

- 280 Those yearnings, which had every day been mine –
 A wild, unworldly-minded youth, given up
 To nature and to books, or, at the most,
 From time to time, by inclination shipped
 One among many in societies
 That were, or seemed, as simple as myself.
 But now was come a change. It would demand
 Some skill, and longer time than may be spared,
 To paint even to myself these vanities,
 And how they wrought. But sure it is that now
- 290 Contagious air did oft environ me,
 Unknown among these haunts in former days.
 The very garments that I wore appeared
 To prey upon my strength, and stopped the course
 And quiet stream of self-forgetfulness.
 Something there was about me that perplexed
 The authentic sight of reason, pressed too closely
 On that religious dignity of mind
 That is the very faculty of truth –
 Which wanting (either from the very first
- 300 A function never lighted up, or else
 Extinguished), man, a creature great and good,
 Seems but a pageant plaything with vile claws,
 And this great frame of breathing elements,
 A senseless idol.

This vague heartless chase
 Of trivial pleasures was a poor exchange
 For books and nature at that early age.
 'Tis true some casual knowledge might be gained
 Of character or life; but at that time,
 Of manners put to school I took small note,
 And all my deeper passions lay elsewhere.

310 Far better had it been to exalt the mind
 By solitary study, to uphold
 Intense desire by thought and quietness –
 And yet, in chastisement of these regrets,
 The memory of one particular hour

Theme of
BN

- And damp those yearnings which had once been mine –
- 290 A wild, unworldly-minded youth, given up
 To his own eager thoughts. It would demand
 Some skill, and longer time than may be spared,
 To paint these vanities, and how they wrought
 In haunts where they, till now, had been unknown.
 It seemed the very garments that I wore
 Preyed on my strength, and stopped the quiet stream
 Of self-forgetfulness.

- Yes, that heartless chase
 Of trivial pleasures was a poor exchange
 For books and nature at that early age.
- 300 'Tis true, some casual knowledge might be gained
 Of character or life; but at that time,
 Of manners put to school I took small note,
 And all my deeper passions lay elsewhere.
 Far better had it been to exalt the mind
 By solitary study, to uphold
 Intense desire through meditative peace;
 And yet, for chastisement of these regrets,
 The memory of one particular hour

! the remembering
of 256 ff
is now
self-forgetful-
ness
or: cp 177-190

Does here rise up against me!

In a throng,

A festal company of maids and youths,
 Old men and matrons staid – promiscuous rout,
 A medley of all tempers – I had passed
 320 The night in dancing, gaiety, and mirth,
 With din of instruments and shuffling feet
 And glancing forms and tapers glittering
 And unaimed prattle flying up and down,
 Spirits upon the stretch, and here and there
 Slight shocks of young love-liking interspersed
 That mounted up like joy into the head
 And tingled through the veins. Ere we retired
 The cock had crowed, the sky was bright with day;
 Two miles I had to walk along the fields
 330 Before I reached my home. Magnificent
 The morning was, a memorable pomp,
 More glorious than I ever had beheld.
 The sea was laughing at a distance; all
 The solid mountains were as bright as clouds,
 Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light;
 And in the meadows and the lower grounds
 Was all the sweetness of a common dawn –
 Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,
 And labourers going forth into the fields.
 340 Ah, need I say, dear friend, that to the brim
 My heart was full? I made no vows, but vows
 Were then made for me: bond unknown to me
 Was given that I should be, else sinning greatly,
 A dedicated spirit. On I walked
 In blessedness, which even yet remains.

