

THE CHOICE.*

——Nec vos, dulcissima mundi
Nomina, vos, Musæ, libertas, otia, libri,
Hortique, silvæque, animâ remanente, relinquam

Nor by me e'er shall you,
You, of all names the sweetest and the best,
You, Muses, books, and liberty, and rest,
You, gardens, fields, and woods, forsaken be,
As long as life itself forsakes not me.

COWLEY.¹

I HAVE been reading Pomfret's *Choice*² this spring,
A pretty kind of-sort-of-kind of thing,
Not much a verse, and poem none at all,
Yet, as they say, extremely natural.
And yet I know not. There's a skill in pies,
In raising crusts as well as galleries;
And he's the poet, more or less, who knows
The charm that hallows the least thing from prose,
And dresses it in its mild singing clothes.
Poetry's that which sets a thought apart,
To worship Nature with a choral heart:
And may be seen where rarely she intrudes,
As birds in cages make us think of woods.

* It is hardly necessary to say, that the mode of life which the author desires for himself in this dreaming speculation, is only such as he could contemplate for his own actual life, and in the present condition of things. If he were speculating for the rest of the world, and upon the possible condition of things, it would be much further modified; and certain personages who make their appearance in it would not be heard of.

Beaux have it in them, when they love the faces
 Of country damsels, and their worsted graces.
 E'en satire, if of laurelled race, retains
 A taste of sweetness in its finer veins;
 Or like its friend, the common stocks, may be
 Touched with a shadow of the living tree.
 The greatest poets please the greatest wits,
 But every reader loves the least by fits:
 The former lord it in their vast editions;
 But 'tothers' cards still gain them recognitions:
 The ladies rise in heaps and give them sweet admissions.

But to the *Choice*. It pleased me as I read,
 Walked with me forth, and went with me to bed.
 And as, when somebody at dinner glows
 In praise of what he likes, soups, harricoes,
 Grouse or a carp, the rest as surely join
 In praise of that on which they like to dine,—
 So Pomfret's likings make me think of mine.
I'll write a *Choice*, said I: and it shall be
 Something 'twixt labour and *extempore*;
 Not long, yet not too quick on the conclusion,
 And for its ease I'll call it an effusion.
 All that I vouch for is to shun the crime,
 (Death, by all laws) of writing for the rhyme.
 I shall not please all tastes, as Pomfret did,
 Even though he said he'd "live a man forbid."*³

*Videlicet, that he would "have no wife:" which not only threatened to lose him his living, but actually cost him his life: for the obstructions raised by his enemies in the mind of Dr. Compton⁴ the bishop, constrained his presence in London, where he caught the small pox and died in 1703, in the thirty-sixth year of his age."⁵—See his life by Johnson.⁶—It is curious, that what would have been hailed as a saintly recommendation in a clergyman at one period of the Church, should become so profane a drawback in another.

Men, in these times, have notions of their own,
And something called a zeal, which makes them known;
Else I would print my fancy by itself,
And be "a love" on every lady's shelf:
Perhaps I shall be so, some day or other;
But I'd at once please every prudent mother;
Not locked in cupboards, like "a losel vilde,"⁷
With sups and sweetmeats that would "hurt the child;"⁸
But bound in lilac, register'd with rose,
I'd smile on tables in the parson's nose;
My lady's woman should approve my lays,
And all the Tomkinses⁹ and Critics' praise.

Come then, ye scenes of quiet and content,
Ye goals of life, on which our hearts are spent,—
Meet my worn eyes. I love you, e'en in vales
Of cups and saucers, and such Delfic¹⁰ dales,
Much more in pen and ink, as bard beseems;
Come—take me to your arms in bowery dreams.

