

## ARTICLE II.

## WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

BY PROFESSOR THEODORE W. HUNT, PH. D.\*

IT is not our purpose to present, in this discussion, the biographical details of the life of Wordsworth, save in so far as they are inseparably connected with his literary work. In a true sense, his poetry is his best biography. Not only is "The Prelude" autobiographical, but "The Excursion" and many of the shorter poems are substantially so.

We may thus proceed at once, to the subject in hand as embraced in three distinct topics of interest.

## I. HIS THEORY OF POETRY.

This was peculiarly his own, called for, in part, by the special character of the time and, mainly, by the instincts and demands of his own nature. He alludes, once and again, to the urgent necessity that existed in English poetry for new canons of criticism and new methods of expression. He thus takes special pains to review the history of English verse, and calls attention to the false taste which had prevailed among the ablest writers of the day.

He dwells upon the fact that by such erroneous standards Spenser and Shakespeare and Milton had largely lost their hold upon the public mind, while such inferior names as those of Halifax, Browne, Sheffield, and Philipps had found a place of honor in Johnson's "Lives of the English Poets." Not even in the opening of the romantic era, in the days of Cowper, did he succeed in discovering what he regarded as the essentials of poetry. It was in place, therefore, for him

to develop a theory of his own, and in the second edition of his poems he gives us by way of preface its clear exposition. "Poetry," he says, "is the image of man and nature, its object being to disclose their unity, and poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual sensibility had, also, thought long and deeply." We discover here the important truth which lies at the basis of the author's theory, that all true poetic emotion is under the guidance and government of thought. It is a *contemplative* emotion. Proceeding, then, from the abstract to the concrete, he defines the poet to be "a man speaking to men, a man who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul than most men, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him." He enumerates six distinct qualifications of the poet—Observation or Description, Sensibility, Reflection, Imagination, Invention, and Judgment; in fine, all the elements that enter into the best English verse. From these and kindred statements his theory may be reached. We may speak of it, as the interpretation of God and man through nature, as the real language of man reduced to metrical form. Negatively viewed, it was a protest against the false sentiments of preceding eras. The main object of his poems, as he indicates, was to present the incidents of everyday life in a language understood by all and, at the same time, to preserve the dignity of verse by investing it with imaginative beauty. He cannot speak too strongly against the attempts hitherto made to establish a separate poetic diction, applicable to poetry only. Hence it is that Pope and Dryden and the later formalists are denounced as the originators of a false standard in poetry, and as using a kind of phraseology nowhere to be found among the masses of the people. "I have wished," says Wordsworth, "to keep the reader in the company of flesh and blood." It was this particular theory that drew

down upon the head of the author of it the most stinging invectives of the critics and occasioned the almost personal controversy that he had with Jeffrey and the Edinburgh reviewers. It was intolerable to these supporters of the old *régime* to note the application of such lowly language to the department of English verse. They ridiculed it as the worst of commonplace, and could see nothing in the future of the nation's poetic art, if developed on this basis, but a slavish adherence to the most threadbare sentiments. "What do we meet here?" asks one of the critics—"Idiot boys, mad mothers, wandering Jews, and phrensied mariners"! In fact, the conventional censors of the time could not from their point of view comprehend the motive of the poet in this new departure. It was so entirely foreign to their conceptions, that they branded it at once as a flagrant literary heresy, and were rather inclined to commiserate a poet who, right in the face of literary history and literary ideal, could thus debase himself to the language of the many. Wordsworth, however, understood fully the need and the purport of his new method, and addressed himself with untiring devotion to its practical application. He could thus write of himself as, in "The Excursion," he writes of the Wanderer—

"From his native hills  
 He wandered far; much did he see of men,  
 Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,  
 Their passions, and their feelings; chiefly those  
 Essential and eternal in the heart,  
 That 'mid the simpler forms of rural life  
 Exist more simple in their elements,  
 And speak a plainer language."

