Margaret Hill, Southey owed his buoyant spirits, his practical sense, and his earliest friends. The first of these, Miss Tyler, his mother’s half-sister, took possession of him when he was three ; under her care he saw and heard a great deal of theatres and of acting. His solitary life in an old maid’s household threw him upon his own resources and developed a taste for reading. He was sent to several private schools, and had good fortune at none of them; in 1788 he went to Westminster, where he was scarcely more fortunate. After a brief sojourn he was expelled in 1792, because an essay of his on flog­ging, in a school magazine called *The Flagellant,* was resented by Dr Vincent, the head-master. At West­minster he gained the friendship of two boys who were faithful to him and helpful throughout his life ; these were Charles Winn and Grosvenor Bedford. About this time his father died ; his aunt, however, determined that he should go to Oxford. He was refused at Christ Church on account of the essay in *The Flagellant* ; but Balliol gave him a home. At Oxford he led his own life, lived in his own thoughts, and got little or nothing from the university. In 1794 Coleridge dashed at Southey, took him by storm, and filled his head with plans for an ideal colony in the wilds. The new society, whose members were to have all things in common, was to be called “The Pantisocracy.” Their life was to com­bine manual labour and domestic bliss ; to attain the latter, Southey set his affections on a Miss Edith Fricker, whose sister married Coleridge. All this was intolerable to Miss Tyler, and Southey was banished. He and Coleridge then tried, by lecturing and journalism, to raise money for their American schemes ; but luckily Southey’s uncle, who had educated him,—Mr Hill, the English chaplain at Lisbon,—advised him to travel. On the 14th of November 1795, before he started, he was secretly married to Edith Fricker. On his return from Lisbon the marriage was acknowledged, and Southey wandered from one house to another in the south of England. He tried, or was urged to try, the three professions which are by courtesy styled “ learned ” ; it might be more true to call them the technical, the stereotyped professions. Southey was scared from all three,—from clericalism by dogma, from medicine by the dissecting-room, from law by its crabbed dulness. In literature alone he found his proper sphere; and in 1803 he settled down in his life­long home, Greta Hall, near Keswick. Henceforth his years were even and uneventful. He wrote and read with mechanical, with appalling regularity ; his library grew to fourteen thousand volumes. He had children, and lost several ; and his house was a refuge for the wife and family of Coleridge. With Wordsworth and Landor he formed close friendships. In 1813 he was made poet- laureate ; and some years before his death he was offered a baronetcy—which, however, he with good reason declined. Two great sorrows embittered his life : in 1809 he lost his eldest boy Herbert, and in 1834 his wife was taken to a madhouse, whence she came back to die. In 1839 he married Caroline Bowles. That same year his memory failed, his speech became uncertain, and his power of writing soon went ; softening of the brain had taken irre­mediable hold of the once tireless intellect. To the last he would hover round his books and handle them lovingly. He died on the 21st of March 1843 ; he is buried, near his first wife and her children, in Crosthwaite churchyard.

The amount of Southey’s work in literature is enormous. His collected verse, with its explanatory notes, fills ten volumes ; his prose occupies about forty. But his greatest works were left un­completed, and this, in some sense, is typical of Southey’s whole achievement in the world of letters; there is always something unsatisfying, disappointing, about him. He seldom realized or seldom found scope for his true bent in literature. This is most