First, on a green I'd have a low, broad house,
Just seen by travellers through the garden boughs;
And that my luck might not seem ill bestowed,
A bench and spring should greet them on the road.
My grounds should not be large; I like to go
To Nature for a range, and prospect too,
And cannot fancy she'll comprise for me,
Even in a park, her all-sufficiency.
Besides, my thoughts fly far; and when at rest,
Love, not a watch-tower, but a lulling nest.
But all the ground I had should keep a look
Of Nature still, have birds'-nests and a brook;
One spot for flowers, the rest all turf and trees;

For I'd not grow my own bad lettuces.
And above all, no house should be so near,
That strangers should discern me here and there;
Much less when some fair friend was at my side,
And swear I thought her charming,—which I did.
I am not sure I'd have a rookery;
But sure I am I'd not live near the sea,
To view its great flat face, and have my sleeps
Filled full of shrieking dreams and foundering ships;
Or hear the drunkard, when his slaughter's o'er,
Like Sinbad's¹¹ monster scratching on the shore.
I'd live far inland, in a world of glades,
Yet not so desart¹² as to fright the maids:
A batch of cottages should smoke beside;
And there should be a town within a morning's ride.

My house of brick should not be great or mean,
Much less built formally, outside or in.
I hate the trouble of a mighty house,
That worst of mountains labouring with a mouse;
And should dislike as much to fill a niche in
A Grecian temple opening to a kitchen.
The frogs in Homer¹³ should have had such boxes,
Or Æsop's frog¹⁴, whose heart was like the ox's.
Such puff about high-roads, so grand, so small,
With wings and what not, portico and all,
And poor drenched pillars, which it seems a sin
Not to mat up at night-time, or take in.
I'd live in none of these. Nor would I have
Veranda'd windows to forestall my grave;
Veranda'd truly, from the northern heat!
And cut down to the floor to comfort one's cold feet!
I like a thing to please the traveller's eye,

But more a house to live in, not to die.
 Older than new I'd have it; dressed with blooms
 Of honied green, and quaint with straggling rooms,
 A few of which, white-bedded and well swept,
 Should bear the name of friends for whom they're kept.
 And yet to show I had a taste withal,
 I'd have some casts of statues in the hall,
 Or rather entrance, whose sweet steady eyes
 Should touch the comers with a mild surprise,
 And so conduct them, hushing to my door,
 Where, if a friend, the house should hear a roar.
 The grateful beggar should peep in at these,
 And wonder what I did with Popish images.

My study should not be, as Pomfret's was,
 Down in the garden; 'tis an awkward place
 In winter; and in summer I prefer
 To write my verses in the open air,
 Stretched on the grass, under the yellow trees,
 With a few books about me, and the bees.
 My study should conclude the upper floor,
 The stillest corner, with a double door:
 The window (one) should just peep down between
 The break of tree-tops on a sylvan scene;
 And on the table, bending a bland eye,
 I'd have, I think, a bust of Mercury.¹⁵
 The walls should be all books. No—here and there
 I'd set a favourite head within a square,—
 A square within the books, and so enclosed
 With such as it loved dearest, or composed.
 My dearest friend should show me his kind face,
 Among the best, over the fire-place;
 So that when winter came, and I could please

My sight no longer with the nestling trees,
 I should turn wholly round, and warm my heart
 And feet alike with facing that best part;
 Still feeling round about me all my books,
 Those for love's arms, the fire-side for its looks.
 You'll say, perhaps, there'd be a want of grace
 In putting pictures in this kind of case:
 There might in many rooms, but not in this;
 For grace is greatest where affection is,
 And merges, like a wife, her name in sympathy's.

Here would I write and read, till it was time
 To ride or walk, or on the grass go rhyme;
 For every day I'd be my friend enough
 To spin my blood and whirl its humours off,
 And take my draught of generous exercise,
 The youth of age, and medicine of the wise.
 And this reminds me, that behind some screen
 About my grounds, I'd have a bowling-green;
 Such as in wits' and merry women's days
 Suckling preferred before his walk of bays.
 You may still see them, dead as haunts of fairies,
 By the old seats of Killigrew and Carews,¹⁶
 Where all, alas, is vanished from the ring,
 Wits and black eyes, the skittles and the king!*

