

# Excerpts from “The Prelude”

## Book First

### Introduction:—Childhood and School-Time

<i>text</i>	<i>varia nt</i>	<i>footno te</i>	<i>line numb er</i>
O there is blessing in this gentle breeze, A visitant that while it fans my cheek Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings From the green fields, and from yon azure sky. Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come To none more grateful than to me; escaped From the vast city, where I long had pined A discontented sojourner: now free, Free as a bird to settle where I will.			5
What dwelling shall receive me? in what vale Shall be my harbour? underneath what grove Shall I take up my home? and what clear stream Shall with its murmur lull me into rest? The earth is all before me. With a heart Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty, I look about; and should the chosen guide Be nothing better than a wandering cloud, I cannot miss my way. I breathe again! Trances of thought and mountings of the mind Come fast upon me: it is shaken off, That burthen of my own unnatural self, The heavy weight of many a weary day Not mine, and such as were not made for me. Long months of peace (if such bold word accord With any promises of human life), Long months of ease and undisturbed delight Are mine in prospect; whither shall I turn, By road or pathway, or through trackless field, Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing Upon the river point me out my course?			10 15 20 25 30

Dear Liberty! Yet what would it avail  
But for a gift that consecrates the joy?  
For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven  
Was blowing on my body, felt within  
A correspondent breeze, that gently moved 35  
With quickening virtue, but is now become  
A tempest, a redundant energy,  
Vexing its own creation. Thanks to both,  
And their congenial powers, that, while they join  
In breaking up a long-continued frost, 40  
Bring with them vernal promises, the hope  
Of active days urged on by flying hours,—  
Days of sweet leisure, taxed with patient thought  
Abstruse, nor wanting punctual service high,  
Matins and vespers of harmonious verse! 45

Thus far, O Friend! did I, not used to make  
A present joy the matter of a song,  
Pour forth that day my soul in measured strains  
That would not be forgotten, and are here  
Recorded: to the open fields I told 50  
A prophecy: poetic numbers came  
Spontaneously to clothe in priestly robe  
A renovated spirit singled out,  
Such hope was mine, for holy services.  
My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's 55  
Internal echo of the imperfect sound;  
To both I listened, drawing from them both  
A cheerful confidence in things to come.

Content and not unwilling now to give  
A respite to this passion, I paced on 60  
With brisk and eager steps; and came, at length,  
To a green shady place, where down I sate  
Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice,  
And settling into gentler happiness.  
'Twas autumn, and a clear and placid day, 65  
With warmth, as much as needed, from a sun  
Two hours declined towards the west; a day  
With silver clouds, and sunshine on the grass,  
And in the sheltered and the sheltering grove  
A perfect stillness. Many were the thoughts 70  
Encouraged and dismissed, till choice was made  
Of a known Vale, whither my feet should turn,

## Book Third

### Residence at Cambridge

*text*

*line number*

It was a dreary morning when the wheels  
Rolled over a wide plain o'erhung with clouds,  
And nothing cheered our way till first we saw  
The long-roofed chapel of King's College lift  
Turrets and pinnacles in answering files, 5  
Extended high above a dusky grove, [A]

Advancing, we espied upon the road  
A student clothed in gown and tasselled cap,  
Striding along as if o'ertasked by Time,  
Or covetous of exercise and air; 1  
He passed—nor was I master of my eyes 0  
Till he was left an arrow's flight behind.  
As near and nearer to the spot we drew,  
It seemed to suck us in with an eddy's force.  
Onward we drove beneath the Castle; caught,  
While crossing Magdalene Bridge, a glimpse of 1  
Cam; 5  
And at the *Hoop* alighted, famous Inn. [B]

My spirit was up, my thoughts were full of hope;  
Some friends I had, acquaintances who there  
Seemed friends, poor simple school-boys, now  
hung round 2  
With honour and importance: in a world 0  
Of welcome faces up and down I roved;  
Questions, directions, warnings and advice,  
Flowed in upon me, from all sides; fresh day  
Of pride and pleasure! to myself I seemed  
A man of business and expense, and went 2  
From shop to shop about my own affairs, 5  
To Tutor or to Tailor, as befel,  
From street to street with loose and careless

mind.

