MOXON'S MINIATURE POETS. A SELECTION FROM THE WORKS OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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Moxon's Miniature Poets. A Selection from the Works of William Wordsworth by William Wordsworth

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WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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MOXON'S MINIATURE POETS.

SELECTION FROM
THE MORKS

OF

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH,

PORT LAUREATE.

SELECTED AND ARRANGED BY FRANCIS TURNER PALGRAVE.



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THE PRONTISPIECE PROM AN ORIGINAL BUST.
THE CHART FROM A DESIGN BY JOHN LESSISTION, F.S.A.
THE SENIES PROJECTED AND SUPERINTENDED BY



BIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE

It has been argued with some force that "a poet's verses are his life," and that he should hence be exempted from the intrusion of biography. phrase quoted is emphatically true of William Wordsworth; and, upon this interpretation of it, would render a notice of his life superfluous. Yet the common feeling of mankind seems to have ruled otherwise; there has always been an interest in learning what manner of man the poet was, when and where he lived, and by what prominent circumstances his mind and heart were moulded. Indeed, it is probable that men have been guided in this by a judicious instinct; and that, if there is a certain identity between the writer and his writings, the fact may be rather found to invite a biography, though of a truer and deeper kind than that which generally bears the name, than to discourage it. If the poet's verses form his life, this must be because his life, in its essential or elementary features, has passed into his verses. For such examination as we

can make, shows that simply as he lived, can he think and write: that only from what may be within him of loftiness in imagination, of purity in feeling, of depth in sympathy, of quickness in observation; from what he is, only, can he win the words which, so far as the epithet may apply to anything of human workmanship, are destined to immortality. This law appears to be absolute in all the Fine Arts, and if absoluteness admitted of degrees, would be most so in Poetry, as the first and greatest of them. We may read the man in the work; but, were it possible to reverse the process, the poem might also be predicted from the There would be no little value and interest in a biography so written: and, although it could not be attempted within the limits of a few pages, yet, having been entrusted by Wordsworth's family with the task of framing the following selection, the editor thinks that the most suitable preface towards a fit comprehension of the poems contained in it, will be, not so much a criticism on the poet's style and place in literature, as a short account of his life, viewed in relation to his writings.

The second son of respectable parents, and of a family which traced itself to the fourteenth century as landowners in the north, William Wordsworth was born (April 7, 1770) at Cockermouth in Cumberland, on the verge of that beautiful land of mountain and lake which will be always associated with his

memory, as it entered in no small degree into the education of his genius, "To those who live in the tame scenery of Cockermouth," says Mr. De Quincey, "the blue mountains in the distance, the sublime peaks of Borrowdale and of Buttermere, raise aloft a signal, as it were, of a new country, a country of romance and mystery, to which the thoughts are habitually turning. Children are fascinated and haunted with vague temptations, when standing on the frontiers of such a foreign land, and so was Wordsworth fascinated, so haunted." The Derwent, "fairest of all rivers," running near Cockermouth, seems to connect the little town with the chief of the Cumbrian lakes; and between Penrith and Cockermouth, Wordsworth passed his earliest years. Losing his parents while yet a child, and separated from the sister who became afterwards so much to him, the "stiff, moody, and violent temper" which he ascribes to himself was probably left to the correction of nature; and, united with the passion for solitude and observant meditativeness characteristic of the poetic disposition, may be traced in its effects throughout his youth. meant that Wordsworth spent his days in abstraction, Whilst at the school of Hawkshead in Esthwaite Vale (1778), and at St. John's College, Cambridge (1787), his great physical strength and spirit, qualities which he retained through life, made him enjoy to the full the energetic sports of boyhood; he travelled much, and

much on foot, and may be reckoned among the first of the many Englishmen who have traversed the higher ranges of the Swiss mountains (1790).

Meanwhile the Poet's inner life had passed through at least one great revolution, which he has himself painted in the "Prelude," "Tintern," and "Ode on Intimations of Immortality." He who was afterwards to describe Nature as she is with a singular force of realization, had looked on her, at first, with an ideal eye which unconsciously reproduced the view of "things without" taken by the early philosophers of Greece. True Being he felt only within his mind: except here, nothing could be felt as veritably existing: all beyond was a mysterious vision, the reality of which lay in the depths of the human soul. "I was often unable," he writes, "to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or a tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality." Shadowy and transient as these strange influences of the childish imagination necessarily were, they lay at the root of that peculiarly spiritual tone with which Wordsworth always looked on the world; they inspired that noble and exquisitely poetic moderation which (even when he had travelled far from his younger opinions on many vital points) was ever ready to

soften and qualify the practical dogmatisms and narrower conclusions with which life encrusts the mind. When this "visionary gleam" passed from the yet unconscious poet's eyes, the same imaginative faculty, taking a new but analogous form, presented the world to him as itself actually interfused with living power:

> He felt the sentiment of Being spread, O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still;— The presences of Nature in the sky And on the earth; the Visions of the hills, And Souls of lonely places.

This mood of the mind, in which all who have any sense of poetry share, held sway over men like Wordsworth or Shefley with an intensity proportioned to their poetical gift, working in them with a force that reminds us again of the spirit in which sea and sky, earth and the "heavenly bodies," were regarded by the early inhabitants of Hellas. The human race seems born again with every child of genius: he exhibits in himself, if his life be prolonged through all its stages, a kind of miniature repetition of man's gradual development. The soul which, as a child, Wordsworth had vaguely transferred from himself to Nature, now appeared to lie also in Nature herself. A more sacred name is often, perhaps too often, and in a mechanical spirit, used in reference to "the sum of things," as Lucretius called Nature, and Wordsworth, especially in