we permit his ethereal flights too much to charm our fancy, his sensual tendencies will inevitably taint our hearts. He is a great genius; but I distinguish between power and development, between the abilities of the man and the perfection of the work.

Before concluding these remarks, it may be permitted, in so grave a work as the BIBLIOTHECA, to ask what place the volumes of Shakespeare should hold in a clergyman's library; and what lessons of utility he may derive from so remote a department of literature. Omitting the benefits of the poetic analysis of human nature; omitting his powers of language and illustration; his wonderful structure and diction, there are especially *two* important lessons, which a preacher may learn from this great master of the drama, which I have not seen noticed.

In the first place, then, it is obvious that one of the great difficulties respecting the inspiration of the Scriptures, and also the interpretation, is, not giving full play to the sphere of language. The Bible is not a series of direct propositions, laid down by a formal logic, and to be understood, like the Elements of Euclid, in the most direct sense. It is poetry; it is painting; it is rhetoric; it is dramatic, in some of its exhibitions; it is lyric; and its meaning is only infallible and instructive when we reach it. The man who receives the obvious and direct sentiment, and makes *that* the dictate of inspiration, will be often grievously deceived. Take the Book of Job, for example; it is a drama; it is full of moral painting; and the object of many a speech is, not to give us a philosophical proposition from the chair of a teacher; but to paint the progress of accusing jealousy or excusing patience, suspicion, agony, perplexity, sorrow, or despair. The man that does not understand this principle, has not found the key which must unlock the golden treasures of the Bible. Now Shakespeare is the author, of all others, that best understood this moral painting. He never talks like a philosopher, but always as a poet. Different as he was from the sacred writers as a moral being, he is always in close communion with them as a genius. "It is obvious," says Professor Richardson, "that though the *description* of a passion or affection may give us pleasure, whether it be described by the agent or the spectator; yet, to those who would apply the inventions of the poet to the uses of philosophical investigation, it is

far from being of equal utility with the passion exactly imitated." And again: "Compare a soliloquy of Hamlet, with one of the descriptions of Roderigue in the Cid. Nothing can be more natural in the circumstances and with the temper of Hamlet, than the following reflections:

O that this too, too solid flesh would melt, etc.

In the Cid, Roderigue, who is the hero of the tragedy and deeply enamoured of Climene, is called upon to revenge a heinous insult done to his father by the father of his mistress; and he delineates the distress of his situation in the following manner, certainly with great beauty of expression and versification, but not as a real sufferer.

Perc jusque au fond du coeur
D'une atteinte imprevue aussi bien que mortelle
Miserable vengeur d'une trop juste querelle,
Et malheureux object d'une injust rigueur,
Il demeure immobile, et son ame abattue
Cede au coup qui me tue.

This harangue would better suit a descriptive novelist or narrator of the story, than the person actually concerned. Let us make the experiment. Let us change the verbs and pronouns from the first person into the third; and instead of supposing Roderigue speaks, let us imagine the state of his mind is described by a spectator: 'pierced even to the heart, by an unforeseen as well as mortal stroke, the miserable avenger of a just quarrel and the unhappy object of unjust severity, *he remains* motionless, and *his* broken spirit *yields* to the blow that destroys him'—

Il demeure immobile, et *son* ame abattue
Cede au coup qui *le* tue —

Try the soliloquy of Hamlet by the same test; and without the words 'he should,' which render it dramatic, the change will be impossible."¹ This distinction between imitating a passion and describing it, must become almost instinctive to the diligent student of Shakespeare.

Now we venture to say that no distinction can be more important to the man who hopes to grasp the true spirit of revelation. The Psalms are, most of them, PICTURES of devotion, perplexity, sorrow, penitence, trust, gratitude. The whole book of Ecclesi-

¹ A Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters, by W. Richardson, Professor of Humanity, Glasgow, Introduction, p. 17.

astes, has scarcely a direct sentiment in it. It is the utterance of the *feelings* of a man wandering without faith, and disappointed in the pursuit of the world. Dr. Dwight was surely no mean man, and moreover he was a poet; and yet if the reader will look into his first volume of *Miscellaneous Sermons*, sermon XVII, he will see how totally at a loss he was from not understanding this great principle of interpretation. He supposes Ecclesiastes 3: 12 to be a formal proposition, having all the authority of inspiration; and if so, why not take one step more, and say, we must believe that somehow the 19th verse is true: "For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preëminence above a beast."

The other lesson, taught us by Shakespeare, is, the wisdom of certain rules in restoring a copy which, to a man not familiar with the subject, appears very perverse and paradoxical. One of Griesbach's¹ rules is, that the harsher reading is often to be preferred, to the more easy and obvious one; and this appears very strange to some, as having no other tendency than to fill the Bible with ungrammatical structures and unauthorized sentiments. No doubt the principle may be pushed too far; but its necessity and wisdom are abundantly confirmed by studying the text of Shakespeare. Thus in *Othello*, Act I, Scene 1, Iago says of Cassio:

A fellow almost damned in a fair wife.

As it appears afterwards that Cassio was not married, it has been proposed to read for *wife*, *life*, supposing the poet to allude to Luke 6: 26, "Wo unto you when all men shall speak well of you." I am, however, inclined to the old reading. For first, Shakespeare seldom alludes to the Bible; secondly, the difficulty arises from not understanding the pregnant meaning of the word *almost*. We find from the play that Cassio was connected with Bianca, and that it was rumored that he was going to marry her, though the rumor was "the monkey's own giving out. She is persuaded I will marry her, out of her own love and flattery, not out of my promise." The phrase, therefore, "almost damned in a fair wife," means, he is on the verge of being married to a harlot. This use of the word *almost*, however unusual in other writers, is exquisitely Shakespearean, and is no doubt the true reading. So in *Macbeth*, we have these lines:

¹ I quote from memory. I forget how Griesbach expresses it; but it is something to this effect.

I have lived long enough : my way of life
 Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf ;
 And that which should accompany old age,
 As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
 I must not look to have ; but in their stead
 Curses, not loud but deep ; mouth-honor, breath,
 Which the poor heart would fain deny, but dare not.¹

In some of the copies it is " my MAY of life is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf." Here I should be inclined to the new reading, if it were Dryden, Lee, or Rowe. " May of life," would be far more natural and easy ; or perhaps Spring of life—vernal season. But not so Shakespeare. He hates to be prescriptive, and loves to be specific ; and " May of life," for its vernal season, would not be unnatural in a poet whose diction is always his own.

The genius of Shakespeare, is like a vast pile of buildings, lighted up by the midnight conflagration ; where the splendor of the fire meets the smoking rafters—astonishing sublimity and meanness, conjoined and reconciled in the blazing ruin.

ARTICLE VI.

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN PROFESSOR VOIGT AND THE BISHOP OF ROCHELLE.

Translated by Professor Emerson.

[The following letters are taken from the last edition of Prof. Voigt's *Life and Times of Hildebrand*.²

Before presenting the letters, it is needful to give some account of the work itself by which they were occasioned and to which they so frequently refer. On its own account, too, the work is well worthy of a more extended notice than can here be given, being one of the most interesting and important productions of the kind. It everywhere bears marks of a thorough acquaintance with the original sources, and of a vigorous and inde-

¹ Macbeth, Act V, Scene 3.

² Hildebrand als Papst Gregorius der Siebente, und sein Zeitalter, aus den Quellen dargestellt von Johannes Voigt, Geheimer Regierungsrath, ordentlicher Professor der Geschichte an der Universität zu Königsberg, u. s. w. Zweite, vielfach veränderte Auflage.—Weimar, 1846, 88. 625.