A Clumsy Biographer.*

Symington's "Life and Works of Wordsworth," although it may in some degree contribute to the ever-growing interest in the great bard of Rydal, will, we are persuaded, add but little lustre to the name and fame of Mr. Symington. Wordsworth is a grand subject for a most instructive and fascinating biography; no finer opportunity for successful original criticism and characterization could be offered the writer desirous of distinction as a connoisseur of true poetry and of true simplicity of life. Here have we the long-time unappreciated, the great misunderstood, the little-read Poet of his generation. His profundity and limpid sincerity, his intensity of political and social conviction, his prim plainness of religious belief, his perseverance in the face of cruel and dogmatic literary criticism, the strange republicanism of his youth and the staid conservatism of his maturer years, all invite and demand an interpreter. There is honor to be gained from careful performance of the pleasant task. But the labor is not one that should be undertaken for its pleasant promise; there is even more of the arduous than of the enticing in its composition. Mr. Symington has evidently weighed well the difficulty of the undertaking, but, unfortunately, he does not appear to have weighed with precision his own capability for the execution of it.

To place before the reading public an attractive account of the life and writings of any great man, three qualifications above all others are requisite: accurate knowledge of all facts germane to the subject; critical and sympathetic judgment as to the relative importance and sequence of these facts; lucid style in the presentation of the whole matter.

Mr. Symington displays fair acquaintance with the events of Wordsworth's life, and admirable knowledge concerning the material and purport of the poet's writings; but his claim to the second and third of the desiderata mentioned above he fails entirely to establish. With regard to judicious arrangement of anecdotes, tid-bits of literary gossip, incidents of domestic sorrow, hope, embarrassment, or success, we can detect in the two volumes not the slightest indication of design. Each paragraph is an indeterminate firkin warranted to hold ample or diminutive measure, as the case may be, of literary oil, wine, or water. Intrinsic adaptation matters nothing. Here are firkins and firkins, "just as fate or fancy carries." A page of thirty lines will not infrequently comprise half a dozen interjectional paragraphs, each, possibly, fraught with matter dissimilar to those which precede and succeed it. The following example may afford a fair idea of the extent to which this vice of abrupt transition is carried. On page 250 of the first volume is quoted Wordsworth's estimate of the genius of Dryden: "Although robust, 'he had neither a tender heart nor a

* William Wordsworth. A Biographical Sketch, with Selections from his Writings in Poetry and Prose. By Andrew J. Symington, F.R.S.N.A. Two volumes. Boston: Roberts Brothers.

lofty sense of moral dignity.'" The mention of a tender heart stirs vehemently the memory and sympathies of Mr. Symington; nor can he resist the temptation to indicate the passion of which his beloved Wordsworth was, at will, capable; we are therefore invited to dally for a season with the ecstacies of the poet's maudlin lover, "Vaudracour"—

"A man too happy for mortality."

What may be the connection between Vaudracour and Dryden will, we trust, be apparent to the keen-witted reader. The consideration of love, however, probably summons to the eyes of the biographer visions of the lyre and lyrics; for in the next paragraph we are informed, with surprising relevancy and solicitude:

"This year (1805) a new edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared."

With which gasp the sententious section breathes its last. So far through the passage under examination, we have, in some uncertain manner, traced an intricately labyrinthine sequence of idea; but now, in the article of desperate hope, the clue entirely escapes us. Can any Thesean expert grasp for us the relation existent between Lyrical Ballads and the following aberrant Minotaur?—

"In order to place before the reader Wordsworth's family history, in relation to money matters and his economical and business habits, we cannot do better than quote the following letter, written to Sir George H. Beaumont, Bart."

