

THE VICTORIAN ERA

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

STRICTLY speaking, the Victorian period signifies the greater part of the 19th century, — from 1837 to 1900. The period is only just gone—though the great force of it began to decline at least ten years ago. Before the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne Tennyson had begun to write. But the first work of Tennyson was so very bad, that it exerted no influence at all—you will be astonished to see how bad it was when I read to you some quotations from his earliest verse. However it was after 1837 that Tennyson and all the greatest poets who succeeded the first romantic group did their great work; and we may say that the reign of the Queen coincides almost exactly with the greatest development in English literature since the Elizabethan age. This development was especially marked in lyric poetry and in fiction. It was not marked at all in drama. But in lyric poetry and in fiction it is unsurpassed. Also it was remarkable for one or two facts. For instance, one poet was universally recognized during all that time as Lord and King—Tennyson. A literary king he was, though not at all in the sense that Johnson was or that Dryden was. Tennyson hated society, lived almost entirely alone, — notwithstanding the special favour shown him by the Queen who often called him to see her; — and visitors to his house were comparatively few. Only by thus isolating himself could he have found time to accomplish the work he did. He was not on terms of intimacy with his contemporaries to any extent. Yet all of them, or nearly all, swallowed their jealousies, and openly acknowledged him their chief. This was quite a new occurrence in the history of poetry; and it says a great deal for the strength of Tennyson's art. The other extraor-

dinary fact in regard to the Victorian period was the introduction of a new mode of thought, which influenced, in a greater or lesser degree, the whole literary production of the age. I mean the evolutionary philosophy.

As a little boy, I remember having been taken upon the knees of a very wise person, as I then thought, who told me that a wicked man called Darwin had written a book in which it had been declared that men were descended from apes. I suppose that millions of little boys were being told about the same thing at that time. This really represented the popular and ignorant idea of evolution. You know that Darwin, who is now as much honoured as he was then despised, never said anything of this kind. He had only classified Man, just as Cuvier and others had previously classified him, as belonging to the great family of quadrumana; and no man of science had ever objected to this classification. Darwin's offence was in saying that, according to scientific evidence, man had at one time been in a much lower condition than that of a savage—that he had been an animal in his habits, and had gradually worked his way up, through lower forms, to the highest place of intelligence and power. But really this had been said long before;—the real evolutionary philosophy was teaching that all higher forms whether suns or men had had their beginnings in very simple form—that the whole world was, in fact, a development.

The contest was between the two interopposed religious ideas of East and West—only now the Eastern thought had entered Europe clad in scientific armour from head to foot, and not as the champion of any creed, but only of truth. Western religion declared, “All things were made, just as they are, by the hand of God—worlds, men, animals, trees.” Science answered, “There is no evidence for any such belief. On the contrary I find that all life is one, and that all forms have been slowly shaped, through immeasurable time, under varying influences. I find that life, upon this earth, before becoming man, existed in a hundred thousand other forms. I find that not only the life, but even the ultimate structure of the substance

of the plant, the animal and the man is the same. I find that all life in this world originally came from the sun, and the world itself from that sun, and that sun from other suns which existed long before. I find that before this universe there must have been myriads of other universes; and I find that after this universe shall have vanished away, other millions of universes will reappear in their order. You say that there was a beginning of matter—that some god made it out of nothing. I answer that nothing produces nothing; and that what is must always have been. What we call Form and Name have begun. But these are not realities;—they go and come only as waves upon the surface of a sea. Substance—the essence of all things—never began,—nor did life ever begin: it always was; it always will be; and what we call mind and what we call matter are but two different appearances of the same Infinite Reality.” You can perceive how great a shock a philosophy like this must have produced upon the Western mind—because it was new. Its great exponent was Herbert Spencer. But the people could not understand Herbert Spencer; to master him signifies a strong mind and years of hard study. On the other hand they could understand Darwin—who only contributed one chapter to the subject, because he wrote about animals, birds, insects, and plants, which they have seen. Darwin received the public abuse; but the real shock was given to the intellectual classes by the philosophy of Spencer, Huxley, Galton, Maudsley, and half a dozen others. The mathematicians, the great men of science were mostly, though not all, on the side of the new thought. This is not the place for a lecture upon evolution; but some mention of the matter is necessary for a comprehension of certain literary changes. Now it is interesting to look back at what has happened.

The much abused Darwin is now justly counted among the glories of English science; and his teachings have been accepted by the very Church that once opposed him so bitterly. In fact his teaching in its fundamental principles has been accepted by all but the oldest and narrowest Christian sects. You may ask whether the whole evolutionary philosophy has also

been accepted. One may say yes—except with regard to the psychology. Every book now written, which has any value, on the subject of astronomy, botany, geology, natural history, ordinary history, even literary criticism, is written from the standpoint of the evolutionary philosophy. Even the scientific work of the great conservative universities is all done upon this foundation. Any book written against this mode of thought, any book of science which even attempts to ignore it is sure to be forgotten within a few years. And yet there is still a great remnant of the opposition to the psychological part of the teaching, especially as expounded by Spencer. For he said and proved that what is commonly called the Soul or Self had been developed like everything else—that thought was but a compounding and recompounding of sensations. What is sensation? That is infinite mystery—no man can answer. Now to the Oriental student there is nothing at all strange about this thinking. What is commonly called the Self is not, to the Oriental thinker, the real Self—the inner principle of all things. Very different seemed the same teaching to Western minds accustomed to think of the soul as a kind of Inner Man,—an immortal ghost. At the universities the shock of the new teaching was such as to provoke a religious reaction. Men fled away in fear from the new thinking—many into the Catholic Church. The excitement is now past; and it is very probable in my opinion, that within no distant time even the psychology, so long opposed, must triumph in every intellectual centre. But you must try in thinking of the literary movement between 1850 and 1900 to understand what a mental revolution was accomplished, to sympathize even with those who earnestly and sincerely strove on both sides. As I said the struggle reflected itself a little in most of the great work of the time. Perhaps it also accounts for present intervals of silence. No more very great poets are likely to sing until the new philosophy has become a part of the intellectual life much more than it is now.

TENNYSON AND THE GREAT POETRY

TENNYSON

The first and the greatest of the Victorian poets—and the first in whose writings the new modes of thought were more or less imperfectly reflected—was Tennyson¹ unquestionably, and quite apart from the consideration of the popular verdict. Tennyson was born in 1809—the son of an English clergyman, and a descendant of poets. Poetical genius “ran” in the family; and Tennyson’s two brothers inherited poetical faculty only in a slightly lesser degree than himself. Alfred was educated at Cambridge, where he obtained the Chancellor’s prize by his poem of *Timbuctoo*.² There was nothing particularly remarkable in the history of his college life; but in 1827 he first put something into print—the joint work of himself and his brothers, entitled *Poems by Two Brothers*.³ It attracted no attention, and deserved none. In 1830 another volume appeared, *Poems by Alfred Tennyson*. This attracted scarcely any attention, and deserved but little. In 1832 appeared another volume,⁴ containing the best of the old poems and several new ones. This did attract attention, and did deserve it, but the attention given was not of the sort that Tennyson wished for. The book was very severely criticized, and the beauties in it did not appear to compensate for the defects. Let me read you an example of the defects; it will be quite as obvious to you as it would be to any English student:—

THE SKIPPING-ROPE

Sure never yet was Antelope
 Could skip so lightly by,
 Stand off, or else my skipping-rope
 Will hit you in the eye.
 How lightly whirls the skipping-rope!

¹ Alfred Tennyson, 1st Lord Tennyson (1808-1892).

² *Timbuctoo*. A poem which obtained the Lord Chancellor’s medal at Cambridge commencement 1829.

³ *Poems by two brothers* 1827. [By Alfred, Charles and Frederick Tennyson]

⁴ *Poems by Alfred Tennyson* 1833 [1832].

How fairy-like you fly!
 Go, get you gone, you muse and mope—
 I hate that silly sigh.
 Nay, dearest, teach me how to hope,
 Or tell me how to die.
 There, take it, take my skipping-rope,
 And hang yourself thereby.

I fancy that you will be astonished enough to ask, "But is it really true that Tennyson wrote this?" Yes, it is quite true. It is a young girl who is supposed to be speaking sarcastically to a lover who is showing himself a little too attentive and too affectionate. So far as that goes, the verses are real enough. But this is not poetry: it is prose. And the following is not much better:—

O DARLING ROOM

O darling room, my heart's delight,
 Dear room, the apple of my sight,
 With thy two couches soft and white,
 There is no room so exquisite,
 No little room so warm and bright,
 Wherein to read, wherein to write.

Is this poetry? I do not think it is; and it was very well for Tennyson that other people did not think so—or he might have gone on writing such nonsense for a much longer time. And the other poems in his first volume were not at all in the shape that we have them now. Even *A Dream of Fair Women*, to-day one of the glories of English literature, one of the most perfect poems in any language, ancient and modern, first appeared in a very crude state. For instance you know that beautiful verse describing the death of Iphigenia as related by her own ghost:—

The high masts flicker'd as they lay afloat;
 The crowds, the temples, waver'd, and the shore;
 The bright death quiver'd at the victim's throat;
 Touch'd; and I knew no more.

Now in the edition of 1832 the 3rd and 4th lines run thus:—

One drew a sharp knife thro' my tender throat
Slowly,—and nothing more.

This is flat stupidity; and it is not wonderful that Lockhart, the great critic, spoke most sarcastically about this line, remarking ironically; “What touching simplicity, what pathetic resignation—he cut my throat, nothing more!” Wilson, the great critic of *Blackwood*, was equally severe. All the big critics simply tore the book to pieces. They were cruel—too cruel, even unjust. But they did good to Tennyson; and it must be acknowledged that Tennyson deserved to be severely criticized. Now appeared the reserved strength of the man's character. Instead of allowing himself to be discouraged, or vexed by such criticism, he thought coolly over the matter, recognized that his critics were partly right and set to work to correct his faults. Then for ten years, from 1832 to 1842, he did nothing but cultivate himself, study hard, correct his bad lines; and when, after ten years, he again printed his poems, the book was well received as the work of a true poet. The difference was enormous. From that time he remained triumphant. Even Wordsworth, a very jealous man, early acknowledged his genius. I need not go into any details about his after life, his death, or his splendid funeral at Westminster Abbey. Enough to say that for more than fifty years he remained the undisputed king of English letters.

I have mentioned the fault of the earlier poem only because the statement suggests a grand moral lesson. Even genius requires labour—though it is not, perhaps, exactly defined by the statement that it is “only the faculty for taking infinite pains.” It is much more than that; and one must be born with it, or else no pains will serve to develop it. But even the genius must work hard; and Tennyson's greatness was really due to the fact that he worked harder than any English poet who ever lived. Everything that he produced was written over again and over again, and corrected and recorrected, and proved and added to, and touched, and retouched, until human intelligence

could imagine nothing further in the way of improvement. So extraordinary was the work thus done, that we can scarcely hope to have a critical edition of Tennyson within another 50 years. It will require the united labour of many patient scholars in order to publish an edition of Tennyson that will show an evolutionary history of every poem and the character of the labour bestowed upon it. The earliest poems have been thus edited by Mr. Collins;¹ and even this was a work of years. A number of the *Idylls*, and other pieces have been edited for school use, but only for school use; and the editing relates only to the final text. As I said a critical edition of Tennyson will take at least 50 years to make.

But what was the result of this astonishing industry? It was this, — that Tennyson became the greatest influence in English literature since Shakespeare. No other man, since the time of Elizabeth, so greatly influenced the language itself as Tennyson. Since Pope, no poet enriched the current speech with so many familiar quotations. No writer, of any age, in his own lifetime, became so widely studied as a model of perfect poetical expression. And no man obtained during his lifetime such supreme authority on the subject of poetry. Yet there is one thing more to remark about Tennyson as an influence. He did not simply reflect his age. He called back to life hundreds of beautiful old English words—old Saxon and Scandinavian words—that had long been dead and buried. He gave them new souls — filled them with such strange vitality that they have become certain of living again as long as the language lives. A philologist only could not do this; but Tennyson was very much more than a philologist: he was a mighty artist, and now, what of his place in poetry?

In speaking of any poet, who has been made the subject of a lecture, the student ought to be able to clearly define the position of that poet in a few words. I mean that he should be able to say what distinguishes such a poet from other poets. Now to define Tennyson within a few words, it is only neces-

¹ *The early poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson.* Edited by John Churton Collins, 1901.

sary to say that he represents the supreme perfection of the romantic movement. There were other poets who might deserve the name of the romantic king. But Tennyson was their acknowledged Emperor. After him the romantic movement in poetry had little left to do. All that it had attempted to do, in giving to poetry new charms of music, form, and colour, Tennyson did better than anybody else. Remember that he is the greatest of the romantics—though in certain directions others may surpass. But in a general way, in consideration of the mass of excellence he displayed in a hundred forms, there is no question as to his being the greatest. There is one characteristic of him, which is not perhaps quite satisfactory—he was especially weak in regard to imaginative construction. Even the *Idylls of the King*¹ do not really form an epic: each of the 12 parts is quite distinct, and does not really fit into any other. *Maud*,² although suggesting a complete story, is not complete: it is a series of studies separately written, and so arranged together as to form a whole. *In Memoriam*³ represents the collocations of about 130 different poems into a single frame; but the relation of part to part is not at all perfect. Indeed Tennyson has given us only two really complete stories in verse (I am not speaking now of his drama);—those two pieces are *Enoch Arden*⁴ and *The Princess*.⁵ He was most successful as a lyric poet. But the whole tone of the romantic movement was lyrical, even in its epic; and we cannot criticize Tennyson too much on this account. The fact is only worth mentioning because it shows the only point at which Tennyson cannot be compared with the very greatest poets of every time. He wanted the faculty called architechtonic. But so did most of the romantics and most of the English poets of other times. Otherwise, remember, that what is best in Milton, best in

¹ *Idylls of the king. Enid* (renamed *Geraint and Enid* in 1870; divided into two parts, *The marriage of Geraint* and *Geraint and Enid* in 1886), *Vivien* (renamed *Merlin and Vivien* in 1870), *Elaine* (renamed *Lancelot and Elaine* in 1870), *Guinevere* 1859; *The Coming of Arthur*, *The Holy Grail*, *Pelleas and Ettarre*, *The Passing of Arthur* 1870; *The Last tournament*, *Gareth and Lynette* 1872; *Balin and Balan* 1885. Complete edn 1889.

² *Maud, and other poems* 1855.

³ *In memoriam A.H.H.* 1850.

⁴ *Enoch Arden. Idylls of the hearth* 1864 ff.

⁵ *The princess; a medley* 1847.

Keats, best in Shelley, seems to be all united in Tennyson. As a nature poet he surpasses Wordsworth; as a lyric poet he often reaches the celestial height of Shelley; and he has given a hundred manifestations of the same rare sense of beauty, sensuous beauty, that is the spirit of Keats. In the evolutionary history of poetry Tennyson may be said to "derive," as they call it, especially from Keats and Wordsworth—retaining, however, many marks of the influence of Milton.

A word about Tennyson as a thinker. It has been said that he reflected the 19th century thought without adding anything to it. This is but partly true; for the man who is able to present the thought of his time in the precise way that it affects his own sentiment and sympathy, certainly adds something to the intellectual wealth of the age. But it is true that Tennyson did not attempt much preaching beyond the simple reiteration of this thought—that the innate desire of a future life is in itself a kind of proof that we ought to believe in it. And of course this position will not stand philosophical criticism—not even as it is put in the splendid verse, the immortal verse of *In Memoriam*. Otherwise Tennyson may be said to have reflected the new idea of evolution, and the half religious hope of a future spiritual evolution which was suggested as a compromise when the new science began to make its presence strongly felt. At the same time Tennyson had a certain amount of religious conservatism in his nature—in his very bones—so to speak; for was he not the son of a clergyman and a descendant of a clergyman? His philosophical position was tolerably broad; and well defined as that of "Liberal-Conservative"—liberal in the acceptance of new scientific ideas, conservative in his clinging to the faith of his fathers in regard to a soul, God, and an established code of ethics, and the hope of Heaven. Still, there was nothing sectarian in Tennyson's idea of the Supreme. Here he very much reminds us of Shelley, who thought of Infinite Love as the creating and ruling power of the universe.

