

THE

214

# PRINCETON MAGAZINE.

EDITED BY

WILLIAM C. ALEXANDER.

---

VOL. I.

---

PRINTED BY JOHN T. ROBINSON.

1850.

THE  
PRINCETON MAGAZINE.

---

WORDSWORTH.

The recent death of Wordsworth affords an irresistible invitation to say something about his poetry. So long has he been before the public, that for some years past men have sat in judgment on him with almost the coolness which we ascribe to posterity. It is hard to say whether he has suffered most from his enemies or his friends. His excesses, simplicities, and almost hoaxes, such as Peter Bell, the Idiot Boy, and those Lyrical Ballads in which he did a violence to nature, and brought the Muse not only into the highway but into the very mire, together with his drowsy, dreamy, long-winded homilies in measured prose, have been embalmed and worshipped by a certain class of his admirers. This has done him more harm than Jeffrey's insulting sneers and unrighteous garbling, or than all the laughter exploded against the Lake School.

That Wordsworth will assume his place among the classic poets of England cannot be doubted for a moment. That he will occupy the same level with Shakspeare and Milton, it would be ridiculous to predict. Great contemporaries and rivals, not excepting his bitter lordly satirist, have recorded later judgments, which ought to hush the petty snarlings of

those who measure all poetry by the rule of Darwin Hoole and Robert Montgomery. Setting aside those who might be considered parties in the case, such as Southey, Lamb and Coleridge, we hear with deference the award of authors who belong wholly to the adverse school, especially Crabbe and Scott; and it is delightful to learn from them how real greatness may soar above all the jealousies of literary pride. Scott could laugh at Wordsworth, but it was with a bonhomie which would have been enjoyed by the brother poet himself. "With my friend Jeffrey's pardon," said he, "I think he loves to see imagination best when it is bitted and managed, and ridden upon the *grand pas*. He does not make allowance for starts and sallies and bounds, when Pegasus is beautiful to behold, though sometimes perilous to his rider. I do not compare myself, in point of imagination with Wordsworth; far from it; for his is naturally exquisite, and highly cultivated from constant exercise. But I can see as many castles in the clouds as any man, as many genii in the curling smoke of a steam-engine, as perfect a Persepolis in the embers of a sea-coal fire. My life has been spent in such day-dreams. But I cry no roast-meat. There are times when a man should remember what Rousseau used to say, *Tait-toi, Jean Jacques, car on ne t'entend pas!*" Scott loved and admired Wordsworth, and has several explicit testimonials on this head. But he touched the very spot of weakness and soreness, in the above metaphor.

The case would soon go against Rydal Mount, if poesy should be judged by the perverse attempts to glorify potters, pedlars and asinine reverberations. And as none saw this more clearly than Coleridge, so none has more philosophically pointed out the fundamental error to his friend, in those maxims on which he aimed to build a new art of poetry. We can scarcely be misunderstood, but the principles which we mean, and for which Wordsworth contended valiantly, even to the extreme of putting them ludicrously into practice, are these: that common every-day objects are all-suffi-

cient as the themes of verse ; that the rustic language, somewhat purified of grossness, is the proper dialect of poetry ; and that between the language of prose and the language of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference. Into these errors Coleridge never fell : he disavowed them in prose, and exemplified the contrary in verse. The richness of his versification always satisfies the ear, and those seeming irregularities of metre in which the verse overruns, as to the mere number of syllables, are really conformed to as strict canons as the like variations of rhythm in Greek iambics. It is a pity that our fugitive sonnet-teers, whose sprawling lines defy all scansion, would not find this out. Wordsworth also is always correct ; but then he loves to disappoint the ear as well as the mind. Fastidious in regard to all that is measured and falsely sweet, he throws in anomalies, which balk the expectation. And the acme of his fault is reached, when pedestrian metre coincides with pedestrian thought, as in the verses :

“ Then did the boy his tongue unlock ;  
 And thus he made reply :  
 ‘ At Kilve there was no weathercock,  
 And that’s the reason why.’ ”

This was, however, not incapacity in the poet, but frowardness. When nature and genius wrought mightily within him, he shook this yoke from his neck ; and these are the strains on which his reputation will be founded. In those youthful effusions which preceded the period of the Lyrical Ballads, and before he had any foregone conclusion to uphold, the verse of Wordsworth is in many specimens melodious and ear-filling ; it might even be called luxuriant, and this was probably suspected and feared by himself. What he could have done in the school of Rogers and Campbell may be surmised from the Alpine Tour. Take samples almost *ad aperturam libri*.

“ Where falls the purple morning far and wide  
 In flakes of light upon the mountain side ;  
 Where with loud voice the power of waters shakes  
 The leafy wood, or sleeps in quiet lakes.”

"From Bruno's forest screams the affrighted jay,  
And slow the insulted eagle wheels away."

"There, all unshaded, blazing forests throw  
Rich golden verdure on the wave below ;  
Slow glides the sail along the illumined shore,  
And steals into the shade the lazy oar."

Each of these is metrically perfect, while each is marked with an excellence characteristic of the poet, and which adheres to his very worst performances; we mean truth to nature in individual pictures. As Gainsborough carried crayon and sketch-book in his pocket to secure every lineament of trees, or vines, or clouds, on the spot; and as Goethe was accustomed actually to describe the scene before his eyes in audible words, that it might be fixed in his memory in all its details; so Wordsworth caught each phase of outward things with the precision of a daguerreotype. Hence there is not a borrowed or an overcharged picture in all his works: they may not always be striking, but they are always true.

