Letters on Literature

Letters on Literature by Susan Fenimore Cooper is a thoughtful collection of essays and personal reflections on literature, writing, and the literary landscape of 19th-century America.

INTRODUCTORY: OF MODERN ENGLISH POETRY

In his letter to Mr. Arthur Wincott of Topeka, Kansas, the author broaches the topic of modern English poetry, responding to a request for letters aimed at living authors—a task he deems inappropriate due to potential impertinence. However, he elevates the notion of utilizing the epistolary style for literary critique, akin to the methods of the Tatler and Spectator, allowing for a blend of personal taste and perhaps prejudice within his observations on poetry. Poetry, he observes, holds a venerable status in literature, despite its waning popularity and the modern democratic age's lukewarm reception towards it. The proliferation of poetical societies, he argues, signals a decline in poetry's art, as it shows a reliance on communal engagement over individual appreciation.

Amidst this backdrop, the letter reflects on the curious state of English poetry, marked by the presence of renowned poets yet a scarcity of commendable new poetry. He ponders the inherent challenges in assessing poetry, influenced by an inclination towards novelty, and questions the enduring legacy of contemporary poets. Despite these challenges, the author firmly positions Tennyson among the greats in the English poetic tradition, acknowledging both his imperfections and major contributions. Tennyson's diverse themes and stylistic features are acknowledged, from his portrayal of grief in "In Memoriam" to his reimagining of classical myths and legends.

The letter contrasts Tennyson's universal appeal with the enigmatic allure of Robert Browning, whose obscurity is both a charm and a hurdle for readers. Browning's profound exploration of human nature in "Men and Women" is lauded, potential for enduring literary significance. However, the author expresses skepticism over the longevity of Browning's more impenetrable works.

Matthew Arnold is commended for the resonant beauty of his poetry, despite not reaching the poetic heights of Tennyson or the intense scrutiny of Browning. Arnold's poetry, reflective and often tinged with melancholy, earns a special place in the author's esteem for its introspective quality and enduring emotional impact.

The letter, thus, serves as a contemplative examination of modern English poetry, navigating the complexities of literary critique with a personal, yet critical lens, maintaining a dialogue between personal affinity and objective analysis.

OF MODERN ENGLISH POETRY

My dear Wincott,

The recent publication of a book by an American lady, showcasing the modern poets of both England and America, illuminates the challenge in discussing contemporary English poetry. The tally of eighteen English poets to sixty American offers a daunting landscape for a single critic. I prefer to narrow my focus to three living poets, in addition to those previously discussed. These include Mr. Swinburne, Mr. William Morris, and a lesser-known Mr. Robert Bridges, whose poetic paths have uniquely contributed to modern English poetry.

Mr. Morris’s early works, like "The Defence of Guinevere," transport us to a vibrant medieval era, blending vivid imagery with human emotions. Despite not gaining immediate popularity, these poems capture the essence of an earlier age with complexity and depth. Mr. Morris later ventured into extensive poetic narratives in "The Earthly Paradise," which, despite its artistic merit, may lean towards artifice over pure artistry. His poetic journey shows a transition from intimate medieval tales to broader, less personal epics.

Mr. Swinburne emerged with "Atalanta in Calydon," captivating readers with its fresh, elemental themes and innovative verse. Despite the controversy provoked by his "Poems and Ballads," Swinburne’s ability to craft musically rich and emotive poetry remains unmatched. His work carries a distinct, albeit occasionally excessive, touch that resists succinct classification but imprints his unique signature on the poetry landscape.

Mr. Robert Bridges, despite his elusive presence in mainstream publications, offers a refined and austere beauty in his work. His early poems exude a reverence for nature and classical forms, engaging with themes of love, loss, and the natural world with a

quiet, persistent charm. His focus on tight, structured forms and deeply reflective content distinguishes his contributions.

Each poet represents a facet of modern English poetry, characterized by individual style, thematic exploration, and varying degrees of acceptance and recognition. Their works, whether celebrated or scrutinized, collectively enrich the fabric of contemporary literature, inviting readers to engage with complex emotions, vivid imagery, and the ongoing evolution of poetic expression.

