

**PEN, PENCIL, AND POISON: A STUDY.**

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**E-Texts for Victorianists**

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## PEN, PENCIL, AND POISON: A STUDY.

It has constantly been made a subject of reproach against artists and men of letters that they are lacking in wholeness and completeness of nature. As a rule this must necessarily be so. That very concentration of vision and intensity of purpose which is the characteristic of the artistic temperament is in itself a mode of limitation. To those who are preoccupied with the beauty of form nothing else seems of much importance. Yet there are many exceptions to this rule. Rubens served as ambassador, and Goethe as state councillor, and Milton as Latin secretary to Cromwell. Sophocles held civic office in his own city; the humorists, essayists, and novelists of modern America seem to desire nothing better than to become the diplomatic representatives of their country; and Charles Lamb's friend, Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, the subject of this brief memoir, though of an extremely artistic temperament, followed many masters other than art, being not merely a poet and a painter, an art-critic, an antiquarian, and a writer of prose, an amateur of beautiful things, and a dilettante of things delightful, but also a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in this or any age

This remarkable man, so powerful with "pen, pencil, and poison," as a great poet of our own day has finely said of him, was born at Chiswick in 1794. His father was the son of a distinguished solicitor of Gray's Inn and Hatton Garden. His mother was the daughter of the celebrated Dr. Griffiths, the editor and founder of the *Monthly Review*, the partner in another literary speculation of Thomas Davies, that famous bookseller of whom Johnson said that he was not a bookseller, but "a gentleman who dealt in books," the friend of Goldsmith and Wedgwood, and one of the most well-known men of his day. Mrs. Wainwright died, in giving him birth, at the early age of twenty-one, and an obituary notice in the *Gentleman's Magazine* tells us of her "amiable disposition and numerous accomplishments," and adds somewhat quaintly that "she is supposed to have understood the writings of Mr. Locke as well as perhaps any person of either sex now living." His father did not long survive his young wife, and the little child seems to have been brought up by his grandfather, and, on the death of the latter in 1803, by his uncle George Edward Griffiths, whom he subsequently poisoned. His boyhood was passed at Linden House, Turnham Green, one of those many fine Georgian mansions that have unfortunately disappeared before the inroads of the suburban builder, and

to its lovely gardens and well-timbered park he owed that simple and impassioned love of nature which never left him all through his life, and which made him so peculiarly susceptible to the spiritual influences of Wordsworth's poetry. He went to school at Charles Burney's academy at Hammersmith. Mr. Burney was the son of the historian of music, and the near kinsman of the artistic lad who was destined to turn out his most remarkable pupil. He seems to have been a man of a good deal of culture, and in after years Mr. Wainewright often spoke of him with much affection as a philosopher, an archæologist, and an admirable teacher who, while he valued the intellectual side of education, did not forget the importance of early moral training. It was under Mr. Burney that he first developed his talent as an artist, and Mr. Hazlitt tells us that a drawing-book which he used at school is still extant, and displays great talent and natural feeling. Indeed, painting was the first art that fascinated him. It was not till much later that he sought to find expression by pen or poison.

Before this, however, he seems to have been carried away by what he thought was the romance and chivalry of a soldier's life, and to have become a young guardsman. But the reckless dissipated life of his companions failed to satisfy the refined artistic temperament of one who was made for other things. In a short time he wearied of the service. "Art," he tells us, in words that still move many by their ardent sincerity and strange fervour, "art touched her renegade; by her pure and high influences the noisome mists were purged; my feelings, parched, hot, and tarnished, were renovated with cool, fresh bloom, simple, beautiful to the simple-hearted." But art was not the only cause of the change. "The writings of Wordsworth," he goes on to say, "did much towards calming the confusing whirl necessarily incident to sudden mutations. I wept over them tears of happiness and gratitude." He accordingly left the army, with its rough barrack-life and coarse mess-room tittle-tattle, and returned to Linden House, full of this new-born enthusiasm for culture. A severe illness, in which, to use his own words, he was "broken like a vessel of clay," prostrated him for a time. His delicately strung organization, however indifferent it might have been to inflicting pain on others, was itself most keenly sensitive to pain. He shrank from suffering as a thing that mars and maims human life, and seems to have wandered through that terrible valley of melancholia from which so many great, perhaps greater, spirits have never emerged. But he was young—only twenty-five years of age—and he soon passed out of the "dead black waters," as he called them, into the larger air of humanistic culture. As he was recovering from the illness that had led him almost to the gates of death, he conceived the idea of taking up literature as an art. "I said with

John Woodvill, 'It were a life of gods to dwell in such an element,'  
to see, and hear, and *write* brave things:—

"These high and gusty relishes of life  
Have no allayings of mortality."

