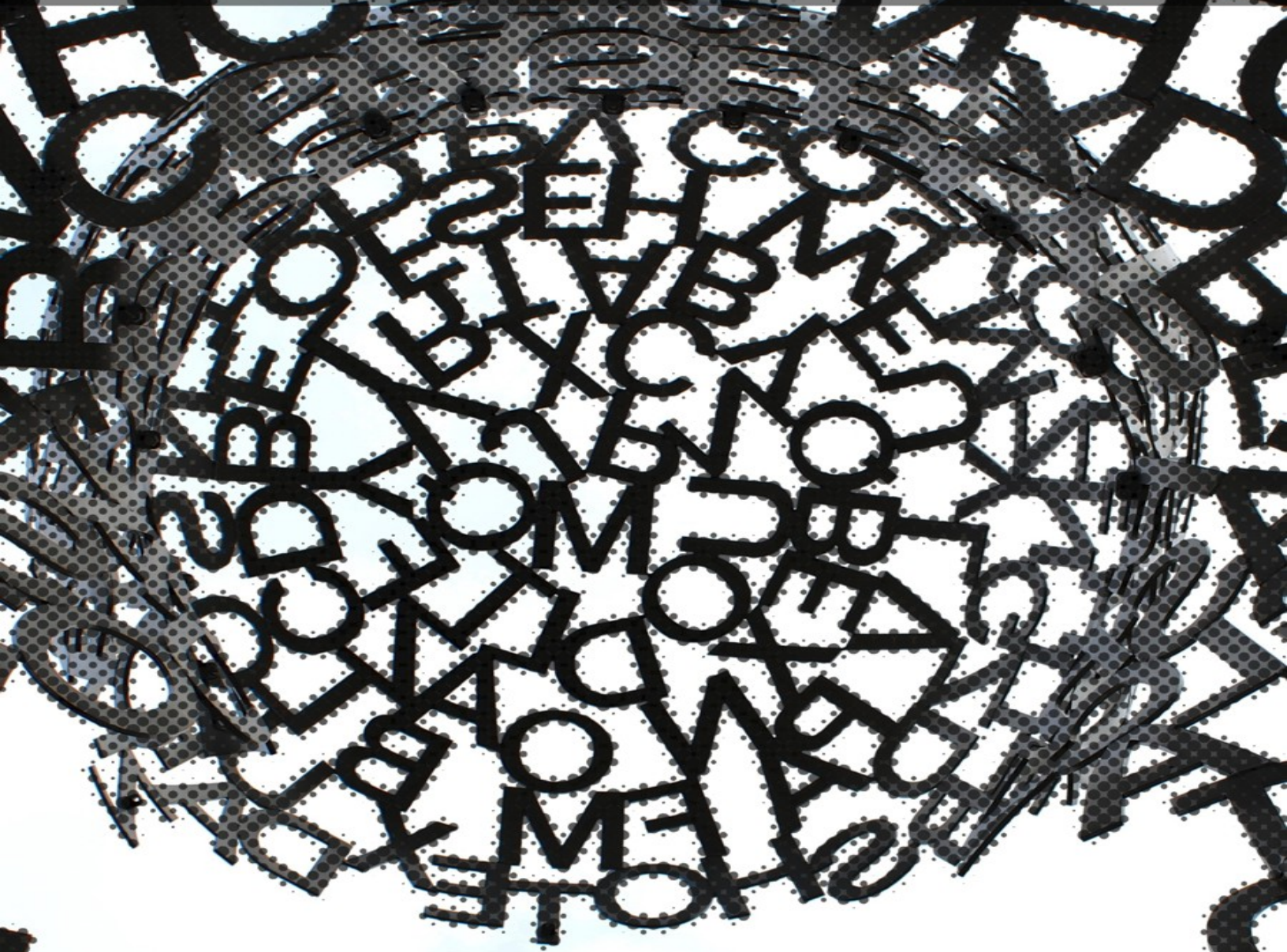


**George Edward
Woodberry**



Studies in letters and life

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Landor

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CRITICISMS.

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LANDOR.

MANY of the most sensitive and discriminating critics of this century have, in the suffrage for fame, listed themselves for Landor. He seemed almost to achieve immortality within his lifetime, so continuously was the subtle appreciation of the best yielded to him, from the far-off years when Shelley used, at Oxford, to declaim with enthusiasm passages from Gebir, to the time, that seems as yesterday, when Swinburne made his pilgrimage to Italy, to offer his tribute of adoration to the old man at the close of his solitary and troubled career; and still each finer spirit,

"As he passes, turns,

And bids fair peace be to his sable shroud."