I was the Dreamer, they the Dream; I roamed  
Delighted through the motley spectacle; 3  
Gowns, grave, or gaudy, doctors, students, 0  
streets,  
Courts, cloisters, flocks of churches, gateways,  
towers:

Migration strange for a stripling of the hills,  
A northern villager.

As if the change 3  
Had waited on some Fairy's wand, at once 5  
Behold me rich in monies, and attired  
In splendid garb, with hose of silk, and hair  
Powdered like rimy trees, when frost is keen.

My lordly dressing-gown, I pass it by,  
With other signs of manhood that supplied 4  
The lack of beard.—The weeks went roundly on, 0  
With invitations, suppers, wine and fruit,  
Smooth housekeeping within, and all without  
Liberal, and suiting gentleman's array.

The Evangelist St. John my patron was: 4  
Three Gothic courts are his, and in the first 5  
Was my abiding-place, a nook obscure; [C]  
Right underneath, the College kitchens made  
A humming sound, less tuneable than bees,  
But hardly less industrious; with shrill notes  
Of sharp command and scolding intermixed.

Near me hung Trinity's loquacious clock, 5  
Who never let the quarters, night or day, 0  
Slip by him unproclaimed, and told the hours  
Twice over with a male and female voice.

Her pealing organ was my neighbour too;  
And from my pillow, looking forth by light  
Of moon or favouring stars, I could behold 5  
The antechapel where the statue stood 5  
Of Newton with his prism and silent face,  
The marble index of a mind for ever  
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.

Of College labours, of the Lecturer's room 6

All studded round, as thick as chairs could stand,           0  
 With loyal students faithful to their books,  
 Half-and-half idlers, hardy recusants,  
 And honest dunces—of important days,  
 Examinations, when the man was weighed  
 As in a balance! of excessive hopes,  
 Tremblings withal and commendable fears,           6  
 Small jealousies, and triumphs good or bad,           5  
 Let others that know more speak as they know.  
 Such glory was but little sought by me,  
 And little won. Yet from the first crude days  
 Of settling time in this untried abode,  
 I was disturbed at times by prudent thoughts,           7  
 Wishing to hope without a hope, some fears           0  
 About my future worldly maintenance,  
 And, more than all, a strangeness in the mind,  
 A feeling that I was not for that hour,  
 Nor for that place. But wherefore be cast down?  
 For (not to speak of Reason and her pure           7  
 Reflective acts to fix the moral law           5  
 Deep in the conscience, nor of Christian Hope,  
 Bowing her head before her sister Faith  
 As one far mightier), hither I had come,  
 Bear witness Truth, endowed with holy powers  
 And faculties, whether to work or feel.           8  
 Oft when the dazzling show no longer new           0  
 Had ceased to dazzle, oftentimes did I quit  
 My comrades, leave the crowd, buildings and  
 groves,  
 And as I paced alone the level fields  
 Far from those lovely sights and sounds sublime           8  
 With which I had been conversant, the mind           5  
 Drooped not; but there into herself returning,  
 With prompt rebound seemed fresh as heretofore.  
 At least I more distinctly recognised  
 Her native instincts: let me dare to speak  
 A higher language, say that now I felt           9  
 What independent solaces were mine,           0  
 To mitigate the injurious sway of place  
 Or circumstance, how far soever changed  
 In youth, or to be changed in manhood's prime;  
 Or for the few who shall be called to look

On the long shadows in our evening years,	9
Ordained precursors to the night of death.	5
As if awakened, summoned, roused, constrained,	
I looked for universal things; perused	
The common countenance of earth and sky:	
Earth, nowhere unembellished by some trace	
Of that first Paradise whence man was driven;	1
And sky, whose beauty and bounty are expressed	0
By the proud name she bears—the name of	0
Heaven.	
I called on both to teach me what they might;	
Or turning the mind in upon herself	
Pored, watched, expected, listened, spread my	
thoughts	1
And spread them with a wider creeping; felt	0
Incumbencies more awful, visitings	5
Of the Upholder of the tranquil soul,	
That tolerates the indignities of Time,	
And, from the centre of Eternity	
All finite motions overruling, lives	
In glory immutable. But peace! enough	1
Here to record that I was mounting now	1
To such community with highest truth—	0
A track pursuing, not untrod before,	
From strict analogies by thought supplied	
Or consciousnesses not to be subdued.	
To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,	
Even the loose stones that cover the high-way,	1
I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,	1
Or linked them to some feeling: the great mass	5
Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all	
That I beheld respired with inward meaning.	
Add that whate'er of Terror or of Love	
Or Beauty, Nature's daily face put on	
From transitory passion, unto this	1
I was as sensitive as waters are	2
To the sky's influence in a kindred mood	0
Of passion; was obedient as a lute	
That waits upon the touches of the wind.	
Unknown, unthought of, yet I was most rich—	
I had a world about me—'twas my own;	
I made it, for it only lived to me,	1