Another thing that every student ought to be able to say about a great poet is to answer the question, "What is his

‘best work’?” In Tennyson’s case the question is particularly difficult; and you must not forget that there is something poor in the great mass of it. But the weightiest critics, the best scholars, have pronounced *The Princess* to be Tennyson’s supremely perfect creation. Why? Because, while it contains every form of poetical beauty which he knew how to create, it has none of the shortcomings to be detected in other compositions. It tells a complete story; each of the seven parts is perfectly interlinked with every other part. And, finally, it is essentially the most romantic production of the Emperor of the romantics. One has to go back to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in order to find anything approaching the romantic spirit of *The Princess*. Yet *The Princess* is essentially of the 19th century, could not possibly have been written in any other time. I think that reasons given by Mr. Saintsbury for thinking *The Princess* Tennyson’s greatest production cannot really be questioned at all. Other critics have preferred *Maud*—that is to say, *Maud* in its last and best form. But *Maud* wants unity; and that is a serious want. The same thing may be said of the *Idylls of the King* considered as a whole—although these poems made Tennyson “popular.” But in any of these greater compositions there are lines that must live as long as literature lives. I should think it better to take this position;—all Tennyson’s poems are precious, with few exceptions; but *The Princess* is his most perfect work and the most perfect expression of the romantic movement.

It only now remains to mention his dramatic works; and you know that so well that it will be unnecessary to say much on the subject. There is beauty all through it; but it has the defect inherent to all drama produced in English since the 18th century—or nearly all,—that it cannot be acted. Some of the shorter work has been acted; but it is not work which ever can succeed to more than a small circle. Tennyson’s drama, like Swinburne’s, must be considered as grand literary work—not work for the stage. I imagine *Harold*¹ to be the best of the dramas, because of the very remarkable characterization of

¹ *Harold: a drama* 1877 [1876].

William the Conqueror. But some persons prefer *Queen Mary*;¹ and it is a fact that *Queen Mary* contains a greater number of successfully managed characters. However, I may add that the exact place of Tennyson in literary drama has not yet been determined; because the dazzle of his other work has attracted the critical attention away from it. In the meantime, if you wish to read his plays, I shall recommend *Harold* especially, for you could scarcely find interest in the politico-religious historical part of *Queen Mary*.

As when the sun shines the stars remain invisible, so, while Tennyson lived, the work of his brothers was scarcely noticed. It is being noticed a good deal now; and perhaps this is the best place for a very brief mention of it—because neither of the brothers is great enough as a producer to justify separate treatment. The two older brothers of Tennyson were respectively named Frederick² and Charles³ — the latter, later in life, took another additional name, so that you will find him mentioned as Tennyson Turner. The great poet of London life, Frederick Locker, did, you know, the same thing—taking another name on the occasion of a second marriage when he became “Locker-Lampson.” It is only necessary to say of Tennyson’s brothers that both were by nature exquisite poets, inheriting the same faculty as Tennyson only in a slightly less degree—but never devoting themselves seriously to poetry as a profession. If they could have determined to be only poets, they would probably have come very near to the high place won by their younger brother. But, as a matter of fact, they wrote poetry only at occasional moments—producing so little that the work of the two would occupy only a small volume. It is, however, work of such delicacy and beauty that some of it is nearly certain to last for a long time. Here we cannot consider it in detail, and must turn our attention to the second of the great poets of the Victorian Age.

¹ *Queen : a Mary drama* 1875.

² Frederick Tennyson (1807-1898).

³ Charles Tennyson Turner (1808-1879).

BROWNING

Robert Browning can rank only after Tennyson, though possessing gifts greater than any possessed by Tennyson. He was born in 1812, and like Tennyson lived a long time, dying only in 1889. Much of his life was passed in Italy. He was always of independent means—rich enough to live where he pleased, and to do very much as he pleased. He was sent to school when very young by his father, who had been employed in the banking business in London; but after that time Browning had no regular education. His father himself taught him, taught him Greek, Latin, a good deal about modern languages, a great deal about art, music, pictures and laws of æsthetic taste. Happy is the man who has so cultivated a father for teacher and trainer; yet in one way the result may be a little unfortunate. Tennyson's perfection of work was chiefly due to the very severe literary training which he underwent at Cambridge University. Browning was never put under such discipline. He was loved and petted, and had courage to follow his own way to develop his individuality to the utmost possible extent. And it is scarcely possible to doubt that this is partly the reason why he wrote so obscurely at times, and needlessly broke almost all the rules of classical composition—not only of classical composition, but of syntax, but of grammar, but of taste. He had very much greater natural powers than Tennyson; but he never would have dreamed of working as Tennyson worked, of submitting to law as Tennyson submitted. There is a saying that a man best able to command is the man best able to obey; and this was certainly true of Tennyson. But in spite of the faults of Browning one is obliged to doubt whether it would have been good for him and for English literature to have worked like Tennyson. If he had been able or willing to maintain the same perfection of form, he would probably have been less strong in his extraordinary power of dramatic presentation. It was not that Browning could not equal Tennyson. His lyrics prove that he could equal Tennyson whenever

he pleased; but he very seldom "pleased." I could quote to you lyrics of Browning not only as fine as anything of Tennyson, but finer. Still it was only at rare moments that he condescended to care for form. As a general rule Browning considered the question of form as altogether subordinate to the question of feeling, and substance of expression.

So much for the artistic side of the two, comparatively criticized. Now about Browning's method. It was a most extraordinary and novel method — almost purely subjective, — almost entirely psychological. One single method is to be found all through the work of Browning—not two or three; only one. Yet the variety of the work, as to subject, is far beyond the variety of Tennyson; and even the variety of forms of verse is greater. What then is this extraordinary system which unites the whole of Browning's work — orbs it within the circle of a single artistic conception?

It is this: — Browning expressed everything, described everything, felt everything "from the inside." He was supremely subjective. He was also supremely psychological. Everything that he relates is related as if another person were speaking, and speaking always in the first person — "I." So that every one of his poems is a monologue, a monodrama. For example Browning wishes us to understand an Italian story about a wicked man who killed his wife simply because she was good—because she did not know how to be wicked enough to please him. How does he tell this horrible story? By making the murderer speak to us,—by making him exactly express to us the state of his own wicked mind so that we can perfectly understand him. Or Browning wishes that we should understand the feeling of a fanatic who delights to see a man of another creed being burnt alive before his eyes. He makes the fanatic talk to us, tell us all his heart. So again he makes hundreds of people talk to us—Greeks dead for 2,500 years; Romans of the Empire; Arabs from the desert; English country gentlemen who died fighting for their King; grim Puritans who slew them; rough scoundrels who become suddenly converted to religion; men of the world who pride themselves upon their

skill in mastering women; women who poisoned their rivals in the time of the French Regency; patriots and heroes of many countries—Italian, French, English; Russian peasants who take the law into their own hands and kill for a moral purpose;—these are only a few of the people that Browning makes talk to us. And there is no sameness in all this work. These hundreds of souls each and all have distinct life, intense personality, vivid actuality. What astonishing power is this? It is the very same faculty as Shakespeare's—the dramatic faculty in its very highest, though not in its most vividly comprehensive form. In the creation of individual personages, Browning is like Shakespeare. But he has not Shakespeare's faculty of making these personages play tragedy or comedy in combination. He takes them singly—makes them each perfect—one by one. But he does not make them talk to each other. They talk only by themselves; and they speak directly to us “I—I—I.” It is always “I.” Yet though Browning be so far short of Shakespeare, how wonderful is the thing which he does! It is as if we were walking with a magician, through all the cemeteries of Europe—and that this magician were to strike grave after grave with his wand, calling up the ghosts of the dead to talk to us. And they talk so much as if they were really alive, that we forget they are ghosts.

So we may say that the whole of Browning's work consists of “soul-pictures” as they have been called. And remember that all his work (excluding regular drama) is monologue. You know that the word dialogue means the speaking together of *two* persons. The word monologue means the speaking of *one* person only. This is the general rule; and although there are some exceptions, this is important to remember when you are asked to characterize Browning.

Perhaps the most extraordinary example of monologue is furnished by the enormous poem of *The Ring and the Book*,¹ which contains more than 20,000 lines. As this vast composition gives us the psychological portraits of a great many characters,—as it is, in short, a great drama,—you might be in-

¹ *The ring and the book*, 4 vols. 1868-9.

clined to question whether it does not form an exception. But, if you examine it closely, you will find that it is only a series of monologues attached together, so as to form one perfect whole. It is, indeed, a drama; but a drama composed in an entirely different way from what is usually called drama. The characters never speak to each other;—they speak only to us—one at a time. And this method is so unique, so extraordinary, and so effective that I wonder why other writers have not since attempted it to any extent. Perhaps only a very great poet would dare to attempt it in England. But I see no possible reason why it should not be attempted in Japan;—I see no reason why some gifted student of the present generation should not attempt to make a book in the same way. The book need not be in verse at all. The very same thing might be done in prose. Only, the person who does it must have a great knowledge of human nature. Now let me tell you how the book is made.

Browning picked up in Italy, at a second-hand bookshop, a little volume containing the history of a terrible murder which had occurred some hundred years before,—with all the facts of the trial of the murderer, his condemnation, and the arguments of the lawyers on both sides. Remember the book was very small—only a mass of dry reports—the history of a law case likely to interest lawyers chiefly. But as Browning read the story, the life of the old dead century revived for him. In a moment he understood the whole history of the case. Here is the case in brief. A wicked nobleman, in want of money, marries a girl of people, in the belief that she is rich, and that he can get her wealth from her. But he soon finds that he has been deceived. She is not rich; she is only the adopted child of rather poor people; she has nothing but her beauty and her virtue. For her beauty he cares nothing, being too old to feel that kind of attraction; and as for her virtue, that is something which he can only detest. Being a thoroughly wicked man, only a thoroughly wicked woman could suit. And she has no money. So he must get rid of her. He might poison her or stab her, or hire a man to stab her or poison her. But that

might cause troublesome enquiries by the police; and he must have at least a good excuse for killing her. He must be able first to make her do something wrong. If he can do that, public opinion will support him, should he kill her. But her extraordinary innocence, her childish virtue are in the way—insuperable obstacles. He tries to corrupt her mind, and can not. Then he tries by extraordinary cruelty to make her run away from him—that would give him an excuse to follow her and kill her under particular circumstances. Her life becomes so hideous, so unendurable, that she has to beg assistance from the church. She first goes to a bishop: he is afraid of the aristocratic family, and will not help her. Then she seeks the help of a good priest—a young and brave man—who is afraid only of doing wrong. He helps her, takes her away from the horrible house, to restore her to her foster-parents. Now comes the opportunity for the wicked husband to kill the woman. Has he not seen her run away with a priest? He follows the pair with his armed retainers, overtakes them,—but this time his plan failed. The young priest is not a coward; but a strong man, skilful with the sword, and it would not be safe to attack him without caution. So all the husband can do is to create a scandal—to bring a charge against his wife and the priest of adultery, and to hand over the two into the charge of the law. The law is partly religious, however; the charge might affect the honour of the church. To prove the woman an adulteress might not have been so difficult, were it not that this proof would involve the proof of adultery on the part of the priest. The church people very carefully examined the evidence, and they cannot find any truth in it. But the priest is punished by banishment,—simply because he created a scandal. And the woman is restored to her parents. In her parents' house, her child is born. When the husband hears that he has a son, he determines to kill her at all hazards. For, now, since a son has been born, the property must pass by law to that son, and he cannot then hope to break his connection with the detested family. In the night he goes to the house with a crowd of ruffians, kills the old mother, the father, everybody in his way, and stabs his

wife through and through, till all her body is but one wound. But, strange to say, he does not kill her, though he thinks he has killed her. The young life is very strong. She lives for three days more, just long enough to tell the truth. The murderer is then arrested, tried, and condemned to death.

Then all the social powers moved their machinery in order to save the life of the wretch. The powerful nobles, the high magistrates, the princes of the church — all these are on his side. No doubt he is a wicked rascal, they said;—but then, think of his family, the disgrace to the nobility. The case is appealed and appealed. At last it is appealed to the Pope himself. Now the Pope happens to be a good Pope—a sincere, keen, wise old man, who, on examining the evidence, understands it better than the lawyers, better than the victim, better than the murderer himself. For the occupation of that old man, through many scores of years, has been only to study human hearts and human minds;—to comprehend human souls. The courts might be bought; the judges might be terrorized; society might be duped in favour of that wicked man. But the Pope is not to be bribed or terrorized or duped; and he immediately sends word that the man shall die. And he died, like a coward; and the story ends. Now let us see how Browning tells it.

He makes each of the personages, or, if you like, the ghost of each person, come back and tell their story in succession.

First the murdered wife speaks. Her monologue is entitled by her own name only—“Pompilia.” She relates the history of her childhood and married life—a history so horrible that it reads like a nightmare. We are filled with indignation and loathing by the history of the cruelties, the atrocity of moral torture inflicted upon her. She is telling her tale to us as she would to a judge. And nevertheless — how sweet the woman is! Even in this frightful story, she never speaks unkindly of her husband: she has tried in all things to be a good wife to him, even when he did all that he could do to torture her body and to terrify her mind. But she would not commit sin for him. If he wanted her to commit a sin, it must have been because he had not yet learned to be a good Christian.

Now comes the priest's turn—the brave young priest, who ran away with her to save her from worse than death. Frankly and boldly he tells the whole truth. But we feel that he does not make a good impression upon the audience. He is very handsome, very young, evidently a man of powerful passion;—and it seems quite possible that the beautiful young wife might have loved him. It is just possible. We find that her evidence seems less touching now than at first. Yes, either she must be a supremely cunning woman, or a woman as simple as a child. Did she tell the truth? That is what people are now beginning to ask.

Guido Franceschini, the husband, the Count, the murderer, now appears. An old man, hideous, venomous looking, with evil eyes and a wicked mouth. We know this, because he describes himself. But when that wicked mouth opens, it seems to tell a very straightforward story. “Why,” he says, “look at me!—do you think that a young woman could love me in a romantic way? No! but look at that handsome priest there—that is the kind of man women fall in love with.” Then he tells us why he married, how kind and good he tried to be to his wife,—and how she mocked him, because he was old and grey,—and how she maligned him,—and how she wrote love letters to other men (he produces the love letters in the court room)—and how, finally, she ran away with the priest. “Now,” he says, “I know I may have shown too much anger; but think, how a man of my name and rank, must have felt at such an outrage!” Guido's story is good, though his face is bad. People probably begin to think that the young wife was lying.

The next book is entitled “Half-Rome.” It is a monologue spoken by one person, expressing one side of public opinion about the case. The man talks like a town-gossip, who knows a great many things. He tells us the real history of Pompilia's childhood, without sympathy. A pretty girl, married for money to a bad old man—how could she be happy with him? No doubt the old man was mean to her. But as for writing those love letters—Pompilia never knew how to write. Very pos-

sibly the letters were forged. The priest — well, could you blame a priest for liking such a pretty woman as that?

Now “The Other Half-Rome” speaks. The other half of Rome is on the side of the husband. What a disgraceful attempt upon the honour of a noble house! Yes, that woman has the face of a child; but she has the cunning of ten devils. All that she said was a carefully studied lie. All the priest said was a lie. If the count had killed them both, he would have been quite right. They married the girl to him, these vulgar people, in order to get money out of him. O! all those people were very bad.

Now comes the lawyer for the prosecution. He gives us all the facts in the case; and argues about them most learnedly, half in Latin, half in Italian, until we are tired of listening to him. Nevertheless he makes us understand that the count was a very badly treated man. Chiefly, however, we know that he is arguing in the hope of obtaining promotion for himself, and does not care a bit on which side the truth may happen to be.

Then we have the speech of the lawyer on the other side — he is supposed to defend Pompilia. But really he defends her so badly, that we feel as if he thought it a hopeless case. He is afraid. He dare not offend the great aristocracy, the princes of the church, by arguing too strongly against them. Moreover, he is thinking of promotion — wants to show how worthy of it he can be. To use an American phrase, “we may suspect him of having sold the case.”

So much for the first part of the tragedy. Now for the second part, — after the killing of Pompilia the case comes before the Pope. This chapter is simply entitled “The Pope.” It is one of the most beautiful in the book — probably the most beautiful; for it shows the highest beauty and strength of character. The Pope tells of the world of Rome as he sees it, the hundred thousands of intrigues going on about him, his perfect knowledge of every attempt made to deceive him, his facile penetration into the cowardly mind of the bishop that was afraid to help Pompilia, and he tells us also of his honest admiration and love of the young priest who did try to help her.

Also he tells us in a certain way the whole signification of the book. What is the signification of the book? Simply this,—that nothing is so difficult in this world as to proclaim the truth for the obtaining of justice. Only by the merest chance has it happened that the scoundrel Guido has been condemned and the memory of Pompilia purified from all blame. The chances were all against virtue, against truth, against justice;—the whole world actually appeared to be combined against that poor brave innocent woman.