Yours sincerely,

GERARD DE NERVAL

In this letter addressed to Miss Girton of Cambridge, the writer delves into the appeal and enigmatic allure of Gerard de Nerval, a figure somewhat reserved for a more discerning, perhaps male, audience. Not due to any impropriety, but rather Nerval's intricate expression of unorthodox sentiment and love, diverging significantly from the conventional. The comparison between Nerval and Edgar Allan Poe illustrates this point, highlighting a shared penchant for the ethereal and ideal over the tangible, particularly in matters of the heart. Nerval's narratives, especially in "Les Filles de Feu," showcase characters captivated not by the women per se, but by what these women represent in the tapestry of their desires and dreams. The essence of Nerval's work encapsulates the perpetual wanderer, in search of a fleeting ideal, culminating in a tragic detachment from worldly confines in pursuit of a metaphysical homestead, possibly realized only in death.

Gerard de Nerval emerges as a seminal figure from the 1830 romantic school alongside literary giants like Hugo and Gautier. Despite his potential obscurity to some, Nerval brought to life "Sylvie," a narrative masterpiece praised for its portrayal of youth, nature, and the ephemeral aspects of love and happiness. The text recounts a personal, if not somewhat fantastical, journey back to the protagonist's childhood environs, sparked by a newspaper announcement. This journey intertwines with memories of young love, symbolized by Sylvie, and an encounter with an enchanting noble's daughter, igniting a quest for an idyllic past and unattainable affections.

"Sylvie" not only serves as a repository for France's pastoral and musical heritage but also illuminates the transient nature of the protagonist's relationships and aspirations. Whether through the carefree escapades in a chateau or the nostalgic recollections in an old peasant's cottage, Nerval masterfully weaves a narrative that transcends time, imbuing the pastoral with an ethereal charm and melancholy. The reunion with Sylvie,

depicted with a blend of simplicity and profound sentiment, underscores the theme of irrevocable change and inevitable loss, which pervades Nerval's body of work. Ultimately, the letter suggests that Nerval's fascination with the fleeting and intangible enshrines his legacy, offering a unique, albeit elusive, comfort in the recognition of beauty and sorrow intertwined.

PLOTINUS (A.D. 200-262)

Letters on Literature by Andrew Lang presents an engaging letter addressed to Lady Violet Lebas, wherein Lang embarks on a descriptive journey into the life and philosophy of Plotinus, the Egyptian philosopher born around 200 A.D. in Lycopolis, Egypt. The letter draws an intriguing parallel between Plotinus and the English literary giant, Dr. Samuel Johnson, highlighting their shared traits of laziness paired with moments of energetic brilliance, short-sightedness (both literal and metaphorical), and a blend of superstition and rationality. Plotinus, described as both a consistent vegetarian and a philosopher deeply immersed in the pursuit of knowledge, attended the schools of Alexandria before embarking on an exploratory journey which failed to reach India due to military defeat.

Lang's narrative vividly captures the eclectic and mystic aspects of Plotinus's life, including an attempted spiritual ceremony in Rome that instead of summoning Plotinus's guardian demon, conjured a god from the higher circles. This incident not only solidified Plotinus's confidence against rival philosophers but also showcased his mystical repute among his contemporaries. Plotinus is shown to possess supernatural abilities, such as detecting a thief with a mere glance and psychically intervening to prevent Porphyry's contemplated suicide, advising instead a recuperative trip to Sicily.

The letter further delves into the philosophical contributions of Plotinus, touching upon his opposition to the Gnostics and his experiences of spiritual transcendence. Despite his philosophical prowess, Plotinus faced accusations of plagiarism, a common plight among many eminent figures according to Lang. The letter touches upon Plotinus's modesty and his reluctance to have his portrait painted, a testament to his character that attracted both genuine seekers and the credulously curious. Lang humorously imagines modern-day intellectual disputes being resolved with the mystical competencies attributed to Plotinus, adding a layer of cultural commentary to his

exploration.

Ending on a note of mysticism and the supernatural, Lang recounts the passing of Plotinus and the subsequent Delphic Oracle's declaration of his transformation into a demon. Throughout, Lang maintains a tone of levity mixed with reverence, presenting the complex figure of Plotinus in an accessible and captivating manner that bridges the historical and philosophical with the personal and poetic.