And to the God who sees into the heart.	2
Such sympathies, though rarely, were betrayed	5
By outward gestures and by visible looks:	
Some called it madness—so indeed it was,	
If child-like fruitfulness in passing joy,	
If steady moods of thoughtfulness matured	
To inspiration, sort with such a name;	1
If prophecy be madness; if things viewed	3
By poets in old time, and higher up	0
By the first men, earth's first inhabitants,	
May in these tutored days no more be seen	
With undisordered sight. But leaving this,	
It was no madness, for the bodily eye	
Amid my strongest workings evermore	1
Was searching out the lines of difference	3
As they lie hid in all external forms,	5
Near or remote, minute or vast, an eye	
Which from a tree, a stone, a withered leaf,	
To the broad ocean and the azure heavens	
Spangled with kindred multitudes of stars,	
Could find no surface where its power might	1
sleep;	4
Which spake perpetual logic to my soul,	0
And by an unrelenting agency	
Did bind my feelings even as in a chain.	
And here, O Friend! have I retraced my life	
Up to an eminence, and told a tale	1
Of matters which not falsely may be called	4
The glory of my youth. Of genius, power,	5
Creation and divinity itself	
I have been speaking, for my theme has been	
What passed within me. Not of outward things	
Done visibly for other minds, words, signs,	
Symbols or actions, but of my own heart	1
Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind.	5
O Heavens! how awful is the might of souls,	0
And what they do within themselves while yet	
The yoke of earth is new to them, the world	
Nothing but a wild field where they were sown.	
This is, in truth, heroic argument,	
This genuine prowess, which I wished to touch	1

With hand however weak, but in the main 5  
 It lies far hidden from the reach of words. 5  
 Points have we all of us within our souls  
 Where all stand single; this I feel, and make  
 Breathings for incommunicable powers;  
 But is not each a memory to himself?  
 And, therefore, now that we must quit this theme, 1  
 I am not heartless, for there's not a man 6  
 That lives who hath not known his god-like 0  
 hours,  
 And feels not what an empire we inherit  
 As natural beings in the strength of Nature.

No more: for now into a populous plain 1  
 We must descend. A Traveller I am, 6  
 Whose tale is only of himself; even so, 5  
 So be it, if the pure of heart be prompt  
 To follow, and if thou, my honoured Friend!  
 Who in these thoughts art ever at my side,  
 Support, as heretofore, my fainting steps.

It hath been told, that when the first delight 1  
 That flashed upon me from this novel show 7  
 Had failed, the mind returned into herself; 0  
 Yet true it is, that I had made a change  
 In climate, and my nature's outward coat  
 Changed also slowly and insensibly.  
 Full oft the quiet and exalted thoughts  
 Of loneliness gave way to empty noise 1  
 And superficial pastimes; now and then 7  
 Forced labour, and more frequently forced hopes; 5  
 And, worst of all, a treasonable growth  
 Of indecisive judgments, that impaired  
 And shook the mind's simplicity.—And yet  
 This was a gladsome time. Could I behold—  
 Who, less insensible than sodden clay 1  
 In a sea-river's bed at ebb of tide, 8  
 Could have beheld,—with undelighted heart, 0  
 So many happy youths, so wide and fair  
 A congregation in its budding-time  
 Of health, and hope, and beauty, all at once  
 So many divers samples from the growth