In fine, Wordsworth's theory was unique in its origin, content, function, and result. It traced all genuine poetic utterance back to the understanding and the heart, and was content to make the daily diction of popular life the medium of its expression. 'Tis true that our author himself departs, at times, from the requirements of his own theory. 'Tis true,

moreover, that the theory is often pressed to undue limits a to choice of theme and character of language. Still, the theory itself was the offspring of an ingenuous nature, its governing aim was the education of the people, and it marked a step of decided advance in the national literature of England. It is not, therefore, the teachings of the school of Jeffrey, but those of the more liberal section of British critics, that we are to follow in the study of the poetry of Wordsworth.

## II. HIS VIEW OF NATURE.

Here, as in the realm of verse, he had his own peculiar way of observation and suggestion. We find him, when a mere boy, thoroughly in love with those natural surroundings in the center of which his early life was happily cast. At Cockermouth, at Alfoxden, at Hawkshead, at Grasmere, and at Rydal Mount, he was the lover and the child of nature. These different English homes were just such as to confirm his deepest constitutional instincts. He looked upon the physical world, not as a mere collection of forms and objects, but as a grand, sentient organism, informed and transfigured by the spirit that was in it. This presence he calls the Spirit of Nature; but one of the varied forms of the manifestation of the Divine Spirit. He sees God in Nature rather than over it,—an immanent and ever-active agency begetting life and love and joy and beauty and cosmic order, under whose benignant influence the soul of man was chastened and enlarged. This is his meaning in the suggestive couplet—

"A gracious Spirit o'er the world presides,  
And o'er the heart of man."

'Tis thus he writes, in "The Prelude"—

"Thou, O Nature, hast fed  
My lofty speculations, and in thee  
For this uneasy heart of ours I find  
A never-failing principle of joy  
And purest passion."

To his discerning eye, everything in nature had a life of its own and its separate ministry to man. He goes so far at times as to intimate that all scenes in nature have their respective counterparts in the soul. We can best express his intensive love of nature by saying that he was enchanted by her. Before his constructive imagination she took a kind of bodily presence. He saw her forms, heard her voice, and felt profoundly the varied movements of her inner life. Her melodies thrilled him, and her revelations subdued and pacified him. There was a kind of understanding between them, giving rise to the very closest intimacies. How rapturous his descriptions of his youthful sports in wood and field! On the banks of the Wye above Tintern Abbey he thus writes:—

“For Nature then  
To me was all in all. The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,  
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
Their colors and their forms, were then to me  
An appetite; a feeling and a love.  
Moves there a cloud o'er midday's flaming eye  
Upward I look and call it luxury.”

He had come to think of nature as invested with something of the supernatural, and, reversing Professor Drummond's phraseology, would see spiritual law in the natural world. It was his favorite teaching, that “heaven lies about us in our infancy” and thus gives shape and bias to our forming character. This is the very meaning of his touching poem on *The Intimations of Immortality in Childhood*; as, also, in “*We are Seven.*” Earth is viewed as but the vestibule of heaven, and the world about us is alive with divinest impulses. There was in all this, it must be conceded, much of the mystical and visionary, and very much of the essentially poetic. There was nothing in earth or sea or sky in which he did not detect poetry, and it was his one ambition to embody these conceptions and impressions in appropriate

verse. Arrogant and independent as he often was in the presence of men, he was ever docile and devout in the presence of nature. He acknowledged her primary right to instruct him. He believed that between the human soul and the outer world there was a mutual interchange of life, a system of preëstablished harmonies, and that life was blessed just to the degree in which man was enabled to discover and apply them. So strong was his love for nature as beneficent, that he seemed either to forget the existence of evil in her or to invest the evil with the attractiveness of the good. Though he alludes to storm and fire, the reference is always to their sublimity, rather than to their agency as destructive and avenging. We never read of the forces of nature as vindictive, of the noxious vapors that poison the air, or of the barren wastes over the face of the earth. Nothing is said of the scriptural relations of nature to the fall of man. Seeing her beneficence only, he counsels all who are in trouble to betake themselves to her for tuition and blessing. He believes that the mental peace which is so desirable is to be secured by "communion with her visible forms." There is something touching in his representation of the attitude in which nature stands to little children. She is their affectionate guardian, watching over their interests with motherly care. 'Tis chiefly for them that she displays her wonders and her beauties. 'Tis her innocent purpose to woo and win them by her constant ministries to their earliest joys and needs. Before they become chafed and hardened by the stern experiences of life, it is for her to shape their pliant minds into harmony with her own teachings.