During his long life he saw the springtime, and outlived the harvest, of the great poetic revival, and the labor of the Victorian poets of the aftermath was half accomplished before his death; but from all these powerful contemporary influences he was free. He remained apart; and this single fact, attesting, as it does, extraordinary self-possession and assurance of purpose, suffices to make his character

interesting, even were his work of inferior worth. As yet, however, even to the minds of cultivated men, he is hardly more than a great figure. He is known, praised, and remembered for particular scenes, dramatic fragments, occasional lyrics, quatrains. This is the natural fate of a discursive writer. It matters not that Landor was wide ranging; it matters not what spoils of thought, what images of beauty, he brought from those far eastern uplands which it was his boast to haunt: he failed to give unity to his work, to give interest to large portions of it, to command public attention for it as a whole. Indeed, his work as a whole does not command the attention even of the best. What does survive, too, lives only in the favor of a small circle. He forfeited popular fame at the beginning, when he selected themes that presuppose rare qualities in his audience, and adopted an antique style; but such considerations, at least in their naked statement, do not tell the whole story. Other poets have missed immediate applause by dealing with subjects that assumed unusual largeness of soul, range of sympathy, and refinement of taste in their readers: like Shelley, singing of unheeded hopes and fears to which the world was to be wrought; like Wordsworth, narrating the myth of Troy. Other poets, in style, have set forth the object plainly, and left it to work its will on the heart and imagination, unaided by the romantic spell, the awakening glow, the silent but imperative suggestion, the overmastering passion that takes heart and imagination captive; and they have not lost their reward. A remote theme, an impersonal style, are not of themselves able to condemn a poet to long neglect. They may make wide

appreciation of him impossible; they may explain the indifference of an imperfectly educated public; but they do not account for the fact that Landor is to be read, even by his admirers, in a book of selections, while the dust is shaken from the eight stout octavos that contain his works only by the professional man of letters.

What first strikes the student of Landor is the lack of any development in his genius. This is one reason why Mr. Leslie Stephen, seizing on the characteristic somewhat rudely, and leaping to an ungracious conclusion, calls him "a glorified and sublime edition of the sixth-form schoolboy." Men whose genius is of this fixed type are rare in English literature, and not of the highest rank. They exhibit no radical change; they are at the beginning what they are at the end; their works do not belong to any particular period of their lives; they seem free from their age, and to live outside of it. Hence, in dealing with them, historical criticism—the criticism whose purpose is to explain rather than to judge—soon finds itself at fault. When the circumstances that determined the original bent of their minds have been set forth, there is nothing more to be said. With Landor, this bent seems to have been given by his classical training. To write Latin verses was the earliest serious employment of his genius, and his efforts were immediately crowned with success. These studies, falling in with natural inclinations and aptitudes, pledged him to a classical manner; they made real for him the myths and history of Greece and Rome; they fed his devotion to the ancient virtues,—love of freedom, aspiration for the calm of wisdom, reverence for the dignity of heroism, delight in beauty for its own sake;

they supported him in what was more distinctively his own, —his refinement in material tastes, his burning indignation, his defense of tyrannicide. These characteristics he had in youth; they were neither diminished nor increased in age. In youth, too, he displayed all his literary excellences and defects: the fullness and weight of line; the march of sentences; the obscurity arising from over-condensation of thought and abrupt and elliptical constructions; his command of the grand and impressive as well as the beautiful and charming in imagery; his fondness for heroic situation and for the loveliness of minute objects. This was a high endowment; why, then, do its literary results seem inadequate?

With all his gifts, Landor did not possess unifying power. He observed objects as they passed before him at haphazard, took them into his mind, and gave them back, untransformed, in their original disorder. He thought disconnectedly, and expressed his thoughts as they came, detached and separate. This lack of unity did not result simply from his choice of the classical mode of treatment, or from a defect in logical or constructive power, although it was connected with these. The ability to fuse experience, to combine its elements and make them one, to give it back to the world, transformed, and yet essentially true, the real creative faculty, is proportioned very strictly to the self-assertive power of genius, to the energy of the reaction of the mind on nature and life; it springs from a strong personality. To say that Landor's personality was weak would be to stultify one's self; but yet the difference between Landor the man and Landor the author is so great as to