Of life's sweet season—could have seen	1
unmoved	8
That miscellaneous garland of wild flowers	5
Decking the matron temples of a place	
So famous through the world? To me, at least,	
It was a goodly prospect: for, in sooth,	
Though I had learnt betimes to stand unpropped,	
And independent musings pleased me so	1
That spells seemed on me when I was alone,	9
Yet could I only cleave to solitude	0
In lonely places; if a throng was near	
That way I leaned by nature; for my heart	
Was social, and loved idleness and joy.	
Not seeking those who might participate	1
My deeper pleasures (nay, I had not once,	9
Though not unused to mutter lonesome songs,	5
Even with myself divided such delight,	
Or looked that way for aught that might be	
clothed	
In human language), easily I passed	
From the remembrances of better things,	
And slipped into the ordinary works	2
Of careless youth, unburthened, unalarmed.	0
<i>Caverns</i> there were within my mind which sun	0
Could never penetrate, yet did there not	
Want store of leafy <i>arbours</i> where the light	
Might enter in at will. Companionships,	
Friendships, acquaintances, were welcome all.	
We sauntered, played, or rioted; we talked	
Unprofitable talk at morning hours;	2
Drifted about along the streets and walks,	0
Read lazily in trivial books, went forth	5
To gallop through the country in blind zeal	
Of senseless horsemanship, or on the breast	
Of Cam sailed boisterously, and let the stars	
Come forth, perhaps without one quiet thought.	
	2
Such was the tenor of the second act	1
In this new life. Imagination slept,	0
And yet not utterly. I could not print	
Ground where the grass had yielded to the steps	

Of generations of illustrious men,	
Unmoved. I could not always lightly pass	
Through the same gateways, sleep where they	2
had slept,	1
Wake where they waked, range that inclosure	5
old,	
That garden of great intellects, undisturbed.	
Place also by the side of this dark sense	
Of noble feeling, that those spiritual men,	
Even the great Newton's own ethereal self,	2
Seemed humbled in these precincts thence to be	2
The more endeared. Their several memories here	0
(Even like their persons in their portraits clothed	
With the accustomed garb of daily life)	
Put on a lowly and a touching grace	
Of more distinct humanity, that left	
All genuine admiration unimpaired.	2
	2
Beside the pleasant Mill of Trompington [D]	5
I laughed with Chaucer in the hawthorn shade;	
Heard him, while birds were warbling, tell his	
tales	
Of amorous passion. And that gentle Bard,	
Chosen by the Muses for their Page of State—	2
Sweet Spenser, moving through his clouded	3
heaven	0
With the moon's beauty and the moon's soft pace,	
I called him Brother, Englishman, and Friend!	
Yea, our blind Poet, who, in his later day,	
Stood almost single; uttering odious truth—	
Darkness before, and danger's voice behind,	2
Soul awful—if the earth has ever lodged	3
An awful soul—I seemed to see him here	5
Familiarly, and in his scholar's dress	
Bounding before me, yet a stripling youth—	
A boy, no better, with his rosy cheeks	
Angelical, keen eye, courageous look,	
And conscious step of purity and pride.	
Among the band of my compeers was one	2
Whom chance had stationed in the very room	4
Honoured by Milton's name. O temperate Bard!	0
Be it confest that, for the first time, seated	

Within thy innocent lodge and oratory,  
 One of a festive circle, I poured out  
 Libations, to thy memory drank, till pride  
 And gratitude grew dizzy in a brain 2  
 Never excited by the fumes of wine 4  
 Before that hour, or since. Then, forth I ran 5  
 From the assembly; through a length of streets,  
 Ran, ostrich-like, to reach our chapel door  
 In not a desperate or opprobrious time,  
 Albeit long after the importunate bell  
 Had stopped, with wearisome Cassandra voice 2  
 No longer haunting the dark winter night. 5  
 Call back, O Friend! [E] a moment to thy mind, 0  
 The place itself and fashion of the rites.  
 With careless ostentation shouldering up  
 My surplice, [F] through the inferior throng I  
 clove  
 Of the plain Burghers, who in audience stood 2  
 On the last skirts of their permitted ground, 5  
 Under the pealing organ. Empty thoughts! 5  
 I am ashamed of them: and that great Bard,  
 And thou, O Friend! who in thy ample mind  
 Hast placed me high above my best deserts,  
 Ye will forgive the weakness of that hour,  
 In some of its unworthy vanities,  
 Brother to many more. 2  
     In this mixed sort 6  
 The months passed on, remissly, not given up 0  
 To wilful alienation from the right,  
 Or walks of open scandal, but in vague  
 And loose indifference, easy likings, aims  
 Of a low pitch—duty and zeal dismissed,  
 Yet Nature, or a happy course of things 2  
 Not doing in their stead the needful work. 6  
 The memory languidly revolved, the heart 5  
 Reposed in noontide rest, the inner pulse  
 Of contemplation almost failed to beat.  
 Such life might not inaptly be compared  
 To a floating island, an amphibious spot  
 Unsound, of spongy texture, yet withal 2  
 Not wanting a fair face of water weeds 7  
 And pleasant flowers. [G] The thirst of living 0