*Bowls are now thought vulgar: that is to say, a certain number of fine vulgar people agree to call them so. The fashion was once otherwise. Suckling¹⁷ prefers

A pair of black eyes, or a lucky hit
 At bowls, above all the trophies of wit.¹⁸

Piccadilly, in Clarendon's¹⁹ time, "was a fair house of entertainment and gaming, with handsome gravel walks for shade, and where were an upper and a lower bowling green, whither very many of the nobility and gentry of

I'd never hunt, except the fox, and then
 Not much, for fear I should fall hunting men,
 And take each rogue I met for a stray soul,
 That hadn't rights, and might not eat his fowl;
 A thing, that by degrees might bring me round
 To trespass on the squire's and lawyer's ground.
 Fishing I hate, because I think about it,
 Which makes it right that I should do without it.
 A dinner, or a death might not be much;
 But cruelty's a rod I dare not touch.
 I own I cannot see my right to feel
 For my own jaws, and tear a carp's with steel;
 To troll him here and there, and spike, and strain,
 And let him loose to jerk him back again.
 Suppose a parson at this sort of work,
 Not with his carp or salmon, but his clerk:
 The clerk he snatches at a tempting bit,
 And hah! an ear-ache with a knife in it!
 That there is pain and evil is no rule
 Why I should make it greater, like a fool;
 Or rid me of my rest so vile a way,
 As long as there's a single manly play.
 The next conclusion to be drawn, might be,
 That higher beings made a carp of me;
 Which I would rather should not be the case;

the best quality resorted, both for exercise and conversation."—*Hist. of the Rebellion, Vol. 2.*²⁰—It seems to have been to the members of Parliament what Brooks's²¹ is now, and was a much better place for them to refresh their faculties in. The robust intellects of the Commonwealth²² grew there, and the airy wits that succeeded them. The modern gambling-houses are fit to produce nothing better than their name bespeaks. There grow our sottish financiers and timid intriguers. It is the same with the difference of the hours they keep.

VOL. II.

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Though "Izaak"²³ were the saint to tear my face,
 And stooping from his heaven with rod and line,
 Made the damn'd sport, with his old dreams divine,
 As pleasant to his taste as rough to mine.
 Such sophistry, no doubt, saves half the hell,
 And fish would have preferred his reasoning well;
 And if my gills concerned him, so should I.
 The dog, I grant, is in that "equal sky:"
 But, Heaven be praised, he's not my deity!

All manly games I'd play at: golf, and quoits,
 And cricket, to set all my limbs to rights,
 And make me conscious, with a due respect,
 Of muscles one forgets by long neglect.
 But as for prize-fights, with their butchering shows,
 And crowds of blacklegs, I'd have none of those;—
 I am not bold in other people's blows.
 Besides, I should reside so far from town,
 Those human waves could never bear me down—
 Which would endear my solitude, I own.
 But if a neighbour, fond of his antiques,
 Tried to renew a bout or two at sticks,
 I'd do my best to force a handsome laugh
 Under a ruddy crack from quarter staff
 Nor think I had a right to walk my wooos,²⁴
 Coy of a science that was Robin Hood's.²⁵
 'Tis healthy, and a man's; and would assist
 To make me wield a falchion in my fist,
 Should foes arise who'd rather not be taught,
 And war against the course of truth-exploring thought.

Thus would I study when alone, and thus
 With friends and villagers a game discuss;

And gather all the health and peace I could,
Man's honey from the wilds and flowery wood.
For in this picture, with its happy frame,
I would not be the shaken thing I am.
I'd write, because I could not help it; read
Much more, but nothing to oppress my head;
For heads are very different things at ease,
And forced to bear huge loads for families.
Still I would think of others; use my pen,
As fits a man and lettered citizen,
And so discharge my duty to the state;
But as to fame and glory, fame might wait
Nevertheless, I'd write a work in verse,
Full of fine dreams and natural characters;
Eastern perhaps, and gathered from a shore
Whence never poet took his world before.
To this sweet sphere I would retire at will,
To sow it with delight, and shape with skill;
And should it please me, and be roundly done,
I'd launch it into light, to sparkle round the sun.