The next book, I think, gives the dying confession of the murdered Pompilia. Even dying, she prays for that wicked husband.

The last book gives us the secret thought of that wicked Guido before his execution. He is in prison, and men are sitting there with him, to whom he pours out the horror of his soul. For the first time, he tells us all he thinks, and all he feels; and we know, as we never knew before, how profoundly wicked a wicked man can be. This is the evil spirit of the Renaissance that speaks to us, the spirit of the Borgias,—the spirit of the Italian despot and tyrant. Now he abuses his wife to us. And why? Because she was innocent—which he hates; because she was pure—and he despises purity; because she was unwilling to commit a sin for him—and he wanted a woman like Lucrezia Borgia. He tells us frankly, that he thinks that a good wife ought to help her husband to deceive, to murder, to gratify lust, to do anything that he may command. But as the moment of execution comes this would-be Borgia becomes what the real Borgia never were,—afraid; he trembles, he screams—last of all, involuntarily he calls out the name of his wife, asks her to help him! The real villainy of the man is not of the grand kind—not the rascality of the tigerish or leopardish kind. It is utterly base.

So is composed this great poem. It is not until we have read all the monologues that we fully understand the case. Is not this exactly true to life? We can only know the whole truth about any event by listening to all evidence, by hearing every side, and we must never trust evidence simply because

of the emotional effect that it produces. Only the wisest man can know the truth. But perhaps you will ask in what way is this method superior to the ordinary dramatic method.

It is not intrinsically superior, of course. The dramatic form must be considered the highest form of literary art in a general way. But there are particular ways and conditions in which better effects can be obtained by the use of another form. The dramatic monologue may have an adventitious value beyond the true dramatic form under particular circumstances. I want you to understand clearly the meaning of the word "adventitious" in this connection—it has the sense of "occasional" and also the sense of "accidental." In landscapes, in scenery, there is often what we call "adventitious beauty." For example, a certain mountain, and a certain village, on the slope of the mountain, may appear very beautiful at a certain season of the year, when the weather happens to be particularly bright, or when morning mists happen to take a particular colour in the light of the sun. The beauty we then see is not a mere beauty of form or line or colour; it is a combination made up of light, vapour, colour, form, and a great many other things;—it is a chance beauty, and *adventitious* beauty. So we may say that the dramatic monologue may occasionally have an adventitious value beyond that of the true dramatic form which is nevertheless superior to it. Why? *Because the dramatic monologue can sometimes be made more suggestive.* In the true drama you must finish the action: the whole thought must be expressed; the whole incident must be completed. It is quite otherwise with the monologue. In that you have only one person speaking his thought and expressing his feeling; and no matter how sincerely both be expressed, they leave room for much thinking by the listener. It is just as when a living man gives us his account of something felt and seen. Then we say, "Yes, he believes that the thing happened this way; and he feels very angry about it. But he may be mistaken. Perhaps he does not know all the facts; perhaps there were extenuating circumstances; perhaps he is wrong to be angry. However, we must ask somebody else." A dramatic mono-

logue makes you think in this way. But a real drama can very seldom do so, because the whole story is told, and there is nothing left to imagine after the telling is done. I know that there are a few astounding dramas of which this cannot be said — some of Shakespeare's, for example. After having read *Othello* you feel in regard to the worst character in it, that of Iago, just as if he had been presented to you only in a dramatic monologue. *His* story is not all told;—the mystery of his atrocious wickedness always remains. But, as a general rule, drama tells everything; and dramatic monologue tells only one side of the many sides of a fact. There lies its adventitious value.

Well, as I have said, most of Browning's work is in this form; and he produced effects with it, and taught lessons with it, such as had never been produced or taught before except by Shakespeare. He was a great teacher and a great innovator as well as a great poet. To the student, his worth ought to lie chiefly in the suggestion of method. Or often he was very, very careless about his language, which has been compared, not inaptly, to the language of the telegraph, and to the hurried compression of shorthand reporting. And this was not because he could not do better: it was because he would not. When he wanted to be fine like Tennyson, he could be and was; but if he had been asked to give an honest opinion about Tennyson's method of revision, I think he would have said that the Poet Laureate was wasting valuable time. And the older he grew the more careless he grew. It is rather in his earlier work than in his later work that he is great both as a musician and as a charming colourist. By his short pieces, he is much more likely to live than by his long compositions—though his method, as exemplified even in the long compositions, will never die: the influence will continue. But the short pieces are, after all, the most wonderful, especially those which have the lyric quality. I may therefore say that you will find the very best of Browning's in such volumes as the *Dramatic Lyrics*,¹ *Bells and Pomegranates*,² *Men and Women*,³ *Dramatis*

¹ 1842.² 8 nos. 1841-6.³ 2 vols. 1855.

Personæ.¹ In those collections there are things so supremely beautiful, and so original, that it is difficult to praise them enough. There was a good deal of passion, robust, healthy passion—as well as thinking, in Browning; and you will find the best examples of his sensuous charm as well as of his ethical suggestiveness in the volumes which I have named. But to name particular poems were almost a waste of time—the variety is so astonishing and so rich. However, for an example of the sensuous element, combined with the tragical, there is nothing among the briefer poems of English literature to equal *In a Gondola*;² and as for the graver side of the poet's power, the splendid metaphysical fervour of *Abt Vogler*³ is not only unmatched in English literature but in any European literature whatever. Yet remember that these two extremely opposite phases of expression are but two out of hundreds. Like Shakespeare, Browning touched almost every aspect of human nature, both good and bad, happy or wretched. And, unlike the greater number of deeply thinking poets, Browning himself was very much of an optimist. Even after telling you the most frightful story of wickedness, he will add a reflection or two that comes like a sudden consolation, to restore our faith in the goodness of mankind.

TWO NEW SCHOOLS: SPASMODIC AND PRE-RAPHAELITE

Browning did not found a school in the proper sense of the word. But he expressed a particular faith of the romantic movement which is worth considering, and which has numerous adherents. It was thought or felt that Tennyson was a little too reserved, too cautious, too strict, too conventional. Tennyson had brought romantic poetry to the highest possible perfection in regard to form and music. But poetry required more freedom, it was thought, in regard to emotion, passion, free-thinking. Browning was the astonishing proof of what

¹ 1864.

² 1842.

³ 1864.

could be done in a psychological direction with romantic poetry. A number of lesser poets also attempted monologue work, and tried to put into their compositions the originality and the passion which seemed to be wanting in Tennyson. Two new schools sprang up. One of these was called the Spasmodic School. The other was called the Pre-Raphaelite School. This is not the place to tell you much about them: I shall do that later on.¹ Enough to say that the Spasmodic School consisted chiefly of men who attempted originality in the same direction as Browning, but chiefly through violent appeals to sentiment, to pathos, and to passion. They could not exactly be called imitators of Browning; for they could not imitate what was best in him;—and they produced no single first-class poet. This school died young, and accomplished almost nothing in the way of change. But the Pre-Raphaelite School, which produced some poetry quite as good as the best of Tennyson, and quite as original as the best of Browning, did not die young; and it accomplished something that never had been accomplished before.

I must say a word to you about the names given to these two schools; it is very necessary that you should understand them. The name "Spasmodic" is a name given in mockery, of course; you know that the word "spasm" means a nervous climax of any kind; but especially a climax of pain, a hysteric or violent nervous condition. The poets called Spasmodic were especially writers of extravagantly emotional poetry: their name is a satire. But you must not suppose that they did no good work. Some of them did beautiful work — though not of the first class. The name of the other school is an artistic name; and a very good one. It means "The Persons of the Time before the Painter Raphael." It is a name that refers therefore more to painting than to literature, and what is known as the Pre-Raphaelite movement in English art was altogether a movement of artists as distinguished from men of letters. But some of these artists were men of letters: two of them were very great men of letters; and they wrote poetry into which they put exactly the same pictorial qualities as they

¹ See *On Poets*, ch. xiii "The Victorian Spasmodics."

put into their pictures. Hence the name, as applied to the school of poets which formed about them. But what were the qualities? Unless I were able to show you in this class-room several hundred pictures representing different periods of artistic development and feeling, I could not perfectly explain what Pre-Raphaelite means. I can only suggest it to you. The great painter Raphael Sanzio represented in his time a new tendency in art—a Renaissance development of the *Ideal*. He made his figures and forms a little more beautiful than nature; he idealized a great deal; and even in his religious paintings the supreme characteristic is beauty rather than religious feeling, or feeling of any kind. But during the Italian middle ages, before Raphael, there were very wonderful painters who idealized very little—who rather belong to the school of Realism than to that of Idealism—who knew nothing or cared nothing for classical convention, and attempted only to picture beauty as they saw it, in connection with religious or other sentiment. There was a simple truth and charm about their work of quite a particular kind; I might say the simplicity of the middle ages blended with the tender side of the religion of the middle ages. For a long time these older painters had been forgotten or ignored. But in the Victorian period various English artists, and men like Ruskin, the great critic, suddenly perceived the strange beauty of this older work; and began to imitate it in their paintings, and to advocate the study of it. Next, the romantics of literature began to take it up. It suggested to them the possibility of a new subject for poetry. The great Tennyson had written about the middle ages without having really studied the middle ages. The writers of historical romance had not really studied the middle ages. There was a great virgin field there, still to be cultivated. What wonderful romance there was in the religious superstitions of the middle ages, the emotionalism, the chivalry, the tragic, and the ideal facts, of mediæval life. At that time, even in England the study of Old and of Middle English was only beginning. Whole branches of philology whose best results are to-day within the reach of every Japanese student in the shape of Skeat's diction-

ary, for example, had been utterly neglected. Then literature as well as art suddenly turned itself, with extraordinary fervour, to the study of mediæval things; and the work of the painters, and the work of the poet, in this new old direction, got the name of Pre-Raphaelite, which it still keeps. To sum up, the word Pre-Raphaelite is almost, though not exactly, synonymous with mediæval.

ROSSETTI

The greatest of the Pre-Raphaelite poets next demands our attention here—I mean Rossetti.¹ His name was Charles Gabriel Dante Rossetti; but for literary reasons he changed the order of the names and signed himself Dante Gabriel Rossetti, by which name he is still known. He was called Dante in honour of the great Italian poet; his father having been a passionate admirer and a student of Dante. That father was a distinguished Italian refugee. Driven from Italy, because of his sincere patriotism, he found a refuge and a welcome in England: and being a very learned man, he easily obtained a professorship of Italian in London. He married in England, but married a girl with Italian blood in her veins. Of this marriage were born four children—two boys and two girls—all of whom were artists and poets. The boys were William and Gabriel Rossetti (William is still alive, and has just completed a new edition of his brother's works.) The two girls were Christina and Maria Francesca. I think you have probably seen the excellent little book by Maria Francesca called *The Shadow of Dante*.² As for Christina, she is now acknowledged to have been the greatest English female poet in the 19th century, greater than Mrs. Browning, greater than George Eliot, greater in fact than any woman of the time in the art of her perfection. Now this is a remarkable family history. But it is also remarkable that one of the greatest of the English

¹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882).

² 1871.

Victorian poets was not an Englishman, any more than his sister, the greatest female poet of the Victorian period, was an English woman. And, indeed, through all the work of these wonderful two there is a particular quality—a something indescribably delicate, graceful and caressing in its charm, which one feels is not English, and could not be English. It is the charm of an older and a finer race—a something inherited from a much ancient civilization.

Dante Rossetti was born in 1828, in London, and had some education at one of the great public schools there; but he left school while still a boy to study painting, and had no university training, indeed, no literary training of any kind. He had what was better, inherited genius—a doubtful genius that branched off in two different directions. As a boy he was writing poetry; but he never thought himself intended to be a poet until already he had become one, almost unconsciously. As a painter he met with an easy success, in spite of bitter opposition: he became the acknowledged chief of the Pre-Raphaelite School of art. Then came the romance of his life, very strange and very sad. Among the girls who sat for him as models, was a young girl called Elizabeth Siddall, who was very beautiful. He became interested in her, not only because of her beauty, but because of her love of poetry and painting. She had great natural talent; and one of the first persons to notice her talent was John Ruskin, who treated her very generously, helping her with considerable sum of money. She was a young person of good family, not at all of the common class. Rossetti fell in love with her; and married her. It was while they were married that he made a little book of poems to please her. She died within a little more than a year after the marriage (poisoned herself, by accident, it was said) and the book had not yet been offered to a publisher. Rossetti said that as it had been written for her sake it should be buried with her. So it was put into her coffin. But within ten years after Rossetti began to regret having buried the poems. He had seen other men become famous by doing much inferior work. He wanted to get the poems back again. But, in order to do this, a great many legal

formalities had to be gone through; and probably, if he had not had influential friends he could not have recovered his book so easily. It is said that, when the coffin was opened, the dead woman appeared almost as fair as during life;—the book was lying on her breast, covered by her long golden hair; and the MS. had been but little damaged by its long interment. The poems were immediately prepared for the press; they appeared in 1870, under the title of *Ballads and Poems*,¹ — and the success was immediate and very great. Rossetti did not have to wait for public approval like Tennyson: he conquered the approval at once; but, then, you must remember that he did not give immature work to the publisher. He had waited many years, and had finished poems just as carefully as he finished his pictures before putting them upon exhibition. There were, however, some mean criticisms—the outcome of private jealousy. The meanest was from the pen of Robert Buchanan,² published anonymously and entitled *The Fleshly School of Poetry*.³ The criticism was intended to hurt, to give pain; and as Rossetti happened to be superatively sensitive, he was very much hurt, and thought himself obliged to suppress one of the poems criticized in future edition of his work. The poem especially attacked was called *The Nuptial Sleep*,⁴ a very delicate subject and difficult to touch without morally offending. But Rossetti touched it so beautifully, that it might very well have been left alone; and there is no doubt that in future time it will reappear in the English edition of the sonnets, just as it now reappeared in the American. Rossetti's answer to the critics was dignified, but strangely gentle. However, he had a powerful helper in the person of Mr. Swinburne, who had also been attacked, and who withered the attacking party in a pamphlet of extraordinary invective power. As for Buchanan, it may be said that his literary reputation never recovered from the consequence of his foolish outbreak of jealousy. He died without producing anything noteworthy, except *The Ballad of*

¹ *Poems* 1870. New [3rd] edn [with alterations and substitutions, 1881].

² Robert Williams Buchanan (1841-1901).

³ *The fleshly school of poetry and other phenomena of the day* 1872. [Originally ptd in *The Contemporary Review*, Oct. 1871.]

⁴ Composed 1869; published 1870.

Judas Iscariot,¹ which I read to you last year.² But the fame of Rossetti is now not less secure than that of Tennyson.

His own death in 1882 was probably the result of mental rather than physical sickness—the reaction of the mind upon the body. He had never really recovered from the shock of his wife's death, and he had got into the bad habit of taking a powerful and dangerous medicine in order to get sleep when grief made him sleepless. The habit grew, and destroyed him. But he had already done his best work both in poetry and painting—work that will endure. His paintings are now of very great value; and his poems have become a part of the inner treasure-house of English literature. Both as a poet and as a painter, he was what is called “a great lover.” Love, and the love of one woman, inspired and coloured all his work. The same fair person who figures in the poems of *The Blessed Damozel*,³ *The Staff and Scrip*,⁴ *The Portrait*⁵ and the wonderful *House of Life*,⁶ figures also in his painting of mediæval heroines and the saints and angels and virgins. She was Beatrice in his pictures of Dante; she was the Blessed Damozel in the celebrated picture of that name; and her portrait is recognizable in hundred pictures and sketches which the artist left behind him. That is the romance of Rossetti—at once strange and sad.

There is not much to say otherwise about his life; but there is much to say about his character, his temperament. It was Italian, and therefore even for that reason only different from anything English and more sensitive, more refined than anything English; but it was more than Italian. It was absolutely mediæval. It has been said that Rossetti had no more relation to the 19th century than if he had been a spirit returned from the 12th century, or a man of the 12th century re-born into the 19th century and able to remember his former birth. I do not mean that he was simply religious, in spite of his Roman Catholic ancestry and blood-sympathies; he prob-

¹ 1869.

² See *On Poetry*, ch. xxxiii “A Note on Robert Buchanan.”

³ Ptd in *The Germ: Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art*, No. 2, Feb, 1850.

⁴ In *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, No. 12, 1856.

⁵ 1870.

⁶ In *Poems*, 1870, and *Poems and Sonnets*, 1881.

ably believed in no religion at all. His art left him indifferent to the subject—even when he was painting the Virgin. But he was mediæval otherwise—especially in his total indifference to modern science, modern philosophy, modern social and political questions. He detested all such matters. The roaring world of London in which he lived never really existed for him. There is a beautiful old Spanish song with a burden :—

My body's in Segovia;
My soul is in Madrid!

