GEORGE SAINTSBURY

ESSAYS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE, 1780-1860

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Содержание

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PREFACE

Of the essays in this volume, the introductory paper on "The Kinds of Criticism" has not before appeared in print. All the rest, with one exception (the Essay on Lockhart which appeared in the *National Review*), were originally published in *Macmillan's Magazine*. To the Editors and Publishers of both these periodicals I owe my best thanks for permission to reprint the articles. To the Editor of *Macmillan's Magazine* in particular (to whom, if dedications were not somewhat in ill odour, I should, in memory of friendship old and new, have dedicated the book), I am further indebted for suggesting several of the subjects as well as accepting the essays. These appear in the main as they appeared; but I have not scrupled to alter phrase or substance where it seemed desirable, and I have in a few places restored passages which had been sacrificed to the usual exigencies of space. In two cases, those of Lockhart and De Quincey, I have thought it best to discuss, in a brief appendix, some questions which have presented themselves since the original publications.

In consequence of these alterations and additions as well as for other reasons, it may be convenient to give the dates and places of the original appearance of each essay. They are as follows: —

> Lockhart, *National Review*, Aug. 1884. Borrow, *Macmillan's Magazine*, Jan. 1886. Peacock, do. April 1886. Wilson (under the title of "Christopher North"), do. July 1886. Hazlitt, do. March 1887. Jeffrey, do. August 1887. Moore, do. March 1888. Sydney Smith, do. May 1888. Praed, do. Sept. 1888. Leigh Hunt, do. April 1889. Crabbe, do. June 1889. Hogg, do. Sept. 1889. De Quincey, do. June 1890.

The present order is chronological, following the birth-years of the authors discussed.

INTRODUCTION
THE KINDS OF CRITICISM

It is probably unnecessary, and might possibly be impertinent, to renew here at any length the old debate between reviewers as reviewers, and reviewers as authors – the debate whether the reissue of work contributed to periodicals is desirable or not. The plea that half the best prose literature of this century would be inaccessible if the practice had been forbidden, and the retort that anything which can pretend to keep company with the best literature of the century will be readily relieved from the objection, at once sum up the whole quarrel, and leave it undecided. For my own part, I think that there is a sufficient connection of subject in the following chapters, and I hope that there is a sufficient uniformity of treatment. The former point, as the least important, may be dismissed first. All the literature here discussed is – with the exception of Crabbe's earliest poems, and the late aftermath of Peacock and Borrow – work of one and the same period, the first half of the present century. The authors criticised were all contemporaries; with only one exception, if with one, they were all writing more or less busily within a single decade, that of 1820 to 1830. And they have the further connection (which has at least the reality of having been present to my mind in selecting them), that while every one of them was

a man of great literary power, hardly one has been by general consent, or except by private crotchet would be, put among the very greatest. They stand not far below, but distinctly below, Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, and Keats. Yet again, they agree in the fact that hardly one of them has yet been securely set in the literary niche which is his due, all having been at some time either unduly valued or unduly neglected, and one or two never having yet received even due appreciation. The greatest of all critics was accused, unjustly, of having a certain dislike of clear, undoubted supremacy. It would be far more fair to say that Sainte-Beuve had eminently, what perhaps all critics who are not mere carpers on the one hand, or mere splashers of superlatives on the other, have more or less – an affection for subjects possessing but qualified merit, and so giving to criticism a certain additional interest in the task of placing and appraising them.

This last sentence may not meet with universal assent, but it will bring me conveniently to the second part of my subject. I should not have republished these essays if I had not thought that, whatever may be their faults (and a man who does not see the faults of his own writing on revising it a second time for the press after an interval, must be either a great genius or an intolerable fool), they possess a certain unity of critical method. Nor should I have republished them if it had seemed to me that this method was exactly identical with that of any other critic of the present day in England. I have at least endeavoured to wear my rue with

a difference, and that not merely for the sake of differing.

Mr. Goldwin Smith, whose work is not likely to be impeached for defect either in form or in substance, wrote but a few months ago, in melancholy mood, that the province of criticism appeared to be now limited to the saying of fine things. I agree with him that this is one vicious extreme of the popular conception of the art; but in order to define correctly, we cannot be contented with one only. The other, as it seems to me, is fixed by the notion, now warmly championed by some younger critics both at home and abroad, that criticism must be of all things "scientific." For my own part, I have gravely and strenuously endeavoured to ascertain from the writings both of foreign critics (the chief of whom was the late M. Hennequin in France), and of their disciples at home, what "scientific" criticism means. In no case have I been able to obtain any clear conception of its connotation in the mouths or minds of those who use the phrase. The new heaven and the new earth which they promise are no doubt to be very different from our own old earth and heaven; of that they are sure, and their sureness does not fail to make itself plain. But what the flora and fauna, the biology and geology of the new heaven and earth are to be, I have never succeeded in ascertaining. The country would appear to be like that Land of Ignorance which, as Lord Brooke says, "none can describe until he be past it." Only I have perceived that when this "scientific" criticism sticks closest to its own formulas and ways, it appears to me to be very bad criticism; and that when, as sometimes happens,

it is good criticism, its ways and formulas are not perceptibly distinguishable from those of criticism which is not "scientific." For the rest, it is all but demonstrable that "scientific" literary criticism is impossible, unless the word "scientific" is to have its meaning very illegitimately altered. For the essential qualities of literature, as of all art, are communicated by the individual, they depend upon idiosyncrasy: and this makes science in any proper sense powerless. *She* can deal only with classes, only with general laws; and so long as these classes are constantly reduced to "species of one," and these laws are set at nought by incalculable and singular influences, she must be constantly baffled and find all her elaborate plant of formulas and generalisations useless. Of course, there are generalisations possible in literature, and to such I may return presently; but scientific criticism of literature must always be a contradiction in terms. You may to some considerable extent ascertain the general laws of language, of metre, of music, as applied to verbal rhythm and cadence; you may classify the subjects which appeal to the general, and further classify their particular manners of appeal; you may arrange the most ingenious "product-of-the-circumstances" theories about race, climate, religion. But always sooner or later, and much more often sooner than later, the mocking demon of the individual, or, if a different phrase be preferred, the great and splendid mystery of the idiosyncrasy of the artist, will meet and baffle you. You will find that on the showing of this science falsely so called, there is no reason why Chapelain should not be a poet, and none

why Shakespeare is. You will ask science in vain to tell you why some dozen or sixteen of the simplest words in language arranged by one man or in one fashion, why a certain number of dabs of colour arranged by another man or in another fashion, make a permanent addition to the delight of the world, while other words and other dabs of colour, differently arranged by others, do not. To put the matter yet otherwise, the whole end, aim, and object of literature and the criticism of literature, as of all art, and the criticism of all art, is beauty and the enjoyment of beauty. With beauty science has absolutely nothing to do.

It is no doubt the sense, conscious or unconscious, of this that has inclined men to that other conception of criticism as a saying of fine things, of which Mr. Goldwin Smith complains, and which certainly has many votaries, in most countries at the present day. These votaries have their various kinds. There is the critic who simply uses his subject as a sort of springboard or platform, on and from which to display his natural grace and agility, his urbane learning, his faculty of pleasant wit. This is perhaps the most popular of all critics, and no age has ever had better examples of him than this age. There is a more serious kind who founds on his subject (if indeed founding be not too solemn a term) elaborate descants, makes it the theme of complicated variations. There is a third, closely allied to him, who seeks in it apparently first of all, and sometimes with no further aim, an opportunity for the display of style. And lastly (though as usual all these kinds pervade and melt into one another, so that, while

in any individual one may prevail, it is rare to find an individual in whom that one is alone present) there is the purely impressionist critic who endeavours in his own way to show the impression which the subject has, or which he chooses to represent that it has, produced on him. This last is in a better case than the others; but still he, as it seems to me, misses the full and proper office of the critic, though he may have an agreeable and even useful function of his own.

For the full and proper office of the critic (again as it seems to me) can never be discharged except by those who remember that "critic" means "judge." Expressions of personal liking, though they can hardly be kept out of criticism, are not by themselves judgment. The famous "J'aime mieux Alfred de Musset," though it came from a man of extraordinary mental power and no small specially critical ability, is not criticism. Mere *obiter dicta* of any kind, though they may be most agreeable and even most legitimate sets-off to critical conversation, are not criticism. The most admirable discourses from the merely literary point of view on taste, Shakespeare, and the musical glasses, with some parenthetic reference to the matter in hand, are not criticism. There must be at least some attempt to take in and render the whole virtue of the subjects considered, some effort to compare them with their likes in other as well as the same languages, some endeavour to class and value them. And as a condition preliminary to this process, there must, I think, be a not inconsiderable study of widely differing periods, forms,

manners, of literature itself. The test question, as I should put it, of the value of criticism is "What idea of the original would this critic give to a tolerably instructed person who did not know that original?" And again, "How far has this critic seen steadily and seen whole, the subject which he has set himself to consider? How far has he referred the main peculiarities of that subject to their proximate causes and effects? How far has he attempted to place, and succeeded in placing, the subject in the general history of literature, in the particular history of its own language, in the collection of authors of its own department?" How far, in short, has he applied what I may perhaps be excused for calling the comparative method in literature to the particular instance? I have read very famous and in their way very accomplished examples of literature ostensibly critical, in which few if any of these questions seem to have been even considered by the critic. He may have said many pretty things; he may have shown what a clever fellow he is; he may have in his own person contributed good literature to swell the literary sum. But has he done anything to aid the general grasp of that literary sum, to place his man under certain lights and in certain aspects, with due allowance for the possibility of other aspects and other lights? Very often, I think, it must be admitted that he has not. I should be the first to admit that my own attempts to do this are unsuccessful and faulty; and I only plead for them that they are such attempts, and that they have been made on the basis of tolerably wide and tolerably careful reading.

For, after all, it is this reading which is the main and principal thing. It will not of course by itself make a critic; but few are the critics that will ever be made without it. We have at this moment an awful example of an exceedingly clever writer who has commenced critic, disdaining this preparation. Some of my friends jeer or comminate at Mr. Howells; for my part I only shudder and echo the celebrated "There, but for the grace of God." Here is a clever man, a very clever man, an excellent though of late years slightly depraved practitioner in one branch of art, who, suddenly and without preparation, takes to another, and becomes a spectacle to men and angels. I hope that we shall one day have a collection of Mr. Howells's critical *dicta* on novels and other things; they will be one of the most valuable, one of the most terrible of books as showing what happens when a man speaks without knowledge. To read what Mr. Howells says of Mr. Thackeray is almost an illiberal education. The reason of the error is quite obvious. It is simply that the clever American does not know; he has not sufficient range of comparison. For my own part, I should not dare to continue criticising so much as a circulating library novel, if I did not perpetually pay my respects to the classics of many literatures: and I am not sure that I do not appreciate the classics of many literatures all the better from my not infrequent reading of circulating library novels.

The only objection of validity that I have ever seen taken to what I have ventured to call comparative criticism, is that it proceeds too much, as the most learned of living French

critics once observed of an English writer, *par cases et par compartiments*, that is to say, as I understand M. Brunetière, with a rather too methodical classification. This, however, was written some seven or eight years ago, and since then I have found M. Brunetière speaking about critical method as distinguished from the science of criticism, and insisting on the necessity of comparison, not less positively, and no doubt with far more authority, than I have done myself. Yet I half think that M. Brunetière, like most of us, does not practise quite up to the level of his preaching; and I should say that on mediæval literature, on Romantic literature, and on some other things, his own excellent censorship might be further improved by a still more catholic sympathy, and a still more constant habit of looking at everything and every writer in conjunction with their analogues and their opposites in the same and other literatures. This constant reference of comparison may indeed stand in the way of those flowing deliverances of personal opinion, in more or less agreeable language, which are perhaps, or rather certainly, what is most popular in criticism; I do not think that they will ever stand in the way of criticism proper. As I understand that long and difficult art, its end, as far as the individual is concerned, is to provide the mind with a sort of conspectus of literature, as a good atlas thoroughly conned provides a man with a conspectus of the *orbis terrarum*. To the man with a geographical head, the mention of a place at once suggests its bearings to other places, its history, its products, all its relations in short; to the man with

a critical head, the mention of a book or an author should call up a similar mental picture. The picture, indeed, will never be as complete in the one instance as in the other, because the intellect and the artistic faculty of man are far vaster than this planet, far more diverse, far more intricately and perplexingly arranged than all its abundant material dispositions and products. The life of Methuselah and the mind of Shakespeare together could hardly take the whole of critical knowledge to be their joint province. But the area of survey may be constantly increased; the particularity of knowledge constantly made more minute.

Another objection, more fantastic in appearance but rather attractive in its way, is that the comparative critic becomes too much of a universal lover, and too little of an enthusiast, that he has an irritating and ungentlemanly habit of seeing blemishes in the greatest, a pottering and peddling fancy for discovering beauties in the most insignificant; that he lacks the exclusiveness and the fastidiousness of intellectual aristocracy, the fervour and rapture of æsthetic passion. To this, one can answer little more than, "It may be so." Certainly the critic of this kind will very rarely be able to indulge in the *engouement* which is the apparent delight of some of his class. He will deal very cautiously in superlatives, and his commendations, when he gives them, will sometimes have, to more gushing persons, the slightly ludicrous air which attached to the modest boast of somebody that he was "the third best authority in England on gray shirtings." On the other hand, the critic of this kind will not be able to neglect the

uninteresting with the serene nonchalance of some of his fellows. He will sometimes have to look back on days and months and years of laborious reading and say to himself, "Were it not well for us, as others use, to take all this for granted?" But to say this is to say no more than that the thorough-going practice of any art and mystery involves a great deal of tedious, thankless, and even positively fruitless work, brushes away a good many illusions, and interferes a good deal with personal comfort. Cockaigne is a delightful country, and the Cockaigne of criticism is as agreeable as the other provinces. But none of these provinces has usually been accounted a wise man's paradise.

It may be asked, "What is the end which you propose for this comparative reading? A method must lead somewhere; whither does this method lead? or does it lead only to statistics and classifications?" Certainly it does not, or at least should not. It leads, like all method, to generalisations which, though as I have said I do not believe that they have attained or ever will attain the character of science, at least throw no small light and interest on the study of literature as a whole, and of its examples as particulars. It gives, I think (speaking as a fool), a constantly greater power of distinguishing good work from bad work, by giving constantly nearer approach (though perhaps it may never wholly and finally attain) to the knowledge of the exact characteristics which distinguish the two. And the way in which it does this is by a constant process of weakening or strengthening, as the case may be, the less or more correct

generalisations with which the critic starts, or which he forms in the early days of his reading. There has often been brought against some great critics the charge that their critical standards have altered at different times of their career. This simply means that they have been constantly applying the comparative method, and profiting by the application. After all, there are few, though there are some, absolute truths in criticism; and a man will often be relatively right in condemning, from certain aspects and in certain combinations, work which, under other aspects and in other combinations, he has been relatively quite as right in admiring. Occasionally, no doubt, there will be an apparent exception to the rule of critical development, as in the case of Hazlitt: but that remarkable exception does not fail to justify the rule. For in truth, Hazlitt's critical range was not so wide as his penetration was deep; and he avows, almost exultingly, that after a comparatively early time of life, he practically left off reading. That is to say, he carefully avoided renewing his plant, and he usually eschewed new material – conditions which, no doubt, conduce to the uniformity, and, within obvious limits, are not prejudicial to the excellence of the product.

It is possible that the title "The Kinds of Criticism" may have excited in some readers expectations of the discussion of a subject which has not yet been handled. We have recently seen revived the sempiternal argument between authors and critics – an argument in which it may be as well to say that the present writer has not yet taken part either anonymously or otherwise.