It is impossible not to feel that in this passage we have the utterance of a man who had a true passion for letters. "To see, and hear, and write brave things," this was his aim.

Scott, the editor of the *London Magazine*, struck with the young man's genius, or under the influence of the strange fascination that he exercised on every one who knew him, invited him to write a series of articles on artistic subjects, and under the fanciful pseudonyms of *Janus Weathercock* and *Egomet Bonmot* he began to contribute to the literature of his day. In an incredibly short time he seems to have made his mark. Charles Lamb speaks of "kind, light-hearted Wainwright," whose prose is "capital." We hear of him entertaining Macready, John Forster, Maginn, Talfourd, Sir Wentworth Dilke, the poet John Clare, and others, at a *petit-dîner*. Like Disraeli, he determined to startle the town as a dandy, and his beautiful rings, his antique cameo breast-pin, and his pale lemon-coloured kid gloves, were well known, and indeed were regarded by Hazlitt as being the signs of a new manner in literature: while his rich curly hair, fine eyes, and exquisite white hands gave him the dangerous and delightful distinction of being different from others. There was something in him of Balzac's Lucien de Rubempré. At times he reminds us of Julien Sorel.

It must be admitted that his literary work hardly justifies his reputation. But it is only the Philistine who seeks to estimate a personality by the vulgar test of production. This young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than to do something. He recognised that life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it. Nor is his work without interest. He seems to have anticipated many of those accidents of modern culture that are regarded by many as true essentials. He writes about La Gioconda, and early French poets, and the Italian Renaissance. He loves Greek gems, and Persian carpets, and Elizabethan translations of *Cupid and Psyche*, and the *Hypnerotomachia*, and book-bindings, and early editions, and wide-margined proofs. He is keenly sensitive to the value of beautiful surroundings, and never wearies of describing to us the rooms in which he lived, or would have liked to live. He had that curious love of green, which in individuals is always the sign of a subtle artistic temperament, and in nations is said to herald a laxity, if not a decadence of morals. Like Baudelaire he was extremely fond of cats, and like Gautier, he was fascinated by that "marble monster" of both sexes that we can still see at Florence and in the Louvre.

There is of course much in his descriptions, and his suggestions for decoration, that shows that he did not entirely free himself from the false taste of his time. But it is clear that he was one of the first to recognize what is, indeed, the very keynote and keystone of all modern decorative schemes, I mean the true harmony of all really beautiful things irrespective of age or place, of school or manner. He saw that in decorating a room, which is to be not a room for show but a room to live in, we should never aim at any archaeological reconstruction of the past, nor burden ourselves with any fanciful necessity for historical accuracy. In this he was perfectly right. All beautiful things belong to the same age.

And so in his own library, as he describes it, we find the delicate fictile vase of the Greek, with its exquisitely painted figures and the faint ΚΑΛΟΣ finely traced upon its side, and behind it hangs an engraving of the "Delphic Sibyl" of Michael Angelo, or of the "Pastoral" of Giorgione. Here is a bit of Florentine majolica, and here a rude lamp from some old Roman tomb. On the table lies a book of Hours, "cased in a cover of solid silver gilt, wrought with quaint devices and studded with small brilliants and rubies," and close by it "squats a little ugly monster, a Lar, perhaps, dug up in the sunny fields of corn-bearing Sicily." Some dark antique bronzes contrast "with the pale gleam of two noble *Christi Crucifixi*, one carved in ivory, the other moulded in wax." He has his trays of Tassie's gems, his tiny Louis-Quatorze *bonbonnière* with a miniature by Petitot, his highly prized "brown-biscuit teapots, filagree-worked," his citron morocco letter-case, and his "pomona-green" chair.