Strange rendezvous my mind was at that time,
 A parti-coloured show of grave and gay,
 Solid and light, short-sighted and profound –
 Of inconsiderate habits and sedate
 350 Consorting in one mansion unreproved.
 I knew the worth of that which I possessed,

Doth here rise up against me. 'Mid a throng
 310 Of maids and youths, old men, and matrons staid,
 A medley of all tempers, I had passed
 The night in dancing, gaiety, and mirth,
 With din of instruments and shuffling feet,
 And glancing forms, and tapers glittering,
 And unaimed prattle flying up and down;
 Spirits upon the stretch, and here and there
 Slight shocks of young love-liking interspersed,
 Whose transient pleasure mounted to the head,
 And tingled through the veins. Ere we retired,
 320 The cock had crowed, and now the eastern sky
 Was kindling, not unseen, from humble copse
 And open field, through which the pathway wound,
 And homeward led my steps. Magnificent
 The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
 Glorious as e'er I had beheld – in front,
 The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,
 The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds,
 Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light;
 And in the meadows and the lower grounds
 330 Was all the sweetness of a common dawn –
 Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,
 And labourers going forth to till the fields.

Ah! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim
 My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
 Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
 Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
 A dedicated Spirit. On I walked
 In thankful blessedness, which yet survives.

Strange rendezvous! My mind was at that time
 340 A parti-coloured show of grave and gay,
 Solid and light, short-sighted and profound;
 Of inconsiderate habits and sedate,
 Consorting in one mansion unreproved.
 The worth I knew of powers that I possessed,

Though slighted and misused. Besides in truth
 That summer, swarming as it did with thoughts
 Transient and loose, yet wanted not a store
 Of primitive hours, when – by these hindrances
 Unthwarted – I experienced in myself
 Conformity as just as that of old
 To the end and written spirit of God's works,
 Whether held forth in nature or in man.

360 From many wanderings that have left behind
 Remembrances not lifeless, I will here
 Single out one, then pass to other themes.
 A favourite pleasure hath it been with me
 From time of earliest youth to walk alone
 Along the public way, when, for the night
 Deserted, in its silence it assumes
 A character of deeper quietness
 Than pathless solitudes. At such an hour
 Once, ere these summer months were passed away,
 370 I slowly mounted up a steep ascent
 Where the road's watery surface, to the ridge

Though slighted and too oft misused. Besides,
 That summer, swarming as it did with thoughts
 Transient and idle, lacked not intervals
 When Folly from the frown of fleeting Time
 Shrunk, and the mind experienced in herself
 350 Conformity as just as that of old
 To the end and written spirit of God's works,
 Whether held forth in Nature or in Man,
 Through pregnant vision, separate or conjoined.

When from our better selves we have too long
 Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
 Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
 How gracious, how benign, is Solitude;
 How potent a mere image of her sway;
 Most potent when impressed upon the mind
 360 With an appropriate human centre – hermit,
 Deep in the bosom of the wilderness;
 Votary (in vast cathedral, where no foot
 Is treading, where no other face is seen)
 Kneeling at prayers; or watchman on the top
 Of lighthouse, beaten by Atlantic waves;
 Or as the soul of that great Power is met
 Sometimes embodied on a public road,
 When, for the night deserted, it assumes
 A character of quiet more profound
 370 Than pathless wastes.

Once, when those summer months
 Were flown, and autumn brought its annual show
 Of oars with oars contending, sails with sails,
 Upon Winander's spacious breast, it chanced
 That – after I had left a flower-decked room
 (Whose in-door pastime, lighted up, survived
 To a late hour), and spirits overwrought
 Were making night do penance for a day
 Spent in a round of strenuous idleness –
 My homeward course led up a long ascent,
 380 Where the road's watery surface, to the top

Of that sharp rising, glittered in the moon
 And seemed before my eyes another stream
 Creeping with silent lapse to join the brook
 That murmured in the valley.

On I went

Tranquil, receiving in my own despite
 Amusement, as I slowly passed along,
 From such near objects as from time to time
 Perforce intruded on the listless sense
 380 Quiescent and disposed to sympathy,
 With an exhausted mind worn out by toil
 And all unworthy of the deeper joy
 Which waits on distant prospect – cliff or sea,
 The dark blue vault and universe of stars.
 Thus did I steal along that silent road,
 My body from the stillness drinking in
 A restoration like the calm of sleep,
 But sweeter far. Above, before, behind,
 Around me, all was peace and solitude:
 390 I looked not round, nor did the solitude
 Speak to my eye, but it was heard and felt.
 Oh happy state – what beautiful pictures now
 Rose in harmonious imagery! They rose
 As from some distant region of my soul
 And came along like dreams; yet such as left
 Obscurely mingled with their passing forms
 A consciousness of animal delight,
 A self-possession felt in every pause
 And every gentle movement of my frame.