The authors, or some of them, have remarked that they have never personally benefited by criticism; and the critics, after their disagreeable way, have retorted that this was obvious. A critic of great ingenuity, my friend Mr. Andrew Lang, has, with his usual humour, suggested that critics and reviewers are two different kinds, and have nothing to do with each other essentially, though accidentally, and in the imperfect arrangements of the world, the discharge of their functions may happen to be combined in the same person. As a matter of practice, this is no doubt too often the case; as a matter of theory, nothing ought much less to be the case. I think that if I were dictator, one of the first non-political things that I should do, would be to make the order of reviewers as close a one, at least, as the bench of judges, or the staff of the Mint, or of any public establishment of a similar character. That any large amount of reviewing is determined by fear or favour is a general idea which has little more basis than a good many other general ideas. But that a very large amount of reviewing is determined by doubtless well-meaning incompetence, there is no doubt whatever. It is on the whole the most difficult kind of newspaper writing, and it is on the whole the most lightly assigned and the most irresponsibly performed. I have heard of newspapers where the reviews depended almost wholly on the accident of some of the staff taking a holiday, or being laid for a time on the shelf, or being considered not up to other work; of others, though this I own is scarcely credible, where the whole reviewing was farmed out to a manager, to be allotted to devils as

good to him seemed; of many where the reviews were a sort of exercising-ground on which novices were trained, broken-down hacks turned out to grass, and invalids allowed a little gentle exercise. And I know of not a few papers and not a few reviewers in which and by whom, errors and accidents excepted, the best work possible is given to one of the most important kinds of work. Of common mistakes on the subject, which are not merely silly crazes, such as the log-rolling craze and the five-pound note craze and the like, the worst known to me, though it is shared by some who should know better, is that a specialist is the best reviewer. I do not say that he is always the worst; but that is about as far as my charity, informed by much experience, can go. Even if he has no special craze or megrim, and does not decide offhand that a man is hopeless because he calls Charles the Great Charlemagne, or *vice versâ*, he is constantly out of focus. The perfect reviewer would be (and the only reviewer whose reviews are worth reading is he who more or less approximates to this ideal) the Platonic or pseudo-Platonic philosopher who is "second best in everything," who has enough special knowledge not to miss merits or defects, and enough general knowledge to estimate the particular subject at, and not above, its relative value to the whole. There have been good critics who were unable to bring themselves down to the mere reading of ephemeral work, but I do not think they were the better for this; I am sure that there never was a good reviewer, even of the lowest trash, who was not *in posse* or *in esse* a good critic of the highest and most

enduring literature. The writer of funny articles, and the "slater," and the intelligent *compte-rendu* man, and the person who writes six columns on the general theory of poetry when he professes to review Mr. Apollo's last book, may do all these things well and not be good critics; but then all these things may be done, and done well, and yet not be good reviews.

Whether the reviewer and the critic are valuable members of society or useless encumbrances, must be questions left to the decision of the world at large, which apparently is not in a hurry to decide either way. There are, no doubt, certain things that the critic, whether he be critic major or critic minor, Sainte-Beuve or Mr. Gall, cannot do. He cannot certainly, and for the present, sell or prevent the sale of a book. "You slated this and it has gone through twenty editions" is not a more uncommon remark than the other, "They slated that and you extol it to the skies." Both, as generally urged, rest on fallacy. In the first case, nothing was probably farther from the critic's intention than to say "this book is not popular"; the most that he intended was "this book is not good." In the second case, it has been discovered of late (it is one of the few things that we have discovered) that very rarely has any really good thing, even in the most famous or infamous attacks on it, been attacked, even with a shadow of success, for its goodness. The critics were severe on Byron's faults, on Keats's faults, and on the present Laureate's faults; they were seldom severe on their goodness, though they often failed to appreciate it fully.

This, however, is in one sense a digression, for there is

no criticism of contemporary work in this volume. I think, however, as I have just endeavoured to point out, that criticism of contemporary work and criticism of classics should proceed on the same lines, and I think that both require the same qualities and the same outfit. Nor am I certain that if narrow inquiry were made, some of the best criticism in all times and in all languages would not be found in the merest casual reviewing. That in all cases the critic must start from a wide comparative study of different languages and literatures, is the first position to be laid down. In the next place he must, I think, constantly refer back his sensations of agreement and disagreement, of liking and disliking, in the same comparative fashion. "Why do I like the *Agamemnon* and dislike Mr. Dash's five-act tragedy?" is a question to be constantly put, and to be answered only by a pretty close personal inquiry as to what "I" really do like in the *Agamemnon* and do dislike in Mr. Dash. And in answering it, it will hardly be possible to consider too large a number of instances of all degrees of merit, from Aeschylus himself to Mr. Dash himself, of all languages, of all times. Let Englishmen be compared with Englishmen of other times to bring out this set of differences, with foreigners of modern times to bring out that, with Greeks and Romans to bring out the other. Let poets of old days be compared with poets of new, classics with romantics, rhymed with unrhymed. Let the straitest doctrinaire criticism of men of talent like Boileau and simpletons like Rymer be compared with the fullest appreciations of Coleridge and Hazlitt,

of Sainte-Beuve and Mr. Arnold. "Compare, always compare" is the first axiom of criticism.[1]

The second, I think, is "Always make sure, as far as you possibly can, that what you like and dislike is the literary and not the extra-literary character of the matter under examination." Make sure, that is to say, that admiration for the author is not due to his having taken care that the Whig dogs or the Tory dogs shall not have the best of it, to his having written as a gentleman for gentlemen, or as an uneasy anti-aristocrat for uneasy anti-aristocrats, as a believer (fervent or acquiescent) in the supernatural, or as a person who lays it down that miracles do not happen, as an Englishman or a Frenchman, a classic or a romantic. Very difficult indeed is the chase and discovery of these enemies: for extra-literary prejudices are as cunning as winter hares or leaf-insects, in disguising themselves by

[1] Only by dint of this constant comparison, can the critic save himself from the besetting error which makes men believe that there is some absolute progress in life and art, instead of, for the most part, mere eddyings-round in the same circle. I am tempted to glance at this, because of a passage which I read while this Essay was a-writing, a passage signed by a person whom I name altogether for the sake of honour, Mr. James Sully. "If we compare," says Mr. Sully, "Fielding for example with Balzac, Thackeray, or one of the great Russian novelists, we see at once what a simple toylike structure used to serve art for a human world. A mind versed in life as contemporary fiction depicts it, feels, on turning to the already antiquated forms of the eighteenth century, that it has to divest itself for the nonce of more than half its equipment of habitual thought and emotion." This might serve as text for a long sermon, I only cite it in passing as an interesting example of the *idola specus* which beset a clever man who loses the power of comparative vision, and sees *Tom Jones* as a toylike structure with the *Kreutzer Sonata* beside it as a human world.

simulating literary forms.

Lastly, never be content without at least endeavouring to connect cause and effect in some way, without giving something like a reason for the faith that is in you. No doubt the critic will often be tempted, will sometimes be actually forced to say, "'J'aime mieux Alfred de Musset,' and there's an end of it." All the imperfect kinds, as they seem to me, of criticism are recommended by the fact that they are, unlike some other literary matter, not only easier writing but also easier reading. The agreeable exercises of style where adjectives meet substantives to whom they never thought they could possibly be introduced (as a certain naughty wit has it), the pleasant chatter about personal reminiscences, the flowers of rhetoric, the fruits of wit, may not be easy, but they are at any rate easier than fashioning some intelligent and intelligible response to the perpetual "Why?" the *quare stans* of criticism.

In the following pages, I shall no doubt be found, like other people, to have come very far short of my own ideal, and my own precepts. I may even say that I have knowingly and intentionally come short of them to some extent. Biographical and anecdotic detail has, I believe, much less to do with the real appreciation of the literary value of an author than is generally thought. In rare instances, it throws a light, but the examples in which we know practically nothing at all, as in that of Shakespeare, or only a few leading facts as in that of Dante, are not those in which criticism is least useful or least satisfactory. At the same time biographical

and anecdotic details please most people, and if they are not allowed to shoulder out criticism altogether, there can be no harm in them. For myself, I should like to have the whole works of every author of merit, and I should care little to know anything whatever about his life; but that is a mere private opinion and possibly a private crotchet. Accordingly some space has been given in most of these Essays to a sketch of the life of the subject. Nor has it seemed advisable (except as a matter of necessary, but very occasional, digression) to argue at length upon abstract and general questions such as the definition of poetry, or the kinds and limits of the novel. Large as is the body of criticism so-called which the last hundred years have seen, it may be doubted whether there is even yet accumulated a sufficient *corpus* of really critical discussion of individuals. If I have in these Essays contributed even a very little to such an accumulation, I shall have done that which I purposed.

I
CRABBE

There is a certain small class of persons in the history of literature the members of which possess, at least for literary students, an interest peculiar to themselves. They are the writers who having attained, not merely popular vogue, but fame as solid as fame can ever be, in their own day, having been praised by the praised, and having as far as can be seen owed this praise to none of the merely external and irrelevant causes – politics, religion, fashion or what not – from which it sometimes arises, experience in a more or less short time after their death the fate of being, not exactly cast down from their high place, but left respectfully alone in it, unvisited, unincensed, unread. Among these writers, over the gate of whose division of the literary Elysium the famous, "Who now reads Bolingbroke?" might serve as motto, the author of "The Village" and "Tales of the Hall" is one of the most remarkable. As for Crabbe's popularity in his own day there is no mistake about that. It was extraordinarily long, it was extremely wide, it included the select few as well as the vulgar, it was felt and more or less fully acquiesced in by persons of the most diverse tastes, habits, and literary standards. His was not the case, which occurs now and then, of a man who makes a great reputation in early life and long afterwards

preserves it because, either by accident or prudence, he does not enter the lists with his younger rivals, and therefore these rivals can afford to show him a reverence which is at once graceful and cheap. Crabbe won his spurs in full eighteenth century, and might have boasted, altering Landor's words, that he had dined early and in the best of company, or have parodied Goldsmith, and said, "I have Johnson and Burke: all the wits have been here." But when his studious though barren manhood was passed, and he again began, as almost an old man, to write poetry, he entered into full competition with the giants of the new school, whose ideals and whose education were utterly different from his. While "The Library" and "The Village" came to a public which still had Johnson, which had but just lost Goldsmith, and which had no other poetical novelty before it than Cowper, "The Borough" and the later Tales entered the lists with "Marmion" and "Childe Harold," with "Christabel" and "The Excursion," even with "Endymion" and "The Revolt of Islam." Yet these later works of Crabbe met with the fullest recognition both from readers and from critics of the most opposite tendencies. Scott, the most generous, and Wordsworth,[2] the most grudging, of all

[2] In 1834, after Crabbe's death, Wordsworth wrote to his son: "Your father's works … will last, from their combined merit as poetry and truth, full as long as anything that has been expressed in verse since the date of their first appearance." A very different estimate by Wordsworth of Crabbe has been published in Mr. Clayden's *Rogers and his Contemporaries*. Here he argues at great length that "Crabbe's verses can in no sense be called poetry," and that "nineteen out of twenty of his pictures are mere matter of fact." It is fair to say that this was in 1808, before the appearance of "The Borough" and of almost all Crabbe's best work.

the poets of the day towards their fellows, united in praising Crabbe; and unromantic as the poet of "The Village" seems to us he was perhaps Sir Walter's favourite English bard. Scott read him constantly, he quotes him incessantly; and no one who has read it can ever forget how Crabbe figures in the most pathetic biographical pages ever written – Lockhart's account of the death at Abbotsford. Byron's criticism was as weak as his verse was powerful, but still Byron had no doubt about Crabbe. The utmost flight of memory or even of imagination can hardly get together three contemporary critics whose standards, tempers, and verdicts, were more different than those of Gifford, Jeffrey, and Wilson. Yet it is scarcely too much to say that they are all in a tale about Crabbe. In this unexampled chorus of eulogy there rose (for some others who can hardly have admired him much were simply silent) one single note, so far as I know, or rather one single rattling peal of thunder on the other side. It is true that this was significant enough, for it came from William Hazlitt.

Yet against this chorus, which was not, as has sometimes happened, the mere utterance of a loud-voiced few, but was echoed by a great multitude who eagerly bought and read Crabbe, must be set the almost total forgetfulness of his work which has followed. It is true that of living or lately living persons in the first rank of literature some great names can be cited on his side; and what is more, that these great names show the same curious diversity in agreement which has been already noticed as one of Crabbe's triumphs. The translator of Omar Khayyám,

his friend the present Laureate, and the author of "The Dream of Gerontius," are men whose literary ideals are known to be different enough; yet they add a third trinity as remarkable as those others of Gifford, Jeffrey, and Wilson, of Wordsworth, Byron, and Scott. Much more recently Mr. Courthope has used Crabbe as a weapon in that battle of his with literary Liberalism which he has waged not always quite to the comprehension of his fellow-critics; Mr. Leslie Stephen has discussed him as one who knows and loves his eighteenth century. But who reads him? Who quotes him? Who likes him? I think I can venture to say, with all proper humility, that I know Crabbe pretty well; I think I may say with neither humility nor pride, but simply as a person whose business it has been for some years to read books, and articles, and debates, that I know what has been written and said in England lately. You will find hardly a note of Crabbe in these writings and sayings. He does not even survive, as "Matthew Green, who wrote 'The Spleen,'" and others survive, by quotations which formerly made their mark, and are retained without a knowledge of their original. If anything is known about Crabbe to the general reader, it is the parody in "Rejected Addresses," an extraordinarily happy parody no doubt, in fact rather better Crabbe in Crabbe's weakest moments than Crabbe himself. But naturally there is nothing of his best there; and it is by his best things, let it be repeated over and over in face of all opposition, that a poet must be judged.

Although Crabbe's life, save for one dramatic revolution, was

one of the least eventful in our literary history, it is by no means one of the least interesting. Mr. Kebbel's book[3] gives a very fair summary of it; but the Life by Crabbe's son which is prefixed to the collected editions of the poems, and on which Mr. Kebbel's own is avowedly based, is perhaps the more interesting of the two. It is written with a curious mixture of the old literary state and formality, and of a feeling on the writer's part that he is not a literary man himself, and that not only his father, but Mr. Lockhart, Mr. Moore, Mr. Bowles and the other high literary persons who assisted him were august beings of another sphere. This is all the more agreeable, in that Crabbe's sons had advantages of education and otherwise which were denied to their father, and might in the ordinary course of things have been expected to show towards him a lofty patronage rather than any filial reverence. The poet himself was born at Aldborough, a now tolerably well-known watering-place (the fortune of which was made by Mr. Wilkie Collins in *No Name*) on Christmas Eve, 1754. That not uncommon infirmity of noble minds which seeks to prove distinguished ancestry seems to have had no hold on the plain common sense of the Crabbe family, who maintained themselves to be at the best Norfolk yeomen, and though they possessed a coat-of-arms, avowed with much frankness that they did not know how they got it. A hundred and forty years ago they had apparently lost even the dignity of yeomanhood, and occupied stations quite in the lower rank of the middle class

[3] *Great Writers; Crabbe*: by T. E. Kebbel. London, 1888.

as tradesmen, non-commissioned officers in the navy or the merchant service, and so forth. George Crabbe, the grandfather, was collector of customs at Aldborough, but his son, also a George, was a parish schoolmaster and a parish clerk before he returned to the Suffolk port as deputy collector and then as salt-master, or collector of the salt duties. He seems to have had no kind of polish, and late in life was a mere rough drinking exciseman; but his education, especially in mathematics, appears to have been considerable, and his ability in business not small. The third George, his eldest son, was also fairly though very irregularly educated for a time, and his father, perceiving that he was "a fool about a boat," had the rather unusual common sense to destine him to a learned profession. Unluckily his will was better than his means, and while the profession which Crabbe chose or which was chosen for him – that of medicine – was not the best suited to his tastes or talents, the resources of the family were not equal to giving him a full education, even in that. He was still at intervals employed in the Customs warehouses at "piling up butter and cheese" even after he was apprenticed at fourteen to a country surgeon. The twelve years which he spent in this apprenticeship, in an abhorred return for a short time to the cheese and butter, in a brief visit to London, where he had no means to walk the hospitals, and in an attempt to practise with little or no qualification at Aldborough itself, present a rather dismal history of apprenticeship which taught nothing. But Love was, for once, most truly and literally Crabbe's solace and

his salvation, his master and his patron. When he was barely eighteen, still an apprentice, and possessed, as far as can be made out, of neither manners nor prospects, he met a certain Miss Sarah Elmy. She was three or four years older than himself and much better connected, being the niece and eventual co-heiress of a wealthy yeoman squire. She was, it is said, pretty; she was evidently accomplished, and she seems to have had access to the country society of those days. But Mira, as Crabbe called her, perhaps merely in the fashion of the eighteenth century, perhaps in remembrance of Fulke Greville's heroine (for he knew his Elizabethans rather well for a man of those days), and no doubt also with a secret joy to think that the last syllables of her Christian name and surname in a way spelt the appellation, fell in love with the boy and made his fortune. But for her Crabbe would probably have subsided, not contentedly but stolidly, into the lot of a Doctor Slop of the time, consoling himself with snuff (which he always loved) and schnaps (to which we have hints that in his youth he was not averse). Mira was at once unalterably faithful to him and unalterably determined not to marry unless he could give her something like a position. Their long engagement (they were not married till he was twenty-nine and she was thirty-three) may, as we shall see, have carried with it some of the penalties of long engagements. But it is as certain as any such thing can be that but for it English literature would have lacked the name of Crabbe.