Such was Wordsworth's theory of nature as related to God and men, to poetry and life. The question naturally arises as to its soundness. It is easy to see that it was a theory capable of gross perversion. There seems to have been, at times, a vagueness in the poet's mind as to the true relation of God to his works. In the earlier history, the clear

conception of a personal Deity separate from his creation is not as sharply defined as we might wish. There are times in his life and poetry when he seems to love the idea of the universe as objective and to resolve it into the being of God. This tendency was pronounced even in his boyhood. In his philosophic monologues among the mountains, this transcendental tendency is ever manifest. Where others beheld and enjoyed, Wordsworth almost worshiped, and at this point was the peril. Hence, we are not surprised to hear the charge of Pantheism, as Devey thus writes: "This deification of the powers of nature; this effort to break down the antithesis between mind and matter—this is all at war with the doctrine of the fall and the essential constituents of the Christian faith." This is all true in so far as tendency is concerned. We must believe, however, that the poet escaped the legitimate results of his own theory. At first, it is true that his views of good and evil, of the soul's origin, and of natural phenomena, were more Platonic than biblical. He never came to the statement, however, that the world is but a mode of the divine existence. Maturer opinions and beliefs are seen to modify the earlier for the better, and not, as in the case of Milton, for the worse. No sympathetic reader of his life can forget the serious mental struggle through which he was called to pass at this juncture, taking its intensest form after he had left England and lived at the center of European commotions. Doubts of all kinds harassed him. He was, as so many others have been, the victim of what Hood calls "the Everlasting No"—the blank denial of all personal existence and accountability. The struggle, however, was not a hopeless one. The light gradually broke in upon him, and he saw the truth in its reality and right relations. In noting the religious beliefs of Wordsworth, it must be confessed that we fail to discover those references to the redemptive system that belong to the writings of a Christian poet. In this, however, he is not alone, while we are

bound, moreover, to make due allowance for the different ways in which men manifest their piety. So true is this, that Mr. Brooke in his "Theology of the English Poets," devotes more than one-half of the treatise to Wordsworth's religious life. With the Bible before him, and nature about him, he used, each in his own way, to interpret the other.

"Early had he learned to reverence the volume  
That displays the mystery, the life which cannot die,  
But in the mountains did he *feel* his faith."

It was precisely to this combination, in his character, of the earthly and the unearthly that he strikingly refers in the poetic desire,

"And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by *natural piety*."

This was his own interpretation of his own religious life. His piety, as his poetry, was, in a true sense, natural, on the basis of which it required but little faith to rise to the supernatural and rest therein.

### III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS POETRY.

1. *Its Ethical Character.*—Wordsworth was a Literary Moralist. His mind was eminently ethical. As Mr. Taine would express it, he was constitutionally devout, "pre-inclined" to piety. We look in vain in his character to find any trace of that groveling temper so often found in authors and authorship. He recognized, from his earliest boyhood onward, his relations to God and duty. Very much of his earlier and later devotion to natural scenery was but the expression of this reverential spirit. Mr. Taine pronounces, unwittingly, a most decided eulogium upon Wordsworth's poetry as he ironically writes, "When I shall have emptied my head of all worldly thoughts, and looked up to the clouds for ten years, to refine my soul, I shall love this poetry." It was this very unworldliness which the worldly French critic could not appreciate had he looked up to the clouds for