I'd have two friends live near me, perhaps three:
Time was, when in one happy house——But he
Has gone to his great home, over the dreadful sea.
Oh Nature, we both loved thee! Pardon one
To whom thine ocean, even in the sun,
Has grown a monstrous and a morbid sight:—
See how I try to love thee still, and dream of thy delight.

Come—let me go on with my builded bower:
I should be nearer him, by many a weary hour.

In pleasure and in pain, alike I find
My face turn tenderly to womankind:

But then they must be truly women,—not
Shes by the courtesy of a petticoat,
And left without enquiry to their claims,
Like haunted houses with their devil's dams.
I'd mend the worst of women, if I could,
But for a constancy, give me the good;—
I do not mean the formal or severe,
Much less the sly, who's all for character;
But such as, in all nations and all times,
Would be good creatures, fit for loving rhymes;
Kind, candid, simple, yet of sterling sense,
And of a golden age for innocence.
Of these my neighbours should have choice relations;
And I (though under certain alterations)
I too would bring—(though I dislike the name;
The Reverend Mr. Pomfret did the same;
Let its wild flavour pass a line so tame;)—
A wife,—or whatsoever better word
The times, grown wiser, might by law afford
To the chief friend and partner of my board.
The dear, good she, by every habit then,—
Ties e'en when pleasant, very strong with men;
Though your wise heads first make one's systems wrong,
And then insist that only their's last long,—
Would finish, and make round in every part,
The natural harmony of her own wise heart;
And by the loss of something of her right
Of being jealous, consummate delight.
Gods! how I'd love her morning, noon, and night!
I'd only know the women she approved,
But then she'd love all those who should be loved:
So that our fair friends, better still than good,
Should crown, like doves, our gentle neighbourhood;

And bring us back the peace the world has lost,
All fav'rites and beloved, though one the most.
Should doubts arise, and want of explanations,
We'd settle all by little gifts and patience;
But there could not be much 'twixt real friends,
Taught to consult each other's common ends:
And as for passions of a graver sort,
Kisses and shakes of hand should cut them short.
Should any one incur the common grief,
By moods that asked and yet repelled relief,
Long tears and the remorseless handkerchief,
One pain well borne for friendship's and love's sake
Should gather to our arms the wanderer back:—
It should be our fixed law, no loving heart should ache.

I'd have my mornings to myself. Ev'n ladies
Should not prevent me this, except on May-days:
Unless we fairly struck our tents awhile,
To stroll, like gypsies, round about the isle;
A plan I might be bent on, I confess,
Provided colds would give us leave, and dress,
And twenty other inconveniences.
I'd give up even my house to live like them,
And have a health in every look and limb,
To which our best perceptions must be dim.
A gypsy's body, and a poet's mind,
Clear blood, quick foot, free spirit, and thought refined,
Perpetual airs to breathe, and loves to bind,—
Such were the last perfection of mankind.

I'd have my mornings to myself then; calm,
Clear, useful, busy, like distilling balm.
The spirit of the genial text I own;

But yet 'tis sometimes "for man to be alone."²⁶
 It makes him feel his own free powers; put forth
 All the glad fruitage that his heart is worth;
 And should his fellows fall to their green tombs,
 Enables him to take the storm that comes,
 And sternly rouse his locks, and stand the driving glooms.
 Alas! too late have I learnt this.—Be strong,
 Be strong, my boughs, and still allure a tranquillizing song!