There is no space here to go through the sufferings of the

novitiate. At last, at the extreme end of 1779, Crabbe made up his mind once more to seek his fortune, this time by aid of literature only, in London. His son too has printed rare scraps of a very interesting Journal to Mira which he kept during at least a part of the terrible year of struggle which he passed there. He saw the riots of '80; he canvassed, always more or less in vain, the booksellers and the peers; he spent three-and-sixpence of his last ten shillings on a copy of Dryden; he was much less disturbed about imminent starvation than by the delay of a letter from Mira ("my dearest Sally" she becomes with a pathetic lapse from convention, when the pinch is sorest) or by the doubt whether he had enough left to pay the postage of one. He writes prayers (but not for the public eye), abstracts of sermons for Mira, addresses (rather adulatory) to Lord Shelburne, which received no answer. All this has the most genuine note that ever man of letters put into his work, for whatever Crabbe was or was not, now or at any time, he was utterly sincere; and his sincerity makes his not very abundant letters and journals unusually interesting. At last, after a year, during which his means of subsistence are for the most part absolutely unknown, he, as he says himself, fixed "by some propitious influence, in some happy moment" on Edmund Burke as the subject of a last appeal.

Nothing in all literary history is, in a modest way and without pearls and gold, quite so like a fairy tale as the difference in Crabbe's fortunes which this propitious influence brought about. On the day when he wrote to Burke he was, as he said in the

letter, "an outcast, without friends, without employment, without bread." In some twenty-four hours (the night-term of which he passed in ceaselessly pacing Westminster Bridge to cheat the agony of expectation) he was a made man. It was not merely that, directly or indirectly, Burke procured him a solid and an increasing income. He did much more than that. Crabbe, like most self-educated men, was quite uncritical of his own work: Burke took him into his own house for months, encouraged him to submit his poems, criticised them at once without mercy and with judgment, found him publishers, found him a public, turned him from a raw country boy into a man who at least had met society of the best kind. It is a platitude to say that for a hundred persons who will give money or patronage there is scarcely one who will take trouble of this kind; and if any devil's advocate objects the delight of producing a "lion," it may be answered that for Burke at least this delight would not have been delightful at all.

The immediate form which the patronage of Burke and that, soon added, of Thurlow took, is one which rather shocks the present day. They made Crabbe turn to the Church, and got a complaisant bishop to ordain him. They sent him (a rather dangerous experiment) to be curate in his own native place, and finally Burke procured him the chaplaincy at Belvoir. The young Duke of Rutland, who had been made a strong Tory by Pitt, was fond of letters, and his Duchess Isabel, who was, – like her elder kinswoman, Dryden's Duchess of Ormond —

A daughter of the rose, whose cheeks unite
The varying beauties of the red and white,

in other words, a Somerset, was one of the most beautiful and gracious women in England. Crabbe, whose strictly literary fortunes I postpone for the present, was apparently treated with the greatest possible kindness by both; but he was not quite happy,[4] and his ever-prudent Mira still would not marry him. At last Thurlow's patronage took the practical form (it had already taken that, equally practical, of a hundred pounds) of two small Chancellor's livings in Dorsetshire, residence at which was dispensed with by the easy fashions of the day. The Duke of Rutland, when he was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, did not take Crabbe with him, a circumstance which has excited some unnecessary discussion; but he gave him free quarters at Belvoir, where he and his wife lived for a time before they migrated to a neighbouring curacy – his wife, for even Mira's prudence had yielded at last to the Dorsetshire livings, and they were married in December 1783. They lived together for nearly thirty years, in, as it would seem, unbroken mutual devotion, but

[4] Although constantly patronised by the Rutland family in successive generations, and honoured by the attentions of "Old Q." and others, his poems are full of growls at patrons. These cannot be mere echoes of Oldham and Johnson, but their exact reason is unknown. His son's reference to it is so extremely cautious that it has been read as a confession that Crabbe was prone to his cups, and quarrelsome in them – a signal instance of the unwisdom of not speaking out.

Mrs. Crabbe's health seems very early to have broken down, and a remarkable endorsement of Crabbe's on a letter of hers has been preserved. I do not think Mr. Kebbel quotes it; it ends, "And yet happiness was denied" – a sentence fully encouraging to Mr. Browning and other good men who have denounced long engagements.[5] The story of Crabbe's life after his marriage may be told very shortly. His first patron died in Ireland, but the duchess with some difficulty prevailed on Thurlow to exchange his former gifts for more convenient and rather better livings in the neighbourhood of Belvoir, at the chief of which, Muston, Crabbe long resided. The death of his wife's uncle made him leave his living and take up his abode for many years at Glemham, in Suffolk, only to find, when he returned, that (not unnaturally, though to his own great indignation) dissent had taken bodily possession of the parish. His wife died in 1813, and the continued kindness, after nearly a generation, of the house of Rutland, gave him the living of Trowbridge, in Wiltshire, with a small Leicestershire incumbency near Belvoir added, instead of Muston. At Trowbridge he lived nearly twenty years, revisiting London society, making the acquaintance personally (he had

[5] Rogers told Ticknor in 1838 that "Crabbe was nearly ruined by grief and vexation at the conduct of his wife for above seven years, at the end of which time she proved to be insane." But this was long after her death and Crabbe's, and it is not clear that while she was alive Rogers knew Crabbe at all. Nor is there the slightest reason for attaching to the phrase "vexation at the conduct" the sense which it would usually have. A quatrain found after Crabbe's death wrapped round his wife's wedding-ring is touching, and graceful in its old-fashioned way.The ring so worn, as you behold,So thin, so pale, is yet of gold:The passion such it was to prove;Worn with life's cares, love yet was love.

already known him by letter) of Sir Walter, paying a memorable visit to Edinburgh, flirting in an elderly and simple fashion with many ladies, writing much and being even more of a lion in the society of George the Fourth's reign than he had been in the days of George the Third. He died on 3rd February 1832.

Crabbe's character is not at all enigmatical, and emerges as clearly in those letters and diaries of his which have been published, as in anecdotes of him by others. Perhaps the famous story of his politely endeavouring to talk French to divers Highlanders, during George the Fourth's visit to Edinburgh, is slightly embroidered – Lockhart, who tells it, was a mystifier without peer. If he did gently but firmly extinguish a candle-snuff while Wordsworth and Sir George Beaumont were indulging in poetic ecstasies over the beautiful undulations of the smoke, there may have been something to say for him as Anne Scott, to whom Wordsworth told the story, is said to have hinted, from the side of one of the senses. His life, no less than his work, speaks him a man of amiable though by no means wholly sweet temper, of more common sense than romance, and of more simplicity than common sense. His nature and his early trials made him not exactly sour, but shy, till age and prosperity mellowed him; but simplicity was his chief characteristic in age and youth alike.

The mere facts of his strictly literary career are chiefly remarkable for the enormous gap between his two periods of productiveness. In early youth he published some verses in the magazines and a poem called "Inebriety," which appeared

at Ipswich in 1775. His year of struggle in London saw the publication of another short piece "The Candidate," but with the ill-luck which then pursued him, the bookseller who brought it out became bankrupt. His despairing resort to Burke ushered in "The Library," 1781, followed by "The Village," 1783, which Johnson revised and improved not a little. Two years later again came "The Newspaper," and then twenty-two years passed without anything appearing from Crabbe's pen. It was not that he was otherwise occupied, for he had little or nothing to do, and for the greater part of the time, lived away from his parish. It was not that he was idle, for we have his son's testimony that he was perpetually writing, and that holocausts of manuscripts in prose and verse used from time to time to be offered up in the open air, for fear of setting the house on fire by their mass. At last, in 1807, "The Parish Register" appeared, and three years later "The Borough" – perhaps the strongest division of his work. The miscellaneous Tales came in 1812, the "Tales of the Hall" in 1819. Meanwhile and afterwards, various collected editions appeared, the last and most complete being in 1829 – a very comely little book in eight volumes. His death led to the issue of some "Posthumous Tales" and to the inclusion by his son of divers fragments both in the Life and in the Works. It is understood, however, that there are still considerable remains in manuscript; perhaps they might be published with less harm to the author's fame and with less fear of incurring a famous curse than in the case of almost any other poet.

For Crabbe, though by no means always at his best, is one of the most curiously equal of verse-writers. "Inebriety" and such other very youthful things are not to be counted; but between "The Village" of 1783 and the "Posthumous Tales" of more than fifty years later, the difference is surprisingly small. Such as it is, it rather reverses ordinary experience, for the later poems exhibit the greater play of fancy, the earlier the exacter graces of form and expression. Yet there is nothing really wonderful in this, for Crabbe's earliest poems were published under severe surveillance of himself and others, and at a time which still thought nothing of such value in literature as correctness, while his later were written under no particular censorship, and when the Romantic revival had already, for better or worse, emancipated the world. The change was in Crabbe's case not wholly for the better. He does not in his later verse become more prosaic, but he becomes considerably less intelligible. There is a passage in "The Old Bachelor," too long to quote but worth referring to, which, though it may be easy enough to understand it with a little goodwill, I defy anybody to understand in its literal and grammatical meaning. Such welters of words are very common in Crabbe, and Johnson saved him from one of them in the very first lines of "The Village." Yet Johnson could never have written the passages which earned Crabbe his fame. The great lexicographer knew man in general much better than Crabbe did; but he nowhere shows anything like Crabbe's power of seizing and reproducing man in particular. Crabbe is one of the first

and certainly one of the greatest of the "realists" who, exactly reversing the old philosophical signification of the word, devote themselves to the particular only. Yet of the three small volumes by which he, after his introduction to Burke, made his reputation, and on which he lived for a quarter of a century, the first and the last display comparatively little of this peculiar quality. "The Library" and "The Newspaper" are characteristic pieces of the school of Pope, but not characteristic of their author. The first catalogues books as folio, quarto, octavo, and so forth, and then cross-catalogues them as law, physic, divinity, and the rest, but is otherwise written very much in the air. "The Newspaper" suited Crabbe a little better, because he pretty obviously took a particular newspaper and went through its contents – scandal, news, reviews, advertisements – in his own special fashion: but still the subject did not appeal to him. In "The Village," on the other hand, contemporaries and successors alike have agreed to recognise Crabbe in his true vein. The two famous passages which attracted the suffrages of judges so different as Scott and Wordsworth, are still, after more than a hundred years, fresh, distinct, and striking. Here they are once more: —

> Theirs is yon House that holds the parish poor,
> Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;
> There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,
> And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day; —
> There children dwell who know no parents' care;
> Parents who know no children's love dwell there!

Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,
Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed;
Dejected widows, with unheeded tears,
And crippled age with more than childhood fears;
The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!
The moping idiot and the madman gay.

Anon, a figure enters, quaintly neat,
All pride and business, bustle and conceit;
With looks unaltered by these scenes of woe,
With speed that, entering, speaks his haste to go,
He bids the gazing throng around him fly,
And carries fate and physic in his eye:
A potent quack, long versed in human ills,
Who first insults the victim whom he kills;
Whose murderous hand a drowsy Bench protect,
And whose most tender mercy is neglect.
Paid by the parish for attendance here,
He wears contempt upon his sapient sneer;
In haste he seeks the bed where Misery lies,
Impatience marked in his averted eyes;
And some habitual queries hurried o'er,
Without reply he rushes on the door:
His drooping patient, long inured to pain,
And long unheeded, knows remonstrance vain,
He ceases now the feeble help to crave
Of man; and silent, sinks into the grave.

The poet executed endless variations on this class of theme,

but he never quite succeeded in discovering a new one, though in process of time he brought his narrow study of the Aldborough fishermen and townsfolk down still more narrowly to individuals. His landscape is always marvellously exact, the strokes selected with extraordinary skill *ad hoc* so as to show autumn rather than spring, failure rather than hope, the riddle of the painful earth rather than any joy of living. Attempts have been made to vindicate Crabbe from the charge of being a gloomy poet, but I cannot think them successful; I can hardly think that they have been quite serious. Crabbe, our chief realist poet, has an altogether astonishing likeness to the chief prose realist of France, Gustave Flaubert, so far as his manner of view goes, for in point of style the two have small resemblance. One of the most striking things in Crabbe's biography is his remembrance of the gradual disillusion of a day of pleasure which, as a child, he enjoyed in a new boat of his father's. We all of us, except those who are gifted or cursed with the proverbial duck's back, have these experiences and these remembrances of them. But most men either simply grin and bear it, or carrying the grin a little farther, console themselves by regarding their own disappointments from the ironic and humorous point of view. Crabbe, though not destitute of humour, does not seem to have been able or disposed to employ it in this way. Perhaps he never quite got over the terrible and, for the most part unrecorded, year in London: perhaps the difference between the Mira of promise and the Mira of possession – the "happiness denied" –

had something to do with it: perhaps it was a question of natural disposition with him. But when, years afterwards, as a prosperous middle-aged man, he began his series of published poems once more with "The Parish Register," the same manner of seeing is evident, though the minute elaboration of the views themselves is almost infinitely greater. Nor did he ever succeed in altering this manner, if he ever tried to do so.

With the exception of his few Lyrics, the most important of which, "Sir Eustace Grey" (one of his very best things), is itself a tale in different metre, and a few other occasional pieces of little importance, the entire work of Crabbe, voluminous as it is, is framed upon a single pattern, the vignettes of "The Village" being merely enlarged in size and altered in frame in the later books. The three parts of "The Parish Register," the twenty-four Letters of "The Borough," some of which have single and others grouped subjects, and the sixty or seventy pieces which make up the three divisions of Tales, consist almost exclusively of heroic couplets, shorter measures very rarely intervening. They are also almost wholly devoted to narratives, partly satirical, partly pathetic, of the lives of individuals of the lower and middle class chiefly. Jeffrey, who was a great champion of Crabbe and allotted several essays to him, takes delight in analysing the plots or stories of these tales; but it is a little amusing to notice that he does it for the most part exactly as if he were criticising a novelist or a dramatist. "The object," says he, in one place, "is to show that a man's fluency of speech depends very much upon

his confidence in the approbation of his auditors": "In Squire Thomas we have the history of a mean, domineering spirit," and so forth. Gifford in one place actually discusses Crabbe as a novelist. I shall make some further reference to this curious attitude of Crabbe's admiring critics. For the moment I shall only remark that the singularly mean character of so much of Crabbe's style, the "style of drab stucco," as it has been unkindly called, which is familiar from the wicked wit that told how the youth at the theatre

> Regained the felt and felt what he regained,

is by no means universal. The most powerful of all his pieces, the history of Peter Grimes, the tyrant of apprentices, is almost entirely free from it, and so are a few others. But it is common enough to be a very serious stumbling-block. In nine tales out of ten this is the staple: —

> Of a fair town where Dr. Rack was guide,
> His only daughter was the boast and pride.

Now that is unexceptionable verse enough, but what is the good of putting it in verse at all? Here again: —

> For he who makes me thus on business wait,
> Is not for business in a proper state.

It is obvious that you cannot trust a man who, unless he is intending a burlesque, can bring himself to write like that. Crabbe not only brings himself to it, but rejoices and luxuriates in the style. The tale from which that last luckless distich is taken, "The Elder Brother," is full of pathos and about equally full of false notes. If we turn to a far different subject, the very vigorously conceived "Natural Death of Love," we find a piece of strong and true satire, the best thing of its kind in the author, which is kept up throughout. Although, like all satire, it belongs at best but to the outer courts of poetry, it is so good that none can complain. Then the page is turned and one reads: —

> "I met," said Richard, when returned to dine,
> "In my excursion with a friend of mine."