It might be said in the same way of Rossetti, that his body was in London, and in the 19th century, but his soul was always somewhere in the 12th, 13th, or 14th century — now in Palestine, now in the chambers of some old French castle, now in the Florence of Dante's day, now in some Border keep in the far North of the 16th century in England. He knew and felt the past so exactly and so vividly, that he gives you the shock and the surprised delight of actually seeing and feeling it yourself. He does this quite as well in his poems as in his pictures—perhaps the poems are even more of pictures than the paintings are. There is nothing artificial about his mediævalism: it is real mediævalism; and he left nothing more for any other poet to do in the same direction when he had finished with it. Even when he touched a mediæval poem, translated it, it took a life, which it did not have before. You know that the history of French poetry properly begins with Villon—that reckless student-poet, who is still loved in spite of his faults after all these hundred years. Some day I want to read to you the quaint French of Villon's *Ballad of Dead Ladies*,¹ and then read to you Rossetti's English rendering of it, in order that you may feel for yourselves how much better Rossetti's English translation is. Swinburne, matchless artist though he be, when translating the best poems of Villon, left that ballad alone — observing that after Rossetti's translation, no mortal man need ever hope to do better. And this was a simple truth.

Having thus spoken of Rossetti's life and temperament, you

¹ 1869.

might expect to hear that there is a great deal of sameness in his work. But that would be quite a mistake. There was a wonderful variety of a particular kind in Rossetti, notwithstanding his mediævalism. He could write modern psychological poem quite as well as Browning when he tried to—witness the singular monologue of *Jenny*. He could write a meditative poem upon an experience of London life as well as Tennyson—observe the poem upon *The Assyrian Bull in the British Museum*. Then his ballads, his sonnets for pictures, his romances,—fragmentary or otherwise—represent a range of subjects remarkably great. And when I say that he was the greatest of all English sonnet writers since Shakespeare, you will understand better his real importance as a poet; for the sonnet is the most difficult of all the forms of short poetry.

A glance at the subjects of his poems is necessary;—for the student should be able to answer readily such a simple question as, “What did Rossetti write about?” You may say in a general way that his subjects were Love and Mediæval Romance; and that in either direction he was primarily the most artistic of love poets. The great collection of sonnets, entitled *The House of Life*, treats of Love, Birth, and Death,—all in relation to one intense personal emotion. But even here the feeling is not modern,—it is old Italian. The sonnets for pictures—exquisite compositions written as inscriptions to be engraved under pictures—are in themselves perfect paintings, truly pictures in words. But the subjects are not of to-day—they are shadows of vanished centuries. The longer poems are all mediæval. *The Bride’s Prelude* is mediæval French: *Rose Mary* is mediæval English; so is *Stratton Water*; so is the terrible ballad of *Sister Helen*; so is *The White Ship*. In regard to such ballads as *Eden Bower* and *Troy Town* you might say that the subject of the first is an old Hebrew or Talmudic legend, and that of the second, Greek. That is true; but in both cases the subject is treated according to the method and the feeling of mediæval writers;—both are excellent imitations of mediæval feeling. There are only two or three poems in the collected works which really touch modern life at all, and

they do so in a strange far-off way—as if to this singular mind the present reality had all been a dream, all the dead past the only actual existence.

What is Rossetti's place in literature?—Is he inferior to Tennyson? No: he is even superior to Tennyson in several directions. We cannot put him behind Tennyson under any circumstance. As I have told you, Tennyson was a great poetical force of the century,—the man who influenced English feeling, and changed the English language more than anybody else. But after all we cannot call him superior to Rossetti as a workman, nor equal to him in certain directions of emotional expression. Yet everybody knows something about Tennyson; and only a class really appreciates Rossetti. But there are excellent reasons for this. Remember that Tennyson, with all his scholarship, was really a simple-minded man, something like Wordsworth, who worked in one direction prodigiously, and never tried to get away from his own time. He reflected the best of his age—the *English* of it. He wrote about things which everybody could understand. Everybody can understand the *Idylls of the King*. Everybody can understand poems like *Enoch Arden*, *The Princess*, or *Maud*. So Tennyson could become as popular as he really deserved to become. With Rossetti the case was entirely different. He never wanted to be popular;—he never even thought of poetry as a profession; for his profession was painting;—and he cared only to be understood by the select circle of painters and men of letters. He wrote for them. Probably he will become more popular every year for many years to come, but never popular like Tennyson. His subjects were not comprehensible to the uncultivated class of readers. It required very considerable culture—including some knowledge of old French and old Italian literatures—to appreciate Rossetti. He was too fine and too far away to be a literary force in the popular sense. Great his influence upon literature will be; but it will affect chiefly the higher forms of complex expression, not the bulk of the English language, not the speech of everyday; and it will be slow. Or if you ask me to speak more plainly, I would say that it is rather the artist

and the emotional poet who will go to Rossetti for inspiration, and not the ordinary reader. But everybody goes to Tennyson, with good reason, as a great authority on English expression. The specialism of Rossetti's work is the only cause of his occupying a minor place. He did some things that Tennyson could not possibly have done.

What were those things? The principal of them was the perfect development of mediæval feeling in the romantic movement. Tennyson's mediævalism was, after all, artificial: he did not understand, nor care about the middle ages; he made no particular study of them. But Rossetti and his circle left nothing for anybody else to do in the same direction. They revived the past so perfectly that no one will attempt, with any chance of success, to do anything in the same way. Also it may be said that Rossetti brought into English poetry a new emotional exquisiteness, a delicacy of feeling such as had never been expressed in English forms before. This was Italian and personal, it is true; but it gave much to think about, and thousands will study it with profit.

A critical edition of Rossetti may be expected before many years. He is a poet who will give very little trouble to those who undertake such an edition. For, with the exception of a few lighter poems, Rossetti did not revise his work after publication. He perfected it first to such an extent that it needed no after-retouching. But he did this because of being an artist by profession, careful never to consider anything finished until he had done his very best with it; and he was already past middle age when he put into print the compositions begun when a boy of nineteen.

For the experienced critic, who has given the better part of a lifetime to the study and discovery of literary beauty, a single reading of a poet may be sufficient for the perception of the best in the book. A single reading may also have a small value for some student of extraordinary genius. But I think there can be no question that, to the ordinary student, a single reading of a great poem means just the same thing as no reading at all. In fact it means worse than no reading; because

the student who thinks that he has read the poem after one perusal, will be a student so satisfied with his own judgment that he will never take the trouble to read the poem a second time. A perfect poem is something to be read fifty times, a hundred times; it cannot be read too often. Remember that the single volume into which the work of any great poet may be collected represents the best thinking and the best experience of one exceptionally gifted human life. You cannot learn much about the whole life of a great man by looking at a book for half an hour; — you must live with the book to get any benefit from it. Now these remarks are particularly applicable in the case of Rossetti. If you want to know what to read in Rossetti, I would say, “Take a few of the shorter poems, read them over a great many times, try if possible to translate one of them into your own language (you cannot do it: but it is worth trying to do), and if the charm of the work then really impresses you, attempt to study the whole of him. It is a work of years; but if you like him, you will not find the time wasted. As to the short poems, I recommend especially *The Staff and Scrip*, *Sister Helen*, *The White Ship*, *The Burden of Nineveh*.¹ But you can choose others for yourselves, if you do not like the subjects — remembering only that when you really learn the charm of a poet, the subject makes no difference. As for the longer poems, you might begin with the magical story of *Rose Mary*, and then try the marvellous fragment of *Bride’s Prelude*.

SWINBURNE

The last of the four great poets now demands attention; — Swinburne. Algernon Charles Swinburne² was the youngest of the group, and is now the only surviving member of it. He was born in London, in 1837, — the son of Admiral Swinburne of the English Navy, and is a descendant of nobles, being re-

¹ Printed in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, No. 8, 1856.

² (1837-1909).

lated to the family of the Earl of Ashburnham. He was educated at Eton and Oxford, but did not take his degree at Oxford—notwithstanding that he was certainly the best classical scholar of his class, and one of the finest Greek scholars, considering his age, that Oxford ever taught. His literary career began even during his student life; and there is not any occasion to dwell much upon it now. The time has not yet come for a good biography of Swinburne. We need now only to speak of the work and the man in the relation of both to literature.

In speaking of Rossetti I said that Rossetti appeared to his contemporaries much as might appear a man of the 14th century reborn into the 19th. Of Swinburne it has been said that the ghost of Shelley seems to have been reincarnated in him. And certainly there are some curious points of resemblance in the history of both men. Shelley, you remember, was a young nobleman by blood, filled with the spirit of revolt against the religious and social conventions of his time. Swinburne is the very same thing—a gifted and wealthy descendant of princes, yet filled with a spirit of revolt against conventions, intellectual and moral. However, there were differences. Shelley was a rebel both in act and thought—both as man and poet. Swinburne, as a member of society, behaved himself perfectly well: he did not get himself into trouble at school; he did not get expelled from Oxford; and he did not make anybody unhappy through a mistaken estimate of the value of the social laws. But in his poetry he has been even much more of a revolutionary than Shelley ever was—much more of a scorner of Christianity—much more of a rebel against modern idea of literary morality, which Shelley was not. Shelley was very chaste as a poet;—the ghostly beauty of his song has not one note of sensualism. Indeed the poetical chastity of Shelley was something unique—something that reminds us of the passionlessness attributed to disembodied spirits. But Swinburne sang the song of the senses as it never had been sung in English before, and very seldom, if at all, in French. In fact, after the work of Tennyson, of Browning and of Rossetti, the neo-romantics had

broken down every convention in the way of literary freedom except one. Swinburne determined to break down even that one; and he did it. It was the unwritten convention that certain matters concerning the sexual relation ought not to be uttered in English poetry. Swinburne simply asked, "And why?" — and he made the utterance. As he was then very young and very aggressive, he uttered a little too much for his own good and too much for an example. Nobody is likely to go quite so far as he went in this direction; and nobody could go any further — unless he ceased to be a great poet. That is why Swinburne is not now the poet laureate of Great Britain. That is why there are even foolish prejudices against him. And that is why some people who ought to know him well even try to degrade him to the standard of a second-class poet. They cannot do it: he stands easily first and he will always remain one of the glories of English literature in spite of the "sins of his youth."

It is necessary that I should tell you these things at the outset, lest others should tell you in a less generous way. At no time was Swinburne an inferior poet; it is true that he has done some things which were needlessly unconventional, and perhaps a little foolish. But on no account are we to despise him, or try to belittle the splendour of his work in view of such mistakes. If Swinburne is less important to Japanese students of English literature than Tennyson or Browning or Rossetti, it is not because he is an immoral poet at all, but simply because his work represents studies of form rather than studies of thought and feeling. That is all. To Japanese students the least important thing to study in an English poem is the form; and the most important thing to study is the thought and feeling. Although there are a few objectionable poems (and only a few) in the great mass of Swinburne's work, the majority of it would be just as important for you as the work of Tennyson, if it were an expression of thought and feeling rather than of perfect form. But, unfortunately it is not. Swinburne is the greatest poet of the Victorian era, the greatest poet in English literature, the greatest poet in all modern liter-

ature—whether French, English, German or Italian—in respect to form. I am not now expressing to you only my personal opinion:—I am expressing the opinion of the most competent critics of poetry. Since the time of the Greeks no such mastery of form has been shown by any poet in any language than by Swinburne. In this respect his genius is one of the greatest wonders in literature. But as I have said before, form is not the all-important thing for our study; and Swinburne's transcendent genius appears chiefly in that direction.

But in order to understand the measure of the spread of the wings of that genius—in order to estimate what the French would call the *envergure* of the man—it is necessary to give you some notion of the extent of his work. No poet of the Victorian era has written more (with the possible exception of one minor poet, Morris); and the bulk of this work comprised in poetry alone, not to speak of prose, the best drama of the 19th century, the most perfect imitation of Greek tragedy ever written, the most perfect lyrical poem, in point of form, ever produced in modern time. Surely that is something astonishing in itself. But the man is altogether astonishing. Swinburne can write poetry equally well in Modern English, or in Old English; in Modern French, or in Old French; in Latin, or in Greek. No other Englishman ever lived who was even remotely capable of this. Landor could indeed write admirable Latin poetry; and so could the wonderful Cambridge scholar Calverley. But that a man should be able to produce the most difficult verse equally well in a half dozen different languages is almost a miracle. Remember that this is a very different matter from what we call “knowing half a dozen languages.” There are many men who know half a dozen languages: some of your professors very probably know as many. But to compose poetry of the first class in any one language besides your own is a great feat. It is no feat for Swinburne. The greatest pleasure of his life has been to study poetical construction in all languages which have a representative literature; and I am underrating rather than overrating his abilities. I have not the slightest doubt that he is quite familiar with the different

forms of Japanese verse; and I have often said that, if any living foreigner could adapt Japanese form to English or French verse construction, that man would be Swinburne. In addition to the extraordinary power which I have indicated, you must remember that Swinburne is also a scholar in the scientific sense—a man who knows as much about old Greek life, old French life, old Roman life, as if he had actually lived in past ages. He has the archæological vision. And that is why a great deal of his work can really be appreciated by scholars only. I must frankly tell you that I am not competent to make a proper estimate of Swinburne for you, in a brief lecture. Only a first-class classical scholar—a great master of Latin and Greek—could properly do that. So Swinburne's position is rather an unfortunate one. His greatest merits can be understood only by scholars; while his faults, in a moral sense, can be understood by vulgar people. The vulgar reading-public is large; the class of real scholars is very small. Accordingly it is no wonder that the prejudice against him is still strong; for the masses can but half understand him.

What has he done for English poetry? He has done this,—he has taught a whole generation new and wonderful things in regard to poetical form; and his work will continue to teach many generations more. It is quite true that some of his poems have more sound than sense, as ungenerous critics have observed; but this does not mean that they are without any value. They were not written with an idea of telling a story, or expressing an emotion, but for the sake of teaching the possibility of new effects in rhythm and rhyme. And remember the criticism does not affect the great mass of his work, but only a part of it, which was merely experimental. Even Tennyson made experiments in the same way, as in the little fragment entitled *Catullian Hendecasyllables*. We do not ask a poet for sense when he makes experiments like these; and it ought not to be demanded of Swinburne simply because his experiment had been conducted upon a larger scale than Tennyson's.

In what is he above all other poets in respect to form? Not in rhyme; for we have had quite as clever rhyme-makers.

Not in colorific effects; for either Rossetti or Tennyson could produce pictorial miracles of equal brilliancy. Only in music, — in rhythm. Of course you know the difference between rhythm and rhyme; and that rhythm belongs to prose as well as to poetry. It signifies only the musical flow and cadence of words. It is the art of music applied to expression. Now in rhythm Swinburne is so supreme that even Tennyson falls far short of him. We have to go back to the poetry of the Greek to find rhythmic effects like Swinburne's; and if Swinburne does not always equal the Greeks, it is because he has to write in a much less perfect language in order to obtain audience. Very possibly he might have written in Greek, but who could then have read except a few professors of philology?

Now just for the reason Swinburne's superative excellence lies in rhythm, I do not think that you can hope to understand the best side of him. Even Englishmen not gifted with a truly musical ear were unable, in spite of learning, to appreciate some of the measures of Rossetti; how much less can the ordinary ear appreciate Swinburne? But still there are parts of Swinburne so delightfully musical that their melody cannot be altogether missed by you—though your own language possesses no possibilities of like rhythmical effects. Again there are beauties in Swinburne of exultant speech—utterances of the joy of life, the splendour of nature, the beauty of women, the sublimity of the sea, which you can very easily appreciate, and even learn to love. Things that he has written are learned by heart without effort, because they force themselves through ear and eye upon memory with a vividness and a force not belonging to any other poet. Such is the splendid chorus in *Atalanta in Calydon* beginning:—

When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
 The mother of months in meadow or plain
 Fills the shadows and windy places
 With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain.

Such also is the wonderful poem in hexameters beginning:—

Out of the golden remote wild west where
the sea without shore is.

That is Greek measure in English — the thunder-roll of Homer's verse. Selections from Swinburne may be a very great pleasure as well as a very great profit for you; but the selection must be judiciously made, and you need not think of trying to read the whole of Swinburne. Indeed the whole of his work is only readable for accomplished students of prosody, who analyse his method merely for the sake of form.

