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# THE ART OF LETTERS

BY

ROBERT LYND

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# THE ART OF LETTERS

## MI.—R. PEPYS

MR. PEPYS was a Puritan. Froude once painted a portrait of Bunyan as an ex-Cavalier. He almost persuaded one that it was true till the later discovery of Bunyan's name on the muster-roll of one of Cromwell's regiments showed that he had been a Puritan from the beginning. If one calls Mr. Pepys a Puritan, however, one does not do so for the love of paradox or at a guess. He tells us himself that he "was a great Roundhead" when he was a boy, and that, on the day on which King Charles was beheaded, he said: "Were I to preach on him, my text should be—'the memory of the wicked shall rot.'" After the Restoration he was uneasy lest his old schoolfellow, Mr. Christmas, should remember these strong words. True, when it came to the turn of the Puritans to suffer, he went, with a fine impartiality, to see General Harrison disembowelled at Charing Cross. "Thus it was my chance," he comments, "to see the King beheaded at White Hall, and to see the first blood shed in revenge for the blood of the King at Charing Cross. From thence to my Lord's, and took Captain Cuttance and Mr. Shepley to the Sun Tavern, and did give them some oysters." Pepys was a spectator and a gourmet even more than he was a Puritan. He was a Puritan, indeed, only north-north-west. Even when at Cambridge he gave evidence of certain susceptibilities to the sins of the flesh. He was "admonished" on one occasion for "having been scandalously overserved with drink ye night before." He also began to write a romance entitled *Love a Cheate*, which he tore up ten years later, though he "liked it very

well." At the same time his writing never lost the tang of Puritan speech. "Blessed be God" are the first words of his shocking Diary. When he had to give up keeping the Diary nine and a half years later, owing to failing sight, he wound up, after expressing his intention of dictating in the future a more seemly journal to an amanuensis, with the characteristic sentences:

> Or, if there be anything, which cannot be much, now my amours to Deb. are past, I must endeavour to keep a margin in my book open, to add, here and there, a note in shorthand with my own hand.
>
> And so I betake myself to that course, which is almost as much as to see myself go into my grave; for which, and all the discomforts that will accompany my being blind, the good God prepare me.

With these words the great book ends—the diary of one of the godliest and most lecherous of men.

In some respects Mr. Pepys reminds one of a type that is now commoner in Scotland, I fancy, than elsewhere. He himself seems at one time to have taken the view that he was of Scottish descent. None of the authorities, however, will admit this, and there is apparently no doubt that he belonged to an old Cambridgeshire family that had come down in the world, his father having dwindled into a London tailor. In temperament, however, he seems to me to have been more Scottish than the very Scottish Boswell. He led a double life with the same simplicity of heart. He was Scottish in the way in which he lived with one eye on "the lassies" and the other on "the meenister." He was notoriously respectable, notoriously hard-working, a judge of sermons, fond of the bottle, cautious, thrifty. He had all the virtues of a K.C.B. He was no scapegrace or scallywag such as you might find nowadays crowing over his sins in Chelsea. He lived, so far as the world was concerned, in the complete starch of rectitude. He was a pillar of Society, and whatever age he had been born in, he would have accepted its orthodoxy. He was as grave a man as Holy Willie. Stevenson has commented on the gradual decline of his primness in the later years of the Diary. "His favourite ejaculation, 'Lord!' occurs," he declares, "but once that

I have observed in 1660, never in '61, twice in '62, and at least five times in '63; after which the 'Lords' may be said to pullulate like herrings, with here and there a solitary 'damned,' as it were a whale among the shoal." As a matter of fact, Mr. Pepys's use of the expression "Lord!" has been greatly exaggerated, especially by the parodists. His primness, if that is the right word, never altogether deserted him. We discover this even in the story of his relations with women. In 1665, for instance, he writes with surprised censoriousness of Mrs. Penington.

> There we drank and laughed [he relates], and she willingly suffered me to put my hand in her bosom very wantonly, and keep it there long. Which methought was very strange, and I looked upon myself as a man mightily deceived in a lady, for I could not have thought she could have suffered it by her former discourse with me; so modest she seemed and I know not what.

It is a sad world for idealists.

Mr. Pepys's Puritanism, however, was something less than Mr. Pepys. It was but a pair of creaking Sunday boots on the feet of a pagan. Mr. Pepys was an appreciator of life to a degree that not many Englishmen have been since Chaucer. He was a walking appetite. And not an entirely ignoble appetite either. He reminds one in some respects of the poet in Browning's "How it strikes a Contemporary," save that he had more worldly success. One fancies him with the same inquisitive ferule on the end of his stick, the same "scrutinizing hat," the same eye for the bookstall and "the man who slices lemon into drink." "If any cursed a woman, he took note." Browning's poet, however, apparently "took note" on behalf of a higher power. It is difficult to imagine Mr. Pepys sending his Diary to the address of the Recording Angel. Rather, the Diary is the soliloquy of an egoist, disinterested and daring as a bad boy's reverie over the fire.

Nearly all those who have written about Pepys are perplexed by the question whether Pepys wrote his Diary with a view to its ultimate publication. This seems to me to betray some ignorance of the working of the human mind.

Those who find one of the world's puzzles in the fact that Mr. Pepys wrapped his great book in the secrecy of a cipher, as though he meant no other eye ever to read it but his own, perplex their brains unnecessarily. Pepys was not the first human being to make his confession in an empty confessional. Criminals, lovers and other egoists, for lack of a priest, will make their confessions to a stone wall or a tree. There is nothing stranger in it than in the singing of birds. The motive may be either to obtain discharge from the sense of guilt or a desire to save and store up the very echoes and last drops of pleasure. Human beings keep diaries for as many different reasons as they write lyric poems. With Pepys, I fancy, the main motive was a simple happiness in chewing the cud of pleasure. The fact that so much of his pleasure had to be kept secret from the world made it all the more necessary for him to babble when alone. True, in the early days his confidences are innocent enough. Pepys began to write in cipher some time before there was any purpose in it save the common prudence of a secretive man. Having built, however, this secret and solitary fastness, he gradually became more daring. He had discovered a room to the walls of which he dared speak aloud. Here we see the respectable man liberated. He no longer needs to be on his official behaviour, but may play the part of a small Nero, if he wishes, behind the safety of shorthand. And how he takes advantage of his opportunities! He remains to the end something of a Puritan in his standards and his public carriage, but in his diary he reveals himself as a pig from the sty of Epicurus, naked and only half-ashamed. He never, it must be admitted, entirely shakes off his timidity. At a crisis he dare not confess in English even in a cipher, but puts the worst in bad French with a blush. In some instances the French may be for facetiousness rather than concealment, as in the reference to the ladies of Rochester Castle in 1665:

Thence to Rochester, walked to the Crowne, and while dinner was getting ready, I did then walk to visit the old Castle ruines,

which hath been a noble place, and there going up I did upon the stairs overtake three pretty mayds or women and took them up with me, and I did *baiser sur mouches et toucher leur mains* and necks to my great pleasure; but lord! to see what a dreadfull thing it is to look down the precipices, for it did fright me mightily, and hinder me of much pleasure which I would have made to myself in the company of these three, if it had not been for that.

Even here, however, Mr. Pepys's French has a suggestion of evasion. He always had a faint hope that his conscience would not understand French.

Some people have written as though Mr. Pepys, in confessing himself in his Diary, had confessed us all. They profess to see in the Diary simply the image of Everyman in his bare skin. They think of Pepys as an ordinary man who wrote an extraordinary book. To me it seems that Pepys's Diary is not more extraordinary as a book than Pepys himself was as a man. Taken separately, nine out of ten of his characteristics may seem ordinary enough—his fears, his greeds, his vices, his utilitarian repentances. They were compounded in him, however, in such proportion as to produce an entirely new mixture—a character hardly less original than Dr. Johnson or Charles Lamb. He had not any great originality of virtue, as these others had, but he was immensely original in his responsiveness—his capacity for being interested, tempted and pleased. The voluptuous nature of the man may be seen in such a passage as that in which, speaking of "the wind-musique when the angel comes down" in *The Virgin Martyr*, he declares:

It ravished me, and indeed, in a word, did wrap up my soul so that it made me really sick, just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife.

Writing of Mrs. Knipp on another occasion, he says:

She and I singing, and God forgive me! I do still see that my nature is not to be quite conquered, but will esteem pleasure above all things, though yet in the middle of it, it has reluctances after my business, which is neglected by my following my pleasure. However, musique and women I cannot but give way to, whatever my business is.

Within a few weeks of this we find him writing again :

> So abroad to my ruler's of my books, having, God forgive me! a mind to see Nan there, which I did, and so back again, and then out again to see Mrs. Bettons, who were looking out of the window as I came through Fenchurch Streete. So that, indeed, I am not, as I ought to be, able to command myself in the pleasures of my eye.

Though page after page of the Diary reveals Mr. Pepys as an extravagant pleasure-lover, however, he differed from the majority of pleasure-lovers in literature in not being a man of taste. He had a rolling rather than a fastidious eye. He kissed promiscuously, and was not aspiring in his lusts. He once held Lady Castlemaine in his arms, indeed, but it was in a dream. He reflected, he tells us,

> that since it was a dream, and that I took so much real pleasure in it, what a happy thing it would be if when we are in our graves (as Shakespeare resembles it) we could dream, and dream but such dreams as this, that then we should not need to be so fearful of death, as we are this plague time.

He praises this dream at the same time as "the best that ever was dreamt." Mr. Pepys's idea of Paradise, it would be seen, was that commonly attributed to the Mohammedans. Meanwhile he did his best to turn London into an anticipatory harem. We get a pleasant picture of a little Roundhead Sultan in such a sentence as "At night had Mercer comb my head and so to supper, sing a psalm and to bed."

It may seem unfair to over-emphasize the voluptuary in Mr. Pepys, but it is Mr. Pepys, the promiscuous amourist, stringing his lute (God forgive him!) on a Sunday, that is the outstanding figure in the Diary. Mr. Pepys attracts us, however, in a host of other aspects—Mr. Pepys whose nose his jealous wife attacked with the red-hot tongs as he lay in bed; Mr. Pepys who always held an anniversary feast on the date on which he had been cut for the stone; Mr. Pepys who was not "troubled at it at all" as soon as he saw that the lady who had spat on him in the theatre was a pretty one; Mr. Pepys drinking; Mr. Pepys among his dishes;

Mr. Pepys among princes; Mr. Pepys who was "mightily pleased" as he listened to "my aunt Jenny, a poor, religious, well-meaning good soul, talking of nothing but God Almighty"; Mr. Pepys, as he counts up his blessings in wealth, women, honour and life, and decides that "all these things are ordered by God Almighty to make me contented"; Mr. Pepys as, having just refused to see Lady Pickering, he comments, "But how natural it is for us to slight people out of power!"; Mr. Pepys who groans as he sees his office clerks sitting in more expensive seats than himself at the theatre. Mr. Pepys is a man so many-sided, indeed, that in order to illustrate his character one would have to quote the greater part of his Diary. He is a mass of contrasts and contradictions. He lives without sequence except in the business of getting-on (in which he might well have been taken as a model by Samuel Smiles). One thinks of him sometimes as a sort of Deacon Brodie, sometimes as the most innocent sinner who ever lived. For, though he was brutal and snobbish and self-seeking and simian, he had a pious and a merry and a grateful heart. He felt that God had created the world for the pleasure of Samuel Pepys, and had no doubt that it was good.

## II.—JOHN BUNYAN

ONCE, when John Bunyan had been preaching in London, a friend congratulated him on the excellence of his sermon. "You need not remind me of that," replied Bunyan. "The Devil told me of it before I was out of the pulpit." On another occasion, when he was going about in disguise, a constable who had a warrant for his arrest spoke to him and inquired if he knew that devil Bunyan. "Know him?" said Bunyan. "You might call him a devil if you knew him as well as I once did." We have in these anecdotes a key to the nature of Bunyan's genius. He was a realist, a romanticist, and a humourist. He was as exact a realist (though in a different way) as Mr. Pepys, whose contemporary he was. He was a realist both in his self-knowledge and in his sense of the outer world. He had the acute eye of the artist which was aware of the stones of the street and the crows in the ploughed field. As a preacher, he did not guide the thoughts of his hearers, as so many preachers do, into the wind. He recalled them from orthodox abstractions to the solid earth. "Have you forgot," he asked his followers, "the close, the milk-house, the stable, the barn, and the like, where God did visit your souls?" He himself could never be indifferent to the place or setting of the great tragi-comedy of salvation. When he relates how he gave up swearing as a result of a reproof from a "loose and ungodly" woman, he begins the story: "One day, as I was standing at a neighbour's shop-window, and there cursing and swearing after my wonted manner, there sat within the woman of the house, who heard me." This passion for locality was always at his elbow. A few pages further on in *Grace Abounding*, when he tells us how he abandoned not only swearing but the deeper-rooted sins of bell-ringing and dancing, and nevertheless remained self-

righteous and "ignorant of Jesus Christ," he introduces the next episode in the story of his conversion with the sentence: "But upon a day the good providence of God called me to Bedford to work at my calling, and in one of the streets of that town I came where there were three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun, talking about the things of God." That seems to me to be one of the most beautiful sentences in English literature. Its beauty is largely due to the hungry eyes with which Bunyan looked at the present world during his progress to the next. If he wrote the greatest allegory in English literature, it is because he was able to give his narrative the reality of a travel-book instead of the insubstantial quality of a dream. He leaves the reader with the feeling that he is moving among real places and real people. As for the people, Bunyan can give even an abstract virtue—still more, an abstract vice—the skin and bones of a man. A recent critic has said disparagingly that Bunyan would have called Hamlet Mr. Facing-both-ways. As a matter of fact, Bunyan's secret is the direct opposite of this. His great and singular gift was the power to create an atmosphere in which a character with a name like Mr. Facing-both-ways is accepted on the same plane of reality as Hamlet.

If Bunyan was a realist, however, as regards place and character, his conception of life was none the less romantic. Life to him was a story of hairbreadth escapes—of a quest beset with a thousand perils. Not only was there that great dragon the Devil lying in wait for the traveller, but there was Doubting Castle to pass, and Giant Despair, and the lions. We have in *The Pilgrim's Progress* almost every property of romantic adventure and terror. We want only a map in order to bring home to us the fact that it belongs to the same school of fiction as *Treasure Island*. There may be theological contentions here and there that interrupt the action of the story as they interrupt the interest of *Grace Abounding*. But the tedious passages are extraordinarily few, considering that the author had the passions of a preacher. No doubt the fact that, when he wrote *The*

*Pilgrim's Progress,* he was not definitely thinking of the edification of his neighbours, goes far towards explaining the absence of commonplace arguments and exhortations. "I did it mine own self to gratify," he declared in his rhymed "apology for his book." Later on, in reply to some brethren of the stricter sort who condemned such dabbling in fiction, he defended his book as a tract, remarking that, if you want to catch fish,

> They must be groped for, and be tickled too,
> Or they will not be catch't, whate'er you do.

But in its origin *The Pilgrim's Progress* was not a tract, but the inevitable image of the experiences of the writer's soul. And what wild adventures those were every reader of *Grace Abounding* knows. There were terrific contests with the Devil, who could never charm John Bunyan as he charmed Eve. To Bunyan these contests were not metaphorical battles, but were as struggles with flesh and blood. "He pulled, and I pulled," he wrote in one place; "but, God be praised, I overcame him—I got sweetness from it." And the Devil not only fought him openly, but made more subtle attempts to entice him to sin. "Sometimes, again, when I have been preaching, I have been violently assaulted with thoughts of blasphemy, and strongly tempted to speak the words with my mouth before the congregation." Bunyan, as he looked back over the long record of his spiritual torments, thought of it chiefly as a running fight with the Devil. Outside the covers of the Bible, little existed save temptations for the soul. No sentence in *The Pilgrim's Progress* is more suggestive of Bunyan's view of life than that in which the merchandise of Vanity Fair is described as including "delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not." It is no wonder that one to whom so much of the common life of man was simply Devil's traffic took a tragic view of even the most innocent pleasures, and applied to himself, on account of his love of strong language,

Sunday sports and bell-ringing, epithets that would hardly have been too strong if he had committed all the crimes of the latest Bluebeard. He himself, indeed, seems to have become alarmed when—probably as a result of his own confessions—it began to be rumoured that he was a man with an unspeakable past. He now demanded that "any woman in heaven, earth or hell" should be produced with whom he had ever had relations before his marriage. "My foes," he declared, "have missed their mark in this shooting at me. I am not the man. I wish that they themselves be guiltless. If all the fornicators and adulterers in England were hanged up by the neck till they be dead, John Bunyan, the object of their envy, would still be alive and well." Bunyan, one observes, was always as ready to defend as to attack himself. The verses he prefixed to *The Holy War* are an indignant reply to those who accused him of not being the real author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He wound up a fervent defence of his claims to originality by pointing out the fact that his name, if "anagrammed," made the words: "NU HONY IN A B." Many worse arguments have been used in the quarrels of theologians.

Bunyan has been described as a tall, red-haired man, stern of countenance, quick of eye, and mild of speech. His mildness of speech, I fancy, must have been an acquired mildness. He loved swearing as a boy, and, as *The Pilgrim's Progress* shows, even in his later life he had not lost the humour of calling names. No other English author has ever invented a name of the labelling kind equal to that of Mr. Worldly Wiseman—a character, by the way, who does not appear in the first edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but came in later as an afterthought. Congreve's "Tribulation Spintext" and Dickens's "Lord Frederick Verisopht" are mere mechanical contrivances compared to this triumph of imagination and phrase. Bunyan's gift for names was in its kind supreme. His humorous fancy chiefly took that form. Even atheists can read him with pleasure for the sake of his names. The modern reader, no doubt, often smiles at these names where Bunyan did not mean him to smile, as

when Mrs. Lightmind says: "I was yesterday at Madam Wanton's, when we were as merry as the maids. For who do you think should be there but I and Mrs. Love-the-flesh, and three or four more, with Mr. Lechery, Mrs. Filth, and some others?" Bunyan's fancifulness, however, gives us pleasure quite apart from such quaint effects as this. How delightful is Mr. By-ends's explanation of the two points in regard to which he and his family differ in religion from those of the stricter sort: "First, we never strive against wind and tide. Secondly, we are always most zealous when Religion goes in his silver slippers; we love much to walk with him in the street, if the sun shines, and the people applaud him." What a fine grotesque, again, Bunyan gives us in toothless Giant Pope sitting in the mouth of the cave, and, though too feeble to follow Christian, calling out after him: "You will never mend till more of you be burnt." We do not read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, however, as a humorous book. Bunyan's pains mean more to us than the play of his fancy. His books are not seventeenth-century grotesques, but the story of his heart. He has written that story twice over—with the gloom of the realist in *Grace Abounding*, and with the joy of the artist in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Even in *Grace Abounding*, however, much as it is taken up with a tale of almost lunatic terror, the tenderness of Bunyan's nature breaks out as he tells us how, when he was taken off to prison, "the parting with my wife and four children hath often been to me in the place as the pulling the flesh from the bones . . . especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all beside. Oh, the thoughts of the hardship I thought my poor blind one might go under would break my heart to pieces!" At the same time, fear and not love is the dominating passion in *Grace Abounding*. We are never far from the noise of Hell in its pages. In *Grace Abounding* man is a trembling criminal. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* he has become, despite his immense capacity for fear, a hero. The description of the fight with Apollyon is a piece of heroic literature equal to anything in those romances of adventure that went

to the head of Don Quixote. "But, as God would have it, while Apollyon was fetching his last blow, thereby to make a full end of this good man, Christian nimbly reached out his hand for his sword, and caught it, saying: 'Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy! when I fall I shall arise'; and with that gave him a deadly thrust, which made him give back, as one that had received a mortal wound." Heroic literature cannot surpass this. Its appeal is universal. When one reads it, one ceases to wonder that there exists even a Catholic version of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Giant Pope is discreetly omitted, but the heroism of Christian remains. Bunyan disliked being called by the name of any sect. His imagination was certainly as little sectarian as that of a seventeenth-century preacher could well be. His hero is primarily not a Baptist, but a man. He bears, perhaps, almost too close a resemblance to Everyman, but his journey, his adventures and his speech save him from sinking into a pulpit generalization.

## III.—THOMAS CAMPION

THOMAS CAMPION is among English poets the perfect minstrel. He takes love as a theme rather than is burned by it. His most charming, if not his most beautiful poem begins: "Hark, all you ladies." He sings of love-making rather than of love. His poetry, like Moore's—though it is infinitely better poetry than Moore's—is the poetry of flirtation. Little is known about his life, but one may infer from his work that his range of amorous experience was wide rather than deep. There is no lady "with two pitch balls stuck in her face for eyes" troubling his pages with a constant presence. The Mellea and Caspia—the one too easy of capture, the other too difficult—to whom so many of the Latin epigrams are addressed, are said to have been his chief schoolmistresses in love. But he has buried most of his erotic woes, such as they were, in a dead language. His English poems do not portray him as a man likely to die of love, or even to forget a meal on account of it. His world is a happy land of song, in which ladies all golden in the sunlight succeed one another as in a pageant of beauties. Lesbia, Laura, and Corinna with her lute equally inhabit it. They are all characters in a masque of love—forms and figures in a revel. Their maker is an Epicurean and an enemy to "the sager sort":

> My sweetest Lesbia, let us live and love,
> And, though the sager sort our deeps reprove,
> Let us not weigh them. Heav'n's great lamps do dive
> Into their west, and straight again revive.
> But, soon as once is set our little light,
> Then must we sleep our ever-during night.

Ladies in so bright and insecure a day must not be permitted to "let their lovers moan." If they do, they will incur the just vengeance of the Fairy Queen Proserpina, who will

send her attendant fairies to pinch their white hands and pitiless arms. Campion is the Fairy Queen's court poet. He claims all men—perhaps, one ought rather to say all women—as her subjects:

In myrtle arbours on the downs
The Fairy Queen Proserpina,
This night by moonshine leading merry rounds,
Holds a watch with sweet love,
Down the dale, up the hill;
No plaints or groans may move
Their holy vigil.

All you that will hold watch with love,
The Fairy Queen Proserpina
Will make you fairer than Dione's dove;
Roses red, lilies white
And the clear damask hue,
Shall on your cheeks alight:
Love will adorn you.

All you that love, or lov'd before,
The Fairy Queen Proserpina
Bids you increase that loving humour more:
They that have not fed
On delight amorous,
She vows that they shall lead
Apes in Avernus.

It would be folly to call the poem that contains these three verses one of the great English love-songs. It gets no nearer love than a ballet does. There are few lyrics of "delight amorous" in English, however, that can compare with it in exquisite fancy and still more exquisite music.

Campion, at the same time, if he was the poet of the higher flirtation, was no mere amorous jester, as Moore was. His affairs of the heart were also affairs of the imagination. Love may not have transformed the earth for him, as it did for Shakespeare and Donne and Browning, but at least it transformed his accents. He sang neither the "De Profundis" of love nor the triumphal ode of love that increases from anniversary to anniversary; but he knew the flying sun and shadow of romantic love, and stayed them in music of a delicious sadness, of a fantastic and playful gravity. His

poems, regarded as statements of fact, are a little insincere. They are the compliments, not the confessions, of a lover. He exaggerates the burden of his sigh, the incurableness of his wounded heart. But beneath these conventional excesses there is a flow of sincere and beautiful feeling. He may not have been a worshipper, but his admirations were golden. In one or two of his poems, such as :

> Follow your saint, follow with accents sweet;
> Haste you, sad notes, fall at her flying feet,

admiration treads on the heels of worship.

> All that I sung still to her praise did tend;
> Still she was first, still she my song did end—

in these lines we find a note of triumphant fidelity rare in Campion's work. Compared with this, that other song beginning :

> Follow thy fair sun, unhappy shadow,
> Though thou be black as night,
> And she made all of light,
> Yet follow thy fair sun, unhappy shadow—

seems but the ultimate perfection among valentines. Others of the songs hesitate between compliment and the finer ecstasy. The compliment is certainly of the noblest in the lyric which sets out—

> When thou must home to shades of underground,
> And, there arriv'd, a new admired guest,
> The beauteous spirits do ingirt thee round,
> White Iope, blithe Helen, and the rest,
> To hear the stories of thy finisht love
> From that smooth tongue whose music hell can move;

but it fades by way of beauty into the triviality of convention in the second verse :

> Then wilt thou speak of banqueting delights,
> Of masks and revels which sweet youth did make,
> Of tourneys and great challenges of knights,
> And all these triumphs for thy beauty's sake:
> When thou hast told these honours done to thee,
> Then tell, O tell, how thou didst murther me.

There is more of jest than of sorrow in the last line. It is an act of courtesy. Through all these songs, however, there is a continuous expense of beauty, of a very fortune of admiration, that entitles Campion to a place above any of the other contemporaries of Shakespeare as a writer of songs. His dates (1567-1620) almost coincide with those of Shakespeare. Living in an age of music, he wrote music that Shakespeare alone could equal and even Shakespeare could hardly surpass. Campion's words are themselves airs. They give us at once singer and song and stringed instrument.

It is only in music, however, that Campion is in any way comparable to Shakespeare. Shakespeare is the nonpareil among song-writers, not merely because of his music, but because of the imaginative riches that he pours out in his songs. In contrast with his abundance, Campion's fortune seems lean, like his person. Campion could not see the world for lovely ladies. Shakespeare in his lightest songs was always aware of the abundant background of the visible world. Campion seems scarcely to know of the existence of the world apart from the needs of a masque-writer. Among his songs there is nothing comparable to "When daisies pied and violets blue," or "Where the bee sucks," or "You spotted snakes with double tongue," or "When daffodils begin to peer," or "Full fathom five," or "Fear no more the heat o' the sun." He had neither Shakespeare's eye nor Shakespeare's experiencing soul. He puts no girdle round the world in his verse. He knows but one mood and its sub-moods. Though he can write

> There is a garden in her face,
> Where roses and white lilies grow,

he brings into his songs none of the dye and fragrance of flowers.

Perhaps it was because he suspected a certain levity and thinness in his genius that Campion was so contemptuous of his English verse. His songs he dismissed as "superfluous blossoms of his deeper studies." It is as though he

thought, like Bacon, that anything written for immortality should be written in Latin. Bacon, it may be remembered, translated his essays into Latin for fear they might perish in so modern and barbarous a tongue as English. Campion was equally inclined to despise his own language in comparison with that of the Greeks and Romans. His main quarrel with it arose, however, from the obstinacy with which English poets clung to "the childish titillation of rhyming." "Bring before me now," he wrote, "any the most self-loved rhymer, and let me see if without blushing he be able to read his lame, halting rhymes." There are few more startling paradoxes in literature than that it should have been this hater of rhymes who did more than any other writer to bring the art of rhyme to perfection in the English language. The bent of his intellect was classical, as we see in his astonishing *Observations on the Art of English Poesy*, in which he sets out to demonstrate "the unaptness of rhyme in poesy." The bent of his genius, on the other hand, was romantic, as was shown when, desiring to provide certain airs with words, he turned out—that seems, in the circumstances, to be the proper word—"after the fashion of the time, ear-pleasing rhymes without art." His songs can hardly be called "pot-boilers," but they were equally the children of chance. They were accidents, not fulfilments of desire. Luckily, Campion, writing them with music in his head, made his words themselves creatures of music. "In these English airs," he wrote in one of his prefaces, "I have chiefly aimed to couple my words and notes lovingly together." It would be impossible to improve on this as a description of his achievement in rhyme. Only one of his good poems, "Rosecheek'd Laura," is to be found among those which he wrote according to his pseudo-classical theory. All the rest are among those in which he coupled his words and notes lovingly together, not as a duty, but as a diversion.

Irish critics have sometimes hoped that certain qualities in Campion's music might be traced to the fact that his grandfather was "John Campion of Dublin, Ireland." The

art—and in Campion it was art, not artlessness—with which he made use of such rhymes as "hill" and "vigil," "sing" and "darling," besides his occasional use of internal rhyme and assonance (he rhymed "licens'd" and "silence," "strangeness" and "plainness," for example), has seemed to be more akin to the practices of Irish than of English poets. No evidence exists, however, as to whether Campion's grandfather was Irish in anything except his adventures. Of Campion himself we know that his training was English. He went to Peterhouse, and, though he left it without taking a degree, he was apparently regarded as one of the promising figures in the Cambridge of his day. "I know, Cambridge," apostrophized a writer of the time, "howsoever now old, thou hast some young. Bid them be chaste, yet suffer them to be witty. Let them be soundly learned, yet suffer them to be gentlemanlike qualified"; and the admonitory reference, though he had left Cambridge some time before, is said to have been to "sweet master Campion."

The rest of his career may be summarized in a few sentences. He was admitted to Gray's Inn, but was never called to the Bar. That he served as a soldier in France under Essex is inferred by his biographers. He afterwards practised as a doctor, but whether he studied medicine during his travels abroad or in England is not known. The most startling fact recorded of his maturity is that he acted as a go-between in bribing the Lieutenant of the Tower to resign his post and make way for a more pliable successor on the eve of the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. This he did on behalf of Sir Thomas Monson, one of whose dependants, as Mr. Percival Vivian says, "actually carried the poisoned tarts and jellies." Campion afterwards wrote a masque in celebration of the nuptials of the murderers. Both Monson and he, however, are universally believed to have been innocent agents in the crime. Campion boldly dedicated his *Third Book of Airs* to Monson after the first shadow of suspicion had passed.

As a poet, though he was no Puritan, he gives the

impression of having been a man of general virtue. It is not only that he added piety to amorousness. This might be regarded as flirting with religion. Did not he himself write, in explaining why he mixed pious and light songs: "He that in publishing any work hath a desire to content all palates must cater for them accordingly"? Even if the spiritual depth of his graver songs has been exaggerated, however, they are clearly the expression of a charming and tender spirit:

> Never weather-beaten sail more willing bent to shore,
> Never tired pilgrim's limbs affected slumber more,
> Than my wearied sprite now longs to fly out of my troubled breast.
> O come quickly, sweetest Lord, and take my soul to rest.

What has the "sweet master Campion" who wrote these lines to do with poisoned tarts and jellies? They are not ecstatic enough to have been written by a murderer.

## IV.—JOHN DONNE

IZAAK WALTON in his short life of Donne has painted a figure of almost seraphic beauty. When Donne was but a boy, he declares, it was said that the age had brought forth another Pico della Mirandola. As a young man in his twenties, he was a prince among lovers, who by his secret marriage with his patron's niece—"for love," says Walton, "is a flattering mischief"—purchased at first only the ruin of his hopes and a term in prison. Finally, we have the later Donne in the pulpit of St. Paul's represented, in a beautiful adaptation of one of his own images, as "always preaching to himself, like an angel from a cloud, though in none; carrying some, as St. Paul was, to Heaven in holy raptures, and enticing others by a sacred art and courtship to amend their lives." The picture is all of noble charm. Walton speaks in one place of "his winning behaviour—which, when it would entice, had a strange kind of elegant irresistible art." There are no harsh phrases even in the references to those irregularities of Donne's youth, by which he had wasted the fortune of £3,000—equal, I believe, to more than £30,000 of our money—bequeathed to him by his father, the ironmonger. "Mr. Donne's estate," writes Walton gently, referring to his penury at the time of his marriage, "was the greatest part spent in many and chargeable travels, books, and dear-bought experience." It is true that he quotes Donne's own confession of the irregularities of his early life. But he counts them of no significance. He also utters a sober reproof of Donne's secret marriage as "the remarkable error of his life." But how little he condemned it in his heart is clear when he goes on to tell us that God blessed Donne and his wife "with so mutual and cordial affections, as in the midst of their sufferings made their bread of sorrow taste more pleasantly than the ban-

quets of dull and low-spirited people." It was not for Walton to go in search of small blemishes in him whom he regarded as the wonder of the world—him whose grave mournful friends "strewed . . . with an abundance of curious and costly flowers," as Alexander the Great strewed the grave of "the famous Achilles." In that grave there was buried for Walton a whole age magnificent with wit, passion, adventure, piety and beauty. More than that, the burial of Donne was for him the burial of an inimitable Christian. He mourns over "that body, which once was a Temple of the Holy Ghost, and is now become a small quantity of Christian dust," and, as he mourns, he breaks off with the fervent prophecy, "But I shall see it reanimated." That is his valediction. If Donne is esteemed three hundred years after his death less as a great Christian than as a great pagan, this is because we now look for him in his writings rather than in his biography, in his poetry rather than in his prose, and in his *Songs and Sonnets* and *Elegies* rather than in his *Divine Poems*. We find, in some of these, abundant evidence of the existence of a dark angel at odds with the good angel of Walton's raptures. Donne suffered in his youth all the temptations of Faust. His thirst was not for salvation but for experience—experience of the intellect and experience of sensation. He has left it on record in one of his letters that he was a victim at one period of "the worst voluptuousness, an hydroptic, immoderate desire of human learning and languages." Faust in his cell can hardly have been a more insatiate student than Donne. "In the most unsettled days of his youth," Walton tells us, "his bed was not able to detain him beyond the hour of four in the morning; and it was no common business that drew him out of his chamber till past ten; all which time was employed in study; though he took great liberty after it." His thoroughness of study may be judged from the fact that "he left the resultance of 1,400 authors, most of them abridged and analyzed with his own hand." But we need not go beyond his poems for proof of the wilderness of learning that he had made his own. He was versed in

medicine and the law as well as in theology. He subdued astronomy, physiology, and geography to the needs of poetry. Nine Muses were not enough for him, even though they included Urania. He called in to their aid Galen and Copernicus. He did not go to the hills and the springs for his images, but to the laboratory and the library, and in the library the books that he consulted to the greatest effect were the works of men of science and learning, not of the great poets with whom London may almost be said to have been peopled during his lifetime. I do not think his verse or correspondence contains a single reference to Shakespeare, whose contemporary he was, having been born nine years later. The only great Elizabethan poet whom he seems to have regarded with interest and even friendship was Ben Jonson. Jonson's Catholicism may have been a link between them. But, more important than that, Jonson was, like Donne himself, an inflamed pedant. For each of them learning was the necessary robe of genius. Jonson, it is true, was a pedant of the classics, Donne of the speculative sciences; but both of them alike ate to a surfeit of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. It was, I think, because Donne was to so great a degree a pagan of the Renaissance, loving the proud things of the intellect more than the treasures of the humble, that he found it easy to abandon the Catholicism of his family for Protestantism. He undoubtedly became in later life a convinced and passionate Christian of the Protestant faith, but at the time when he first changed his religion he had none of the fanaticism of the pious convert. He wrote in an early satire as a man whom the intellect had liberated from dogma-worship. Nor did he ever lose this rationalist tolerance. "You know," he once wrote to a friend, "I have never imprisoned the word religion. . . . They" (the churches) "are all virtual beams of one sun." Few converts in those days of the wars of religion wrote with such wise reason of the creeds as did Donne in the lines:

> To adore or scorn an image, or protest,
> May all be bad; doubt wisely; in strange way
> To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;

> To sleep or run wrong is. On a huge hill,
> Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
> Reach her, about must and about must go;
> And what the hill's suddenness resists win so.