It may be childish, it may be uncritical, but I own that such verse as that excites in me an irritation which destroys all power of enjoyment, except the enjoyment of ridicule. Nor let any one say that pedestrian passages of the kind are inseparable from ordinary narrative in verse and from the adaptation of verse to miscellaneous themes. If it were so the argument would be fatal to such adaptation, but it is not. Pope seldom indulges in such passages, though he does sometimes: Dryden never does. He can praise, abuse, argue, tell stories, make questionable jests, do anything in verse that is still poetry, that has a throb and a quiver and a swell in it, and is not merely limp, rhythmed prose.

In Crabbe, save in a few passages of feeling and a great many of mere description – the last an excellent setting for poetry but not necessarily poetical – this rhythmed prose is everywhere. The matter which it serves to convey is, with the limitations above given, varied, and it is excellent. No one except the greatest prose novelists has such a gallery of distinct, sharply etched characters, such another gallery of equally distinct scenes and manner-pieces, to set before the reader. Exasperating as Crabbe's style sometimes is, he seldom bores – never indeed except in his rare passages of digressive reflection. It has, I think, been observed, and if not the observation is obvious, that he has done with the pen for the neighbourhood of Aldborough and Glemham what Crome and Cotman have done for the neighbourhood of Norwich with the pencil. His observation of human nature, so far as it goes, is not less careful, true, and vivid. His pictures of manners, to those who read them at all, are perfectly fresh and in no respect grotesque or faded, dead as the manners themselves are. His pictures of motives and of facts, of vice and virtue, never can fade, because the subjects are perennial and are truly caught. Even his plays on words, which horrified Jeffrey —

> Alas! your reverence, wanton thoughts I grant
> Were once my motive, now the thoughts of want,

and the like – are not worse than Milton's jokes on the guns. He has immense talent, and he has the originality which sets

talent to work in a way not tried by others, and may thus be very fairly said to turn it into genius. He is all this and more. But despite the warnings of a certain precedent, I cannot help stating the case which we have discussed in the old form, and asking, was Crabbe a poet?

And thus putting the question, we may try to sum up. It is the gracious habit of a summing-up to introduce, if possible, a dictum of the famous men our fathers that were before us. I have already referred to Hazlitt's criticism on Crabbe in *The Spirit of the Age*, and I need not here urge at very great length the cautions which are always necessary in considering any judgment of Hazlitt's.[6] Much that he says even in the brief space of six or eight pages which he allots to Crabbe is unjust; much is explicably, and not too creditably, unjust. Crabbe was a successful man, and Hazlitt did not like successful men: he was a clergyman of the Church of England, and Hazlitt did not love clergymen of the Church of England: he had been a duke's chaplain, and Hazlitt loathed dukes: he had been a Radical, and was still (though Hazlitt does not seem to have thought him so) a Liberal, but his Liberalism had been Torified into a tame variety. Again, Crabbe, though by no means squeamish, is the most unvoluptuous and dispassionate of all describers of inconvenient things; and Hazlitt was the author of *Liber Amoris*. Accordingly there is much that is untrue in the tissue of denunciation which the critic devotes to the poet. But there are two passages in this tirade which alone might

[6] See below, Essay on Hazlitt.

show how great a critic Hazlitt himself was. Here in a couple of lines ("they turn, one and all, on the same sort of teasing, helpless, unimaginative distress") is the germ of one of the most famous and certainly of the best passages of the late Mr. Arnold; and here again is one of those critical taps of the finger which shivers by a touch of the weakest part a whole Rupert's drop of misapprehension. Crabbe justified himself by Pope's example. "Nothing," says Hazlitt, "can be more dissimilar. Pope describes what is striking: Crabbe would have described merely what was there… In Pope there was an appeal to the imagination, you see what was passing *in a poetical point of view*."

Even here (and I have not been able to quote the whole passage) there is one of the flaws, which Hazlitt rarely avoided, in the use of the word "striking"; for, Heaven knows, Crabbe is often striking enough. But the description of Pope as showing things "in a poetical point of view" hits the white at once, wounds Crabbe mortally, and demolishes realism, as we have been pleased to understand it for the last generation or two. Hazlitt, it is true, has not followed up the attack, as I shall hope to show in an instant; but he has indicated the right line of it. As far as mere treatment goes, the fault of Crabbe is that he is pictorial rather than poetic, and photographic rather than pictorial. He sees his subject steadily, and even in a way he sees it whole; but he does not see it in the poetical way. You are bound in the shallows and the miseries of the individual; never do you reach the large freedom of the poet who looks at the universal. The absence of

selection, of the discarding of details that are not wanted, has no doubt a great deal to do with this – Hazlitt seems to have thought that it had everything to do. I do not quite agree with him there. Dante, I think, was sometimes quite as minute as Crabbe; and I do not know that any one less hardy than Hazlitt himself would single out, as Hazlitt expressly does, the death-bed scene of Buckingham as a conquering instance in Pope to compare with Crabbe. We know that the bard of Twickenham grossly exaggerated this. But suppose he had not? Would it have been worse verse? I think not. Although the faculty of selecting instead of giving all, as Hazlitt himself justly contends, is one of the things which make *poesis non ut pictura*, it is not all, and I think myself that a poet, if he is a poet, could be almost absolutely literal. Shakespeare is so in the picture of Gloucester's corpse. Is that not poetry?

The defect of Crabbe, as it seems to me, is best indicated by reference to one of the truest of all dicta on poetry, the famous maxim of Joubert – that the lyre is a winged instrument and must transport. There is no wing in Crabbe, there is no transport, because, as I hold (and this is where I go beyond Hazlitt), there is no music. In all poetry, the very highest as well as the very lowest that is still poetry, there is something which transports, and that something in my view is always the music of the verse, of the words, of the cadence, of the rhythm, of the sounds superadded to the meaning. When you get the best music married to the best meaning, then you get, say, Shakespeare: when you get some

music married to even moderate meaning, you get, say, Moore. Wordsworth can, as everybody but Wordsworthians holds, and as some even of Wordsworthians admit, write the most detestable doggerel and platitude. But when any one who knows what poetry is reads —

> Our noisy years seem moments in the being
> Of the eternal silence,

he sees that, quite independently of the meaning, which disturbs the soul of no less a person than Mr. John Morley, there is one note added to the articulate music of the world – a note that never will leave off resounding till the eternal silence itself gulfs it. He leaves Wordsworth, he goes straight into the middle of the eighteenth century, and he sees Thomson with his hands in his dressing-gown pockets biting at the peaches, and hears him between the mouthfuls murmuring —

> So when the shepherd of the Hebrid Isles,
> Placed far amid the melancholy main,

and there is another note, as different as possible in kind yet still alike, struck for ever. Yet again, to take example still from the less romantic poets, and in this case from a poet, whom Mr. Kebbel specially and disadvantageously contrasts with Crabbe, when we read the old schoolboy's favourite —

When the British warrior queen,
Bleeding from the Roman rods,

we hear the same quality of music informing words, though again in a kind somewhat lower, commoner, and less. In this matter, as in all matters that are worth handling at all, we come of course *ad mysterium*. Why certain combinations of letters, sounds, cadences, should almost without the aid of meaning, though no doubt immensely assisted by meaning, produce this effect of poetry on men no man can say. But they do; and the chief merit of criticism is that it enables us by much study of different times and different languages to recognise some part of the laws, though not the ultimate and complete causes, of the production.

Now I can only say that Crabbe does not produce, or only in the rarest instances produces, this effect on me, and what is more, that on ceasing to be a patient in search of poetical stimulant and becoming merely a gelid critic, I do not discover even in Crabbe's warmest admirers any evidence that he produced this effect on them. Both in the eulogies which Mr. Kebbel quotes, and in those that he does not quote, I observe that the eulogists either discreetly avoid saying what they mean by poetry, or specify for praise something in Crabbe that is not distinctly poetical. Cardinal Newman said that Crabbe "pleased and touched him at thirty years' interval," and pleaded that this answers to the "accidental definition of a classic." Most certainly;

but not necessarily to that of a poetical classic. Jeffrey thought him "original and powerful." Granted; but there are plenty of original and powerful writers who are not poets. Wilson gave him the superlative for "original and vivid painting." Perhaps; but is Hogarth a poet? Jane Austen "thought she could have married him." She had not read his biography; but even if she had would that prove him to be a poet? Lord Tennyson is said to single out the following passage, which is certainly one of Crabbe's best, if not his very best: —

> Early he rose, and looked with many a sigh
> On the red light that filled the eastern sky;
> Oft had he stood before, alert and gay,
> To hail the glories of the new-born day;
> But now dejected, languid, listless, low,
> He saw the wind upon the water blow,
> And the cold stream curled onward as the gale
> From the pine-hill blew harshly down the vale;
> On the right side the youth a wood surveyed,
> With all its dark intensity of shade;
> Where the rough wind alone was heard to move
> In this, the pause of nature and of love
> When now the young are reared, and when the old,
> Lost to the tie, grow negligent and cold:
> Far to the left he saw the huts of men,
> Half hid in mist that hung upon the fen:
> Before him swallows gathering for the sea,
> Took their short flights and twittered o'er the lea;

And near the bean-sheaf stood, the harvest done,
And slowly blackened in the sickly sun;
All these were sad in nature, or they took
Sadness from him, the likeness of his look
And of his mind – he pondered for a while,
Then met his Fanny with a borrowed smile.

It is good: it is extraordinarily good: it could not be better of its kind. It is as nearly poetry as anything that Crabbe ever did – but is it quite? If it is (and I am not careful to deny it) the reason, as it seems to me, is that the verbal and rhythmical music here, with its special effect of "transporting" of "making the common as if it were uncommon," is infinitely better than is usual with Crabbe, that in fact there is music as well as meaning. Hardly anywhere else, not even in the best passages of the story of Peter Grimes, shall we find such music; and in its absence it may be said of Crabbe much more truly than of Dryden (who carries the true if not the finest poetical undertone with him even into the rant of Almanzor and Maximin, into the interminable arguments of "Religio Laici" and "The Hind and the Panther") that he is a classic of our prose.

Yet the qualities which are so noteworthy in him are all qualities which are valuable to the poet, and which for the most part are present in good poets. And I cannot help thinking that this was what actually deceived some of his contemporaries and made others content for the most part to acquiesce in an exaggerated estimate of his poetical merits. It must be

remembered that even the latest generation which, as a whole and unhesitatingly, admired Crabbe, had been brought up on the poets of the eighteenth century, in the very best of whom the qualities which Crabbe lacks had been but sparingly and not eminently present. It must be remembered too, that from the great vice of the poetry of the eighteenth century, its artificiality and convention, Crabbe is conspicuously free. The return to nature was not the only secret of the return to poetry; but it was part of it, and that Crabbe returned to nature no one could doubt. Moreover he came just between the school of prose fiction which practically ended with *Evelina* and the school of prose fiction which opened its different branches with *Waverley* and *Sense and Sensibility*. His contemporaries found nowhere else the narrative power, the faculty of character-drawing, the genius for description of places and manners, which they found in Crabbe; and they knew that in almost all, if not in all the great poets there is narrative power, faculty of character-drawing, genius for description. Yet again, Crabbe put these gifts into verse which at its best was excellent in its own way, and at its worst was a blessed contrast to Darwin or to Hayley. Some readers may have had an uncomfortable though only half-conscious feeling that if they had not a poet in Crabbe they had not a poet at all. At all events they made up their minds that they had a poet in him.

But are we bound to follow their example? I think not. You could play on Crabbe that odd trick which used, it is said, to be actually played on some mediæval verse chroniclers and unrhyme

him – that is to say, put him into prose with the least possible changes – and his merits would, save in rare instances, remain very much as they are now. You could put other words in the place of his words, keeping the verse, and it would not as a rule be much the worse. You cannot do either of these things with poets who are poets. Therefore I shall conclude that save at the rarest moments, moments of some sudden gust of emotion, some happy accident, some special grace of the Muses to reward long and blameless toil in their service, Crabbe was not a poet. But I have not the least intention of denying that he was great, and all but of the greatest among English writers.

II
HOGG

"What on earth," it was once asked "will you make of Hogg?" I think that there is something to be made of Hogg, and that it is something worth the making. In the first place, it is hardly possible, without studying "the Shepherd" pretty close, fully to appreciate three other persons, all greater, and one infinitely greater, than himself; namely, Wilson, Lockhart, and Scott. To the two first he was a client in the Roman sense, a plaything, something of a butt, and an invaluable source of inspiration or at least suggestion. Towards the last he occupied a very curious position, never I think quite paralleled elsewhere – the position of a Boswell who would fain be a Boswell and is not allowed to be, who has wild notions that he is really a greater man than Johnson and occasionally blasphemes against his idol, but who in the intervals is truly Boswellian. In the second place, he has usually hitherto been not criticised at all, but either somewhat sneered at or else absurdly over-praised. In the third place, as both Scott and Byron recognised, he is probably the most remarkable example we have of absolute self-education, or of no education: for Burns was an academically instructed student in comparison with Hogg. In the fourth, he produced, amid a mass of rubbish, some charming verse and one prose-story which,

though it is almost overlooked by the general, some good judges are, I believe, agreed with me in regarding as one of the very best things of its kind, while it is also a very curious literary puzzle.

The anecdotic history, more or less authentic, of the Ettrick Shepherd would fill volumes, and I must try to give some of the cream of it presently. The non-anecdotic part may be despatched in a few sentences. The exact date of his birth is not known, but he was baptized on 9th December 1770. His father was a good shepherd and a bad farmer – a combination of characteristics which Hogg himself inherited unimpaired and unimproved. If he had any early education at all, he forgot it so completely that he had, as a grown-up man, to teach himself writing if not reading a second time. He pursued his proper vocation for about thirty years, during the latter part of which time he became known as a composer of very good songs, "Donald Macdonald" being ranked as the best. He printed a few as a pamphlet in the first year of the century, but met with little success. Then he fell in with Scott, to whom he had been introduced as a purveyor of ballads, not a few of which his mother, Margaret Laidlaw, knew by heart. This old lady it was who gave Scott the true enough warning that the ballads were "made for singing and no for reading." Scott in his turn set Hogg on the track of making some money by his literary work, and Constable published *The Mountain Bard* together with a treatise called *Hogg on Sheep*, which I have not read, and of which I am not sure that I should be a good critic if I had. The two books brought Hogg three hundred pounds.

This sum he poured into the usual Danaids' vessel of the Scotch peasant – the taking and stocking of a farm, which he had neither judgment to select, capital to work, nor skill to manage; and he went on doing very much the same thing for the rest of his life. The exact dates of that life are very sparely given in his own *Autobiography*, in his daughter's *Memorials*, and in the other notices of him that I have seen. He would appear to have spent four or five years in the promising attempt to run, not one but two large stock-farms. Then he tried shepherding again, without much success; and finally in 1810, being forty years old and able to write, he went to Edinburgh and "commenced," as the good old academic phrase has it, literary man. He brought out a new book of songs called *The Forest Minstrel*, and then he started a periodical, *The Spy*. On this, as he tells us, Scott very wisely remonstrated with him, asking him whether he thought he could be more elegant than Addison or Mackenzie. Hogg replied with his usual modesty that at any rate he would be "mair original." The originality appears to have consisted in personality; for Hogg acknowledges one exceedingly insolent attack on Scott himself, which Scott seems, after at first resenting it (and yet Hogg tells us elsewhere that he never resented any such thing), to have forgiven. He had also some not clearly known employments of the factorship or surveyorship kind; he was much patronised by two worthy hatters, Messrs. Grieve and Scott, and in 1813 the book which contains all his best verse, *The Queen's Wake*, was published. It was deservedly successful; but, by a species

of bad luck which pursued Hogg with extraordinary assiduity, the two first editions yielded nothing, as his publisher was not solvent. The third, which Blackwood issued, brought him in good profit. Two years later he became in a way a made man. He had very diligently sought the patronage of Harriet, Duchess of Buccleuch, and, his claims being warmly supported by Scott and specially recommended by the Duchess on her deathbed to her husband, Hogg received rent free, or at a peppercorn, the farm of Mossend, Eltrive or Altrive. It is agreed even by Hogg's least judicious admirers that if he had been satisfied with this endowment and had then devoted himself, as he actually did, to writing, he might have lived and died in comfort, even though his singular luck in not being paid continued to haunt him. But he must needs repeat his old mistake and take the adjacent farm of Mount Benger, which, with a certain reckless hospitable way of living for which he is not so blamable, kept him in difficulties all the rest of his life and made him die in them. He lived twenty years longer; married a good-looking girl much his superior in rank and twenty years his junior, who seems to have made him an excellent wife; engaged in infinite magazine- and book-writing, of which more presently; became the inspirer, model and butt of *Blackwood's Magazine*; constantly threatened to quarrel with it for traducing him, and once did so; loved Edinburgh convivialities more well than wisely; had the very ill luck to survive Scott and to commit the folly of writing a pamphlet (more silly than anything else) on the "domestic manners" of that great

man, which estranged Lockhart, hitherto his fast friend; paid a visit to London in 1832, whereby hang tales; and died himself on 21st November 1835.