400 While thus I wandered, step by step led on,
 It chanced a sudden turning of the road
 Presented to my view an uncouth shape,
 So near that, slipping back into the shade
 Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,
 Myself unseen. He was of stature tall,
 A foot above man's common measure tall,

Of that sharp rising, glittered to the moon
 And bore the semblance of another stream.
 Stealing with silent lapse to join the brook
 That murmured in the vale. All else was still;

No living thing appeared in earth or air,
 And, save the flowing water's peaceful voice,
 Sound there was none – but, lo! an uncouth shape,
 Shown by a sudden turning of the road,
 So near that, slipping back into the shade

390 Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,
 Myself unseen. He was of stature tall,
 A span above man's common measure, tall,

Stiff in his form, and upright, lank and lean –
 A man more meagre, as it seemed to me,
 Was never seen abroad by night or day.
 410 His arms were long, and bare his hands; his mouth
 Showed ghastly in the moonlight; from behind,
 A milestone propped him, and his figure seemed
 Half sitting, and half standing. I could mark
 That he was clad in military garb,
 Though faded yet entire. He was alone,
 Had no attendant, neither dog, nor staff,
 Nor knapsack; in his very dress appeared
 A desolation, a simplicity,
 That seemed akin to solitude. Long time
 420 Did I peruse him with a mingled sense
 Of fear and sorrow. From his lips meanwhile
 There issued murmuring sounds, as if of pain
 Or of uneasy thought; yet still his form
 Kept the same steadiness, and at his feet
 His shadow lay, and moved not. In a glen
 Hard by, a village stood, whose roofs and doors
 Were visible among the scattered trees,
 Scarce distant from the spot an arrow's flight.
 I wished to see him move, but he remained
 430 Fixed to his place, and still from time to time
 Sent forth a murmuring voice of dead complaint,
 Groans scarcely audible.

Without self-blame

I had not thus prolonged my watch; and now,
 Subduing my heart's specious cowardice,
 I left the shady nook where I had stood
 And hailed him. Slowly from his resting-place
 He rose, and with a lean and wasted arm
 In measured gesture lifted to his head
 Returned my salutation, then resumed
 440 His station as before. And when erelong
 I asked his history, he in reply
 Was neither slow nor eager, but unmoved
 And with a quiet uncomplaining voice,

Stiff, lank, and upright; a more meagre man
 Was never seen before by night or day.
 Long were his arms, pallid his hands; his mouth
 Looked ghastly in the moonlight: from behind,
 A mile-stone propped him; I could also ken
 That he was clothed in military garb,
 Though faded, yet entire. Companionless,
 400 No dog attending, by no staff sustained,
 He stood, and in his very dress appeared
 A desolation, a simplicity,
 To which the trappings of a gaudy world
 Make a strange back-ground. From his lips, ere long,
 Issued low muttered sounds, as if of pain
 Or some uneasy thought; yet still his form
 Kept the same awful steadiness – at his feet
 His shadow lay, and moved not. From self-blame
 Not wholly free, I watched him thus; at length
 410 Subduing my heart's specious cowardice,
 I left the shady nook where I had stood
 And hailed him. Slowly from his resting-place
 He rose, and with a lean and wasted arm
 In measured gesture lifted to his head
 Returned my salutation; then resumed
 His station as before; and when I asked
 His history, the veteran, in reply,
 Was neither slow nor eager; but, unmoved,
 And with a quiet uncomplaining voice,

A stately air of mild indifference,
 He told in simple words a soldier's tale –
 That in the tropic islands he had served,
 Whence he had landed scarcely ten days past;
 That on his landing he had been dismissed,
 And now was travelling to his native home.
 450 At this, I turned and looked towards the village
 But all were gone to rest, the fires all out,
 And every silent window to the moon
 Shone with a yellow glitter. 'No one there',
 Said I, 'is waking; we must measure back
 The way which we have come. Behind yon wood
 A labourer dwells, and (take it on my word)
 He will not murmur should we break his rest,
 And with a ready heart will give you food
 And lodging for the night.' At this he stooped
 460 And from the ground took up an oaken staff
 By me yet unobserved – a traveller's staff
 Which I suppose from his slack hand had dropped,
 And lain till now neglected in the grass.