This surely was the heresy of an inquisitive mind, not the mood of a theologian. It betrays a tolerance springing from ardent doubt, not from ardent faith.

It is all in keeping with one's impression of the young Donne as a man setting out bravely in his cockle-shell on the oceans of knowledge and experience. He travels, though he knows not why he travels. He loves, though he knows not why he loves. He must escape from that "hydroptic, immoderate" thirst of experience by yielding to it. One fancies that it was in this spirit that he joined the expedition of Essex to Cadiz in 1596 and afterwards sailed to the Azores. Or partly in this spirit, for he himself leads one to think that his love-affairs may have had something to do with it. In the second of those prematurely realistic descriptions of storm and calm relating to the Azores voyage, he writes:

> Whether a rotten state, and hope of gain,
> Or to disuse me from the queasy pain
> Of being belov'd, and loving, or the thirst
> Of honour, or fair death, out pusht me first.

In these lines we get a glimpse of the Donne that has attracted most interest in recent years—the Donne who experienced more variously than any other poet of his time "the queasy pain of being beloved and loving." Donne was curious of adventures of many kinds, but in nothing more than in love. As a youth he gives the impression of having been an Odysseus of love, a man of many wiles and many travels. He was a virile neurotic, comparable in some points to Baudelaire, who was a sensualist of the mind even more than of the body. His sensibilities were different as well as less of a piece, but he had something of Baudelaire's taste for hideous and shocking aspects of lust. One is not surprised to find among his poems that "heroical epistle of Sappho to Philaenis," in which he makes himself the casuist

of forbidden things. His studies of sensuality, however, are for the most part normal, even in their grossness. There was in him more of the Yahoo than of the decadent. There was an excremental element in his genius as in the genius of that other gloomy dean, Jonathan Swift. Donne and Swift were alike satirists born under Saturn. They laughed more frequently from disillusion than from happiness. Donne, it must be admitted, turned his disillusion to charming as well as hideous uses. *Go and Catch a Falling Star* is but one of a series of delightful lyrics in disparagement of women. In several of the *Elegies,* however, he throws away his lute and comes to the satirist's more prosaic business. He writes frankly as a man in search of bodily experiences:

> Whoever loves, if he do not propose
> The right true end of love, he's one that goes
> To sea for nothing but to make him sick.

In *Love's Progress* he lets his fancy dwell on the detailed geography of a woman's body, with the sick imagination of a schoolboy, till the beautiful seems almost beastly. In *The Anagram* and *The Comparison* he plays the Yahoo at the expense of all women by the similes he uses in insulting two of them. In *The Perfume* he relates the story of an intrigue with a girl whose father discovered his presence in the house as a result of his using scent. Donne's jest about this is suggestive of his uncontrollable passion for ugliness:

> Had it been some bad smell, he would have thought
> That his own feet, or breath, that smell had brought.

It may be contended that in *The Perfume* he was describing an imaginary experience, and indeed we have his own words on record: "I did best when I had least truth for my subjects." But even if we did not accept Mr. Gosse's common-sense explanation of these words, we should feel that the details of the story have a vividness that springs straight from reality. It is difficult to believe that Donne had not actually lived in terror of the gigantic manservant who was set to spy on the lovers:

> The grim eight-foot-high iron-bound serving-man
> That oft names God in oaths, and only then;
> He that to bar the first gate doth as wide
> As the great Rhodian Colossus stride,
> Which, if in hell no other pains there were,
> Makes me fear hell, because he must be there.

But the most interesting of all the sensual intrigues of Donne, from the point of view of biography, especially since Mr. Gosse gave it such eminent significance in that *Life of John Donne* in which he made a living man out of a mummy, is that of which we have the story in *Jealousy* and *His Parting from Her*. It is another story of furtive and forbidden love. Its theme is an intrigue carried on under a

> Husband's towering eyes,
> That flamed with oily sweat of jealousy.

A characteristic touch of grimness is added to the story by making the husband a deformed man. Donne, however, merely laughs at his deformity, as he bids the lady laugh at the jealousy that reduces her to tears:

> O give him many thanks, he is courteous,
> That in suspecting kindly warneth us.
> We must not, as we used, flout openly,
> In scoffing riddles, his deformity;
> Nor at his board together being sat,
> With words, nor touch, scarce looks adulterate.

And he proposes that, now that the husband seems to have discovered them, they shall henceforth carry on their intrigue at some distance from where

> He, swol'n and pampered with great fare,
> Sits down and snorts, cag'd in his basket chair.

It is an extraordinary story, if it is true. It throws a scarcely less extraordinary light on the nature of Donne's mind, if he invented it. At the same time, I do not think the events it relates played the important part which Mr. Gosse assigns to them in Donne's spiritual biography. It is impossible to read Mr. Gosse's two volumes without getting the impres-

sion that "the deplorable but eventful liaison," as he calls it, was the most fruitful occurrence in Donne's life as a poet. He discovers traces of it in one great poem after another—even in the *Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day,* which is commonly supposed to relate to the Countess of Bedford, and in *The Funeral,* the theme of which Professor Grierson takes to be the mother of George Herbert. I confess that the oftener I read the poetry of Donne the more firmly I become convinced that, far from being primarily the poet of desire gratified and satiated, he is essentially the poet of frustrated love. He is often described by the historians of literature as the poet who finally broke down the tradition of Platonic love. I believe that, far from this being the case, he is the supreme example of a Platonic lover among the English poets. He was usually Platonic under protest, but at other times exultantly so. Whether he finally overcame the more consistent Platonism of his mistress by the impassioned logic of *The Ecstasy* we have no means of knowing. If he did, it would be difficult to resist the conclusion that the lady who wished to continue to be his passionate friend and to ignore the physical side of love was Anne More, whom he afterwards married. If not, we may look for her where we will, whether in Magdalen Herbert (already a young widow who had borne ten children when he first met her) or in the Countess of Bedford or in another. The name is not important, and one is not concerned to know it, especially when one remembers Donne's alarming curse on :

> Whoever guesses, thinks, or dreams he knows
> Who is my mistress.

One sort of readers will go on speculating, hoping to discover real people in the shadows, as they speculate about Swift's Stella and Vanessa and his relations to them. It is enough for us to feel, however, that these poems railing at or glorying in Platonic love are no mere goldsmith's compliments, like the rhymed letters to Mrs. Herbert and Lady Bedford. Miracles of this sort are not wrought save by the

heart. We do not find in them the underground and sardonic element that appears in so much of Donne's merely amorous work. We no longer see him as a sort of Vulcan hammering out the poetry of base love, raucous, powerful, mocking. He becomes in them a child of Apollo, as far as his temperament will allow him. He makes music of so grave and stately a beauty that one begins to wonder at all the critics who have found fault with his rhythms—from Ben Jonson, who said that "for not keeping accent, Donne deserved hanging," down to Coleridge, who declared that his "muse on dromedary trots," and described him as "rhyme's sturdy cripple." Coleridge's quatrain on Donne is, without doubt, an unequalled masterpiece of epigrammatic criticism. But Donne rode no dromedary. In his greatest poems he rides Pegasus like a master, even if he does weigh the poor beast down by carrying an encyclopædia in his saddle-bags.

Not only does Donne remain a learned man on his Pegasus, however: he also remains a humorist, a serious fantastic. Humour and passion pursue each other through the labyrinth of his being, as we find in those two beautiful poems, *The Relic* and *The Funeral,* addressed to the lady who had given him a bracelet of her hair. In the former he foretells what will happen if ever his grave is broken up and his skeleton discovered with

> A bracelet of bright hair about the bone.

People will fancy, he declares, that the bracelet is a device of lovers

> To make their souls at the last busy day
> Meet at the grave and make a little stay.

Bone and bracelet will be worshipped as relics—the relics of a Magdalen and her lover. He conjectures with a quiet smile:

> All women shall adore us, and some men.

He warns his worshippers, however, that the facts are far different from what they imagine, and tells the miracle-

seekers what in reality were "the miracles we harmless lovers wrought":

> First we loved well and faithfully,
> Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why;
> Difference of sex no more we knew
> Than our guardian angels do;
> Coming and going, we
> Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
> Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals,
> Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free:
> These miracles we did; but now, alas!
> All measure, and all language, I should pass,
> Should I tell what a miracle she was.

In *The Funeral* he returns to the same theme:

> Whoever comes to shroud me do not harm
> Nor question much
> That subtle wreath of hair that crowns my arm;
> The mystery, the sign you must not touch,
> For 'tis my outward soul.

In this poem, however, he finds less consolation than before in the too miraculous nobleness of their love:

> Whate'er she meant by it, bury it with me,
> For since I am
> Love's martyr, it might breed idolatry,
> If into other hands these relics came;
> As 'twas humility
> To afford to it all that a soul can do,
> So, 'tis some bravery,
> That, since you would have none of me, I bury some
> of you.

In *The Blossom* he is in a still more earthly mood, and declares that, if his mistress remains obdurate, he will return to London, where he will find another mistress:

> As glad to have my body as my mind.

*The Primrose* is a further appeal for a less intellectual love:

> Should she
> Be more than woman, she would get above
> All thought of sex, and think to move
> My heart to study her, and not to love.

If we turn back to *The Undertaking*, however, we find Donne boasting once more of the miraculous purity of a love which it would be useless to communicate to other men, since, there being no other mistress to love in the same kind, they "would love but as before." Hence he will keep the tale a secret:

> If, as I have, you also do,
> Virtue attir'd in woman see,
> And dare love that, and say so too,
> And forget the He and She:
>
> And if this love, though placed so,
> From profane men you hide,
> Which will no faith on this bestow,
> Or, if they do, deride:
>
> Then you have done a braver thing
> Than all the Worthies did;
> And a braver thence will spring,
> Which is, to keep that hid.

It seems to me, in view of this remarkable series of poems, that it is useless to look in Donne for a single consistent attitude to love. His poems take us round the entire compass of love as the work of no other English poet—not even, perhaps, Browning's—does. He was by destiny the complete experimentalist in love in English literature. He passed through phase after phase of the love of the body only, phase after phase of the love of the soul only, and ended as the poet of the perfect marriage. In his youth he was a gay—but was he ever really gay?—free-lover, who sang jestingly:

> How happy were our sires in ancient times,
> Who held plurality of loves no crime!

But even then he looks forward, not without cynicism, to a time when he

> Shall not so easily be to change dispos'd,
> Nor to the arts of several eyes obeying;
> But beauty with true worth securely weighing,
> Which, being found assembled in some one,
> We'll love her ever, and love her alone.

By the time he writes *The Ecstasy* the victim of the body has become the protesting victim of the soul. He cries out against a love that is merely an ecstatic friendship:

> But O alas, so long, so far,
> Our bodies why do we forbear?

He pleads for the recognition of the body, contending that it is not the enemy but the companion of the soul:

> Soul into the soul may flow
> Though it to body first repair.

The realistic philosophy of love has never been set forth with greater intellectual vehemence:

> So must pure lovers' souls descend
> T' affections and to faculties,
> Which sense may reach and apprehend,
> Else a great Prince in prison lies.
> To our bodies turn we then, that so
> Weak men on love reveal'd may look;
> Love's mysteries in souls do grow
> But yet the body is the book.

I, for one, find it impossible to believe that all this passionate verse—verse in which we find the quintessence of Donne's genius—was a mere utterance of abstract thoughts into the wind. Donne, as has been pointed out, was more than most writers a poet of personal experience. His greatest poetry was born of struggle and conflict in the obscure depths of the soul as surely as was the religion of St. Paul. I doubt if, in the history of his genius, any event ever happened of equal importance to his meeting with the lady who first set going in his brain that fevered dialogue between the body and the soul. Had he been less of a frustrated lover, less of a martyr, in whom love's

> Art did express
> A quintessence even from nothingness,
> From dull privations and lean emptiness,

much of his greatest poetry, it seems to me, would never have been written.

One cannot, unfortunately, write the history of the progress of Donne's genius save by inference and guessing.

His poems were not, with some unimportant exceptions, published in his lifetime. He did not arrange them in chronological or in any sort of order. His poem on the flea that has bitten both him and his inamorata comes after the triumphant *Anniversary*, and but a page or two before the *Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day*. Hence there is no means of telling how far we are indebted to the Platonism of one woman, how much to his marriage with another, for the enrichment of his genius. Such a poem as *The Canonization* can be interpreted either in a Platonic sense or as a poem written to Anne More, who was to bring him both imprisonment and the liberty of love. It is, in either case, written in defence of his love against some who censured him for it:

> For God's sake, hold your tongue, and let me love.

In the last verses of the poem Donne proclaims that his love cannot be measured by the standards of the vulgar:

> We can die by it, if not live by love,
> And if unfit for tombs or hearse
> Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
> And, if no piece of chronicle we prove,
> We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
> As well a well-wrought urn becomes
> The greatest ashes as half-acre tombs,
> And by these hymns all shall approve
> Us canoniz'd by love:
>
> And thus invoke us: "You whom reverend love
> Made one another's hermitage;
> You to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
> Who did the whole world's soul contract and drove
> Into the glasses of your eyes
> (So made such mirrors, and such spies,
> That they did all to you epitomize),
> Countries, towns, courts. Beg from above
> A pattern of your love!"

According to Walton, it was to his wife that Donne addressed the beautiful verses beginning:

> Sweetest love, I do not go
> For weariness of thee;

as well as the series of *Valedictions*. Of many of the other love-poems, however, we can measure the intensity but not guess the occasion. All that we can say with confidence when we have read them is that, after we have followed one tributary and another leading down to the ultimate Thames of his genius, we know that his progress as a lover was a progress from infidelity to fidelity, from wandering amorousness to deep and enduring passion. The image that is finally stamped on his greatest work is not that of a roving adulterer, but of a monotheist of love. It is true that there is enough Don-Juanism in the poems to have led even Sir Thomas Browne to think of Donne's verse rather as a confession of his sins than as a golden book of love. Browne's quaint poem, *To the deceased Author, before the Promiscuous printing of his Poems, the Looser Sort, with the Religious*, is so little known that it may be quoted in full as the expression of one point of view in regard to Donne's work:

> When thy loose raptures, Donne, shall meet with those
> That do confine
> Tuning unto the duller line,
> And sing not but in sanctified prose,
> How will they, with sharper eyes,
> The foreskin of thy fancy circumcise,
> And fear thy wantonness should now begin
> Example, that hath ceased to be sin!
> And that fear fans their heat; whilst knowing eyes
> Will not admire
> At this strange fire
> That here is mingled with thy sacrifice,
> But dare read even thy wanton story
> As thy confession, not thy glory;
> And will so envy both to future times,
> That they would buy thy goodness with thy crimes.

To the modern reader, on the contrary, it will seem that there is as much divinity in the best of the love-poems as in the best of the religious ones. Donne's last word as a secular poet may well be regarded as having been uttered in that great poem in celebration of lasting

love, *The Anniversary*, which closes with so majestic a sweep:

> Here upon earth we are kings, and none but we
> Can be such kings, nor of such subjects be.
> Who is so safe as we, where none can do
> Treason to us, except one of us two?
> True and false fears let us refrain;
> Let us love nobly, and live, and add again
> Years and years unto years, till we attain
> To write three-score: this is the second of our reign.

Donne's conversion as a lover was obviously as complete and revolutionary as his conversion in religion.

It is said, indeed, to have led to his conversion to passionate religion. When his marriage with Sir George More's sixteen-year-old daughter brought him at first only imprisonment and poverty, he summed up the sorrows of the situation in the famous line—a line which has some additional interest as suggesting the correct pronunciation of his name:

> John Donne; Anne Donne; Undone.

His married life, however, in spite of a succession of miseries due to ill-health, debt and thwarted ambition, seems to have been happy beyond prophecy; and when at the end of sixteen years his wife died in childbed, after having borne him twelve children, a religious crisis resulted that turned his conventional churchmanship into sanctity. His original change from Catholicism to Protestantism has been already mentioned. Most of the authorities are agreed, however, that this was a conversion in a formal rather than in a spiritual sense. Even when he took Holy Orders in 1615, at the age of forty-two, he appears to have done so less in answer to any impulse to a religious life from within than because, with the downfall of Somerset, all hope of advancement through his legal attainments was brought to an end. Undoubtedly, as far back as 1612, he had thought of entering the Church. But we find him at the end of 1613 writing an epithalamium for the murderers of Sir Thomas Overbury. It is a curious fact that three great poets—Donne, Ben

Jonson, and Campion—appear, though innocently enough, in the story of the Countess of Essex's sordid crime. Donne's temper at the time is still clearly that of a man of the world. His jest at the expense of Sir Walter Raleigh, then in the Tower, is the jest of an ungenerous worldling. Even after his admission into the Church he reveals himself as ungenerously morose when the Countess of Bedford, in trouble about her own extravagances, can afford him no more than £30 to pay his debts. The truth is, to be forty and a failure is an affliction that might sour even a healthy nature. The effect on a man of Donne's ambitious and melancholy temperament, together with the memory of his dissipated health and his dissipated fortune, and the spectacle of a long family in constant process of increase, must have been disastrous. To such a man poverty and neglected merit are a prison, as they were to Swift. One thinks of each of them as a lion in a cage, ever growing less and less patient of his bars. Shakespeare and Shelley had in them some volatile element that could, one feels, have escaped through the bars and sung above the ground. Donne and Swift were morbid men suffering from claustrophobia. They were pent and imprisoned spirits, hating the walls that seemed to threaten to close in on them and crush them. In his poems and letters Donne is haunted especially by three images—the hospital, the prison, and the grave. Disease, I think, preyed on his mind even more terrifyingly than warped ambition. "Put all the miseries that man is subject to together," he exclaims in one of the passages in that luxuriant anthology that Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith has made from the *Sermons;* "sickness is more than all. . . . In poverty I lack but other things; in banishment I lack but other men; but in sickness I lack myself." Walton declares that it was from consumption that Donne suffered; but he had probably the seeds of many diseases. In some of his letters he dwells miserably on the symptoms of his illnesses. At one time, his sickness "hath so much of a cramp that it wrests the sinews, so much of tetane that it withdraws and pulls the mouth, and so much of the gout . . . that it is not

like to be cured. . . . I shall," he adds, "be in this world, like a porter in a great house, but seldomest abroad; I shall have many things to make me weary, and yet not get leave to be gone." Even after his conversion he felt drawn to a morbid insistence on the details of his ill-health. Those amazing records which he wrote while lying ill in bed in October, 1623, give us a realistic study of a sick-bed and its circumstances, the gloom of which is hardly even lightened by his odd account of the disappearance of his sense of taste: "My taste is not gone away, but gone up to sit at David's table; my stomach is not gone, but gone upwards toward the Supper of the Lamb." "I am mine own ghost," he cries, "and rather affright my beholders than interest them. . . . Miserable and inhuman fortune, when I must practise my lying in the grave by lying still."

It does not surprise one to learn that a man thus assailed by wretchedness and given to looking in the mirror of his own bodily corruptions was often tempted, by "a sickly inclination," to commit suicide, and that he even wrote, though he did not dare to publish, an apology for suicide on religious grounds, his famous and little-read *Biathanatos*. The family crest of the Donnes was a sheaf of snakes, and these symbolize well enough the brood of temptations that twisted about in this unfortunate Christian's bosom. Donne, in the days of his salvation, abandoned the family crest for a new one—Christ crucified on an anchor. But he might well have left the snakes writhing about the anchor. He remained a tempted man to the end. One wishes that the *Sermons* threw more light on his later personal life than they do. But perhaps that is too much to expect of sermons. There is no form of literature less personal except a leading article. The preacher usually regards himself as a mouthpiece rather than as a man giving expression to himself. In the circumstances what surprises us is that the *Sermons* reveal, not so little, but so much of Donne. Indeed, they make us feel far more intimate with Donne than do his private letters, many of which are little more than exercises in composition. As a preacher, no less than as a poet, he

is inflamed by the creative heat. He shows the same vehemence of fancy in the presence of the divine and infernal universe—a vehemence that prevents even his most far-sought extravagances from disgusting us as do the lukewarm follies of the Euphuists. Undoubtedly the modern reader smiles when Donne, explaining that man can be an enemy of God as the mouse can be an enemy to the elephant, goes on to speak of "God who is not only a multiplied elephant, millions of elephants multiplied into one, but a multiplied world, a multiplied all, all that can be conceived by us, infinite many times over; nay (if we may dare to say so) a multiplied God, a God that hath the millions of the heathens' gods in Himself alone." But at the same time one finds oneself taking a serious pleasure in the huge sorites of quips and fancies in which he loves to present the divine argument. Nine out of ten readers of the *Sermons*, I imagine, will be first attracted to them through love of the poems. They need not be surprised if they do not immediately enjoy them. The dust of the pulpit lies on them thickly enough. As one goes on reading them, however, one becomes suddenly aware of their florid and exiled beauty. One sees beyond their local theology to the passion of a great suffering artist. Here are sentences that express the Paradise, the Purgatory, and the Hell of John Donne's soul. A noble imagination is at work—a grave-digging imagination, but also an imagination that is at home among the stars. One can open Mr. Pearsall Smith's anthology almost at random and be sure of lighting on a passage which gives us a characteristic movement in the symphony of horror and hope that was Donne's contribution to the art of prose. Listen to this, for example, from a sermon preached in St. Paul's in January, 1626:

> Let me wither and wear out mine age in a discomfortable, in an unwholesome, in a penurious prison, and so pay my debts with my bones, and recompense the wastefulness of my youth with the beggary of mine age; let me wither in a spittle under sharp, and foul, and infamous diseases, and so recompense the wantonness of my youth with that loathsomeness in mine age; yet, if God withdraw not his

spiritual blessings, his grace, his patience, if I can call my suffering his doing, my passion his action, all this that is temporal is but a caterpillar got into one corner of my garden, but a mildew fallen upon one acre of my corn: the body of all, the substance of all is safe, so long as the soul is safe.

The self-contempt with which his imagination loved to intoxicate itself finds more lavish expression in a passage in a sermon delivered on Easter Sunday two years later:

When I consider what I was in my parents' loins (a substance unworthy of a word, unworthy of a thought), when I consider what I am now (a volume of diseases bound up together; a dry cinder, if I look for natural, for radical moisture; and yet a sponge, a bottle of overflowing Rheums, if I consider accidental; an aged child, a grey-headed infant, and but the ghost of mine own youth), when I consider what I shall be at last, by the hand of death, in my grave (first, but putrefaction, and, not so much as putrefaction; I shall not be able to send forth so much as ill air, not any air at all, but shall be all insipid, tasteless, savourless, dust; for a while, all worms, and after a while, not so much as worms, sordid, senseless, nameless dust), when I consider the past, and present, and future state of this body, in this world, I am able to conceive, able to express the worst that can befall it in nature, and the worst that can be inflicted on it by man, or fortune. But the least degree of glory that God hath prepared for that body in heaven, I am not able to express, not able to conceive.

Excerpts of great prose seldom give us that rounded and final beauty which we expect in a work of art; and the reader of Donne's *Sermons* in their latest form will be wise if he comes to them expecting to find beauty piecemeal and tarnished though in profusion. He will be wise, too, not to expect too many passages of the same intimate kind as that famous confession in regard to prayer which Mr. Pearsall Smith quotes, and which no writer on Donne can afford not to quote:

I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door. I talk on, in the same posture of praying; eyes lifted up; knees bowed down; as though I prayed to God; and, if God, or his Angels should ask me, when I thought last of God in that prayer, I cannot tell. Sometimes I find that I had forgot what I was

about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterday's pleasures, a fear of to-morrow's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an anything, a nothing, a fancy, a chimera in my brain troubles me in my prayer.

If Donne had written much prose in this kind, his *Sermons* would be as famous as the writings of any of the saints since the days of the Apostles.

Even as it is, there is no other Elizabethan man of letters whose personality is an island with a crooked shore, inviting us into a thousand bays and creeks and river-mouths, to the same degree as the personality that expressed itself in the poems, sermons, and life of John Donne. It is a mysterious and at times repellent island. It lies only intermittently in the sun. A fog hangs around its coast, and at the base of its most radiant mountain-tops there is, as a rule, a miasma-infested swamp. There are jewels to be found scattered among its rocks and over its surface, and by miners in the dark. It is richer, indeed, in jewels and precious metals and curious ornaments than in flowers. The shepherd on the hillside seldom tells his tale uninterrupted. Strange rites in honour of ancient infernal deities that delight in death are practised in hidden places, and the echo of these reaches him on the sighs of the wind and makes him shudder even as he looks at his beloved. It is an island with a cemetery smell. The chief figure who haunts it is a living man in a winding-sheet. It is, no doubt, Walton's story of the last days of Donne's life that makes us, as we read even the sermons and the love-poems, so aware of this ghostly apparition. Donne, it will be remembered, almost on the eve of his death, dressed himself in a winding-sheet, "tied with knots at his head and feet," and stood on a wooden urn with his eyes shut, and "with so much of the sheet turned aside as might show his lean, pale, and death-like face," while a painter made a sketch of him for his funeral monument. He then had the picture placed at his bedside, to which he summoned his friends and servants in order to bid them farewell. As he lay awaiting death, he said characteristically, "I were miserable if I might not

die," and then repeatedly, in a faint voice, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done." At the very end he lost his speech, and "as his soul ascended and his last breath departed from him he closed his eyes, and then disposed his hands and body into such a posture as required not the least alteration by those that came to shroud him." It was a strange chance that preserved his spectral monument almost uninjured when St. Paul's was burned down in the Great Fire, and no other monument in the cathedral escaped. Among all his fantasies none remains in the imagination more despotically than this last fanciful game of dying. Donne, however, remained in all respects a fantastic to the last, as we may see in that hymn which he wrote eight days before the end, tricked out with queer geography, and so anciently egoistic amid its worship, as in the verse:

> Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
> Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
> Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
> That this is my south-west discovery,
> *Per fretum febris*, by these straits to die.

Donne was the poet-geographer of himself, his mistresses, and his God. Other poets of his time dived deeper and soared to greater altitudes, but none travelled so far, so curiously, and in such out-of-the-way places, now hurrying like a nervous fugitive, and now in the exultation of the first man in a new-found land.

## V.—HORACE WALPOLE

HORACE WALPOLE was a dainty rogue in porcelain who walked badly. In his best days, as he records in one of his letters, it was said of him that he "tripped like a pewit." "If I do not flatter myself," he wrote when he was just under sixty, "my march at present is more like a dabchick's." A lady has left a description of him entering a room, "knees bent, and feet on tiptoe as if afraid of a wet floor." When his feet were not swollen with the gout, they were so slender, he said, that he "could dance a minuet on a silver penny." He was ridiculously lean, and his hands were crooked with his unmerited disease. An invalid, a caricature of the birds, and not particularly well dressed in spite of his lavender suit and partridge silk stockings, he has nevertheless contrived to leave in his letters an impression of almost perfect grace and dandyism. He had all the airs of a beau. He affected coolness, disdain, amateurishness, triviality. He was a china figure of insolence. He lived on the mantelpiece, and regarded everything that happened on the floor as a rather low joke that could not be helped. He warmed into humanity in his friendships and in his defence of the house of Walpole; but if he descended from his mantelpiece, it was more likely to be in order to feed a squirrel than to save an empire. His most common image of the world was a puppet-show. He saw kings, prime ministers, and men of genius alike about the size of dolls. When George II. died, he wrote a brief note to Thomas Brand: "Dear Brand—You love laughing; there is a king dead; can you help coming to town?" That represents his measure of things. Those who love laughing will laugh all the more when they discover that, a week earlier, Walpole had written a letter, rotund, fulsome, and in the language

of the bended knee, begging Lord Bute to be allowed to kiss the Prince of Wales's hand. His attitude to the Court he described to George Montagu as "mixing extreme politeness with extreme indifference." His politeness, like his indifference, was but play at the expense of a solemn world. "I wrote to Lord Bute," he informed Montague; "thrust all the *unexpecteds, want of ambition, disinterestedness,* etc., that I could amass, gilded with as much duty, affection, zeal, etc., as possible." He frankly professed relief that he had not after all to go to Court and act out the extravagant compliments he had written. "Was ever so agreeable a man as King George the Second," he wrote, "to die the very day it was necessary to save me from ridicule?" "For my part," he adds later in the same spirit, "my man Harry will always be a favourite; he tells me all the amusing news; he first told me of the late Prince of Wales's death, and to-day of the King's." It is not that Walpole was a republican of the school of Plutarch. He was merely a toy republican who enjoyed being insolent at the expense of kings, and behind their backs. He was scarcely capable of open rudeness in the fashion of Beau Brummell's "Who's your fat friend?" His ridicule was never a public display; it was a secret treasured for his friends. He was the greatest private entertainer of the eighteenth century, and he ridiculed the great, as people say, for the love of diversion. "I always write the thoughts of the moment," he told the dearest of his friends, Conway, "and even laugh to divert the person I am writing to, without any ill will on the subjects I mention." His letters are for the most part those of a good-natured man.

It is not that he was above the foible—it was barely more than that—of hatred. He did not trouble greatly about enemies of his own, but he never could forgive the enemies of Sir Robert Walpole. His ridicule of the Duke of Newcastle goes far beyond diversion. It is the baiting of a mean and treacherous animal, whose teeth were "tumbling out," and whose mouth was "tumbling in." He rejoices in the exposure of the dribbling indignity of the Duke, as when

he describes him going to Court on becoming Prime Minister in 1754:

> On Friday this august remnant of the Pelhams went to Court for the first time. At the foot of the stairs he cried and sunk down; the yeomen of the guard were forced to drag him up under the arms. When the closet-door opened, he flung himself at his length at the King's feet, sobbed, and cried, "God bless your Majesty! God preserve your Majesty!" and lay there howling and embracing the King's knees, with one foot so extended that my Lord Coventry, who was *luckily* in waiting, and begged the standers-by to retire, with, "For God's sake, gentlemen, don't look at a great man in distress!" endeavouring to shut the door, caught his grace's foot, and made him roar with pain.

The caricature of the Duke is equally merciless in the description of George II.'s funeral in the Abbey, in which the "burlesque Duke" is introduced as comic relief into the solemn picture:

> He fell into a fit of crying the moment he came into the chapel, and flung himself back in a stall, the Archbishop hovering over him with a smelling-bottle; but in two minutes his curiosity got the better of his hypocrisy, and he ran about the chapel with his glass to spy who was or was not there, spying with one hand and mopping his eyes with the other. Then returned the fear of catching cold; and the Duke of Cumberland, who was sinking with heat, felt himself weighed down, and turning round found it was the Duke of Newcastle standing upon his train to avoid the chill of the marble.

Walpole, indeed, broke through his habit of public decorum in his persecution of the Duke; and he tells how on one occasion at a ball at Bedford House he and Brand and George Selwyn plagued the pitiful old creature, who "wriggled, and shuffled, and lisped, and winked, and spied" his way through the company, with a conversation at his expense carried on in stage whispers. There was never a more loyal son than Horace Walpole. He offered up a Prime Minister daily as a sacrifice at Sir Robert's tomb.