Such, briefly but not I think insufficiently given, is the Hogg of history. The Hogg of anecdote is a much more considerable and difficult person. He mixes himself up with or becomes by turns (whichever phrase may be preferred) the Shepherd of the *Noctes* and the Hogg who is revealed to us, say his panegyrists, with "uncalled-for malignity" in Lockhart's *Life of Scott*. But these panegyrists seem to forget that there are two documents which happen not to be signed either "John Gibson Lockhart" or "Christopher North," and that these documents are Hogg's *Autobiography*, published by himself, and the *Domestic Manners of Sir Walter Scott*, likewise authenticated. In these two we have the Hogg of the *ana* put forward pretty vividly. For instance, Hogg tells us how, late in Sir Walter's life, he and his wife called upon Scott. "In we went and were received with all the affection of old friends. But his whole discourse was addressed to my wife, while I was left to shift for myself… In order to attract his attention from my wife to one who I thought as well deserved it, I went close up to him with a scrutinising look and said, 'Gudeness guide us, Sir Walter, but ye hae gotten a braw gown.'" The rest of the story is not bad, but less characteristic. Immediately afterwards Hogg tells his own speech about being "not sae yelegant but mair original" than Addison. Then there is the other capital legend, also self-told, how he said to Scott,

"Dear Sir Walter, ye can never suppose that I belang to your school of chivalry! Ye are the king of that school, but I'm the king of the mountain and fairy school, which is a far higher ane than yours!" "This," says Professor Veitch, a philosopher, a scholar, and a man of letters, "though put with an almost sublime egotism, is in the main true." Almost equally characteristic is the fact that, after beginning his pamphlet by calling Lockhart "the only man thoroughly qualified for the task" of writing Scott's life, Hogg elsewhere, in one of the extraordinary flings that distinguish him, writes: "Of Lockhart's genius and capabilities Sir Walter always spoke with the greatest enthusiasm: more than I thought he deserved. For I knew him a great deal better than Sir Walter did, and, whatever Lockhart may pretend, I knew Sir Walter a thousand times better than he did."

Now be it remembered that these passages are descriptive of Hogg's Hogg, to use the always useful classification of Dr. Holmes. To complete them (the actual texts are too long to give here) it is only necessary to compare the accounts of a certain dinner at Bowhill given respectively by Hogg in the *Domestic Manners* and by Lockhart in his biography, and also those given in the same places of the one-sided quarrel between Scott and Hogg, because the former, according to his almost invariable habit, refused to collaborate in Hogg's *Poetic Mirror*. In all this we have the man's own testimony about himself. It is not in the least incompatible with his having been, as his panegyrists contend, an affectionate friend, husband, and father; a very good

fellow when his vanity or his whims were not touched; and inexhaustibly fertile in the kind of rough profusion of flower and weed that uncultivated soil frequently produces. But it most certainly is also not inconsistent, but on the contrary highly consistent, with the picture drawn by Lockhart in his great book; and it shows how, to say the least and mildest, the faults and foibles of the curious personage known as "the Shepherd of the *Noctes*" were not the parts of the character on which Wilson need have spent, or did spend, most of his invention. Even if the "boozing buffoon" had been a boozing buffoon and nothing more, Hogg, who confesses with a little affected remorse, but with evident pride, that he once got regularly drunk every night for some six weeks running, till "an inflammatory fever" kindly pulled him up, could not have greatly objected to this part of the matter. The wildest excesses of the *Eidolon*-Shepherd's vanity do not exceed that speech to Scott which Professor Veitch thinks so true; and the quaintest pranks played by the same shadow do not exceed in quaintness the immortal story of Hogg being introduced to Mrs. Scott for the first time, extending himself on a sofa at full length (on the excuse that he "thought he could never do wrong to copy the lady of the house," who happened at the time to be in a delicate state of health), and ending by addressing her as "Charlotte." This is the story that Mrs. Garden, Hogg's daughter, without attempting to contest its truth, describes as told by Lockhart with "uncalled-for malignity." Now when anybody who knows something of Lockhart comes across

"malignant," "scorpion," or any term of the kind, he, if he is wise, merely shrugs his shoulders. All the literary copy-books have got it that Lockhart was malignant, and there is of course no more to be said.[7] But something may be done by a little industrious clearing away of fiction in particulars. It may be most assuredly and confidently asserted that no one reading the *Life of Scott* without knowing what Hogg's friends have said of it would dream of seeing malignity in the notices which it contains of the Shepherd. Before writing this paper I gave myself the trouble, or indulged myself in the pleasure (for perhaps that is the more appropriate phrase in reference to the most delightful of biographies, if not of books), of marking with slips of paper all the passages in Lockhart referring to Hogg, and reading them consecutively. I am quite sure that any one who does this, even knowing little or nothing of the circumstances, will wonder where on earth the "ungenerous assaults," the "virulent detraction," the "bitter words," the "false friendship," and so forth, with which Lockhart has been charged, are to be found. But any one who knows that Hogg had, just before his own death, and while the sorrow of Sir Walter's end was fresh, published the possibly not ill-intentioned but certainly ill-mannered pamphlet referred to – a pamphlet which contains among other things, besides the grossest impertinences about Lady Scott's origin, at least one insinuation that Scott wrote Lockhart's books for him – if any one further knows (I think the late Mr. Scott

[7] For something more, however, see the Essay on Lockhart below.

Douglas was the first to point out the fact) that Hogg had calmly looted Lockhart's biography of Burns, then he will think that the "scorpion," instead of using his sting, showed most uncommon forbearance. This false friend, virulent detractor and ungenerous assailant describes Hogg as "a true son of nature and genius with a naturally kind and simple character." He does indeed remark that Hogg's "notions of literary honesty were exceedingly loose." But (not to mention the Burns affair, which gave me some years ago a clue to this sentence) the remark is subjoined to a letter in which Hogg placidly suggests that he shall write an autobiographic sketch, and that Scott, transcribing it and substituting the third person for the first, shall father it as his own. The other offence I suppose was the remark that "the Shepherd's nerves were not heroically strung." This perhaps might have been left out, but if it was the fact (and Hogg's defenders never seem to have traversed it) it suggested itself naturally enough in the context, which deals with Hogg's extraordinary desire, when nearly forty, to enter the militia as an ensign. Moreover the same passage contains plenty of kindly description of the Shepherd. Perhaps there is "false friendship" in quoting a letter from Scott to Byron which describes Hogg as "a wonderful creature," or in describing the Shepherd's greeting to Wilkie, "Thank God for it! I did not know you were so young a man" as "graceful," or in the citation of Jeffrey's famous blunder in selecting for special praise a fabrication of Hogg's among the "Jacobite Ballads," or in the genial description, without a touch of ridicule, of Hogg at the St.

Ronan's Games. The sentence on Hogg's death is indeed severe: "It had been better for his memory had his end been of earlier date; for he did not follow his benefactor until he had insulted his dust." It is even perhaps a little too severe, considering Hogg's irresponsible and childlike nature. But Lockhart might justly have retorted that men of sixty-four have no business to be irresponsible children; and it is certainly true that in this unlucky pamphlet Hogg distinctly accuses Scott of anonymously puffing himself at his, Hogg's, expense, of being over and over again jealous of him, of plagiarising his plots, of sneering at him, and, if the passage has any meaning, of joining a conspiracy of "the whole of the aristocracy and literature of the country" to keep Hogg down and "crush him to a nonentity." Neither could Lockhart have been exactly pleased at the passage where Scott is represented as afraid to clear the character of an innocent friend to the boy Duke of Buccleuch.

> He told me that which I never knew nor suspected before; that a certain gamekeeper, on whom he bestowed his maledictions without reserve, had prejudiced my best friend, the young Duke of Buccleuch, against me by a story; and though he himself knew it to be a malicious and invidious lie, yet seeing his grace so much irritated, he durst not open his lips on the subject, further than by saying, "But, my lord duke, you must always remember that Hogg is no ordinary man, although he may have shot a stray moorcock." And then turning to me he said, "Before you had ventured to give any saucy language to a low scoundrel

of an English gamekeeper, you should have thought of Fielding's tale of Black George."

"I never saw that tale," said I, "and dinna ken ought about it. But never trouble your head about that matter, Sir Walter, for it is awthegither out o' nature for our young chief to entertain ony animosity against me. The thing will never mair be heard of, an' the chap that tauld the lees on me will gang to hell, that's aye some comfort."

Part of my reason for quoting this last passage is to recall to those who are familiar with the *Noctes Ambrosianæ* the extraordinary felicity of the imitation. This, which Hogg with his own pen represents himself as speaking with his own mouth, might be found textually in any page of the *Noctes* without seeming in the least out of keeping with the ideal Hogg.

And this brings me to the second charge of Hogg's friends, that Wilson wickedly caricatured his humble friend, if indeed he did not manufacture a Shepherd out of his own brain. This is as uncritical as the other, and even more surprising. That any one acquainted with Hogg's works, especially his autobiographic productions, should fail to recognise the resemblance is astonishing enough; but what is more astonishing is that any one interested in Hogg's fame should not perceive that the Shepherd of the *Noctes* is Hogg magnified and embellished in every way. He is not a better poet, for the simple reason that the verses put in his mouth are usually Hogg's own and not always his best. But out of the *Confessions of a Sinner*, Hogg has never signed anything half so good as the best prose passages assigned to him

in the *Noctes*. They are what he might have written if he had taken pains: they are in his key and vein; but they are much above him. Again, unless any reader is so extraordinarily devoid of humour as to be shocked by the mere horse-play, it must be clear to him that the Shepherd's manners are dressed up with extraordinary skill, so as to be just what he would have liked them to be. As for the drinking and so forth, it simply comes to this – that the habits which were fashionable when the century was not yet in its teens, or just in them, were getting to be looked on askance when it was entering or had entered on its thirties. But, instead of being annoyed at this Socrates-Falstaff, as somebody has called it, one might have thought that both Hogg himself and his admirers would have taken it as an immense compliment. The only really bad turn that Wilson seems to have done his friend was posthumous and pardonable. He undertook the task of writing the Shepherd's life and editing his *Remains* for the benefit of his family, who were left very badly off; and he not only did not do it but appears to have lost the documents with which he was entrusted. It is fair to say that after the deaths, which came close together, of his wife, of Blackwood, and of Hogg himself, Wilson was never fully the same man; and that his strongly sentimental nature, joined to his now inveterate habit of writing rapidly as the fancy took him, would have made the task of hammering out a biography and of selecting and editing *Remains* so distasteful from different points of view as to be practically impossible. But in that case of course he should not

have undertaken it, or should have relinquished it as soon as he found out the difficulties. Allan Cunningham, it is said, would have gladly done the business; and there were few men better qualified.

And now, having done a by no means unnecessary task in this preliminary clearance of rubbish, let us see what sort of a person in literature and life this Ettrick Shepherd really was – the Shepherd whom Scott not only befriended with unwearied and lifelong kindness, but ranked very high as an original talent, whom Byron thought Scott's only second worth speaking of, whom Southey, a very different person from either, esteemed highly, whom Wilson selected as the mouthpiece and model for one of the most singular and (I venture to say despite a certain passing wave of unpopularity) one of the most enduring of literary character-parts, and to whom Lockhart was, as Hogg himself late in life sets down, "a warm and disinterested friend." We have seen what Professor Veitch thinks of him – that he is the king of a higher school than Scott's. On the other hand, I fear the general English impression of him is rather that given by no Englishman, but by Thomas Carlyle, at the time of Hogg's visit to London in 1832. Carlyle describes him as talking and behaving like a "gomeril," and amusing the town by walking about in a huge gray plaid, which was supposed to be an advertisement, suggested by his publisher.

The king of a school higher than Scott's and the veriest gomeril – these surely, though the judges be not quite of equal

competence, are judgments of a singularly contradictory kind. Let us see what middle term we can find between them.

The mighty volume (it has been Hogg's ill-fortune that the most accessible edition of his work is in two great double-columned royal octavos, heavy to the hand and not too grateful to the eye) which contains the Shepherd's collected poetical work is not for every reader. "Poets? where are they?" Wordsworth is said, on the authority of De Quincey, to have asked, with a want of graciousness of manners uncommon even in him and never forgiven by Hogg, when the latter used the plural in his presence, and in that of Wilson and Lloyd. It was unjust as well as rude, but endless allowance certainly has to be made for Hogg as a poet. I do not know to whom the epigram that "everything that is written in Scotch dialect is not necessarily poetry" is originally due, but there is certainly some justice in it. Scotch, as a language, has grand accommodations; it has richer vowels and a more varied and musical arrangement of consonants than English, while it falls not much short of English in freedom from that mere monotony which besets the richly-vowelled continental languages. It has an almost unrivalled provision of poetical *clichés* (the sternest purist may admit a French word which has no English equivalent), that is to say, the stock phrases which Heaven knows who first minted and which will pass till they are worn out of all knowledge. It has two great poets – one in the vernacular, one in the literary language – who are rich enough to keep a bank for their inferiors almost to the end

of time. The depreciation of it by "glaikit Englishers" (I am a glaikit Englisher who does not depreciate), simply because it is unfamiliar and rustic-looking, is silly enough. But its best practitioners are sometimes prone to forget that nothing ready-made will do as poetry, and that you can no more take a short cut to Parnassus by spelling good "guid" and liberally using "ava," than you can execute the same journey by calling a girl a nymph and a boy a swain. The reason why Burns is a great poet, and one of the greatest, is that he seldom or never does this in Scots. When he takes to the short cut, as he does sometimes, he usually "gets to his English." Of Hogg, who wrote some charming things and many good ones, the same cannot be said. No writer known to me, not even the eminent Dr. Young, who has the root of the poetical matter in him at all, is so utterly uncritical as Hogg. He does not seem even to have known when he borrowed and when he was original. We have seen that he told Scott that he was not of his school. Now a great deal that he wrote, perhaps indeed actually the major part of his verse, is simply imitation and not often very good imitation of Scott. Here is a passage: —

> Light on her airy steed she sprung,
> Around with golden tassels hung.
> No chieftain there rode half so free,
> Or half so light and gracefully.
> How sweet to see her ringlets pale
> Wide-waving in the southland gale,
> Which through the broom-wood odorous flew

To fan her cheeks of rosy hue!
Whene'er it heaved her bosom's screen
What beauties in her form were seen!
And when her courser's mane it swung,
A thousand silver bells were rung.
A sight so fair, on Scottish plain,
A Scot shall never see again.

I think we know where this comes from. Indeed Hogg had a certain considerable faculty of conscious parody as well as of unconscious imitation, and his *Poetic Mirror*, which he wrote as a kind of humorous revenge on his brother bards for refusing to contribute, is a fair second to *Rejected Addresses*. The amusing thing is that he often parodied where he did not mean parody in the least, and nowadays we do not want Scott-and-water. Another vein of Hogg's, which he worked mercilessly, is a similar imitation, not of Scott, but of the weakest echoes of Percy's *Reliques*: —

O sad, sad, was young Mary's plight:
She took the cup, no word she spake,
She had even wished that very night
To sleep and never more to wake.

