

FROM THE RECLUSE

- On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
 Musing in solitude, I oft perceive
 Fair trains of imagery before me rise,
 Accompanied by feelings of delight
 Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed;
 And I am conscious of affecting thoughts
 And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes
 Or elevates the Mind, intent to weigh
 The good and evil of our mortal state.
 — To these emotions, whencesoever they come,
 Whether from breath of outward circumstance,
 Or from the Soul — an impulse to herself —
 I would give utterance in numerous verse.
 Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope,
 And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith;
 Of blessed consolations in distress;
 Of moral strength, and intellectual Power;
 Of joy in widest commonalty spread;
 Of the individual Mind that keeps her own
 Inviolate retirement, subject there
 To Conscience only, and the law supreme
 Of that Intelligence which governs all —
 I sing: — “fit audience let me find though few!”
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- So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the Bard —
 In holiest mood. Urania, I shall need
 Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
 Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven!
 For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
 Deep — and, aloft ascending, breathe in words
 To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
 All strength — all terror, single or in bands,
 That ever was put forth in personal form —
 Jehovah — with his thunder, and the choir
 Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones —
 I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
 By help of dreams — can breed such fear and awe
 As fall upon us often when we look
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man —
 My haunt, and the main region of my song.
 — Beauty — a living Presence of the earth,
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Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms
 Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed
 From earth's materials — waits upon my steps;
 Pitches her tents before me as I move,
 An hourly neighbour. Paradise, and groves
 Elysian, Fortunate Fields — like those of old
 Sought in the Atlantic Main — why should they be
 A history only of departed things,
 Or a mere fiction of what never was?
 For the discerning intellect of Man,
 When wedded to this goodly universe
 In love and holy passion, shall find these
 A simple produce of the common day.
 — I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
 Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
 Of this great consummation: — and, by words
 Which speak of nothing more than what we are,
 Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep
 Of Death, and win the vacant and the vain
 To noble raptures; while my voice proclaims
 How exquisitely the individual Mind
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
 Of the whole species) to the external World
 Is fitted: — and how exquisitely, too —
 Theme this but little heard of among men —
 The external World is fitted to the Mind;
 And the creation (by no lower name
 Can it be called) which they with blended might
 Accomplish: — this is our high argument.
 — Such grateful haunts foregoing, if I oft
 Must turn elsewhere — to travel near the tribes
 And fellowships of men, and see ill sights
 Of madding passions mutually inflamed;
 Must hear Humanity in fields and groves
 Pipe solitary anguish; or must hang
 Brooding above the fierce confederate storm
 Of sorrow, barricaded evermore
 Within the walls of cities — may these sounds
 Have their authentic comment; that even these
 Hearing, I be not downcast or forlorn! —
 Descend, prophetic Spirit! that inspir'd
 The human Soul of universal earth,
 Dreaming on things to come; and dost possess
 A metropolitan temple in the hearts
 Of mighty Poets; upon me bestow
 A gift of genuine insight; that my Song
 With star-like virtue in its place may shine,

Shedding benignant influence, and secure,
 Itself, from all malevolent effect
 Of those mutations that extend their sway
 Throughout the nether sphere! — And if with this
 I mix more lowly matter; with the thing
 Contemplated, describe the Mind and Man
 Contemplating; and who, and what he was —
 The transitory Being that beheld
 This Vision; when and where, and how he lived; —
 Be not this labour useless. If such theme
 May sort with highest objects, then — dread Power!
 Whose gracious favour is the primal source
 Of all illumination — may my Life
 Express the image of a better time,
 More wise desires, and simpler manners; — nurse
 My Heart in genuine freedom: — all pure thoughts
 Be with me; — so shall thy unfailing love
 Guide, and support, and cheer me to the end!

THE PRELUDE
OR, GROWTH OF A POET'S MIND
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POEM

BOOK FIRST

INTRODUCTION — CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL-TIME

O THERE is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come
To none more grateful than to me; escaped
From the vast city, where I long had pined
A discontented sojourner: now free,
Free as a bird to settle where I will.
What dwelling shall receive me? in what vale
Shall be my harbour? underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home? and what clear stream
Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?
The earth is all before me. With a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about; and should the chosen guide
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way. I breathe again!
Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,
That burthen of my own unnatural self,
The heavy weight of many a weary day
Not mine, and such as were not made for me.
Long months of peace (if such bold word accord
With any promises of human life),
Long months of ease and undisturbed delight
Are mine in prospect; whither shall I turn,
By road or pathway, or through trackless field,
Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing
Upon the river point me out my course?