One can see him lying there in the midst of his casts and books and engravings, like a virtuoso or a subtle connoisseur, turning over his fine collection of Marc Antonios, and his Turner's "Liber Studiorum," of which he was a great admirer, or examining with a magnifier some of his antique gems and cameos, "the head of Alexander on an onyx of two strata," or "that superb *altissimo rilievo* on cornelian, Jupiter *Ægiochus*." He was always a great amateur of engravings, and gives some very useful suggestions as to the best means of forming a collection. Indeed, while fully appreciating modern art, he never lost sight of the importance of reproductions of the great masterpieces of the past, and all that he says about the value of plaster casts is quite admirable.

As an art-critic he concerned himself primarily with the complex impressions produced by a work of art, and certainly the first step in æsthetic criticism is to realize one's own impressions. He cared nothing for abstract discussions on the nature of the beautiful, and the historical method, which has since yielded such rich fruit, did not belong to his day, but he never lost sight of the great truth

that art's first appeal is neither to the intellect nor to the emotions, but purely to the artistic temperament, and he more than once points out that this temperament, this "taste," as he calls it, being unconsciously guided and made perfect by frequent contact with the best work, becomes in the end a form of right judgment. Of course there are fashions in art just as there are fashions in dress, and perhaps none of us can ever quite free ourselves from the influence of custom and the influence of novelty. He certainly could not, and he frankly acknowledges how difficult it is to form any fair estimate of contemporary work. But, on the whole, his taste was good and sound. He admired Turner and Constable at a time when they were not so much thought of as they are now, and saw that for the highest landscape art we require more than "mere industry and accurate transcription." Of Crome's "Heath Scene near Norwich" he remarks that it shows "how much a subtle observation of the elements, in their wild moods, does for a most uninteresting flat," and of the popular type of landscape of his day he says that it is "simply an enumeration of hill and dale, stumps of trees, shrubs, water, meadows, cottages, and houses; what is commonly called a *view*, little more than topography, a kind of pictorial map-work; in which rainbows, showers, mists, haloes, large beams shooting through rifted clouds, storms, starlight, all the most valued materials of the real painter, are not." He had a thorough dislike of what is obvious or commonplace in art, and cared as little for Wilkie's pictures as he did for Crabbe's poems. With the imitative and realistic tendencies of his day he had no sympathy, and he tells us frankly that his great admiration for Fuseli was largely due to the fact that Fuseli did not consider it necessary that an artist should only paint what he sees. The qualities that he sought for in a picture were composition, beauty and dignity of line, richness of colour, and imaginative power. Upon the other hand, he was not a doctrinaire. "I hold that no work of art can be tried otherwise than by laws deduced from itself: whether or not it be consistent with itself is the question." This is one of his excellent aphorisms. And in criticising painters so different as Landseer and Martin, Stothard and Etty, he shows that, to use a now classical phrase, he is trying "to see the object as it really is."

However, as I pointed out before, he never feels quite at his ease in his criticisms of contemporary work. "The present," he says, "is about as agreeable a confusion to me as Ariosto on the first perusal. . . . Modern things dazzle me. I must look at them through Time's telescope. Elia complains that to him the merit of a MS. poem is uncertain; '*print*,' as he excellently says, 'settles it.' Fifty years toning does the same thing to a picture." He is happier when he is writing about Watteau and Lancret, about Rubens and Gior-

gione, about Rembrandt, Correggio, and Michael Angelo; happiest of all when he is writing about Greek things. What is Gothic touched him very little, but classical art and the art of the Renaissance were always dear to him. He saw what our English art could gain from a study of Greek models, and never wearies of pointing out to the young student the artistic possibilities that lie dormant in Hellenic marbles and Hellenic methods of work. The highest praise that we can give to him is that he tried to revive style as a conscious tradition. But he saw that no amount of art-lectures or art congresses, or "plans for advancing the fine arts" will ever produce this result. The people, he says very wisely, must always have "the best models constantly before their eyes."

As regards his own method as an art critic he is often extremely technical, and talks learnedly of "a delicate Schiavone, various as a tulip-bed, with rich broken tints," of "a glowing portrait, remarkable for *morbidezza*, by the scarce Moroni," and of another picture being "pulpy in the carnations." Of Tintoret's "St. George delivering the Egyptian Princess from the Dragon" he remarks:—

"The robe Of Sabra, warmly glazed with Prussian blue, is relieved from the pale greenish background by a vermilion scarf; and the full hues of both are beautifully echoed, as it were, in a lower key by the purple-lake coloured stuffs and bluish iron armour of the saint, besides an ample balance to the vivid azure drapery on the foreground in the indigo shades of the wild wood surrounding the castle."