Sad, sad indeed is the plight of the poet who publishes verses like this, of which there are thousands of lines to be found in Hogg. And then one comes to "Kilmeny," and the note changes

with a vengeance: —

> Bonny Kilmeny gaed up the glen;
> But it wasna to meet Duneira's men,
> Nor the rosy monk of the isle to see,
> For Kilmeny was pure as pure could be.
> It was only to hear the yorlin sing,
> And pu' the cress-flower round the spring,
> The scarlet hip and the hindberry,
> For Kilmeny was pure as pure could be.
>
> Kilmeny looked up with a lovely grace,
> But nae smile was seen on Kilmeny's face;
> As still was her look and as still was her ee
> As the stillness that lay on the emeraut lea,
> Or the mist that sleeps on a waveless sea.
> For Kilmeny had been she kent not where,
> And Kilmeny had seen what she could not declare;
> Kilmeny had been where the cock never crew,
> Where the rain never fell and the wind never blew.

No matter that it is necessary even here to make a cento, that the untutored singer cannot keep up the song by natural force and has not skill enough to dissemble the lapses. "Kilmeny" at its best is poetry – such poetry as, to take Hogg's contemporaries only, there is none in Rogers or Crabbe, little I fear in Southey, and not very much in Moore. Then there is no doubt at all that he could write ballads. "The Witch of Fife" is long and is not

improved by being written (at least in one version) in a kind of Scots that never was on land or sea, but it is quite admirable of its class. "The Good Grey Cat," his own imitation of himself in the *Poetic Mirror*, comes perhaps second to it, and "The Abbot McKinnon" (which is rather close to the imitations of Scott) third. But there are plenty of others. As for his poems of the more ambitious kind, "Mador of the Moor," "Pilgrims of the Sun," and even "Queen Hynde," let blushing glory – the glory attached to the literary department – hide the days on which he produced those. She can very well afford it, for the hiding leaves untouched the division of Hogg's poetical work which furnishes his highest claims to fame except "Kilmeny," the division of the songs. These are numerous and unequal as a matter of course. Not a few of them are merely variations on older scraps and fragments of the kind which Burns had made popular; some of them are absolute rubbish; some of them are mere imitations of Burns himself. But this leaves abundance of precious remnants, as the Shepherd's covenanting friends would have said. The before-mentioned "Donald Macdonald" is a famous song of its kind: "I'll no wake wi' Annie" comes very little short of Burns's "Green grow the rashes O!" The piece on the lifting of the banner of Buccleuch, though a curious contrast with Scott's "Up with the Banner" does not suffer too much by the comparison: "Cam' ye by Athole" and "When the kye comes hame" everybody knows, and I do not know whether it is a mere delusion, but there seems to me to be a rare and agreeable humour in "The Village of

Balmaquhapple."

> D'ye ken the big village of Balmaquhapple?
> The great muckle village of Balmaquhapple?
> 'Tis steeped in iniquity up to the thrapple,
> An' what's to become o' poor Balmaquhapple?

Whereafter follows an invocation to St. Andrew, with a characteristic suggestion that he may spare himself the trouble of intervening for certain persons such as

> Geordie, our deacon for want of a better,
> And Bess, wha delights in the sins that beset her —

ending with the milder prayer:

> But as for the rest, for the women's sake save them,
> Their bodies at least, and their sauls if they have them.
>
> And save, without word of confession auricular,
> The clerk's bonny daughters, and Bell in particular;
> For ye ken that their beauty's the pride and the stapple
> Of the great wicked village of Balmaquhapple!

"Donald McGillavry," which deceived Jeffrey, is another of the half-inarticulate songs which have the gift of setting the blood coursing;

Donald's gane up the hill hard an' hungry;
Donald's come down the hill wild an' angry:
Donald will clear the gowk's nest cleverly;
Here's to the King and Donald McGillavry!

Donald has foughten wi' reif and roguery,
Donald has dinnered wi' banes and beggary;
Better it war for Whigs an' Whiggery
Meeting the deevil than Donald McGillavry.
Come like a tailor, Donald McGillavry,
Come like a tailor, Donald McGillavry,
Push about, in an' out, thimble them cleverly.
Here's to King James an' Donald McGillavry!

"Love is Like a Dizziness," and the "Boys' Song,"

Where the pools are bright and deep,
Where the grey trout lies asleep,
Up the river and over the lea,
That's the way for Billy and me —

and plenty more charming things will reward the explorer of the Shepherd's country. Only let that explorer be prepared for pages on pages of the most unreadable stuff, the kind of stuff which hardly any educated man, however great a "gomeril" he might be, would ever dream of putting to paper, much less of sending to press. It is fair to repeat that the educated man who thus refrained would probably be a very long time before

he wrote "Kilmeny," or even "Donald McGillavry" and "The Village of Balmaquhapple."

Still (though to say it is enough to make him turn in his grave) if Hogg had been a verse-writer alone he would, except for "Kilmeny" and his songs, hardly be worth remembering, save by professed critics and literary free-selectors. A little better than Allan Cunningham, he is but for that single, sudden, and unsustained inspiration of "Kilmeny," and one or two of his songs, so far below Burns that Burns might enable us to pay no attention to him and not lose much. As for Scott, "Proud Maisie" (an unapproachable thing), the fragments that Elspeth Cheyne sings, even the single stanza in *Guy Mannering*, "Are these the Links of Forth? she said," any one of a thousand snatches that Sir Walter has scattered about his books with a godlike carelessness will "ding" Hogg and all his works on their own field. But then it is not saying anything very serious against a man to say that he is not so great as Scott. With those who know what poetry is, Hogg will keep his corner ("not a polished corner," as Sydney Smith would say) of the temple of Apollo.

Hogg wrote prose even more freely than he wrote verse, and after the same fashion – a fashion which he describes with equal frankness and truth by the phrases, "dashing on," "writing as if in desperation," "mingling pathos and absurdity," and so forth. Tales, novels, sketches, all were the same to him; and he had the same queer mixture of confidence in their merits and doubt about the manner in which they were written. *The*

Brownie of Bodsbeck, *The Three Perils of Man* (which appears refashioned in the modern editions of his works as *The Siege of Roxburgh*), *The Three Perils of Woman*, *The Shepherd's Calendar* and numerous other uncollected tales exhibit for the most part very much the same characteristics. Hogg knew the Scottish peasantry well, he had abundant stores of unpublished folklore, he could invent more when wanted, he was not destitute of the true poetic knowledge of human nature, and at his best he could write strikingly and picturesquely. But he simply did not know what self-criticism was, he had no notion of the conduct or carpentry of a story, and though he was rather fond of choosing antique subjects, and prided himself on his knowledge of old Scots, he was quite as likely to put the baldest modern touches in the mouth of a heroine of the fourteenth or fifteenth century as not. If anybody takes pleasure in seeing how a good story can be spoilt, let him look at the sixth chapter of the *Shepherd's Calendar*, "The Souters of Selkirk;" and if any one wants to read a novel of antiquity which is not like Scott, let him read *The Bridal of Polmood*.

In the midst, however, of all this chaotic work, there is still to be found, though misnamed, one of the most remarkable stories of its kind ever written – a story which, as I have said before, is not only extraordinarily good of itself, but insists peremptorily that the reader shall wonder how the devil it got where it is. This is the book now called *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Fanatic*, but by its proper and original title,

The Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Hogg's reference to it in his *Autobiography* is sufficiently odd. "The next year (1824)," he says, "I published *The Confessions of a Fanatic [Sinner]*, but, it being a story replete with horrors, after I had written it I durst not venture to put my name to it, so it was published anonymously, and of course did not sell very well – so at least I believe, for I do not remember ever receiving anything for it, and I am sure if there had been a reversion [he means return] I should have had a moiety. However I never asked anything, so on that point there was no misunderstanding." And he says nothing more about it, except to inform us that his publishers, Messrs. Longman, who had given him for his two previous books a hundred and fifty pounds each "as soon as the volumes were put to press," and who had published the *Confessions* on half profits, observed, when his next book was offered to them, that "his last publication (the *Confessions*) had been found fault with in some very material points, and they begged leave to decline the present one until they consulted some other persons." That is all. But the Reverend Thomas Thomson, Hogg's editor, an industrious and not incompetent man of letters, while admitting that it is "in excellence of plot, concentration of language and vigorous language, one of the best and most interesting [he might have said the best without a second] of Hogg's tales," observes that it "alarmed the religious portion of the community who hastily thought that the author was assailing Christianity." "Nothing could be more unfounded," says the Reverend Thomas Thomson

with much justice. He might have added that it would have been much more reasonable to suspect the author of practice with the Evil One in order to obtain the power of writing anything so much better than his usual work.

For, in truth, *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, while it has all Hogg's merits and more, is quite astoundingly free from his defects. His tales are generally innocent of the most rudimentary notions of construction: this goes closely ordered, with a few pardonable enough digressions, from beginning to end. He has usually little concentrated grasp of character: the few personages of the *Confessions* are consistent throughout. His dialogue is, as a rule, extraordinarily slipshod and unequal: here there is no fault to find with it. His greatest lack, in short, is the lack of form: and here, though the story might perhaps have been curtailed, or rather "cut" in the middle, with advantage, the form is excellent. As its original edition, though an agreeable volume, is rare, and its later ones are buried amidst discordant rubbish, it may not be improper to give some account of it. The time is pitched just about the Revolution and the years following, and, according to a common if not altogether praiseworthy custom, the story consists of an editor's narrative and of the *Confessions* proper imbedded therein. The narrative tells how a drinking Royalist laird married an exceedingly precise young woman, how the dissension which was probable broke out between them, how a certain divine, the Reverend Robert Wringhim, endeavoured to convert the sinner at the instances of the saint, and perhaps succeeded in consoling

the saint at the expense of the sinner; how the laird sought more congenial society with a certain cousin of his named Arabella Logan, and how, rather out of jealousy than forgiveness, such a union or quasi-union took place between husband and wife that they had two sons, George and Robert, the elder of whom was his father's favourite and like, while the younger was pretty much left to the care of Mr. Wringhim. The tale then tells how, after hardly seeing one another in boyhood, the brothers met as young men at Edinburgh, where on extreme provocation the elder was within an ace of killing the younger. The end of it was that, after Robert had brought against George a charge of assaulting him on Arthur's Seat, George himself was found mysteriously murdered in an Edinburgh close. His mother cared naught for it; his father soon died of grief; the obnoxious Robert succeeded to the estates, and only Arabella Logan was left to do what she could to clear up the mystery, which, after certain strange passages, she did. But when warrants were made out against Robert he had disappeared, and the whole thing remained wrapped in more mystery than ever.

To this narrative succeed the confessions of Robert himself. He takes of course the extreme side both of his mother and of her doctrines, but for some time, though an accomplished Pharisee, he is not assured of salvation, till at last his adopted (if not real) father Wringhim announces that he has wrestled sufficiently in prayer and has received assurance.

Thereupon the young man sallies out in much exaltation of

feeling and full of contempt for the unconverted. As he goes he meets another young man of mysterious appearance, who seems to be an exact double of himself. This wraith, however, presents himself as only a humble admirer of Robert's spiritual glory, and holds much converse with him. He meets this person repeatedly, but is never able to ascertain who he is. The stranger says that he may be called Gil Martin if Robert likes, but hints that he is some great one – perhaps the Czar Peter, who was then known to be travelling incognito about Europe. For a time Robert's Illustrious Friend (as he generally calls him) exaggerates the extremest doctrines of Calvinism, and slips easily from this into suggestions of positive crime. A minister named Blanchard, who has overheard his conversation, warns Robert against him, and Gil Martin in return points out Blanchard as an enemy to religion whom it is Robert's duty to take off. They lay wait for the minister and pistol him, the Illustrious Friend managing not only to avert all suspicion from themselves, but to throw it with capital consequences on a perfectly innocent person. After this initiation in blood Robert is fully reconciled to the "great work" and, going to Edinburgh, is led by his Illustrious Friend without difficulty into the series of plots against his brother which had to outsiders so strange an appearance, and which ended in a fresh murder. When Robert in the course of events above described becomes master of Dalchastel, the family estate, his Illustrious Friend accompanies him and the same process goes on. But now things turn less happily for Robert. He finds himself, without

any consciousness of the acts charged, accused on apparently indubitable evidence, first of peccadillos, then of serious crimes. Seduction, forgery, murder, even matricide are hinted against him, and at last, under the impression that indisputable proofs of the last two crimes have been discovered, he flies from his house. After a short period of wandering, in which his Illustrious Friend alternately stirs up all men against him and tempts him to suicide, he finally in despair succumbs to the temptation and puts an end to his life. This of course ends the *Memoir*, or rather the *Memoir* ends just before the catastrophe. There is then a short postscript in which the editor tells a tale of a suicide found with some such legend attaching to him on a Border hillside, of an account given in *Blackwood* of the searching of the grave, and of a visit to it made by himself (the editor), his friend Mr. L – t of C – d [Lockhart of Chiefswood], Mr. L – w [Scott's Laidlaw] and others. The whole thing ends with a very well written bit of rationalisation of the now familiar kind, discussing the authenticity of the *Memoirs*, and concluding that they are probably the work of some one suffering from religious mania, or perhaps a sort of parable or allegory worked out with insufficient skill.

Although some such account as this was necessary, no such account, unless illustrated with the most copious citation, could do justice to the book. The first part or Narrative is not of extraordinary, though it is of considerable merit, and has some of Hogg's usual faults. The *Memoirs* proper are almost wholly free

from these faults. In no book known to me is the grave treatment of the topsy-turvy and improbable better managed; although, by an old trick, it pleases the "editor" to depreciate his work in the passage just mentioned. The writer, whoever he was, was fully qualified for the task. The possibility of a young man of narrow intellect – his passion against his brother already excited, and his whole mind given to the theology of predestination – gliding into such ideas as are here described is undoubted; and it is made thoroughly credible to the reader. The story of the pretended Gil Martin, preposterous as it is, is told by the unlucky maniac exactly in the manner in which a man deluded, but with occasional suspicions of his delusion, would tell it. The gradual change from intended and successful rascality and crime into the incurring or the supposed incurring of the most hideous guilt without any actual consciousness of guilty action may seem an almost hopeless thing to treat probably. Yet it is so treated here. And the final gathering and blackening of the clouds of despair (though here again there is a very slight touch of Hogg's undue prolongation of things) exhibits literary power of the ghastly kind infinitely different from and far above the usual raw-head-and-bloody-bones story of the supernatural.

Now, who wrote it?

No doubt, so far as I know, has been generally entertained of Hogg's authorship, though, since I myself entertained doubts on the subject, I have found some good judges not unwilling to agree with me. Although admitting that it appeared anonymously,

Hogg claims it, as we have seen, not only without hesitation but apparently without any suspicion that it was a particularly valuable or meritorious thing to claim, and without any attempt to shift, divide, or in any way disclaim the responsibility, though the book had been a failure. His publishers do not seem to have doubted then that it was his; nor, I have been told, have their representatives any reason to doubt it now. His daughter, I think, does not so much as mention it in her *Memorials*, but his various biographers have never, so far as I know, hinted the least hesitation. At the same time I am absolutely unable to believe that it is Hogg's unadulterated and unassisted work. It is not one of those cases where a man once tries a particular style, and then from accident, disgust, or what not, relinquishes it. Hogg was always trying the supernatural, and he failed in it, except in this instance, as often as he tried it. Why should he on this particular occasion have been saved from himself? and who saved him? – for that great part of the book at least is his there can be no doubt.