These mornings, with their work, should earn for me
 My afternoon's content and liberty.
 I'd have an early dinner, and a plain,
 Not tempting much to "cut and come again;"²⁷
 A little wine, or not, as health allowed,
 But for my friends, a stock to make me proud;
 Bottles of something delicate and rare,
 Which I should draw, and hold up with an air,
 And set them on the table, and say, "There!"
 My friend the doctor (not the apothecary,
 For they and doctors eminently vary;
 Doctors, I mean, such as the Muses²⁸ love,
 And with the liberal more than hand and glove,*)
 Should draw on these for med'cines for the poor,
 And our delicious fee should be the cure.
 Perhaps I'd make him give me a degree
 Myself, and practise out of jealousy.
 Oh Garth!²⁹ Oh Goldsmith!³⁰ Oh ye sons of theirs,
 In wit, or in wise heart, your real heirs,
 And you the most, ever yourself, and true

*I am told by a surgeon's kinswoman, that I ought to include surgeons; which I do with a great deal of pleasure. I mean, in short, all medical men, who are not ignorant and rapacious; not excepting the mere apothecary, if he happens to be one of them.

To your old patients and new duties too,
Whom my soul thanks, and, if it might, would bless,
To all the world with trembling tenderness,—
How meanly do I rate your brethren's arts,
How highly your's, and how like gems your hearts!
Gems deeply cut with Phœbus and the Nine:³¹
May never sorrow shatter them like mine!

See—I'm at least a promising beginner,
And, out of pure good will, have left my dinner.

My dining-room should have some shelves of books,
If only for their grace and social looks—
Horace³² and Plutarch,³³ Plato,³⁴ and some more,
Who knew how to refine the tables' roar,
And sprinkled sweet philosophy between,
As meats are reconciled with slips of green.
I read infallibly, if left alone;
But after meat, an author may step down
To settle a dispute, or talk himself:—
I seem to twitch him now with finger from his shelf.

I would not sit in the same room to dine
And pass the evening; much less booze till nine,
And then, with a white waistcoat and red face,
Rise, with some stupid, mumbling, common place,
And "join the ladies," bowing, for some tea,
With nauseous looks, half lust, half irony.
I'd have two rooms, in one of which, as weather
Of fancy chose, we all might come together,
With liberty for each one nevertheless
To wander in and out, and taste the lawns and trees.
One of the rooms should face a spot of spots,

Such as would please a squirrel with his nuts;
I mean a slope, looking upon a slope,
Wood-crowned, and delled with turf, a sylvan cup.
Here, when our moods were quietest, we'd praise
The scenic shades, and watch the doves and jays,
And so receive the twilight with low talk,
And moon, slow issuing to her maiden walk.
The other sitting-room, a story higher,
Should look out towards the road and village spire;
And here we'd have our music and our mirth,
And seem as if we laughed with the whole rolling earth.

Next there, and looking out on either side,
I'd have "a little chapel edified,"³⁵
Informed with heads of those who, heavenly wise,
Through patient thought or many sympathies,
Lived betwixt heaven and earth, and bore for us
Dire thirsty deaths, or drank the deadly juice.
Greek beauty should be there, and Gothic shade;
And brave as anger, gentle as a maid,
The name on whose dear heart my hope's worn cheek was laid.
Here, with a more immediate consciousness,
Would we feel all that blesses us, and bless;
And lean on one another's heart, and make
Sweet resolutions, ever, for love's sake;
And recognise the eternal Good and Fair,
Atoms of whose vast active spirit we are;
And try by what great yearnings we could force
The globe on which we live to take a more harmonious course.

And when I died, 'twould please me to be laid
In my own ground's most solitary shade;
Not for the gloom, much less to be alone,

But solely as a room that still might seem my own.
There should my friends come still, as to a place
That held me yet, and bring me a kind face:
There should they bring me still their griefs and joys,
And hear in the swell'd breeze a little answering noise.
Had I renown enough, I'd choose to lie,
As Hafiz³⁶ did, bright in the public eye,
With marble grace enclosed, and a green shade,
And young and old should read me, and be glad.
This for mankind, and one who loves them all:
But should my own pure pleasure guide the pall,
Then to the bed of my affections, where
My best friends lay, should its calm steps repair;
And two such vistas to my travail's end
Before me now with gathering looks attend:
One, in a gentle village, my old home;
The other, by the softened walls of Rome.

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EDITORIAL NOTES

¹ Abraham Cowley (1618-67), English poet and essayist. The passage selected by Hunt is part of Cowley's essay "Of Myself" first published in his collection *Essays* in 1668.