A word now about his work, by titles. There are three volumes all named *Poems and Ballads*,¹ first series, second series, and third series. These contain the most wonderful part of his earlier lyric poetry. They contain also some of his objectionable poems; but even the objectionable poems ought not to be objectionable to grown-up students of literature. They are not things which could be explained to children; but I can see no reason why a student of poetry should fail to read them, because they contain some music and many thoughts of beauty that are simply astonishing. Besides, I must tell you that the so-called objectionable parts of Swinburne are objectionable for peculiar reasons. When he writes about things which other English poets would not dare to write about, he does so in such a learned way that only a scholar can really understand the character of certain allusions. Therefore, it would be impossible to say that his language is ever inelegant or unrefined. Other poets have written about certain things in the same veiled way, and no objection has been made. For instance Rossetti has a famous passage upon sexual lust, which everybody knows and admires, and which no critic ever was foolish enough to find fault with. Swinburne, taking the very same subject, scandalizes everybody, except the scholars and a few really great critics. Why is this? Simply because Swinburne treats those questions not from the standpoint of modern moral, as Rossetti does, but from a purely Greek and pagan point of view. All the powers of nature were personified by the ancients; and Swinburne speaks of passion as mysteriously divine, apotheo-

¹ 1866. Second series, 1878. Third series, 1889.

sizes it, sings hymns to it, and—like some pagan of the later Empire—attacks and mocks the Christian idea at the same time. Unless the reader can perceive the real art of Swinburne's position, the attempt to represent emotionally old pagan sensualism in the 19th century poetry,—he is likely to be shocked. The scholars knew perfectly well what Swinburne meant. But the ordinary reader could only see that he was praising lust and mocking virtue. Now the correct way to look at Swinburne is to leave the moral question entirely aside, and consider only the artistic aspect of the work. I do not think that the subjects are always undeserving of blame; but if Swinburne had been more conservative in his choice of themes, it is very probable that we should have missed some of the best poetry ever written. And that is the way that the good critics look at the matter. In spite of the fact that the subjects are at times reprehensible, the poems are among the glories of European literature. At the same time a large number of them could not be explained in class; they are not adapted for public commentary. But some of them can; for example the splendid hymn to the sea-gull in the third volume, and the wonderful poem about the sun-dew.

Besides these volumes entitled *Poems and Ballads*, there are the *Songs before Sunrise*,¹ *Songs of the Springtides*.² In one of these you will find a celebrated philosophical poem certain to live as long as the English language lives: the glorious poem of *Hertha*. That you ought to read;—indeed I intend, if possible, to give you a little lecture upon it. Then we have the *Century of Roundels*,³—a hundred poems illustrating the sweetness and power of a particular form of old French verse adapted into English with astonishing success. These volumes represent most of the miscellaneous poems. But the works of Swinburne already comprise no less than twenty-three volumes,—not counting the volumes of selections. Half a dozen of these are critical prose—mostly essays upon pictures and books. The remainder is drama.

We have nothing to do here with Swinburne's prose, —

¹ 1871.

² 1880.

³ *A century of roundels* 1883.

though it is prose-poetry. But his drama represents the very greatest of his work in sustained verse. The most perfect thing in it is undoubtedly the *Atalanta in Calydon*,¹ — the most successful attempt ever made to reproduce in English tragedy the spirit of Greek tragedy. Every student must read parts of this: they cannot be ignored. Great in another way is the vast trilogy of dramas on the subject of the life and death of Mary, Queen of Scots. Here we have three great plays, forming one great tragedy. I believe this is the grandest piece of dramatic writing on a large scale done in England during the century. It is not, perhaps, actable; but that has nothing to do with its relation to poetry. In order to be able to enjoy these plays (they are of course much easier for you to understand than *Atalanta* with its Greek allusions), you should first read the history of Mary by the historian Froude; not only because the history of Froude is as interesting as any novel, but because Swinburne has closely followed Froude in his historical treatment of the subject. I believe that the strongest part of the trilogy is *Bothwell*.² These are not all the dramas of Swinburne; — there are also *Erechtheus*, *The Queen Mother* and several others; but I cannot attempt to give you details about them. One more department of Swinburne's poetical work may be referred to, — English epic. He has, like Tennyson, taken up the study of the old Arthurian romance; and even after having read Tennyson's *Idylls* on the same subject, Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*³ will appear to you quite as fine and strong as Tennyson's, but in a different way. It is altogether a passionate treatment of the subject — emotional to a degree, which Tennyson would never have ventured.

There is one more observation about Swinburne that it may be necessary to make. You may ask why, since he is in some respects superior to Tennyson, has he not been able to influence the English language to the same extent. It is necessary that the student should understand the nature of Swinburne's influence very distinctly.

¹ *Atalanta in Calydon, a tragedy* 1865. Kelmscott press edn. 1894.

² *Bothwell; a tragedy* 1874.

³ *Tristram of Lyonesse, and other poems* 1882.

Swinburne has not influenced the English language to the same degree as Tennyson for two reasons,—first, that his work has been much less in English directions, but rather in old classic, in French, and in Old English directions; and partly because his work never could obtain the same great popularity as Tennyson's. It is too scholarly.

But, in poetry Swinburne's influence has been very much greater than Tennyson's. Almost every English poet of any consequence, since Swinburne, has been influenced by Swinburne. He provoked or produced an altogether new tendency in taste, especially as to form and rhythm. But remember that this influence has been exerted mostly in directions which are beyond the range of popular taste. To give you any good and just idea of Swinburne by a merely critical notice is quite impossible. I could only illustrate him by means of copious examples; and such examples would require the time and space of a very considerable lecture.¹

SUMMARY

This ends our historical notice of the four greatest poets of the Victorian age. Let us summarize very briefly the most important facts about them:—

I. Tennyson perfected the romantic style in those directions already followed by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, but especially Keats; and even while remaining the king of the romantics, he gave to his romantic verse the classical perfection suggested by the work of Milton. He became the most popular, and still remains the most popular, of all English poets in spite of this great perfection; and he influenced the English language as no other poets had done before him since the time of Pope.

II. Browning introduced into English poetry a new form of monodramatic art, and dealt especially with psychological

¹See *On Poets*, ch. iii "Studies in Swinburne."

reality. More than any other English poet he resembles Shakespeare by his power of giving life to dramatic personages. He has great faults of obscurity and of construction; but he has also astonishing splendours of verse. But for his faults, he might be called the greatest of modern English poets in regard to emotional expression. Indeed, I am inclined to think that it would be very difficult to class him otherwise.

III. Rossetti gave to English verse an artistic quality of delicate feeling, rather Italian than English; and he advanced the romantic movement a stage further than Tennyson in the domain of mediæval sentiment. He best represents the mediæval feeling so much studied by the painters of the pre-Raphaelite School; and of that school he was at once the greatest painter and the greatest poet. Remember also the pictorial quality in his work, which makes his poems impress the imagination exactly like powerful paintings.

IV. Swinburne carried the art of English verse to the highest point ever reached in the direction of musical effect;—he is undoubtedly the greatest master of rhythm that has lived in modern times. Also, he did a great deal to introduce into English, beautiful forms of old French verse which had never been successfully handled by English poets before him. Of all English poets he is the most scholarly; and it will be well for you to remember that he has written perfect poetry in many different languages. As Tennyson best represents the genius of Keats, expanded and perfected in a new direction, Swinburne rather descends from Shelley than from any other poet of the past. But he is a very much greater poet in certain directions than Shelley, while he lacks the ghostly and impressive beauty of that singer. It will not be necessary in this summary to consider him outside of purely artistic limits.

THE MINOR SINGERS

INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS

No fact better exemplifies the importance of Victorian poetry than the extremely high rank of many of those who must be called its minor voices. The minor poets of the Victorian period are really greater, in certain ways, in very many ways, than the first-class poets in the time before this period. Moreover we cannot make two simple divisions of Victorian poets; we cannot simply class them as major and minor. On the contrary the very extensive groups of minor poets give us at least three distinct sub-classes; and below these again are classes which we shall have no time even to consider. As I told you before, the outburst of poetry in the time of Victoria was much like the outburst of song in the age of Elizabeth. There have been so many poets, and so many good ones, that we cannot treat of them all in a lecture. We can only try to group a few of the best in each principal group, as illustrating the tone and methods of that class.

Now we have to observe at the beginning that the romantics did not have everything in their own way: there was a reactionary class of poets who attempted a return to classical severity; and some of these were great forces. I might call them the classical school. The romantics again must be divided into the old romantics and the neo-romantics; and neo-romantics were divided, as I told you before, into the spasmodics, and the pre-Raphaelites. Again outside of these groups are a multitude of singers, not belonging to any one class alone, but often showing the influence of two or even three different groups. What are we to do in such a case? I am sure that whatever course might be adopted of grouping by schools, it could only tend to confuse the student's mind, unless attempted in a special lecture. I shall give a special lecture on the spasmodic poets, and on the pre-Raphaelite poets; but for the minor poets in general, I think it will be best to class them simply by order of importance. This will make it

easier to remember their place in the history of English poetry.

Now I should place in the first group of Victorian minor poets, first of all, Miss Rossetti; secondly, George Meredith; thirdly, Robert Bridges; fourthly, William Morris; and fifthly, Matthew Arnold. I know that this arrangement is somewhat different from arrangements previously made by distinguished critics, and by myself, following the guidance of those critics. But the new arrangement which I give you now is fully supported by the best judgment of the day. And you must remember that every few years literary estimates have to be revised. It requires a very long time to understand perfectly the merits and the demerits of really great poets, especially those who have lived in our own time; and it is not surprising to find that a distinguished critic will change, after the lapse of five or ten years, some judgment previously made.

MISS ROSSETTI

Let us now consider these five names in their literary significance and order. I have already made a special lecture¹ upon Christina Rossetti;² — therefore I can be brief in her regard. You know that she occupies now the highest place of any female poet in English literature. If she is not classed with the very greatest men poets also, it is not because she is inferior to them in exquisiteness, but only because she is weaker than they in respect to the force and volume of her work. Were it otherwise, we should be face to face with a miracle; I mean that we should find ourselves confronting the phenomenon of a woman capable of the same amount of intellectual nerve-expenditure as that of the strongest man of genius, for, after all, remember that literary work of any kind means nervous work,—means expenditure of force. The astonishing thing is that any woman should have been able to come

¹ See *On Poets*, ch. xxxii “Note on Christina Rossetti and her Relation to Victorian Poetry.”

² Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894).

so very close to the place of Tennyson, of Browning, of Swinburne, and of Gabriel Rossetti. Like her brother, Christina was a leader of the pre-Raphaelite movement. Her work was much too fine to be fully appreciated in her own day—particularly in an age when people imagined that Mrs. Browning was the greatest female poet that ever lived. Such talent had to wait for appreciation. And now everybody knows that Christina almost reaches the very highest place in poetry, and that Mrs. Browning must take a very low place in all future histories of 19th century verse. She has scarcely written a single poem without faults, and very bad faults; whereas Miss Rossetti cannot be said to have written a single poem that is bad. And a remarkable fact is the variety of her work. Whether a fairy tale, a mystical romance, a symbolic poem or a religious parable, a ballad or a song, the work is always perfect of its kind—and perfect with that severe beauty, born of perfect self-control, which we should expect to find in the work of a man rather in that of a woman.

GEORGE MEREDITH

George Meredith¹ I have put second to Miss Rossetti, because he has faults which Miss Rossetti has not,—the same provoking faults as those of Browning: obscurity, fantasticality, eccentricities that offend against all canons of perfect taste,—that is, occasionally; at his best Meredith is not surpassed by anybody; but his best does not represent the bulk of his work by any means. He comes closer to Browning than any other English poet, though he certainly never attempted to imitate Browning; it is an extraordinary case of like minds appearing and developing about the same time. Like Browning, he is a psychologist; and like Browning he deals a great deal with abstract questions. But as a thinker (by a thinker, I mean one who expresses the profoundest thought of the time in the most

¹ (1828-1909).

original way) he is greater than Browning. Where Browning would have hesitated to express an idea or a conviction, Meredith never hesitated. He has not Browning's dramatic faculty in poetry—although he has that faculty in his novels; for you must remember that Meredith is chiefly known as a psychological novelist. But he expresses the scientific philosophy of his age after a fashion that Browning never attempted. He is particularly the poet of evolution. His work is very largely didactic: it represents an application of ethics to evolution. The teaching, in brief, is this:—Effort is the great law of the universe, and the highest of moral duties. Whatever a man attempts, he must do his best in—his very best, and untiringly. The greatest sin is weakness. There are two kinds of weakness; and both are crime. Physical weakness is, however, much less contemptible than moral weakness. Moral weakness represents failure in the purpose of life. Man can progress only by fighting against the common impulses of nature—against his own passions, which are natural, against his own likes and dislikes which are natural, against even all conventions which have become, in a certain sense, a natural part of social existence, and are nevertheless wrong in the same degree that they are false or represent falsehood. And the great virtue is courage—moral courage for the man, as physical courage for the young. If you are afraid of nature, she will devour you, or stamp you out of existence. If you fight her nobly and unselfishly, she will love you, and lead your feet to the path by which you can become a god. When? Not in this world. But after the universe has passed away you will still exist in many other universes; and if you are wise and brave, you will constantly rise to higher and yet higher things. This is the summary, in a very few words, of Meredith's teaching; and in these days of fantastic philosophy it is certainly worth studying and thinking about. Moreover it has extraordinary charm of form; for Meredith is a wonderful poet at certain times, when the inspiration comes upon him.

You must observe that this view of man's relation to the universe is exactly the opposite to that of the German thinker

Nietzsche whose ideas have been temporarily attracting some attention. Meredith, as an evolutionist, is supremely moral, and supremely an optimist. He believes in the tendency of all things to good: we might say that he shows a belief in what is called "the dramatic tendency" of the universe. But we cannot call him either a deist or a pantheist or an atheist. He simply expresses the great mystery of things and his belief in the future evolution of all towards the highest good. You might say that this is Herbert Spencer in verse. Well, some of the best of Spencer's thinking is to be found in Meredith; but Meredith is much more than Spencer in verse—for he does not stop at the line drawn by agnosticism. The scientific agnostic, whose position is more clearly defined by Huxley than even by Spencer, draws a circle representing the horizon-line of exact human knowledge of relative experience, and says: "Beyond this you have no right to go." Mr. Meredith takes the right and goes—just as religion must do in order to exist. Indeed his work is a kind of nature-religion, best expressed in such compositions as *The Woods of Westermain*, and *Earth and Man*. Swinburne's greatest metaphysical poem, *Hertha*, is on the very same subject as Meredith's *Earth and Man*; but, magnificent as that pantheistic poem of Swinburne's is, the treatment of the idea by Meredith is nobler and vaster and much more in real accord with scientific thought.

But it is not only as a thinker that Meredith is a great poet. He is a great poet in representing terrible passion or moral pain. There is no poem in the English language more terrible in its picturesqueness and in its stormy emotion than *Nuptials of Attila*, and there is no more terrible ballad in any language than *King Harold's Trance*. Indeed the student who would study Meredith chiefly for sentiment and literary method would do well to confine himself to the splendid shorter pieces entitled *Ballads and Poems*.¹ Besides philosophical poetry, and narrative or lyrical poetry, there is yet a third division of Meredith's poetry which is altogether psychological. His worst faults appear in this division; but that is not the reason why I

¹ *Ballads and poems of tragic life* 1887.

advise the student not to trouble himself about such compositions as *Modern Love*¹ and *The Empty Purse*²—to mention only two out of numerous examples. The fact is that Meredith's psychological poetry treats of conditions of Western society which do not exist in this country—and treats of them by allusion and hint, so that only those who have had a particular social experience can understand. But I want you to read, very carefully, at least two of the narrative poems, and two of the metaphysical poems. The best of Meredith is probably immortal; but a large part of his later and more obscure work must perish.

BRIDGES

Robert Bridges³ presents us with a curious phenomenon of a classic poet in the midst of the romantic triumph. I do not mean that Dr. Bridges thinks always like a man of the 18th century; but his forms of verse and his choice and treatment of subjects are nearly all classical. But this classicism has a plain beauty, a simple strength, a cool, clear colour, that are simply delightful. You must try to imagine a classical poet with all the faults and conventions of classical school left out. So there is a charm about the poetry of Bridges which is old-fashioned, because it reminds us of the style of a hundred years ago, and yet new, because it reflects the sentiment and feeling of a man still alive and writing at the opening of the 20th century. I have lectured to you upon Bridges;⁴ and I need not say much to guide you in reading him. Excepting the delightful dramas, founded upon Greek mythology or classic history, most of his poems are very short; and you may pick and choose for yourselves. Most of the reputation acquired by Bridges, after long years of waiting, was first won by his love poems; but I do not think that you may care so much for these; my par-

¹ *Modern love and poems of the English roadside* 1862. Portland [U.S A.], 1891.