LUCRETIUS

To the Rev. Geoffrey Martin, Oxford, the letter delves into the intriguing aspect of how the religious beliefs of ancient Greece and Rome provided comfort or solace to individuals, a topic that remains largely unexplored in modern discourse. This curiosity is framed within the context of understanding the personal and emotional connection individuals of antiquity might have had with their Gods, considering the detailed knowledge we possess about their rituals, mythology, and deities yet knowing so little about their personal sentiments towards religion in a modern sense.

The focus then shifts to Lucretius and his monumental work, "De Rerum Natura," emphasizing its significance as a piece aimed at dismantling the concept of religion as Lucretius understood it. The work's core purpose was to liberate humanity from the fears of the afterlife and divine retribution, advocating for a life free from the dread of Gods’ intervention. This perspective reveals a society that, contrary to the common portrayal of the ancient Greeks and Romans leading a carefree existence, was deeply enmeshed in the fear of spiritual condemnation—a notion largely absent from mainstream historical narratives.

Lucretius’ poetic endeavor is seen as a stark reaction against prevalent fears of the afterlife, which were perpetuated by both popular belief and philosophical musings of figures like Socrates, who seemed to imbue these ancient anxieties with a scholarly credence. This fear, as chronicled by Lucretius, suggests a community besieged by an almost Calvinistic dread of post-mortem judgement, contrasting sharply with the frivolous image traditionally ascribed to them.

Despite the expansive beauty and the compelling arguments present in Lucretius' verses, the letter highlights the inherent melancholy of his philosophy – a testament to the ultimate futility of life and an eternal rest devoid of consciousness or dream. This

nihilistic view, though articulated with sublime eloquence, fails to resonate with the human yearning for purpose and meaning beyond the material realm. The letter poignantly reflects on the rejection of Lucretius’ dismissal of the afterlife and divine benevolence, underscoring the intrinsic human desire for hope and fear as essential to the richness of the human experience.

The discussion concludes by pondering the value of Lucretius' beliefs in contemporary times, questioning the merit of advancements and conquests if they lead to a world stripped of its dreams and spiritual aspirations. The text suggests that perhaps the ancient ways, imbued with hopes and fears, offer a more fulfilling existence than a reality bounded by the stark finality of death. Through this exploration, the letter offers a profound contemplation on the intersection of religion, philosophy, and the human condition as navigated in the ancient world and reflected upon through Lucretius' enduring work.

ON VERS DE SOCIETE

In "On Vers De Société," addressed to Mr. Gifted Hopkins, the chapter dissects the art and history of light verse, specifically within societal and courtly contexts. The ancient Greeks and Romans are initially dismissed for their lack of societal structure conducive to the creation of sociable verses, highlighting the absence of women in social equality. The narrative transitions to the emergence of court life in France as the inception point for this style of verse, crediting figures like Charles d'Orleans and poets of "Livre des Cent Ballades" for their contributions. It celebrates the evolution of poetic expression in light verse through to the likes of Clement Marot and Ronsard, culminating in the effusive works of Voiture and Sarrazin.

The discourse shifts to English literature, referencing Mr. Locker's anthology, "Lyra Elegantiarum," to trace the timeline of English sociable verse from Skelton through Sidney to the more familiar territory of Ben Jonson, Carew, and Herrick. Jonson's adaptation from Greek prose and Carew's golden-dusted poetry exemplify the era's inclination towards lightly adorned, musically influenced poetry. The focus on physical beauty and romantic endeavors is distinguished in Herrick's works, presenting a more tangible, fleshed-out vision of love compared to his predecessors and contemporaries.

Suckling's blend of martial swagger and Lovelace's noble expressions of fidelity represent the soldier-poet archetype, merging the pursuits of love and war with lyrical finesse. The author laments the post-Civil War shift in English verse to the more restrained and polished, yet emotionally detached sensibilities of poets such as Pope and the Queen Anne wits, including Prior, whom the author still holds in high esteem for his candidness and charm.