twenty years, and which only serves to cast about the genius of the poet a purer luster than it would otherwise have possessed. We are not surprised to learn from the poet's biography that his friends had designed him for the holy ministry. He understood, however, still better than they, the aptitudes of his nature, and preached through his literary work to a far larger audience than he could have reached from an English pulpit. All spheres and activities of human life were to him serious. Hence, we mark in his verse the absence of mere sentiment or of words uttered for their own sake. How striking the absence of that species of poetry so common to all the poets from Spenser to Moore—amorous lyrics in honor of some personal or imaginary favorite! By no means devoid of deep and generous feeling, he always gave expression to it in the forms of simple truth. So decided was this ethical bias, that we fail to discover that ingenuous humor and pleasantry of temper which naturally belongs to the poet's nature. The critics are correct when they affirm that this defect serves to detract from the merits, as indeed from the readableness of his style. Still, the defect is so thoroughly consistent with his character, that what is lost on the side of pleasantry is more than gained on that of an honest adherence to the reality of things. From first to last, there is not a whit of the affected and conventional; no studied artifice by which to attract attention, but the ever-present influence of a lofty moral aim. There is here, what Christopher North has purposely called, "an out-of-the-worldish look." It was always an occasion of regret to Wordsworth that the great majority of men were so thoroughly engrossed in the pursuit of merely temporal good.

"The world is too much with us, late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

He thus aimed to exalt virtue among all classes. As a citizen, he was cautious and conservative. His very politics were

ethical. Stating in one of his familiar talks, "that he had given twelve hours to society for one to poetry," he adds, "The world is running mad with the notion that all its evils are to be relieved by political remedies; whereas the great evils lie deep in the heart, and nothing but religion can remove them." He well knew that all sound political economy was based on public virtue. In the noble work that he did on behalf of popular rights, and in his soul-stirring sonnets on the same key and theme, we can see that he was laboring for the civic good through the use of moral agencies. The peculiar views which he held of nature softened and ennobled his character; so that he always connected conscience with national progress, and made it his mission as a man and a poet to elevate his race. "One thing," he said, "is a comfort of my old age, that none of my works written since early youth contains a line I should wish to blot out because it panders to the baser passions of our nature." In this respect he falls into line with the larger number of our best English authors, and confirms the character of English literature as eminently moral. In this respect we may add, that there is a far wider distance between British and Continental Letters than the breadth of the English Channel.

In speaking of this ethical element in Wordsworth's poetry, it is in place to refer with emphasis to his *conscientious devotion* to his mission as a poet. Poetry was his solemn calling, and he pursued it as devoutly as a priest serves his parish, or ministers at the altar. This is the high sentiment to which he gives expression in his dedicatory verses to "The White Doe of Rylstone."

"He serves the Muses erringly and ill  
Whose aim is pleasure, light and fugitive;  
O that my mind were equal to fulfill  
The comprehensive mandate which they give."

It is true, indeed, that we do not find in our author's personal history the presence of those crucial struggles which have

tested the moral fidelity of so many authors, as Dante and Cervantes, Milton and Bunyan. He did not suffer, as they, from exile, imprisonment, or poverty, and yet he may be said to have had his full share of personal trials. Mrs. Browning, in her "Vision of the English Poets," gives us a touching description of the four pools, the waters of which must be tasted by every successful bard. At these Wordsworth had knelt and drunk. He knew what it was to be contemned of men. Rarely has an author been so beset in his early life by the critics and reviewers. Public sentiment was prejudiced against the kindly reception of his poems, while brother bards, either from envy or from an undue concession to the reigning criticism, swelled the general voice against him. Fully thirty years passed before he rose into merited repute, and, even after this, a score of years was spent in literary conflict ere his final reputation was established. Christopher North, of *Blackwood*, and De Quincey, the essayist, are led to rebuke their countrymen, and to praise themselves as a quarter of a century in advance of British criticism in their high appreciation of the worth of Wordsworth. Through all this hostile and malicious fault-finding, the poet of the Lakes remained more loyal than ever to his sacred trust. At the time when his friends were the least friendly, and his foes the most bitter, he took up the defense of his own productions with all the heroism of a knight. Nor was this all. His temptation to abandon the sphere of verse was not alone from the side of captious judgment, but from the very abundance of his worldly resources and the delights of leisure. Though at one period his circumstances were somewhat reduced, all difficulties soon vanished, and full provision was made for his needs. With all the appliances of luxury at hand, and with rare inducements on the part of the English government to confine his attention to English politics, we see him at Rydal Mount passing a life of modest retiracy and frugality, devoted, as he tells us, "to plain living and high thinking." More than once

had he been enticed, as Burns had been, to abandon his poetic work, and had always successfully resisted. Alluding most affectionately to the helpful sympathy of his sister in these personal trials, he writes in "The Prelude":—

"She in the midst of all preserved me still  
A poet, made me seek beneath that name,  
And that alone, my office upon earth."