² Boston, 1892.

³ (1844-1930).

⁴ See *On Poets*, ch. xxxiii "Robert Bridges."

ticular admiration for Bridges rests chiefly upon his poems about children, and child-memories; and I think that you will share my liking in this respect.

MORRIS

Inferior to any one of the foregoing at their best, William Morris¹ nevertheless will always be a rather important minor poet. If he never did anything of the greatest, neither did he do anything that could be considered bad. Nor was he only mediocre; he was always just a little above mediocrity, and sometimes very much above it. To understand his place in Victorian poetry you must try to think of him as a man who had exactly the same kind of a natural gift for verse as Walter Scott: that is, a man able to write verse as easily as other men write prose, and producing enormous quantities of verse almost without any effort. It is very surprising that this verse should be all good, considering the quantity of it; but it is more astonishing to discover that none of it is bad, and that some of it is more than good. I have lectured about Morris to you, and read you his best pieces;² here we need only to talk of his literary position. Next to Rossetti he was the greatest of the pre-Raphaelites, as an influence in the new movement. You know that nearly all his subjects were mediæval subjects, most carefully studied, just as a painter studies. For, like Rossetti, Morris was a painter, and an excellent artist. (He was also a great manufacturer of furniture of quaint and beautiful forms, —a maker of stained glass window,—and a master painter, who tried to bring printing back to the beautiful perfection of the early Italian publishing days.) It was natural that the example of Chaucer should have had particular influence upon Morris; and he undertook successfully a work planned after the style of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*,—*The Earthly Paradise*.³ But

¹ (1834-1896).

² See *On Poets*, ch. vii "William Morris."

³ *The earthly paradise: a poem*, 3 vols. in 4 pts. 1868-70. Kelmscott press edn. 8 vols. 1896-7.

there is a peculiar thing in this monstrous, yet beautiful work, —the mixture of Scandinavian and Greek legends. You know that Chaucer used Latin and Greek stories in his *Canterbury Tales*. But the introduction of Norse material into Morris' collection created quite a new effect. It is remarkable how well these two very different forms of imagination blend harmoniously together. Morris could not affect the form of English poetry; he was not quite great enough for that; but he taught poets a great many things about the value and the comparative value of subjects, and of their treatment. If you want to read stories in good verse, perhaps you will find Morris even more interesting than Walter Scott. If you want to read the best of his work upon a Norse subject, read his splendid translation of the *Volsunga Saga*.¹ But if you want to read the best of his work in the sense of *fine* poetry, then turn to his shorter poems in *Poems by the Way*,² and other volumes. Some of the shorter pieces in the collection entitled *The Defence of Guenevere*³ I quoted to you last year, as representing his treatment of mediæval life in its tragic aspect.

MATTHEW ARNOLD

Matthew Arnold,⁴ the last of this group, in one way must be classed with Robert Bridges. Miss Rossetti and George Meredith and William Morris were all of them romantics—two of them pre-Raphaelites. But both Robert Bridges and Matthew Arnold are not neo-romantics, but neo-classics. Both kept to certain classic forms and also to certain classic rules concerning choice of subject. They wrote in direct opposition to the whole romantic movement: they produced a new classic spirit, and sought for plain, severe beauty where others sought for colour and sound and novelty of every kind. Matthew Arnold is a grave poet, like Robert Bridges; but he is even

¹ *Volsunga saga . . . translated . . . by E. Magnusson and W.M.* 1870.

² *Poems by the way* 1891. Kelmscott press edn. 1891.

³ *The Defence of Guenevere and other poems* 1858. Kelmscott press edn. 1892.

⁴ (1822-1888).

more grave, more cool, more calm. I am afraid that we must confess he is also less finished and less perfect. He had a particular theory of his own, which he preached, and which he tried to practise with only imperfect success. It was a classical theory, scarcely modified,—the theory that the first thing to be considered in poetry was the subject. This, you know, had been a classical position for hundreds of years. It used to be taught that only certain classes of subjects could be properly chosen for poetry, and that these subjects were classifiable by grades. Now the romantics utterly denied such restriction. They claimed with good reasons that any subjects (except subjects condemned by all human moral experience) were good subjects for the poet who could find inspiration in them. No doubt this romantic position is the true one, and never will be again overthrown. I suppose that Matthew Arnold was, even in theory, more liberal than the 18th century classics; but it is a curious fact that all his best poetry is written upon lines contrary to his own theories. For example, perhaps his very best lyrical performance is *The Forsaken Merman*—and that is assuredly no classic subject, either in treatment or in conception, as he presents it. It is a most romantic subject, founded upon a mediæval legend about a woman who married a merman. And even the forms of the verse which Arnold uses in that poem are more romantic than classic. But this was the case in which the romantic spirit of the time carried Arnold away in spite of himself. More generally he uses severe and old-fashioned form of verse—especially blank verse. In a lecture¹ which I gave last year, I told you that Matthew Arnold was especially a poet for old people to read;—he is not a poet to attract young readers capable of feeling the beauty of life and the happiness of the world. The whole tone of his poetry is reflective, meditative and melancholy: it reads as if it were written in the grey twilight of life, in the time when a man has known all disappointments, all sorrows and all doubts. It is not pessimistic poetry exactly; but it comes very close to pessimistic. It expresses especially the trouble in an age of

¹ See *On Poets*, ch. xxxi “Matthew Arnold as Poet.”

doubting—the trouble expressed by the question, “What is the meaning of the universe, and what is the meaning of pain?” But it is not, on any of these accounts, at all contemptible. Some of it is majestic enough to be worthy of Milton; and some of the lyrical pieces are as good as almost anything by Wordsworth. Unfortunately all of the poetry is not of the same quality. If it were, Matthew Arnold would have to be placed in the first and not in the second rank.

Now let us consider the third group, or the second group of the minor poets. Here we may place Mrs. Browning, Edward Fitzgerald, Lord de Tabley, William Bell Scott, Charles Kingsley, William Johnson (Cory) and Arthur O’Shaughnessy. All of these persons did beautiful work; but scarcely any of them did beautiful work on such a scale as to be classed higher than we are placing them. In another century several of them would have been counted first-class. In the Victorian era we can group them no higher than in the third grade. But remember that among their compositions there are numerous pieces which belong to the first grade,—pieces which could be ranked with the compositions of the very greatest. Here we must estimate by quantity as well as quality.

CHARLES KINGSLEY

For example Charles Kingsley¹ wrote three or four of the very best songs not only in English literature, but in European literature. Yet it is not possible to put him with the group of great poets like Tennyson and Browning who made poetry the only occupation of their lives. Kingsley wrote poetry at rare intervals only: he was more of a novelist than anything else. But his songs are immortal, and there is nothing to surpass them—though you can put all of them upon one page of ordinary octavo print. The rest of his poetry is unequal—though

¹ (1819-1875).

it is true that he made the best English hexameters ever written. However, he wrote these hexameters successfully only because he took a Greek subject, the legend of Andromeda, which allowed him to use many Greek words. It must be still confessed that perfect hexameters in pure English are almost impossible.

FITZGERALD

Then there is Edward Fitzgerald.¹ He has been a great force in literature; and his translations of *Omar Khayyám*,² of *Calderon*,³ and of some other things are classics. Also the little romance *Salaman and Absal*⁴ is worthy of being called a classic. But these compositions are really only translations from the Persian and from the Spanish, translated with the art of a man who had a genius in verse worthy of Tennyson and a romantic taste scarcely inferior to that of Rossetti. Still we cannot honestly place the translator upon the same rank as the original poet.

MRS. BROWNING

Mrs. Browning⁵ almost belongs to the spasmodic school; for she has all the faults of the spasmodics, and some merits which they had not. Her faults in versification and rhythm and rhyme have been very severely criticized by Professor Saintsbury and others: I need not even try to point them out to you. But what is much worse than faults of form, are her faults of sentiment,—exaggerated sentiment, or sentimentality,—tiresome diffuseness,—total incapacity of emotional control. There is scarcely one of her poems (except the *Sonnets from*

¹ (1809-1883).

² *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the astronomer-poet of Persia, rendered into English verse* 1859. 2nd edn, completely revised 1868. 3rd edn. 1872, 4th edn. 1879.

³ *Six Dramas of Calderon freely translated* 1853.

⁴ *Salaman and Absal: an allegory translated from the Persian of Jami* 1856.

⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861).

*the Portuguese*¹) which would not be improved by shortening it at least two-thirds. They are too long by far, too emotional, too tiresome. Yet there are exceptions. One of them is the splendid thing entitled *A Musical Instrument* that has become, and will always remain, one of the gems of English literature. Thus the greater part of Mrs. Browning's verse will soon be forgotten; and we cannot give a high place to the author of scarcely half a dozen good poems.

W. JOHNSON

More than half a dozen good poems were produced by William Johnson (or William Cory)² — the Eton school-master, about whom I gave a lecture last year.³ His little book *Ionica*⁴ — perhaps the smallest book of poems in Victorian literature which has an established place — is a perfect delight to fine judges of poetry. It is the work of a scholar as well as a man of feeling; and its chief defect, if defect it can be called, is that it happens to be too scholarly. The classic allusions compel the ordinary reader to study classical dictionaries in order to get at the meaning; and the meaning is sometimes so learned that even classical dictionaries do not help. But I have read to you some beautiful pages of *Ionica*; and you will be able to remember that this delicate poet, though a great classical scholar, was a supreme romantic in feeling.

TABLEY

Lord de Tabley (Leicester Warren)⁵ was the subject of a lecture last year.⁶ He was an exquisite poet in the same fine way as Cory, but with less originality, and with less tendency

¹ *Sonnets by E.B.B.* Reading, 1847. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* 1850.

² William Johnson Cory (1823-1892).

³ See *On Poetry*, ch. xxx "Ionica."

⁴ *Ionica* [*Poems by W.J.*] 1858.

⁵ John Byrne Leicester Warren, 3rd Lord de Tabley (1835-1895).

⁶ See *On Poetry*, ch. xxxiv "The Poetry of Lord de Tabley."

to deal in scholarly subjects. He was greatly influenced in his work by honest admiration of Swinburne and of Tennyson; and there are passages in his best pages which equal the splendour of both poets. But he was no mere imitator. In proof of the fact you need only to turn to his poem of *Astarte* which I quoted to you last year, and which was certainly inspired by reading *Dolores* of Swinburne. But here you have no repetition of Swinburne: though you can recognize echoes of him in the verse. On the contrary the subject has been taken out of the earthly and merely sensuous plane and elevated to the same height to which it was lifted of old by the Roman poet Lucretius,—with just enough of modern mysticism to etherealize it. Very beautiful too, and quite original as well, are the poems entitled *A Woodland Grave*, *The Two Old Kings*, and various other pieces. One of the most astonishing things in the book is a poem about a spider, which I quoted to you on a former occasion. If you are interested in the personality of Lord de Tabley—one of the most shy and modest men that ever lived—you would do well to read a beautiful essay about him, written by Professor Edmund Gosse. All his work is represented by one very small volume, simply entitled *Poems*.¹

O'SHAUGHNESSY

Arthur O'Shaughnessy² must also be considered a fine poet when at his best; but he had neither the scholarship nor the power of fine workmanship characterizing either of the two preceding poets. He was a clerk in the British Museum, who found time to study old French, and to produce four volumes of poems, two of which are only translations from Mediæval French. O'Shaughnessy's great merit is passional; it is due rather to the melodious expression of strong emotion, sincerely uttered, than to mere art of verse. But there is more than sincerity in him; he had a very original fancy,—producing at

¹ *Poems dramatic and lyrical*. 2 series 1893-5.

² Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy (1844-1881).

times things so strangely beautiful that they have been committed to the treasure-house of lyrical poetry for all time. If you look at Palgrave's *Golden Treasury Series of Poems*, (not the first volume, but the second) you will find it prefaced by a poem on poets by O'Shaughnessy. It was Palgrave who first made him famous; but Palgrave's high estimate of him has been sharply criticized. It is true that this poet is at times very weak, and very unsatisfactory. He must be classed, by his faults, among the spasmodics—though, by his merits, he ranks with the best romantics—we may say, with the pre-Raphaelites. The two volumes of original poetry which he wrote are entitled respectively *Music and Moonlight*,¹ and *An Epic of Women*.² In the first you will find most of the pieces quoted by Palgrave, but not all of them—not, for example, the beautiful composition entitled *Three Silences*, which I quoted in a lecture about love poetry.³ But you will find there *Palms*, a marvellous tropical fancy; *The Fountain of Tears*; *Greater Memory*, a poem on the remembrance of love after rebirth; and a great many other jewels. Unfortunately you will also find some bad prose poetry, and some uninteresting sentimentality. *An Epic of Women* contains a like mixture of beauty and weakness. It is now out of print, but must soon appear in a new edition. The two other volumes, *Songs of a Worker*⁴ and *Lays of France*,⁵ being only translations, do not rank very high; for O'Shaughnessy did not have the genius required for great translation. All his fame rests upon a score of lyrical poems of curious and beautiful emotion and fancy. He appears to have been very unhappy in life—particularly in regard to some love affair; and it is interesting to study the way in which he has transformed this unhappiness into lyrical song.

Yet another group of poets remains to be considered in regular order, and one group of poets in irregular order. By reason of the excellence of the work of this special group in a special direction, I shall consider it first, by itself.

¹ *Music and moonlight: poems and songs* 1874.

² *An epic of women, and other poems* 1870.

³ See *On Poetry* ch. xv and xxviii.

⁴ 1881.

⁵ 1872.

LIGHT VERSE

This group of poets represents the light verse of the Victorian era — light verse of several kinds. One kind of light verse is called “Society Verse”; several other kinds are hard to define. But all, in master hands, must rank high. I shall first speak of the society verse as represented by Austin Dobson, Frederick Locker, Andrew Lang, and Calverley.

It is necessary to define clearly for you what is meant by society verse. The term was adopted into English from the French who called the same kind of poetry *Vers de Société*; and the French practised it very successfully long before the English learned to imitate them. But it is not especially a classic form of verse—though first practised with power and grace in classic times and classic forms. There is not any particular form to be insisted upon, nor is there any particular limitation of subject. The limitations of society verse are only those relating to restraints upon the expression of emotion and thought. Of course there is a preference for classical forms of lyric but the real meaning of society verse is only this:—It is verse that faithfully represents the tone of fashionable society in expressing its ideas and emotion.

I need scarcely remind you that almost everywhere in the world cultivated society has its particular ways of speaking and acting—in Japan just as in England, the differences are only on the surface. You know that among the common class of people, among the peasants, for example, there is a tendency to be very frank in speech, and in the expression of emotion. A little higher up in the social scale, where there is more education and training of the young, considerably greater restraint is placed upon the expression of sincere feeling. Go still higher into the upper classes, and there you find that the educational tendency is to control the expression of ideas and emotions in all *personal* directions. In the highest class impassiveness is especially aimed at — all expression of self is studiously repressed except in those directions which conduce to social hap-

piness and elegant tastes. I may remark that there are countries in which society, as the word is understood in England, does not exist—democratic societies, such as that of America, where any educational efforts to form a social *manner* must either fail altogether, or produce results of very different kind.

Now consider to yourselves for a moment how aristocratic society acts in regard to the expression of ideas and emotion. There must be restraints of a great many kinds upon both — because there are a great many conventions to be supported — social conventions and religious conventions, wherever there is a national religion, moral conventions and conventions relating to particular forms of conduct whose rules are imposed upon the privileged class. Instead of enjoying most freedom intellectual or otherwise, an aristocracy in any part of the world enjoys least freedom. The English peasant is a much freer man than the English duke.

Therefore literature produced by an aristocracy, merely as a pastime, for the purpose of expressing only aristocratic ways of feeling and acting, would be under extraordinary restraints in all directions. It is not to be wondered at that aristocrats who also happen to be authors very seldom write anything resembling society verse in these times. I need not explain why. The highest classes remain silent on merely social subjects in their poetry. But a little below, there is an elegant class less fettered, which can tell its story in verse. To-day society verse relates mostly to the upper middle class rather than to the very highest class.

What are the rules, generally speaking, about the expression of personal opinion and personal emotion in fine society? I think they are everywhere in a general way about the same. You must not speak too seriously about your own joy or pain; you must not speak violently or harshly upon any subject; you may mock, but you must not be a cruel or a brutal mocker; you may be cynical, but not to the extent of insulting good feeling. Where other forms of society would allow and expect sentiment or passion, you must at most only suggest the sentiment, and altogether suppress the passion as a vulgar tendency.