But, as a rule, he deals with his impressions of the work as an artistic whole, and tries to translate those impressions into words, to give, as it were, the literary equivalent for the visual and mental effect. He was one of the first to develop what Sir George Trevelyan once called the art-literature of the nineteenth century, that form of literature which has found in Mr. Ruskin and Mr. Browning its two most perfect exponents. His description of Lancret's *Repas Italien*, in which "a dark-haired girl, 'amorous of mischief,' lies on the daisy-powdered grass," is in some respects very charming. Here is his account of "The Crucifixion," by Rembrandt. It is extremely characteristic of his style:—

"Darkness—sooty, portentous darkness—shrouds the whole scene: only above the accursed wood, as if through a horrid rift in the murky ceiling, a rainy deluge—'sleety-flaw, discoloured water'—streams down amain, spreading a grisly spectral light, even more horrible than the palpable night. Already the Earth pants thick and fast! the darkened Cross trembles! the winds are dropt—the air is stagnant—a muttering rumble growls underneath their feet, and some of that miserable crowd begin to fly down the hill. The horses snuff the coming terror, and become unmanageable through fear. The moment rapidly approaches when, nearly torn asunder by his own weight, fainting with loss of blood, which now runs in narrower rivulets from his slit veins, his temples and breast drowned in sweat, and his black tongue

parched with the fiery death-fever, Jesus cried, 'I thirst.' The deadly vinegar is elevated to him.

"His head sinks, and the sacred corpse 'swings senseless of the cross.' A sheet of vermilion flame shoots sheer through the air and vanishes; the rocks of Carmel and Lebanon cleave asunder; the sea rolls on high from the sands its black weltering waves. Earth yawns, and the graves give up their dwellers. The dead and the living are mingled together in unnatural conjunction and hurry through the holy city. New prodigies await them there. The veil of the temple—the unpierceable veil—is rent asunder from top to bottom, and that dreaded recess containing the Hebrew mysteries—the fatal ark, with the tables and seven-branched candelabrum—is disclosed by the light of unearthly flames to the God-deserted multitude.

"Rembrandt never *painted* this sketch, and he was quite right. It would have lost nearly all its charms in losing that perplexing veil of indistinctness which affords such ample range wherein the doubting imagination may speculate. At present it is like a thing in another world. A dark gulf is betwixt us. It is not tangible by the body. We can only approach it in the spirit."

In this passage, written, the author tells us, "in awe and reverence," there is much that is terrible, horrible even, but it is not without a certain crude form of power. It is pleasanter, however, to pass to this description of Giulio Romano's "Cephalus and Procris":—

"We should read Moschus's lament for Bion, the sweet shepherd, before looking at this picture, or study the picture as a preparation for the lament. We have nearly the same images in both. For either victim the high groves and forest dells murmur; the flowers exhale sad perfume from their buds; the nightingale mourns on the craggy lands, and the swallow in the long-winding vales; 'the satyrs, too, and fauns dark-veiled groan,' and the fountain nymphs within the wood melt into tearful waters. The sheep and goats leave their pasture; and oreads, 'who love to scale the most inaccessible tops of all uprightest rocks,' hurry down from the song of their wind-courting pines; while the dryads bend from the branches of the meeting trees, and the rivers moan for white Procris, 'with many-sobbing streams,'

"Filling the far-seen ocean with a voice."

The golden bees are silent on thymy Hymettus; and the knelling horn of Aurora's love no more shall scatter away the cold twilight on the top of Hymettus. The foreground of our subject is a grassy sunburnt bank, broken into swells and hollows like waves (a sort of land-breakers), rendered more uneven by many foot-tripping roots and stumps of trees stocked untimely by the axe, which are again throwing out light green shoots. This bank rises rather suddenly on the right to a clustering grove, penetrable to no star, at the entrance of which sits the stunned Thessalian king, holding between his knees that ivory-bright body which was, but an instant ago, parting the rough boughs with her smooth forehead, and treading alike on thorns and flowers with jealousy-stung foot—now helpless, heavy, void of all motion, save when the breeze lifts her thick hair in mockery.