Landor's classical touches are lauded, though Praed's reliance on clever antithesis earns mixed feelings. Thackeray's occasional carelessness in verse is forgiven for the breadth of his humor and tenderness. Among contemporary authors, Mr. Locker and

Mr. Austin Dobson receive praise for their contributions to the tradition of vers de société, marking a continuum of light verse that spans the complexities of societal changes, romantic ideation, and the nuances of human emotion, all while maintaining a playfully engaging and intellectually stimulating demeanor.

TO A YOUNG AMERICAN BOOK-HUNTER

To Philip Dodsworth, Esq., in New York, the author addresses his experiences and advice on the pursuit of book-hunting, congratulating Dodsworth on joining this passionate quest. He begins by evoking the sentimentality and solitude that comes with the love for books, referencing Thomas e Kempis and the comfort found in reading. Despite offering advice, the author humorously acknowledges that like many enthusiasts, Dodsworth may not strictly follow it, highlighting the eager but often haphazard nature of beginning collectors.

The author advises against indiscriminate collecting, especially when one is not financially buoyant, emphasizing the value of restraint and selective acquisition based on genuine interest rather than the allure of bargains. He shares personal anecdotes of his own wayward purchases outside his literary interests, including works on curling and a truculent treatise on murder bought possibly out of admiration for Sir Walter Scott. He regrets these missteps, attributing them to whims, curiosity, or mere cheapness, and stresses the importance of collecting with a system and purpose.

The narrative then shifts to a more practical guide on building a valuable collection, suggesting focusing on areas less influenced by the fluctuating market trends like the highly priced illustrated French books of the eighteenth century. Instead, the author suggests investing in first editions of notable American and English poets like Longfellow, Poe, and Whittier, acknowledging the rarity and value of these works. He recounts the rare instances of acquiring early editions of Poe's works and emphasizes the general high demand and prices of American literature of a certain age.

The author also points out the unpredictable nature of book values, with examples of modern works that have significantly appreciated in value, advising Dodsworth to discern which new releases might become valuable. The strategic acquisition of books

printed on large paper as a potentially profitable investment is recommended, yet he cautions against buying purely for speculative purposes, advocating for a balance between a book's inherent value and its potential as a collectible.

In closing, the author expresses a broad sentiment towards collecting, hinting at the joy, the pitfalls, and the serendipity involved in the hunt for books. He encapsulates the nuanced approach required to cultivate a collection that is both personally satisfying and potentially lucrative, underlining the importance of passion, knowledge, and selectivity in the world of book-hunting.

OF VERS DE SOCIETE

In the letter "Of Vers De Societe" addressed to Mr. Gifted Hopkins, the writer critiques Hopkins's poem "To Delia in Girton," advising against his attempt at society verses, highlighting the challenge of this genre even for the ancients who excelled in other poetic forms. The writer navigates through historical and cultural contexts, from Theocritus's AEolic verses, emblematic of tasteful gift-giving and unobtrusive flattery, to the limitations observed in Roman and Greek poetry, where societal norms restricted the themes and expressions suitable for 'society verses.'

The writer expresses admiration for the precise yet limited application of vers de societe in ancient times, marked by cultural constraints and a different understanding of women's roles. The scrutiny extends to Roman poetry, where Catullus's passionate expressions and Horace's reflections on life and politics, albeit in delicate form, diverge from the essence of 'society verses' – light, decorous, yet thoughtful. Horace's subtle playfulness is noted as a closer match, yet the writer suggests that the true spirit of society verse seldom surged in Roman poetics, restrained by customs and a more grave contemplation of life's brevity.

Ovid's work is briefly entertained for its lighter touch and playful approach, pointing out the balance between elegant jest and sentimentality, a characteristic deemed essential for successful vers de societe. However, Ovid's inclination towards a monotone style disqualifies him from mastering this delicate art form. The letter criticizes the necessity for variety and subtleness in tone, qualities that evade many despite their literary prowess.

The letter briefly traverses modern interpretations, challenging the prevailing norms and celebrating the finesse required to captivate with brevity and wit. Martial is extolled for combining humor with a personal touch, although his content often strays far from being socially acceptable today. The writer emphasizes the uniqueness of

successfully mastering society verse, underlining it as a pursuit for the genuinely gifted, hinting at Hopkins's potential yet advising a cautious refinement of his craft in aligning with societal elegance and subtlety.

