

## Canadiana.

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### V.

There are three main lines along which enlightened thought may travel, Poetry, Philosophy, and Divinity. There are subsidiary ones; but these thoroughfares are long, broad and glorious. Of these, eldest and preferable,—as partially inclusive of the others,—is Poetry. This is the flowering of all thought, the subtle essence of all speech, the mighty language in which noblest souls, at their noblest attitudes, speak to us.

Of the poets: We should at least know the masters. We will not say, confine to these. No man is forbidden to meddle with the glow worms, to follow in their night the fire flies, to note when a new light flashes out from this or that coast; but it is folly to neglect the stars. The five leading creative and impulsive poets should be sought out, if we do not come accidentally to them. They are the chartered members and the princes of this great poetic fraternity, and we are in the outer circles until we know them. Who are they?

#### 1st. Homer, the Greek,—

"With the broad suspense  
Of thunderous brows, and lips intense  
Of garrulous God-innocence."

He is the bard of fire, force, splendor, freshness, freedom, enthusiasm, who contains in him the seed and potency of the Hellenic intellect. In him the mind finds an expansive element. It was the experience of Bonchardon that while reading Homer his "whole frame appeared to himself to be enlarged." This is his peculiar function, to dilate and enkindle, and is closely akin to the enthusiastic spirit of our youth. He stands warden at one of the morning gates of Time, by which we enter into the realm of the Ideal. If you read him in English, for a suitable translation, remember the commendation of Keats:

"Of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his  
demesne:  
Yet did I never breathe the pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman\* speak out loud and  
bold."

2nd. Virgil, the Latin. Much fagged over, as to his parts; he is to be approached spiritually and sympathetically. Let him again be introduced, sitting as Mrs. Browning has imaged him:

"Shade of Mantuan beech  
Did help the shade of bay to reach  
And knit around his forehead high.  
For his gods wore less majesty  
Than his brown bees hummed deathlessly."

He, too, has his peculiar function. The elm and vine seem emblematic of his mind. In him dignity and grace stand supremely

embodied. These Virgilian attributes the loving student finds contagious; they infuse themselves into the mind, and, unaware, his thoughts take on grace and beauty. "The influence of familiarity with the Aeneid," says Dr. Shedd, "is highly refining. Men of elegant traits, like Canning and Robert Hall, relish and quote Virgil. Everything in him is full of grace and propriety."

#### 3rd. Dante, the Tuscan,—

"Dante stern  
And sweet, whose spirit was an urn  
For wine and milk poured out in turn."

He who thinks mediævalism was barren will not affect Dante; certainly the shallow and trivial will avoid him, and all whose peculiar cant is optimistic cheerfulness. He has a religious instinct for the pains and sorrows of all time, but his tones tremble with tenderness and sympathy. He is marked not only for his poetic, but his religious and theologic significance. Nominally a Papist, he is, like Savonarola, in temper and spirit, a Protestant. He is of the blood royal, and spiritually related to angels and Luther. Where others show us amorphous horrors or splendors, he will give distinctness; he will show us "beauty unadorned, adorned the most." He reveals and images the mystical; he teaches thought to be compact and massive; we learn from him select and economical words. He is the antipodes of Spenser, with his golden prodigality. His characteristic force is hinted in the following image from the pen of Lovell: "A cloudless sunrise in mid-ocean is beyond comparison for simple grandeur. It is like Dante's style, *bare and perfect*."

4th. Akin to the Tuscan, but of a more ornate and classic style, and a more heroic grandeur. Austerely pathetic, his figure is unfolded:

"Here Milton's eyes strike piercing dim;  
The shapes of suns and stars did swim  
Like clouds from them and granted him  
God for sole vision!"

Here is one of the turn-peaks of our own Parnassus, as Coleridge has been pleased to phrase it. He has transfused the inner qualities of the foregone masters into English. The witchery of his earlier muse is in delightful contrast to the heroism and loftiness of his sacred themes. It is as if we saw the fays sporting on eternal green, against the background of a towering forest and the cliffs and summits of perpetual crystals. Below chime the brooks; above rattle the thunders, while over all is the braided bow. The English student cannot prudently neglect

"That mighty orb of song  
The divine Milton."

without tending, by so much, to intellectual poverty.

5th. Shakspeare. Last, because greatest. This is the summit:

"Shakspeare: on whose forehead climb  
The crowns of the world! Oh, eyes sublime,  
With tears and laughter for all time!"

Not always finished in detail, but colossal, and with the occasional fineness or rudeness of Nature. Here is the major voice of the world, with an artless spontaneity of song that, among moderns, Burns only approaches. We want him for accurate description of multifarious life; for breadth and subtlety; for insight; for marvellous poetical facility; for an independent, unapproachable diction; for what, on the human side, at least, do we not want him? The generations walk in his gallery, and he comprehends everything from the pebbles to the stars.

Do we imply dispraise or neglect of any other worthies? We trust not. We shall not love them less, but understand them better, for our closer communion with this Five. These are the masters of the choir immortal.

And is this profitable and practicable to us? We think so; and to the end that you may be so persuaded, reader. These words are written. We might speak in the praise of science, but a temporary apotheosis of the scientific spirit will, on the part of specialists, give birth to such dicta as these, from a journal open on my table: "Nobody reads poetry,"—uttered by "an eloquent man who is doing a grand work for humanity." "Poets are worse than useless, and have done *nothing* for the good of the world." Such amazing assertions carry their own refutation, with all who have not deliberately turned aside from what no god at least has called profitless, "common or unclean." The wiser hearts of every generation will renew the emphasis we place on the words of Wordsworth:

"Blessings be with them, and eternal praise,  
Who gave us nobler loves, and nobler cares,  
The poets—who on earth have made us heirs  
Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays."

### NOTES.

An interesting phase of the authorship of Mr. William T. James is that he is able to be his own publisher, and put his work forth with all the advantage of close personal supervision. He has made a daintily attractive book, has put in it various things that more than justify its existence, and has dedicated it to Professor Goldwin Smith. "Rhymes Afloat and Afield" are pretty equally divided between sea and shore, with a little preference in freedom, spirit and quality for the blue, boundless deep. There are two songs of the sea that seem to us particularly spirited and sympathetic, "A Yachting Song," and "All Hands on Deck"; perhaps we should include a third—"Land Ho!"—all of them lyrics as buoyant as the waves, as hearty and fresh as the winds of ocean, that inspired them. A single stanza may indicate their quality:

"When clouds brood on the sullen main,  
Black with the portents of a storm;  
When growls the furious hurricane,  
Hoarse cries the watch below alarm,  
And flights of slumber rudely check;  
"Ahoj, below! All hands on deck!"

From the cares of business and the walks of trade, like a Halleck or Stedman, Mr. James has the poet-impulse to turn aside

\*An excellent, inexpensive edition of Chapman's Homer may be found in Routledge's Universal Library, edited by John Morley.

\*Care, on the whole, gives the best popular translation. Alden has it.