At the same time, his aversions were not always assumed as part of a family inheritance. He had by temperament a

small opinion of men and women outside the circle of his affections. It was his first instinct to disparage. He even described his great friend Madame du Deffand, at the first time of meeting her, as "an old blind debauchée of wit." His comments on the men of genius of his time are almost all written in a vein of satirical intolerance. He spoke ill of Sterne and Dr. Johnson, of Fielding and Richardson, of Boswell and Goldsmith. Goldsmith he found "silly"; he was "an idiot with once or twice a fit of parts." Boswell's *Tour of the Hebrides* was "the story of a mountebank and his zany." Walpole felt doubly justified in disliking Johnson owing to the criticism of Gray in the *Lives of the Poets*. He would not even, when Johnson died, subscribe to a monument. A circular letter asking for a subscription was sent to him, signed by Burke, Boswell, and Reynolds. "I would not deign to write an answer," Walpole told the Miss Berrys, "but sent down word by my footman, as I would have done to parish officers with a brief, that I would not subscribe." Walpole does not appear in this incident the "sweet-tempered creature" he had earlier claimed to be. His pose is that of a schoolgirl in a cutting mood. At the same time his judgment of Johnson has an element of truth in it. "Though he was good-natured at bottom," he said of him, "he was very ill-natured at top." It has often been said of Walpole that, in his attitude to contemporary men of genius, he was influenced mainly by their position in Society—that he regarded an author who was not a gentleman as being necessarily an inferior author. This is hardly fair. The contemporary of whom he thought most highly was Gray, the son of a money broker. He did not spare Lady Mary Wortley Montagu any more than Richardson. If he found an author offensive, it was more likely to be owing to a fastidious distaste for low life than to an aristocratic distaste for low birth; and to him Bohemianism was the lowest of low life. It was certainly Fielding's Bohemianism that disgusted him. He relates how two of his friends called on Fielding one evening and found him "banqueting with a blind man, a woman, and three Irish-

men, on some cold mutton and a bone of ham, both in one dish, and the dirtiest cloth." Horace Walpole's daintiness recoiled from the spirit of an author who did not know how to sup decently. If he found Boswell's *Johnson* tedious, it was no doubt partly due to his inability to reconcile himself to Johnson's table manners. It can hardly be denied that he was unnaturally sensitive to surface impressions. He was a great observer of manners, but not a great portrayer of character. He knew men in their absurd actions rather than in their motives—even their absurd motives. He never admits us into the springs of action in his portraits as Saint-Simon does. He was too studied a believer in the puppetry of men and women to make them more than ridiculous. And unquestionably the vain race of authors lent itself admirably to his love of caricature. His account of the vanity of Gibbon, whose history he admired this side enthusiasm, shows how he delighted in playing with an egoistic author as with a trout:

> You will be diverted to hear that Mr. Gibbon has quarrelled with me. He lent me his second volume in the middle of November. I returned it with a most civil panegyric. He came for more incense. I gave it, but, alas, with too much sincerity! I added, "Mr. Gibbon, I am sorry *you* should have pitched on so disgusting a subject as the Constantinopolitan History. There is so much of the Arians and Eunomians, and semi-Pelagians; and there is such a strange contrast between Roman and Gothic manners, and so little harmony between a Consul Sabinus and a Ricimer, Duke of the palace, that though you have written the story as well as it could be written, I fear few will have patience to read it." He coloured; all his round features squeezed themselves into sharp angles; he screwed up his button-mouth, and rapping his snuff-box, said, "It had never been put together before"—*so well* he meant to add—but gulped it. He meant *so well* certainly, for Tillemont, whom he quotes in every page, has done the very thing. Well, from that hour to this I have never seen him, though he used to call once or twice a week; nor has he sent me the third volume, as he promised. I well knew his vanity, even about his ridiculous face and person, but thought he had too much sense to avow it so palpably.

"So much," he concludes, "for literature and its fops." The comic spirit leans to an under-estimate rather than an

over-estimate of human nature, and the airs the authors gave themselves were not only a breach of his code, but an invitation to his contempt. "You know," he once wrote, "I shun authors, and would never have been one myself if it obliged me to keep such bad company. They are always in earnest and think their profession serious, and will dwell upon trifles and reverence learning. I laugh at all these things, and write only to laugh at them and divert myself. None of us are authors of any consequence, and it is the most ridiculous of all vanities to be vain of being *mediocre*." He followed the Chinese school of manners and made light of his own writings. "What have I written," he asks, "that was worth remembering, even by myself?" "It would be affected," he tells Gray, "to say I am indifferent to fame. I certainly am not, but I am indifferent to almost anything I have done to acquire it. The greater part are mere compilations; and no wonder they are, as you say, incorrect when they were commonly written with people in the room."

It is generally assumed that, in speaking lightly of himself, Walpole was merely posturing. To me it seems that he was sincere enough. He had a sense of greatness in literature, as is shown by his reverence of Shakespeare, and he was too much of a realist not to see that his own writings at their best were trifles beside the monuments of the poets. He felt that he was doing little things in a little age. He was diffident both for his times and for himself. So difficult do some writers find it to believe that there was any deep genuineness in him that they ask us to regard even his enthusiasm for great literature as a pretence. They do not realize that the secret of his attraction for us is that he was an enthusiast disguised as an eighteenth-century man of fashion. His airs and graces were not the result of languor, but of his pleasure in wearing a mask. He was quick, responsive, excitable, and only withdrew into the similitude of a china figure, as Diogenes into his tub, through philosophy. The truth is, the only dandies who are tolerable are those whose dandyism is a cloak of reserve. Our interest in

character is largely an interest in contradictions of this kind. The beau capable of breaking into excitement awakens our curiosity, as does the conqueror stooping to a humane action, the Puritan caught in the net of the senses, or the pacifist in a rage of violence. The average man, whom one knows superficially, is a formula, or seems to live the life of a formula. That is why we find him dull. The characters who interest us in history and literature, on the other hand, are perpetually giving the lie to the formulæ we invent, and are bound to invent, for them. They give us pleasure not by confirming us, but by surprising us. It seems to me absurd, then, to regard Walpole's air of indifference as the only real thing about him and to question his raptures. From his first travels among the Alps with Gray down to his senile letters to Hannah More about the French Revolution, we see him as a man almost hysterical in the intensity of his sensations, whether of joy or of horror. He lived for his sensations like an æsthete. He wrote of himself as "I, who am as constant at a fire as George Selwyn at an execution." If he cared for the crownings of kings and such occasions, it was because he took a childish delight in the fireworks and illuminations.

He had the keen spirit of a masquerader. Masquerades, he declared, were "one of my ancient passions," and we find him as an elderly man dressing out "a thousand young Conways and Cholmondeleys" for an entertainment of the kind, and going "with more pleasure to see them pleased than when I formerly delighted in that diversion myself." He was equally an enthusiast in his hobbies and his tastes. He rejoiced to get back in May to Strawberry Hill, "where my two passions, lilacs and nightingales, are in bloom." He could not have made his collections or built his battlements in a mood of indifference. In his love of mediæval ruins he showed himself a Goth-intoxicated man. As for Strawberry Hill itself, the result may have been a ridiculous mouse, but it took a mountain of enthusiasm to produce it. Walpole's own description of his house and its surroundings has an exquisite charm that almost makes one love the

place as he did. "It is a little plaything house," he told Conway, "that I got out of Mrs. Chenevix's shop, and is the prettiest bauble you ever saw. It is set in enamelled meadows, with filigree hedges:

> A small Euphrates through the piece is roll'd,
> And little finches wave their wings in gold."

He goes on to decorate the theme with comic and fanciful properties:

> Two delightful roads that you would call dusty supply me continually with coaches and chaises; barges as solemn as barons of the exchequer move under my window; Richmond Hill and Ham-walks bound my prospect; but, thank God, the Thames is between me and the Duchess of Queensberry. Dowagers as plenty as flounders inhabit all around, and Pope's ghost is just now skimming under my window by a most poetical moonlight. I have about land enough to keep such a farm as Noah's when he set up in the Ark with a pair of each kind.

It is in the spirit of a child throwing its whole imagination into playing with a Noah's Ark that he describes his queer house. It is in this spirit that he sees the fields around his house "speckled with cows, horses and sheep." The very phrase suggests toy animals. Walpole himself declared at the age of seventy-three: "My best wisdom has consisted in forming a baby-house full of playthings for my second childhood." That explains why one almost loves the creature. Macaulay has severely censured him for devoting himself to the collection of knick-knacks, such as King William III.'s spurs, and it is apparently impossible to defend Walpole as a collector to be taken seriously. Walpole, however, collected things in a mood of fantasy as much as of connoisseurship. He did not take himself quite seriously. It was fancy, not connoisseurship, that made him hang up Magna Charta beside his bed and, opposite it, the warrant for the execution of King Charles I., on which he had written "Major Charta." Who can question the fantastic quality of the mind that wrote to Conway: "Remember, neither Lady Salisbury nor you, nor Mrs. Damer, have seen my new divine closet, nor the billiard-

sticks with which the Countess of Pembroke and Arcadia used to play with her brother, Sir Philip," and ended: "I never did see Cotchel, and am sorry. Is not the old wardrobe there still? There was one from the time of Cain, but Adam's breeches and Eve's under-petticoat were eaten by a goat in the ark. Good-night." He laughed over the knick-knacks he collected for himself and his friends. "As to snuff-boxes and toothpick cases," he wrote to the Countess of Ossory from Paris in 1771, "the vintage has entirely failed this year." Everything that he turned his mind to in Strawberry Hill he regarded in the same spirit of comic delight. He stood outside himself, like a spectator, and nothing gave him more pleasure than to figure himself as a master of the ceremonies among the bantams and the squirrels and the goldfish. In one of his letters he describes himself and Bentley fishing in the pond for goldfish with "nothing but a pail and a basin and a tea-strainer, which I persuade my neighbours is the Chinese method." This was in order to capture some of the fish for Bentley, who "carried a dozen to town t'other day in a decanter." Walpole is similarly amused by the spectacle of himself as a planter and gardener. "I have made great progress," he boasts, "and talk very learnedly with the nursery-men, except that now and then a lettuce runs to seed, overturns all my botany, and I have more than once taken it for a curious West Indian flowering shrub. Then the deliberation with which trees grow is extremely inconvenient to my natural impatience." He goes on enviously to imagine the discovery by posterity of a means of transplanting oaks of a hundred and fifty years as easily as tulip-bulbs. This leads him to enlarge upon the wonders that the Horace Walpole of posterity will be able to possess when the miraculous discoveries have been made.

Then the delightfulness of having whole groves of humming-birds, tame tigers taught to fetch and carry, pocket spying-glasses to see all that is doing in China, and a thousand other toys, which we now look upon as impracticable, and which pert posterity would laugh in our face for staring at.

Among the various creatures with which he loved to surround himself, it is impossible to forget either the little black spaniel, Tony, that the wolf carried off near a wood in the Alps during his first travels, or the more imperious little dog, Tonton, which he has constantly to prevent from biting people at Madame du Deffand's, but which with Madame du Deffand herself "grows the greater favourite the more people he devours." "T'other night," writes Walpole, to whom Madame du Deffand afterwards bequeathed the dog in her will, "he flew at Lady Barrymore's face, and I thought would have torn her eye out, but it ended in biting her finger. She was terrified; she fell into tears. Madame du Deffand, who has too much parts not to see everything in its true light, perceiving that she had not beaten Tonton half enough, immediately told us a story of a lady whose dog having bitten a piece out of a gentleman's leg, the tender dame, in a great fright, cried out, 'Won't it make him sick?'" In the most attractive accounts we possess of Walpole in his old age, we see him seated at the breakfast-table, drinking tea out of "most rare and precious ancient porcelain of Japan," and sharing the loaf and butter with Tonton (now grown almost too fat to move, and spread on a sofa beside him), and afterwards going to the window with a basin of bread and milk to throw to the squirrels in the garden.

Many people would be willing to admit, however, that Walpole was an excitable creature where small things were concerned—a parroquet or the prospect of being able to print original letters of Ninon de l'Enclos at Strawberry, or the discovery of a poem by the brother of Anne Boleyn, or Ranelagh, where "the floor is all of beaten princes." What is not generally realized is that he was also a high-strung and eager spectator of the greater things. I have already spoken of his enthusiasm for wild nature as shown in his letters from the Alps. It is true he grew weary of them. "Such uncouth rocks," he wrote, "and such uncomely inhabitants." "I am as surfeited with mountains and inns as if I had eat them," he groaned in a later letter.

But the enthusiasm was at least as genuine as the fatigue. His tergiversation of mood proves only that there were two Walpoles, not that the Walpole of the romantic enthusiasms was insincere. He was a devotee of romance, but it was romance under the control of the comic spirit. He was always amused to have romance brought down to reality, as when, writing of Mary Queen of Scots, he said: "I believe I have told you that, in a very old trial of her, which I bought for Lord Oxford's collection, it is said that she was a large lame woman. Take sentiments out of their *pantoufles*, and reduce them to the infirmities of mortality, what a falling off there is!" But see him in the picture-gallery in his father's old house at Houghton, after an absence of sixteen years, and the romantic mood is uppermost. "In one respect," he writes, speaking of the pictures, "I am very young; I cannot satiate myself with looking," and he adds, "Not a picture here but calls a history; not one but I remember in Downing Street or Chelsea, where queens and crowds admired them." And, if he could not "satiate himself with looking" at the Italian and Flemish masters, he similarly preserved the heat of youth in his enthusiasm for Shakespeare. "When," he wrote, during his dispute with Voltaire on the point, "I think over all the great authors of the Greeks, Romans, Italians, French and English (and I know no other languages), I set Shakespeare first and alone and then begin anew." One is astonished to find that he was contemptuous of Montaigne. "What signifies what a man thought," he wrote, "who never thought of anything but himself, and what signifies what a man did who never did anything?" This sentence might have served as a condemnation of Walpole himself, and indeed he meant it so. Walpole, however, was an egoist of an opposite kind to Montaigne. Walpole lived for his eyes, and saw the world as a masque of bright and amusing creatures. Montaigne studied the map of himself rather than the map of his neighbours' vanities. Walpole was a social being, and not finally self-centred. His chief purpose in life was not to know himself, but to give pleasure to his

friends. If he was bored by Montaigne, it was because he had little introspective curiosity. Like Montaigne himself, however, he was much the servant of whim in his literary tastes. That he was no sceptic but a disciple where Shakespeare and Milton and Pope were concerned suggests, on the other hand, how foolish it is to regard him as being critically a fashionable trifler.

Not that it is possible to represent him as a man with anything Dionysiac in his temperament. The furthest that one can go is to say that he was a man of sincere strong sentiment with quivering nerves. Capricious in little things, he was faithful in great. His warmth of nature as a son, as a friend, as a humanitarian, as a believer in tolerance and liberty, is so unfailing that it is curious it should ever have been brought in question by any reader of the letters. His quarrels are negligible when put beside his ceaseless extravagance of good humour to his friends. His letters alone were golden gifts, but we also find him offering his fortune to Conway when the latter was in difficulties. "I have sense enough," he wrote, "to have real pleasure in denying myself baubles, and in saving a very good income to make a man happy for whom I have a just esteem and most sincere friendship." "Blameable in ten thousand other respects," he wrote to Conway seventeen years later, "may not I almost say I am perfect with regard to you? Since I was fifteen have I not loved you unalterably?" "I am," he claimed towards the end of his life, "very constant and sincere to friends of above forty years." In his friendships he was more eager to give than to receive. Madame du Deffand was only dissuaded from making him her heir by his threat that if she did so he would never visit her again. Ever since his boyhood he was noted for his love of giving pleasure and for his thoughtfulness regarding those he loved. The earliest of his published letters was until last year one written at the age of fourteen. But Dr. Paget Toynbee, in his supplementary volumes of Walpole letters, recently published, has been able to print one to Lady Walpole written at the age of eight, which suggests that

Walpole was a delightful sort of child, incapable of forgetting a parent, a friend, or a pet:

> Dear mama, I hop you are wall, and I am very wall, and I hop papa is wal, and I begin to slaap, and I hop al wall and my cosens like there pla things vary wall
> and I hop Doly phillips is wall and pray give my Duty to papa.
> HORACE WALPOLE.
>
> and I am very glad to hear by Tom that all my cruatuars are all wall. and Mrs. Selwyn has sprand her Fot and gvis her Sarves to you and I dind ther yester Day.

At Eton later on he was a member of two leagues of friendship—the "Triumvirate," as it was called, which included the two Montagus, and the "Quadruple Alliance," in which one of his fellows was Gray. The truth is, Walpole was always a person who depended greatly on being loved. "One loves to find people care for one," he wrote to Conway, "when they can have no view in it." His friendship in his old age for the Misses Berry—his "twin wives," his "dear Both"—to each of whom he left an annuity of £400, was but a continuation of that kindliness which ran like a stream (ruffled and sparkling with malice, no doubt) through his long life. And his kindness was not limited to his friends, but was at the call of children and, as we have seen, of animals. "You know," he explains to Conway, apologizing for not being able to visit him on account of the presence of a "poor little sick girl" at Strawberry Hill, "how courteous a knight I am to distrest virgins of five years old, and that my castle gates are always open to them." One does not think of Walpole primarily as a squire of children, and certainly, though he loved on occasion to romp with the young, there was little in him of a Dickens character. But he was what is called "sympathetic." He was sufficient of a man of imagination to wish to see an end put to the sufferings of "those poor victims, chimney-sweepers." So far from being a heartless person, as he has been at times portrayed, he had a heart as sensitive as an anti-vivisectionist. This was shown in his attitude to animals. In 1760, when there was a great terror of mad

dogs in London, and an order was issued that all dogs found in the streets were to be killed, he wrote to the Earl of Strafford:

> In London there is a more cruel campaign than that waged by the Russians: the streets are a very picture of the murder of the innocents—one drives over nothing but poor dead dogs! The dear, good-natured, honest, sensible creatures! Christ! how can anybody hurt them? Nobody could but those Cherokees the English, who desire no better than to be halloo'd to blood—one day Admiral Byng, the next Lord George Sackville, and to-day the poor dogs!

As for Walpole's interest in politics, we are told by writer after writer that he never took them seriously, but was interested in them mainly for gossip's sake. It cannot be denied that he made no great fight for good causes while he sat in the House of Commons. Nor had he the temper of a ruler of men. But as a commentator on politics, and a spreader of opinion in private, he showed himself to be a politician at once sagacious, humane, and sensitive to the meaning of events. His detestation of the arbitrary use of power had almost the heat of a passion. He detested it alike in a Government and in a mob. He loathed the violence that compassed the death of Admiral Byng and the violence that made war on America. He raged against a public world that he believed was going to the devil. "I am not surprised," he wrote in 1776, "at the idea of the devil being always at our elbows. They who invented him no doubt could not conceive how men could be so atrocious to one another, without the intervention of a fiend. Don't you think, if he had never been heard of before, that he would have been invented on the late partition of Poland?" "Philosophy has a poor chance with me," he wrote a little later in regard to America, "when my warmth is stirred—and yet I know that an angry old man out of Parliament, and that can do nothing but be angry, is a ridiculous animal." The war against America he described as "a wretched farce of fear daubed over with airs of bullying." War at any time was, in his eyes, all but the unforgivable sin. In 1781, however, his hatred had lightened into con-

tempt. "The Dutch fleet is hovering about," he wrote, "but it is a pickpocket war, and not a martial one, and I never attend to petty larceny." As for mobs, his attitude to them is to be seen in his comment on the Wilkes riots, when he declares:

> I cannot bear to have the name of Liberty profaned to the destruction of the cause; for frantic tumults only lead to that terrible corrective, Arbitrary Power—which cowards call out for as protection, and knaves are so ready to grant.

Not that he feared mobs as he feared Governments. He regarded them with an aristocrat's scorn. The only mob that almost won his tolerance was that which celebrated the acquittal of Admiral Keppel in 1779. It was of the mob at this time that he wrote to the Countess of Ossory: "They were, as George Montagu said of our earthquakes, *so tame you might have stroked them.*" When near the end of his life the September massacres broke out in Paris, his mob-hatred revived again, and he denounced the French with the hysterical violence with which many people to-day denounce the Bolshevists. He called them "*inferno-human* beings," "that atrocious and detestable nation," and declared that "France must be abhorred to latest posterity." His letters on the subject to "Holy Hannah," whatever else may be said against them, are not those of a cold and dilettante gossip. They are the letters of the same excitable Horace Walpole who, at an earlier age, when a row had broken out between the manager and the audience in Drury Lane Theatre, had not been able to restrain himself, but had cried angrily from his box, "He is an impudent rascal!" But his politics never got beyond an angry cry. His conduct in Drury Lane was characteristic of him:

> The whole pit huzzaed, and repeated the words. Only think of my being a popular orator! But what was still better, while my shadow of a person was dilating to the consistence of a hero, one of the chief ringleaders of the riot, coming under the box where I sat, and pulling off his hat, said, "Mr. Walpole, what would you please to have us do next?" It is impossible to describe to you the confusion into which this apostrophe threw me. I sank down into the box, and have never since ventured to set my foot into the playhouse.

There you have the fable of Walpole's life. He always in the end sank down into his box or clambered back to his mantelpiece. Other men might save the situation. As for him, he had to look after his squirrels and his friends.

This means no more than that he was not a statesman, but an artist. He was a connoisseur of great actions, not a practiser of them. At Strawberry Hill he could at least keep himself in sufficient health with the aid of iced water and by not wearing a hat when out of doors to compose the greatest works of art of their kind that have appeared in English. Had he written his letters for money we should have praised him as one of the busiest and most devoted of authors, and never have thought of blaming him for abstaining from statesmanship as he did from wine. Possibly he had the constitution for neither. His genius was a genius, not of Westminster, but of Strawberry Hill. It is in Strawberry Hill that one finally prefers to see him framed, an extraordinarily likeable, charming, and whimsical figure. He himself has suggested his kingdom entrancingly for us in a letter describing his return to Strawberry after a visit to Paris in 1769:

> I feel myself here like a swan, that after living six weeks in a nasty pool upon a common, is got back into its own Thames. I do nothing but plume and clean myself, and enjoy the verdure and silent waves. Neatness and greenth are so essential in my opinion to the country, that in France, where I see nothing but chalk and dirty peasants, I seem in a terrestrial purgatory that is neither town or country. The face of England is so beautiful, that I do not believe Tempe or Arcadia were half so rural; for both, lying in hot climates, must have wanted the turf of our lawns. It is unfortunate to have so pastoral a taste, when I want a cane more than a crook. We are absurd creatures; at twenty I loved nothing but London.

Back in Strawberry Hill, he is the Prince Charming among correspondents. One cannot love him as one loves Charles Lamb and men of a deeper and more imaginative tenderness. But how incomparable he is as an acquaintance! How exquisite a specimen—hand-painted—for the collector of the choice creatures of the human race!

## VI.—WILLIAM COWPER

COWPER has the charm of littleness. His life and genius were on the miniature scale, though his tragedy was a burden for Atlas. He left several pictures of himself in his letters, all of which make one see him as a veritable Tom Thumb among Christians. He wrote, he tells us, at Olney, in "a summerhouse not much bigger than a sedan-chair." At an earlier date, when he was living at Huntingdon, he compared himself to "a Thames wherry in a world full of tempest and commotion," and congratulated himself on "the creek I have put into and the snugness it affords me." His very clothes suggested that he was the inhabitant of a plaything world. "Green and buff," he declared, "are colours in which I am oftener seen than in any others, and are become almost as natural to me as a parrot." "My thoughts," he informed the Rev. John Newton, "are clad in a sober livery, for the most part as grave as that of a bishop's servants"; but his body was dressed in parrot's colours, and his bald head was in a bag or a white cap. If he requested one of his friends to send him anything from town, it was usually some little thing, such as a "genteelish toothpick case," a handsome stock-buckle, a new hat—"not a round slouch, which I abhor, but a smart well-cocked fashionable affair"—or a cuckoo-clock. He seems to have shared Wordsworth's taste for the last of these. Are we not told that Wordsworth died as his favourite cuckoo-clock was striking noon? Cowper may almost be said, so far as his tastes and travels are concerned, to have lived in a cage. He never ventured outside England, and even of England he knew only a few of the southern counties. "I have lived much at Southampton," he boasted at the age of sixty, "have slept and caught a sore throat at Lyndhurst, and have swum in the Bay of Weymouth." That was his grand

tour. He made a journey to Eastham, near Chichester, about the time of this boast, and confessed that, as he drove with Mrs. Unwin over the downs by moonlight, "I indeed myself was a little daunted by the tremendous height of the Sussex hills in comparison of which all I had seen elsewhere are dwarfs." He went on a visit to some relations on the coast of Norfolk a few years later, and, writing to Lady Hesketh, lamented: "I shall never see Weston more. I have been tossed like a ball into a far country, from which there is no rebound for me." Who but the little recluse of a little world could think of Norfolk as a far country and shake with alarm before the "tremendous height" of the Sussex downs?

"We are strange creatures, my little friend," Cowper once wrote to Christopher Rowley; "everything that we do is in reality important, though half that we do seems to be push-pin." Here we see one of the main reasons of Cowper's eternal attractiveness. He played at push-pin during most of his life, but he did so in full consciousness of the background of doom. He trifled because he knew, if he did not trifle, he would go mad with thinking about Heaven and Hell. He sought in the infinitesimal a cure for the disease of brooding on the infinite. His distractions were those not of too light, but of too grave, a mind. If he picnicked with the ladies, it was in order to divert his thoughts from the wrath to come. He was gay, but on the edge of a precipice.

I do not mean to suggest that he had no natural inclination to trifling. Even in the days when he was studying law in the Temple he dined every Thursday with six of his old school-fellows at the Nonsense Club. His essays in Bonnell Thornton and Coleman's paper, *The Connoisseur*, written some time before he went mad and tried to hang himself in a garter, lead one to believe that, if it had not been for his breakdown, he might have equalled or surpassed Addison as a master of light prose. He was something of the traditional idle apprentice, indeed, during his first years in a solicitor's office, as we gather from the letter in which he reminds Lady Hesketh how he and Thurlow used to pass

the time with her and her sister, Theodora, the object of his fruitless love. "There was I, and the future Lord Chancellor," he wrote "constantly employed from morning to night in giggling and making giggle, instead of studying the law." Such was his life till the first attack of madness came at the age of thirty-two. He had already, it is true, on one occasion, felt an ominous shock as a schoolboy at Westminster, when a skull thrown up by a gravedigger at St. Margaret's rolled towards him and struck him on the leg. Again, in his chambers in the Middle Temple, he suffered for a time from religious melancholy, which he did his best to combat with the aid of the poems of George Herbert. Even at the age of twenty-three he told Robert Lloyd in a rhymed epistle that he "addressed the muse," not in order to show his genius or his wit,

> But to divert a fierce banditti
> (Sworn foe to everything that's witty)
> That, in a black infernal train,
> Make cruel inroads in my brain,
> And daily threaten to drive thence
> My little garrison of sense.

It was not till after his release from the St. Albans madhouse in his thirties, however, that he began to build a little new world of pleasures on the ruins of the old. He now set himself of necessity to the task of creating a refuge within sight of the Cross, where he could live, in his brighter moments, a sort of Epicurean of evangelical piety. He was a damned soul that must occupy itself at all costs and not damn itself still deeper in the process. His round of recreation, it must be admitted, was for the most part such as would make the average modern pleasure-seeker quail more than any inferno of miseries. Only a nature of peculiar sweetness could charm us from the atmosphere of endless sermons and hymns in which Cowper learned to be happy in the Unwins' Huntingdon home. Breakfast, he tells us, was between eight and nine. Then, "till eleven, we read either the Scripture, or the sermons of some faithful preacher of those holy mysteries." Church was at eleven.

After that he was at liberty to read, walk, ride, or work in the garden till the three o'clock dinner. Then to the garden, "where with Mrs. Unwin and her son I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea-time." After tea came a four-mile walk, and "at night we read and converse, as before, till supper, and commonly finish the evening either with hymns or a sermon; and last of all the family are called to prayers." In those days, it may be, evangelical religion had some of the attractions of a new discovery. Theories of religion were probably as exciting a theme of discussion in the age of Wesley as theories of art and literature in the age of cubism and *vers libre*. One has to remember this in order to be able to realize that, as Cowper said, "such a life as this is consistent with the utmost cheerfulness." He unquestionably found it so, and, when the Rev. Morley Unwin was killed as the result of a fall from his horse, Cowper and Mrs. Unwin moved to Olney in order to enjoy further evangelical companionship in the neighbourhood of the Rev. John Newton, the converted slave-trader, who was curate in that town. At Olney Cowper added at once to his terrors of Hell and to his amusements. For the terrors, Newton, who seems to have wielded the Gospel as fiercely as a slaver's whip, was largely responsible. He had earned a reputation for "preaching people mad," and Cowper, tortured with shyness, was even subjected to the ordeal of leading in prayer at gatherings of the faithful. Newton, however, was a man of tenderness, humour, and literary tastes, as well as of a somewhat savage piety. He was not only Cowper's tyrant, but Cowper's nurse, and, in setting Cowper to write the Olney Hymns, he gave a powerful impulse to a talent hitherto all but hidden. At the same time, when, as a result of the too merciless flagellation of his parishioners on the occasion of some Fifth of November revels, Newton was attacked by a mob and driven out of Olney, Cowper undoubtedly began to breathe more freely. Even under the eye of Newton, however, Cowper could enjoy his small pleasures, and we have an attractive picture of him feeding his eight pair of tame

pigeons every morning on the gravel walk in the garden. He shared with Newton his amusements as well as his miseries. We find him in 1780 writing to the departed Newton to tell him of his recreations as an artist and gardener. "I draw," he said, "mountains, valleys, woods, and streams, and ducks, and dab-chicks." He represents himself in this lively letter as a Christian lover of baubles, rather to the disadvantage of lovers of baubles who are not Christians:

> I delight in baubles, and know them to be so; for rested in, and viewed without a reference to their author, what is the earth—what are the planets—what is the sun itself but a bauble? Better for a man never to have seen them, or to see them with the eyes of a brute, stupid and unconscious of what he beholds, than not to be able to say, "The Maker of all these wonders is my friend!" Their eyes have never been opened to see that they are trifles; mine have been, and will be till they are closed for ever. They think a fine estate, a large conservatory, a hothouse rich as a West Indian garden, things of consequence; visit them with pleasure, and muse upon them with ten times more. I am pleased with a frame of four lights, doubtful whether the few pines it contains will ever be worth a farthing; amuse myself with a greenhouse which Lord Bute's gardener could take upon his back, and walk away with; and when I have paid it the accustomed visit, and watered it, and given it air, I say to myself: "This is not mine, it is a plaything lent me for the present; I must leave it soon."

In this and the following year we find him turning his thoughts more and more frequently to writing as a means of forgetting himself. "The necessity of amusement," he wrote to Mrs. Unwin's clergyman son, "makes me sometimes write verses; it made me a carpenter, a birdcage maker, a gardener; and has lately taught me to draw, and to draw too with . . . surprising proficiency in the art, considering my total ignorance of it two months ago." His impulse towards writing verses, however, was an impulse of a playful fancy rather than of a burning imagination. "I have no more right to the name of poet," he once said, "than a maker of mouse-traps has to that of an engineer. . . . Such a talent in verse as mine is like a

child's rattle—very entertaining to the trifler that uses it, and very disagreeable to all beside." "Alas," he wrote in another letter, "what can I do with my wit? I have not enough to do great things with, and these little things are so fugitive that, while a man catches at the subject, he is only filling his hand with smoke. I must do with it as I do with my linnet; I keep him for the most part in a cage, but now and then set open the door, that he may whisk about the room a little, and then shut him up again." It may be doubted whether, if subjects had not been imposed on him from without, he would have written much save in the vein of "dear Mat Prior's easy jingle" or the Latin trifles of Vincent Bourne, of whom he said: "He can speak of a magpie or a cat in terms so exquisitely appropriated to the character he draws that one would suppose him animated by the spirit of the creature he describes."

Cowper was not to be allowed to write, except occasionally, on magpies and cats. Mrs. Unwin, who took a serious view of the poet's art, gave him as a subject *The Progress of Error,* and is thus mainly responsible for the now little-read volume of moral satires, with which he began his career as a poet at the age of fifty in 1782. It is not a book that can be read with unmixed, or even with much, delight. It seldom rises above a good man's rhetoric. Cowper, instead of writing about himself and his pets and his cucumber-frames, wrote of the wicked world from which he had retired, and the vices of which he could not attack with that particularity that makes satire interesting. The satires are not exactly dull, but they are lacking in force, either of wit or of passion. They are hardly more than an expression of sentiment and opinion. The sentiments are usually sound—for Cowper was an honest lover of liberty and goodness—but even the cause of liberty is not likely to gain much from such a couplet as:

> Man made for kings! those optics are but dim
> That tell you so—say, rather, they for him.

Nor will the manners of the clergy benefit much as the result

of such an attack on the "pleasant-Sunday-afternoon" kind of pastor as is contained in the lines:

> If apostolic gravity be free
> To play the fool on Sundays, why not we?
> If he the tinkling harpsichord regards
> As inoffensive, what offence in cards?

These, it must in fairness be said, are not examples of the best in the moral satires; but the latter is worth quoting as evidence of the way in which Cowper tried to use verse as the pulpit of a rather narrow creed. The satires are hardly more than denominational in their interest. They belong to the religious fashion of their time, and are interesting to us now only as the old clothes of eighteenth-century evangelicalism. The subject-matter is secular as well as religious, but the atmosphere almost always remains evangelical. The Rev. John Newton wrote a Preface for the volume, suggesting this and claiming that the author "aims to communicate his own perceptions of the truth, beauty and influence of the religion of the Bible." The publisher became so alarmed at this advertisement of the piety of the book that he succeeded in suppressing it in the first edition. Cowper himself had enough worldly wisdom to wish to conceal his pious intentions from the first glance of the reader, and for this reason opened the book, not with *The Progress of Error*, but with the more attractively-named *Table Talk*. "My sole drift is to be useful," he told a relation, however. " . . . My readers will hardly have begun to laugh before they will be called upon to correct that levity, and peruse me with a more serious air." He informed Newton at the same time: "Thinking myself in a measure obliged to tickle, if I meant to please, I therefore affected a jocularity I did not feel." He also told Newton: "I am merry that I may decoy people into my company." On the other hand, Cowper did not write *John Gilpin*, which is certainly his masterpiece, in the mood of a man using wit as a decoy. He wrote it because it irresistibly demanded to be written. "I wonder," he once wrote to Newton, "that a sportive thought should ever knock at the door of my

intellects, and still more that it should gain admittance. It is as if harlequin should intrude himself into the gloomy chamber where a corpse is deposited in state." Harlequin, luckily for us, took hold of his pen in *John Gilpin* and in many of the letters. In the moral satires, harlequin is dressed in a sober suit and sent to a theological seminary. One cannot but feel that there is something incongruous in the boast of a wit and a poet that he had "found occasion towards the close of my last poem, called *Retirement*, to take some notice of the modern passion for seaside entertainments, and to direct the means by which they might be made useful as well as agreeable." This might serve well enough as a theme for a "letter to the editor" of the *Baptist Eye-opener*. One cannot, however, imagine its causing a flutter in the breast of even the meekest of the nine muses.