ROCHEFOUCAULD

In a letter to Lady Violet Lebas, the author expresses mixed feelings about Rochefoucauld's "Reflexions, ou Sentences et Maximes Morales." He suggests that the maxims, while insightful, can become overwhelming due to their sheer number and the cynicism they project about human nature. The author contrasts Rochefoucauld's observations on self-love, vanity, and human motives with his own experiences and beliefs, arguing for a more nuanced view of human actions that includes genuine affection and selflessness.

Rochefoucauld is credited with analyzing self-love as the driving force behind all actions, a point the author contests by highlighting examples of true kindness and altruism that defy this notion. He shares an anecdote about a black Australian's act of forgiveness, using it to underscore the existence of innate goodness and compassion in people, qualities Rochefoucauld seems to overlook.

The author challenges several of Rochefoucauld's maxims, particularly those regarding love, friendship, and appreciation. He defends the capacity for true love and friendship beyond mere transactions of self-interest, and he takes issue with the notion that past loves or acts of kindness are only met with ingratitude or embarrassment. Instead, he provides examples to argue that genuine emotions and actions can transcend Rochefoucauld's somewhat cynical view.

The letter also touches on Rochefoucauld's comments on societal behaviors, flirting, the dynamics within relationships, and the essence of love and jealousy, subtly critiquing or expanding upon these with a more optimistic or complex view of human nature. Rochefoucauld's assertion that people's actions are primarily driven by self-interest and vanity is met with a call to recognize the broader range of human emotions and motives, including those driven by genuine care and unselfishness.

By contrasting his views with Rochefoucauld's pithy observations, the author advocates for a richer, less cynical understanding of human interaction and emotion, arguing for the presence of altruism, genuine love, and the inherent worth within people, despite Rochefoucauld's assertions to the contrary.

FIELDING

Dear Mrs. Goodhart,

Thank you for sharing with me the fascinating statistics on book-buying in the Upper Mississippi Valley. It's intriguing to learn that Rev. E. P. Roe triumphs in popularity over Henry Fielding, signaling unique regional tastes. While I have not delved into Roe's works, it's apparent that your community might be missing out on the richness of Fielding's contributions, despite acknowledged coarseness.

Dr. Johnson's critique of "Tom Jones" as a "vicious book" contrasts sharply with Fielding's nuanced moral landscape, where virtues of kindness, generosity, and honesty are celebrated amidst human foibles. Fielding, recognized for his humor and deep affection for humanity, does not shy away from depicting characters with all their imperfections. Yet, his portrayal of women, as seen through characters like Sophia Western and the heartfelt words of Mr. Wilson in "Joseph Andrews," highlights a respectful and nuanced understanding of gender and virtue.

Fielding's moral compass, while advocating for tolerance of youthful indiscretions, firmly condemns exploitation and celebrates the integrity of marriage. His works offer a vivid satire of 18th-century England, blending critical social commentary with an unwavering empathy for the less fortunate. Despite the coarse narrative and challenging themes, Fielding's call for humanity and fairness remains compelling.

His advocacy for social reform through literature presents a moral framework that, despite its era-specificity, continues to resonate. Fielding's combination of scholarly insights with an accessible and humorous narrative invites readers to reflect on societal virtues and vices.

In closing, your observation of Fielding's comparative unpopularity raises compelling questions about literary tastes and the enduring impact of an author who masterfully balances moral inquiry with comedic brilliance. Fielding's works, rich with character and wit, provide a window into the complexities of human nature and society's foibles, offering timeless insights into the essence of integrity and compassion.

Warmest regards,

[Your Name]

LONGFELLOW

In a heartfelt letter to Walter Mainwaring, Esq., of Lothian College, Oxford, the author shares his reluctance to join a discussion on Browning's "Sordello," preferring to visit during the May races. This preference leads him into a nostalgic journey through his bookshelves, particularly revisiting Longfellow's poetry, which he had not explored in two decades. Through Longfellow's writings, the author is transported back to his youth, experiencing a flood of memories that remind him of the profound impact poetry has on the shaping of one’s sensibilities through different stages of life.