Perhaps Lyrical Ballads and business habits possess pecuniary brotherhood; we, however, must confess to the blankest ignorance of any logical fraternity between the concepts. In the letter to Sir George Beaumont, mention is made of certain moneys lent to Captain John Wordsworth, brother to the poet; we are accordingly hurried, in the succeeding paragraph, to a consideration of the life and character of this excellent man, his noble intentions and his untimely death—a consideration admirably appropriate in some other part of the work, but hardly cognate with any thought in the neighborhood. And thus, in the course of two "16mo" pages, we scan the horizon for Dryden's talents, Wordsworth's "Vaudracour and Julia," the "Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth's business habits, and his estimable drowned brother John. A hundred such irrelevancies of statement might be cited —intellectual aeronautics from Dan to Beersheba. As things are, we cannot but regard the inconsequence of idea, the profound contempt for all appositeness in arrangement, as absolutely ludicrous. Nor even when the narrative has given fair temporary promise of definite purpose, can it reasonably hold its own; some intrusive though never so exquisite poem, charmingly malicious in her destruction of all order and etiquette, will persistently thrust her pretty face and feet upon the unexpecting scene. Now we are frequently glad to lose ourselves in the deep simplicity of the measures of Wordsworth, but, for all that, we have a decided preference for poetic *abandon* of our own choosing, or, at the least, for ingenious inducement on the part of the man who would tempt us to such poetic contemplation. So far, then, as critical judgment and proper disposition of material are concerned, we must make the best of the worst, and plead in Mr. Symington's favor the evident affection with which he approaches the career of the poet.

In grace of style, the third and most important of the qualifications of a biographer, the author of these volumes is singularly deficient. His constructions are loose, his figures weak, and his muse is horribly haunted by parenthetical clauses. The following sentence is a curiosity in pellucid expression, and will suffice to sustain the justice of our remarks. We refer it for examination to the expert, with the assurance, indeed, that the problem does not defy solution; but are temperate vices the only virtues requisite in good style? A certain antique cabinet in the possession of the Wordsworth family happens to be under consideration:

"Ellis Yarnall, an American gentleman to whom Wordsworth showed it, in describing his Rydal Mount visit to the late Professor Henry Reed, Wordsworth's accomplished and appreciative correspondent, and the friend who had introduced him to the poet, in mentioning the old chest thus refers to the pious motto carved on it: 'This Wordsworth repeated twice, and in an emphatic way, as he read the inscription,'" etc.

That is a logogriph worthy to be carefully treasured up. Scotticisms are fortunately not plentiful, and we have noticed but one or two glaring solecisms in the two volumes. The style grows more easy, if possible, as the story proceeds, and in the second volume it is comparatively tolerable.

To enter at length into the immediate peculiarities of Mr. Symington's method has ap-

peared unavoidable, even at the risk of sacrificing all discussion concerning the subject of which these volumes treat. Such necessity has therefore hindered the performance of more pleasant criticism. To Mr. Symington's credit be it said that selections from the works of Wordsworth are presented in such profusion as should suggest to the student careful and interesting study of all that the poet has written. Besides forty-seven of Wordsworth's finest sonnets, some fifty other poems appear in full; while fragments from twice as many pieces of verse are introduced by way of example or by implication. "The Excursion," to which thirty-seven pages of the second volume are devoted, is excellently set forth in numerous excerpts accompanied by a running commentary of descriptive and philosophical explanation. With regard to extracts from prose writings, work not so widely known as are the poems of Wordsworth, the author has exercised commendable discernment. The poet was even as earnest and luminous in his prose as in his verse, although it cannot be denied that his influence as an essayist or a political enthusiast was of slight weight in comparison with his slowly-gained but enduring importance as an interpreter of the poetry that is in Nature. About a hundred judicious selections from his letters, miscellaneous essays, and reflections on poetics, have been furnished as indication of the poet's diversified and patient industry.

At the same time a painstaking chronicle of the life and a useful anthology of the writings of Wordsworth, these volumes, although destitute of nearly all the finer graces which should characterize a successful biography, possess one conspicuous merit: they are inspired by fond appreciation of the pure and unselfish labor that the master accomplished.

CHARLES MILLS GAYLEY.