Cowper, to say truth, had the genius not of a poet but of a letter-writer. The interest of his verse is chiefly historical. He was a poet of the transition to Wordsworth and the revolutionists, and was a mouthpiece of his time. But he has left only a tiny quantity of memorable verse. Lamb has often been quoted in his favour. "I have," he wrote to Coleridge in 1796, "been reading *The Task* with fresh delight. I am glad you love Cowper. I could forgive a man for not enjoying Milton, but I would not call that man my friend who should be offended with the 'divine chit-chat of Cowper.'" Lamb, it should be remembered, was a youth of twenty-one when he wrote this, and Cowper's verse had still the attractiveness of early blossoms that herald the coming of spring. There is little in *The Task* to make it worth reading to-day, except to the student of literary history. Like the Olney Hymns and the moral satires it was a poem written to order. Lady Austen, the vivacious widow who had meanwhile joined the Olney group, was anxious that Cowper should show what he could do in blank verse. He undertook to humour her if she would give him a subject. "Oh," she said, "you can never be in want of a subject; you can write upon any; write upon this sofa!"

Cowper, in his more ambitious verse, seems seldom to have written under the compulsion of the subject as the great poets do. Even the noble lines *On the Loss of the Royal George* were written, as he confessed, "by desire of Lady Austen, who wanted words to the March in *Scipio*." For this Lady Austen deserves the world's thanks, as she does for cheering him up in his low spirits with the story of John Gilpin. He did not write *John Gilpin* by request, however. He was so delighted on hearing the story that he lay awake half the night laughing at it, and the next day he felt compelled to sit down and write it out as a ballad. "Strange as it may seem," he afterwards said of it, "the most ludicrous lines I ever wrote have been written in the saddest mood, and but for that saddest mood, perhaps, had never been written at all." "The grinners at *John Gilpin*," he said in another letter, "little dream what the author sometimes suffers. How I hated myself yesterday for having ever wrote it!" It was the publication of *The Task* and *John Gilpin* that made Cowper famous. It is not *The Task* that keeps him famous to-day. There is, it seems to me, more of the divine fire in any half-dozen of his good letters than there is in the entire six books of *The Task*. One has only to read the argument at the top of the third book, called *The Garden*, in order to see in what a dreary didactic spirit it is written. Here is the argument in full:

> Self-recollection and reproof—Address to domestic happiness—Some account of myself—The vanity of many of the pursuits which are accounted wise—Justification of my censures—Divine illumination necessary to the most expert philosopher—The question, what is truth? answered by other questions—Domestic happiness addressed again—Few lovers of the country—My tame hare—Occupations of a retired gentleman in the garden—Pruning—Framing—Greenhouse—Sowing of flower-seeds—The country preferable to the town even in the winter—Reasons why it is deserted at that season—Ruinous effects of gaming and of expensive improvement—Book concludes with an apostrophe to the metropolis.

It is true that, in the intervals of addresses to domestic happiness and apostrophes to the metropolis, there is plenty of room here for Virgilian verse if Cowper had had the

genius for it. Unfortunately, when he writes about his garden, he too often writes about it as prosaically as a contributor to a gardening paper. His description of the making of a hot frame is merely a blank-verse paraphrase of the commonest prose. First, he tells us:

> The stable yields a stercoraceous heap,
> Impregnated with quick fermenting salts,
> And potent to resist the freezing blast;
> For, ere the beech and elm have cast their leaf
> Deciduous, when now November dark
> Checks vegetation in the torpid plant,
> Expos'd to his cold breath, the task begins.
> Warily therefore, and with prudent heed
> He seeks a favour'd spot; that where he builds
> Th' agglomerated pile his frame may front
> The sun's meridian disk, and at the back
> Enjoy close shelter, wall, or reeds, or hedge
> Impervious to the wind.

Having further prepared the ground:

> Th' uplifted frame, compact at every joint,
> And overlaid with clear translucent glass,
> He settles next upon the sloping mount,
> Whose sharp declivity shoots off secure
> From the dash'd pane the deluge as it falls.

The writing of blank verse puts the poet to the severest test, and Cowper does not survive the test. Had *The Task* been written in couplets he might have been forced to sharpen his wit by the necessity of rhyme. As it is, he is merely ponderous—a snail of imagination labouring under a heavy shell of eloquence. In the fragment called *Yardley Oak* he undoubtedly achieved something worthier of a distant disciple of Milton. But I do not think he was ever sufficiently preoccupied with poetry to be a good poet. He had even ceased to read poetry by the time he began in earnest to write it. "I reckon it," he wrote in 1781, "among my principal advantages, as a composer of verses, that I have not read an English poet these thirteen years, and but one these thirty years." So mild was his interest in his contemporaries that he had never heard Collins's name till

he read about him in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Though descended from Donne—his mother was Anne Donne—he was apparently more interested in Churchill and Beattie than in him. His one great poetical master in English was Milton, Johnson's disparagement of whom he resented with amusing vehemence. He was probably the least bookish poet who had ever had a classical education. He described himself in a letter to the Rev. Walter Bagot, in his later years, as "a poor man who has but twenty books in the world, and two of them are your brother Chester's." The passages I have quoted give, no doubt, an exaggerated impression of Cowper's indifference to literature. His relish for such books as he enjoyed is proved in many of his letters. But he was incapable of such enthusiasm for the great things in literature as Keats showed, for instance, in his sonnet on Chapman's *Homer*. Though Cowper, disgusted with Pope, took the extreme step of translating Homer into English verse, he enjoyed even Homer only with certain evangelical reservations. "I should not have chosen to have been the original author of such a business," he declared, while he was translating the nineteenth book of the *Iliad*, "even though all the Nine had stood at my elbow. Time has wonderful effects. We admire that in an ancient for which we should send a modern bard to Bedlam." It is hardly to be wondered at that his translation of Homer has not survived, while his delightful translation of Vincent Bourne's *Jackdaw* has.

Cowper's poetry, however, is to be praised, if for nothing else, because it played so great a part in giving the world a letter-writer of genius. It brought him one of the best of his correspondents, his cousin, Lady Hesketh, and it gave various other people a reason for keeping his letters. Had it not been for his fame as a poet his letters might never have been published, and we should have missed one of the most exquisite histories of small beer to be had outside the pages of Jane Austen. As a letter-writer he does not, I think, stand in the same rank as Horace Walpole and Charles Lamb. He has less wit and humour, and he mirrors

less of the world. His letters, however, have an extraordinarily soothing charm. Cowper's occupations amuse one, while his nature delights one. His letters, like Lamb's, have a soul of goodness—not of mere virtue, but of goodness—and we know from his biography that in life he endured the severest test to which a good nature can be subjected. His treatment of Mrs. Unwin in the imbecile despotism of her old age was as fine in its way as Lamb's treatment of his sister. Mrs. Unwin, who had supported Cowper through so many dark and suicidal hours, afterwards became palsied and lost her mental faculties. "Her character," as Sir James Frazer writes in the introduction to his charming selection from the letters, "underwent a great change, and she who for years had found all her happiness in ministering to her afflicted friend, and seemed to have no thought but for his welfare, now became querulous and exacting, forgetful of him and mindful, apparently, only of herself. Unable to move out of her chair without help, or to walk across the room unless supported by two people, her speech at times almost unintelligible, she deprived him of all his wonted exercises, both bodily and mental, as she did not choose that he should leave her for a moment, or even use a pen or a book, except when he read to her. To these demands he responded with all the devotion of gratitude and affection; he was assiduous in his attentions to her, but the strain told heavily on his strength." To know all this does not modify our opinion of Cowper's letters, except in so far as it strengthens it. It helps us, however, to explain to ourselves why we love them. We love them because, as surely as the writings of Shakespeare and Lamb, they are an expression of that sort of heroic gentleness which can endure the fires of the most devastating tragedy. Shakespeare finally revealed the strong sweetness of his nature in *The Tempest*. Many people are inclined to over-estimate *The Tempest* as poetry simply because it gives them so precious a clue to the character of his genius, and makes clear once more that the grand source and material of poetry is the infinite tender-

ness of the human heart. Cowper's letters are a tiny thing beside Shakespeare's plays. But the same light falls on them. They have an eighteenth-century restraint and freedom from emotionalism and gush. But behind their chronicle of trifles, their small fancies, their little vanities, one is aware of an intensely loving and lovable personality. Cowper's poem, *To Mary*, written to Mrs. Unwin in the days of her feebleness, is, to my mind, made commonplace by the odious reiteration of "My Mary!" at the end of every verse. Leave the my Marys" out, however, and see how beautiful, as well as moving, a poem it becomes. Cowper was at one time on the point of marrying Mrs. Unwin, when an attack of madness prevented him. Later on Lady Austen apparently wished to marry him. He had an extraordinary gift for commanding the affections of those of both sexes who knew him. His friendship with the poet Hayley, then a rocket fallen to earth, towards the close of his life, reveals the lovableness of both men.

If we love Cowper, then, it is not only because of his little world, but because of his greatness of soul that stands in contrast to it. He is like one of those tiny pools among the rocks, left behind by the deep waters of ocean and reflecting the blue height of the sky. His most trivial actions acquire a pathos from what we know of the *De Profundis* that is behind them. When we read of the Olney household—"our snug parlour, one lady knitting, the other netting, and the gentleman winding worsted"—we feel that this marionette-show has some second and immortal significance. On another day, "one of the ladies has been playing a harpsichord, while I, with the other, have been playing at battledore and shuttlecock." It is a game of cherubs, though of cherubs slightly unfeathered as a result of belonging to the pious English upper-middle classes. The poet, inclined to be fat, whose chief occupation in winter is "to walk ten times in a day from the fireside to his cucumber frame and back again," is busy enough on a heavenly errand. With his pet hares, his goldfinches, his dog, his carpentry, his greenhouse—"Is not our green-

house a cabinet of perfumes?"—his clergymen, his ladies, and his tasks, he is not only constantly amusing himself, but carrying on a secret battle with all the terrors of Hell. He is, indeed, a pilgrim who struggles out of one slough of despond only to fall waist-deep into another. This strange creature who passed so much of his time writing such things as *Verses written at Bath on Finding the Heel of a Shoe, Ode to Apollo on an Ink-glass almost dried in the Sun, Lines sent with Two Cockscombs to Miss Green,* and *On the Death of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bullfinch,* stumbled along under a load of woe and repentance as terrible as any of the sorrows that we read of in the great tragedies. The last of his original poems, *The Castaway,* is an image of his utter hopelessness. As he lay dying in 1800 he was asked how he felt. He replied, "I feel unutterable despair." To face damnation with the sweet unselfishness of William Cowper is a rare and saintly accomplishment. It gives him a place in the company of the beloved authors with men of far greater genius than himself—with Shakespeare and Lamb and Dickens.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has, in one of his essays, expressed the opinion that of all the English poets "the one who, but for a stroke of madness, would have become our English Horace was William Cowper. He had the wit," he added, "with the underlying moral seriousness." As for the wit, I doubt it. Cowper had not the wit that inevitably hardens into "jewels five words long." Laboriously as he sought after perfection in his verse, he was never a master of the Horatian phrase. Such phrases of his—and there are not many of them—as have passed into the common speech flash neither with wit nor with wisdom. Take the best-known of them:

> "The cups
> That cheer but not inebriate;"
>
> "God made the country and man made the town;"
>
> "I am monarch of all I survey;"

"Regions Cæsar never knew;"

"England, with all thy faults, I love thee still!"

This is lead for gold. Horace, it is true, must be judged as something more than an inventor of golden tags. But no man can hope to succeed Horace unless his lines and phrases are of the kind that naturally pass into golden tags. This, I know, is a matter not only of style but of temper. But it is in temper as much as in style that Cowper differs from Horace. Horace mixed on easy terms with the world. He enjoyed the same pleasures; he paid his respects to the same duties. He was a man of the world above all other poets. Cowper was in comparison a man of the parlour. His sensibilities would, I fancy, have driven him into retreat, even if he had been neither mad nor pious. He was the very opposite of a worldling. He was, as he said of himself in his early thirties, "of a very singular temper, and very unlike all the men that I have ever conversed with." While claiming that he was not an absolute fool, he added: "If I was as fit for the next world as I am unfit for this—and God forbid I should speak it in vanity—I would not change conditions with any saint in Christendom." Had Horace lived in the eighteenth century he would almost certainly have been a Deist. Cowper was very nearly a Methodist. The difference, indeed, between them is fundamental. Horace was a pig, though a charming one; Cowper was a pigeon.

This being so, it seems to me a mistake to regard Cowper as a Horace *manqué*, instead of being content with his miraculous achievement as a letter-writer. It may well be that his sufferings, so far from destroying his real genius, harrowed and fertilized the soil in which it grew. He unquestionably was more ambitions for his verse than for his prose. He wrote his letters without labour, while he was never weary of using the file on his poems. "To touch and retouch," he once wrote to the Rev. William Unwin, "is, though some writers boast of negligence, and others would be ashamed to show their foul copies, the secret of almost

all good writing, especially in verse. I am never weary of it myself." Even if we count him only a middling poet, however, this does not mean that all his fastidiousness of composition was wasted. He acquired in the workshop of verse the style that stood him in such good stead in the field of familiar prose. It is because of this hard-won ease of style that readers of English will never grow weary of that epistolary autobiography in which he recounts his maniacal fear that his food has been poisoned; his open-eyed wonder at balloons; the story of his mouse; the cure of the distention of his stomach by Lady Hesketh's gingerbread; the pulling out of a tooth at the dinner-table unperceived by the other guests; his desire to thrash Dr. Johnson till his pension jingled in his pocket; and the mildly fantastic tastes to which he confesses in such a paragraph as:

> I know no beast in England whose voice I do not account musical save and except always the braying of an ass. The notes of all our birds and fowls please me without one exception. I should not indeed think of keeping a goose in a cage, that I might hang him up in the parlour for the sake of his melody, but a goose upon a common, or in a farm-yard, is no bad performer.

Here he is no missfire rival of Horace or Milton or Prior, or any of the other poets. Here he has arrived at the perfection for which he was born. How much better he was fitted to be a letter-writer than a poet may be seen by anyone who compares his treatment of the same incidents in verse and in prose. There is, for instance, that charming letter about the escaped goldfinch, which is not spoiled for us even though we may take Blake's view of caged birds:

> I have two goldfinches, which in the summer occupy the greenhouse. A few days since, being employed in cleaning out their cages, I placed that which I had in hand upon the table, while the other hung against the wall; the windows and the doors stood wide open. I went to fill the fountain at the pump, and on my return was not a little surprised to find a goldfinch sitting on the top of the cage I had been cleaning, and singing to and kissing the goldfinch within. I approached him, and he discovered no fear; still nearer, and he discovered none. I advanced my hand towards him, and he

took no notice of it. I seized him, and supposed I had caught a new bird, but casting my eye upon the other cage perceived my mistake. Its inhabitant, during my absence, had contrived to find an opening, where the wire had been a little bent, and made no other use of the escape it afforded him, than to salute his friend, and to converse with him more intimately than he had done before. I returned him to his proper mansion, but in vain. In less than a minute he had thrust his little person through the aperture again, and again perched upon his neighbour's cage, kissing him, as at the first, and singing, as if transported with the fortunate adventure. I could not but respect such friendship, as for the sake of its gratification had twice declined an opportunity to be free, and, consenting to their union, resolved that for the future one cage should hold them both. I am glad of such incidents; for at a pinch, and when I need entertainment, the versification of them serves to divert me. . . .

Cowper's "versification" of the incident is vapid compared to this. The incident of the viper and the kittens again, which he "versified" in *The Colubriad,* is chronicled far more charmingly in the letters. His quiet prose gave him a vehicle for that intimacy of the heart and fancy which was the deepest need of his nature. He made a full confession of himself only to his friends. In one of his letters he compares himself, as he rises in the morning to "an infernal frog out of Acheron, covered with the ooze and mud of melancholy." In his most ambitious verse he is a frog trying to blow himself out into a bull. It is the frog in him, not the intended bull, that makes friends with us to-day.

## VII.—A NOTE ON ELIZABETHAN PLAYS

VOLTAIRE'S criticism of Shakespeare as rude and barbarous has only one fault. It does not fit Shakespeare. Shakespeare, however, is the single dramatist of his age to whom it is not in a measure applicable. "He was a savage," said Voltaire, "who had imagination. He has written many happy lines; but his pieces can please only in London and in Canada." Had this been said of Marlowe, or Chapman, or Jonson (despite his learning), or Cyril Tourneur, one might differ, but one would admit that perhaps there was something in it. Again, Voltaire's boast that he had been the first to show the French "some pearls which I had found" in the "enormous dunghill" of Shakespeare's plays was the sort of thing that might reasonably have been said by an anthologist who had made selections from Dekker or Beaumont and Fletcher or any dramatist writing under Elizabeth and James except William Shakespeare. One reads the average Elizabethan play in the certainty that the pearls will be few and the rubbish-heap practically five acts high. There are, perhaps, a dozen Elizabethan plays apart from Shakespeare's that are as great as his third-best work. But there are no *Hamlets* or *Lears* among them. There are no *Midsummer Night's Dreams*. There is not even a *Winter's Tale*.

If Lamb, then, had boasted about what he had done for the Elizabethans in general in the terms used by Voltaire concerning himself and Shakespeare his claim would have been just. Lamb, however, was free from Voltaire's vanity. He did not feel that he was shedding lustre on the Elizabethans as a patron: he regarded himself as a borrower. Voltaire was infuriated by the suggestion that Shakespeare wrote better than himself; Lamb probably looked on even Cyril Tourneur as his superior. Lamb was in this as wide

of the mark as Voltaire had been. His reverent praise has made famous among virgins and boys many an old dramatist who but for him would long ago have been thrown to the antiquaries, and have deserved it. Everyone goes to the Elizabethans at some time or another in the hope of coming on a long succession of sleeping beauties. The average man retires disappointed from the quest. He would have to be unusually open to suggestion not to be disappointed at the first reading of most of the plays. Many a man can read the Elizabethans with Charles Lamb's enthusiasm, however, who never could have read them with his own.

One day, when Swinburne was looking over Mr. Gosse's books, he took down Lamb's *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets,* and, turning to Mr. Gosse, said, "That book taught me more than any other book in the world—that and the Bible." Swinburne was a notorious borrower of other men's enthusiasms. He borrowed republicanism from Landor and Mazzini, the Devil from Baudelaire, and the Elizabethans from Lamb. He had not, as Lamb had, Elizabethan blood in his veins. Lamb had the Elizabethan love of phrases that have cost a voyage, of fancies discovered in a cave. Swinburne had none of this rich taste in speech. He used words riotously, but he did not use great words riotously. He was excitedly extravagant where Lamb was carefully extravagant. He often seemed to be bent chiefly on making a beautiful noise. Nor was this the only point on which he was opposed to Lamb and the Elizabethans. He differed fundamentally from them in his attitude to the spectacle of life. His mood was the mood not of a spectator but of a revivalist. He lectured his generation on the deadly virtues. He was far more anxious to shock the drawing-room than to entertain the bar-parlour. Lamb himself was little enough of a formal Puritan. He felt that the wings both of the virtues and the vices had been clipped by the descendants of the Puritans. He did not scold, however, but retired into the spectacle of another century. He wandered among old plays like an exile

returning with devouring eyes to a dusty ancestral castle. Swinburne, for his part, cared little for seeing things and much for saying things. As a result, a great deal of his verse—and still more of his prose—has the heat of an argument rather than the warmth of life.

His posthumous book on the Elizabethans is liveliest when it is most argumentative. Swinburne is less amusing when he is exalting the Elizabethans than when he is cleaving the skull of a pet aversion. His style is an admirable one for faction-fighting, but is less suitable for intimate conversation. He writes in superlatives that give one the impression that he is furious about something or other even when he is being fairly sensible. His criticism has thus an air of being much more insane than it is. His estimates of Chapman and Richard Brome are both far more moderate and reasonable than appears at first reading. He out-Lambs Lamb in his appreciativeness; but one cannot accuse him of injudicious excess when he says of Brome:

> Were he now alive, he would be a brilliant and able competitor in their own field of work and study with such admirable writers as Mrs. Oliphant and Mr. Norris.

Brome, I think, is better than this implies. Swinburne is not going many leagues too far when he calls *The Antipodes* "one of the most fanciful and delightful farces in the world." It is a piece of poetic low comedy that will almost certainly entertain and delight any reader who goes to it expecting to be bored.

It is safe to say of most of the Elizabethan dramatists that the average reader must fulfil one of two conditions if he is not to be disappointed in them. He must not expect to find them giants on the Shakespeare scale. Better still, he must turn to them as to a continent or age of poetry rather than for the genius of separate plays. Of most of them it may be said that their age is greater than they—that they are glorified by their period rather than glorify it. They are figures in a golden and teeming landscape, and

one moves among them under the spell of their noble circumstances.

They are less great individually than in the mass. If they are giants, few of them are giants who can stand on their own legs. They prop one another up. There are not more than a dozen Elizabethan plays that are individually worth a superlative, as a novel by Jane Austen or a sonnet by Wordsworth is. The Elizabethan lyrics are an immensely more precious possession than the plays. The best of the dramatists, indeed, were poets by destiny and dramatists by accident. It is conceivable that the greatest of them, apart from Shakespeare—Marlowe and Jonson and Webster and Dekker—might have been greater writers if the English theatre had never existed. Shakespeare alone was as great in the theatre as in poetry. Jonson, perhaps, also came near being so. *The Alchemist* is a brilliant heavy-weight comedy, which one would hardly sacrifice even for another of Jonson's songs. As for Dekker, on the other hand, much as one admires the excellent style in which he writes as well as the fine poetry and comedy which survive in his dialogue, his *Sweet Content* is worth all the purely dramatic work he ever wrote.

One thing that differentiates the other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists from Shakespeare is their comparative indifference to human nature. There is too much mechanical malice in their tragedies and too little of the passion that every man recognizes in his own breast. Even so good a play as *The Duchess of Malfi* is marred by inadequacy of motive on the part of the duchess's persecutors. Similarly, in Chapman's *Bussy d'Ambois*, the villains are simply a dramatist's infernal machines. Shakespeare's own plays contain numerous examples of inadequacy of motive—the casting-off of Cordelia by her father, for instance, and in part the revenge of Iago. But, if we accept the first act of *King Lear* as an incident in a fairy-tale, the motive of the passion of Lear in the other four acts is not only adequate but overwhelming. *Othello* breaks free from mechanism of plot in a similar way. Shakespeare as a writer of the fiction

of human nature was as supreme among his contemporaries as was Gulliver among the Lilliputians.

Having recognized this, one can begin to enjoy the Elizabethan dramatists again. Lamb and Coleridge and Hazlitt found them lying flat, and it was natural that they should raise them up and set them affectionately on pedestals for the gaze of a too indifferent world. The modern reader, accustomed to seeing them on their pedestals, however, is tempted to wish that they were lying flat again. Most of the Elizabethans deserve neither fate. They should be left neither flat nor standing on separate pedestals, but leaning at an angle of about forty-five degrees—resting against the base of Shakespeare's colossal statue.

Had Swinburne written of them all as imaginatively as he has written of Chapman, his interpretations, excessive though they often are, would have added to one's enjoyment of them. His *Chapman* gives us a portrait of a character. Several of the chapters in *Contemporaries of Shakespeare,* however, are, apart from the strong language, little more inspiring than the summaries of novels and plays in a school history of literature. Even Mr. Gosse himself, if I remember right, in his *Life of Swinburne,* described one of the chapters as "unreadable." The book as a whole is not that. But it unquestionably shows us some of the minor Elizabethans by fog rather than by the full light of day.

## VIII.—THE OFFICE OF THE POETS

THERE is—at least, there seems to be—more cant talked about poetry just now than at any previous time. Tartuffe is to-day not a priest but a poet, or a critic. Or, perhaps, Tartuffe is too lively a prototype for the curates of poetry who swarm in the world's capitals at the present hour. There is a tendency in the followers of every art or craft to impose it on the world as a mystery of which the vulgar can know nothing. In medicine, as in bricklaying, there is a powerful trade union into which the members can retire as into a sanctuary of the initiate. In the same way, the theologians took possession of the temple of religion and refused admittance to laymen, except as a meek and awe-struck audience. This largely resulted from the Pharisaic instinct that assumes superiority over other men. Pharisaism is simply an Imperialism of the spirit—joyless and domineering. Religion is a communion of immortal souls. Pharisaism is a denial of this and an attempt to set up an oligarchy of superior persons. All the great religious reformations have been rebellions on the part of the immortal souls against the superior persons. Religion, the reformers have proclaimed, is the common possession of mankind. Christ came into the world not to afford a career to theological pedants, but that the mass of mankind might have life and might have it more abundantly.

Poetry is in constant danger of suffering the same fate as religion. In the great ages of poetry, poetry was what is called a popular subject. The greatest poets, both of Greece and of England, took their genius to that extremely popular institution, the theatre. They wrote not for pedants or any exclusive circle, but for mankind. They were, we have reason to believe, under no illusions as to the imperfections of mankind. But it was the best audience they could get,

and represented more or less the same kind of world that they found in their own bosoms. It is a difficult thing to prove that the ordinary man can appreciate poetry, just as it is a difficult thing to prove that the ordinary man has an immortal soul. But the great poets, like the great saints, gave him the benefit of the doubt. If they had not, we should not have had the Greek drama or Shakespeare.

That they were right seems probable in view of the excellence of the poems and songs that survive among a peasantry that has not been de-educated in the schools. If the arts were not a natural inheritance of simple people, neither the Irish love-songs collected by Dr. Douglas Hyde nor the Irish music edited by Moore could have survived. I do not mean to suggest that any art can be kept alive without the aid of such specialists as the poet, the singer, and the musician; but neither can it be kept healthily alive without the popular audience. Tolstoy's use of the unspoiled peasant as the test of art may lead to absurdities, if carried too far. But at least it is an error in the right direction. It is an affirmation of the fact that every man is potentially an artist just as Christianity is an affirmation of the fact that every man is potentially a saint. It is also an affirmation of the fact that art, like religion, makes its appeal to feelings which are shared by the mass of men rather than to feelings which are the exclusive possession of the few. Where Tolstoy made his chief mistake was in failing to see that the artistic sense, like the religious sense, is something that, so far from being born perfect, even in the unspoiled peasant, passes through stage after stage of labour and experience on the way to perfection. Every man is an artist in the seed: he is not an artist in the flower. He may pass all his life without ever coming to flower. The great artist, however, appeals to a universal potentiality of beauty. Tolstoy's most astounding paradox came to nothing more than this—that art exists, not for the hundreds of people who are artists in name, but for the millions of people who are artists in embryo.

At the same time, there is no use in being too confident

that the average man will ever be a poet, even in the sense of being a reader of poetry. All that one can ask is that the doors of literature shall be thrown open to him, as the doors of religion are in spite of the fact that he is not a perfect saint. The histories of literature and religion, it seems likely, both go back to a time in which men expressed their most rapturous emotions in dances. In time the inarticulate shouts of the dancers—Scottish dancers still utter those shouts, do they not?—gave place to rhythmic words. It may have been the genius of a single dancer that first broke into speech, but his genius consisted not so much in his separateness from the others as in his power to express what all the others felt. He was the prophet of a rapture that was theirs as much as his own.

Men learned to speak rhythmically, however, not merely in order to liberate their deepest emotions, but in order to remember things. Poetry has a double origin in joy and utility. The "Thirty days hath September" rhyme of the English child suggests the way in which men must have turned to verse in prehistoric times as a preservative of facts, of proverbial wisdom, of legend and narrative. Sir Henry Newbolt, one gathers from his *New Study of English Poetry*, would deny the name of poetry to all verse that is not descended from the choric dance. In my opinion it is better to recognize the two lines, as of the father and the mother, in the pedigree of poetry. We find abundant traces of them not only in Hesiod and Virgil, but in Homer and Chaucer. The utility of form and the joy of form have in all these poets become inextricably united. The objection to most of the "free verse" that is being written to-day is that in form it is neither delightful nor memorable. The truth is, the memorableness of the writings of a man of genius becomes a part of their delight. If Pope is a delightful writer it is not merely because he expressed interesting opinions; it is because he threw most of the energies of his being into the task of making them memorable and gave them a heightened vitality by giving them rhymes. His satires and *The Rape of the Lock* are, no doubt, better

poetry than the *Essay on Man*, because he poured into them a still more vivid energy. But I doubt if there is any reasonable definition of poetry which would exclude even Pope the "essayist" from the circle of the poets. He was a puny poet, it may be, but poets were always, as they are to-day, of all shapes and sizes.

Unfortunately, "poetry," like "religion," is a word that we are almost bound to use in several senses. Sometimes we speak of "poetry" in contradistinction to prose: sometimes in contradistinction to bad poetry. Similarly, "religion" would in one sense include the Abode of Love as opposed to rationalism, and in another sense would exclude the Abode of Love as opposed to the religion of St. James. In a common-sense classification, it seems to me, poetry includes every kind of literature written in verse or in rhythms akin to verse. Sir Thomas Browne may have been more poetic than Erasmus Darwin, but in his best work he did not write poetry. Erasmus Darwin may have been more prosaic than Sir Thomas Browne, but in his most famous work he did not write prose. Sir Henry Newbolt will not permit a classification of this kind. For him poetry is an expression of intuitions—an emotional transfiguration of life—while prose is the expression of a scientific fact or a judgment. I doubt if this division is defensible. Everything that is literature is, in a sense, poetry as opposed to science; but both prose and poetry contain a great deal of work that is preponderantly the result of observation and judgment, as well as a great deal that is preponderantly imaginative. Poetry is a house of many mansions. It includes fine poetry and foolish poetry, noble poetry and base poetry. The chief duty of criticism is the praise—the infectious praise—of the greatest poetry. The critic has the right to demand not only a transfiguration of life, but a noble transfiguration of life. Swinburne transfigures life in *Anactoria* no less than Shakespeare transfigures it in *King Lear*. But Swinburne's is an ignoble, Shakespeare's a noble transfiguration. Poetry may be divine or devilish, just as religion may be. Literary criticism is so timid of

being accused of Puritanism that it is chary of admitting that there may be a Heaven and a Hell of poetic genius as well as of religious genius. The moralists go too far on the other side and are tempted to judge literature by its morality rather than by its genius. It seems more reasonable to conclude that it is possible to have a poet of genius who is nevertheless a false poet, just as it is possible to have a prophet of genius who is nevertheless a false prophet. The lover of literature will be interested in them all, but he will not finally be deceived into blindness to the fact that the greatest poets are spiritually and morally, as well as æsthetically, great. If Shakespeare is infinitely the greatest of the Elizabethans, it is not merely because he is imaginatively the greatest; it is also because he had a soul incomparably noble and generous. Sir Henry Newbolt deals in an interesting way with this ennoblement of life that is the mark of great poetry. He does not demand of poetry an orthodox code of morals, but he does contend that great poetry marches along the path that leads to abundance of life, and not to a feeble and degenerate egotism.

The greatest value of his book, however, lies in the fact that he treats poetry as a natural human activity, and that he sees that poetry must be able to meet the challenge to its right to exist. The extreme moralist would deny that it had a right to exist unless it could be proved to make men more moral. The hedonist is content if it only gives him pleasure. The greatest poets, however, do not accept the point of view either of the extreme moralist or of the hedonist. Poetry exists for the purpose of delivering us neither to good conduct nor to pleasure. It exists for the purpose of releasing the human spirit to sing, like a lark, above this scene of wonder, beauty and terror. It is consonant both with the world of good conduct and the world of pleasure, but its spirit is song and an enrichment of the earth, uttered on wings half-way between earth and heaven. Sir Henry Newbolt suggests that the reason why hymns almost always fail as poetry is that the writers of hymns turn their eyes away so resolutely from the earth we know to a world that

is only a formula. Poetry, in his view, is a transfiguration of life heightened by the home-sickness of the spirit for a perfect world. But it must always use the life we live as the material of its joyous vision. It is born of our double attachment to Earth and to Paradise. There is no formula for absolute beauty, but the poet can praise the echo and reflection of it in the songs of the birds and the colours of the flowers. It is open to question whether

> There is a fountain filled with blood

expresses the home-sickness of the spirit as yearningly as

> And now my heart with pleasure fills
> And dances with the daffodils.

There are many details on which one would like to join issue with Sir Henry Newbolt, but his main contentions are so suggestive, his sympathies so catholic and generous, that it seems hardly worth while arguing with him about questions of scansion or of the relation of Blake to contemporary politics, or of the evil of anthologies. His book is the reply of a capable and honest man of letters to the challenge uttered to poets by Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion,* where Moneta demands :

> What benefits canst thou, or all thy tribe,
> To the great world?

and declares :

> None can usurp this height . . .
> But those to whom the miseries of the world
> Are misery, and will not let them rest.