Dear Liberty! Yet what would it avail
But for a gift that consecrates the joy?
For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A correspondent breeze, that gently moved

With quickening virtue, but is now become
 A tempest, a redundant energy,
 Vexing its own creation. Thanks to both,
 And their congenial powers, that, while they join
 In breaking up a long-continued frost,
 Bring with them vernal promises, the hope
 Of active days urged on by flying hours, —
 Days of sweet leisure, taxed with patient thought
 Abstruse, nor wanting punctual service high,
 Morns and vespers of harmonious versel

Thus far, O Friend! did I, not used to make
 A present joy the matter of a song,
 Pour forth that day my soul in measured strains
 That would not be forgotten, and are here
 Recorded: to the open fields I told
 A prophecy: poetic numbers came
 Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe
 A renovated spirit singled out,
 Such hope was mine, for holy services.
 My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's
 Internal echo of the imperfect sound;
 To both I listened, drawing from them both
 A cheerful confidence in things to come.

Content and not unwilling now to give
 A respite to this passion, I paced on
 With brisk and eager steps; and came, at length,
 To a green shady place, where down I sate
 Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice,
 And settling into gentler happiness.
 'Twas autumn, and a clear and placid day,
 With warmth, as much as needed, from a sun
 Two hours declined towards the west; a day
 With silver clouds, and sunshine on the grass,
 And in the sheltered and the sheltering grove
 A perfect stillness. Many were the thoughts
 Encouraged and dismissed, till choice was made
 Of a known Vale, whither my feet should turn,
 Nor rest till they had reached the very door
 Of the one cottage which methought I saw.
 No picture of mere memory ever looked
 So fair; and while upon the fancied scene
 I gazed with growing love, a higher power
 Than Fancy gave assurance of some work
 Of glory there forthwith to be begun,
 Perhaps too there performed. Thus long I mused,

Nor e'er lost sight of what I mused upon,
 Save when, amid the stately grove of oaks,
 Now here, now there, an acorn, from its cup
 Dislodged, through sere leaves rustled, or at once
 To the bare earth dropped with a startling sound.
 From that soft couch I rose not, till the sun
 Had almost touched the horizon; casting then
 A backward glance upon the curling cloud
 Of city smoke, by distance ruralised;
 Keen as a Truant or a Fugitive,
 But as a Pilgrim resolute, I took,
 Even with the chance equipment of that hour,
 The road that pointed toward the chosen Vale.
 It was a splendid evening, and my soul
 Once more made trial of her strength, nor lacked
 Æolian visitations; but the harp
 Was soon defrauded, and the banded host
 Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds,
 And lastly utter silence! "Be it so;
 Why think of any thing but present good?"
 So, like a home-bound labourer I pursued
 My way beneath the mellowing sun, that shed
 Mild influence; nor left in me one wish
 Again to bend the Sabbath of that time
 To a servile yoke. What need of many words?
 A pleasant loitering journey, through three days
 Continued, brought me to my hermitage.
 I spare to tell of what ensued, the life
 In common things — the endless store of things,
 Rare, or at least so seeming, every day
 Found all about me in one neighbourhood —
 The self-congratulation, and, from morn
 To night, unbroken cheerfulness serene.
 But speedily an earnest longing rose
 To brace myself to some determined aim,
 Reading or thinking; either to lay up
 New stores, or rescue from decay the old
 By timely interference; and therewith
 Came hopes still higher, that with outward life
 I might endue some airy phantasies
 That had been floating loose about for years,
 And to such beings temperately deal forth
 The many feelings that oppressed my heart.
 That hope hath been discouraged; welcome light
 Dawns from the east, but dawns to disappear
 And mock me with a sky that ripens not
 Into a steady morning: if my mind,

Remembering the bold promise of the past,
Would gladly grapple with some noble theme,
Vain is her wish; where'er she turns she finds
Impediments from day to day renewed.

130

And now it would content me to yield up
Those lofty hopes awhile, for present gifts
Of humbler industry. But, oh, dear Friend!

133

The Poet, gentle creature as he is,
Hath, like the Lover, his unruly times;

His fits when he is neither sick nor well,

Though no distress be near him but his own
Unmanageable thoughts: his mind, best pleased

140

While she as duteous as the mother dove

Sits brooding, lives not always to that end,

But like the innocent bird, hath goadings on
That drive her as in trouble through the groves;

145

With me is now such passion, to be blamed
No otherwise than as it lasts too long.

When, as becomes a man who would prepare
For such an arduous work, I through myself
Make rigorous inquisition, the report

150

Is often cheering; for I neither seem
To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,

Nor general Truths, which are themselves a sort
Of Elements and Agents, Under-powers,

Subordinate helpers of the living mind:
Nor am I naked of external things,

155

Forms, images, nor numerous other aids

Of less regard, though won perhaps with toil
And needful to build up a Poet's praise.

Time, place, and manners do I seek, and these
Are found in plentiful store, but nowhere such

As may be singled out with steady choice;
No little band of yet remembered names

160

Whom I, in perfect confidence, might hope
To summon back from lonesome banishment,

And make them dwellers in the hearts of men
Now living, or to live in future years.