In all this the ethical element of the poet's nature was manifest. Poetry was a matter of conscience, as well as of culture, in his view, and he profoundly felt that whoever was called of God to this high ministry of verse was morally bound to prosecute it in the face of all neglect and obstacle.

2. *Its Emotional Character.*—This is seen, mainly, in his Human Sympathies. His very theory of poetry took its origin in a broad affection for man as man. Such a conception of the function of poetry would have been utterly foreign to any other than a catholic nature. We can discern at this stage in the history of our poet a most striking resemblance to the favorite bard of the Lowland Scotch. Wordsworth alludes with pleasure to the fact that he can stand upon the top of the peaks of Cumberland and look away to Ellisland—one of the homes of Burns. He expresses deep regret that he had not enjoyed more fully the fellowship of this poet of nature and of man. Each of them had been born and bred in lowly life, and ardently yearned for the good of the people. They aimed in every way to elevate the common classes of society, and especially through their literary work to minister to their highest needs. If in the prosecution of this purpose they excited against them the reproaches of the great and affluent, it was in no sense because they despised the upper orders, but because they honored the lower. Hence the utter falsity of such a view as that to which Devey and others give expression, "that Wordsworth was hampered by themes which cut him off from genuine sympathy with the largest section of humanity; that he turned his back upon the great conservative classes

of society; that he scrupulously avoided *respectable* people; that the upper ten thousand were practically worthless to him; that his heart beat in unison with the rustic poor only, at home only among vagrant pedlars and ragged shepherds." This is the extreme of cynicism, and smacks of Grub Street, in its literary flavor. Totally misleading, there is just enough of truth in it to make it plausible and give it currency. 'Tis true that Wordsworth, as Burns, felt more at home among the peasants and the middle classes than among the aristocracy of wealth and position. This is not to concede, however, that he did not accord them their rightful place. His life was devoted to the yeomanry because their needs were greater. Just so long as the privileged classes were true to their privileges they had a staunch supporter in the person of our author. When, however, the lines began to be too closely drawn, and the doctrine of social caste was exalted beyond measure, then Wordsworth was ever found the zealous advocate of popular rights—the poet of the people. Here we quote from Devey words of truth, though strangely aside from his previous statements, that "Wordsworth designed to erect a poetic temple at the shrine of which the most selfish hearts should be humanized, and a feeling of love ever kept alive between the politically great and the socially defenseless." This is just what he designed and if, in its execution, he offended the aristocracy by his laudable devotion to the humbler orders of the nation, what is the result of this but to make it all the worse for the aristocracy in their social exclusiveness! "I desire from posterity no other praise," he says, "than that which may be given me for the way in which my poems exhibit man in his essentially human character and relations." Hence his aim to exalt the humblest state. Hence his messages of cheer to the sorrowing and suffering. Hence his discovery of something attractive in objects the most unattractive. In this respect, at least, he was the poet of the Commonalty, and, in order to reach its innermost heart, he was quite con-

tent to abandon the formal diction of the schools, and use "great plainness of speech." It was his aim to construct a body of English poetry on a distinctively popular plane, and suffused with human sympathy.

The question as to whether Wordsworth's poetry may be said to be emotional, apart from that element of feeling which arises from his sympathies with his kind, is still an open one, and not without reason.<sup>1</sup> The more we study the author and his verse, however, the more we are inclined to give him credit for an ever-larger measure of genuine poetic sentiment, and separate him from such purely didactic authors as Dryden, Pope, Akenside, and Rogers. That ethical quality, to which reference has been made, has in itself a decidedly emotional character. His ingenuous devotion to his calling had, also, something of this emotive feature. His view of poetry, and of nature as related to it, may be said to have involved this quality of feeling, and that in such marked degree that Mr. Brooke and other recent critics emphasize his "poetic sensibility." 'Tis true, indeed, that we find nothing in Wordsworth at this point to remind us of those outbursts of tender passion which mark the correspondence of Schiller and Goethe, of Racine and Pascal, of Cowper and Shelley. There is nothing of the sensuous sentiment of "Lalla Rookh" or of "Don Juan," nor, indeed, of the ever-flowing feeling of Chaucer and Spenser. 'Twould have been quite impossible for him to have written in prose as Swift wrote to Stella, or in poetry as Burns penned his verses to the lassies of the Highlands.

