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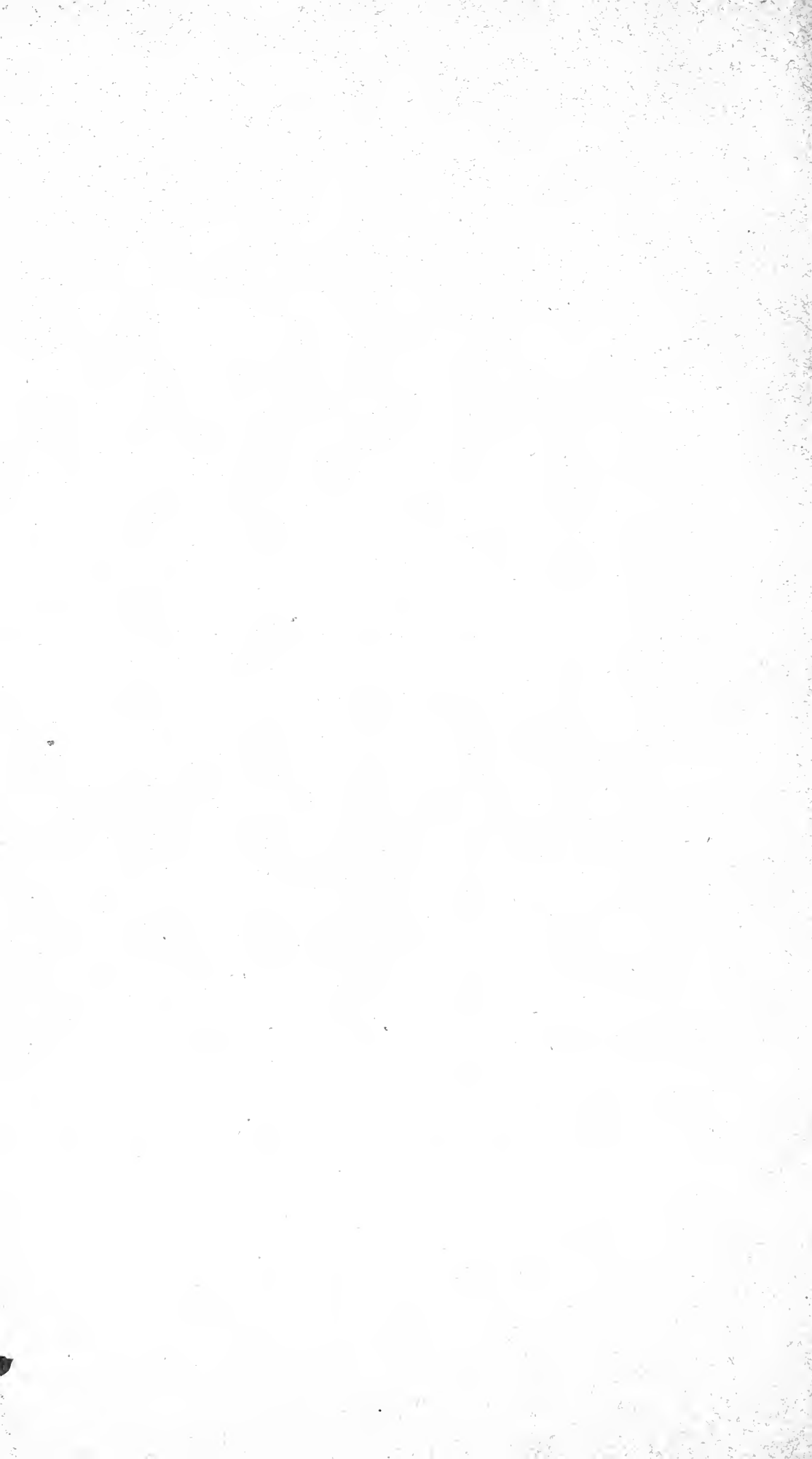


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ON THE  
Platonism of Wordsworth.