make the two almost antithetical; and in his imaginative work, by which he must be judged, it is not too much to say that he denied and forswore his personality, and obliterated himself so far as was possible. He not only eliminated self from his style, and, after the classical manner, defined by Arnold, "relied solely on the weight and force of that which, with entire fidelity, he uttered," but he also eliminated self, so far as one can, from his subject. He did not bind his work together by the laws of his own mind; he did not root it in the truth, as he saw truth; he did not interpenetrate and permeate it with his own beliefs, as the great masters have always done. His principles were at the best vague, hardly amounting to more than an unapplied enthusiasm for liberty, heroism, and the other great watchwords of social rather than individual life. These illuminate his work, but they do not give it consistency. It is crystalline in structure, beautiful, ordered, perfect in form when taken part by part, but conglomerate as a whole; it is a handful of jewels, many of which are singly of the most transparent and glowing light, but unrelated one to another, placed in juxtaposition, but not set; and in the crystalline mass is imbedded grosser matter, and mingled with the jewels are stones of dull color and light weight. A lovely object caught his eye, and he set it forth in verse; a fine thought came to him, and he inserted it in his dialogues; but his days were not "bound each to each by natural piety," or by any other of the shaping principles of high genius. He was a spectator of life, not an actor in life. Nature was to him a panorama, wonderful, awful, beautiful, and he described its scenes down to its most minute and evanescent details. History was his

theatre, where the personages played great parts; and he recorded their words and gestures, always helping them with the device of the high buskin and something of a histrionic air. He was content to be thus guided from without; to have his intellectual activity determined by the chance of sensation and of reading, rather than by a well-thought-out and enthusiastic purpose of his own soul. And so he became hardly more than a mirror of beauty and an Æolian harp of thought; if the vision came, if the wind breathed, he responded.

This self-effacement, this impersonality, as it is called, in literature, is much praised. It is said to be classical, and there is an impression in some minds that such an abdication of the individual's prerogatives is the distinctive mark of classicism. There is no more misleading and confusing error in criticism. Not impersonality, but universality, is that mark; and this is by no means the same thing, differently stated. In any age, the first, although not the sole, characteristic of classical work is that it deals with universal truth, of interest to all men: and hence the poet is required to keep to himself his idiosyncrasies, hobbies, all that is simply his own; all that is not identical with the common human nature; all that men in large bodies cannot sympathize with, understand, and appreciate. Under these conditions direct self-revelation is exceptional. The poet usually expresses himself by so arranging his plot and developing his characters that they will illustrate the laws of life, as he sees these laws, without any direct statement,—though the Greek chorus is full of didactic sayings; and he may also express himself by such a powerful presentation of

the morality intrinsic in beautiful things and noble actions as "to soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of men," without any dogmatic insistence in his own person. In these ways Æschylus obliterated himself from his work just as much as Shakespeare, and no more; Swift just as much as Aristophanes, and no more; but the statement that Shakespeare or Swift obliterated themselves from their works needs only to be made to be laughed at. The faith of Æschylus, the wisdom of Sophocles, are in all their dramas; Anacreon is in all his songs, Horace in all his odes. The lasting significance of their productions to mankind is derived from the clearness, the power, the skill, with which they informed their works with their personality. These men had a philosophy of life, that underlay and unified their work. They rebuilt the world in their imagination, and gave it the laws of their own minds. Their spirits were active, moulding, shaping, creating, subduing the whole of nature and life to themselves. It is true that the ancients accomplished their purpose rather by thought, the moderns rather by emotion; but this difference is incidental to the change in civilization. Either instrument is sufficient for its end; but he who would now choose the ancient instead of the modern mode, narrows, postpones, and abbreviates his fame only less than Landor, in his youth, by writing in Latin. Whatever be the mode of its operation, the energy of personality is the very essence of effective genius.

That Landor had no philosophy of life, in the same sense as Shakespeare or Æschylus, is plain to any reader. Those who look on art, including poetry, as removed from ordinary human life, who think that its chief service to men lies in

affording delight rather than in that quickening of the spirit of which delight is only the sign and efflorescence, would consider Landor's lack of this philosophy a virtue. It accounts largely for his failure to interest even the best in the larger part of his work, and especially for the discontinuity of his reflections. These reflections are always his own; and this fact may seem to make against the view that he eliminated self from his productions so far as possible. But the presence of personality in literature as a force, ordering a great whole and giving it laws, is a very different thing from its presence as a mere mouthpiece of opinion. The thoughts may be numerous, varied, wise, noble; they may have all the virtues of truth and grace; but if they are disparate and scattered, if they tend nowhither, if they leave the reader where they found him, if they subserve no ulterior purpose and accomplish no end, there is a wide gulf between them and the thoughts of Shakespeare and Æschylus, no less their own than were Landor's his. In the former, personality is a power; in the latter, it is only a voice. In Landor's eight volumes there are more fine thoughts, more wise apothegms, than in any other discursive author's works in English literature; but they do not tell on the mind. They bloom like flowers in their gardens, but they crown no achievement. At the end, no cause is advanced, no goal is won. This incoherence and inefficiency proceed from the absence of any definite scheme of life, any compacted system of thought, any central principles, any strong, pervading, and ordering personality.