There is present, however, in Wordsworth a kind of subdued, inward poetic impulse which is just demonstrative enough to be discernible, and in beautiful keeping with his nature as retiring and pensive. In his references to English womanhood there is nothing that borders upon the impetuous outflow of the feelings of the heart, and yet the most cursory reader can detect the presence of high personal regard and genuine love.

<sup>1</sup> See "Wordsworth's Passion," *New Princeton Review*, May, 1886.

So, in his allusions to Coleridge and other literary colleagues, and in his expressed opinions as to the great questions of social reform and the high interests of English poetry. What Mackenzie would call, *The Man of Feeling*, is undoubtedly visible, and yet more concealed than apparent. A careful perusal of his longer poems, as well as his *Ecclesiastical and Descriptive Sketches* and *Lyrical Ballads*, will serve to reveal what we may term the substantial presence of emotion, and go far to redeem his reputation for an order of verse so matter-of-fact and commonplace as to awaken no response from impassioned natures.

3. *Its Intellectual Character.*—There is no stage in the interpretation of Wordsworth's personal and poetic nature where he will better stand the test of close inspection than just here. His type of life, and order of verse were those of the thinker. English critics have termed him, in this sense, a philosopher. Perhaps the one word which will best express the idea at this point is *Reflection*, in its strictly mental meaning. In this particular he has no superior, and but few rivals, in English Letters. Coleridge is nearer to him than any other one, and, had he written as much verse as Wordsworth, would have been still nearer in literary type.

"The outward show of sky and earth,  
Of hill and valley, he has viewed.  
But impulses of deeper birth  
Have come to him in solitude."

The more fully we thus come to understand the real poet behind and beneath his poetry, the more clearly we shall note the absence of the objective and the ever-active presence of the inward eye. His habit of mind was introspective, rather than excursive or discursive. Even in his poem "*The Excursion*" the method is metaphysical, rather than historical. His very boyhood, as we have seen, was marked by philosophic gravity, as was that of Milton. He was always meditating. He was in love with solitude, and largely because it

was congenial to his poetic moods and needs. As the contemplative Shelley, he was often hidden in the very heart of the forest or the hills, thinking and composing. He was wont to indulge in mental reverie—the study of self, of nature, and of God. When residing at Alfoxden, so peculiar were his habits that the citizens came to regard him as a mysterious visitant to their village. This conviction became at length so decided with them, that when he and Coleridge walked forth together in quiet contemplation, the eye of the government officials was upon them. We can but slightly appreciate the radical change which the poet must have experienced when he left his secluded home for the publicity of academic life at Cambridge. He speaks feelingly when he tells us that “he was not for that hour or that place.” Even there, however, scholastic routine and formalism could not greatly modify his mental habit, and we still find him studying nature and self rather than books. When publishing his *Descriptive Sketches*, he does it, as he says, to show “that although he gained no honors at the University, he could do something.” He meant to say that he had been intently engaged in the study of truth outside the prescribed manuals. So strong is this reflective habit that even in his travels he was developing it. Though a Stamp Distributor in the employ of the English Government, he never allowed this to interfere with the supreme object of his literary life. How strange and ill-timed must have been his visit to the French capital! The reserved and recluse student was suddenly plunged into the very center of Parisian politics. Had he not been delivered from it all just when he was, his real poetic character might have been materially impaired.