How much stress he laid on this, and how determinately he sought it, is manifest from his admirable criticisms, in the long Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Of the metaphysics of that and another prefatory treatise, especially the arbitrary and now popular distinction between *Fancy* and *Imagination*, we shall only say at present, that we regard it as a beautiful whimsey. But the strictures on the British descriptive poetry of the iron age, must abide among the noblest monuments of sound criticism. Their contents have been already incorporated into the literature of our day; but it was the merit of Wordsworth to have scourged out the meretricious muse. Of his own success it would be impossible to give the secret more concisely or fully than in his own words: "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject, consequently, I hope there is in these poems little falsehood of description." This explains to us why we are so often struck with a single dash of his pencil; we see the very object; and we see it because the poet did not write without seeing it himself. Hundreds of proofs might be

given; here are two of which there can be but one opinion; and first the Green Linnet:

“ Upon you tuft of hazel trees  
That twinkle to the gusty breeze,  
Behold him perched in ecstasies,  
    Yet seeming still to hover;  
There! where the flutter of his wings  
Upon his back and body flings  
Shadows and sunny glimmerings,  
    That cover him all over.”

“ Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves  
The violets of five seasons reappear  
And fade, unseen by any human eye;  
Where fairy water-breaks do murmur on  
For ever,—and I saw the sparkling foam  
And with my cheek on one of those green stones  
That, fleeced with moss, beneath the shady trees,  
Lay round me, scattered like a flock of sheep,  
I heard the murmur, and the murmuring sound,  
In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay  
Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure,  
The heart luxuriates with indifferent things,  
Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones,  
And on the vacant air.”

But it would be endless to cite passages of a peculiarity so abundantly exemplified. Although the tendency of Wordsworth to hover long over his subject renders him less quotable than most poets, especially in small parcels or pungent aphorisms, it is nevertheless remarkable that certain sayings of his have become household words, and only cease to be recited because they have become trite. This is one of the happiest contributions of a poet to the culture and happiness of his countrymen. We will string together a few of these, though they are already in the memories of many readers, perhaps of some who know not whom they have to thank.

#### BURNS.

“ Of Him who walked in glory and in joy  
Following the plough along the mountain side.”

#### MEMORABLE DAY.

“ One of those heavenly days which cannot die.”

## FARMS.

—“ These pastoral farms  
Green to the very door.”

## DAILY GOOD.

—“ That best portion of a good man's life  
His little, harmless, unremembered acts  
Of kindness and of love.”

## EVENING.

“ The holy time is quiet as a Nun,  
Breathless with adoration ;”——

## MILTON.

“ Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart.”

## ENGLISH.

“ We must be free or die, who speak the tongue  
That Shakspeare spake, the faith and morals hold  
Which Milton held.”

## GRATITUDE.

“ I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
With coldness still returning ;  
Alas ! the gratitude of men  
Hath oftener left me mourning.”

We might add the “ Sea Shell ”—“ O joy that in our embers yet doth live ”—“ The child is father of the man ”—and “ Our birth is but a sleep and forgetting.” But our object is not to give bricks from a building so familiar, nor yet to extract beauties, but to show how truly Wordsworth has attained that peculiar eminence which is indicated by the adoption of his words into the circulation of common life. The man who can do this innocently is indeed a benefactor ; and of no one can this be more truly said than of William Wordsworth. He is not always, nor in our view, generally, great ; but good he always is. Peaceful contemplation of nature, in a mood of serious philosophy, may be given as the character of all his writings. We dare not call him so much a Christian, as a religious poet. When he touches Christianity it is with holy awe, but Christianity in his system of thought is rather a subdivision of philosophy. He is the

poet of temperance, of peace, and above all of rustic innocence and converse with nature. Playfulness, humour, irony, sarcasm, invective, passion—these are seldom present. One turns to the Ballads or the Excursion, not for excitement but for soothing. Far more truly is Wordsworth the Quaker-poet, than he who bears the name; even in garb and manners he likened himself to the quiet friendly folk.

Though numbered also among the Lake Poets, no one is more unlike the lamented bard than his friend Coleridge, and no one has criticised him more searchingly or more impartially pointed out his merits. The first year that they lived as neighbours, they talked over their respective plans. The results of their theories when realized, diverged as widely as *Christabel* and the *Ancient Mariner* from the *Lyrical Ballads*; one species owing its charm to supernatural shadows of the imagination, and the other to “things of every day.” We should despair of amending the catalogue which Coleridge has given of Wordsworth’s pre-eminent qualities. These are austere purity of language both grammatically and logically; freshness of thoughts, so that “they have the dew upon them;” sinewy strength of single lines and paragraphs; perfect truth in images and descriptions; meditative pathos; and the gift of imagination in the highest and strictest sense of the word, according to their own distinction. We shall only add, and with no low estimate of the tribute intended, a virginal purity, which exempts his entire works from the lightest breath of suspicion from the most rigid moralist. Such a writer may well be lamented, when he passes from the earth in a gentle and beautiful old age. J.