Sir Henry Newbolt, like Sir Sidney Colvin, no doubt, would hold that here Keats dismisses too slightingly his own best work. But how noble is Keats's dissatisfaction with himself ! It is such noble dissatisfaction as this that distinguishes the great poets from the amateurs. Poetry and religion—the impulse is alike in both. The rest is but a parlour-game.

## IX.—EDWARD YOUNG AS CRITIC

So little is Edward Young read in these days that we have almost forgotten how wide was his influence in the eighteenth century. It was not merely that he was popular in England, where his satires, *The Love of Fame, the Universal Passion,* are said to have made him £3,000. He was also a power on the Continent. His *Night Thoughts* was translated not only into all the major languages, but into Portuguese, Swedish and Magyar. It was adopted as one of the heralds of the romantic movement in France. Even his *Conjectures on Original Composition,* written in 1759 in the form of a letter to Samuel Richardson, earned in foreign countries a fame that has lasted till our own day. A new edition of the German translation was published at Bonn so recently as 1910. In England there is no famous author more assiduously neglected. Not so much as a line is quoted from him in *The Oxford Book of English Verse.* I recently turned up a fairly full anthology of eighteenth-century verse only to find that though it has room for Mallet and Ambrose Phillips and Picken, Young has not been allowed to contribute a purple patch even five lines long. One looks round one's own shelves, and they tell the same story. Small enough poets stand there in shivering neglect. Akenside, Churchill and Parnell have all been thought worth keeping. But not on the coldest, topmost shelf has space been found for Young. He scarcely survives even in popular quotations. The copy-books have perpetuated one line:

Procrastination is the thief of time.

Apart from that, *Night Thoughts* have been swallowed up in an eternal night.

And certainly a study of the titles of his works will not encourage the average reader to go to him in search of

treasures of the imagination. At the age of thirty, in 1713, he wrote a *Poem on the Last Day*, which he dedicated to Queen Anne. In the following year he wrote *The Force of Religion, or Vanquish'd Love*, a poem about Lady Jane Grey, which he dedicated to the Countess of Salisbury. And no sooner was Queen Anne dead than he made haste to salute the rising sun in an epistle *On the Late Queen's Death and His Majesty's Accession to the Throne*. Passing over a number of years, we find him, in 1730, publishing a so-called Pindaric ode, *Imperium Pelagi; a Naval Lyric*, in the preface to which he declares with characteristic italics: "*Trade* is a very *noble* subject in itself; more *proper* than any for an Englishman; and particularly *seasonable* at this juncture." Add to this that he was the son of a dean, that he married the daughter of an earl, and that, other means of advancement having failed, he became a clergyman at the age of between forty and fifty, and the suggested portrait is that of a prudent hanger-on rather than a fiery man of genius. His prudence was rewarded with a pension of £200 a year, a Royal Chaplaincy, and the position (after George III.'s accession) of Clerk of the Closet to the Princess Dowager. In the opinion of Young himself, who lived till the age of 82, the reward was inadequate. At the age of 79, however, he had conquered his disappointment to a sufficient degree to write a poem on *Resignation*.

Readers who, after a hasty glance at his biography, are inclined to look satirically on Young as a time-server, oily with the mediocrity of self-help, will have a pleasant surprise if they read his *Conjectures on Original Composition* for the first time. It is a bold and masculine essay on literary criticism, written in a style of quite brilliant, if old-fashioned, rhetoric. Mrs. Thrale said of it: "In the *Conjectures upon Original Composition* . . . we shall perhaps read the wittiest piece of prose our whole language has to boast; yet from its over-twinkling, it seems too little gazed at and too little admired perhaps." This is an exaggerated estimate. Dr. Johnson, who heard Young read the *Conjectures* at Richardson's house, said that "he was surprised

to find Young receive as novelties what he thought very common maxims." If one tempers Mrs. Thrale's enthusiasms with Dr. Johnson's scorn, one will have a fairly just idea of the quality of Young's book.

It is simply a shot fired with a good aim in the eternal war between authority and liberty in literature. This is a controversy for which, were men wise, there would be no need. We require in literature both the authority of tradition and the liberty of genius to seek new conquests. Unfortunately, we cannot agree as to the proportions in which each of them is required. The French exaggerated the importance of tradition, and so gave us the classical drama of Racine and Corneille. Walt Whitman exaggerated the importance of liberty, and so gave us *Leaves of Grass*. In nearly all periods of literary energy, we find writers rushing to one or other of these extremes. Either they declare that the classics are perfect and cannot be surpassed but only imitated; or, like the Futurists, they wish to burn the classics and release the spirit of man for new adventures. It is all a prolonged duel between reaction and revolution, the wise man of genius doing his best, like a Liberal, to bring the two opponents to terms.

Much of the interest of Young's book is due to the fact that in an age of reaction he came out on the revolutionary side. There was seldom a time at which the classics were more slavishly idolized and imitated. Miss Morley quotes from Pope the saying that "all that is left us is to recommend our productions by the imitation of the ancients." Young threw all his eloquence on the opposite side. He uttered the bold paradox: "The less we copy the renowned ancients, we shall resemble them the more." "Become a noble collateral," he advised, "not a humble descendant from them. Let us build our compositions in the spirit, and in the taste, of the ancients, but not with their materials. Thus will they resemble the structures of Pericles at Athens, which Plutarch commends for having had an air of antiquity as soon as they were built." He refuses to believe that the moderns are necessarily inferior to the ancients. If they

are inferior, it is because they plagiarize from the ancients instead of emulating them. "If ancients and moderns," he declares, "were no longer considered as masters and pupils, but as hard-matched rivals for renown, the moderns, by the longevity of their labours, might one day become ancients themselves."

He deplores the fact that Pope should have been so content to indenture his genius to the work of translation and imitation:

> Though we stand much obliged to him for giving us an Homer, yet had he doubled our obligation by giving us—a Pope. He had a strong imagination and the true sublime? That granted, we might have had two Homers instead of one, if longer had been his life; for I heard the dying swan talk over an epic plan a few weeks before his decease.

For ourselves, we hold that Pope showed himself to be as original as needs be in his epistles to Martha Blount and Dr. Arbuthnot. None the less, the general philosophy of Young's remarks is sound enough. We should reverence tradition in literature, but not superstitiously. Too much awe of the old masters may easily scare a modern into hiding his talent in a napkin. True, we are not in much danger of servitude to tradition in literature to-day. We no longer imitate the ancients; we only imitate each other. On the whole, we wish there was rather more sense of the tradition in contemporary writing. The danger of arbitrary egoism is quite as great as the danger of classicism. Luckily, Young, in stating the case against the classicists, has at the same time stated perfectly the case for familiarity with the classics. "It is," he declares, "by a sort of noble contagion, from a general familiarity with their writings, and not by any particular sordid theft, that we can be the better for those who went before us." However we may deride a servile classicism, we should always assume at the outset the necessity of the "noble contagion" for every man of letters.

The truth is, the man of letters must in some way reconcile himself to the paradox that he is at once the acolyte and

the rival of the ancients. Young is optimistic enough to believe that it is possible to surpass them. In the mechanic arts, he complains, men are always attempting to go beyond their predecessors; in the liberal arts, they merely try to follow them. The analogy between the continuous advance of science and a possible continuous advance in literature is, perhaps, a misleading one. Professor Gilbert Murray, in *Religio Grammatici*, bases much of his argument on a denial that such an analogy should be drawn. Literary genius cannot be bequeathed and added to as a scientific discovery can. The modern poet does not stand on Shakespeare's shoulders as the modern astronomer stands on Galileo's shoulders. Scientific discovery is progressive. Literary genius, like religious genius, is a miracle less dependent on time. None the less, we may reasonably believe that literature, like science, has ever new worlds to conquer—that, even if Æschylus and Shakespeare cannot be surpassed, names as great as theirs may one day be added to the roll of literary fame. And this will be possible only if men in each generation are determined, in the words of Goldsmith, "bravely to shake off admiration, and, undazzled by the splendour of another's reputation, to chalk out a path to fame for themselves, and boldly cultivate untried experiment." Goldsmith wrote these words in *The Bee* in the same year in which Young's *Conjectures* was published. I feel tolerably certain that he wrote them as a result of reading Young's work. The reaction against traditionalism, however, was gathering general force by this time, and the desire to be original was beginning to oust the desire to copy. Both Young's and Goldsmith's essays are exceedingly interesting as anticipations of the romantic movement. Young was a true romantic when he wrote that Nature "brings us into the world all Originals—no two faces, no two minds, are just alike; but all bear evident marks of separation on them. Born Originals, how comes it to pass that we are Copies?" Genius, he thinks, is commoner than is sometimes supposed, if we would make use of it. His book is a plea for giving genius its head.

He wishes to see the modern writer, instead of tilling an exhausted soil, staking out a claim in the perfectly virgin field of his own experience. He cannot teach you to be a man of genius; he could not even teach himself to be one. But at least he lays down many of the right rules for the use of genius. His book marks a revolutionary stage in the development of English literary criticism.

## X.—GRAY AND COLLINS

THERE seems to be a definite connection between good writing and indolence. The men whom we call stylists have, most of them, been idlers. From Horace to Robert Louis Stevenson, nearly all have been pigs from the sty of Epicurus. They have not, to use an excellent Anglo-Irish word, "industered" like insects or millionaires. The greatest men, one must admit, have mostly been as punctual at their labours as the sun—as fiery and inexhaustible. But, then, one does not think of the greatest writers as stylists. They are so much more than that. The style of Shakespeare is infinitely more marvellous than the style of Gray. But one hardly thinks of style in presence of the sea or a range of mountains or in reading Shakespeare. His munificent and gorgeous genius was as far above style as the statesmanship of Pericles or the sanctity of Joan of Arc was above good manners. The world has not endorsed Ben Jonson's retort to those who commended Shakespeare for never having "blotted out" a line: "Would he had blotted out a thousand!" We feel that so vast a genius is beyond the perfection of control we look for in a stylist. There may be badly-written scenes in Shakespeare, and pot-house jokes, and wordy hyperboles, but with all this there are enchanted continents which we may continue to explore though we live to be a hundred.

The fact that the noble impatience of a Shakespeare is above our fault-finding, however, must not be used to disparage the lazy patience of good writing. An Æschylus or a Shakespeare, a Browning or a Dickens, conquers us with an abundance like nature's. He feeds us out of a horn of plenty. This, unfortunately, is possible only to writers of the first order. The others, when they attempt profusion, become fluent rather than abundant, facile of ink rather

than generous of golden grain. Who does not agree with Pope that Dryden, though not Shakespeare, would have been a better poet if he had learned:

> The last and greatest art—the art to blot?

Who is there who would not rather have written a single ode of Gray's than all the poetical works of Southey? If voluminousness alone made a man a great writer, we should have to canonize Lord Lytton. The truth is, literary genius has no rule either of voluminousness or of the opposite. The genius of one writer is a world ever moving. The genius of another is a garden often still. The greatest genius is undoubtedly of the former kind. But as there is hardly enough genius of this kind to fill a wall, much less a library, we may well encourage the lesser writers to cultivate their gardens, and, in the absence of the wilder tumult of creation, to delight us with blooms of leisurely phrase and quiet thought.

Gray and Collins were both writers who laboured in little gardens. Collins, indeed, had a small flower-bed—perhaps only a pot—rather than a garden. He produced in it one perfect bloom—the *Ode to Evening*. The rest of his work is carefully written, inoffensive, historically interesting. But his continual personification of abstract ideas makes the greater part of his verse lifeless as allegories or as sculpture in a graveyard. He was a romantic, an inventor of new forms, in his own day. He seems academic to ours. His work is that of a man striking an attitude rather than of one expressing the deeps of a passionate nature. He is always careful not to confess. His *Ode to Fear* does not admit us to any of the secrets of his maniacal and melancholy breast. It is an anticipation of the factitious gloom of Byron, not of the nerve-shattered gloom of Dostoevsky. Collins, we cannot help feeling, says in it what he does not really think. He glorifies fear as though it were the better part of imagination, going so far as to end his ode with the lines:

> O thou whose spirit most possessed
> The sacred seat of Shakespeare's breast!

By all that from thy prophet broke
In thy divine emotions spoke:
Hither again thy fury deal,
Teach me but once, like him, to feel;
His cypress wreath my meed decree,
And I, O Fear, will dwell with thee!

We have only to compare these lines with Claudio's terrible speech about death in *Measure for Measure* to see the difference between pretence and passion in literature. Shakespeare had no fear of telling us what he knew about fear. Collins lived in a more reticent century, and attempted to fob off a disease on us as an accomplishment. What perpetually delights us in the *Ode to Evening* is that here at least Collins can tell the truth without falsification or chilling rhetoric. Here he is writing of the world as he has really seen it and been moved by it. He still makes use of personifications, but they have been transmuted by his emotion into imagery. In these exquisite formal unrhymed lines, Collins has summed up his view and dream of life. One knows that he was not lying or bent upon expressing any man's experiences but his own when he described how the

Air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat,
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn.

He speaks here, not in the stiffness of rhetoric, but in the liberty of a new mood, never, for all he knew or cared, expressed before. As far as all the rest of his work is concerned, his passion for style is more or less wasted. But the *Ode to Evening* justifies both his pains and his indolence. As for the pains he took with his work, we have it on the authority of Thomas Warton that "all his odes . . . had the marks of repeated correction: he was perpetually changing his epithets." As for his indolence, his uncle, Colonel Martin, thought him "too indolent even for the Army," and advised him to enter the Church—a step from which he was dissuaded, we are told, by "a

tobacconist in Fleet Street." For the rest, he was the son of a hatter, and went mad. He is said to have haunted the cloisters of Chichester Cathedral during his fits of melancholia, and to have uttered a strange accompaniment of groans and howls during the playing of the organ. The Castle of Indolence was for Collins no keep of the pleasures. One may doubt if it is ever this for any artist. Did not even Horace attempt to escape into Stoicism? Did not Stevenson write *Pulvis et Umbra?*

Assuredly Gray, though he was as fastidious in his appetites as Collins was wild, cannot be called in as a witness to prove the Castle of Indolence a happy place. "Low spirits," he wrote, when he was still an undergraduate, "are my true and faithful companions; they get up with me, go to bed with me, make journeys and return as I do; nay, and pay visits, and will even affect to be jocose, and force a feeble laugh with me." The end of the sentence shows (as do his letters, indeed, and his verses on the drowning of Horace Walpole's cat) that his indolent melancholy was not without its compensations. He was a wit, an observer of himself and the world about him, a man who wrote letters that have the genius of the essay. Further, he was Horace Walpole's friend, and (while his father had a devil in him) his mother and his aunts made a circle of quiet tenderness into which he could always retire. "I do not remember," Mr. Gosse has said of Gray, "that the history of literature presents us with the memoirs of any other poet favoured by nature with so many aunts as Gray possessed." This delicious sentence contains an important criticism of Gray. Gray was a poet of the sheltered life. His genius was shy and retiring. He had no ambition to thrust himself upon the world. He kept himself to himself, as the saying goes. He published the *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* in 1751 only because the editors of the *Magazine of Magazines* had got hold of a copy and Gray was afraid that they would publish it first. How lethargic a poet Gray was may be gathered from the fact that he began the *Elegy* as far back as 1746—Mason says it was

begun in August, 1742—and did not finish it until June 12, 1750. Probably there is no other short poem in English literature which was brooded over for so many seasons. Nor was there ever a greater justification for patient brooding. Gray in this poem liberated the English imagination after half a century of prose and rhetoric. He restored poetry to its true function as the confession of an individual soul. Wordsworth has blamed Gray for introducing, or at least, assisting to introduce, the curse of poetic diction into English literature. But poetic diction was in use long before Gray. He is remarkable among English poets, not for having succumbed to poetic diction, but for having triumphed over it. It is poetic feeling, not poetic diction, that distinguishes him from the mass of eighteenth-century writers. It is an interesting coincidence that Gray and Collins should have brought about a poetic revival by the rediscovery of the beauty of evening, just as Mr. Yeats and "A. E." brought about a poetic revival in our own day by the rediscovery of the beauty of twilight. Both schools of poetry (if it is permissible to call them schools) found in the stillness of the evening a natural refuge for the individual soul from the tyrannical prose of common day. There have been critics, including Matthew Arnold, who have denied that the *Elegy* is the greatest of Gray's poems. This, I think, can only be because they have been unable to see the poetry for the quotations. No other poem that Gray ever wrote was a miracle. *The Bard* is a masterpiece of imaginative rhetoric. But the *Elegy* is more than this. It is an autobiography and the creation of a world for the hearts of men. Here Gray delivers the secret doctrine of the poets. Here he escapes out of the eighteenth century into immortality. One realizes what an effort it must have been to rise above his century when one reads an earlier version of some of his most famous lines:

> Some village Cato (——) with dauntless breast
> The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
> Some mute, inglorious Tully here may rest;
> Some Cæsar guiltless of his country's blood.

Could there be a more effective example of the return to reality than we find in the final shape of this verse?

> Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
> The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
> Some mute, inglorious Milton here may rest,
> Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

It is as though suddenly it had been revealed to Gray that poetry is not a mere literary exercise but the image of reality; that it does not consist in vain admiration of models far off in time and place, but that it is as near to one as one's breath and one's country. Not that the *Elegy* would have been one of the great poems of the world if it had never plunged deeper into the heart than in this verse. It is a poem of beauty and sorrow that cannot be symbolized by such public figures as Cromwell and Milton. Here the genius of the parting day, and all that it means to the imagination, its quiet movement and its music, its pensiveness and its regrets, have been given a form more lasting than bronze. Perhaps the poem owes a part of its popularity to the fact that it is a great homily, though a homily transfigured. But then does not *Hamlet* owe a great part of its popularity to the fact that it is (among other things) a great blood-and-thunder play with duels and a ghost?

One of the so-called mysteries of literature is the fact that Gray, having written so greatly, should have written so little. He spoke of himself as a "shrimp of an author," and expressed the fear that his works might be mistaken for those of "a pismire or a flea." But to make a mystery of the indolence of a rather timid, idle, and unadventurous scholar, who was blessed with more fastidiousness than passion, is absurd. To say perfectly once and for all what one has to say is surely as fine an achievement as to keep restlessly trying to say it a thousand times over. Gray was no blabber. It is said that he did not even let his mother and his aunts know that he wrote poetry. He lacked boldness, volubility and vital energy. He stood aside from life. He would not even take money from his publishers for his

poetry. No wonder that he earned the scorn of Dr. Johnson, who said of him to Boswell, "Sir, he was dull in his company, dull in his closet, dull everywhere. He was dull in a new way, and that made many think him great." Luckily, Gray's reserve tempted him into his own heart and into external nature for safety and consolation. Johnson could see in him only a "mechanical poet." To most of us he seems the first natural poet in modern literature.

## XI.—ASPECTS OF SHELLEY

### (1) The Character Half Comic.

SHELLEY is one of the most difficult of men of genius to portray. It is easy enough to attack him or defend him—to damn him as an infidel or to praise him because he made Harriet Westbrook so miserable that she threw herself into the Serpentine. But this is an entirely different thing from recapturing the likeness of the man from the nine hundred and ninety-nine anecdotes that are told of him. These for the most part leave him with an air of absurdity. In his habit of igoring facts he appeals again and again to one's sense of the comic, like a drunken man who fails to see the kerb or who walks into a wall. He was indeed drunken with doctrine. He lived almost as much from doctrine as from passion. He pursued theories as a child chases butterflies. There is a story told of his Oxford days which shows how eccentrically his theories converted themselves into conduct. Having been reading Plato with Hogg, and having soaked himself in the theory of pre-existence and reminiscence, he was walking on Magdalen Bridge when he met a woman with a child in her arms. He seized the child, while its mother, thinking he was about to throw it into the river, clung on to it by the clothes. "Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, madam?" he asked, in a piercing voice and with a wistful look. She made no answer, but on Shelley repeating the question, she said, "He cannot speak." "But surely," exclaimed Shelley, "he can if he will, for he is only a few weeks old! He may fancy perhaps that he cannot, but it is only a silly whim; he cannot have forgotten entirely the use of speech in so short a time; the thing is absolutely impossible." The woman, obviously taking him for a lunatic, replied mildly: "It is not for me to dispute with you gentlemen,

but I can safely declare that I never heard him speak, nor any child, indeed, of his age." Shelley walked away with his friend, observing, with a deep sigh: "How provokingly close are these new-born babes!" One can, possibly, discover similar anecdotes in the lives of other men of genius and of men who fancied they had genius. But in such cases it is usually quite clear that the action was a jest or a piece of attitudinizing, or that the person who performed it was, as the vulgar say, "a little above himself." In any event it almost invariably appears as an abnormal incident in the life of a normal man. Shelley's life, on the other hand, is largely a concentration of abnormal incidents. He was habitually "a bit above himself." In the above incident he was, no doubt, consciously behaving comically. But many of his serious actions were quite as comically extraordinary.

Godwin is related to have said that "Shelley was so beautiful, it was a pity he was so wicked." I doubt if there is a single literate person in the world to-day who would apply the word "wicked" to Shelley. It is said that Browning, who had begun as so ardent a worshipper, never felt the same regard for Shelley after reading the full story of his desertion of Harriet Westbrook and her suicide. But Browning did not know the full story. None of us knows the full story. On the face of it, it looks a peculiarly atrocious thing to desert a wife at a time when she is about to become a mother. It seems ungenerous, again, when a man has an income of £1,000 a year to make an annual allowance of only £200 to a deserted wife and her two children. Shelley, however, had not married Harriet for love. A nineteen-year-old boy, he had run away with a seventeen-year-old girl in order to save her from the imagined tyranny of her father. At the end of three years Harriet had lost interest in him. Besides this, she had an intolerable elder sister whom Shelley hated. Harriet's sister, it is suggested, influenced her in the direction of a taste for bonnet-shops instead of supporting Shelley's exhortations to her that she should cultivate her mind.

"Harriet," says Mr. Ingpen in *Shelley in England*, "foolishly allowed herself to be influenced by her sister, under whose advice she probably acted when, some months earlier, she prevailed upon Shelley to provide her with a carriage, silver plate and expensive clothes." We cannot help sympathizing a little with Harriet. At the same time, she was making a breach with Shelley inevitable. She wished him to remain her husband and to pay for her bonnets, but she did not wish even to pretend to "live up to him" any longer. As Mr. Ingpen says, "it was love, not matrimony," for which Shelley yearned. "Marriage," Shelley had once written, echoing Godwin, "is hateful, detestable. A kind of ineffable, sickening disgust seizes my mind when I think of this most despotic, most unrequired fetter which prejudice has forged to confine its energies." Having lived for years in a theory of "anti-matrimonialism," he now saw himself doomed to one of those conventional marriages which had always seemed to him a denial of the holy spirit of love. This, too, at a time when he had found in Mary Godwin a woman belonging to the same intellectual and spiritual race as himself—a woman whom he loved as the great lovers in all the centuries have loved. Shelley himself expressed the situation in a few characteristic words to Thomas Love Peacock: "Everyone who knows me," he said, "must know that the partner of my life should be one who can feel poetry and understand philosophy. Harriet is a noble animal, but she can do neither." "It always appeared to me," said Peacock, "that you were very fond of Harriet." Shelley replied: "But you did not know how I hated her sister." And so Harriet's marriage-lines were torn up, as people say nowadays, like a scrap of paper. That Shelley did not feel he had done anything inconsiderate is shown by the fact that, within three weeks of his elopement with Mary Godwin, he was writing to Harriet, describing the scenery through which Mary and he had travelled, and urging her to come and live near them in Switzerland. "I write," his letter runs—

to urge you to come to Switzerland, where you will at least find one firm and constant friend, to whom your interests will be always dear—by whom your feelings will never wilfully be injured. From none can you expect this but me—all else are unfeeling, or selfish, or have beloved friends of their own, as Mrs. B[oinville], to whom their attention and affection is confined.

He signed this letter (the Ianthe of whom he speaks was his daughter):

With love to my sweet little Ianthe, ever most affectionately yours, S.

This letter, if it had been written by an amorist, would seem either base or priggish. Coming from Shelley, it is a miracle of what can only be called innocence.

The most interesting of the "new facts and letters" in Mr. Ingpen's book relate to Shelley's expulsion from Oxford and his runaway match with Harriet, and to his father's attitude on both these occasions. Shelley's father, backed by the family solicitor, cuts a commonplace figure in the story. He is simply the conventional grieved parent. He made no effort to understand his son. The most he did was to try to save his respectability. He objected to Shelley's studying for the Bar, but was anxious to make him a Member of Parliament; and Shelley and he dined with the Duke of Norfolk to discuss the matter, the result being that the younger man was highly indignant "at what he considered an effort to shackle his mind, and introduce him into life as a mere follower of the Duke." How unpromising as a party politician Shelley was may be gathered from the fact that in 1811, the same year in which he dined with the Duke, he not only wrote a satire on the Regent *à propos* of a Carlton House fête, but "amused himself with throwing copies into the carriages of persons going to Carlton House after the fête." Shelley's methods of propaganda were on other occasions also more eccentric than is usual with followers of dukes. His journey to Dublin to preach Catholic Emancipation and repeal of the Union was the beginning of a brief but extraordinary period of propaganda by pamphlet. Having written a fivepenny pamphlet, *An*

*Address to the Irish People*, he stood in the balcony of his lodgings in Lower Sackville Street, and threw copies to the passers-by. "I stand," he wrote at the time, "at the balcony of our window, and watch till I see a man *who looks likely;* I throw a book to him." Harriet, it is to be feared, saw only the comic side of the adventure. Writing to Elizabeth Hitchener—"the Brown Demon," as Shelley called her when he came to hate her—she said:

> I'm sure you would laugh were you to see us give the pamphlets. We throw them out of the window, and give them to men that we pass in the streets. For myself, I am ready to die of laughter when it is done, and Percy looks so grave. Yesterday he put one into a woman's hood and cloak. She knew nothing of it, and we passed her. I could hardly get on: my muscles were so irritated.

Shelley, none the less, was in regard to Ireland a wiser politician than the politicians, and he was indulging in no turgid or fanciful prose in his *Address* when he described the Act of Union as "the most successful engine that England ever wielded over the misery of fallen Ireland." Godwin, with whom Shelley had been corresponding for some time, now became alarmed at his disciple's reckless daring. "Shelley, you are preparing a scene of blood!" he wrote to him in his anxiety. It is evidence of the extent of Godwin's influence over Shelley that the latter withdrew his Irish publications and returned to England, having spent about six weeks on his mission to the Irish people.

Mr. Ingpen has really written a new biography of Shelley rather than a compilation of new material. The new documents incorporated in the book were discovered by the successors to Mr. William Whitton, the Shelleys' family solicitor, but they can hardly be said to add much to our knowledge of the facts about Shelley. They prove, however, that his marriage to Harriet Westbrook took place in a Presbyterian church in Edinburgh, and that, at a later period, he was twice arrested for debt. Mr. Ingpen holds that they also prove that Shelley "appeared on the boards of the Windsor Theatre as an actor in Shakespearean

drama." But we have only William Whitton, the solicitor's, word for this, and it is clear that he had been at no pains to investigate the matter. "It was mentioned to me yesterday," he wrote to Shelley's father in November, 1815, "that Mr. P. B. Shelley was exhibiting himself on the Windsor stage in the character of Shakespeare's plays, under the figured name of Cooks." "The character of Shakespeare's plays" sounds oddly, as though Whitton did not know what he was talking about, unless he was referring to allegorical "tableaux vivants" of some sort. Certainly, so vague a rumour as this—the sort of rumour that would naturally arise in regard to a young man who was supposed to have gone to the bad—is no trustworthy evidence that Shelley was ever "an actor in Shakespearean drama." At the same time, Mr. Ingpen deserves enthusiastic praise for the untiring pursuit of facts which has enabled him to add an indispensable book to the Shelley library. I wish that, as he has to some extent followed the events of Shelley's life until the end, he had filled in the details of the life abroad as well as the life in England. His book is an absorbing biography, but it remains of set purpose a biography with gaps. He writes, it should be added, in the spirit of a collector of facts rather than of a psychologist. One has to create one's own portrait of Shelley out of the facts he has brought together.

One is surprised, by the way, to find so devoted a student of Shelley—a student to whom every lover of literature is indebted for his edition of Shelley's letters as well as for the biography—referring to Shelley again and again as "Bysshe." Shelley's family, it may be admitted, called him "Bysshe." But never was a more inappropriate name given to a poet who brought down music from heaven. At the same time, as we read his biography over again, we feel that it is possible that the two names do somehow express two incongruous aspects of the man. In his life he was, to a great extent, Bysshe; in his poetry he was Shelley. Shelley wrote *The Skylark* and *Pan* and *The West Wind*.

It was Bysshe who imagined that a fat old woman in a train had infected him with incurable elephantiasis. Mr. Ingpen quotes Peacock's account of this characteristic illusion:

> He was continually on the watch for its symptoms; his legs were to swell to the size of an elephant's, and his skin was to be crumpled over like goose-skin. He would draw the skin of his own hands, arms, and neck very tight, and, if he discovered any deviation from smoothness, he would seize the person next to him and endeavour, by a corresponding pressure, to see if any corresponding deviation existed. He often startled young ladies in an evening party by this singular process, which was as instantaneous as a flash of lightning.

Mr. Ingpen has wisely omitted nothing about Bysshe, however ludicrous. After reading a biography so unsparing in tragi-comic narrative, however, one has to read *Prometheus* again in order to recall that divine song of a freed spirit, the incarnation of which we call Shelley.

### (2) The Experimentalist.

Mr. Buxton Forman has an original way of recommending books to our notice. In an Introduction to Medwin's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* he begins by frankly telling us that it is a bad book, and that the only point of controversy in regard to it is as to the kind of bad book it is. "Last century," he declares, "produced a plethora of bad books that were valuable, and of fairly good books with no lasting value. Medwin's distinction is that he left two bad books which were and still are valuable, but whether the *Byron Conversations* and the *Life of Shelley* should be called the two most valuable bad books of the century or the two worst valuable books of the century is a hard point in casuistry." Medwin, we may admit, even if he was not the "perfect idiot" he has been called, would have been a dull fellow enough if he had never met Shelley or Byron. But he did meet them, and as a result he will live to all eternity, or near it, a little gilded by their rays. He was not, Mr. Forman contends, the original of the man who "saw

Shelley plain " in Browning's lyric. None the less, he is precisely that man in the imaginations of most of us. A relative of Shelley, a school friend, an intimate of the last years in Italy, even though we know him to have been one of those men who cannot help lying because they are so stupid, he still fascinates us as a treasury of sidelights on one of the strangest and most iridescent lives in the history of English literature.

Shelley is often presented to us as a kind of creature from fairyland, continually wounded in a struggle with the despotic realities of earth. Here and in his poetry, however, we see him rather as the herald of the age of science: he was a born experimentalist; he experimented, not only in chemistry, but in life and in politics. At school, he and his solar microscope were inseparable. Ardently interested in chemistry, he once, we are told, borrowed a book on the subject from Medwin's father, but his own father sent it back with a note saying: "I have returned the book on chemistry, as it is a forbidden thing at Eton." During his life at University College, Oxford, his delight in chemical experiments continued.

His chemical operations seemed to an unskilful observer to premise nothing but disasters. He had blown himself up at Eton. He had inadvertently swallowed some mineral poison, which he declared had seriously injured his health, and from the effects of which he should never recover. His hands, his clothes, his books, and his furniture, were stained and covered by medical acids—more than one hole in the carpet could elucidate the ultimate phenomena of combustion, especially in the middle of the room, where the floor had also been burnt by his mixing ether or some other fluid in a crucible, and the honourable wound was speedily enlarged by rents, for the philosopher, as he hastily crossed the room in pursuit of truth, was frequently caught in it by the foot.

The same eagerness of discovery is shown in his passion for kite-flying as a boy:

He was fond of flying kites, and at Field Place made an electrical one, an idea borrowed from Franklin, in order to draw lightning from the clouds—fire from Heaven, like a new Prometheus.

And his generous dream of bringing science to the service of humanity is revealed in his reflection:

> What a comfort it would be to the poor at all times, and especially in winter, if we could be masters of caloric, and could at will furnish them with a constant supply!

Shelley's many-sided zeal in the pursuit of truth naturally led him early to invade theology. From his Eton days, he used to enter into controversies by letter with learned divines. Medwin declares that he saw one such correspondence in which Shelley engaged in argument with a bishop "under the assumed name of a woman." It must have been in a somewhat similar mood that "one Sunday, after we had been to Rowland Hill's chapel, and were dining together in the City, he wrote to him under an assumed name, proposing to preach to his congregation."