I need scarcely tell you that such poetry never can be great; for literary greatness requires absolute freedom. But such poetry, thought it cannot be great, can be very dainty, very pretty, very refined, quite exquisite in a small way. And the best of English society verse is all of this. But it is not great. It can only have a special and rather narrow value.

LOCKER

I think you now understand clearly what society verse should be, and that it cannot escape from being artificial under any circumstances. The best modern example of this kind of verse in English is the work of Frederick Locker, or Locker-Lampson,¹ as his name afterwards became on his second marriage. He wrote very little; but that little is precious, and is contained in the tiny volume entitled *London Lyrics*.² The subjects are mostly of the day—though there is to be found here and there an imitation of French forms. But usually the poems are inspired by such commonplace events as the sight of a muff, moth-eaten and old-fashioned,—or by the sight of a little girl running up and down stairs with her doll,—or by the vision of a pair of lady's shoes,—or by some old family painting, or by some incident of the ball-room or the banquet table. Each of these themes happens to be one which, under the circumstances, naturally invites deep feeling. We feel the emotion, and expect the poet to express it. But he does not. He suppresses it; and he suppresses it with a quiet laugh. What is the result? The result is this,—*that the emotion is suggested by its suppression*. And the effect thus becomes strong. For example, here we have a young man looking at the picture of his dead grandmother, when she was a beautiful young girl. That is a subject for emotion. How does the poet treat it? He bids you notice the old-fashioned way of dressing the hair, the old-fashioned ornaments, and he laughs at them, *gently*.

¹ Frederick Locker, afterwards Locker-Lampson, (1821-1895).

² *London lyrics . . . With an illustration by Cruikshank* 1857.

He does not laugh at the beautiful young face—he only compliments it in a formal and polite way, and remarks that he hopes his grandmother was able in heaven to make herself as pretty and as innocent-looking as that—for the sake of grandfather! But you can feel that you are very close to the source of tears behind this light fun. I think the poem *On an old Muff* is one of the best in the collection; but every one is good, and I should like you to read all of them, if you can be interested in this class of poetry. I need scarcely remind you that “muffs” are now coming into fashion in Tokyo,—so the subject of Locker’s poem cannot be any longer strange to you.

Locker was essentially an aristocrat; and we may doubt whether better society verse will ever be written by a man of the same class.

DOBSON

The next most significant writer in the same direction is Mr. Austin Dobson,¹ who still lives, and has made a very high reputation in several varieties of what we may call *elegant* literature. Mr. Dobson passed most of his life in official work; but it was official work which allowed him ample leisure for two favourite pursuits, old books and poetry. The great difference between his society verse and the society verse of Mr. Locker is that it is less modern: it is quaint; it is an imitation of English and of French 18th century forms, with occasional studies of still older forms,—17th century, for example. You will find in his beautiful little books very curious and dainty verse-pictures of the aristocratic French life of the time of Louis XIV;—you will also find delightful sketches of the English conventional life of the times of Pope and Johnson. Occasionally these poetical studies take the form of little dramas; sometimes, again, they are dialogues. You will also find ballads and *ballades*. Ballads of old English life; *ballades* of old French

¹ (1840-1923)

life;—and I need hardly remind you that the forms indicated by these two kindred words are altogether different. The French *ballade* is a very complicated form of verse, regularly divided according to unchangeable rules. As these facts might suggest to you, the value of Mr. Dobson's work is much more than that of light verse, or the expression of fashionable sentiment. He is much more of a poetical word-smith than of a society verse writer; and it is especially through his studies of old French forms and his revival of sundry old English forms (I mean especially 18th century work) that his production will continue for some time to influence English verse.

I may remark that he has carried his abilities, in the same direction, into the field of prose. No man has made a closer study of the best tradition of 18th century style; and no man has more successfully imitated it. Dobson is the very prince of imitators in one particular way—the quaint way;—it is not too much to say that his imitations are often quite equal to the originals. Of his poetry, perhaps the very best things are to be found in the little volume entitled *Old-World Idylls*;¹ but there are nearly half a dozen volumes of his poems, as originally issued; and he is one of the exquisite writers who never produced anything bad. Still it requires a particular taste on the part of the student to become fond of him. It all depends upon the way in which you are able to feel the life of the 18th century in England or the old life of French society in the time of Louis XIV and XV. The best advice that I can give you is to read a little of the *Old-World Idylls*; and if you like that and understand the beauty of it, you can read the whole of Dobson's poetry with pleasure and profit. I must also tell you that he is a good classical scholar; and that his translations or imitations both of Greek and of Latin poets are among the very best of their kind. He is worth a special lecture; and perhaps I shall attempt one during the last term.

¹ *Old-world idylls and other verses* 1888.

LANG

The third name in this group is that of Andrew Lang,¹ whom I am now considering only very briefly as a writer of light verse. He comes much closer to Dobson than to Locker; and most of his light verse has actually been done in the very same direction. But he is less exquisite than Dobson, less delicate, altogether less satisfactory. Moreover the touches of humour, which form an essential part of all this kind of verse, are never so lightly and naturally managed as they are by Locker and by Dobson. However, to expect anything really great from Andrew Lang is almost impossible; while it is also almost impossible to expect anything bad. The name of Andrew Lang is altogether one of the most formidable in existing literature. Although by no means yet an old man, Andrew Lang has either written or edited about five hundred different books, numbering between six and seven hundred volumes. Since the days of Southey, no such literary production has been heard of — not at least in relation to work of the same steadily good quality. There is a writer of whom you have heard, the Rev. Baring-Gould who is credited also with an enormous power of production; but I believe that Andrew Lang has now considerably surpassed him. Among these hundreds of books, there are actually some of very great value—for example, the beautiful prose translations of Homer,² which he made in conjunction with several other scholars. These are the best prose version of Homer in the English language; and they are incomparably better than any English poetical translation from the Greek. But it must be obvious to the student that no man can turn out five hundred different books and maintain a high average of work. I imagine that a general criticism of the mass of that work would be justified in these terms: “A little better than the common, but in nothing

¹ (1844-1912).

² *The Odyssey of Homer. Done into English prose by S H. Butcher and A. Lang 1879. The Iliad of Homer. Done into English prose by Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Myers 1883.*

reaching the highest, and rather clever than excellent." I have praised the *Homer*; but that is really the work of a group. This is why, I firmly believe, that while Andrew Lang has never done anything bad in poetry he has never done anything quite so good as a page of Austin Dobson. But he is worth mentioning here, as a writer of light verse, because he did a great deal to bring into fashion the form of culture best exemplified by the work of Mr. Dobson.

CALVERLEY

Two more writers of light verse remain to be considered—Charles Stuart Calverley and Thomas Barham. Calverley¹ was a Cambridge scholar—and by the word scholar I mean all that is properly attached to that name by the learned. He was a man who could compose Latin poetry, correctly and elegantly, more quickly than anybody else could compose English poetry. To give you an example of his powers in this direction I may quote a well known story about him. He used to ask people to take up a volume of Wordsworth, or some other poet, and read a page—at random—anywhere. Then he would repeat, in Latin verse, the whole substance of what had been read to him. His Greek powers were also considerable; but as a Latinist, he was perhaps the most wonderful man that Cambridge produced in modern times. And he is a matchless and delightful translator of Latin poets. His version of Horace especially is famous. But to the ordinary public, he is better known by work in another direction—poems satirical or humourous. He was very clever and very terrible in satire and in parody. He was also very clever in jocose narrative. His light verse is not society verse: it is the verse of a university wit;—it altogether lacks the lightness that must qualify true society verse. Nor does it deal with society life at all. It rather deals with certain common aspects of human nature; and the humour, the

¹ (1831-1884).

mockery, if not exactly rough, always come very near to being cruel; there is something acrid about it.

I can best express Calverley's peculiarities by a quotation: it is very difficult to explain his acrid humour, and his peculiar irony, in any other way. And as he is very little known outside of the circle of scholarship, I may very well cite from him here,—for his relation to light verse could not very well be made a subject of a special lecture. I shall choose a little piece ironically entitled *On the Brink*—telling the story of a man who was very nearly asking a pretty widow to marry him, but did not ask her. The reason that he did not ask her was that he heard her speaking angrily to her little child. The curiosity of this narration is the extraordinary mixture of fine poetical expression and feeling with cutting colloquial phrases and a snap-fire of jeering mockery.

I watch'd her as she stoop'd to pluck
A wildflower in her hair to twine;
And wish'd that it had been my luck
To call her mine.

Anon I heard her rate with mad
Mad words her babe within its cot;
And felt particularly glad
That it had not.

I knew (such subtle brains have men)
That she was uttering what she shouldn't;
And thought that I would chide, and then
I thought I wouldn't:

Who could have gazed upon that face,
Those pouting coral lips, and chided?
A Rhadamanthus,¹ in my place
Had done as I did;

For ire wherewith our bosoms glow
Is chain'd there oft by Beauty's spell;
And, more than that, I did not know
The widow well.

¹ Rhadamanthus—A man in Greek mythology noted for his strict justice—*Author*.

So the harsh phrase pass'd unproved.
 Still mute—(O brothers, was it sin?)—
 I drank, unutterably moved,
 Her beauty in:

And to myself I murmur'd low,
 As on her upturn'd face and dress
 The moonlight fell, "Would she say No,
 By chance, or Yes?"

She stood so calm, so like a ghost
 Betwixt me and that magic moon,
 That I already was almost
 A finish'd coon.¹

But when she caught adroitly up
 And soothed with smiles her little daughter;
 And gave it, if I'm right, a sup
 Of barley-water;

And, crooning still the strange sweet lore
 Which only mothers' tongues can utter,
 Snow'd with deft hand the sugar o'er
 Its bread-and-butter;

And kiss'd it clingingly—(Ah, why
 Don't women do these things in private?)—
 I felt that if I lost her, I
 Should not survive it:

And from my mouth the words nigh flew—
 The past, the future, I forgat 'em:
 "Oh! if you'd kiss me as you do
 That thankless atom!"

But this thought came ere yet I spake,
 And froze the sentence on my lips:
 "They err, who marry wives that make
 Those little slips."

¹ "Finished coon." An American slang phrase. The racoon or coon, as it is commonly called in America, is a little animal, very cunning and very difficult to catch and kill. A person in a desperate situation, in spite of his natural cleverness, is sometime called a finished coon—"finished" meaning that all hope is lost.—*Author.*

It came like some familiar rhyme,
 Some copy to my boyhood set;
 And that's perhaps the reason I'm
 Unmarried yet.

* * *

Be kind to babes and beasts and birds:
 Hearts may be hard, though lips are coral;
 And angry words are angry words;
 And that's the moral.

This is both pretty and cruel—sometimes a little too cruel. But how perfectly true is the painting of the two characters; and how excellently even the use of slang phrases and colloquial is managed! A whole book of this kind of verse would be a wonderful thing; but Calverley did not often thus amuse himself. A much harsher example of his method is the famous piece entitled *Gemini and Virgo*,—the story of two schoolboys who had been great friends, until they both fell in love with their school-mistress. They were about eleven or twelve years old; and she was about thirty; the boys had a fight and she plastered up their wounds—after which she married the writing master. The incident is very probably true—although told with exaggerated irony; and clever as the piece is, we feel that the romantic fancies of the innocent boyhood are a little too savagely mocked. The whole of Calverley's work is comprised in two thin volumes of verse — one volume of original composition being entitled *Fly Leaves*;¹ and the other, consisting entirely or almost entirely of English renderings of Latin and Greek poets, and of renderings of English poets into Latin, being entitled *Verses and Translations*.² Calverley might have done wonderful things if he had lived; and, being one of the strongest athletes ever at Cambridge, he appeared to have a long life before him. But an accident, which happened during skating, produced concussion of the brain; as a result of which he died in 1884 while only in the prime of his powers.

¹ 1871.

² 1862.

R. H. BARHAM, "THOMAS INGOLDSBY"

Of the Rev. Thomas Ingoldsby¹ I need to tell you little;—I think you all know something of the famous *Ingoldsby Legends*²—the most popular book of humourous verse that ever was written in modern times. Barham was a clergyman of the Church of England; but he found plenty of time to amuse himself with literature; and his success was immense. He is now much less read than formerly, but that is only because fashions have changed. There is the danger for any kind of humourous literature. All that we call comic must be the fashion of a time;—things that appeared very funny to our forefathers cannot make us smile, because we have learned to think about the matter in a different way; and what amuses us at the present day may seem a very serious thing to those who will come after us. Therefore, unless humourous verse happens to be executed with the highest literary art, it is certain to become old-fashioned within a few years. Barham's verse is always good; but it is not of the very best—so Barham has become old-fashioned. Yet what is old-fashioned for English readers need not be so for Japanese readers; and I should recommend anybody who can like *The Ingoldsby Legends* to read them, not for the mere story, but for the good vigorous English, many times over. The verse has the same kind of sturdy clarity as that of Macaulay; and the humour is easy to understand and enjoy. A curious thing to notice is that this book, which appeared in the early days of Tennyson, and which made fun of mediævalism and mediæval tradition, had no effect at all in checking the neo-romantic tendency. On the contrary it rather tended to make mediæval subjects more popular. This is probably due to its good-natured tone, as much as to its cleverness. Men who could appreciate the tragic and solemn sides of mediæval life as expressed by Rossetti or by Morris, could equally well appreciate the humourous sides as rendered by Barham,—and

¹ Richard Harris Barham (1788-1845).

² *The Ingoldsby Legends* 1840. Second and Third Series 1847. (First appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* and *The New Monthly Magazine*).

the enjoyment of one did not at all interfere with the enjoyment of the other.

AYTOUN

Such was not the case with the work of Aytoun,¹ who in *Firmilian*² satirized the spasmodic poets, and who also wrote comical ballads to make fun of them. His work really helped to kill the spasmodic school; but it did not interfere with the serious work of the pre-Raphaelite school. I do not think that mere satire has much value in literature; and I mention Aytoun chiefly because he was the author of something much superior to satire,—the strong and animated ballads, or narrative poems entitled *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers*:³ a collection of incidents of heroism shown by Scotchmen in many parts of the world.

THE LAST GROUP

BAILEY

Now, leaving unmentioned less important writers of light verse, let us turn to the fourth and last group of minor Victorian poets—at least to the most significant names. Among these I will place the writers of the spasmodic school and some others — at least the less important rhapsodists, as the spasmodics were also called. The first, who made a reputation in this direction, was Philip James Bailey,⁴ who wrote a romantic tragedy in verse, called *Festus*,⁵ — which at one time was very popular indeed. To-day nobody reads it: it was the study of the Faust-legend in a new way;—in *Festus* the demon triumphs by his intelligence and power, but he is touched by the simple

¹ William Edmonstoune Aytoun (1813-1865).

² *Firmilian: or the student of Badajoz. A spasmodic tragedy. By T. Percy Jones* 1854.

³ *Lays of the Scottish cavaliers and other poems* 1849.

⁴ (1816-1902).

⁵ *Festus, a poem* 1839.

devotion of the woman, and exhibits a certain amount of human tenderness. Byron had treated the subject also, in a kindred way; but there were some new ideas in *Festus* which should please as long as they were new. When the novelty wore itself out, people saw that there was no great art in *Festus*; and the book rapidly dropped out of sight.

DOBELL AND SMITH

Sydney Dobell¹ did better work in some of his lyrical pieces, especially when treating of the sorrows of humble lives. Alexander Smith,² with his *Life Drama*,³ had a temporary success like that of the author of *Festus*; but when his *Life Drama* proved a failure, he did not drop out of sight like Bailey. On the contrary he took to lyrical work with great success, and in his *City Poems*⁴ achieved a reputation that caused many to believe he would become as great as Tennyson. Unfortunately he died of consumption while still young. Others of the spasmodics are not worth even mentioning. But there is one name that will probably live longer than any of the rest—except in the direction of the short lyrics.

THOMSON

I mean James Thomson.⁵ I class James Thomson at least partly with the spasmodics. He is the second poet in English literature called James Thomson; and it is impossible to imagine any greater contrast than is offered by the work and thought of the first James Thomson and those of the second James Thomson. You know that the first James Thomson

¹ Sydney Thompson Dobell (1824-1874)

² (1830-1867).

³ *A Life Drama* 1854.

⁴ *City Poems*. Cambridge, 1857.

⁵ James Thomson, 'B.V.' (1834-1882).

marks an epoch in English poetry—the 18th century movement of returning to nature. That Thomson was a most cultivated gentleman, a great poet, a lover of beauty and light, an optimist in feeling. The second James Thomson was a common, uneducated man—or almost uneducated,—a thorough pessimist, the gloomiest and darkest of poets, the one remarkable English poet who wrote a sort of Gospel of Despair. But, for all that, he is a poet, and a very remarkable poet. He has been called “the English Poe”; but the comparison is not good,—except in so far as the lives of the two men are concerned. Both were addicted to drink; both died in consequence of drinking. Both were unhappy. But the supernatural element in Poe is totally absent in Thomson.