"From between the closely-neighboured boles astonished nymphs press forward with loud cries—

"And deerskin-vested satyrs, crowned with ivy twists, advance;  
And put strange pity in their horned countenance."

"Laelaps lies beneath, and shows by his panting the rapid pace of death. On the other side of the group, Virtuous Love with 'vans dejected' holds

forth the arrow to an approaching troop of sylvan people, fauns, rams, goats, satyrs, and satyr-mothers, pressing their children tighter with their fearful hands, who hurry along from the left in a sunken path between the foreground and a rocky wall, on whose lowest ridge a brook-guardian pours from her urn her grief-telling waters. Above, and more remote than the Ephidryad, another female, rending her locks, appears among the vine-festooned pillars of an unshorn grove. The centre of the picture is filled by shady meadows, sinking down to a river-mouth; beyond is 'the vast strength of the ocean stream,' from whose floor the extinguisher of stars, rosy Aurora, drives furiously up her brine-washed steeds to behold the death-pangs of her rival."

In everything connected with the stage he was always extremely interested, and upheld the necessity for archæological accuracy in costume and scene-painting. "In art," he says in one of his essays, "whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well;" and he points out that once we allow the intrusion of anachronisms, it becomes difficult to say where the line is to be drawn. In literature, like Lord Beaconsfield on a famous occasion, he was, "on the side of the angels." He was one of the first to admire Keats and Shelley—"the tremulously-sensitive and poetical Shelley," as he calls him. His admiration for Wordsworth was sincere and profound. He loved Alain Chartier, and Ronsard, and the Elizabethan dramatists, and Chaucer, and Chapman, and Petrarch. To him all the arts were one. "Our critics," he says in one of his essays, "seem hardly aware of the identity of the primal seeds of poetry and painting, nor that any true advancement in the serious study of one art cogenerates a proportionate perfection in the other;" and he says elsewhere that if a man who does not admire Michael Angelo talks of his love for Milton, he is deceiving either himself or his listeners. To his fellow-contributors on the *London Magazine* and his contemporaries he was always extremely generous, and praises Barry Cornwall, Allan Cunningham, Hazlitt, Elton, and Leigh Hunt without anything of the malice of a friend. Some of his sketches of Charles Lamb are admirable in their way, though not free from affectation:—

"What can I say of thee more than all know? that thou hadst the gaiety of a boy with the knowledge of a man: as gentle a heart as ever sent tears to the eyes.

"How wittily would he mistake your meaning, and put in a conceit most seasonably out of season. His talk without affectation was compressed, like his beloved Elizabethans, even unto obscurity. Like grains of fine gold, his sentences would beat out into whole sheets. He had small mercy on spurious fame, and a caustic observation on the *fashion for men of genius* was a standing dish. Sir Thomas Browne was a 'bosom cronie' of his; so was Burton, and old Fuller. In his amorous vein he dallied with that peerless Duchess of many-folio odour; and with the heyday comedies of Beaumont and Fletcher he induced light dreams. He would deliver critical touches on these, like one inspired, but it was good to let him choose his own game; if another began even on the acknowledged pets he was liable to interrupt, or rather append, in a mode difficult to define whether as misapprehensive or mischievous. One

night at C——'s, the above dramatic partners were the temporary subject of chat. Mr. X. commended the passion and haughty style of a tragedy (I don't know which of them), but was instantly taken up by Elia, who told him 'That was nothing; the lyrics were the high things—the lyrics!'"

One side of his literary career deserves especial notice. Modern journalism may be said to owe almost as much to him as to any man of the early part of this century. He was the pioneer of asiatic prose, and delighted in pictorial epithets, and pompous exaggerations. To have a style so gorgeous that it conceals the subject is one of the highest achievements of an important and much admired school of modern journalism, and Mr. Wainwright may be said to have invented this school. He also saw that it was quite easy by continued reiteration to make the public interested in his own personality, and in his purely journalistic articles this extraordinary young man tells the world what he had for dinner, where he gets his clothes, what wines he likes, and in what state of health he is, just as if he were writing weekly notes for some popular newspaper of our own day. This is the least charming side of his work, and it is the one that has had the most obvious influence.