Certainly, Shelley loved mystification scarcely less than he loved truth itself. He was a romanticist as well as a philosopher, and the reading in his childhood of novels like *Zofloya the Moor*—a work as wild, apparently, as anything Cyril Tourneur ever wrote—excited his imagination to impossible flights of adventure. Few of us have the endurance to study the effects of this ghostly reading in Shelley's own work—his forgotten novels, *Zastrozzi*, and *St. Irvyne; or the Rosicrucian*—but we can see how his life itself borrowed some of the extravagances of fiction. Many of his recorded adventures are supposed to have been hallucinations, like the story of the "stranger in a military cloak" who, seeing him in a post-office at Pisa, said, "What! Are you that d——d atheist, Shelley?" and felled him to the ground. On the other hand, Shelley's story of his being attacked by a midnight assassin in Wales, after being disbelieved for three-quarters of a century, has in recent years been corroborated in the most unexpected way. Wild a fiction as his life was in many respects, it was a fiction he himself sincerely and innocently believed. His imaginative appetite, having devoured science by day and sixpenny romances by night, still remained unsatisfied,

and, quite probably, went on to mix up reality and make-believe past all recognition for its next dish. Francis Thompson, despite the protests of some critics, was right when he noted what a complete playfellow Shelley was in his life. When he was in London after his expulsion from the University, he could throw himself with all his being into childish games like skimming stones on the Serpentine, "counting with the utmost glee the number of bounds, as the flat stones flew skimming over the surface of the water." He found a perfect pleasure in paper boats, and we hear of his making a sail on one occasion out of a ten-pound note—one of those myths, perhaps, which gather round poets. It must have been the innocence of pleasure shown in games like these that made him an irresistible companion to so many comparatively prosaic people. For the idea that Shelley in private life was aloof and unpopular from his childhood up is an entirely false one. As Medwin points out, in referring to his school-days, he "must have had a rather large circle of friends, since his parting breakfast at Eton cost £50."

Even at the distance of a century, we are still seized by the fascination of that boyish figure with the "stag eyes," so enthusiastic in pursuit of truth and of dreams, of trifles light as air and of the redemption of the human race. "His figure," Hogg tells us, "was slight and fragile, and yet his bones were large and strong. He was tall, but he stooped so much that he seemed of low stature." And, in Medwin's book, we even become reconciled to that shrill voice of his, which Lamb and most other people found so unpleasant. Medwin gives us nothing in the nature of a portrait of Shelley in these heavy and incoherent pages; but he gives us invaluable materials for such a portrait—in descriptions, for instance, of how he used to go on with his reading, even when he was out walking, and would get so absorbed in his studies that he sometimes asked, "Mary, have I dined?" More important, as revealing his too exquisite sensitiveness, is the account of how Medwin saw him, "after threading the carnival crowd in the Lung'

Arno Corsos, throw himself, half-fainting, into a chair, overpowered by the atmosphere of evil passions, as he used to say, in that sensual and unintellectual crowd." Some people, on reading a passage like this, will rush to the conclusion that Shelley was a prig. But the prig is a man easily wounded by blows to his self-esteem, not by the miseries and imperfections of humanity. Shelley, no doubt, was more convinced of his own rightness than any other man of the same fine genius in English history. He did not indulge in repentance, like Burns and Byron. On the other hand, he was not in the smallest degree an egolater. He had not even such an innocent egoism as Thoreau's. He was always longing to give himself to the world. In the Italian days we find him planning an expedition with Byron to rescue, by main force, a man who was in danger of being burnt alive for sacrilege. He has often been denounced for his heartless treatment of Harriett Westbrook, and, though we may not judge him, it is possible that a better man would have behaved differently. But it was a mark of his unselfishness, at least, that he went through the marriage service with both his wives in spite of his principles, that he so long endured Harriett's sister as the tyrant of his house, and that he neglected none of his responsibilities to her, in so far as they were consistent with his deserting her for another woman. This may seem a *bizarre* defence, but I merely wish to emphasize the fact that Shelley behaved far better than ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have behaved, given the same principles and the same circumstances. He was a man who never followed the line of least resistance or of self-indulgence, as most men do in their love affairs. He fought a difficult fight all his life in a world that ignored him, except when it was denouncing him as a polluter of Society. Whatever mistakes we may consider him to have made, we can hardly fail to admit that he was one of the greatest of English Puritans.

### (3) The Poet of Hope.

Shelley is the poet for a revolutionary age. He is the poet of hope, as Wordsworth is the poet of wisdom. He has been charged with being intangible and unearthly, but he is so only in the sense in which the future is intangible and unearthly. He is no more unearthly than the skylark or the rainbow or the dawn. His world, indeed, is a universe of skylarks and rainbows and dawns—a universe in which

> Like a thousand dawns on a single night
> The splendours rise and spread.

He at once dazzles and overwhelms us with light and music. He is unearthly in the sense that as we read him we seem to move in a new element. We lose to some extent the gravity of flesh and find ourselves wandering among stars and sunbeams, or diving under sea or stream to visit the buried day of some wonder-strewn cave. There are other great poets besides Shelley who have had a vision of the heights and depths. Compared with him, however, they have all about them something of Goliath's disadvantageous bulk. Shelley alone retains a boyish grace like David's, and does not seem to groan under the burden of his task. He does not round his shoulders in gloom in the presence of Heaven and Hell. His cosmos is a constellation. His thousand dawns are shaken out over the earth with a promise that turns even the long agony of Prometheus into joy. There is no other joy in literature like Shelley's. It is the joy not of one who is blind or untroubled, but of one who, in a midnight of tyranny and suffering of the unselfish, has learned

> . . . to hope till Hope creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates.

To write like this is to triumph over defeat. It is to cease to be a victim and to become a creator. Shelley recognized that the world had been bound into slavery by the Devil,

but he more than anyone else believed that it was possible for the human race in a single dayspring to recover the first intention of God.

> In the great morning of the world,
> The Spirit of God with might unfurled
> The flag of Freedom over Chaos.

Shelley desired to restore to earth not the past of man but the past of God. He lacked the bad sort of historical sense that will sacrifice the perfect to-morrow to pride in the imperfect yesterday. He was the devoted enemy of that dark spirit of Power which holds fast to the old greed as to a treasure. In *Hellas* he puts into the mouth of Christ a reproof to Mahomet which is a reproof to all those who are haters of a finer and freer future to-day :

> Obdurate spirit!
> Thou seest but the Past in the To-come.
> Pride is thy error and thy punishment.
> Boast not thine empire, dream not that thy worlds
> Are more than furnace-sparks or rainbow-drops
> Before the Power that wields and kindles them.
> True greatness asks not space.

There are some critics who would like to separate Shelley's politics from his poetry. But Shelley's politics are part of his poetry. They are the politics of hope as his poetry is the poetry of hope. Europe did not adopt his politics in the generation that followed the Napoleonic Wars, and as a result we have had an infinitely more terrible war a hundred years later. Every generation rejects Shelley ; it prefers incredulity to hope, fear to joy, obedience to common sense, and is surprised when the logic of its common sense turns out to be a tragedy such as even the wildest orgy of idealism could not have produced. Shelley must, no doubt, still seem a shocking poet to an age in which the limitation of the veto of the House of Lords was described as a revolutionary step. To Shelley even the new earth for which the Bolsheviks are calling would not have seemed an extravagant demand. He was almost the only

English poet up to his own time who believed that the world had a future. One can think of no other poet to whom to turn for the prophetic music of a real League of Nations. Tennyson may have spoken of the federation of the world, but his passion was not for that but for the British Empire. He had the craven fear of being great on any but the old Imperialist lines. His work did nothing to make his country more generous than it was before. Shelley, on the other hand, creates for us a new atmosphere of generosity. His patriotism was love of the people of England, not love of the Government of England. Hence, when the Government of England allied itself with the oppressors of mankind, he saw nothing unpatriotic in arraigning it as he would have arraigned a German or a Russian Government in the same circumstances.

He arraigned it, indeed, in the preface to *Hellas* in a paragraph which the publisher nervously suppressed, and which was only restored in 1892 by Mr. Buxton Forman. The seditious paragraph ran :

> Should the English people ever become free, they will reflect upon the part which those who presume to represent them will have played in the great drama of the revival of liberty, with feelings which it would become them to anticipate. This is the age of the war of the oppressed against the oppressors, and every one of those ringleaders of the privileged gangs of murderers and swindlers, called Sovereigns, look to each other for aid against the common enemy, and suspend their mutual jealousies in the presence of a mightier fear. Of this holy alliance all the despots of the earth are virtual members. But a new race has arisen throughout Europe, nursed in the abhorrence of the opinions which are its chains, and she will continue to produce fresh generations to accomplish that destiny which tyrants foresee and dread.

It is nearly a hundred years since Shelley proclaimed this birth of a new race throughout Europe. Would he have turned pessimist if he had lived to see the world infected with Prussianism as it has been in our time? I do not think he would. He would have been the singer of the new race to-day as he was then. To him the resurrection of the old despotism, foreign and domestic, would have seemed

but a fresh assault by the Furies on the body of Prometheus. He would have scattered the Furies with a song.

For Shelley has not failed. He is one of those who have brought down to earth the creative spirit of freedom. And that spirit has never ceased to brood, with however disappointing results, over the chaos of Europe until our own time. His greatest service to freedom is, perhaps, that he made it seem, not a policy, but a part of Nature. He made it desirable as the spring, lovely as a cloud in a blue sky, gay as a lark, glad as a wave, golden as a star, mighty as a wind. Other poets speak of freedom, and invite the birds on to the platform. Shelley spoke of freedom and himself became a bird in the air, a wave of the sea. He did not humiliate beauty into a lesson. He scattered beauty among men not as a homily but as a spirit—

> Singing hymns unbidden, till the world is wrought
> To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not.

His politics are implicit in *The Cloud* and *The Skylark* and *The West Wind*, no less than in *The Mask of Anarchy*. His idea of the State as well as his idea of sky and stream and forest was rooted in the exuberant imagination of a lover. The whole body of his work, whether lyrical in the strictest sense or propagandist, is a Book of Revelation.

It is impossible to say whether he might not have been a greater poet if he had not been in such haste to rebuild the world. He would, one fancies, have been a better artist if he had had a finer patience of phrase. On the other hand, his achievement even in the sphere of phrase and music is surpassed by no poet since Shakespeare. He may hurry along at intervals in a cloud of second-best words, but out of the cloud suddenly comes a song like Ariel's and a radiance like the radiance of a new day. With him a poem is a melody rather than a manuscript. Not since Prospero commanded songs from his attendant spirits has there been singing heard like the *Hymn of Pan* and *The Indian Serenade*. *The Cloud* is the most magical transmutation of things seen into things heard in the English language.

Not that Shelley misses the wonder of things seen. But he apprehends things, as it were, musically.

> My soul is an enchanted boat
> Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
> Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing.

There is more of music than painting in this kind of writing.

There is no other music but Shelley's which seems to me likely to bring healing to the madness of the modern Saul. For this reason I hope that Professor Herford's fine edition of the shorter poems (arranged for the first time in chronological order) will encourage men and women to turn to Shelley again. Professor Herford promises us a companion volume on the same lines, containing the dramas and longer poems, if sufficient interest is shown in his book. The average reader will probably be content with Mr. Hutchinson's cheap and perfect "Oxford Edition" of Shelley. But the scholar, as well as the lover of a beautiful page, will find in Professor Herford's edition a new pleasure in old verse.

# XII.—THE WISDOM OF COLERIDGE

## (1) Coleridge as Critic.

COLERIDGE was the thirteenth child of a rather queer clergyman. The Rev. John Coleridge was queer enough in having thirteen children: he was queerer still in being the author of a Latin grammar in which he renamed the ablative the "quale-quare-quidditive case." Coleridge was thus born not only with an unlucky number, but trailing clouds of definitions. He was in some respects the unluckiest of all Englishmen of literary genius. He leaves on us an impression of failure as no other writer of the same stature does. The impression may not be justified. There are few writers who would not prefer the magnificent failure of a Coleridge to their own little mole-hill of success. Coleridge was a failure in comparison not with ordinary men, but only with the immense shadow of his own genius. His imperfection is the imperfection of a demi-god. Charles Lamb summed up the truth about his genius as well as about his character in that final phrase, "an archangel a little damaged." This was said at a time when the archangel was much more than a little damaged by the habit of laudanum; but even then Lamb wrote: "His face, when he repeats his verses, hath its ancient glory." Most of Coleridge's great contemporaries were aware of that glory. Even those who were afterwards to be counted among his revilers, such as Hazlitt and De Quincey, had known what it was to be disciples at the feet of this inspired ruin. They spoke not only of his mind, but even of his physical characteristics—his voice and his hair—as though these belonged to the one man of his time whose food was ambrosia. Even as a boy at Christ's Hospital, according to Lamb, he used to make

the "casual passer through the Cloisters stand still, intranced with admiration (while he weighed the disproportion between the *speech* and the *garb* of the young Mirandola), to hear thee unfold, in thy deep and sweet intonations, the mysteries of Iamblichus, or Plotinus . . . or reciting Homer in the Greek, or Pindar—while the walls of the old Grey Friars re-echoed to the accents of the *inspired charity-boy!*"

It is exceedingly important that, as we read Coleridge, we should constantly remember what an archangel he was in the eyes of his contemporaries. *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan* we could read, no doubt, in perfect enjoyment even if we did not know the author's name. For the rest, there is so much flagging of wing both in his verse and in his prose that, if we did not remind ourselves what flights he was born to take, we might persuade ourselves at times that there was little in his work but the dull flappings and slitherings of a penguin. His genius is intermittent and comes arbitrarily to an end. He is inspired only in fragments and aphorisms. He was all but incapable of writing a complete book or a complete poem at a high level. His irresponsibility as an author is described in that sentence in which he says: "I have laid too many eggs in the hot sands of this wilderness, the world, with ostrich carelessness and ostrich oblivion." His literary plans had a ludicrous way of breaking down. It was characteristic of him that, in 1817, when he projected a complete edition of his poems, under the title *Sibylline Leaves*, he omitted to publish Volume I. and published only Volume II. He would announce a lecture on Milton, and then give his audience "a very eloquent and popular discourse on the general character of Shakespeare." His two finest poems he never finished. He wrote not by an act of the will but according to the wind, and when the wind dropped he came to earth. It was as though he could soar but was unable to fly. It is this that differentiates him from other great poets and critics. None of them has left such a record of unfulfilled purposes. It is not that he did not get

through an enormous amount of work, but that, like the revellers in Mr. Chesterton's poem, he "went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head," and in the end he did not get to Birmingham. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch gives an amusing account of the way in which *Biographia Literaria* came to be written. Originally, in 1815, it was conceived as a preface—to be "done in two, or at farthest three days"—to a collection of some "scattered and manuscript poems." Two months later the plan had changed. Coleridge was now busy on a preface to an *Autobiographia Literaria, sketches of my literary Life and Opinions*. This in turn developed into "a full account (*raisonné*) of the controversy concerning Wordsworth's poems and theory," with a "disquisition on the powers of Association . . . and on the generic difference between the Fancy and the Imagination." This ran to such a length that he decided not to use it as a preface, but to amplify it into a work in three volumes. He succeeded in writing the first volume, but he found himself unable to fill the second. "Then, as the volume obstinately remained too small, he tossed in *Satyrane*, an epistolary account of his wanderings in Germany, topped up with a critique of a bad play, and gave the whole painfully to the world in July, 1817." It is one of the ironies of literary history that Coleridge, the censor of the incongruous in literature, the vindicator of the formal purpose as opposed to the haphazard inspiration of the greatest of writers, a missionary of the "shaping imagination," should himself have given us in his greatest book of criticism an incongruous, haphazard, and shapeless jumble. It is but another proof of the fact that, while talent cannot safely ignore what is called technique, genius almost can. Coleridge, in spite of his formlessness, remains the wisest man who ever spoke in English about literature. His place is that of an oracle among controversialists.

Even so, *Biographia Literaria* is a disappointing book. It is the porch, but it is not the temple. It may be that, in literary criticism, there can be no temple. Literary criticism is in its nature largely an incitement to enter, a hint

of the treasures that are to be found within. Persons who seek rest in literary orthodoxy are always hoping to discover written upon the walls of the porch the ten commandments of good writing. It is extremely easy to invent ten such commandments—it was done in the age of Racine and in the age of Pope—but the wise critic knows that in literature the rules are less important than the "inner light." Hence, criticism at its highest is not a theorist's attempt to impose iron laws on writers: it is an attempt to capture the secret of that "inner light" and of those who possess it and to communicate it to others. It is also an attempt to define the conditions in which the "inner light" has most happily manifested itself, and to judge new writers of promise according to the measure in which they have been true to the spirit, though not necessarily to the technicalities, of the great tradition. Criticism, then, is not the Roman father of good writing: it is the disciple and missionary of good writing. The end of criticism is less law-giving than conversion. It teaches not the legalities, but the love, of literature. *Biographia Literaria* does this in its most admirable parts by interesting us in Coleridge's own literary beginnings, by emphasizing the strong sweetness of great poets in contrast to the petty animosities of little ones, by pointing out the signs of the miracle of genius in the young Shakespeare, and by disengaging the true genius of Wordsworth from a hundred extravagances of theory and practice. Coleridge's remarks on the irritability of minor poets—"men of undoubted talents, but not of genius," whose tempers are "rendered yet more irritable by their desire to *appear* men of genius"—should be written up on the study walls of everyone commencing author. His description, too, of his period as "this age of personality, this age of literary and political gossiping, when the meanest insects are worshipped with a sort of Egyptian superstition, if only the brainless head be atoned for by the sting of personal malignity in the tail," conveys a warning to writers that is not of an age but for all time. Coleridge may have exaggerated the

"manly hilarity" and "evenness and sweetness of temper" of men of genius. But there is no denying that, the smaller the genius, the greater is the spite of wounded self-love. "Experience informs us," as Coleridge says, "that the first defence of weak minds is to recriminate." As for Coleridge's great service to Wordsworth's fame, it was that of a gold-washer. He cleansed it from all that was false in Wordsworth's reaction both in theory and in practice against "poetic diction." Coleridge pointed out that Wordsworth had misunderstood the ultimate objections to eighteenth-century verse. The valid objection to a great deal of eighteenth-century verse was not, he showed, that it was written in language different from that of prose, but that it consisted of "translations of prose thoughts into poetic language." Coleridge put it still more strongly, indeed, when he said that "the language from Pope's translation of Homer to Darwin's *Temple of Nature* may, notwithstanding some illustrious exceptions, be too faithfully characterized as claiming to be poetical for no better reason than that it would be intolerable in conversation or in prose." Wordsworth, unfortunately, in protesting against the meretricious garb of mean thoughts, wished to deny verse its more splendid clothing altogether. If we accepted his theories we should have to condemn his *Ode*, the greatest of his sonnets, and, as Coleridge put it, "two-thirds at least of the marked beauties of his poetry." The truth is, Wordsworth created an engine that was in danger of destroying not only Pope but himself. Coleridge destroyed the engine and so helped to save Wordsworth. Coleridge may, in his turn, have gone too far in dividing language into three groups—language peculiar to poetry, language peculiar to prose, and language common to both, though there is much to be said for the division; but his jealousy for the great tradition in language was the jealousy of a sound critic. "Language," he declared, "is the armoury of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests."

He, himself, wrote idly enough at times: he did not shrink from the phrase, "literary man," abominated by Mr. Birrell. But he rises in sentence after sentence into the great manner, as when he declares:

> No man was ever yet a great poet without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language.

How excellently, again, he describes Wordsworth's early aim as being—

> to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.

He explains Wordsworth's gift more fully in another passage:

> It was the union of deep feeling with profound thought, the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed, and, above all, the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world, around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew-drops.

Coleridge's censures on Wordsworth, on the other hand, such as that on *The Daffodil*, may not all be endorsed by us to-day. But in the mass they have the insight of genius, as when he condemns "the approximation to what might be called *mental* bombast, as distinguished from verbal." His quotations of great passages, again, are the very flower of good criticism.

Mr. George Sampson's editorial selection from *Biographia Literaria* and his pleasant as well as instructive notes give one a new pleasure in rereading this classic of critical literature. The "quale-quare-quidditive" chapters have been removed, and Wordsworth's revolutionary prefaces and essays given in their place. In its new form, *Biographia Literaria* may not be the best book that could

be written, but there is good reason for believing that it is the best book that has been written, on poetry in the English tongue.

### (2) Coleridge as a Talker.

Coleridge's talk resembles the movements of one of the heavenly bodies. It moves luminously on its way without impediment, without conflict. When Dr. Johnson talks, half our pleasure is due to our sense of conflict. His sentences are knobby sticks. We love him as a good man playing the bully even more than as a wise man talking common sense. He is one of the comic characters in literature. He belongs, in his eloquence, to the same company as Falstaff and Micawber. He was, to some extent, the invention of a Scottish humourist named Boswell. "Burke," we read in Coleridge's *Table Talk*, "said and wrote more than once that he thought Johnson greater in talking than writing, and greater in Boswell than in real life." Coleridge's conversation is not to the same extent a coloured expression of personality. He speaks out of the solitude of an oracle rather than struts upon the stage of good company, a master of repartees. At his best, he becomes the mouthpiece of universal wisdom, as when he says: "To most men experience is like the stern lights of a ship, which illuminate only the track it has passed." He can give us in a sentence the central truth of politics, reconciling what is good in Individualism with what is good in Socialism in a score or so of words:

> That is the most excellent state of society in which the patriotism of the citizen ennobles, but does not merge, the individual energy of the man.

And he can give common sense as well as wisdom imaginative form, as in the sentence:

> Truth is a good dog; but beware of barking too close to the heels of Error, lest you get your brains knocked out.

"I am, by the law of my nature, a reasoner," said Coleridge, and he explained that he did not mean by this

"an arguer." He was a discoverer of order, of laws, of causes, not a controversialist. He sought after principles, whether in politics or literature. He quarrelled with Gibbon because his *Decline and Fall* was "little else but a disguised collection of . . . splendid anecdotes" instead of a philosophic search for the ultimate causes of the ruin of the Roman Empire. Coleridge himself formulated these causes in sentences that are worth remembering at a time when we are debating whether the world of the future is to be a vast boxing ring of empires or a community of independent nations. He said:

> The true key to the declension of the Roman Empire—which is not to be found in all Gibbon's immense work—may be stated in two words: the imperial character overlaying, and finally destroying, the *national* character. Rome under Trajan was an empire without a nation.

One must not claim too much for Coleridge, however. He was a seer with his head among the stars, but he was also a human being with uneven gait, stumbling amid infirmities, prejudices, and unhappinesses. He himself boasted in a delightful sentence:

> For one mercy I owe thanks beyond all utterance—that, with all my gastric and bowel distempers, my head hath ever been like the head of a mountain in blue air and sunshine.

It is to be feared that Coleridge's "gastric and bowel distempers" had more effect on his head than he was aware of. Like other men, he often spoke out of a heart full of grievances. He uttered the bitterness of an unhappily married dyspeptic when he said: "The most happy marriage I can picture or image to myself would be the union of a deaf man to a blind woman." It is amusing to recall that one of the many books which he wished to write was "a book on the duties of women, more especially to their husbands." One feels, again, that in his defence of the egoism of the great reformers, he was apologizing for a vice of his own rather than making an impersonal statement of truth. "How can a tall man help thinking

of his size," he asked, "when dwarfs are constantly standing on tiptoe beside him?" The personal note that occasionally breaks in upon the oracular rhythm of the *Table Talk,* however, is a virtue in literature, even if a lapse in philosophy. The crumbs of a great man's autobiography are no less precious than the crumbs of his wisdom. There are moods in which one prefers his egotism to his great thoughts. It is pleasant to hear Coleridge boasting: "The *Ancient Mariner* cannot be imitated, nor the poem *Love. They may be excelled; they are not imitable.*" One is amused to know that he succeeded in offending Lamb on one occasion by illustrating "the cases of vast genius in proportion to talent and the predominance of talent in conjunction with genius in the persons of Lamb and himself." It is amusing, too, to find that, while Wordsworth regarded *The Ancient Mariner* as a dangerous drag on the popularity of *Lyrical Ballads,* Coleridge looked on his poem as the feature that had sold the greatest number of the copies of the book. It is only fair to add that in taking this view he spoke not self-complacently, but humorously:

> I was told by Longmans that the greater part of the *Lyrical Ballads* had been sold to seafaring men, who, having heard of the *Ancient Mariner,* concluded that it was a naval song-book, or, at all events, that it had some relation to nautical matters.

Of autobiographical confessions there are not so many in *Table Talk* as one would like. At the same time, there are one or two which throw light on the nature of Coleridge's imagination. We get an idea of one of the chief differences between the poetry of Coleridge and the poetry of Wordsworth when we read the confession:

> I have the perception of individual images very strong, but a dim one of the relation of place. I remember the man or the tree, but where I saw them I mostly forget.

The nephew who collected Coleridge's talk declared that there was no man whom he would more readily have chosen as a guide in morals, but "I would not take him as a guide through streets or fields or earthly roads." The author

of *Kubla Khan* asserted still more strongly on another occasion his indifference to locality:

Dear Sir Walter Scott and myself were exact but harmonious opposites in this—that every old ruin, hill, river, or tree called up in his mind a host of historical or biographical associations, just as a bright pan of brass, when beaten, is said to attract the swarming bees; whereas, for myself, notwithstanding Dr. Johnson, I believe I should walk over the plain of Marathon without taking more interest in it than in any other plain of similar features. Yet I receive as much pleasure in reading the account of the battle, in Herodotus, as anyone can. Charles Lamb wrote an essay on a man who lived in past time: I thought of adding another to it on one who lived not *in time* at all, past, present, or future—but beside or collaterally.

Some of Coleridge's other memories are of a more trifling and amusing sort. He recalls, for instance, the occasion of his only flogging at school. He had gone to a shoemaker and asked to be taken on as an apprentice. The shoemaker, "being an honest man," had at once told the boy's master:

Bowyer asked me why I had made myself such a fool? to which I answered, that I had a great desire to be a shoemaker, and that I hated the thought of being a clergyman. "Why so?" said he. "Because, to tell you the truth, sir," said I, "I am an infidel!" For this, without more ado, Bowyer flogged me—wisely, as I think—soundly, as I know. Any whining or sermonizing would have gratified my vanity, and confirmed me in my absurdity; as it was, I laughed at, and got heartily ashamed of, my folly.

Among the reminiscences of Coleridge no passage is more famous than that in which he relates how, as he was walking in a lane near Highgate one day, a "loose, slack, not well-dressed youth" was introduced to him:

It was Keats. He was introduced to me, and stayed a minute or so. After he had left us a little way, he came back, and said: "Let me carry away the memory, Coleridge, of having pressed your hand!" "There is death in that hand," I said to ——, when Keats was gone; yet this was, I believe, before the consumption showed itself distinctly.

Another famous anecdote relates to the time at which Coleridge, like Wordsworth, carried the fires of the French Revolution about him into the peace of the West Country.

Speaking of a fellow-disciple of the liberty of those days, Coleridge afterwards said:

John Thelwall had something very good about him. We were once sitting in a beautiful recess in the Quantocks, when I said to him: "Citizen John, this is a fine place to talk treason in!" "Nay! Citizen Samuel," replied he, "it is rather a place to make a man forget that there is any necessity for treason!"

Is there any prettier anecdote in literary history?

Besides the impersonal wisdom and the personal anecdotes of the *Table Talk*, however, there are a great number of opinions which show us Coleridge not as a seer, but as a "character"—a crusty gentleman, every whit as ready to express an antipathy as a principle. He shared Dr. Johnson's quarrel with the Scots, and said of them:

I have generally found a Scotchman with a little literature very disagreeable. He is a superficial German or a dull Frenchman. The Scotch will attribute merit to people of any nation rather than the English.

He had no love for Jews, or Dissenters, or Catholics, and anticipated Carlyle's hostility to the emancipation of the negroes. He raged against the Reform Bill, Catholic Emancipation, and the education of the poor in schools. He was indignant with Belgium for claiming national independence. One cannot read much of his talk about politics without amazement that so wise a man should have been so frequently a fool. At the same time, he generally remained an original fool. He never degenerated into a mere partisan. He might be deceived by reactionary ideals, but he was not taken in by reactionary leaders. He was no more capable than Shelley of mistaking Castlereagh for a great man, and he did not join in the glorification of Pitt. Like Dr. Johnson, he could be a Tory without feeling that it was necessary at all costs to bully Ireland. Coleridge, indeed, went so far as to wish to cut the last link with Ireland as the only means of saving England. Discussing the Irish question, he said:

I am quite sure that no dangers are to be feared by England from the disannexing and independence of Ireland at all comparable with

the evils which have been, and will yet be, caused to England by the Union. We have never received one particle of advantage from our association with Ireland. . . . Mr. Pitt has received great credit for effecting the Union; but I believe it will sooner or later be discovered that the manner in which, and the terms upon which, he effected it made it the most fatal blow that ever was levelled against the peace and prosperity of England. From it came the Catholic Bill. From the Catholic Bill has come this Reform Bill! And what next?

When one thinks of the injury that the subjection of Ireland has done the English name in America, in Russia, in Australia, and elsewhere in quite recent times, one can hardly deny that Coleridge was a sound prophet, though for other reasons than he thought.

It is the literary rather than the political opinions, however, that will bring every generation of readers afresh to Coleridge's *Table Talk*. No man ever talked better in a few sentences on Shakespeare, Sterne, and the tribe of authors. One may not agree with Coleridge in regarding Jeremy Taylor as one of the four chief glories of English literature, or in thinking Southey's style "next door to faultless." But one listens to his *obiter dicta* eagerly as the sayings of one of the greatest minds that have interested themselves in the criticism of literature. There are tedious pages in *Table Talk*, but these are, for the most part, concerned with theology. On the whole, the speech of Coleridge was golden. Even the leaden parts are interesting because they are Coleridge's lead. One wishes the theology was balanced, however, by a few more glimpses of his lighter interests, such as we find in the passage: "Never take an iambus for a Christian name. A trochee, or tribrach, will do very well. Edith and Rotha are my favourite names for women." What we want most of all in table talk is to get an author into the confession album. Coleridge's *Table Talk* would have stood a worse chance of immortality were it not for the fact that he occasionally came down out of the pulpit and babbled.

## XIII.—TENNYSON: A TEMPORARY CRITICISM

IF Tennyson's reputation has diminished, it is not that it has fallen before hostile criticism: it has merely faded through time. Perhaps there was never an English poet who loomed so large to his own age as Tennyson—who represented his contemporaries with the same passion and power. Pope was sufficiently representative of his age, but his age meant, by comparison, a limited and aristocratic circle. Byron represented and shocked his age by turns. Tennyson, on the other hand, was as close to the educated middle-class men and women of his time as the family clergyman. That is why, inevitably, he means less to us than he did to them. That he was ahead of his age on many points on which this could not be said of the family clergyman one need not dispute. He was a kind of "new theologian." He stood, like Dean Farrar, for the larger hope and various other heresies. Every representative man is ahead of his age—a little, but not enough to be beyond the reach of the sympathies of ordinary people. It may be objected that Tennyson is primarily an artist, not a thinker, and that he should be judged not by his message but by his song. But his message and his song sprang from the same vision—a vision of the world seen, not *sub specie æternitatis*, but *sub specie* the reign of Queen Victoria. Before we appreciate Tennyson's real place in literature, we must frankly recognize the fact that his muse wore a crinoline. The great mass of his work bears its date stamped upon it as obviously almost as a copy of *The Times*. How topical, both in mood and phrasing, are such lines as those in *Locksley Hall*:

> Then her cheek was pale, and thinner than should be for one so young,
> And her eyes on all my motions with a mute observance hung.
> And I said "My cousin Amy, speak, and speak the truth to me,
> "Trust me, cousin, all the current of my being sets to thee."

One would not, of course, quote these lines as typical of Tennyson's genius. I think, however, they may be fairly quoted as lines suggesting the mid-Victorian atmosphere that clings round all but his greatest work. They bring before our minds the genteel magazine illustrations of other days. They conjure up a world of charming, vapid faces, where there is little life apart from sentiment and rhetoric. Contrast such a poem as *Locksley Hall* with *The Flight of the Duchess*. Each contains at once a dramatization of human relations, and the statement of a creed. The human beings in Browning's poem, however, are not mere shadows out of old magazines; they are as real as the men and women in the portraits of the masters, as real as ourselves. Similarly, in expressing his thought, Browning gives it imaginative dignity as philosophy, while Tennyson writes what is after all merely an exalted leading article. Tennyson is more representative of the age of Lytton than is generally realized. Both were fond of windy words. They were slaves of language to almost as great an extent as Swinburne. One feels that too often phrases like "moor and fell" and "bower and hall" were mere sounding substitutes for a creative imagination. I have heard it argued that the lines in *Maud:*

> All night have the roses heard
> The flute, violin, bassoon

introduce a curiously inappropriate instrument into a ball-room orchestra merely for the sake of euphony. The mistake about the bassoon is a small one, and is, I suppose, borrowed from Coleridge, but it is characteristic.

Tennyson was by no means the complete artist that for years he was generally accepted as being. He was an artist of lines rather than of poems. He seldom wrote a poem which seemed to spring full-armed from the imagination as the great poems of the world do. He built them up haphazard, as Thackeray wrote his novels. They are full of sententious padding and prettiness, and the wordiness is not merely a philosopher's vacuous babbling in his sleep,

as so much of Wordsworth's is; it is the word-spinning of a man who loves words more than people, or philosophy, or things. At the same time, when Tennyson is word perfect he takes his place beyond dispute among the immortals. One may be convinced that the bulk of his work is already as dead as the bulk of Longfellow's. But in his great poems he awoke to the vision of romance in its perfect form, and expressed it perfectly. He did this in *Ulysses*, which comes nearer a noble perfection, perhaps, than anything else he ever wrote. One can imagine the enthusiasm of some literary discoverer many centuries hence, when Tennyson is as little known as Donne was fifty years ago, coming upon lines hackneyed for us by much quotation:

> The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
> The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
> Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
> 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
> Push off, and sitting well in order smite
> The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
> To sail beyond the sunset and the baths
> Of all the western stars, until I die.
> It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
> It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
> And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.