By way of answer to these questions I can at least point out certain coincidences and probabilities. It has been seen that Lockhart's name actually figures in the postscript to the book. Now at this time and for long afterwards Lockhart was one of the closest of Hogg's literary allies; and Hogg, while admitting that the author of *Peter's Letters* hoaxed him as he hoaxed everybody, is warm in his praise. He describes him in his *Autobiography* as "a warm and disinterested friend." He tells us in the book on Scott how he had a plan, even later than

this, that Lockhart should edit all his (the Shepherd's) works, for discouraging which plan he was very cross with Sir Walter. Further, the vein of the *Confessions* is very closely akin to, if not wholly identical with, a vein which Lockhart not only worked on his own account but worked at this very same time. It was in these very years of his residence at Chiefswood that Lockhart produced the little masterpiece of "Adam Blair" (where the terrors and temptations of a convinced Presbyterian minister are dwelt upon), and "Matthew Wald," which is itself the history of a lunatic as full of horrors, and those of no very different kind, as the *Confessions* themselves. That editing, and perhaps something more than editing, on Lockhart's part would have been exactly the thing necessary to prune and train and direct the Shepherd's disorderly luxuriance into the methodical madness of the Justified Sinner – to give Hogg's loose though by no means vulgar style the dress of his own polished manner – to weed and shape and correct and straighten the faults of the Boar of the Forest – nobody who knows the undoubted writing of the two men will deny. And Lockhart, who was so careless of his work that to this day it is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain what he did or did not write unassisted, would certainly not have been the man to claim a share in the book, even had it made more noise; though he may have thought of this as well as of other things when, in his wrath over the foolish blethering about Scott, he wrote that the Shepherd's views of literary morality were peculiar. As for Hogg himself, he would never have thought

of acknowledging any such editing or collaboration if it did take place; and that not nearly so much from vanity or dishonesty as from simple carelessness, dashed perhaps with something of the habit of literary *supercherie* which the society in which he lived affected, and which he carried as far at least as any one of its members.

It may seem rather hard after praising a man's ewe lamb so highly to question his right in her. But I do not think there is any real hardship. I should think that the actual imagination of the story is chiefly Hogg's, for Lockhart's forte was not that quality, and his own novels suffer rather for want of it. If this be the one specimen of what the Shepherd's genius could turn out when it submitted to correction and training, it gives us a useful and interesting explanation why the mass of his work, with such excellent flashes, is so flawed and formless as a whole. It explains why he wished Lockhart to edit the others. It explains at the same time why (for the Shepherd's vanity was never far off) he set apparently little store by the book. It is only a hypothesis of course, and a hypothesis which is very unlikely ever to be proved, while in the nature of things it is even less capable of disproof. But I think there is good critical reason for it.

At any rate, I confess for myself, that I should not take anything like the same interest in Hogg, if he were not the putative author of the *Confessions*. The book is in a style which wearies soon if it be overdone, and which is very difficult indeed to do well. But it is one of the very best things of its kind,

and that is a claim which ought never to be overlooked. And if Hogg in some lucky moment did really "write it all by himself," as the children say, then we could make up for him a volume composed of it, of "Kilmeny," and of the best of the songs, which would be a very remarkable volume indeed. It would not represent a twentieth part of his collected work, and it would probably represent a still smaller fraction of what he wrote, while all the rest would be vastly inferior. But it would be a title to no inconsiderable place in literature, and we know that good judges did think Hogg, with all his personal weakness and all his literary shortcomings, entitled to such a place.

III
SYDNEY SMITH

The hackneyed joke about biographers adding a new terror to death holds still as good as ever. But biography can sometimes make a good case against her persecutors; and one of the instances which she would certainly adduce would be the instance of Sydney Smith. I more than suspect that his actual works are less and less read as time goes on, and that the brilliant virulence of *Peter Plymley*, the even greater brilliance, not marred by virulence at all, of the *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton*, the inimitable quips of his articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, are familiar, if they are familiar at all, only to the professed readers of the literature of the past, and perhaps to some intelligent newspaper men who find Sydney[8] to be what Fuseli pronounced Blake, "d – d good to steal from." But the *Life* which Lady Holland, with her mother's and Mrs. Austin's aid, produced more than thirty years ago has had a different fate; and a fresh lease of popularity seems to have been secured by another *Life*, published by Mr. Stuart Reid in 1883. This was partly abridged from the first, and partly supplied with fresh matter by a new

[8] To speak of him in this way is not impertinence or familiarity. He was most generally addressed as "Mr. Sydney," and his references to his wife are nearly always to "Mrs. Sydney," seldom or never to "Mrs. Smith."

sifting of the documents which Lady Holland had used. Nor do the authors of these works, however great must be our gratitude to them, take to themselves any such share of the credit as is due to Boswell in the case of Johnson, to Lockhart in the case of Scott, to Carlyle in the case of Sterling. Neither can lay claim to the highest literary merit of writing or arrangement; and the latter of the two contains digressions, not interesting to all readers, about the nobility of Sydney's cause. It is because both books let their subject reveal himself by familiar letters, scraps of journal, or conversation, and because the revelation of self is so full and so delightful, that Sydney Smith's immortality, now that the generation which actually heard him talk has all but disappeared, is still secured without the slightest fear of disturbance or decay. With a few exceptions (the Mrs. Partington business, the apologue of the dinners at the synod of Dort, "Noodle's Oration," and one or two more), the things by which Sydney is known to the general, all come, not from his works, but from his *Life* or *Lives*. No one with any sense of fun can read the Works without being delighted; but in the Life and the letters the same qualities of wit appear, with other qualities which in the Works hardly appear at all. A person absolutely ignorant of anything but the Works might possibly dismiss Sydney Smith as a brilliant but bitter and not too consistent partisan, who fought desperately against abuses when his party was out, and discovered that they were not abuses at all when his party was in. A reader of his Life and of his private utterances knows him

better, likes him better, and certainly does not admire him less.

He was born in 1771, the son of an eccentric and apparently rather provoking person, who for no assigned reason left his wife at the church door in order to wander about the world, and who maintained his vagabond principles so well that, as his granddaughter ruefully records, he bought, spent money on, and sold at a loss, no less than nineteen different houses in England and Wales. Sydney was also the second of four clever brothers, the eldest and cleverest being the somewhat famous "Bobus," who co-operated in the *Microcosm* with Canning and Frere, survived his better known brother but a fortnight, founded a family, and has left one of those odd reputations of immense talent not justified by any producible work, to which our English life of public schools, universities, and Parliament gives peculiar facilities. Bobus and Cecil the third brother were sent to Eton: Sydney and Courtenay, the fourth, to Winchester, after a childhood spent in precocious reading and arguing among themselves. From Winchester Sydney (of whose school-days some trifling but only trifling anecdotes are recorded,) proceeded in regular course to New College, Oxford, and being elected of right to a Fellowship, then worth about a hundred pounds a year, was left by his father to "do for himself" on that not extensive revenue. He did for himself at Oxford during the space of nine years; and it is supposed that his straitened circumstances had something to do with his dislike for universities, which however was a kind of point of

conscience among his Whig friends. It is at least singular that this residence of nearly a decade has left hardly a single story or recorded incident of any kind; and that though three generations of undergraduates passed through Oxford in his time, no one of them seems in later years to have had anything to say of not the least famous and one of the most sociable of Englishmen. At that time, it is true, and for long afterwards, the men of New College kept more to themselves than the men of any other college in Oxford; but still it is odd. Another little mystery is, Why did Sydney take orders? Although there is not the slightest reason to question his being, according to his own standard, a very sincere and sufficient divine, it obviously was not quite the profession for him. He is said to have wished for the Bar, but to have deferred to his father's wishes for the Church. That Sydney was an affectionate and dutiful son nobody need doubt: he was always affectionate, and in his own way dutiful. But he is about the last man one can think of as likely to undertake an uncongenial profession out of high-flown dutifulness to a father who had long left him to his own resources, and who had neither influence nor prospects in the Church to offer him. The Fellowship would have kept him, as it had kept him already, till briefs came. However, he did take orders; and the later *Life* gives more particulars than the first as to the incumbency which indirectly determined his career. It was the curacy of Netheravon on Salisbury Plain; and its almost complete seclusion was tempered by a kindly squire, Mr. Hicks-Beach, great-grandfather of the present Sir

Michael Hicks-Beach. Mr. Hicks-Beach offered Sydney the post of tutor to his eldest son; Sydney accepted it, started for Germany with his pupil, but (as he picturesquely though rather vaguely expresses it) "put into Edinburgh under stress of war" and stayed there for five years.

The sojourn at Edinburgh began in June 1798: it ended in August 1803. It will thus be seen that Sydney was by no means a very young man even when he began reviewing, the year before leaving the Scotch capital. Indeed the aimless prolongation of his stay at Oxford, which brought him neither friends, money, nor professional experience of any kind, threw him considerably behindhand all his life; and this delay, much more than Tory persecution or Whig indifference, was the cause of the comparative slowness with which he made his way. His time at Edinburgh was, however, usefully spent even before that invention of the *Review*, over which there is an amicable and unimportant dispute between himself and Jeffrey. His tutorship was so successful that Mr. Hicks-Beach rewarded it with a cheque for a thousand pounds: he did duty in the Episcopal churches of Edinburgh: he made friends with all the Whigs and many of the Tories of the place: he laughed unceasingly at Scotchmen and liked them very much. Also, about the middle of his stay, he got married, but not to a Scotch girl. His wife was Miss Catherine Pybus, of Cheam, and the marriage was as harebrained a one, from the point of view of settlements, as

Jeffrey's own.[9] Sydney's settlement on his wife is well known: it consisted of "six small silver teaspoons much worn," with which worldly goods he did her literally endow by throwing them into her lap. It would appear that there never was a happier marriage; but it certainly seemed for some years as if there might have been many more prosperous in point of money. When Sydney moved to London he had no very definite prospect of any income whatever; and had not Mrs. Smith sold her mother's jewels (which came to her just at the time), they would apparently have had some difficulty in furnishing their house in Doughty Street. But Horner, their friend (the "parish bull" of Scott's irreverent comparison), had gone to London before them, and impressed himself, apparently by sheer gravity, on the political world as a good young man. Introduced by him, Sydney Smith soon became one of the circle at Holland House. It is indeed not easy to live on invitations and your mother-in-law's pearls; but Sydney reviewed vigorously, preached occasionally, before very long received a regular appointment at the Foundling Hospital, and made some money by lecturing very agreeably at the Royal Institution on Moral Philosophy – a subject of which he honestly admits that he knew, in the technical sense, nothing. But his hearers did not want technical ethics, and in Sydney Smith they had a moral philosopher of the practical kind who could hardly be excelled either in sense or in wit. One little incident of this time, however, throws some light on the complaints which have

[9] See next Essay.

been made about the delay of his promotion. He applied to a London rector to license him to a vacant chapel, which had not hitherto been used for the services of the Church. The immediate answer has not been preserved; but from what followed it clearly was a civil and rather evasive but perfectly intelligible request to be excused. The man was of course quite within his right, and a dozen good reasons can be guessed for his conduct. He may really have objected, as he seems to have said he did, to take a step which his predecessors had refused to take, and which might inconvenience his successors. But Sydney would not take the refusal, and wrote another very logical, but extremely injudicious, letter pressing his request with much elaboration, and begging the worthy Doctor of Divinity to observe that he, the Doctor, was guilty of inconsistency and other faults. Naturally this put the Doctor's back up, and he now replied with a flat and very high and mighty refusal. We know from another instance that Sydney was indisposed to take "No" for an answer. However he obtained, besides his place at the Foundling, preacherships in two proprietary chapels, and seems to have had both business and pleasure enough on his hands during his London sojourn, which was about the same length as his Edinburgh one. It was, however, much more profitable, for in three years the ministry of "All the Talents" came in, the Holland House interest was exerted, and the Chancellor's living of Foston, near York, valued at five hundred pounds a year, was given to Sydney. He paid for it, after a fashion which in a less zealous and convinced Whig might seem

a little dubious, by the famous lampoons of the *Plymley Letters*, advocating the claims of Catholic emancipation, and extolling Fox and Grenville at the expense of Perceval and Canning. Very edifying is it to find Sydney Smith objecting to this latter that he is a "diner out," a "maker of jokes and parodies," a trifler on important subjects – in fact each and all of the things which the Rev. Sydney Smith himself was, in a perfection only equalled by the object of his righteous wrath. But of Peter more presently.

Even his admiring biographers have noticed, with something of a chuckle, the revenge which Perceval, who was the chief object of Plymley's sarcasm, took, without in the least knowing it, on his lampooner. Had it not been for the Clergy Residence Bill, which that very respectable, if not very brilliant, statesman passed in 1808, and which put an end to perhaps the most flagrant of all then existing abuses, Sydney, the enemy of abuses, would no doubt have continued with a perfectly clear conscience to draw the revenues of Foston, and while serving it by a curate, to preach, lecture, dine out, and rebuke Canning for making jokes, in London. As it was he had to make up his mind, though he obtained a respite from the Archbishop, to resign (which in the recurring frost of Whig hopes was not to be thought of), to exchange, which he found impossible, or to bury himself in Yorkshire. This was a real hardship upon him, because Foston, as it was, was uninhabitable, and had had no resident clergyman since the seventeenth century. But whatever bad things could be said of Sydney (and I really do not know what they are, except

that the combination of a sharp wit, a ready pen, and strong political prejudices sometimes made him abuse his talents), no one could say that he ever shirked either a difficulty or a duty. When his first three years' leave expired, he went down in 1809 with his family to York, and established himself at Heslington, a village near the city and not far from his parish. And when a second term of dispensation from actual residence was over, he set to work and built the snuggest if the ugliest parsonage in England, with farm-buildings and all complete, at the cost of some four thousand pounds. Of the details of that building his own inimitable account exists, and is or ought to be well known. The brick-pit and kiln on the property, which were going to save fortunes and resulted in nothing but the production of exactly a hundred and fifty thousand unusable bricks: the four oxen, Tug, Lug, Haul and Crawl, who were to be the instruments of another economy and proved to be, at least in Sydneian language, equal to nothing but the consumption of "buckets of sal volatile: " the entry of the distracted mother of the household on her new domains with a baby clutched in her arms and one shoe left in the circumambient mud: the great folks of the neighbourhood (Lord and Lady Carlisle) coming to call graciously on the strangers, and being whelmed, coach and four, outriders and all, in a ploughed field of despond: the "universal scratcher" in the meadows, inclined so as to let the brute creation of all heights enjoy that luxury: Bunch the butler, a female child of tender years but stout proportions: Annie Kay the factotum:

the "Immortal," a chariot which was picked up at York in the last stage of decay, and carried the family for many years half over England – all these things and persons are told in divers delightful scraps of autobiography and in innumerable letters, after a fashion impossible to better and at a length too long to quote.

Sydney Smith was for more than twenty years rector of Foston, and for fully fifteen actually resided there. During this time he made the acquaintance of Lord and Lady Grey, next to Lord and Lady Holland his most constant friends, visited a little, entertained in his own unostentatious but hearty fashion a great deal, wrote many articles for the *Edinburgh Review*, found himself in a minority of one or two among the clergy of Yorkshire on the subject of Emancipation and similar matters, but was on the most friendly terms possible with his diocesan, Archbishop Vernon Harcourt. Nor was he even without further preferment, for he held for some years (on the then not discredited understanding of resignation when one of the Howards was ready for it) the neighbouring and valuable living of Londesborough. Then the death of an aunt put an end to his monetary anxieties, which for years had been considerable, by the legacy of a small but sufficient fortune. And at last, when he was approaching sixty, the good things of the Church, which he never affected to despise, came in earnest. The Tory Chancellor Lyndhurst gave him a stall at Bristol, which carried with it a small Devonshire living, and soon afterwards he was able to exchange

Foston (which he had greatly improved), for Combe Florey near Taunton. When his friend Lord Grey became Prime Minister, the stall at Bristol was exchanged for a much more valuable one at St. Paul's; Halberton, the Devonshire vicarage, and Combe Florey still remaining his. These made up an ecclesiastical revenue not far short of three thousand a year, which Sydney enjoyed for the last fifteen years of his life. He never got anything more, and it is certain that for a time he was very sore at not being made a bishop, or at least offered a bishopric. Lord Holland had rather rashly explained the whole difficulty years before, by reporting a conversation of his with Lord Grenville, in which they had hoped that when the Whigs came into power they would be more grateful to Sydney than the Tories had been to Swift. Sydney's acuteness must have made him wince at the omen. For my part I do not see why either Harley or Grey should have hesitated, as far as any scruples of their own went. But I think any fair-minded person must admit the possibility of a scruple, though he may not share it, about the effect of seeing either the *Tale of a Tub* or *Peter Plymley's Letters*, with "By the Right Rev. the Lord Bishop of – " on the title-page. The people who would have been shocked might in each case have been fools: there is nothing that I at least can see, in either book, inconsistent with sound religion and churchmanship. But they would have been honest fools, and of such a Prime Minister has to take heed. So Amen Corner (or rather, for he did not live there, certain streets near Grosvenor Square) in London, and Combe Florey in the country,

were Sydney Smith's abodes till his death. In the former he gave his breakfasts and dinners in the season, being further enabled to do so by his share (some thirty thousand pounds) of his brother Courtenay's Indian fortune. The latter, after rebuilding it, – for he had either a fate or a passion for bricks and mortar, – he made on a small scale one of the most beautiful and hospitable houses in the West of England.