² John Pomfret (1667-1702), English clergyman and poet. In "The Choice", here revisited by Hunt, Pomfret sings the praises of country life, celebrating simplicity, moderation, and personal fulfilment.

³ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* I.iii.22.

⁴ Henry Compton (1632-1713), Anglican clergyman and Bishop of London (1675-1713). At that time, Pomfret travelled to London to gain Compton's favour.

⁵ Misprint. The quotation starts from the words *in London*.

⁶ Samuel Johnson (1709-84), English man of letters, among whose most important accomplishments are *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81), a collection of short biographies and critical profiles of fifty-two poets. John Pomfret appears among the writers included by Johnson in his *Lives of the Poets*.

⁷ Untraced quotation.

⁸ Untraced quotation.

⁹ Surnames like Tomkins are typically used by Hunt to indicate stereotypical Cockneys, the inhabitants from East London.

¹⁰ Pertaining to the Greek oracle at Delphi.

¹¹ Sinbad the Sailor, fictional mariner in the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Hunt is probably alluding to Sinbad's third voyage, in which the mariner and his crew are cast on an island inhabited by a ravenous monster.

¹² Archaic form of the noun *desert*.

¹³ Reference to the *Batrachomyomachia*, also known as *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, a comic epic parodying the *Iliad* attributed to Homer by the Romans.

¹⁴ Aesop, Greek fabulist and storyteller, whose works are known collectively as *Aesop's Fables*. Hunt is probably alluding to the fable *The Frog and the Ox*, the tale of a frog that inflates to the size of an ox until it bursts.

¹⁵ Mercury is the Roman god of merchants and travellers.

¹⁶ Sir Henry Killigrew (d. 1603), English diplomat. Killigrew served during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) and, in 1554, helped the English adventurer Sir Peter Carew (1514-75) to flee to the Continent.

¹⁷ Sir John Suckling (1609-42), English poet and dramatist, best known for his lyrics such as the skit "A Session of the Poets" (1637, published 1646).

¹⁸ See Sir John Suckling, "A Session of the Poets" ll.79-80. Apollo oversees a meeting of English poets and, after assessing their qualifications for the laureateship, ironically grants the title to the least deserving candidate.

¹⁹ Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon (1609-74), English diplomat and historian.

²⁰ Lord Clarendon was one of the first to make direct mention of Piccadilly in his *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (1702-04), an account of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms.

²¹ A gentlemen's club founded in 1764 by twenty-seven Whig nobles.

²² The Commonwealth of England was the political system in place between 1649 and 1660, whereby England, Wales and, later, Ireland, and Scotland, were ruled as a republic following the end of the Second English Civil War.

²³ One of the three patriarchs of Judaism.

²⁴ Misprint for *woods*.

²⁵ Robin Hood, legendary outlaw of English folklore, who became a symbol of justice and defiance against tyranny.

²⁶ Biblical reference: see *Genesis* 2.18.

²⁷ That can be cut or harvested repeatedly.

²⁸ Goddesses of Greek mythology who inspired literature, science and the arts.

²⁹ Sir Samuel Garth (1661-1719), English physician and poet.

³⁰ Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74), Anglo-Irish writer. Goldsmith studied medicine but failed in his attempts as a physician.

EDITORIAL NOTES

³¹ According to the myth, Apollo was the lover of all nine Muses. As he could not decide among them, he remained unwed.

³² Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known in English as Horace (65-8 BCE), Roman poet best known for his lyric poetry, satires, and epistles.

³³ Plutarch (c. 46-120), Greek philosopher and historian, author of *Parallel Lives*.

³⁴ Plato (c. 428-348BCE), Greek philosopher, whose influential works are written primarily in the form of dialogues.

³⁵ See Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* I.i.xxxiv.

³⁶ Khājah Shams-od-Dīn Mohammad Ḥāfeẓ-e Shīrāzī (1325-90), known by the pen name Hafez or Hafiz, was a Persian lyric poet.