There, even if you have not the stalwart imagination which makes Browning's people alive, you have a most beautiful fancy illustrating an old story. One of the most beautiful lines Tennyson ever wrote:

> The horns of Elfland faintly blowing,

has the same suggestion of having been forged from the gold of the world's romance.

Tennyson's art at its best, however, as in these two instances, is art founded upon art, not art founded upon life. We used to be asked to admire the vivid observation shown in such lines as:

> More black than ashbuds in the front of March;

and it is undoubtedly interesting to learn that Tennyson had a quick eye for the facts of nature. But such lines,

however accurate, do not make a man a poet. It is in his fine ornamental moods that Tennyson means most to our imaginations nowadays—in the moods of such lines as:

> Now droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost.

The truth is, Tennyson, with all his rhetoric and with all his prosaic Victorian opinions, was an æsthete in the immortal part of him no less than were Rossetti and Swinburne. He seemed immense to his contemporaries, because he put their doubts and fears into music, and was master of the fervid rhetoric of the new gospel of Imperialism. They did not realize that great poetry cannot be founded on a basis of perishable doubts and perishable gospels. It was enough for them to feel that *In Memoriam* gave them soothing anchorage and shelter from the destructive hurricanes of science. It was enough for them to thrill to the public-speech poetry of *Of old sat Freedom on the Heights*, the patriotic triumph of *The Relief of Lucknow*, the glorious contempt for foreigners exhibited in his reference to "the red fool-fury of the Seine." Is it any wonder that during a great part of his life Tennyson was widely regarded as not only a poet, but a teacher and a statesman? His sneering caricature of Bright as the "broad-brimmed hawker of holy things" should have made it clear that in politics he was but a party man, and that his political intelligence was commonplace.

He was too deficient in the highest kind of imagination and intellect to achieve the greatest things. He seldom or never stood aloof from his own time, as Wordsworth did through his philosophic imagination, as Keats did through his æsthetic imagination, as Browning did through his dramatic imagination. He wore a poetical cloak, and avoided the vulgar crowd physically; he had none of Browning's taste for tea-parties. But Browning had not the tea-party imagination; Tennyson, in a great degree, had. He preached excellent virtues to his time; but they were respectable rather than spiritual virtues. Thus, *The Idylls of the King* have become to us mere ancient fashion-

plates of the virtues, while the moral power of *The Ring and the Book* is as commanding to-day as in the year in which the poem was first published.

It is all the more surprising that no good selection from Tennyson has yet appeared. His "complete works" contain so much that is ephemeral and uninspired as to be a mere book of reference on our shelves. When will some critic do for him what Matthew Arnold did for Wordsworth, separating the gold from the dross—do it as well as Matthew Arnold did it for Wordsworth? Such a selection would be far thinner than the Wordsworth volume. But it would entitle Tennyson to a much higher place among the poets than in these years of the reaction he is generally given.

# XIV.—THE POLITICS OF SWIFT AND SHAKESPEARE

## (1) Swift.

THERE are few greater ironies in history than that the modern Conservatives should be eager to claim Swift as one of themselves. One finds even the *Morning Post*—which someone has aptly enough named the *Morning Pogrom*—cheerfully counting the author of *A Voyage to Houyhnhnms* in the list of sound Tories. It is undeniable that Swift wrote pamphlets for the Tory Party of his day. A Whig, he turned from the Whigs of Queen Anne in disgust, and carried the Tory label for the rest of his life. If we consider realities rather than labels, however, what do we find were the chief political ideals for which Swift stood? His politics, as every reader of his pamphlets knows, were, above all, the politics of a pacifist and a Nationalist—the two things most abhorrent to the orthodox Tories of our own time. Swift belonged to the Tory Party at one of those rare periods at which it was a peace party. *The Conduct of the Allies* was simply a demand for a premature peace. Worse than this, it was a pamphlet against England's taking part in a land-war on the Continent instead of confining herself to naval operations. "It was the kingdom's misfortune," wrote Swift, "that the sea was not the Duke of Marlborough's element, otherwise the whole force of the war would infallibly have been bestowed there, infinitely to the advantage of his country." Whether Swift and the Tories were right in their attack on Marlborough and the war is a question into which I do not propose to enter. I merely wish to emphasize the fact that *The Conduct of the Allies* was, from the modern Tory point of view, not merely a pacifist, but a treasonable, document. Had anything like it appeared in our time, it would have

been in danger from the Defence of the Realm Act. And that Swift was a hater of war, not merely as a party politician, but as a philosopher, is shown by the discourse on the causes of war which he puts into the mouth of Gulliver when the latter is trying to convey a picture of human society to his Houyhnhnm master:

> Sometimes the quarrel between two princes is to decide which of them shall dispossess a third of his dominions, where neither of them pretends to any right. Sometimes one prince quarrelleth with another for fear the other should quarrel with him. Sometimes a war is entered upon because the enemy is too strong, and sometimes because he is too weak. Sometimes our neighbours want the things which we have, or have the things which we want; and we both fight till they take ours or give us theirs. It is a very justifiable cause of a war to invade a country after the people have been wasted by famine, destroyed by pestilence or embroiled by factions among themselves. It is justifiable to enter into war with our nearest ally, when one of his towns lies convenient for us, or a territory of land that would render our dominions round and complete. If a prince sends forces into a nation, where the people are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put half of them to death or make slaves of the rest, in order to civilize and reduce them from their barbarous way of living.

There you have "Kultur" wars, and "white man's burden" wars, and wars for "places of strategic importance," satirized as though by a twentieth-century humanitarian. When the *Morning Post* begins to write leaders in the same strain, we shall begin to believe that Swift was a Tory in the ordinary meaning of the word.

As for Swift's Irish politics, Mr. Charles Whibley, like other Conservative writers, attempts to gloss over their essential Nationalism by suggesting that Swift was merely a just man righteously indignant at the destruction of Irish manufactures. At least, one would never gather from his recent book that Swift was practically the father of the modern Irish demand for self-government. Swift was an Irish patriot in the sense in which Washington was an American patriot. Like Washington, he had no quarrel with English civilization. He was not an eighteenth-century Sinn Féiner. He regarded himself as a colonist, and his Nationalism was Colonial Nationalism. As such he

was the forerunner of Grattan and Flood, and also, in a measure, of Parnell and Redmond. While not a Separatist, he had the strongest possible objection to being either ruled or ruined from London. In his *Short View of the State of Ireland,* published in 1728, he preached the whole gospel of Colonial Nationalism as it is accepted by Irishmen like Sir Horace Plunkett to-day. He declared that one of the causes of a nation's thriving—

> . . . is by being governed only by laws made with their own consent, for otherwise they are not a free people. And, therefore, all appeals for justice, or applications for favour or preferment, to another country are so many grievous impoverishments.

He said of the Irish :

> We are in the condition of patients who have physic sent to them by doctors at a distance, strangers to their constitution and the nature of their disease.

In the *Drapier's Letters* he denied the right of the English Parliament to legislate for Ireland. He declared that all reason was on the side of Ireland's being free, though power and the love of power made for Ireland's servitude. "The arguments on both sides," he said in a passage which sums up with perfect irony the centuries-old controversy between England and Ireland, were "invincible" :

> For in reason all government without the consent of the governed is slavery. But, in fact, eleven men well armed will certainly subdue one single man in his shirt.

It would be interesting to know how the modern Tory, whose gospel is the gospel of the eleven men well armed, squares this with Swift's passionate championship of the "one single man in his shirt." One wishes very earnestly that the Toryism of Swift were in fact the Toryism of the modern Conservative party. Had it been so, there would have been no such thing as Carsonism in pre-war England; and, had there been no Carsonism, one may infer from Mr. Gerard's recent revelations, there might have been no European war.

Mr. Whibley, it is only fair to say, is concerned with Swift as a man of letters and a friend, rather than with Swift as a party politician. The book referred to is a reprint of the Leslie Stephen lecture which he delivered at Cambridge a few months ago. It was bound, therefore, to be predominantly literary in interest. At the same time, Mr. Whibley's political bias appears both in what he says and in what he keeps silent about. His defence of Swift against the charge of misanthropy is a defence with which we find ourselves largely in agreement. But Mr. Whibley is too single-minded a party politician to be able to defend the Dean without clubbing a number of his own pet antipathies in the process. He seems to think that the only alternative to the attitude of Dean Swift towards humanity is the attitude of persons who, "feigning a bland and general love of abstract humanity . . . wreak a wild revenge upon individuals." He apparently believes that it is impossible for the same human being to wish well to the human race in general, and to be affectionate to John, Peter and Thomas in particular. Here are some of his rather wild comments on this topic. He writes:

[We know well enough whither universal philanthropy leads us. The Friend of Man is seldom the friend of men. At his best he is content with a moral maxim, and buttons up his pocket in the presence of poverty. "*I* give thee sixpence! I will see thee damned first!" It is not for nothing that Canning's immortal words were put in the mouth of the Friend of Humanity, who, finding that he cannot turn the Needy Knife Grinder to political account, gives him kicks for ha'pence, and goes off in "a transport of Republican enthusiasm." Such is the Friend of Man at his best.]

"At his best" is good. It makes one realize that Mr. Whibley is merely playing a game of make-believe, and playing it very hard. His indictment of humanitarians has about as much, or as little, basis in fact as would an indictment of wives or seagulls or fields of corn. One has only to mention Shelley with his innumerable personal benevolences to set Mr. Whibley's card-castle of abuse tumbling.

With Mr. Whibley's general view of Swift as opposed to his general view of politics, I find myself for the most part in harmony. I doubt, however, whether Swift has been pursued in his grave with such torrential malignity as Mr. Whibley imagines. Thackeray's denigration, I admit, takes the breath away. One can hardly believe that Thackeray had read either Swift's writings or his life. We know that he had, but his passion for the sentimental graces made him incapable of doing justice to a genius of saturnine realism such as Swift's. The truth is, though Swift was among the staunchest of friends, he is not among the most sociable of authors. His writings are seldom in the vein either of tenderness or of merriment. We know of the tenderness of Swift only from a rare anecdote or from the prattle of the *Journal to Stella*. As for his laughter, as Mr. Whibley rightly points out, Pope was talking nonsense when he wrote of Swift as laughing and shaking in Rabelais's easy chair. Swift's humour is essentially of the intellect. He laughs out of his own bitterness rather than to amuse his fellow-men. As Mr. Whibley says, he is not a cynic. He is not sufficiently indifferent for that. He is a satirist, a sort of perverted and suffering idealist: an idealist with the cynic's vision. It is the essential nobleness of Swift's nature which makes the *Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* a noble and not a disgusting piece of literature. There are people who pretend that this section of *Gulliver's Travels* is almost too terrible for sensitive persons to read. This is sheer affectation. It can only be honestly maintained by those who believe that life is too terrible for sensitive persons to live.

### (2) Shakespeare.

Mr. Whibley goes through history like an electioneering bill-sticker. He plasters up his election-time shrillnesses not only on Fox's House of Commons but on Shakespeare's Theatre. He is apparently interested in men of

genius chiefly as regards their attitude to his electioneering activities. Shakespeare, he seems to imagine, was the sort of person who would have asked for nothing better as a frieze in his sitting-room in New Place than a scroll bearing in huge letters some such motto as "Vote for Curzon and Down with the Common People" or "Vote for Carson and No League of Nations." Mr. Whibley thinks Shakespeare was like that, and so he exalts Shakespeare. He has, I do not doubt, read Shakespeare, but that has made no difference. He would clearly have taken much the same view of Shakespeare if he had never read him. To be great, said Emerson, is to be misunderstood. To be great is assuredly to be misunderstood by Mr. Whibley.

I do not think it is doing an injustice to Mr. Whibley to single out the chapter on "Shakespeare: Patriot and Tory" as the most representative in his volume of *Political Portraits*. It would be unjust if one were to suggest that Mr. Whibley could write nothing better than this. His historical portraits are often delightful as the work of a clever illustrator, even if we cannot accept them as portraits. Those essays in which he keeps himself out of the picture and eschews ideas most successfully attract us as coming from the hand of a skilful writer. His studies of Clarendon, Metternich, Napoleon and Melbourne are all of them good entertainment. If I comment on the Shakespeare essay rather than on these, it is because here more than anywhere else in the book the author's skill as a portrait-painter is put to the test. Here he has to depend almost exclusively on his imagination, intelligence, and knowledge of human nature. Here, where there are scarcely any epigrams or anecdotes to quote, a writer must reveal whether he is an artist and a critic, or a pedestrian intelligence with the trick of words. Mr. Whibley, I fear, comes badly off from the test. One does not blame him for having written on the theme that "Shakespeare, being a patriot, was a Tory also." It would be easy to conceive a scholarly and amusing study

of Shakespeare on these lines. Whitman maintained that there is much in Shakespeare to offend the democratic mind; and there is no reason why an intelligent Tory should not praise Shakespeare for what Whitman deplored in him. There is every reason, however, why the portraiture of Shakespeare as a Tory, if it is to be done, should be done with grace, intelligence, and sureness of touch. Mr. Whibley throws all these qualifications to the winds, especially the second. The proof of Shakespeare's Toryism, for instance, which he draws from *Troilus and Cressida,* is based on a total misunderstanding of the famous and simple speech of Ulysses about the necessity of observing "degree, priority and place." Mr. Whibley, plunging blindly about in Tory blinkers, imagines that in this speech Ulysses, or rather Shakespeare, is referring to the necessity of keeping the democracy in its place. "Might he not," he asks, "have written these prophetic lines with his mind's eye upon France of the Terror or upon modern Russia?" Had Mr. Whibley read the play with that small amount of self-forgetfulness without which no man has ever yet been able to appreciate literature, he would have discovered that it is the unruliness not of the democracy but of the aristocracy against which Ulysses—or, if you prefer it, Shakespeare—inveighs in this speech. The speech is aimed at the self-will and factiousness of Achilles and his disloyalty to Agamemnon. If there are any moderns who come under the noble lash of Ulysses, they must be sought for not among either French or Russian revolutionists, but in the persons of such sound Tories as Sir Edward Carson and such sound patriots as Mr. Lloyd George. It is tolerably certain that neither Ulysses nor Shakespeare foresaw Sir Edward Carson's escapades or Mr. Lloyd George's insubordinate career as a member of Mr. Asquith's Cabinet. But how admirably they sum up all the wild statesmanship of these later days in lines which Mr. Whibley, accountably enough, fails to quote:

> They tax our policy, and call it cowardice;
> Count wisdom as no member of the war;

> Forestall prescience, and esteem no act
> But that of hand; the still and mental parts—
> That do contrive how many hands shall strike,
> When fitness calls them on, and know, by measure
> Of their observant toil, the enemies' weight—
> Why, this hath not a finger's dignity.
> They call this bed-work, mappery, closet-war:
> So that the ram, that batters down the wall,
> For the great swing and rudeness of his poise,
> They place before his hand that made the engine,
> Or those that with the fineness of their souls
> By reason guide his execution.

There is not much in the moral of this speech to bring balm to the soul of the author of the *Letters of an Englishman*.

Mr. Whibley is not content, unfortunately, with having failed to grasp the point of *Troilus and Cressida*. He blunders with equal assiduity in regard to *Coriolanus*. He treats this play, not as a play about Coriolanus, but as a pamphlet in favour of Coriolanus. He has not been initiated, it seems, into the first secret of imaginative literature, which is that one may portray a hero sympathetically without making believe that his vices are virtues. Shakespeare no more endorses Coriolanus's patrician pride than he endorses Othello's jealousy or Macbeth's murderous ambition. Shakespeare was concerned with painting noble natures, not with pandering to their vices. He makes us sympathize with Coriolanus in his heroism, in his sufferings, in his return to his better nature, in his death; but from Shakespeare's point of view, as from most men's, the Nietzschean arrogance which led Coriolanus to become a traitor to his city is a theme for sadness, not (as apparently with Mr. Whibley) for enthusiasm. "Shakespeare," cries Mr. Whibley, as he quotes some of Coriolanus's anti-popular speeches, "will not let the people off. He pursues it with an irony of scorn." "There in a few lines," he writes of other speeches, "are expressed the external folly and shame of democracy. Ever committed to the worse cause, the people has not even the courage of its own

opinions." It would be interesting to know whether in Mr. Whibley's eyes Coriolanus's hatred of the people is a sufficiently splendid virtue to cover his guilt in becoming a traitor. That good Tories have the right to become traitors was a gospel preached often enough in regard to the Ulster trouble before the war. It may be doubted, however, whether Shakespeare was sufficiently a Tory to foresee the necessity of such a gospel in *Coriolanus*. Certainly, the mother of Coriolanus, who was far from being a Radical, or even a mild Whig, preached the very opposite of the gospel of treason. She warned Coriolanus that his triumph over Rome would be a traitor's triumph, that his name would be "dogg'd with curses," and that his character would be summed up in history in one fatal sentence:

> The man was noble,
> But with his last attempt he wiped it out,
> Destroyed his country, and his name remains
> To the ensuing age abhorr'd.

Mr. Whibley appears to loathe the mass of human beings so excessively that he does not quite realize the enormity (from the modern point of view) of Coriolanus's crime. It would, I agree, be foolish to judge Coriolanus too scrupulously from a modern point of view. But Mr. Whibley has asked us to accept the play as a tract for the times, and we must examine it as such in order to discover what Mr. Whibley means.

But, after all, Mr. Whibley's failure as a portrait-painter is a failure of the spirit even more than of the intellect. A narrow spirit cannot comprehend a magnanimous spirit, and Mr. Whibley's imagination does not move in that large Shakespearean world in which illustrious men salute their mortal enemies in immortal sentences of praise after the manner of

> He was the noblest Roman of them all.

The author who is capable of writing Mr. Whibley's character-study of Fox does not understand enough about the

splendour and the miseries of human nature to write well on Shakespeare. Of Fox Mr. Whibley says:

He put no bounds upon his hatred of England, and he thought it not shameful to intrigue with foreigners against the safety and credit of the land to which he belonged. Wherever there was a foe to England, there was a friend of Fox. America, Ireland, France, each in turn inspired his enthusiasm. When Howe was victorious at Brooklyn, he publicly deplored "the terrible news." After Valmy he did not hesitate to express his joy. "No public event," he wrote, "not excepting Yorktown and Saratoga, ever happened that gave me so much delight. I could not allow myself to believe it for some days for fear of disappointment."

It does not seem to occur to Mr. Whibley that in regard to America, Ireland, and France, Fox was, according to the standard of every ideal for which the Allies professed to fight, tremendously right, and that, were it not for Yorktown and Valmy, America and France would not in our own time have been great free nations fighting against the embattled Whibleys of Germany. So far as Mr. Whibley's political philosophy goes, I see no reason why he should not have declared himself on the side of Germany. He believes in patriotism, it is true, but he is apparently a patriot of the sort that loves his country and hates his fellow-countrymen (if that is what he means by "the people," and presumably it must be). Mr. Whibley has the mind of a German professor. His vehemence against the Germans for appreciating Shakespeare is strangely like a German professor's vehemence against the English for not appreciating him. "Why then," he asks,

should the Germans have attempted to lay violent hands upon our Shakespeare? It is but part of their general policy of pillage. Stealing comes as easy to them as it came to Bardolph and Nym, who in Calais stole a fire-shovel. Wherever they have gone they have cast a thievish eye upon what does not belong to them. They hit upon the happy plan of levying tolls upon starved Belgium. It was not enough for their greed to empty a country of food; they must extract something from its pocket, even though it be dying of hunger. . . . No doubt, if they came to these shores, they would feed their fury by

scattering Shakespeare's dust to the winds of heaven. As they are unable to sack Stratford, they do what seems to them the next best thing: they hoist the Jolly Roger over Shakespeare's works.

Their arrogance is busy in vain. Shakespeare shall never be theirs. He was an English patriot, who would always have refused to bow the knee to an insolent alien.

This is mere foaming at the mouth—the tawdry violence of a Tory Thersites. This passage is a measure of the good sense and imagination Mr. Whibley brings to the study of Shakespeare. It is simply theatrical Jolly-Rogerism.

## XV.—THE PERSONALITY OF MORRIS

ONE thinks of William Morris as a man who wished to make the world as beautiful as an illuminated manuscript. He loved the bright colours, the gold, the little strange insets of landscape, the exquisite craftsmanship of decoration, in which the genius of the medieval illuminators expressed itself. His Utopia meant the restoration, not so much of the soul of man, as of the selected delights of the arts and crafts of the Middle Ages. His passion for trappings—and what fine trappings !—is admirably suggested by Mr. Cunninghame-Graham in his preface to Mr. Compton-Rickett's *William Morris: a Study in Personality*. Morris, he gives it as his opinion, was "no mystic, but a sort of symbolist set in a medieval frame, and it appeared to me that all his love of the old times of which he wrote was chiefly of the setting; of tapestries well wrought; of needlework, rich colours of stained glass falling upon old monuments, and of fine work not scamped." To emphasize the preoccupation of Morris with the very handiwork, rather than with the mystic secrets, of beauty is not necessarily to diminish his name. He was essentially a man for whom the visible world existed, and in the manner in which he wore himself out in his efforts to reshape the visible world he proved himself one of the great men of his century. His life was, in its own way, devotional ever since those years in which Burne-Jones, his fellow-undergraduate at Oxford, wrote to him: "We must enlist you in this Crusade and Holy Warfare against the age." Like all revolutions, of course, the Morris revolution was a prophecy rather than an achievement. But, perhaps, a prophecy of Utopia is itself one of the greatest achievements of which humanity is capable.

It is odd that one who spilled out his genius for the

world of men should have been so self-sufficing, so little dependent on friendships and ordinary human relationships as Morris is depicted both in Mr. Mackail's biography and Mr. Compton-Rickett's study. Obviously, he was a man with whom generosity was a second nature. When he became a Socialist, he sold the greater part of his precious library in order to help the cause. On the other hand, to balance this, we have Rossetti's famous assertion: "Top"—the general nickname for Morris—"never gives money to a beggar." Mr. Mackail, if I remember right, accepted Rossetti's statement as expressive of Morris's indifference to men as compared with causes. Mr. Compton-Rickett, however, challenges the truth of the observation. "The number of 'beggars,'" he affirms, "who called at his house and went away rewarded were legion."

Mr. Belfort Bax declares that he kept a drawerful of half-crowns for foreign anarchists, because, as he explained apologetically: "They always wanted half-a-crown, and it saved time to have a stock ready."

But this is no real contradiction of Rossetti. Morris's anarchists represented his life's work to him. He did not help them from that personal and irrational charity which made Rossetti want to give a penny to a beggar in the street. This may be regarded as a supersubtle distinction; but it is necessary if we are to understand the important fact about Morris that—to quote Mr. Compton-Rickett—"human nature in the concrete never profoundly interested him." Enthusiastic as were the friendships of his youth—when he gushed into "dearests" in his letters—we could imagine him as living without friends and yet being tolerably happy. He was, as Mr. Compton-Rickett suggests, like a child with a new toy in his discovery of ever-fresh pursuits in the three worlds of Politics, Literature and Art. He was a person to whom even duties were pleasures. Mr. Mackail has spoken of him as "the rare instance of a man who, without ever once swerving from truth or duty, knew what he liked and did what he liked, all his life long." One thinks of him in his work as a child

with a box of paints—an inspired child with wonderful paints and the skill to use them. He was such a child as accepts companions with pleasure, but also accepts the absence of companions with pleasure. He could absorb himself in his games of genius anywhere and everywhere. "Much of his literary work was done on buses and in trains." His poetry is often simply the delightful nursery-work of a grown man. "His best work," as Mr. Compton-Rickett says, "reads like happy improvizations." He had a child's sudden and impulsive temper, too. Once, having come into his studio in a rage, he "took a flying kick at the door, and smashed in a panel." "It's all right," he assured the scared model, who was preparing to fly; "it's all right—*something* had to give way." The same violence of impulse is seen in the story of how, on one occasion, when he was staying in the country, he took an artistic dislike to his hostess's curtains, and tore them down during the night. His judgments were often much the same kind of intemperate emotions as he showed in the matter of the curtains—his complaint, for example, that a Greek temple was "like a table on four legs: a damned dull thing!" He was a creature of whims: so much so that, as a boy, he used to have the curse, "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel," flung at him. He enjoyed the expression of knock-out opinions such as: "I always bless God for making anything so strong as an onion!" He laughed easily, not from humour so much as from a romping playfulness. He took a young boy's pleasure in showing off the strength of his mane of dark brown hair. He would get a child to catch hold of it, and lift him off the ground by it "with no apparent inconvenience." He was at the same time nervous and restless. He was given to talking to himself; his hands were never at peace; "if he read aloud, he punched his own head in the exuberance of his emotions." Possibly there was something high-strung even about his play, as when, Mr. Mackail tells us, "he would imitate an eagle with considerable skill and humour, climbing on to a chair and, after a sullen pause, coming down

with a soft, heavy flop." It seems odd that Mr. John Burns could say of this sensitive and capricious man of genius, as we find him saying in Mr. Compton-Rickett's book, that "William Morris was a chunk of humanity in the rough; he was a piece of good, strong, unvarnished oak—nothing of the elm about him." But we can forgive Mr. Burns's imperfect judgment in gratitude for the sentences that follow:

> There is no side of modern life which he has not touched for good. I am sure he would have endorsed heartily the House and Town Planning Act for which I am responsible.

Morris, by the way, would have appreciated Mr. Burns's reference to him as a fellow-craftsman: did he not once himself boast of being "a master artisan, if I may claim that dignity"?

The buoyant life of this craftsman-preacher—whose craftsmanship, indeed, was the chief part of his preaching—who taught the labourers of his age, both by precept and example, that the difference between success and failure in life was the difference between being artisans of loveliness and poor hackworkers of profitable but hideous things—has a unique attractiveness in the history of the latter half of the nineteenth century. He is a figure of whom we cannot be too constantly and vividly reminded. When I took up Mr. Compton-Rickett's book I was full of hope that it would reinterpret for a new generation Morris's evangelistic personality and ideals. Unfortunately, it contains very little of importance that has not already appeared in Mr. Mackail's distinguished biography; and the only interpretation of first-rate interest in the book occurs in the bold imaginative prose of Mr. Cunninghame-Graham's introduction. More than once the author tells us the same things as Mr. Mackail, only in a less life-like way. For example, where Mr. Mackail says of Morris that "by the time he was seven years old he had read all the Waverley novels, and many of Marryat's," Mr. Compton-Rickett vaguely writes: "He was suckled on Romance, and knew his Scott and Marryat

almost before he could lisp their names." That is typical of Mr. Compton-Rickett's method. Instead of contenting himself with simple and realistic sentences like Mr. Mackail's, he aims at—and certainly achieves—a kind of imitative picturesqueness. We again see his taste for the high-flown in such a paragraph as that which tells us that "a common bond unites all these men—Dickens, Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris. They differed in much; but, like great mountains lying apart in the base, they converge high up in the air." The landscape suggested in these sentences is more topsy-turvy than the imagination likes to dwell upon. And the criticisms in the book are seldom lightning-flashes of revelation. For instance:

> A more polished artistry we find in Tennyson; a greater intellectual grip in Browning; a more haunting magic in Rossetti; but for easy mastery over his material and general diffusion of beauty Morris has no superior.

That, apart from the excellent "general diffusion of beauty," is the kind of conventional criticism that might pass in a paper read to a literary society. But somehow, in a critic who deliberately writes a book, we look for a greater and more personal mastery of his authors than Mr. Compton-Rickett gives evidence of in the too facile eloquence of these pages.

The most interesting part of the book is that which is devoted to personalia. But even in the matter of personalia Mr. Cunninghame-Graham tells us more vital things in a page of his introduction than Mr. Compton-Rickett scatters through a chapter. His description of Morris's appearance, if not a piece of heroic painting, gives us a fine grotesque design of the man:

> His face was ruddy, and his hair inclined to red, and grew in waves like water just before it breaks over a fall. His beard was of the same colour as his hair. His eyes were blue and fiery. His teeth, small and irregular, but white except upon the side on which he held his pipe, where they were stained with brown. When he walked he swayed a little, not like a sailor sways, but as a man who lives a sedentary life toddles a little in his gait. His ears were small, his

nose high and well-made, his hands and feet small for a man of his considerable bulk. His speech and address were fitting the man; bold, bluff, and hearty. . . . He was quick-tempered and irritable, swift to anger and swift to reconciliation, and I should think never bore malice in his life.

When he talked he seldom looked at you, and his hands were always twisting, as if they wished to be at work.

Such was the front the man bore. The ideal for which he lived may be summed up, in Mr. Compton-Rickett's expressive phrase, as "the democratization of beauty." Or it may be stated more humanly in the words which Morris himself spoke at the grave of a young man who died of injuries received at the hands of the police in Trafalgar Square on "Bloody Sunday." "Our friend," he then said:

—our friend who lies here has had a hard life, and met with a hard death; and, if society had been differently constituted, his life might have been a delightful, a beautiful, and a happy one. It is our business to begin to organize for the purpose of seeing that such things shall not happen; to try and make this earth a beautiful and happy place.

There you have the sum of all Morris's teaching. Like so many fine artists since Plato, he dreamed of a society which would be as beautiful as a work of art. He saw the future of society as a radiant picture, full of the bright light of hope, as he saw the past of society as a picture steeped in the charming lights of fancy. He once explained Rossetti's indifference to politics by saying that he supposed "it needs a person of hopeful mind to take disinterested notice of politics, and Rossetti was certainly not hopeful." Morris was the very illuminator of hope. He was as hopeful a man as ever set out with words and colours to bring back the innocent splendours of the Golden Age.

# XVI.—GEORGE MEREDITH

## (1) The Egoist.

GEORGE MEREDITH, as his friends used to tell one with amusement, was a vain man. Someone has related how, in his later years, he regarded it as a matter of extreme importance that his visitors should sit in a position from which they would see his face in profile. This is symbolic of his attitude to the world. All his life he kept one side of his face hidden. Mr. Ellis, who is the son of one of Meredith's cousins, now takes us for a walk round Meredith's chair. No longer are we permitted to remain in restful veneration of "a god and a Greek." Mr. Ellis invites us—and we cannot refuse the invitation—to look at the other side of the face, to consider the full face and the back of the head. He encourages us to feel Meredith's bumps, and no man whose bumps we are allowed to feel can continue for five minutes the pretence of being an Olympian. He becomes a human being under a criticizing thumb. We discover that he had a genius for imposture, an egoist's temper, and a stomach that fluttered greedily at the thought of dainty dishes. We find all those characteristics that prevented him from remaining on good terms first with his father, next with his wife, and then with his son. At first, when one reads the full story of Meredith's estrangements through three generations, one has the feeling that one is in the presence of an idol in ruins. Certainly, one can never mistake Box Hill for Olympus again. On the other hand, let us but have time to accustom ourselves to see Meredith in other aspects than that which he himself chose to present to his contemporaries—let us begin to see in him not so much one of the world's great comic censors, as one of the world's great comic subjects, and we shall soon find ourselves back

among his books, reading them no longer with tedious awe, but with a new passion of interest in the figure-in-the-background of the complex human being who wrote them.

For Meredith was his own great subject. Had he been an Olympian he could not have written *The Egoist* or *Harry Richmond*. He was an egoist and pretender, coming of a line of egoists and pretenders, and his novels are simply the confession and apology of such a person. Meredith concealed the truth about himself in his daily conversation; he revealed it in his novels. He made such a mystery about his birth that many people thought he was a cousin of Queen Victoria's, or at least a son of Bulwer Lytton's. It was only in *Evan Harrington* that he told the essentials of the truth about the tailor's shop in Portsmouth above which he was born. Outside his art, nothing would persuade him to own up to the tailor's shop. Once, when Mr. Clodd was filling in a census-paper for him, Meredith told him to put "near Petersfield" as his place of birth. The fact that he was born at Portsmouth was not publicly known, indeed, until some time after his death. And not only was there the tailor's shop to live down, but on his mother's side he was the grandson of a publican, Michael Macnamara. Meredith liked to boast that his mother was "pure Irish"—an exaggeration, according to Mr. Ellis—but he said nothing about Michael Macnamara of "The Vine." At the same time it was the presence not of a bar sinister but of a yardstick sinister in his coat of arms that chiefly filled him with shame. When he was marrying his first wife he wrote "Esquire" in the register as a description of his father's profession. There is no evidence, apparently, as to whether Meredith himself ever served in the tailor's shop after his father moved from Portsmouth to St. James's Street, London. Nothing is known of his life during the two years after his return from the Moravian school at Neuwied. As for his hapless father (who had been trained as a medical student but went into the family business in order to save it from ruin), he did not succeed in London any better than in Portsmouth,

and in 1849 he emigrated to South Africa and opened a shop in Cape Town. It was while in Cape Town that he read Meredith's ironical comedy on the family tailordom, *Evan Harrington; or He Would be a Gentleman.* Naturally, he regarded the book (in which his father and himself were two of the chief figures) with horror. It was as though George had washed the family tape-measure in public. Augustus Meredith, no less than George, blushed for the tape-measure daily. Probably, Melchizedek Meredith, who begat Augustus, who begat George, had also blushed for it in his day. As the "great Mel" in *Evan Harrington* he is an immortal figure of genteel imposture. His lordly practice of never sending in a bill was hardly that of a man who accepted the conditions of his trade. In *Evan Harrington* three generations of a family's shame were held up to ridicule. No wonder that Augustus Meredith, when he was congratulated by a customer on his son's fame, turned away silently with a look of pain.