ON THE

PLATONISM

OF

WORDSWORTH.

A PAPER READ TO THE WORDSWORTH SOCIETY,

JULY 19TH, 1881.

By J. H. SHORTHOUSE,

*AUTHOR OF "JOHN INGLESANT; A ROMANCE."*

BIRMINGHAM:

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It is hoped that the reader will perceive that no allusion is made in this Essay to the general religious opinions of the Poet. The writer has simply attempted to trace certain lines of thought which seem to him to exist in Wordsworth's philosophic poetry.

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THE  
PLATONISM OF WORDSWORTH.

*A Paper read to the Wordsworth Society,*

*July 19th, 1881.*

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**T**O write of Wordsworth would seem futile. Wordsworth is himself; to paraphrase or parody his words or characters is unspeakably painful; nay more, it is useless, it will convey no adequate idea to the man who is ignorant of Wordsworth's poetry. It is the perfection of certain passages which induces the wish to call attention to them, but this perfection leaves nothing to be desired or added; nor can any want of variety be pleaded as an excuse for using any words other than the poet's own. The stage is crowded already. Think of the press of fairy folk who throng upon your memory as you turn over his pages in your recollection—the miller and his maids on their island platform in the river—that strange woman and her no less weird mate beneath the tower of Jedburgh—the stealthy mystic form of the leech-gatherer—the stately march of figures which fill the pathways of the White Doe—the valleys and

hill-slopes gay with blithe or hallowed with solemn figures which delight our fancy in the pages of the Excursion — the churchyard where the brother sleeps — the mountain sheepfold where Michael toiled and sorrowed—the foot plank which bore the last impress of Lucy's feet—the dusty highway along which the Cumberland beggar moved, and will move now for ever—the ghastly fellowship that haunted the prosaic everyday walks of the travelling potter, Peter Bell—Matthew, the school-master, and his mysteriously provoking witty rhymes—Simon Lee—old childless Timothy and the hunt, and that exquisite apologue which genius heard even in the chance echo of the cuckoo's cry—

“unsolicited reply  
To a babbling wanderer sent.”

Wordsworth was a leader of men in the truest sense. On his guidance the jaded and perplexed intellect may safely depend; he possessed a power of cheerful calm, clear as the dawn and unvarying as the stars.

“The Kitten and  
Fallen Leaves.”  
p. 130, Ed. 1849.

“That, when time brings on decay,  
Now and then may I possess  
Hours of perfect gladness;  
Keep the sprightly soul awake,  
And have faculties to take  
Even from things by sorrow wrought,  
Matter for a jocund thought;  
Spite of care and spite of grief  
To gambol with life's falling leaf.”



“ It is the spirit of Paradise,  
 ————— a spirit strong,  
 That gives to all the selfsame bent  
 Where life is wise and innocent.”

p. 121, Ed. 1849.

It may be that there are lines of thought which the poet merely indicated, but which it is possible to trace out more clearly, and to follow farther on, not only to our own delight and advantage but also to the appreciation of the poet.

It has been suggested that one of these lines of thought is the similarity of Wordsworth's teaching to that of Plato. I have said the *similarity* of Wordsworth to Plato, because it is not asserted that Wordsworth consciously Platonized; on the contrary, it is not likely that he ever read the Dialogues. It is not impossible that Coleridge may have talked to him upon the matter. We know he discoursed at length to him upon Spinoza, and Mr. Frederick Pollock fancies that he can trace the effect of those conversations in the poet's work.