Like most artificial people he had a great love of nature. "I hold three things in high estimation," he says somewhere: "to sit lazily on an eminence that commands a rich prospect; to be shadowed by thick trees while the sun shines around me; and to enjoy solitude with the consciousness of neighbourhood. The country gives them all to me." He writes about his wandering over fragrant furze and heath repeating Collin's "Ode to Evening," just to catch the quality of the moment; about smothering his face "in a watery bed of cowslips, wet with May dews;" and about the pleasure of seeing the sweet-breathed kine "pass slowly homeward through the twilight," and hearing "the distant clank of the sheep-bell." One phrase of his, "the polyanthus glowed in its cold bed of earth, like a solitary picture of Giorgione on a dark oaken panel," is curiously characteristic of the man, and this passage is rather pretty in its way—

"The short tender grass was covered with marguerites—'such that men called *daisies* in our town'—thick as stars on a summer's night. The harsh caw of the busy rooks came pleasantly mellowed from a high dusky grove of elms at some distance off, and at intervals was heard the voice of a boy scaring away the birds from the newly-sown seeds. The blue depths were the colour of the darkest ultramarine; not a cloud streaked the calm æther; only round the horizon's edge streamed a light, warm, film of misty vapour, against which the near village with its ancient stone church showed sharply out with blinding whiteness. I thought of Wordsworth's 'Lines written in March.'"

However, we must not forget that the cultivated young man who penned these lines, and who was so susceptible to Wordsworthian influences, was also, as I said at the beginning of this article, one of the most subtle and secret poisoners of this or any age. How he

first became fascinated by this strange sin he does not tell us, and the diary in which he carefully noted the results of his terrible experiments and the methods that he adopted, has unfortunately been lost to us. There is no doubt, however, that the poison that he used was strychnine. In one of the beautiful rings of which he was so proud, and which served to show off the fine modelling of his delicate ivory hands, he used to carry crystals of the Indian *nux vomica*, a poison, one of his biographers tells us, "nearly tasteless, difficult of discovery, and capable of almost infinite dilution." His first victim was his uncle, Mr. Thomas Griffiths. He murdered him in 1829 to gain possession of Linden House, a place to which he had always been very much attached. In the August of the next year he poisoned Mrs. Abercrombie, his wife's mother, and in the following December he poisoned the lovely Helen Abercrombie, his sister-in-law. Why he murdered Mrs. Abercrombie is not known, but the murder of Helen Abercrombie was carried out by himself and his wife for the sake of a sum of about £18,000 for which they had insured her life in various offices. The circumstances of the murder were as follows. On the 12th of December he and his wife and child came up to London from Linden House, and took lodgings at No. 12, Conduit Street, Regent Street. With them were the two sisters, Helen and Madeleine Abercrombie. On the evening of the 14th they all went to the play, and at supper that night Mr. Wainwright began to poison Helen. The next day she was extremely ill, and Dr. Locock, of Hanover Square, was called in to attend her. She remained ill till Monday the 20th, when, after the doctor's morning visit, Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright brought her some poisoned jelly, and then went out for a walk. When they returned Helen Abercrombie was dead. She was about twenty years of age, a tall graceful girl with fair hair. A very charming red-chalk drawing of her by Mr. Wainwright is still in existence, and shows how much his style as an artist was influenced by Sir Thomas Lawrence, for whom he had always entertained a great admiration.

The insurance companies, suspecting the murder, refused to pay the policy on the technical ground of misrepresentation and want of interest, and Mr. Wainwright entered an action in the Court of Chancery against the Imperial, it being agreed that one decision should decide all the cases. The trial, however, did not come on for five years, when after one disagreement, a verdict was ultimately given in favour of the companies. The judge on the occasion was Lord Abinger. Mr. Wainwright was represented by Mr. Erle and Sir William Follet, and the Attorney-General and Sir Frederick Pollock appeared for the companies. The plaintiff was not present, however, at either of the trials. The refusal of the com-