Thomson was the son of a sailor, and probably inherited the tendency to drunkenness. He had an ordinary country school education — that was all. Afterwards he became an army schoolmaster; but he was discharged from the army for breaking certain rules. After that he tried to do a great many things with indifferent success, and finally became a journalist. When his poems appeared, they attracted attention and got him the friendship of influential men—among others, of the historian Froude, and of a number of English men of letters. If he could have kept away from drink, his future would have been secure. But it became impossible even for those who most loved and liked him, to help him efficiently; and he died very suddenly through the bursting of a blood-vessel, caused by excessive drinking. Nearly always without money, nearly always in desperate straits, his life was horribly miserable; and he put the expression of that misery into his verse in a most strange and splendid way. There are two volumes of Thomson’s poems;¹ and the second volume is scarcely worth looking at. About two-thirds of the first volume are not worth looking at. But the remainder will probably live. Three things, at least, are worth reading and remembering: *The City of Dreadful Night*,² *Insomnia*, and *To Our Ladies of Death*. Some persons

¹ *The poetical works of James Thomson. Edited by Bertram Dobell. 2 vols 1895.*

² First appeared in *The National Reformer* 22 Mar. to 17 May 1874.

praise *Vane's Story*. But I am quite sure that they are wrong. There is nothing great in *Vane's Story*, and very little that is good; while there is much that is bad, vulgar and commonplace. But there is nothing vulgar about *Insomnia* nor about *The City of Dreadful Night*; and because of those two compositions in special, Thomson will never be quite forgotten. *The City of Dreadful Night* is a horrible allegory of human existence, under the conditions of modern civilization; and the verse is as grand and sonorous and gloomy as anything of the kind in modern English literature. I am going to give examples of it in another lecture.¹ The poem *Insomnia*—that means, you know, the disease of sleeplessness,—is described as no other poet ever described it,—the horrible suffering of sleeplessness, caused by the habit of drinking. Pain, moral pain as well as physical pain, truly inspired Thomson: he wrote some great poetry because he suffered a great deal. What is obvious even in his finer poems, however, is a certain want of literary training;—with literary training there is no saying what such a man might not have been able to do. But we must all the more respect the rude talent which reaches the grand result rather by instinct than by teaching; for the struggle is one of unspeakable difficulty.

OWEN MEREDITH

There are two other poets in this fourth group that are very hard to classify. One is "Owen Meredith,"—by which pseudonym the younger Lord Lytton² is known to literature.

He was the son of the great novelist Bulwer-Lytton, about whom I have already spoken; and he was trained by his father especially for diplomatic service. Certainly his career was singularly successful. I think you know that he was made Viceroy of India, and in the later years of his life, Ambassador at Paris,—which is the highest position that England can pos-

¹ See *On Poets*, ch. vi "Pessimists and Their Kindred."

² Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, 1st Earl of Lytton (1831-1891).

sibly give to any diplomatist outside of her own borders. Indeed, I do not know but that such a position is even greater than that of Prime Minister. Notwithstanding his very busy life, Lord Lytton found time to write a great deal of poetry, under the name of Owen Meredith—perhaps, because, owing to his very high position, it would not have looked exactly right for him to figure as a singer of love songs, or as a composer of rhymed satires (for such many of his poems really are) on the vices of fashionable society. The mass of his poetry is not altogether commendable. A great deal of it reads only like a weak imitation of Tennyson and of other poets. His long novel in verse *Lucile*,¹ is a little better than an imitation; but it has the serious defect of being scarcely more than the clever paraphrase of a French novel. There is a great deal of variety in his work; and yet there is very little to be said for most of it. Only in one direction was he really a very remarkable poet; and his poems in this particular direction are few in number. To put the matter in as few words as possible, he was a great master of ironical narrative. I suppose the word “narrative” will remind you of ballad poetry; and Owen Meredith’s best narrative poems are actually cast in ballad form. They are chiefly stories of fashionable society, sometimes strangely imaginative, often qualified by a want of moral tone which might be called immoral if it were not so distinctly French, and always full of bitter humour,—a cold, icy mockery that is difficult to parallel with any other poet of the time. Of course there is tenderness to be found; but the tenderness of expression nearly always precedes some cynical allusion or statement that surprises and shocks us after the manner of Heine. Only we always feel that Heine is human, warm, lovable, sincere: before this fashionable man of the world, this supremely clever diplomatist who made himself Viceroy of India, we never feel warm: we feel disquieted, suspicious, uneasy. And it is very difficult to persuade ourselves that the man was not in character very much like his poetry. He comes very close to our hearts occasionally; but that only puts us upon our guard. It is mere

¹ 1860.

diplomacy. Here is a part of one of his very best narrative pieces. It is only a dream, a mockery—but there is a queer splendour about it.

AUX ITALIENES

Of all the operas that Verdi wrote,
 The best, to my taste, is the *Trovatore*;
 And Mario can soothe with a tenor note
 The souls in Purgatory.

The moon on the tower slept soft as snow:
 And who was not thrill'd in the strangest way,
 As we heard him sing, while the gas burn'd low,
 "*Non ti scordar di me*"?

The Emperor there, in his box of state,
 Look'd grave, as if he had just then seen
 The red flag wave from the city-gate
 Where his eagles in bronze had been.

* * *

Meanwhile, I was thinking of my first love,
 As I had not been thinking of aught for years,
 Till over my eyes there began to move
 Something that felt like tears.

I thought of the dress that she wore last time,
 When we stood, 'neath the cypress-trees, together,
 In that lost land, in that soft clime,
 In the crimson evening weather;

Of that muslin dress (for the eve was hot),
 And her warm white neck in its golden chain,
 And her full, soft hair, just tied in a knot,
 And falling loose again;

And the jasmine-flower in her fair young breast,
 (O the faint, sweet smell of that jasmine-flower!)
 And the one bird singing alone to his nest,
 And the one star over the tower.

At this point of the poem he reminds us that the girl is dead: he tells us how much he wishes that he had been more kind to her,—that his love could bring her back to him from the grave. Remember he is thinking all these things in the theatre while watching the play and listening to the music:—

And I swear, as I thought of her thus, in that hour,
And of how, after all, old things were best,
That I smelt the smell of that jasmine-flower
Which she used to wear in her breast.

It smelt so faint, and it smelt so sweet,
It made me creep, and it made me cold!
Like the scent that steals from the crumbling sheet
Where a mummy is half unroll'd.

And I turn'd, and look'd. She was sitting there
In a dim box, over the stage; and dress'd
In that muslin dress with that full soft hair,
And that jasmine in her breast!

So his love comes back to him: she is there in the theatre;—he has only to go over to the other side of the house to speak to her. But he is sitting with another woman, to whom he is engaged to be married. Without a moment's hesitation, he leaves his betrothed, and goes across the theatre to speak to his old love, who has come back from the dead:—

I was here; and she was there;
And the glittering horseshoe curv'd between:—
From my bride-betroth'd, with her raven hair,
And her sumptuous scornful mien,

To my early love, with her eye down cast,
And over her primrose face the shade
(In short from the Future back to the Past),
There was but a step to be made.

To my early love from my future bride,
One moment I look'd. Then I stole to the door,
I travers'd the passage; and down at her side
I was sitting, a moment more.

My thinking of her, or the music's strain,
 Or something which never will be exprest,
 Had brought her back from the grave again,
 With the jasmine in her breast.

What a splendid opportunity might a true romantic have found in such a story, — such a romantic, for example, as Gautier, who produced those two matchless stories of love after death, respectively entitled *La Morte Amoureuse* and *Arria Marcella*? But Owen Meredith is not a true romantic;—he awakens a romantic fancy, a romantic emotion, only to mock it, to trifle with it. Now what I have read to you is very pretty, as it stands;—the sensuous beauty of some verse is almost unmatched. But the reason of the pleasant effect produced is that I have given you only the beautiful verses, and have left out all the sarcastic and ironical ones. If you read the whole of the poem, you will find that the effect is very different: you will feel a sense of disappointment, of depression that is difficult to define, but that certainly means that you know you have been tricked, duped. It is not exactly the same thing with another and very famous narrative poem entitled *The Portrait* which I quoted to you some years ago.¹ There is a frankly immoral story about a frankly immoral phase of fashionable life, apparently told in scorn of all human emotion and trust. It is the story of a rich man, overcome with grief at the death of his mistress. While weeping for her, he suddenly remembers that she wore round her neck a portrait of himself, set in diamond: as she is going to be buried in the morning, it will be better to take the portrait from the corpse at once. He goes upstairs to the death chamber, gropes for the portrait on the dead woman's breast and suddenly finds his hand touching the hand of another man. He looks: that other man is his best friend,—who acknowledges that he also came to take away a portrait. This means a confession of betrayal. The two men are ready to quarrel; but first they agree to look at the picture in order to see whose face is in the jewelled locket. And then

¹ See *On Poets*, ch. vi "Pessimists and Their Kindred."

they find that it is the face of a priest to whom the woman had shown much confidence. So there is a third betrayal: love, friendship, religion, all mocked in the same incident. The art of the poem is simply wonderful;—nobody can read it without expressing a shock of admiration as well as a shock of moral feeling. But have we not right in such a case to ask ourselves whether this is not to put art to a base use? No doubt such horrible things do happen. But art is surely not intended for the depiction of the horrible rather than of the beautiful. A line must be drawn somewhere. Otherwise we might as well say that putrefaction is a good subject for art.

Even in the lightest narratives of Owen Meredith there is a certain discomfoting suggestiveness. Let me quote one of the very simplest of his studies in this direction, entitled *The Castle of King Macbeth*:—

This is the castle of King Macbeth.

And here he feasts, when the daylight wanes,
And the moon is abroad o'er the blasted heath,
His earls and thanes.

A hundred harpers, with harps of gold,
Harp thorough the night high festival:
And the revelling music thereof is roll'd
From hall to hall,

While the wassailers shout till the rafters rock
O'er the ringing board: and their shout is borne
To the courts outside where the crowing cock
Is waked ere morn.

But there is one room of that castle old,
In a cobwebb'd turret,—a dismal room,
For in it a corpse sits crown'd and cold.
There are four know whom.

One of those four the king must be:
But the secret is his, and he keepeth it well.
The others that know are the witches three;
But they are in hell.

You may ask, What does this mean? Of course the poet is referring to Shakespeare's tragedy; and we all know that the cold crowned corpse must be the corpse of Duncan. That is not what the poet wants to tell us—not at all. What he means to tell us really is this:—that only one person can keep a secret,—that nobody in this world can be trusted. If the witches do not tell the secret, it is only because they happened to be inhabitants of hell, and rarely able to communicate with human kind. Well, an experienced diplomatist may be obliged to believe this, or to act upon it; but the expression of the belief does not make us feel comfortable. I imagine that some of the extraordinary narrative poems of Meredith cannot die: the workmanship is too fine, and the mockery too profound to allow of their being forgotten. They are triumphs in a particular direction; and we cannot help admiring. But they are morally unhealthy, depressing, and not at all the kind of work which a student should allow himself to think of imitating. Of all kinds of light verse this Mephistophelian kind is the least commendable.

COVENTRY PATMORE

One more minor poet to mention—and I leave the subject. Coventry Patmore¹ has given to anthology some beautiful work, and deserves more than slight attention. He did something that nobody else had tried to do before him, and made a popular success. This was to treat romantically the subject of his own courtship and marriage in a kind of narrative poem, divided into a number of books. In no country, is a man expected to make his own love affairs the subject of his poetry, overtly and boldly; and it requires a great deal of courage to attempt such a thing. I do not mean that he used his own name, or his wife's name in his verses: he changed the names, but acknowledged the fact in his prologue. Yet, somehow or other, the poem

¹ Coventry Kersey Dighton Patmore (1823-1896).

was so thoroughly sincere, and so marked by passages of real eloquence and beauty, that the public were greatly pleased instead of being greatly shocked. The book went through seven different editions at an early date;—Ruskin quoted from it, and highly praised it; other men of letters did the same; then the anthologists made excerpts from it. The name of this book is *The Angel in the House*,¹ — the angel being woman in the abstract as represented by Mrs. Patmore in the concrete. But although I speak lightly, just to give you an idea of the extraordinary undertaking, do not understand me to speak lightly of the book itself. It has great faults; but it has beauties that will live for generations; and Ruskin's praise was not undeserved. Nevertheless I cannot recommend you to attempt to read the whole volume;—the story reflects pictures of a particular society in which you could scarcely be interested. Read only the extracts chosen by good judges.

But, better than *The Angel in the House*, in almost every way — that is, considered as poetry — was the collection of poems entitled *The Unknown Eros*,² which appeared a few years before Patmore's death. A number of the poems are mystical and religious; — Patmore undertook nothing more than to adopt the Greek story of Eros and Psyche to the framework of Christian mysticism. Probably you would not care to read the mystical poetry. But there is much more than mysticism in the book: there are several beautiful and very tender lyrical pieces relating to domestic lives. Through these in particular Patmore will live in English poetry. From this book was taken that exquisite child-poem entitled *The Toys* which I quoted to you some time ago.³ Perhaps you will remember the measure in which that poem was written. It is a very irregular measure; and the whole book is written in the same measure, which is called catalectic verse. This big word is from the Greek: the Greek word "catalexis" meaning "pause." So catalectic verse would seem to mean only verse that is regulated by pause. But the true meaning of catalectic verse is

¹ *The angel in the house. The betrothal*, 2 pts 1854-6.

² *The unknown Eros and other odes*, I-XXXI, 1877.

³ See *On Poetry* ch. xi "Poems about Children."

iambic verse in which the poet can make the pause fall whenever he pleases, and make the lines as long or as short as the emotion of the moment may justify. It is really written according to artistic rule, though it seems to be without any rules at all. Some of the lines are only one foot long; some of them are eight feet long: but the average is six iambic feet, if there is an average. Southey, you may remember, wrote a good deal in catalectic verse; and Patmore appears to have been influenced by Southey; but we might say the very same thing about Matthew Arnold. At all events Patmore did very finely in this measure; and I have talked to you about it thus long simply because I think that Japanese poets can obtain some future inspiration from the study of English catalectic verse. I imagine that a Japanese form of narrative poetry might be invented in which the poet could alter the length of his lines, the number of his accents, to suit the emotion of the moment. The fact that you cannot make with Japanese words anything exactly corresponding to iambic feet makes no difference at all. It is not a question of feet that I would insist upon, but a question of liberty to lengthen or shorten the measure according to emotional circumstance. If any of you be interested by this suggestion of mine, it would be well to look at *The Unknown Eros* and observe the great liberty afforded by this rhymeless verse. For you can have catalectic verse without any rhyme at all.

SUMMARY

This is all that I think is necessary now to say of the history of Victorian poetry. It reached its first perfect form in Tennyson; its second, or neo-romantic form, in Rossetti, Browning, Swinburne and their followers. The progress from Wordsworth to Rossetti has been sufficiently traced, I think: you must have recognized that the whole course of the movement has been towards greater freedom as well as towards

greater perfection. In the pre-Victorian romantic period neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge had been able to allow themselves the freedom that after poets fought for and won. The first fighters, except Shelley, were considerably hampered by old traditions: even Byron had classic leaning of the stiffer kind. And then neither Byron nor Shelley could, in their role of revolutionists, immediately bring about a wholesome change;—indeed they could not very well have defined what changes were really desirable. No changes of any importance can be made suddenly and with good result in literature. All progress must be gradual. The greater part of a century had to pass before the romantic movement could do the highest of which it was capable. You must understand that it has now exhausted itself—no man knows for how long. All the great poets, or nearly all, are dead; and the three old men who survived from the neo-romantic period, have ceased to create. English magazines are full of trifling poems by trifling singers; but there is no great verse. It is now winter in the fields of poetry;—the birds have ceased to sing, or have gone away, all except the sparrows, which keep chattering and chirping to no purpose. Except one singer of ballads, there is no name worth mentioning to you. Some people think that the changes of thought caused by scientific discovery and by evolutionistic philosophy have brought this about. If that be true, we may hope to see a revival of poetry before many years—poetry expressing the new thought of a larger scale. I very much fear that the cause is not so simple,—that it is much more due to the growth of individualism in society, and the ever increasing harshness of social condition. If this be true even a hundred years or more may pass before another really great English poet arises in England. We can now turn to the second period of prose,—the second period of the novel.