I should suppose that any ordinarily educated man would, if asked, describe Wordsworth as a poet of nature, and he has with the utmost emphasis described himself as a “worshipper of nature;” nevertheless it would seem that Wordsworth is essentially the poet of *Man*. He is in fact less of a poet than of a Seer. It is *man* whom he chiefly busies himself about. It is the emotions and thoughts of *men* which fill his thoughts. Nature is the type of permanence and reality, man is transient and ever changing; nevertheless nature is ever sub-

Excursion.  
Wanderer.  
p. 447, Ed. 1849. servient to man. Seen by man's intellect inanimate nature becomes "an ebbing and a flowing mind." It is intellect projected upon the bleak side of some tall peak "familiar with forgotten years," that gave to it its "visionary character." It was the transitory nature of the being that stood upon its bank that gave to the flowing stream its lesson of "life continuous—being unimpair'd." By these forms of nature, "In the relation which they bear to man" are evoked "The spiritual presences of absent things, convoked by knowledge."

p. 449.

Despondency  
Corrected.  
p. 482.  
idem, p. 487.

idem, 1st edition

The Excursion.  
The Churchyard  
p. 504, Ed. 1849.

"Amid the groves, beneath the shadowy hills  
The generations are prepared."

The Excursion.  
The Wanderer.  
p. 449, Ed. 1849.

"Their manners, their enjoyments and pursuits,  
Their passions, and their feelings; chiefly those  
Essential and eternal in the heart."

But, though man consecrates nature, nature elevates man—man and nature act and re-act. That glorious universe, the intelligent succession of conditioned existence, has

The Excursion.  
The Wanderer.  
p. 450, Ed. 1849.

"meanings which it brought  
From years of youth. Which like a Being made  
Of many Beings, it has wondrous skill  
To blend with knowledge of the years to come ;"

and thus to lure mankind from a superstitious manicheeism into a state of abiding and gracious calm, in which he is at last able to recognize the eternal unity which pervades all things, the synthesis of thought and matter, the clear dawning of the perfect intellectual day.

“ 'Tis nature's law  
 That none, the meanest of created things,  
 Of forms created the most vile and brute,  
 The dullest or most noxious, should exist  
 Divorced from good—a spirit and pulse of good,  
 A life and soul to every mode of being  
 Inseparably link'd.”

The  
 Cumberland  
 Beggar.  
 p. 425, Ed. 1849.

If this is the nature of Wordsworth's poetry what is the result? He has himself told us that he did not intend to found a system; but the effect produced by his teaching is a sacred peace, in the presence of pure and absolute Being. The petty troubles of existence vanish before the passionless face of nature, and in the presence of invariable Law an entrance is won into the kingdom of the pure Intellect,

“ by mystery and hope,  
 And the first virgin passion of a soul  
 Communing with the glorious universe.”

The Excursion.  
 The Wanderer.  
 p. 449, Ed. 1849.

“ Immutably survive  
 For our support the measures and the forms  
 Which an abstract intelligence supplies,  
 Whose kingdom is, where time and space are not.”

The Excursion.  
 Despondency  
 Corrected.  
 p. 476, Ed. 1849.

Now let us turn for a moment to the banks of the Ilissus and we shall find something of the same character.

Standing under the shady plane trees, which have long since vanished, groups of earnest looking

young men are discussing those themes which, as the years roll on, generation after generation will discuss: while among them a queer looking little man whom all reverence, and make way for, and listen to, walks about asking questions, and showing each one of them, to his own satisfaction, how great a fool he is. Plato's dialogues, just as much as Wordsworth's poems, form a volume of Philosophical Romance. For his groundwork he seized upon a wonderful and unique man. His philosophy is based upon the story of a life and death, his pages are crowded with men; without the aid of narrative he can create character: but story is not wanting. Anecdote and incident, apologue and poetry enliven the page. The trials, the difficulties, the follies and aims of men are his theme. Nor does he stop here, his philosophy (transcendental as it has been called) is human, his ideas are those of earth. Unlike Aristotle and the schoolmen he does not occupy himself with Existence, Substance, Attribute, Essence, Eternity, but with matters of everyday life; in the first place destroying false and pedantic notions, and then basing his idealism upon recognised facts, such as love, hatred, strength, and even horses, dogs, and mud.