praise,  
 Fit reverence for the glorious Dead, the sight  
 Of those long vistas, sacred catacombs,  
 Where mighty minds lie visibly entombed,  
 Have often stirred the heart of youth, and bred 2  
 A fervent love of rigorous discipline.— 7  
 Alas! such high emotion touched not me. 5  
 Look was there none within these walls to shame  
 My easy spirits, and discountenance  
 Their light composure, far less to instil  
 A calm resolve of mind, firmly addressed  
 To puissant efforts. Nor was this the blame  
 Of others, but my own; I should, in truth, 2  
 As far as doth concern my single self, 8  
 Misdeem most widely, lodging it elsewhere: 0  
 For I, bred up 'mid Nature's luxuries,  
 Was a spoiled child, and rambling like the wind,  
 As I had done in daily intercourse  
 With those crystalline rivers, solemn heights,  
 And mountains, ranging like a fowl of the air, 2  
 I was ill-tutored for captivity; 8  
 To quit my pleasure, and, from month to month, 5  
 Take up a station calmly on the perch  
 Of sedentary peace. Those lovely forms  
 Had also left less space within my mind,  
 Which, wrought upon instinctively, had found  
 A freshness in those objects of her love, 2  
 A winning power, beyond all other power. 9  
 Not that I slighted books, [H]—that were to lack 0  
 All sense,—but other passions in me ruled,  
 Passions more fervent, making me less prompt  
 To in-door study than was wise or well,  
 Or suited to those years. Yet I, though used  
 In magisterial liberty to rove, 2  
 Culling such flowers of learning as might tempt 9  
 A random choice, could shadow forth a place 5  
 (If now I yield not to a flattering dream)  
 Whose studious aspect should have bent me  
 down  
 To instantaneous service; should at once  
 Have made me pay to science and to arts 3  
 And written lore, acknowledged my liege lord, 0

A homage frankly offered up, like that	0
Which I had paid to Nature. Toil and pains	
In this recess, by thoughtful Fancy built,	
Should spread from heart to heart; and stately	
groves,	
Majestic edifices, should not want	3
A corresponding dignity within.	0
The congregating temper that pervades	5
Our unripe years, not wasted, should be taught	
To minister to works of high attempt—	
Works which the enthusiast would perform with	
love.	
Youth should be awed, religiously possessed	3
With a conviction of the power that waits	1
On knowledge, when sincerely sought and prized	0
For its own sake, on glory and on praise	
If but by labour won, and fit to endure	
The passing day; should learn to put aside	
Her trappings here, should strip them off abashed	
Before antiquity and stedfast truth	3
And strong book-mindedness; and over all	1
A healthy sound simplicity should reign,	5
A seemingly plainness, name it what you will,	
Republican or pious.	
If these thoughts	
Are a gratuitous emblazonry	
That mocks the recreant age <i>we</i> live in, then	3
Be Folly and False-seeming free to affect	2
Whatever formal gait of discipline	0
Shall raise them highest in their own esteem—	
Let them parade among the Schools at will,	
But spare the House of God. Was ever known	
The witless shepherd who persists to drive	
A flock that thirsts not to a pool disliked?	
A weight must surely hang on days begun	3
And ended with such mockery. Be wise,	2
Ye Presidents and Deans, and, till the spirit	5
Of ancient times revive, and youth be trained	
At home in pious service, to your bells	
Give seasonable rest, for 'tis a sound	
Hollow as ever vexed the tranquil air;	
And your officious doings bring disgrace	3