The author reflects on the evolution of his literary taste, acknowledging Longfellow's significant influence on his understanding of poetry's essence beyond the youthful admiration for Scott's battle pieces. He appreciates Longfellow’s reflective and moralistic qualities, which once offered fresh insights, though they may now seem trite with the wisdom of age. Longfellow's verses, particularly from "Voices of the Night," evoke an autumnal, reflective mood, stirring a sense of connection to a more innocent time, marked by simple pleasures and the company of kind, now-vanished faces from one's past.

Though recognizing the occasional overt moralizing in Longfellow's work as disenchanting, the author admires Longfellow's ability to evoke vivid imagery and emotional resonance, citing poems like "The Fire of Driftwood" and "The Children's Hour." These works, devoid of pretense and filled with genuine sentiment, reaffirm the author's affection for Longfellow, contrasting his sincere, life-affirming poetry with the more detached, eerie verses of Poe.

Longfellow's poetry, interwoven with the reader’s personal memories and experiences, stands as a testament to the enduring power of words to connect us to our past selves and to each other. The author's musings culminate in a celebration of Longfellow's contribution to the literary landscape, highlighting his unique ability to capture the

essence of human experience, despite the occasional heavy-handed moral.

ON BOOKS ABOUT RED MEN

In "ON BOOKS ABOUT RED MEN," addressed to Richard Wilby, Esq., at Eton College, Windsor, the writer, presumably an uncle, shares his fascination with literature, particularly stories about "Red Indians," with his nephew, Dick. The uncle reminiscences about his childhood antics inspired by such tales, including his attempts at crafting a tomahawk and a pipe, reminiscent of Hiawatha's, albeit unsuccessfully.

The uncle endorses "A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner," a true account of Tanner's thirty years among the Indians, published in 1830 by Messrs. Carvill in New York. Tanner's saga begins in Kentucky, where a young Tanner, against his father's advice, is kidnapped by Shawnees, setting off a chain of events that lead him to be adopted by the tribe. His narrative weaves through the hardships of adapting to a new culture, including being initially mistreated, learning to hunt for survival, and encountering the spiritual beliefs of his adopted people. Tanner's experiences reveal both the grueling and mystical aspects of living among the Indians, from facing starvation to having visionary dreams guided by the Great Spirit, and even encountering ghosts.

The uncle points out the stark realities of life among the Indians, which include battling starvation and the dangers of succumbing to alcoholism, a fate that Tanner narrowly avoids. Despite these challenges, Tanner grows into a formidable hunter and a revered member of the community. His life takes a turn towards tragedy, entangled in marital issues and a dispute with a medicine-man, culminating in Tanner self-extracting a bullet from his body, an act showcasing his resilience.

The chapter reflects the uncle's desire to instill in young Dick a nuanced appreciation for these narratives, not merely as adventures but as windows into the complex realities of cultural differences, survival, and the human spirit's resilience. Through Tanner's story, the uncle conveys the broader lessons of courage, adaptability, and the

importance of understanding across cultures, while also nurturing a love for true tales of adventure and the human experience.

A FRIEND OF KEATS

In the chapter from "Letters on Literature," the focus is on a somewhat lesser-known figure in literature, Mr. Reynolds, who was a contemporary of John Keats, the famous Romantic poet. The author laments Reynolds's obscurity, particularly his poetry, and embarks on a quest to bring some of his works to light.

Reynolds's initial publication drew a "careless good word" from Lord Byron but is noted most prominently for "The Fancy," a collection that includes a fictional memoir of Peter Corcoran, a character with a deep interest in prize-fighting. This unusual passion among poets for boxing reflects a broader Romantic era theme of valorizing physicality alongside intellectual pursuits.

The narrative delves into how Reynolds, like his creation Peter Corcoran, and other literary figures of the time including Byron, Shelley, and Keats himself, saw merit in the physical aspects of life—boxing, in particular—as well as the artistic. Peter Corcoran, in the text, emerges as a mirror reflecting both Keats's physicality and his poetic sensibilities. Reynolds uses Corcoran's life, filled with poetry, love, and the "science" of boxing, to explore themes of passion, mortality, and the fleeting nature of fame and physical prowess.

Furthermore, the text outlines Corcoran's unfortunate love story, highlighting how his physical scars and poetic descriptions of boxing fail to win over his love interest, leading to his untimely demise—a narrative reinforcing the transient joy of physical and artistic triumphs.