Let us endeavour to trace this likeness still more clearly by two examples before we attempt to realise the metaphysic result, and the particular mode in which it forced itself on the poet's imagination and by which he is still enabled to communicate it to us.

He speaks of

“another gift  
Of aspect more sublime ; that blessed mood  
In which the burden of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world  
Is lighten'd : that serene and blessed mood  
In which the affections gently lead us on,  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motions of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul ;  
While, with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.”

Tintern Abbey.  
p. 160, Ed. 1849.

Such an extract as this has said everything that need be said on the subject. It covers all possible ground. Let us remain silent, and turn to the other master.

“And what think you would happen were it given to anyone to behold beauty itself, clear as the light, pure and undefiled, not daubed with human colouring, nor polluted with human fleshlyness, and other kinds of mortal trash ; so that, in its singleness of form he were able to see the beautiful and the god-like in one. Think you that the life of a man would be of little account if he look thitherward (without fear) and has such fellowship as this ? Do you not see that to him alone will power be given (who alone has the power to behold the beautiful) to beget, not the deceitful show of virtue, as not being tempted by deceitful shows, but the truth itself, as one who embraces a reality :—and so begetting virtue (as a lovely daughter) and bringing her up, it will happen to him to be God-beloved, and, if any man can be, immortal.”

Plato  
Symposium  
xxix. E.  
Ed. Stallbaum.

Apart from all the distracting terminology of metaphysic, then, the meaning of the English poet and the Greek philosopher seems to be this—The forces of life, which we call intellectual, may be actually of similar birth with the physical, but phenomenally they stand out in clear distinction. Love, self-sacrifice and self-denial, courage, and the other virtues are so far immaterial at least that they are indestructible, invisible, invariable in action, unregulated by the laws which attach to matter. So long as the race endures they are eternal. But a difficulty seems to present itself at the outset. Love and self-denial, courage and the rest, are all that you state them to be, but so are hatred, revenge, fear and the like. Will then the eternal world of Pure Intellect, which an abstract intelligence has peopled, prove nothing more than a repetition of this?—with all its unintelligible gloom, its perplexities, its cruelties, its Sphinx-riddles which lead to despair and death?

To grapple with this difficulty Plato fell back upon what may be called a principle of excellence, which rules the formation and government of all animate and inanimate things. What this principle was he was often at a loss to decide, but he appealed boldly to the experience of his hearers to acknowledge that there was such a principle, and to pronounce upon the success or failure of any Work or Being in proportion as it adheres to or departs from it. This being so it follows that all temporary, accidental, and unsuitable adjuncts being eliminated, nothing but the pure idea of the perfect object will

exist in the intellect; so that to the perfectly instructed man there would be no such thing as evil or bad workmanship in the world. Indeed this is really the case in the pure intellect, in which alone all things exist, (all things, that is, in their perfect form,) and which is God.

The general truth of this I think will not be denied. The latest efforts of modern speculation have declared that the world of thought and that alone is subjective and objective at once, and that all conceivable attributes turn out to be objective aspects of thought itself. "The ultimate elements of thought are not merely correlated with the ultimate elements of things. They are the elements of things themselves."

vid. Mr. Fred.  
Pollock's  
Spinoza, pp.  
176-9.

Nor is Platonism antagonistic to any older or later form of philosophic thought. You may make matter as eternal as you like. You may deny the argument of design, and conclude that no evidence exists of a Creator, beneficent or otherwise. You may endow matter with such vital energies and such faculties of thought as you may require. You may satisfy yourself that force, or motion, or extension is the immanent cause of all things: but the Platonic theory can never be antiquated or impossible.

From every phenomenon you will always be able to eliminate the transitory and the accidental, until you arrive at an abstract idea which exists only in the pure intellect. It is into this world of ideas that the Platonist forces his way. In this fourth dimension of intellectual space he finds himself in a

world familiar and yet wonderful. Into this world, neither change, nor corruption, nor decay can enter. This is the true eternal life. Of all earthly things the ideas are eternal, and this pure intellect, this world in which they live and move and have their being, and some portion of which we have each of us received, is none other than the all-perfect, all-containing intellect, the mind of God.

