

TO BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON

*Leatherhead, Nov. 20th, 1817*

MY DEAR HAYDON,

YOU are right. Dante ranks among us in somewhat of the same predicament with Goethe. Both seem vapid and uninspired to those who cannot drink of their fountains at the rocky source. But the Florentine has this advantage over the bard of Weimar: that time, which alone forms the enduring crystal, has tested by upwards of half a thousand ages the hardness of his reputation, and proved that it is not glass. The opinion of what we call the world "the contemporary world" is fallacious; but the judgment of the real world, the world of generations, must be accepted; the one is the seeming horizon, that extends a little way only; the other is the true one, which embraces the hemisphere. In this universal verdict, how few are the names, from the great flood, which may justly be catalogued with Dante? And even of these how few are not indebted to that which no genius can compass – the luck of precedency of date? He has not, indeed, left one of those universal works which exact tribute from all sympathies. There is an individuality in his imagination which makes those whose fancies run wholly in another vein, sensible only of his difficulty or his dullness. He is less to be commended than loved, and they who truly feel his charm will need no argument for their passionate fondness. With them lie has attained that highest favour of an author – exemptions from those canons to which the little herd must bow, Dante, whether he has been glorified by the Germans, or derided by the French, it matters little. Consider too, how far his fame has travelled. It is true, mere wideness of reputation is nothing now-a-days, except as it is concomitant with durability. But as Horace, amid the groves of Tibur already pinfeathered in imagination, could plume himself on the prospect of being one clay read beside the Rhone; let it also be remembered what a stretch it is from Arno to the Thames.