In the same way the objectivity of Landor's work, its naturalism as distinguished from imaginativeness, results from the same cause, but with the difference that, while the faults already mentioned are largely due to an imperfect equipment of the mind, his mode of art seems to have been adopted by conscious choice and of set purpose. The opinion of those who look on naturalism as a virtue in art is deserving of respect. We have been admonished for a long while that men should see things as they are, and present them as they are, and that this was the Greek way. The dictum, when applied with the meaning that men should be free from prejudice and impartial in judgment, no one would contest; but when it is proclaimed with the meaning that poets should express ideas nakedly, and should reproduce objects by portraiture, there is excuse for raising some question. No doubt, this was in general the practice of the ancients. The Athenians were primarily intellectual, the Romans unimaginitive. But by the operation of various causes—the chief of which are the importance bestowed on the individual and the impulse given to emotion by the Christian religion—mankind has changed somewhat; and therefore the methods of appeal to men, the ways of touching their hearts and enlightening their minds, have been modified. In literature this change is expressed by saying that the romantic manner has, in general, superseded the classical. The romantic manner aims at truth no less than the classical; it sets forth things as they are no less completely and clearly. The difference is rather one of methods than of aims. The classical poet usually perceives the object by his intellect, and makes his appeal

to the mind; the romantic poet seizes on the object with his imagination, and makes his appeal to the heart. Not that classical work is without imagination, or romantic work devoid of intellectuality; but that in one the intellect counts for more, in the other imagination. The classical poet, having once presented ideas and objects, leaves them to make their way; the romantic poet not only presents them, but, by awakening the feelings, predisposes the mood of the mind, makes their reception by the mind easier, wins their way for them. In classical work, consequently, success depends mainly on lucidity of understanding, clearness of vision, skill in verbal expression; in romantic work, the poet must not only possess these qualities, but must superadd, as his prime characteristic, rightness, one might better say sanity, of passion. The classical virtues are more common among authors, the romantic far more rare; and hence error in the romantic manner is more frequent, especially in dealing with ideas. But with all its liability to mistake in weak hands, romantic art, by its higher range, its fiercer intensity, especially by its greater certainty, has, in the hands of a master, a clear increase of power over classical art, and under the changed conditions of civilization its resources are not to be lightly neglected. Indeed, one who voluntarily adopts the classical manner as an exclusive mode seems to choose an instrument of less compass and melody, to prefer Greek to modern music. He sings to a secluded and narrow circle, and loses the ear of the world. Certainly Landor made this choice, and by it he must stand.

Let us take an example from the best of Landor's work, and from that region of classical art where it is wholly

competent,—the brief description of small objects:—

"The ever-sacred cup

Of the pure lily hath between my hands

Felt safe, unsoiled, nor lost one grain of gold."

How completely, how distinctly, the image is given,—its form, its transparent purity, its fragile and trembling gold! How free from any other than a strictly artistic charm! And yet how different is its method of appeal from Shelley's

"tender blue-bells, at whose birth

The sod scarce heaved;"

from Shakespeare's

"daffodils

That come before the swallow dares, and take

The winds of March with beauty."

Or, to select an illustration, also of Landor's best, when the image, no less objective, yields of itself an infinite suggestion:—

" Borgia, thou once wert almost too august

And high for adoration; now thou 'rt dust.

All that remains of thee these plaits unfold,

Calm hair meandering in pellucid gold."

Again, how perfect is the image, how effective the development of the third line; how the melody of the last blends with its selected epithets to place the object entire and whole before the mind; how free is the quatrain from any self-intrusion of the poet! But here, too, the method of appeal is very different from Shakespeare's, as in the lines on Yorick's skull: "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft." The difference in mood between these two only emphasizes the difference in method. Enough has

been said, however, in description and exemplification of the two kinds of art. Either is sufficient for its ends, nor would any one desire to dispense with that which has resulted in work so admirable as has been quoted from Landor. The distinctively romantic poets do not consign the classical style to disuse. In the presentation of images, Keats has frequent recourse to it, as in his picture of Autumn lying

"on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers."

