

was the greater poet—a question that might be solved if there were any standard of comparison, and which, in the absence of such a measure, is about as practicable as a discussion about the relative weight of last year's rainbows—we may apply ourselves to the task of finding out the key to the superiority of so much modern poetry over the product of the corresponding minds of the Jacobean or Hanoverian period. A careful perusal of the extracts in this volume will bear us out when we affirm that the superiority exists in the greater wealth of thought with which the poets of this century have been endowed, and the more lavish hand with which they have scattered it over their pages. The effect of this profusion is two-fold. Here is the direct effect produced by the thoughts themselves; which we may compare, to borrow an example from Political Economy, to the actual purchasing power of so much wealth. But, to pursue the metaphor, as the free and judicious expenditure of wealth produces credit and confidence in the expender's resources, even so does the freedom with which a Keats heaps beauty on beauty and harmony on harmony lead our imagination to gift him with the inexhaustible resources of nature, and makes us feel as though it were as easy for the poet as for the poet's teacher to hide radiance behind radiance, to gem a hill-side with the burning jewels of the dew merely to hide it beneath a misty swathe of cloud that catches all the tints of morning, or to frame a glowing sunset that should last eternally merely to dissipate it, in all the capriciousness of power, by a breath of evening wind.

The richness and close texture of the thought which is found worked into our modern poems is marvellous when we compare it with the slender outfit with which so many good old writers ventured forth to scale Parnassus. A single, poor miserable idea, stunted by long abiding in the haunts of common-place, often furnished the motive of a long poem, the unit of whose calculation was never less than a Book or a Canto. If a man got a thought he strove to spread it, like gold leaf, over as wide a space as possible, and if it would not hold out, some judicious little piece of unnatural description, in which mountains would be sure to nod (if it were night time), and trees hide themselves in their own umbrageous shades, came to the rescue

and helped to stop the leak in the classical cock-boat. Surely there is more thought, more imagination and greater perception of the realities of things in many a verse by Wordsworth or Shelley than most long poems of the previous century could boast.

This wealth of endowment has lately tended in some instances to confusion, the poet striving to beat more thought into one short poem than it could fairly hold. Excess of meaning proves as unprofitable as defect, and the intellectual digestion declines to assimilate nourishment which is presented to it in so concentrated a form. Some of our poets of to-day appear to consider it sufficient if they have a good sound meaning, and regard it as the reader's province to puzzle out what it is. When these knotty thoughts are couched in language that appears to have learnt its style at the telegraph office, where the economically disposed lop off all excrescences, till their poor sentence is left at last, palpitating as from the knife of the vivisector, it is often very difficult to unravel the author's meaning. No better exercise could be set these criminals than to study a few pages of Pope every morning and write a few verses in his manner every evening. The thoughts which Pope enunciated were none of the newest, and very few were startling. They had been part of the stock in trade of the literary world for many a long year, and many of them had almost blundered into the domains of Proverbial wisdom. But stale and familiar as they really were, so that one might be expected to guess their meaning from the first few words, and closely and tightly as they were packed in Pope's well-filled lines, he took very good care that none but a dunce would need to read any one of them more than once.

We do not find the difficulty above complained of in the poems of Wordsworth or Coleridge, with which this volume opens. Yet, both of these men could put away much meaning in the compass of a line, or even convey it by the choice selection of a word. Wordsworth, particularly, excelled in the short poems which were confined to the rounding off of one complete and perfectly beautiful thought, like a spring song-bird in a bough of fruit-blossoms seen against the blue, soft sky. His grander thoughts too, are not to be sought for up and down the length and breadth of the 'Excursion,' but in his 'Sonnets,' from