panies to pay the £18,000 had placed him in a position of great pecuniary embarrassment. Indeed, a few months after the murder of Helen Abercrombie, he had been arrested for debt while he was serenading some friends of his who lived in Caroline Place, Mecklenburgh Square. This difficulty was got over at the time, but shortly afterwards he thought it better to go abroad till he could come to some arrangement with his creditors. He accordingly went to Boulogne on a visit to a Norfolk gentleman who was a great friend of his, and who had an extremely pretty daughter. Indeed it was the daughter whom he had been serenading at the time of his arrest. While he was there, wishing to revenge himself on the insurance companies, he induced his friend to insure his life with the Pelican office for £3,000. As soon as the necessary formalities had been gone through and the policy executed, he poisoned him by dropping some crystals of strychnine into his coffee as they sat together one evening after dinner. He himself did not gain any monetary advantage by doing this, but he revenged himself on one of the offices. His friend died the next day in his presence, and he left Boulogne at once for a sketching tour in Brittany, and was for some time the guest of an old French gentleman, who had a beautiful country house at St. Omer. From this he moved to Paris, where he remained for several years. In 1837 he returned to England privately. Some strange mad fascination brought him back. He followed a woman whom he loved.

It was the month of June, and he was staying at one of the hotels in Covent Garden. His sitting-room was on the ground floor, and he prudently kept the blinds down for fear of being seen. Thirteen years before, when he was making his fine collection of majolica and Marc Antonios, he had forged the names of his trustees to a power of attorney, which enabled him to get possession of some of the money which he had inherited from his mother, and which he had brought into marriage settlement. He knew that this forgery had been discovered, and that by returning to England he was imperiling his life. Yet he returned.

He was discovered by an accident. A noise in the street attracted his attention, and he pushed aside the blind for a moment. Some one outside called out "That's Wainwright, the Bank-forgery." It was Forrester, the Bow Street runner.

On the 5th of July he was brought up at the Old Bailey. The following report of the proceedings appeared in the *Times*:—

"Before Mr. Justice Vaughan and Mr. Baron Alderson, Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, aged forty-two, a man of gentlemanly appearance, wearing mustachios, was indicted for forging and uttering a certain power of attorney for £2,259, with intent to defraud the Governor and Company of the Bank of England.

"There were five indictments against the prisoner, to all of which he pleaded not guilty, when he was arraigned before Mr. Serjeant Arabin in the course of

the morning. On being brought before the judges, however, he begged to be allowed to withdraw the former plea, and then pleaded guilty to two of the indictments, which were not of a capital nature.

"The counsel for the Bank having explained that there were three other indictments, but that the Bank did not desire to shed blood, the plea of guilty on the two minor charges was recorded, and the prisoner at the close of the session sentenced by the Recorder to transportation for life."

He was taken back to Newgate, preparatory to his removal to the colonies. In one of his early essays he had fancied himself "lying in Horsemonger Gaol under sentence of death" for having been unable to resist the temptation of stealing some Marc Antonios from the British Museum to complete his collection. The sentence now passed on him was to a man of his culture a form of death. He complained bitterly of it to his friends, and pointed out, with a good deal of reason, that the money was his own, having come to him from his mother, and that the forgery, such as it was, had been committed thirteen years before, which, to use his own phrase, was at least a *circonstance attenuante*. The permanence of personality is a very subtle metaphysical problem, and certainly the English law solves the question in an extremely rough-and-ready manner. There is, however, something dramatic in the fact that this heavy punishment was inflicted on him for the least of all his sins.

While he was in Newgate, Dickens, Macready, and Hablot Browne came across him by chance. They had been going over the prisons of London, and in Newgate they suddenly caught sight of him. He met them with a defiant stare, Forster tells us, but Macready was "horrified to recognize a man familiarly known to him in former years, and at whose table he had dined."

His cell was for some time a kind of fashionable lounge. Many men of letters went down to visit their old literary comrade. But he was no longer the kind light-hearted Janus whom Charles Lamb admired. He seems to have grown extremely cynical.

To the agent of an insurance company who was visiting him one afternoon, and who thought he would improve the occasion by pointing out that, after all, crime was a bad speculation, he replied: "Sir, you City men enter on your speculations and take the chances of them. Some of your speculations succeed, some fail. Mine happen to have failed, yours happen to have succeeded, that is the only difference, sir, between my visitor and me. But, sir, I will tell you one thing in which I have succeeded to the last. I have been determined through life to hold the position of a gentleman. I have always done so. I do so still. It is the custom of this place that each of the inmates of a cell shall take his morning's turn of sweeping it out. I occupy a cell with a bricklayer and a sweep, but they never offer me the broom!" When a friend reproached him with the murder of Helen Abercrombie he shrugged his shoulders

and said, "Yes; it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very ugly ankles."