We can readily see that Wordsworth was much more at home in philosophic Germany. He had that quality of meditateness so prominent in the old Teutonic mind. His work was similar to theirs—to sound the depths of man’s mental and ethical being. We hear him confessing that the very act

of writing was too external and manual to be agreeable. He found his pleasure in mental composition, leaving it to others to interpret and transcribe. It was in accordance with this same mental habit that we find him possessed of but few books. It is probable that Southey spent as much time over his library in the course of a month as Wordsworth did over his scanty one in years. Even what he did read was rather for the purpose of recreation than for profit. This explains his fondness for fiction and travels. The sources whence he drew his stores and inspiration were internal and concealed. It is thus one of the distinctive features of his poetry that it requires mental sobriety on the part of the reader to understand and enjoy it. As he reads, he feels that here is a deep mental and moral experience into sympathy with which he must, if possible, place himself, in order to the best results. The frivolous and the superficial find nothing here. Hence Wordsworth could never become, as to his thought and general style, the poet of the masses. Light-minded and leisure-loving readers will at once discard him, as indeed they have already done, for something more congenial. Reflective minds, however, will seek and relish such high discourse, and will be all the more repaid the longer they read him. The author has given us in "The Prelude" a true description of his own character in this regard when, after alluding to men of eloquence and active life, he adds—

"Others too there are among the walks of homely life  
 Still higher, men for contemplation formed  
 Shy and unpractised in the strife of phrase,  
 Theirs is the language of the heavens, the power,  
 The thought, the image and the silent joy.  
 Words are but under agents in their souls.  
 When they are groping with their greatest strength  
 They do not breathe among them."

The power of his poetry lies thus in its ideas—seminal and suggestive. It is, in a true sense, psychological. It is mainly because of the absence of this element, that poetry has come

to mean, with so many, mere flights of fancy and superficial musings, with no solid substratum of truth, as if, indeed, it were the product of erratic minds, and written only for readers of a capricious mental habit. Wordsworth has taught us this, if nothing else, that genuine poetry is something more than imagination or sentiment, that it is the expression of thought through these as a medium. It is here, especially, that the signal benefit of this order of verse is seen, in that the poet magnifies the philosophic element throughout; establishes a union between the reflective and the impassioned, and redeems the poetic art from the current charge of mental weakness.

Such may be said to be, in brief, the ethical, emotional, and intellectual quality of the poetry of Wordsworth. Each of these three fundamental characteristics is marked by some degree of excellence—sufficiently so to invite and reward the careful study of the critic and the reader, and yet not sufficiently so to satisfy the largest demands of either. We feel, as we read and examine, that something is lacking by the presence of which the influence of the poet would be manifestly increased, and we cannot greatly wonder at the earnest discussion, still in progress, as to just what is, or what is not, the poetical merit of our author.

The question, therefore, arises as to the possible defect or defects of Wordsworth's verse. We believe that the whole truth may be summarily expressed at this point in the one phrase—Limitation of Power.

The one quality of high poetic genius which Wordsworth does not possess is Range of Function, Poetic Prescience and Breadth. This is so true that it finds its illustration in each of the spheres of poetic life that we have examined.

The *ethical* character of his verse was strictly ethical, rather than positively Christian. In this respect it was restricted in its province and influence, and obliges the most loyal advo-

cates of the author's work to assume negative ground where all should be outspoken and open.

So as to the *emotional* element. It is, as seen, undoubtedly present, and yet present under prescribed conditions, outside the confines of which it never passes. There is a kind and measure of emotion rarely, if ever, rising to the form of controlling passion. There is genuine sentiment without the presence of all-engrossing fervor and unction. The flow of feeling is not so deep and potent as to be resistless, bearing all before it and, withal, majestic in its movement. We hear none of those surgings of soul which characterize the experience of the chosen few in the realm of verse. Where we expect to find an ever-deepening and ever-widening expression of emotive life, we note a studied reserve. There is too much of the cautious and conventional in all this, so that while we acknowledge some degree of genuine poetic impulse it always reaches its fullest measure this side of the impassioned and sublime.