To Combe Florey, as to Foston, a sheaf of fantastic legends attaches itself; indeed, as Lady Holland was not very fond of dates, it is sometimes not clear to which of the two residences some of them apply. At both Sydney had a huge store-room, or rather grocer's and chemist's shop, from which he supplied the wants, not merely of his household, but of half the neighbourhood. It appears to have been at Combe Florey (for though no longer poor he still had a frugal mind), that he hit upon the device of "putting the cheapest soaps in the dearest papers," confident of the result upon the female temper. It was certainly there that he fitted up two favourite donkeys with a kind of holiday-dress of antlers, to meet the objection of one of his lady-visitors that he had no deer; and converted certain large bay-trees in boxes into the semblance of an orangery, by fastening some dozens of fine fruit to the branches. I like to think of the mixed astonishment and disgust of a great Russian, and a not very small Frenchman, both not long deceased, M. Tourguénieff and M. Paul de Saint-Victor, if they had heard of these pleasing tomfooleries. But tomfoolery, though, when properly and not

inordinately indulged, one of the best things in life, must, like the other good things of life, come to an end. After an illness of some months Sydney Smith died at his house in Green Street, of heart disease, on 22nd February 1845, in the seventy-fourth year of his age.

The memorials and evidences of his peculiar if not unique genius consist of three different kinds; reported or remembered conversations and jokes, letters, and formal literary work. He was once most famous as a talker; but conversation is necessarily the most perishable of all things, and its recorded fragments bear keeping less than any other relics. Some of the verbal jests assigned to him (notably the famous one about the tortoise, which, after being long known by the initiated not to be his, has at last been formally claimed by its rightful owner), are certainly or probably borrowed or falsely attributed, as rich conversationalists always borrow or receive. And always the things have something of the mangled air which sayings detached from their context can hardly escape. It is otherwise with the letters. The best letters are always most like the actual conversation of their writers, and probably no one ever wrote more as he talked than Sydney Smith. The specially literary qualities of his writing for print are here too in great measure; and on the whole, though of course the importance of subject is nearly always less, and the interest of sustained work is wholly absent, nowhere can the entire Sydney be better seen. Of the three satirists of modern times with whom he may not unfairly claim to rank – Pascal, Swift, and Voltaire

– he is most like Voltaire in his faculty of presenting a good thing with a preface which does not in the least prepare you for it, and then leaving it without the slightest attempt to go back on it, and elaborate it, and make sure that his hearer has duly appreciated it and laughed at it. And of the two, though the palm of concentration must be given to Voltaire, the palm of absolute simplicity must be given to Sydney. Hardly any of his letters are without these unforced flashes of wit, from almost his first epistle to Jeffrey (where, after rallying that great little man on being the "only male despondent he has met," he adds the postscript, "I beg to except the Tuxford waiter, who desponds exactly as you do") to his very last to Miss Harcourt, in which he mildly dismisses one of his brethren as "anything but a *polished* corner of the Temple." There is the "usual establishment for an eldest landed baby: " the proposition, advanced in the grave and chaste manner, that "the information of very plain women is so inconsiderable, that I agree with you in setting no store by it: " the plaintive expostulation with Lady Holland (who had asked him to dinner on the ninth of the month, after previously asking him to stay from the fifth to the twelfth), "it is like giving a gentleman an assignation for Wednesday when you are going to marry him on the previous Sunday – an attempt to combine the stimulus of gallantry with the security of connubial relations: " the simple and touching information that "Lord Tankerville has sent me a whole buck. This necessarily takes up a good deal of my time;" that "geranium-fed bacon is of a beautiful

colour, but it takes so many plants to fatten one pig that such a system can never answer;" that "it is a mistake to think that Dr. Bond could be influenced by partridges. He is a man of very independent mind, with whom pheasants at least, or perhaps even turkeys, are necessary;" and scores more with references to which I find the fly-leaves of my copy of the letters covered. If any one wants to see how much solid there is with all this froth, let him turn to the passages showing the unconquerable manliness, fairness, and good sense with which Sydney treated the unhappy subject of Queen Caroline, out of which his friends were so ready to make political capital; or to the admirable epistle in which he takes seriously, and blunts once for all, the points of certain foolish witticisms as to the readiness with which he, a man about town, had taken to catechisms and cabbages in an almost uninhabited part of the despised country. In conversation he would seem sometimes to have a little, a very little, "forced the note." The Quaker baby, and the lady "with whom you might give an assembly or populate a parish," are instances in point. But he never does this in his letters. I take particular pleasure in the following passage written to Miss Georgiana Harcourt within two years of his death: "What a charming existence! To live in the midst of holy people; to know that nothing profane can approach you; to be certain that a Dissenter can no more be found in the Palace than a snake can exist in Ireland, or ripe fruit in Scotland! To have your society strong, and undiluted by the laity; to bid adieu to human learning; to feast on the Canons and revel

in the Thirty-Nine Articles! Happy Georgiana!" Now if Sydney had been what some foolish people think him, merely a scoffer, there would be no fun in this; it would be as impertinent and in as bad taste as the stale jokes of the eighteenth century about Christianity. But he was much else.

Of course, however, no rational man will contend that in estimating Sydney Smith's place in the general memory, his deliberate literary work, or at least that portion of it which he chose to present on reflection, acknowledged and endorsed, can be overlooked. His *Life* contains (what is infinitely desirable in all such Lives and by no means always or often furnished) a complete list of his contributions to the *Edinburgh Review*, and his works contain most of them. To these have to be added the pamphlets, of which the chief and incomparably the best are, at intervals of thirty years, *Peter Plymley* and the *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton*, together with sermons, speeches, and other miscellaneous matter. The whole, except the things which he did not himself care to reprint, can be obtained now in one volume; but the print is not to be recommended to aged or weakly sight.

Sydney Smith had no false modesty, and in not a few letters to Jeffrey he speaks of his own contributions to the *Edinburgh* with the greatest freedom, combating and quite refusing to accept his editor's suggestion as to their flippancy and fantasticality, professing with much frankness that this is the way he can write and no other, and more than once telling Jeffrey that whatever

they may think in solemn Scotland, his, Sydney's, articles are a great deal more read in England and elsewhere than any others. Although there are maxims to the contrary effect, the judgment of a clever man, not very young and tolerably familiar with the world, on his own work, is very seldom far wrong. I should say myself that, putting aside the historic estimate, Sydney Smith's articles are by far the most interesting nowadays of those contributed by any one before the days of Macaulay, who began just as Sydney ceased to write anonymously in 1827, on his Bristol appointment. They are also by far the most distinct and original. Jeffrey, Brougham, and the rest wrote, for the most part, very much after the fashion of the ancients: if a very few changes were made for date, passages of Jeffrey's criticism might almost be passages of Dryden, certainly passages of the better critics of the eighteenth century, as far as manner goes. There is nobody at all like Sydney Smith before him in England, for Swift's style is wholly different. To begin with, Sydney had a strong prejudice in favour of writing very short articles, and a horror of reading long ones – the latter being perhaps less peculiar to himself than the former. Then he never made the slightest pretence at systematic or dogmatic criticism of anything whatever. In literature proper he seems indeed to have had no particular principles, and I cannot say that he had very good taste. He commits the almost unpardonable sin of not merely blaspheming Madame de Sévigné, but preferring to her that second-rate leader-writer in petticoats, Madame de

Staël. On the other hand, if he had no literary principles, he had (except in rare cases where politics came in, and not often then) few literary prejudices, and his happily incorrigible good sense and good humour were proof against the frequent bias of his associates. Though he could not have been very sensible, from what he himself says, of their highest qualities, he championed Scott's novels incessantly against the Whigs and prigs of Holland House. He gives a most well-timed warning to Jeffrey that the constant running-down of Wordsworth had very much the look of persecution, though with his usual frankness he avows that he has not read the particular article in question, because the subject is "quite uninteresting to him." I think he would, if driven hard, have admitted with equal frankness that poetry, merely as poetry, was generally uninteresting. Still he had so many interests of various kinds, that few books failed to appeal to one or the other, and he, in his turn, has seldom failed to give a lively if not a very exact or critical account of his subject. But it is in his way of giving this account that the peculiarity, glanced at above as making a parallel between him and Voltaire, appears. It is, I have said, almost original, and what is more, endless as has been the periodical writing of the last eighty years, and sedulously as later writers have imitated earlier, I do not know that it has ever been successfully copied. It consists in giving rapid and apparently business-like summaries, packed, with apparent negligence and real art, full of the flashes of wit so often noticed and to be noticed. Such are, in the article on "The Island of Ceylon," the

honey-bird "into whose body the soul of a common informer seems to have migrated," and "the chaplain of the garrison, all in black, the Rev. Mr. Somebody or other whose name we have forgotten," the discovery of whose body in a serpent his ruthless clerical brother pronounces to be "the best history of the kind he remembers." Very likely there may be people who can read this, even the "all in black," without laughing, and among them I should suppose must be the somebody or other, whose name we too have forgotten, who is said to have imagined that he had more than parried Sydney's unforgiven jest about the joke and the surgical operation, by retorting, "Yes! an *English* joke." I have always wept to think that Sydney did not live to hear this retort. The classical places for this kind of summary work are the article just named on Ceylon, and that on Waterton. But the most inimitable single example, if it is not too shocking to this very proper age, is the argument of Mat Lewis's tragedy: "Ottilia becomes quite furious from the conviction that Cæsario has been sleeping with a second lady called Estella; whereas he has really been sleeping with a third lady called Amelrosa."

Among the most important of these essays are the two famous ones on Methodism and on Indian missions, which gave far more offence to the religious public of evangelical persuasion than all Sydney's jokes on bishops, or his arguments for Catholic emancipation, and which (owing to the strong influence which then, as now, Nonconformists possessed in the counsels of the Liberal party) probably had as much to do as anything else

with the reluctance of the Whig leaders, when they came into power, to give their friend the highest ecclesiastical preferment. These subjects are rather difficult to treat in a general literary essay, and it may perhaps be admitted that here, as in dealing with poetry and other subjects of the more transcendental kind, Sydney showed a touch of Philistinism, and a distinct inability to comprehend exaltation of sentiment and thought. But the general sense is admirably sound and perfectly orthodox; and the way in which so apparently light and careless a writer has laboriously supported every one of his charges, and almost every one of his flings, with chapter and verse from the writings of the incriminated societies, is very remarkable. Nor can it, I think, be doubted that the publication, in so widely read a periodical, of the nauseous follies of speech in which well-meaning persons indulged, had something to do with the gradual disuse of a style than which nothing could be more prejudicial to religion, for the simple reason that nothing else could make religion ridiculous. The medicine did not of course operate at once, and silly people still write silly things. But I hardly think that the Wesleyan body or the Church Missionary Society would now officially publish such stuff as the passage about Brother Carey, who, while in the actual paroxysm of sea-sickness, was "wonderfully comforted by the contemplation of the goodness of God," or that about Brother Ward "in design clasping to his bosom" the magnanimous Captain Wickes, who subsequently "seemed very low," when a French privateer was in sight. Jeffrey was, it seems,

a little afraid of these well-deserved exposures, which, from the necessity of abundant quotation, are an exception to the general shortness of Sydney's articles. Sydney's interest in certain subjects led him constantly to take up fresh books on them; and thus a series of series might be made out of his papers, with some advantage to the reader perhaps, if a new edition of his works were undertaken. The chief of such subjects is America, in dealing with which he pleased the Americans by descanting on their gradual emancipation from English prejudices and abuses, but infuriated them by constant denunciations of slavery, and by laughing at their lack of literature and cultivation. With India he also dealt often, his brothers' connection with it giving him an interest therein. Prisons were another favourite subject, though, in his zeal for making them uncomfortable, he committed himself to one really atrocious suggestion – that of dark cells for long periods of time. It is odd that the same person should make such a truly diabolical proposal, and yet be in a perpetual state of humanitarian rage about man-traps and spring-guns, which were certainly milder engines of torture. It is odd, too, that Sydney, who was never tired of arguing that prisons ought to be made uncomfortable, because nobody need go there unless he chose, should have been furiously wroth with poor Mr. Justice Best for suggesting much the same thing of spring-guns. The greatest political triumph of his manner is to be found no doubt in the article "Bentham on Fallacies," in which the unreadable diatribes of the apostle of utilitarianism are somehow spirited and crisped

up into a series of brilliant arguments, and the whole is crowned by the famous "Noodle's Oration," the summary and storehouse of all that ever has been or can be said on the Liberal side in the lighter manner. It has not lost its point even from the fact that Noodle has now for a long time changed his party, and has elaborated for himself, after his manner, a similar stock of platitudes and absurdities in favour of the very things for which Sydney was fighting.

The qualities of these articles appear equally in the miscellaneous essays, in the speeches, and even in the sermons, though Sydney Smith, unlike Sterne, never condescended to buffoonery or theatrical tricks in the pulpit. In *Peter Plymley's Letters* they appear concentrated and acidulated: in the *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton*, in the *Repudiation Letters*, and the *Letters on Railways* which date from his very last days, concentrated and mellowed. More than one good judge has been of the opinion that Sydney's powers increased to the very end of his life, and it is not surprising that this should have been the case. Although he did plenty of work in his time, the literary part of it was never of an exhausting nature. Though one of the most original of commentators, he was a commentator pure and simple, and found, but did not supply, his matter. Thus there was no danger of running dry, and as his happiest style was not indignation but good-natured raillery, his increasing prosperity, not chequered, till quite the close of his life, by any serious bodily ailment, put him more and more in the right atmosphere and temper for

indulging his genius. *Plymley*, though very amusing, and, except in the Canning matter above referred to, not glaringly unfair for a political lampoon, is distinctly acrimonious, and almost (as "almost" as Sydney could be) ill-tempered. It is possible to read between the lines that the writer is furious at his party being out of office, and is much more angry with Mr. Perceval for having the ear of the country than for being a respectable nonentity. The main argument, moreover, is bad in itself, and was refuted by facts. Sydney pretends to be, as his friend Jeffrey really was, in mortal terror lest the French should invade England, and, joined by rebellious Irishmen and wrathful Catholics generally, produce an English revolution. The Tories replied, "We will take good care that the French shall *not* land, and that Irishmen shall *not* rise." And they did take the said good care, and they beat the Frenchmen thorough and thorough while Sydney and his friends were pointing their epigrams. Therefore, though much of the contention is unanswerable enough, the thing is doubtfully successful as a whole. In the *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton* the tone is almost uniformly good-humoured, and the argument, whether quite consistent or not in the particular speaker's mouth, is absolutely sound, and has been practically admitted since by almost all the best friends of the Church. Here occurs that inimitable passage before referred to.

> I met the other day, in an old Dutch chronicle, with a passage so apposite to this subject, that, though it is somewhat too light for the occasion, I cannot abstain from

quoting it. There was a great meeting of all the clergy at Dordrecht, and the chronicler thus describes it, which I give in the language of the translation: "And there was great store of Bishops in the town, in their robes goodly to behold, and all the great men of the State were there, and folks poured in in boats on the Meuse, the Merse, the Rhine, and the Linge, coming from the Isle of Beverlandt and Isselmond, and from all quarters in the Bailiwick of Dort; Arminians and Gomarists, with the friends of John Barneveldt and of Hugh Grote. And before my Lords the Bishops, Simon of Gloucester, who was a Bishop in those parts, disputed with Vorstius and Leoline the Monk, and many texts of Scripture were bandied to and fro; and when this was done, and many propositions made, and it waxed towards twelve of the clock, my Lords the Bishops prepared to set them down to a fair repast, in which was great store of good things – and among the rest a roasted peacock, having in lieu of a tail the arms and banners of the Archbishop, which was a goodly sight to all who favoured the Church – and then the Archbishop would say a grace, as was seemly to do, he being a very holy man; but ere he had finished, a great mob of townspeople and folks from the country, who were gathered under the windows, cried out *Bread! bread!*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.