From Newgate he was brought to the hulks at Portsmouth, and sent from there in the *Susan* to Van Diemen's Land with three hundred other convicts. He described the ship in a letter to a friend as "a moral sepulchre," and spoke bitterly about the ignominy of "the companion of poets and artists being put in irons," and being compelled to associate with "country bumpkins."

His love of art never deserted him. At Hobart Town he started a studio, and returned to sketching and portrait-painting, and his conversation and manners seem not to have lost their charm. Nor did he give up his habit of poisoning, and there are two cases on record in which he tried to make away with people who had offended him. However his hand seems to have lost its cunning. In 1844 he presented a memorial to the governor of the settlement, Sir John Eardley Wilmot, praying for a ticket-of-leave. In it he speaks of himself as being "tormented by ideas struggling for outward form and realization, barred up from increase of knowledge, and deprived of the exercise of profitable or even of decorous speech." His request, however, was refused, and he consoled himself with opium-eating. In 1852 he died of apoplexy, his sole living companion being a cat, for which he evinced an extraordinary affection.

His crimes seem to have had a curious effect upon his art. They gave a strong personality to his style, a quality that his early work certainly lacked. In a note to the *Life of Dickens*, Forster mentions that in 1847 Lady Blessington received from her brother, Major Povor, who held a military appointment at Hobart Town, an oil portrait of a young lady from his clever brush; and it is said that "he had contrived to put the expression of his own wickedness into the portrait of a nice, kind-hearted girl." M. Zola, in one of his novels, tells us of a young man who, having committed a murder, takes to art, and paints greenish portraits of perfectly respectable people, all of which bear a curious resemblance to his victim. The development of Mr. Wainwright's style seems to me far more subtle and suggestive. I can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin.

This strange and fascinating figure that for a few years dazzled literary London, and made so brilliant a *début* in life and letters, seems to me to be a most interesting psychological study. Mr. W. Carew Hazlitt, his latest biographer, to whom I am indebted for many of the facts contained in this article, and whose little book is, indeed, quite invaluable in its way, is of opinion that his love of art and nature was a mere pretence and assumption, and others have denied to him all literary power. This seems to me a shallow, or at least a mistaken, view. The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing

against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art, though they may serve as an excellent advertisement for art. It is possible that I may have exaggerated his critical powers, and I cannot help saying again that there is much in his published works that is too familiar, too common, too journalistic, in the bad sense of that bad word. Here and there he is very vulgar in expression, and he is always lacking in the self-restraint of the true artist. But for some of his faults we must blame the time in which he lived, and, after all, prose that Charles Lamb thought "capital" has no small historic interest. That he had a sincere love of art and nature seems to me quite certain. There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be.

Of course, he is far too close to our own time for us to be able to form any purely artistic judgment about him. It is impossible not to feel a strong prejudice against a man who might have poisoned one's own grandmother, or, if not impossible, certainly difficult. But had the man worn a costume and spoken a language different from our own, had he lived in imperial Rome, or at the time of the Italian Renaissance, or in Spain in the seventeenth century, or in any land or any century but this century and this land, we would be quite able to arrive at a perfectly unprejudiced estimate of him. I know that there are many historians, or at least writers on historical subjects, who still think it necessary to apply moral judgments to history, and who distribute their praise or blame with the reckless impartiality of a successful schoolmaster. This, however, is a foolish habit, and merely shows that the moral instinct can be brought to such a pitch of perfection that it will make its appearance wherever it is not required. Nobody with any true historical sense ever dreams of blaming Nero, or scolding Tiberius, or censuring Cæsar Borgia. These personages have become like the puppets of a play. They may fill us with terror, or horror, or wonder, but they do not harm us. They are not in immediate relations with us. We have nothing to fear from them. They have passed into the sphere of art and of science, and neither art nor science knows anything of moral approval or disapproval. And so it may be some day with Charles Lamb's friend. At present he is just a little too modern to be treated in that fine spirit of disinterested curiosity to which we owe so many charming studies of the great criminals of the Italian Renaissance. However, art has not forgotten him. He is the hero of Dickens's *Hunted Down*, the Varney of Bulwer's *Lucretia*; and it is gratifying to note that fiction has paid some homage to one who was so powerful with "pen, pencil, and poison."

OSCAR WILDE.