The chapter also reflects on Reynolds's other literary endeavors, including his marriage which seemingly ushered in a shift away from poetry towards domestic life. The narrator shares poignant reflections on Reynolds's and Keats's friendship, marked by mutual admiration and support amidst the harsh critiques from contemporary

literary magazines. Their correspondence is celebrated, especially Keats's "Ode to Autumn," a masterpiece sent to Reynolds towards the end of Keats's life.

Towards the conclusion, Reynolds's "The Garden of Florence" receives mention as a notable work, appreciated for its poetic beauty and emotional depth. It serves as a tribute to Keats and to the indelible mark of friendship, loss, and artistic kinship that framed their relationship. The chapter closes with an acknowledgment of the profound impact of sensitive, intense natures on art and the world, encapsulating the lives and losses of these Romantic poets within the broader discourse on the value of literature and personal relationships.

ON VIRGIL

In the letter to Lady Violet Lebas, the author delves into a personal and reflective discussion on the appreciation of literature, specifically focusing on Virgil. Initially, the letter highlights a resistance to conforming tastes to critical acclaim, using personal disinterest in renowned authors like Gibbon, Racine, Wordsworth, and Amiel as examples to argue for a more natural, spontaneous appreciation of art. This prelude serves as a foundation for the main subject: Virgil, whose work, despite not evoking a passionate admiration in the author, is recognized for its enduring beauty and influence.

Virgil is portrayed as a figure whose sweetness and moral serenity traverse the ages, endearing him to readers centuries after his time. The author describes a personal connection to Virgil that originated from a school experience, where a marble bust of Virgil captured the author’s affection, overshadowing even the tedium of studying his works. This affection sustains despite acknowledging the perceived limitations of Virgil's poetry, including its imitative nature and occasional lack of original passion. Yet, Virgil's ability to invoke the beauty of his homeland, his love for the natural world, and his reflections on peace and rural life are highlighted as elements of genuine connection between his work and the reader.

Further, the letter explores Virgil's commentary on the troubles of his time—the inner turmoil within the Roman state and external threats—drawing parallels with contemporary concerns of empire and societal unrest. Through describing Virgil’s yearning for a simpler, past Golden Age, the author connects with the poet's escape into a pastoral idyll free from contemporary horrors, echoing a universal desire for peace amidst chaos.

In critiquing the "Aeneid," the author acknowledges its status as a commissioned piece, suggesting a lack of genuine enthusiasm from Virgil compared to the vivid, lived

experiences that fuel Homer's epics. Despite this, Virgil's moments of personal reflection and descriptive brilliance, notably in his portrayal of romantic love and mystical underpinnings, are celebrated. The letter closes on a contemplative note, envisioning Virgil in a serene afterlife, mingling with past sages and poets, forever in the realm of his own making—a testament to the undying legacy of his work and spirit.

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

To Lady Violet Lebas, this letter introduces "Aucassin et Nicolette," a novel that perplexes with its ancient French, far removed from the familiar parlance taught in schools. Authored around the twelfth century's close in Picardy, it flourishes in a blend of verse and prose, a format reminiscent of the "Chanson de Roland," where verses are unified by assonance rather than rhyme. The anonymous author, an elder likely bearing warmth and a touch of weariness, presents a tale rich in youthful ardor and seasoned contemplation, akin to the sagely yet sentimental narratives found in Thackeray's works.

In this archaic story, young Aucassin, son of Count Garin of Beaucaire, falls deeply in love with Nicolette, a mysterious captive maiden. Defying his father's wishes, he refuses knighthood and the battlefield unless he can be with her. Their love leads Nicolette to escape her confinement using her wit and bravery, demonstrating her deep affection and bold spirit. Aucassin, though a fighter in love's name, reveals his vulnerability and longing through his trials and the pursuit of his beloved in a painterly medieval landscape, rich with color and emotion.

The narrative is punctuated by adventures and moments of deep reflection, displaying love's power to transcend societal norms and the natural elements. We see the couple navigating through trials, their love deepening amidst adversity. Situated in a world where class distinctions are evident yet momentarily bridged by genuine human connection, their story juxtaposes moments of light-hearted banter with profound societal insights, such as the poignant encounter Aucassin has with a suffering peasant, pointing to the author's subtle critique of social inequalities.