On the plain steeples of our English Church,	3
Whose worship, 'mid remotest village trees,	0
Suffers for this. Even Science, too, at hand	
In daily sight of this irreverence,	
Is smitten thence with an unnatural taint,	
Loses her just authority, falls beneath	
Collateral suspicion, else unknown.	3
This truth escaped me not, and I confess,	3
That having 'mid my native hills given loose	5
To a schoolboy's vision, I had raised a pile	
Upon the basis of the coming time,	
That fell in ruins round me. Oh, what joy	
To see a sanctuary for our country's youth	
Informed with such a spirit as might be	3
Its own protection; a primeval grove,	4
Where, though the shades with cheerfulness were	0
filled,	
Nor indigent of songs warbled from crowds	
In under-coverts, yet the countenance	
Of the whole place should bear a stamp of awe;	
A habitation sober and demure	3
For ruminating creatures; a domain	4
For quiet things to wander in; a haunt	5
In which the heron should delight to feed	
By the shy rivers, and the pelican	
Upon the cypress spire in lonely thought	
Might sit and sun himself.—Alas! Alas!	
In vain for such solemnity I looked;	3
Mine eyes were crossed by butterflies, ears vexed	5
By chattering popinjays; the inner heart	0
Seemed trivial, and the impresses without	
Of a too gaudy region.	
Different sight	
Those venerable Doctors saw of old,	
When all who dwelt within these famous walls	3
Led in abstemiousness a studious life;	5
When, in forlorn and naked chambers cooped	5
And crowded, o'er the ponderous books they	
hung	
Like caterpillars eating out their way	
In silence, or with keen devouring noise	
Not to be tracked or fathered. Princes then	3

At matins froze, and couched at curfew-time,	6
Trained up through piety and zeal to prize	0
Spare diet, patient labour, and plain weeds.	
O seat of Arts! renowned throughout the world!	
Far different service in those homely days	
The Muses' modest nurslings underwent	
From their first childhood: in that glorious time	3
When Learning, like a stranger come from far,	6
Sounding through Christian lands her trumpet,	5
roused	
Peasant and king; when boys and youths, the	
growth	
Of ragged villages and crazy huts,	
Forsook their homes, and, errant in the quest	3
Of Patron, famous school or friendly nook,	7
Where, pensioned, they in shelter might sit down,	0
From town to town and through wide scattered	
realms	
Journeyed with ponderous folios in their hands;	
And often, starting from some covert place,	
Saluted the chance comer on the road,	3
Crying, "An obolus, a penny give	7
To a poor scholar!" [I]—when illustrious men,	5
Lovers of truth, by penury constrained,	
Bucer, Erasmus, or Melancthon, read	
Before the doors or windows of their cells	
By moonshine through mere lack of taper light.	3
	3
But peace to vain regrets! We see but darkly	8
Even when we look behind us, and best things	0
Are not so pure by nature that they needs	
Must keep to all, as fondly all believe,	
Their highest promise. If the mariner,	
When at reluctant distance he hath passed	
Some tempting island, could but know the ills	3
That must have fallen upon him had he brought	8
His bark to land upon the wished-for shore,	5
Good cause would oft be his to thank the surf	
Whose white belt scared him thence, or wind that	
blew	
Inexorably adverse: for myself	
I grieve not; happy is the gownèd youth,	3

Who only misses what I missed, who falls 9  
No lower than I fell. 0

I did not love,  
Judging not ill perhaps, the timid course  
Of our scholastic studies; could have wished  
To see the river flow with ampler range 3  
And freer pace; but more, far more, I grieved 9  
To see displayed among an eager few, 5  
Who in the field of contest persevered,  
Passions unworthy of youth's generous heart  
And mounting spirit, pitiably repaid,  
When so disturbed, whatever palms are won.  
From these I turned to travel with the shoal 4  
Of more unthinking natures, easy minds 0  
And pillowy; yet not wanting love that makes 0  
The day pass lightly on, when foresight sleeps,  
And wisdom and the pledges interchanged  
With our own inner being are forgot.