Towards the cottage without more delay
 We shaped our course. As it appeared to me
 He travelled without pain, and I beheld
 With ill-suppressed astonishment his tall
 And ghastly figure moving at my side;
 Nor, while we journeyed thus, could I forbear
 470 To question him of what he had endured
 From hardship, battle, or the pestilence.
 He all the while was in demeanour calm,
 Concise in answer. Solemn and sublime
 He might have seemed, but that in all he said
 There was a strange half-absence, and a tone
 Of weakness and indifference, as of one
 Remembering the importance of his theme
 But feeling it no longer. We advanced
 Slowly, and ere we to the wood were come
 480 Discourse had ceased. Together on we passed
 In silence through the shades gloomy and dark;

420 A stately air of mild indifference,
 He told in few plain words a soldier's tale –
 That in the Tropic Islands he had served,
 Whence he had landed scarcely three weeks past;
 That on his landing he had been dismissed,
 And now was travelling towards his native home.
 This heard, I said, in pity, 'Come with me.'
 He stooped, and straightway from the ground took up
 An oaken staff by me yet unobserved –
 A staff which must have dropt from his slack hand
 430 And lay till now neglected in the grass.
 Though weak his step and cautious, he appeared
 To travel without pain, and I beheld,
 With an astonishment but ill suppressed,
 His ghostly figure moving at my side;
 Nor could I, while we journeyed thus, forbear
 To turn from present hardships to the past,
 And speak of war, battle, and pestilence,
 Sprinkling this talk with questions, better spared,
 On what he might himself have seen or felt.
 440 He all the while was in demeanour calm,
 Concise in answer; solemn and sublime
 He might have seemed, but that in all he said
 There was a strange half-absence, as of one
 Knowing too well the importance of his theme,
 But feeling it no longer. Our discourse
 Soon ended, and together on we passed
 In silence through a wood gloomy and still.

Then, turning up along an open field,
 We gained the cottage. At the door I knocked,
 Calling aloud 'My friend, here is a man
 By sickness overcome. Beneath your roof
 This night let him find rest, and give him food,
 If food he need, for he is faint and tired.'
 Assured that now my comrade would repose
 In comfort, I entreated that henceforth
 490 He would not linger in the public ways
 But ask for timely furtherance, and help
 Such as his state required. At this reproof,
 With the same ghastly mildness in his look
 He said 'My trust is in the God of Heaven,
 And in the eye of him that passes me!'

The cottage door was speedily unlocked;
 And now the soldier touched his hat again
 With his lean hand, and in a voice that seemed
 To speak with a reviving interest
 500 Till then unfelt, he thanked me. I returned
 The blessing of the poor unhappy man,
 And so we parted. Back I cast a look,
 And lingered near the door a little space,
 Then sought with quiet heart my distant home.

Up-turning, then, along an open field,
 We reached a cottage. At the door I knocked,
 450 And earnestly to charitable care
 Commended him as a poor friendless man,
 Belated and by sickness overcome.
 Assured that now the traveller would repose
 In comfort, I entreated that henceforth
 He would not linger in the public ways,
 But ask for timely furtherance and help
 Such as his state required. At this reproof,
 With the same ghastly mildness in his look,
 He said, 'My trust is in the God of Heaven,
 460 And in the eye of him who passes me!'

The cottage door was speedily unbarred,
 And now the soldier touched his hat once more
 With his lean hand, and in a faltering voice,
 Whose tone bespoke reviving interests
 Till then unfelt, he thanked me; I returned
 The farewell blessing of the patient man,
 And so we parted. Back I cast a look,
 And lingered near the door a little space,
 Then sought with quiet heart my distant home.