true of his efforts in verse. In his childhood Southey fell in with Tasso, Tasso led him to Ariosto, and Ariosto to Spenser. These beautiful, these luxuriantly imaginative poets captivated the boy; and Southey mistook his youthful enthusiasm for an abiding, a life­long inspiration. His inspiration was not genuinely imaginative ; he had too large an infusion of prosaic commonplace in his nature to be a true follower of Ariosto and Spenser. Southey, quite early in life, resolved to write a series of epics on the chief religions of the world. The subject was dangerous, and one epic is a life’s work ; it is not surprising that the too ambitious poet failed. His failure is twofold : he was wanting in artistic power and in poetic sympathy. With regard to the first, he says of himself, “ It was long before I acquired this power,”—the power of plan and con­struction,—“not fairly, indeed, till I was about five or six and thirty.” The fact is, he never acquired it; he never could con­struct a dramatic plot or mould it into artistic details. When his epics are not wildly impossible they are incurably dull ; at the best their interest is extrinsic rather than intrinsic, pervaded by the glamour of historic romance rather than the light of pure poetry. And a man is not fit to write epics on the religions of the world when he can say of the prophet who has satisfied the gravest races of mankind,—Mohammed was “far more remarkable for audacious profligacy than for any intellectual endowments.” Southey’s age was bounded, and had little sympathy for anything beyond itself and its own narrow interests ; it was violently Tory, narrowly Protestant, defiantly English. And in his verse Southey truthfully reflects the feeling of his age. This led him to say dreadful things about the Eastern religions in his prefaces to *Kehαmα* and *Τhalaba∙,* it made *Joan of Arc* an incongruous blend­ing of Rousseau, of Horace Walpole’s romanticism, of the Surrey theatre, and of Lady Huntingdon; it gave Madoc, a Celt of the 12th century, the mind of a cold middle-class Saxon evangelical of the regency. In the shorter pieces Southey’s commonplace asserts itself, and if that does not meet us we find his bondage to his gener­ation. This bondage is quite abject in *The Vision of Judgment·,* Southey’s heavenly personages are British Philistines from Old Sarum, magnified but not transformed, engaged in endless placid adoration of an infinite George III. When Southey sets himself to fondle the regent, he loses all sense of measure and propriety. In the *Funeral Ode* to the Princess he can assert of her father—

“Such the proud, the virtuous story,

Such the great, the endless glory Of her father’s splendid reign ! "

This famous ode, “with the grace and beauty of which,” Sir Henry Taylor thinks, “no facts could compete,” is, it must be said, in many of its couplets, too like the average hymn. The twang of the hymn spoils two of Southey’s best pieces. *The Holly Tree* ends—

“That in my age as cheerful I might be As the green winter of the holly tree.”

The last lines of *Stanzas Written in his Library,* a poem dear to the book-lover, are painfully like a rhyme on a tomb-stone :—

“ Yet leaving here a name, I trust,

That will not perish in the dust.”

Some of his subjects, *The Poet's Pilgrimage,* for instance, he would have treated delightfully in prose ; others, like the *Botany Bay Eclogues, Songs to American Indians, The Pig, The Dancing Bear,* should never have been written. *The Retrospect,* of which this is a fair specimen,—

“ There where my little hands were wont to rear with pride the earliest salad of the year,”—

a living critic and biographer of Southey has compared to *The Deserted, Village.* Southey was not in the highest sense of the word a poet ; but if we turn from his verse to his prose we are in a different world ; there Southey is a master in his art, who works at ease with grace and skill. “Southey’s prose is perfect,” said Byron ; and, if we do not stretch the “perfect,” or take it to mean the supreme perfection of the very greatest masters of style, Byron was right. For good prose, plain, unassuming, natural, he is not surpassed in English. In his charming story of *The Three Bears* a phrase is often used which exactly describes his style ; when the old lady finds what is neither too hot nor too cold, too large nor too small, she says it is “just right.” Southey’s prose is “just right,”—it expresses his meaning with simple and admirable precision. In his prose and in his criticism we of a later generation could do worse than learn from Southey ; his sober writing is an excellent corrective for our prevailing faults. In prose the real Southey emerges from his conventionality. His interest and his curiosity are unbounded, as his *Common-Place Book* will prove; his stores of learning are at his readers’ service, as in *The Doctor·,* his patriotism is vigorous and healthy, as in the *Life of Nelson* ; his criticism is sound, as in the *Lives* of Cowper and of Wesley. But the truest Southey is in his *Letters* : the loyal, gallant, tender­hearted, faithful man that he was is revealed in them. Southey’s fame will not rest, as he supposed, on his verse ; all his faults are in that,—all his own weakness, and all the false taste of his age. But his prose assures him a high place in English literature, though not a place in the first rank even of prose writers.