As to the *intellectual* feature of the poetry before us, such limitation of function is especially manifest. This narrowness of mental horizon is Wordsworth's main defect. There is not only a subjective, but an individual, element in his poetry, which made it impossible for him to take any higher ground than he did. Had he not spent a large portion of his earlier life under the broadening influence of European travel, this restriction of power would have been still more marked. Wordsworth's most ardent admirers cannot justly call him a many-sided man or poet. In this lack of comprehensiveness and reach is found the sufficient explanation of the undramatic quality of his verse, and his failure to construct an English Epic. He was too limited in his gifts and faculties to excel in either of these departments of representative verse. His mental acreage was not spacious, and, hence, "The Prelude" and "Excursion" apart, we have from his pen no extensive product. His genius expanded itself in the form best

adapted to its ability. Doing his best poetical work before he was forty, we fail to mark that gradual development of power and result of right expected from the master poet. His limitation, in fact, was in the sphere of creative capability. He had neither the imagination nor the grasp requisite to real inventive work, nor yet, indeed, that continuity of power absolutely essential to the typical forms of literary art. Hence his want of humor, of the facile and flexible qualities of verse; of adaptation to all classes and circumstances; of range of diction and method—in fine, of intellectual expansion—of genius.

As to Wordsworth's place in English Poetry the most diverse opinions have been held. "For our own part," says North, "we believe that Wordsworth's genius has had a greater influence on the spirit of poetry in Britain than any other individual mind," while it is reserved for Mr. Arnold, in his criticism of Emerson, strongly to confirm this opinion as he says, "Wordsworth's poetry is, in my judgment, the most important work done in verse in our language during the present century." On the other hand, Jeffrey and his school ranked him as a third-rate versifier, in which decision Hood, his biographer, substantially concurs.

In each of these deliverances we fail to reach the exact truth. Wordsworth is not the genius which North and Arnold would make him, neither is he the poetic weakling of Hood and the Edinburgh critics. He has, in a sense, a place of his own, and, if he must be classified, stands among the first names of England's second grade of poets.

He had too little genius to rank with Shakespeare and Milton; he had far too much to rank with Crabbe and Rogers and Campbell. Nor is this all. It was one of the high aims and results of Wordsworth's work to call attention to the need of natural verse, as distinct from the stilted couplets of the classical school. This he did by his fervent love of natural beauty, by his adoption of the common speech of men, and

by his subordination of form to thought. Though not the founder of a new school of poetry, he was, in a sense, its central figure, and did a work, though possible to others, yet never attempted by them. We look in vain, from Cowper to Tennyson, for any one competent to its accomplishment. Coleridge alone had similar poetic instincts and aptitudes, but soon betook himself to prose and philosophy. Shelley and Keats, Southey and Scott, were working on different lines, while one of Wordsworth's most beneficent aims was to present a solemn protest in his verse against the sensuous lines of Moore and Byron.

In the light of such facts, criticism must be somewhat cautious, lest it overreach itself on the side of depreciation and severity. English Poetry, as indeed English Literature, could ill spare his name and work. He had a high mission, and may be said worthily to have fulfilled it; nor can his influence as a poet be measured by mere relative position and specific poetic product. He appeared, and was prominent, just when he was needed, and left an impression on behalf of clean and thoughtful poetry that will last as long as our language lasts. Defamed and neglected at first, he came at length to just appreciation. Again allowed to retire for a time into comparative obscurity, literary history strangely repeats itself in that special revival of interest now discernible in all that pertains to his character and work.

While there is in his poetry, as suggested, a something lacking that we greatly need, there is, also, it must be conceded, a something present that we need with equal intensity of desire. It is that something lacking that excludes our poet, with all his excellence, from the innermost circle of English bards; it is that something present that, with all his defects, makes him essential to our literature and our personal culture.

Despite all adverse criticism, all acknowledged limitation of faculty and function in the man and in the poet, we are still glad to indorse what we read on the tablet above his pew in

the little church at Grasmere, "In memory of William Wordsworth, a true philosopher and poet, who, by the special gift and calling of Almighty God, whether he discoursed on Man or Nature, failed not to lift up the heart to Holy Things; tired not of maintaining the cause of the Poor and Simple, and so in perilous times was raised up to be a chief minister not only of Noblest Poesy, but of High and Sacred Truth."