Ultimately, "Aucassin et Nicolette" marvels at the folly and beauty of love, its ability to challenge and overcome obstacles. It celebrates the youthful defiance against constraints, all while the author, through a lens of experience and perhaps a glimmer

of nostalgia, crafts a narrative that transcends time—preserving the freshness of love, the beauty of rebellion, and the enduring human spirit. This literary work, with its captivating tale and embedded socio-cultural commentary, invites readers into a medieval fantasy that resonates with timeless themes of love, adventure, and the quest for understanding across the divides of age and status.

APPENDIX I

In the appendix titled "Reynolds's Peter Bell," found in "Letters on Literature," the author discusses John Hamilton Reynolds's parody of William Wordsworth's "Peter Bell." This lyrical ballad, mentioned by Keats and published by Taylor and Hessey in London in 1888, was aimed at producing a parody before Wordsworth’s original work had a chance to establish itself fully. The context of this act of parody is deeply rooted in Reynolds's dissatisfaction with Wordsworth, particularly with what was perceived as Wordsworth's overly serious demeanor and his lukewarm praise of Keats's work, disparagingly described as "a pretty piece of heathenism."

Reynolds's motivations for writing this parody were multifaceted. He was irked by Wordsworth's constant solemnity and what Thomas Hood had referred to as “The Betty Foybles" of Wordsworth's style. This discontent led Reynolds to craft a parody that, despite its personal nature of attack—a characteristic criticized by some contemporaries as “insolent”—was found to be quite humorous by the author. The charm of the parody, according to the text, lays in its clever wit and the playful manner in which it mocks Wordsworth’s work, drawing comparisons to the humorous yet critical tones of "the sneering brothers, the vile Smiths," known for their own parody "Rejected Addresses."

An excerpt of the parody illustrates the humor Reynolds injected into his work, particularly targeting the solitary character of Peter Bell and his lack of familial connections in a whimsically repetitive and rhyming fashion. This parody was not only a jest at Wordsworth’s expense but also a reflection of the literary rivalries and friendships within this circle of poets. Keats’s review of the parody is mentioned, highlighting his diplomatic stance yet evident support for Reynolds, even suggesting that a similar humorous critique might be applied to Lord Byron.

The author’s appreciation for Reynolds's parody in "Letters on Literature" underscores the rich intertextuality and personal dynamics among early 19th-century literary figures, revealing the complex relationships between parody, criticism, and camaraderie in the literary community of the time.

APPENDIX II

In the appendix titled "Portraits of Virgil and Lucretius," part of "Letters on Literature," the discussion revolves around the historical depictions of these eminent Roman poets, underscoring the almost mythical quest to visualize their likenesses. Regarding Virgil, we learn about the speculative nature of his portraits. The narrative tells us that there exists no concrete bust of the poet; instead, our only clues come from manuscripts (MSS.), with the most notable being housed in the Vatican. This manuscript, dated to the twelfth century, features an illustration of a youthful Virgil, identified by his dark hair and serene demeanor, engrossed in reading beside a desk, highlighting a link to a tradition where the essence of Virgil's appearance might have been preserved through centuries of replication in illustrations.

Contrastingly, the search for Lucretius' portrayal presents us with a more tangible yet equally controversial artifact: a sard engraved with a profile believed to be of the poet, thanks to the inscription "LVCR" accompanying the image. This gem, which once belonged to the Nott collection and now resides with the author, sparks debate among scholars regarding its authenticity. Esteemed experts like Mr. A. S. Murray and Mr. C. W. King have lent it some credibility, suggesting it could be a genuine portrayal of Lucretius. Others, however, contest this view, labeling it and similar inscribed Roman gems as dubious. Adding a personal touch to the academic discourse, the author speculates on Lucretius's character, imagining him as a serious, if not cold, figure—a stark contrast to the presumably unfounded jealousy of his wife.

Through these explorations, the chapter captures the intrigue and complexities surrounding the quest for historical accuracy in the portrayal of these literary giants. It paints a picture of an enduring fascination with the personal likenesses of figures whose works have transcended time, underscoring the blend of mystique and scholarship that often accompanies the study of the past.