In what way then does Wordsworth speak of this world? Under what aspect did its eternal glories present themselves to him? He tells us that

Michael.  
p. 96, Ed. 1849.

“The power  
Of nature, by the gentle agency  
Of natural objects, led me on to feel  
For passions that were not my own, and think  
On man, the heart of man, and human life.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Preface to  
Excursion.  
p. 445, Ed. 1849.

“How exquisitely the individual mind  
————— to the external world  
Is fitted, and how exquisitely too  
The external world is fitted to the mind.”

Excursion.  
The Wanderer.  
p. 447, Ed. 1849.

“From that bleak tenement  
He many an evening to his distant home  
In solitude returning, saw the hills  
Grow larger in the darkness; all alone  
Beheld the stars come out above his head,  
And travelled through the wood with no one near,  
To whom he might confess the things he saw.  
So the foundations of his mind were laid  
In such communion not from terror free.”

\* \* \* \* \*



“While yet a child and long before his time  
 Had he perceived the presence and the power  
 Of greatness : and deep feelings had impressed  
 Great objects on his mind, with portraiture  
 And colour so distinct, that on his mind  
 They lay like substances, and almost seem'd  
 To haunt the bodily sense.”

idem, 1st Ed.  
 p. 10.

I venture to think that these lines deserve the closest study. They seem to me to contain the key not only to Wordsworth's Platonism, but to that peculiar conception of his that an entrance into the world of abstract thought may be won by the help of material objects.

“The presence and the power of greatness”—this is that “principle of excellence” in which Plato believed. This expression includes all that can be conceived of absolute perfection—of immutable morality, absolute in itself—independent of space and time, of locality and temperament. It includes that power within us which, in Mr. Matthew Arnold's phrase, “makes for righteousness,” that consciousness which assures us that, in the Divine Intellect, love must rule and not hatred, confidence and not fear.

By deep feeling, the poet goes on to tell us, this greatness is impressed upon our mind, so that its attributes lie like substances upon us and haunt the bodily sense. It is evident, I think, that he uses the word “substance” in this place not in the strict metaphysical sense, but in that secondary sense which has vitiated all the terms which express essence or reality, popular use and wont invariably

attaching these two last terms to that which is not essential or real. The poet evidently refers to that lower substantiality which belongs to matter, and which is perceived by the senses. He seems to affirm that by the help of the vast objects of nature, perceived in silence and in solitude, we are enabled to understand and to conceive the great realities of abstract thought, and to

Preface to  
Excursion.

“ Breathe in worlds  
To which the Heaven of Heavens is but a veil.”

Excursion.  
The Wanderer.  
1st Ed., p. 14.

“ But in the mountains did he feel his faith,  
There did he see the writing—all things there  
Breathed immortality, revolving life  
And greatness still revolving ;—infinite.  
There littleness was not, the least of things  
Seemed infinite : and there his spirit shaped  
Her prospects.”

The Excursion.  
p. 497, Ed. 1849.  
To H.C.,  
Six years old.  
The Excursion.  
The Wanderer.  
p. 455, Ed. 1849.

This is that “ divine hope of pure imagination,”  
that “ fittest to unutterable thought,” “ the passing  
shows of being.”

To H.C., p. 62.

“ The silence and the calm of mute insensate things.”  
“ Where earth and heaven create one imagery.”

Despondency  
Corrected.  
p. 487, Ed. 1849.  
The Parsonage,  
p. 523.

Matter therefore is a thought of God. The rural gods of Greece would seem to have occupied a similar position in the mind of the Platonist as did these “ spiritual presences of absent things,” “ This soul imparted to brute matter,” in the poet’s “ pure imaginative soul.”