So Wordsworth, in expressing ideas, is sometimes more bald than the least imaginative of the classics. But such poets do not employ this style alone; they are characterized by the modern manner; they give us those "sweet views" which in the ancient mode "can never well be seen." Landor droops below his great contemporaries, not by merely adopting the classical method, but by adopting it exclusively. Whether this choice was entirely free, or partly determined by natural incapacity, is doubtful. Violent and tempestuous as his nature was, with all his boyish intensity of indignation, his boyish delicacy of tenderness, he seems to possess temper rather than true passion. In the verses to his poetic love, *Ianthe*, there are many fine sentiments, graceful turns; there is courtliness of behavior; but the note of passion is not struck. *Ianthe* is only another poetic mistress of the cavalier school, and in the memory her name is less, both for dignity and pathos, than *Rose Aylmer's*. Without passion, of course, a poet is condemned to the classical style. Passion is the element in which the

romantic writer fuses beauty and wisdom; it is the means by which personality pervades literary work with most ease, directness, and glow. In the great modern poets it is the substance of their genius. But just as neither by a philosophy of life nor in any other way did Landor fill his subject with himself, so neither by passion nor by any other quality did he breathe his own spirit into his style.

The consequence is that Landor, unclassified in his own age, is now to be ranked among the poets, increasing in number, who appeal rather to the artistic than to the poetic sense. He is to be placed in that group which looks on art as a world removed; which prizes it mainly for the delight it gives; which, caring less for truth, deals chiefly with the beauty that charms the senses; and which therefore weaves poetry like tapestry, and uses the web of speech to bring out a succession of fine pictures. The watchwords of any school, whether in thought or art, seldom awake hostility until their bearing on the details of practice reveals their meaning. Art is, in a sense, a world removed from the actual and present life, and beauty is the sole title that admits any work within its limits. Of this there is no question. But that world, however far from what is peculiar to any one age, has its eternal foundations in universal life; and that beauty has its enduring power because it is the incarnation of universal life. What poem has a better right to admission there than *The Eve of St. Agnes*? and in what poem does the heart of life beat more warmly? *Laodamia* belongs in that world, but it is because it voices abiding human feelings no less than because of its serenity. Nature in itself is savage, sterile, and void; individual life in itself is trifling: each obtains its value

through its interest to humanity as a whole, and the office of art is to set forth that value. A lovely object, a noble action, are each of worth to men, but the latter is of the more worth; and, as was long ago pointed out, poetry is by the limitations of language at a considerable disadvantage in treating of formal beauty. But without developing these remarks, of which there is no need, the only point here to be made is that in so far as poetry concerns itself with objects without relation to ideas, it loses influence; in so far as it neglects emotion and thought for the purpose of gaining sensuous effects it loses worth; in both it declines from the higher to the lower levels. Landor, notwithstanding his success in presenting objects of artistic beauty—and his poetry is full of exquisite delineations of them—failed to interest men; nor could his skill in expressing thought, although he was far more intellectual than his successors, save his reputation. Landor mistook a few of the marks of art for all. His work has the serenity, the remoteness, that characterize high art, but it lacks an intimate relation with the general life of men; it sets forth formal beauty, as painting does, but that beauty remains a sensation, and does not pass into thought. This absence of any vital relation between his art and life, between his objects and ideas, denotes his failure. There are so many poets whose works contain as perfect beauty, and in addition truth and passion; so many who instead of mirroring beauty make it the voice of life,—who instead of responding in melodious thought to the wandering winds of reverie strike their lyres in the strophe and antistrophe of continuous song,—that the world is content to let Landor go by. The guests at the

famous late dinner-party to which he looked forward will indeed be very few, and they will be men of leisure.

Thus far, in examining the work of Landor as a whole, and endeavoring to understand somewhat the public indifference to it, the answer has been found in its objectivity and its discontinuity, both springing from the effacement of his personality as an active power; or, in other words, in the fact that, by failing to link his images with his thoughts, and his thoughts one with another, so as to make them tell on the mind, and especially by eliminating the romantic element of passion, he failed to bring his work into sympathetic or helpful relations with the general emotional and intellectual life of men.