165

Sometimes the ambitious Power of choice, mistaking
Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,

Will settle on some British theme, some old
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;

More often turning to some gentle place
Within the groves of Chivalry, I pipe

170

To shepherd swains, or seated harp in hand,

Amid reposing knights by a river side
Or fountain, listen to the grave reports

1754

Of dire enchantments faced and overcome
By the strong mind, and tales of warlike feats,

Where spear encountered spear, and sword with sword
Fought, as if conscious of the blazonry

180

Thence inspiration for a song that winds
Through ever changing scenes of votive quest

Wrongs to redress, harmonious tribute paid
To patient courage and unblemished truth,

To firm devotion, zeal unquenchable,
And Christian meekness hallowing faithful loves.

185

Sometimes, more sternly moved, I would relate
How vanquished Mithridates northward passed,

And, hidden in the cloud of years, became
Odin, the Father of a race by whom

190

Perished the Roman Empire: how the friends
And followers of Sertorius, out of Spain

Flying, found shelter in the Fortunate Isles,
And left their usages, their arts and laws,

To disappear by a slow gradual death,
To dwindle and to perish one by one,

195

Starved in those narrow bounds: but not the soul
Of Liberty, which fifteen hundred years

Survived, and, when the European came
With skill and power that might not be withstood,

200

Did, like a pestilence, maintain its hold
And wasted down by glorious death that race

Of natural heroes: or I would record
How, in tyrannic times, some high-souled man,

Unnamed among the chronicles of kings,
Suffered in silence for Truth's sake: or tell,

205

How that one Frenchman, through continued force
Of meditation on the inhuman deeds

Of those who conquered first the Indian Isles,
Went single in his ministry across

The Ocean; not to comfort the oppressed,
But, like a thirsty wind, to roam about

210

Withering the Oppressor: how Gustavus sought
Help at his need in Dalecarlia's mines:

How Wallace fought for Scotland; left the name
Of Wallace to be found, like a wild flower,

215

All over his dear Country; left the deeds
Of Wallace, like a family of Ghosts,

To people the steep rocks and river banks,
Her natural sanctuaries, with a local soul

Of independence and stern liberty.
 Sometimes it suits me better to invent
 A tale from my own heart, more near akin
 To my own passions and habitual thoughts;
 Some variegated story, in the main
 Lofty, but the unsubstantial structure melts
 Before the very sun that brightens it,
 Mist into air dissolving! Then a wish,
 My best and favourite aspiration, mounts
 With yearning toward some philosophic song
 Of Truth that cherishes our daily life;
 With meditations passionate from deep
 Recesses in man's heart, immortal yre;
 Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre;
 But from this awful burthen I full soon
 Take refuge and beguile myself with trust
 That mellow years will bring a ripier mind
 And clearer insight. Thus my days are past
 In contradiction; with no skill to part
 Vague longing, haply bred by want of power,
 From paramount impulse not to be withstood,
 A timorous capacity from prudence,
 From circumspection, infinite delay.
 Humility and modest awe themselves
 Betray me, serving often for a cloak
 To a more subtle selfishness; that now
 Looks every function up in blank reserve,
 Now dupes me, trusting to an anxious eye
 That with intrusive restlessness beats off
 Simplicity and self-presented truth.
 Ah! better far than this, to stray about
 Voluptuously through fields and rural walks,
 And ask no record of the hours, resigned
 To vacant musing, unproved neglect
 Of all things, and deliberate holiday
 Far better never to have heard the name
 Of zeal and just ambition, than to live
 Baffled and plagued by a mind that every hour
 Turns recreant to her task; takes heart again,
 Then feels immediately some hollow thought
 Hang like an interdict upon her hopes.
 This is my lot; for either still I find
 Some imperfection in the chosen theme,
 Or see of absolute accomplishment
 Much wanting, so much wanting, in myself,
 That I recoil and droop, and seek repose
 In listlessness from vain perplexity,

Unprofitably travelling toward the grave,
 Like a false steward who hath much received
 And renders nothing back.
 Was it for this
 That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
 To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
 And, from his alder shades and rocky falls,
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
 That flowed along my dreams? For this, didst thou,
 O Derwent! winding among grassy holms
 Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,
 Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts
 To more than infant softness, giving me
 Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind
 A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
 That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.
 When he had left the mountains and received
 On his smooth breast the shadow of those towers
 That yet survive, a shattered monument
 Of feudal sway, the bright blue river passed
 Along the margin of our terrace walk;
 A tempting playmate whom we dearly loved.
 Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
 In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
 Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
 Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again
 Alternate, all a summer's day, or scoured
 The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves
 Of yellow ragwort; or when rock and hill,
 The woods, and distant Skiddaw's lofty height,
 Were bronzed with deepest radiance, stood alone
 Beneath the sky, as if I had been born
 On Indian plains, and from my mother's hut
 Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport
 A naked savage, in the thunder shower.

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
 Fostered alike by beauty and by fear:
 Much favoured in my birth-place, and no less
 In that beloved Vale to which ere long
 We were transplanted — there were we let loose
 For sports of wider range. Ere I had told
 Ten birth-days, when among the mountain slopes
 Frost, and the breath of frosty wind, had snapped
 The last autumnal crocus, 'twas my joy
 With store of springes o'er my shoulder hung
 To range the open heights where woodcocks run