Despondency  
Corrected.  
p. 482.

“ We live by admiration, hope, and love.”

“A spirit hung,  
 Beautiful region o'er thy towns and farms,  
 And emanations were perceived, and acts  
 Of immortality, on nature's course,  
 Exemplified by mysteries, that were felt  
 As bonds.”

Excursion,  
 p. 482, Ed. 1849.  
 Despondency  
 Corrected.

The means are not very different, the result is the same. This absolute being is described as including within itself, as the sea its waves, all adoring and conscious and apprehending existence.

“————— Life continuous—being unimpaired,  
 That hath been, is, and where it was, and is,  
 There shall be—seen, and heard, and felt, and known,  
 And recognised—existence unexposed  
 To the blind walk of mortal accident,  
 From diminution safe, and weakening age.  
 While man grows old, and dwindles and decays,  
 And countless generations of mankind  
 Depart, and leave no vestige where he trod.”

Despondency  
 Corrected,  
 1st Ed.

“Thou, thou alone  
 Art everlasting, and the blessed spirits  
 Which thou includest as the sea her waves :  
 For adoration thou endurest. Endure  
 For consciousness, the motions of thy will,  
 For apprehension those transcendent truths  
 Of the pure intellect that stand as laws  
 Even to Thy Being's infinite majesty.”

Despondency  
 Corrected.  
 p. 476, Ed. 1849.

The inborn conscience of humanity has recognised the perfection of Being in a variety of forms—by diverse myths and it may be grotesque imaginations at which a misdirected intellect may sneer. The “secret spirit of Humanity” has consented

The Wanderer,  
 p. 455, Ed. 1849.

with a marvellous unanimity to conceive of a world where wrong is made right, where suffering is turned to joy, where inequality is removed, and the rough places of misery and oppression made smooth—where the poor and the afflicted who have seen or felt little in this life to delight or elevate may find existence somewhat more worthy to be lived. That this blessed consummation may never arrive in the form religionists have dreamed may be true: but that the idea can ever be aught else than true and righteous is impossible.

Despondency,  
p. 469, Ed. 1849.

“ The life where hope and memory are as one,  
Earth quiet and unchanged, the human soul  
Consistent in self-rule, and heaven revealed  
To meditation in that quietness.”

Miserable indeed would the world become were this ideal of righteousness ever entirely lost.

Despondency  
Corrected,  
1st Ed. p. 195

“ Who in this spirit communes with the forms  
Of nature, who with understanding heart  
Doth know and love such objects as excite  
No morbid passions.”

p. 196.

“ the light of love  
Not failing, perseverance from his steps  
Departing not, he shall at length obtain  
The glorious habit by which sense is made  
Subservient still to moral purposes,  
Auxiliar to divine.”

p. 197.

“ Thus deeply drinking in the soul of things  
He shall be wise perforce, and while inspired

By choice, and conscious that the will is free,  
 Unswerving shall he move, as if impelled  
 By strict necessity, along the path  
 Of order and of good. Whate'er he see,  
 Whate'er he feel of agency direct  
 Or indirect, shall tend to feed and nurse  
 His faculties, shall fix in calmer seats  
 Of moral strength, and raise to loftier heights  
 Of love divine, his intellectual soul."

It would be easy to go on. This synthesis of thought and matter is the key-note of every line in the poem. But the line of thought has been sufficiently laid down; who will follow it up?

"He excels," says Jewish proverb, when at loss for words of highest praise, "He excels upon Sheminith"—the eighth string of the world to come which shall be added to the Kinnor of the Sanctuary when Messiah begins his reign. Listening, weary and sad, amidst the rustling echoes of the *selva selvaggia* of metaphysical tradition, we may catch from these two master-singers, as Dante heard in the stately rhythm of the volume he so long had conned, the clear resonance of this mystical string.



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OF

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BY

MR. J. H. SHORTHOUSE.

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