Why, then, do the most sensitive and discriminating critics, as was said at the beginning, list themselves in Landor's favor? They are, without exception, fellow-workers with him in the craft of literature. They have, by their continued eulogy of him, made it a sign of refinement to be charmed by him, a proof of unusually good taste to praise him. His admirers, by their very divergence in opinion from the crowd, seem to claim uncommon sensibilities; and the coterie is certainly one of the highest order, intellectually: Browning, Lowell, Swinburne, to name no more. They are all literary men. They are loud in their plaudits of his workmanship, but are noticeably guarded in their commendation of his entire contents; the passages for which they express unstinted enthusiasm are few. Landor was, beyond doubt, a master-workman, and skill in workmanship is dear to the craft; others may feel its effects, but none appreciate it with the keen relish of the

professional author. The fullness, power, and harmony of Landor's language are clearly evident in his earliest work. He had the gift of literary expression from his youth, and in his mature work it shows as careful and high cultivation as such a gift ever received from its possessor. None could give keener point and smoother polish to a short sentence; none could thread the intricacies of long and involved constructions more unerringly. He had at command all the grammatical resources of lucidity, though he did not always care to employ them. He knew all the devices of prose composition to conceal and to disclose; to bring the commonplace to issue in the unexpected; to lead up, to soften, to hesitate, to declaim; to extort all the supplementary and new suggestions of an old comparison; to frame a new and perfect simile; in short, he was thoroughly trained to his art. Yet his prose is not, by present canons, perfect prose. It is not self-possessed, subdued, and graceful conversation, modulated, making its points without aggressive insistence, yet with certainty, keeping interest alive by a brilliant but natural turn and by the brief and luminous flash of truth through a perfect phrase. His prose is rather the monologue of a seer. In reading his works one feels somewhat as if sitting at the feet of Coleridge. Landor has the presence that abashes companions. His manner of speech is more dignified, more ceremonial, his enunciation is more resonant, his accent more exquisite, than belong to the man of the world. He silences his readers by the mere impossibility of interrupting with a question so noble and smooth-sliding a current of words. The style is a sort of modern Miltonic; it has the suggestion of the pulpit divine in

Hooker, the touch of formal artificiality that characterizes the first good English prose. Landor goes far afield for his vocables; his page is a trifle too polysyllabic, has too much of the surface glitter of Latinity. But in the age that produced the styles of De Quincey, Ruskin, and Carlyle, it would be mere folly to find fault because Landor did not write, we will not say after the French fashion, but after the fashion of Swift, at his highest and on his level, the unrivaled master of simple English prose. Landor, at his best, is not so picturesque as De Quincey, nor so eloquent as Ruskin, nor so intense as Carlyle; but he has more self-possession, more serenity, more artistic charm, a wider compass, a more equal harmony, than any of these.

Landor pleases his fellow-craftsmen, however, not only by this general command of language as a means of expression, but by the perfection of form in his short pieces. Perfection of form is the great feature of classical art; it is an intellectual virtue, at least in literature, and appeals to the mind. The moderns are lacking in it. Landor's command of form was limited, insufficient for the construction of a drama; impressive as *Count Julian* is, it has not this final excellence. Landor's power in this respect is analogous to Herrick's; it is perfect only within narrow bounds; but it lacks Herrick's spontaneity. His verses are not the "swallow flights of song;" he was not a singer. The lyric on *Rose Aylmer* is entirely exceptional, and much of its charm lies in the beauty of the name, the skillful repetition, and, we must add, in the memory of Lamb's fondness for it. Familiar as it is, it would be unjust not to quote it:—

" Ah, what avails the sceptred race!

Ah, what the form divine!
What every virtue, every grace!
Rose Aylmer, all were thine.
Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes
May weep, but never see,
A night of memories and of sighs
I consecrate to thee."

Ordinarily, however, Landor deals with a beautiful image or one fine sentiment. His objectivity, his discontinuity, help him here; they insure that simplicity and singleness which are necessary for success. The lack of any temptation in his mind to expound and suggest is probably one reason why he rejected the sonnet, certainly the most beautiful poetic mould to give shape to such detached thoughts and feelings. He scorned the sonnet; it was too long for him; he must be even more brief. He would present the object at once, instead of gradually, as the sonnet does; not unveiling the perfect and naked image until the last word has trembled away. His best work of this kind is in the quatrain, which is rather the moralist's than the poet's form,—Martial's, not Horace's.

" I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.
Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,
It sinks, and I am ready to depart."

This is perfect; but it is perfect speech, not perfect song. When Landor had something to say at more length, when he had a story to tell, he chose the idyl; and his work in this kind is no less perfect in form than are his quatrains. Indeed,