The comedy of the Meredith family springs, of course, not from the fact that they were tailors, but that they pretended not to be tailors. Whether Meredith himself was more ashamed of their tailoring or their pretentiousness it is not easy to decide. Both *Evan Harrington* and *Harry Richmond* are, in a measure, comedies of imposture, in which the vice of imposture is lashed as fiercely as Molière lashes the vice of hypocrisy in *Tartuffe*. But it may well be that in life Meredith was a snob, while in art he was a critic of snobs. Mr. Yeats, in his last book of prose, put forward the suggestion that the artist reveals in his art not his "self" (which is expressed in his life), but his "anti-self," a complementary and even contrary self. He might find in the life and works of Meredith some support for his not quite convincing theory. Meredith was an egoist in his life, an anti-egoist in his books. He was pretentious in his life, anti-pretentious in his books. He took up the attitude of the wronged man in his life; he took up the case of the wronged woman in his books. In short, his life was vehemently pro-George-Meredith, while

his books were vehemently anti-George-Meredith. He knew himself more thoroughly, so far as we can discover from his books, than any other English novelist has ever done.

He knew himself comically, no doubt, rather than tragically. In *Modern Love* and *Richard Feverel* he reveals himself as by no means a laughing philosopher; but he strove to make fiction a vehicle of philosophic laughter rather than of passionate sympathy. Were it not that a great poetic imagination is always at work—in his prose, perhaps, even more than in his verse—his genius might seem a little cold and head-in-the-air. But his poet's joy in his characters saves his books from inhumanity. As Diana Warwick steps out in the dawn she is not a mere female human being undergoing critical dissection; she is bird-song and the light of morning and the coming of the flowers. Meredith had as great a capacity for rapture as for criticism and portraiture. He has expressed in literature as no other novelist has done the rapturous vision of a boy in love. He knew that a boy in love is not mainly a calf but a poet. *Love in a Valley* is the incomparable music of a boy's ecstasy. Much of *Richard Feverel* is its incomparable prose. Rapture and criticism, however, make a more practical combination in literature than in life. In literature, criticism may add flavour to rapture; in life it is more than likely to destroy the flavour. One is not surprised, then, to learn the full story of Meredith's first unhappy marriage. A boy of twenty-one, he married a widow of thirty, high-strung, hot and satirical like himself; and after a depressing sequence of dead babies, followed by the birth of a son who survived, she found life with a man of genius intolerable, and ran away with a painter. Meredith apparently refused her request to go and see her when she was dying. His imaginative sympathy enabled him to see the woman's point of view in poetry and fiction; it does not seem to have extended to his life. Thus, his biography is to a great extent a "showing-up" of George Meredith. He

proved as incapable of keeping the affection of his son, Arthur, as of keeping that of his wife. Much as he loved the boy he had not been married again long before he allowed him to become an alien presence. The boy felt he had a grievance. He said—probably without justice—that his father kept him short of money. Possibly he was jealous for his dead mother's sake. Further, though put into business, he had literary ambitions—a prolific source of bitterness. When Arthur died, Meredith did not even attend his funeral.

Mr. Ellis has shown Meredith up not only as a husband and a father, but as a hireling journalist and a lark-devouring gourmet. On the whole, the poet who could eat larks in a pie seems to me to be a more shocking "great man" than the Radical who could write Tory articles in a newspaper for pay. At the same time, it is only fair to say that Meredith remains a sufficiently splendid figure in Mr. Ellis's book even when we know the worst about him. Was his a generous genius? It was at least a prodigal one. As poet, novelist, correspondent, and conversationalist, he leaves an impression of beauty, wit, and power in a combination that has no precedent.

### (2) The Olympian Unbends.

Lady Butcher's charming *Memoirs of George Meredith* is admittedly written in reply to Mr. Ellis's startling volume. It seems to me, however, that it is a supplement rather than a reply. Mr. Ellis was not quite fair to Meredith as a man, but he enabled us to understand the limitations which were the conditions of Meredith's peculiar genius. Many readers were shocked by the suggestion that characters, like countries, must have boundaries. Where Mr. Ellis failed, in my opinion, was not in drawing these as carefully as possible, but in the rather unfriendly glee with which, one could not help feeling, he did so. It is also true that he missed some of the grander mountain-peaks in Meredith's character. Lady Butcher, on the

other hand, is far less successful than Mr. Ellis in drawing a portrait which makes us feel that now we understand something of the events that gave birth to *The Egoist* and *Richard Feverel* and *Modern Love*. Her book tells us nothing of the seed-time of genius, but is a delightful account of its autumn.

At the same time it helps to dissipate one ridiculous popular fallacy about Meredith. Meredith, like most of the wits, has been accused of straining after image and epigram. Wit acts as an irritant on many people. They forget the admirable saying of Coleridge: "Exclusive of the abstract sciences, the largest and worthiest portion of our knowledge consists of aphorisms; and the greatest of men is but an aphorism." They might as well denounce a hedge for producing wild roses or a peacock for growing tail feathers with pretty eyes as a witty writer for flowering into aphorism, epigram and image. Even so artificial a writer as Wilde had not to labour to be witty. It has often been laid to his charge that his work smells of the lamp, whereas what is really the matter with it is that it smells of the drawing-room gas. It was the result of too much "easy-goingness," not of too much strain. As for Meredith, his wit was the wit of an abounding imagination. Lady Butcher gives some delightful examples of it. He could not see a baby in long robes without a witty image leaping into his mind. He said he adored babies "in the comet stage."

Of a lady of his acquaintance he said: "She is a woman who has never had the first tadpole wriggle of an idea," adding, "She has a mind as clean and white and flat as a plate: there are no eminences in it." Lady Butcher tells of a picnic-party on Box Hill at which Meredith was one of the company. "After our picnic . . . it came on to rain, and as we drearily trudged down the hill with cloaks and umbrellas, and burdened with our tea baskets, Mr. Meredith, with a grimace, called out to a passing friend: 'Behold! the funeral of picnic!'"

If Meredith is to some extent an obscure author, it is

clear that this was not due to his over-reaching himself in laborious efforts after wit. His obscurity is not that of a man straining after expression, but the obscurity of a man deliberately hiding something. Meredith believed in being as mysterious as an oracle. He assumed the Olympian manner, and objected to being mistaken for a frequenter of the market-place. He was impatient of ordinary human witlessness, and spoke to his fellows, not as man to man, but as Apollo from his seat. This was probably a result of the fact that his mind marched much too fast for the ordinary man to keep pace with it. "How I leaped through leagues of thought when I could walk!" he once said when he had lost the power of his legs. Such buoyancy of the imagination and intellect separated him more and more from a world in which most of the athletics are muscular, not mental; and he began to take a malicious pleasure in exaggerating the difference that already existed between himself and ordinary mortals. He dressed his genius in a mannerism, and, as he leaped through his leagues of thought, the flying skirts of his mannerism were all that the average reader panting desperately after him could see. Shakespeare and the greatest men of genius are human enough to wait for us, and give us time to recover our breath. Meredith, however, was a proud man, and a mocker.

In the ordinary affairs of life, Lady Butcher tells us, he was so proud that it was difficult to give him even trifling gifts. "I remember," she says, "bringing him two silver flat poached-egg spoons from Norway, and he implored me to take them back with me to London, and looked much relieved when I consented to do so!" He would always "prefer to bestow rather than to accept gifts." Lady Butcher, replying to the charge that he was ungrateful, suggests that "no one should expect an eagle to be grateful." But then, neither can one love an eagle, and one would like to be able to love the author of *Love in a Valley* and *Richard Feverel*. Meredith was too keenly aware what an eagle he was. Speaking of the reviewers who had

attacked him, he said: "They have always been abusing me. I have been observing them. It is the crueller process." It is quite true, but it was a superior person who said it.

Meredith, however, among his friends and among the young, loses this air of superiority, and becomes something of a radiant romp as well as an Olympian. Lady Butcher's first meeting with him took place when she was a girl of thirteen. She was going up Box Hill to see the sun rise with a sixteen-year-old cousin, when the latter said: "I know a madman who lives on Box Hill. He's quite mad, but very amusing; he likes walks and sunrises. Let's go and shout him up!" It does Meredith credit that he got out of bed and joined them, "his nightshirt thrust into brown trousers." Even when the small girl insisted on "reading aloud to him one of the hymns from Keble's *Christian Year*," he did not, as the saying is, turn a hair. His attachment to his daughter Mariette—his "dearie girl," as he spoke of her with unaffected softness of phrase—also helps one to realize that he was not all Olympian. Meredith, the condemner of the "guarded life," was humanly nervous in guarding his own little daughter. "He would never allow Mariette to travel alone, even the very short distance by train from Box Hill to Ewell; a maid had always to be sent with her or to fetch her. He never allowed her to walk by herself." One likes Meredith the better for Lady Butcher's picture of him as a "harassed father."

One likes him, too, as he converses with his dogs, and for his thoughtfulness in giving some of his MSS., including that of *Richard Feverel*, to Frank Cole, his gardener, in the hope that "some day the gardener would be able to sell them" and so get some reward for his devotion. As to the underground passages in Meredith's life and character, Lady Butcher is not concerned with them. She writes of him merely as she knew him. Her book is a friend's tribute, though not a blind tribute. It may not be effective as an argument against those who are bent on

disparaging the greatest lyrical wit in modern English literature. But it will be welcomed by those for whom Meredith's genius is still a bubbling spring of good sense and delight.

### (3) The Posthumous Novel.

Meredith never wrote a novel which was less a novel than *Celt and Saxon*. It is only a fragment of a book. It is so much a series of essays and sharp character-sketches, however, that the untimely fall of the curtain does not greatly trouble us. There is no excitement of plot, no gripping anxiety as to whether this or that pair of lovers will ever reach the altar. Philip O'Donnell and Patrick, his devoted brother, and their caricature relative, the middle-aged Captain Con, all interest us as they abet each other in the affairs of love or politics, or as they discuss their native country or the temperament of the country which oppresses it; but they are chiefly desirable as performers in an Anglo-Irish fantasia, a Meredithian piece of comic music, with various national anthems, English, Welsh, and Irish, running through and across it in all manner of guises, and producing all manner of agreeable disharmonies.

In the beginning we have Patrick O'Donnell, an enthusiast, a Celt, a Catholic, setting out for the English mansion of the father of Adiante Adister to find if the girl cannot be won over to reconsider her refusal of his brother Philip. He arrives in the midst of turmoil in the house, the cause of it being a hasty marriage which Adiante had ambitiously contracted with a hook-nosed foreign prince. Patrick, a broken-hearted proxy, successfully begs her family for a miniature of the girl to take back to his brother, but he falls so deeply in love with her on seeing the portrait that his loyalty to Philip almost wavers, when the latter carelessly asks him to leave the miniature on a more or less public table instead of taking it off to the solitude of his own room for a long vigil of adoration.

In the rest of the story we have an account of the brothers

in the London house of Captain Con, the happy husband married to a stark English wife of mechanical propriety—a rebellious husband, too, when in the sociable atmosphere of his own upper room, amid the blackened clay pipes and the friendly fumes of whisky, he sings her praises, while at the same time full of grotesque and whimsical criticisms of all those things, Saxon and more widely human, for which she stands. There is a touch of farce in the relations of these two, aptly symbolized by the bell which rings for Captain Con, and hurries him away from his midnight eloquence with Patrick and Philip. "He groaned, 'I must go. I haven't heard the tinkler for months. It signifies she's cold in her bed. The thing called circulation is unknown to her save by the aid of outward application, and I'm the warming-pan, as legitimately as I should be. I'm her husband and her Harvey in one.'"

It is in the house of Captain Con, it should be added, that Philip and Patrick meet Jane Mattock, the Saxon woman; and the story as we have it ends with Philip invalided home from service in India, and Jane, a victim of love, catching "glimpses of the gulfs of bondage, delicious, rose-enfolded, foreign." There are nearly three hundred pages of it altogether, some of them as fantastic and lyrical as any that Meredith ever wrote.

As one reads *Celt and Saxon,* however, one seems to get an inkling of the reason why Meredith has so often been set down as an obscure author. It is not entirely that he is given to using imagery as the language of explanation—a subtle and personal sort of hieroglyphics. It is chiefly, I think, because there is so little direct painting of men and women in his books. Despite his lyricism, he had something of an X-rays imagination. The details of the modelling of a face, the interpreting lines and looks, did not fix themselves with preciseness on his vision, enabling him to pass them on to us with the surface reality we generally demand in prose fiction.

It is as though he painted some of his men and women

upon air: they are elusive for all we know of their mental and spiritual processes. Even though he is at pains to tell us that Diana's hair is dark, we do not at once accept the fact but are at liberty to go on believing she is a fair woman, for he himself was general rather than insistently particular in his vision of such matters. In the present book, again, we have a glimpse of Adiante in her miniature—"this lighted face, with the dark raised eyes and abounding auburn tresses, where the contrast of colours was in itself thrilling," "the light above beauty distinguishing its noble classic lines and the energy of radiance, like a morning of chivalrous promise, in the eyes"—and, despite the details mentioned, the result is to give us only the lyric aura of the woman where we wanted a design.

Ultimately, these women of Meredith's become intensely real to us—the most real women, I think, in English fiction—but, before we come to handshaking terms with them, we have sometimes to go to them over bogs and rocky places with the sun in our eyes. Before this, physically, they are apt to be exquisite parts of a landscape, sharers of a lyric beauty with the cherry-trees and the purple crocuses.

Coming to the substance of the book—the glance from many sides at the Irish and English temperaments—we find Meredith extremely penetrating in his criticism of John Bullishness, but something of a foreigner in his study of the Irish character. The son of an Irishwoman, he chose an Irishwoman as his most conquering heroine, but he writes of the race as one who has known the men and women of it entirely, or almost entirely, in an English setting—a setting, in other words, which shows up their strangeness and any surface eccentricities they may have, but does not give us an ordinary human sense of them. Captain Con is vital, because Meredith imagined him vitally, but when all is said, he is largely a stage-Irishman, winking over his whisky that has paid no excise—a better-born relative of Captain Costigan.

Politically, *Celt and Saxon* seems to be a plea for Home Rule—Home Rule, with a view towards a "consolidation of the Union." Its diagnosis of the Irish difficulty is one which has long been popular with many intellectual men on this side of the Irish Sea. Meredith sees, as the roots of the trouble, misunderstanding, want of imagination, want of sympathy. It has always seemed curious to me that intelligent men could persuade themselves that Ireland was chiefly suffering from want of understanding and want of sympathy on the part of England, when all the time her only ailment has been want of liberty. To adapt the organ-grinder's motto,

> Sympathy without relief
> Is like mustard without beef.

As a matter of fact, Meredith realized this, and was a friend to many Irish national movements from the Home Rule struggle down to the Gaelic League, to the latter of which the Irish part of him sent a subscription in his later years. He saw things from the point of view of an Imperial Liberal idealist, however, not of a Nationalist. In the result, he did not know the every-day and traditional setting of Irish life sufficiently well to give us an Irish Nationalist central figure as winning and heroic, even in his extravagances, as, say, the patriotic Englishman Neville Beauchamp.

At the same time, one must be thankful for a book so obviously the work of a great and abundant mind—a mind giving out its criticisms like flutters of birds—a heroic intellect always in the service of an ideal of liberty, courage, and gracious manners—a characteristically island brain, that was yet not insular.

## XVII.—OSCAR WILDE

OSCAR WILDE is a writer whom one must see through in order to appreciate. One must smash the idol in order to preserve the god. If Mr. Ransome's estimate of Wilde in his clever and interesting and seriously-written book is a little unsatisfactory, it is partly because he is not enough of an iconoclast. He has not realized with sufficient clearness that, while Wilde belonged to the first rank as a wit, he was scarcely better than second-rate as anything else. Consequently, it is not Wilde the beau of literature who dominates his book. Rather, it is Wilde the egoistic, æsthetic philosopher, and Wilde the imaginative artist.

This is, of course, as Wilde would have liked it to be. For, as Mr. Ransome says, "though Wilde had the secret of a wonderful laughter, he preferred to think of himself as a person with magnificent dreams." Indeed, so much was this so, that it is even suggested that, if *Salomé* had not been censored, the social comedies might never have been written. "It is possible," observes Mr. Ransome, "that we owe *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the fact that the Censor prevented Sarah Bernhardt from playing *Salomé* at the Palace Theatre." If this conjecture is right, one can never think quite so unkindly of the Censor again, for in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and in it alone, Wilde achieved a work of supreme genius in its kind.

It is as lightly-built as a house of cards, a frail edifice of laughter for laughter's sake. Or you might say that, in the literature of farce, it has a place as a "dainty rogue in porcelain." It is even lighter and more fragile than that. It is a bubble, or a flight of bubbles. It is the very ecstasy of levity. As we listen to Lady Bracknell discussing the possibility of parting with her daughter to a man who had been "born, or at least bred, in a handbag," or as we watch Jack and Algernon wrangling over the propriety of eating

muffins in an hour of gloom, we seem somehow to be caught up and to sail through an exhilarating mid-air of nonsense. Some people will contend that Wilde's laughter is always the laughter not of the open air but of the salon. But there is a spontaneity in the laughter of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that seems to me to associate it with running water and the sap rising in the green field.

It is when he begins to take Wilde seriously as a serious writer that one quarrels with Mr. Ransome. Wilde was much better at showing off than at revealing himself, and, as the comedy of showing off is much more delightful than the solemn vanity of it, he was naturally happiest as a wit and persifleur. On his serious side he counts, not as an original artist, but as a popularizer—the most accomplished popularizer, perhaps, in English literature. He popularized William Morris, both his domestic interiors and his Utopias, in the æsthetic lectures and in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*—a wonderful pamphlet, the secret of the world-wide fame of which Mr. Ransome curiously misses. He popularized the cloistral æstheticism of Pater and the cultural egoism of Goethe in *Intentions* and elsewhere. In *Salomé* he popularized the gorgeous processionals of ornamental sentences upon which Flaubert had expended not the least marvellous part of his genius.

Into an age that guarded respectability more closely than virtue and ridiculed beauty because it paid no dividend came Wilde, the assailant of even the most respectable ugliness, parrying the mockery of the meat tea with a mockery that sparkled like wine. Lighting upon a world that advertised commercial wares, he set himself to advertise art with as heroic an extravagance, and who knows how much his puce velvet knee-breeches may have done to make the British public aware of the genius, say, of Walter Pater? Not that Wilde was not a finished egoist, using the arts and the authors to advertise himself rather than himself to advertise them. But the time-spirit contrived that the arts and the authors should benefit by his outrageous breeches.

It is in the relation of a great popularizer, then—a popularizer who, for a new thing, was not also a vulgarizer—that Wilde seems to me to stand to his age. What, then, of Mr. Ransome's estimate of *Salomé?* That it is a fascinating play no lover of the pageantry of words can deny. But of what quality is this fascination? It is, when all is said, the fascination of the lust of painted faces.

Here we have no tragedy, but a mixing of degenerate philtres. Mr. Ransome hears "the beating of the wings of the angel of death" in the play; but that seems to me to be exactly the atmosphere that Wilde fails to create. As the curtain falls on the broken body of Salomé one has a sick feeling, as though one had been present where vermin were being crushed. There is not a hint of the elation, the liberation, of real tragedy. The whole thing is simply a wonderful piece of coloured sensationalism. And even if we turn to the costly sentences of the play, do we not find that, while in his choice of colour and jewel and design Flaubert wrought in language like a skilled artificer, Wilde, in his treatment of words, was more like a lavish amateur about town displaying his collection of splendid gems?

Wilde speaks of himself in *De Profundis* as a lord of language. Unhappily, he was just the opposite. Language was a vice with him. He took to it as a man might take to drink. He was addicted rather than devoted to language. He had a passion for it, but too little sense of responsibility towards it, and, in his choice of beautiful words, we are always conscious of the indolence as well as the extravagance of the man of pleasure. How beautifully, with what facility of beauty, he could use words, everyone knows who has read his brief *Endymion* (to name one of the poems), and the many hyacinthine passages in *Intentions*. But when one is anxious to see the man himself as in *De Profundis*—that book of a soul imprisoned in embroidered sophistries—one feels that this cloak of strange words is no better than a curse.

If Wilde was not a lord of language, however, but only its bejewelled slave, he was a lord of laughter, and it is

because there is so much laughter as well as language in *Intentions* that I am inclined to agree with Mr. Ransome that *Intentions* is "that one of Wilde's books that most nearly represents him." Even here, however, Mr. Ransome will insist on taking Wilde far too seriously. For instance, he tells us that "his paradoxes are only unfamiliar truths." How horrified Wilde would have been to hear him say so! His paradoxes are a good deal more than truths—or a good deal less. They helped, no doubt, to redress a balance, but many of them were the merest exercises in intellectual rebellion. Mr. Ransome's attitude on the question of Wilde's sincerity seems to me as impossible as his attitude in regard to the paradoxes. He draws up a code of artistic sincerity which might serve as a gospel for minor artists, but of which every great artist is a living denial. Disagree as we may with many of Mr. Ransome's conclusions, however, we must be grateful to him for a thoughtful, provocative, and ambitious study of one of the most brilliant personalities and wits, though by no means one of the brilliant imaginative artists, of the nineteenth century.

## XVIII.—TWO ENGLISH CRITICS

### (1) Mr. Saintsbury.

MR. SAINTSBURY as a critic possesses in a high degree the gift of sending the reader post-haste to the works he criticizes. His *Peace of the Augustans* is an almost irresistible incitement to go and forget the present world among the poets and novelists and biographers and letter-writers of the eighteenth century. His enthusiasm weaves spells about even the least of them. He does not merely remind us of the genius of Pope and Swift, of Fielding and Johnson and Walpole. He also summons us to Amory's *John Buncle* and to the Reverend Richard Graves's *Spiritual Quixote* as to a feast. Of the latter novel he declares that "for a book that is to be amusing without being flimsy, and substantial without being ponderous, *The Spiritual Quixote* may, perhaps, be commended above all its predecessors and contemporaries outside the work of the great Four themselves." That is characteristic of the wealth of invitations scattered through *The Peace of the Augustans*. After reading the book, one can scarcely resist the temptation to spend an evening over Young's *Night Thoughts*, and one will be almost more likely to turn to Prior than to Shakespeare himself—Prior who, "with the eternal and almost unnecessary exception of Shakespeare . . . is about the first to bring out the true English humour which involves sentiment and romance, which laughs gently at its own tears, and has more than half a tear for its own laughter"—Prior, of whom it is further written that "no one, except Thackeray, has ever entered more thoroughly into the spirit of *Ecclesiastes*." It does not matter that in a later chapter of the book it is *Rasselas* which is put with *Ecclesiastes*, and, after *Rasselas*, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

One does not go to Mr. Saintsbury as an inspector of literary weights and measures. His estimates of authors are the impressions of a man talking in a hurry, and his method is the method of exaggeration rather than of precise statement. How deficient he is in the sense of proportion may be judged from the fact that he devotes slightly more space to Collins than to Pope, unless the pages in which he assails "Grub Street" as a malicious invention of Pope's are to be counted to the credit of the latter. But Mr. Saintsbury's book is not so much a thorough and balanced survey of eighteenth-century literature as a confession, an almost garrulous monologue on the delights of that literature. How pleasant and unexpected it is to see a critic in his seventies as incautious, as pugnacious, as boisterous as an undergraduate! It is seldom that we find the apostolic spirit of youth living in the same breast with the riches of experience and memory, as we do in the present book.

One of the great attractions of the eighteenth century for the modern world is that, while it is safely set at an historical distance from us, it is, at the same time, brought within range of our everyday interests. It is not merely that about the beginning of it men began to write and talk according to the simple rules of modern times. It is rather that about this time the man of letters emerges from the mists of legend and becomes as real as one's uncle in his daily passions and his train of little interests. One has not to reconstruct the lives of Swift and Pope from a handful of myths and references in legal documents. There is no room for anything akin to Baconianism in their regard. They live in a thousand letters and contemporary illusions, and one might as well be an agnostic about Mr. Asquith as about either of them. Pope was a master liar, and Swift spun mystifications about himself. But, in spite of lies and mystifications and gossip, they are both as real to us as if we met them walking down the Strand. One could not easily imagine Shakespeare walking down the Strand. The Strand would have to be rebuilt, and the rest of us would have to put on fancy dress in order to receive him. But

though Swift and Pope lived in a century of wig and powder and in a London strangely unlike the London of to-day, we do not feel that similar preparations would be needed in their case. If Swift came back, one can without difficulty imagine him pamphleteering about war as though he had merely been asleep for a couple of centuries; and Pope, we may be sure, would resume, without too great perplexity, his attack on the egotists and dunces of the world of letters. But Shakespeare's would be a return from legendary Elysian fields.

Hence Mr. Saintsbury may justly hope that his summons to the modern random reader, no less than to the scholar, to go and enjoy himself among the writers of the eighteenth century will not fall on entirely deaf ears. At the same time, it is only fair to warn the general reader not to follow Mr. Saintsbury's recommendations and opinions too blindly. He will do well to take the author's advice and read Pope, but he will do very ill to take the author's advice as regards what in Pope is best worth reading. Mr. Saintsbury speaks with respect, for instance, of the *Elegy on an Unfortunate Lady*—an insincere piece of tombstone rhetoric. "There are some," he declared in a footnote, "to whom this singular piece is Pope's strongest atonement, both as poet and man, for his faults as both." It seems to me to be a poem which reveals Pope's faults as a poet, while of Pope the man it tells us simply nothing. It has none of Pope's wit, none of his epigrammatic characterization, none of his bewigged and powdered fancies, none of his malicious self-revelation. Almost the only interesting thing about it is the notes the critics have written on it, discussing whether the lady ever lived, and, if so, whether she was a Miss Wainsbury or a lady of title, whether she was beautiful or deformed, whether she was in love with Pope or the Duke of Buckingham or the Duc de Berry, whether Pope was in love with her, or even knew her, and whether she killed herself with a sword or by hanging herself. One can find plenty of "rest and refreshment" among the conjectures of the commentators, but in the verse itself one can find

little but a good example of the technique of the rhymed couplet. But Mr. Saintsbury evidently loves the heroic couplet for itself alone. The only long example of Pope's verse which he quotes is merely ding-dong, and might have been written by any capable imitator of the poet later in the century. Surely, if his contention is true that Pope's reputation as a poet is now lower than it ought to be, he ought to have quoted something from the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* or *The Rape of the Lock,* or even *The Essay on Man.* The two first are almost flawless masterpieces. Here Pope suddenly becomes a star. Here he gilds his age and his passions with wit and fancy; he ceases to be a mere rhymed moralist, a mechanician of metre. Mr. Saintsbury, I regret to see, contends that the first version of *The Rape of the Lock* is the best. One can hardly forgive this throwing overboard of the toilet and the fairies which Pope added in the later edition. We may admit that the gnomes are a less happy invention than the sylphs, and that their introduction lets the poem down from its level of magic illusion. But in the second telling the poem is an infinitely richer and more peopled thing. Had we known only the first version, we should, no doubt, have felt with Addison that it was madness to tamper with such exquisite perfection. But Pope, who foolishly attributed Addison's advice to envy, proved that Addison was wrong. His revision of *The Rape of the Lock* is one of the few magnificently successful examples in literature of painting the lily.

One differs from Mr. Saintsbury, however, less in liking a different garden from his than in liking a different seat in the same garden. One who is familiar as he is with all the literature he discusses in the present volume is bound to indulge all manner of preferences, whims and even eccentricities. An instance of Mr. Saintsbury's whims is his complaint that the eighteenth-century essays are almost always reprinted only in selections and without the advertisements that appeared with them on their first publication. He is impatient of J. R. Green's dismissal of the periodical

essayist as a "mass of rubbish," and he demands his eighteenth-century essayists in full, advertisements and all. "Here," he insists, "these things fringe and vignette the text in the most appropriate manner, and so set off the quaint variety and the other-worldly character as nothing else could do." Is not the author's contention, however, as to the great loss the Addisonian essay suffers when isolated from its context a severe criticism on that essay as literature? The man of letters likes to read from a complete *Spectator* as he does from a complete Wordsworth. At the same time, the best of Addison, as of Wordsworth, can stand on its own feet in an anthology, and this is the final proof of its literary excellence. The taste for eighteenth-century advertisements is, after all, only literary antiquarianism—a delightful indulgence, a by-path, but hardly necessary to the enjoyment of Addison's genius.

But it is neither Pope nor Addison who is ultimately Mr. Saintsbury's idol among the poets and prose-writers of the eighteenth century. His idol of idols is Swift, and next to him he seems most wholeheartedly to love and admire Dr. Johnson and Fielding. He makes no bones about confessing his preference of Swift to Aristophanes and Rabelais and Molière. Swift does not at once fascinate and cold-shoulder him as he does so many people. Mr. Saintsbury glorifies *Gulliver*, and wisely so, right down to the last word about the Houyhnhnms, and he demands for the *Journal to Stella* recognition as "the first great novel, being at the same time a marvellous and absolutely genuine autobiography." His ultimate burst of appreciation is a beautifully characteristic example of what has before been called Saintsburyese—not because of any obscurity in it, but because of its oddity of phrase and metaphor:

> Swift never wearies, for, as Bossuet said of human passion generally, there is in this greatest master of one of its most terrible forms, *quelque chose d'infini*, and the refreshment which he offers varies unceasingly from the lightest froth of pure nonsense, through beverages middle and stronger to the most drastic restoratives—the very strychnine and capsicum of irony.

But what, above all, attracts Mr. Saintsbury in Swift, Fielding and Johnson is their eminent manliness. He is an enthusiast within limits for the genius of Sterne and the genius of Horace Walpole. But he loves them in a grudging way. He is disgusted with their lack of muscle. He admits of the characters in *Tristram Shandy* that "they are . . . much more intrinsically true to life than many, if not almost all, the characters of Dickens," but he is too greatly shocked by Sterne's humour to be just to his work as a whole. It is the same with Walpole's letters. Mr. Saintsbury will heap sentence after sentence of praise upon them, till one would imagine they were his favourite eighteenth-century literature. He even defends Walpole's character against Macaulay, but in the result he damns him with faint praise quite as effectively as Macaulay did. That he has an enviable appetite for Walpole's letters is shown by the fact that, in speaking of Mrs. Toynbee's huge sixteen-volume edition of them, he observes that "even a single reading of it will supply the evening requirements of a man who does not go to bed very late, and has learnt the last lesson of intellectual as of other enjoyment—to enjoy *slowly*—for nearer a month than a week, and perhaps for longer still." The man who can get through Horace Walpole in a month of evenings without sitting up late seems to me to be endowed not only with an avarice of reading, but with an avarice of Walpole. But, in spite of this, Mr. Saintsbury does not seem to like his author. His ideal author is one of whom he can say, as he does of Johnson, that he is "one of the greatest of Englishmen, one of the greatest men of letters, and one of the greatest of *men*." One of his complaints against Gray is that, though he liked *Joseph Andrews*, he "had apparently not enough manliness to see some of Fielding's real merits." As for Fielding, Mr. Saintsbury's verdict is summed up in Dryden's praise of Chaucer, "Here is God's plenty." In *Tom Jones* he contends that Fielding "puts the whole plant of the pleasure-giver in motion, as no novel-writer—not even Cervantes—had ever done before." For myself,

I doubt whether the exaltation of Fielding has not become too much a matter of orthodoxy in recent years. Compare him with Swift, and he is long-winded in his sentences. Compare him with Sterne, and his characters are mechanical. Compare him with Dickens, and he reaches none of the depths, either of laughter or of sadness. This is not to question the genius of Fielding's vivid and critical picture of eighteenth-century manners and morals. It is merely to put a drag on the wheel of Mr. Saintsbury's galloping enthusiasm.

But, however one may quarrel with it, *The Peace of the Augustans* is a book to read with delight—an eccentric book, an extravagant book, a grumpy book, but a book of rare and amazing enthusiasm for good literature. Mr. Saintsbury's constant jibes at the present age, as though no one had ever been unmanly enough to make a joke before Mr. Shaw, become amusing in the end like Dr. Johnson's rudenesses. And Mr. Saintsbury's one attempt to criticize contemporary fiction—where he speaks of *Sinister Street* in the same breath with *Waverley* and *Pride and Prejudice*—is both amusing and rather appalling. But, in spite of his attitude to his own times, one could not ask for more genial company on going on a pilgrimage among the Augustans. Mr. Saintsbury has in this book written the most irresistible advertisement of eighteenth-century literature that has been published for many years.

### (2) Mr. Gosse.

Mr. Gosse and Mr. Saintsbury are the two kings of Sparta among English critics of to-day. They stand pre-eminent among those of our contemporaries who have served literature in the capacity of law-givers during the past fifty years. I do not suggest that they are better critics than Mr. Birrell or Sir Sidney Colvin or the late Sir E. T. Cook. But none of these three was ever a professional and whole-time critic, as Mr. Gosse and Mr. Saintsbury are. One thinks of the latter primarily as the authors of books

about books, though Mr. Gosse is a poet and biographer as well, and Mr. Saintsbury, it is said, once dreamed of writing a history of wine. One might say of Mr. Gosse that even in his critical work he writes largely as a poet and biographer, while Mr. Saintsbury writes of literature as though he were writing a history of wine. Mr. Saintsbury seeks in literature, above all things, exhilarating qualities. He can read almost anything and in any language, provided it is not non-intoxicating. He has a good head, and it cannot be said that he ever allows an author to fuddle it. But the authors whom he has collected in his wonderful cellar unquestionably make him merry. In his books he always seems to be pressing on us "another glass of Jane Austen," or "just a thimbleful of Pope," or "a drop of '42 Tennyson." No other critic of literature writes with the garrulous gusto of a boon-companion as Mr. Saintsbury does. In our youth, when we demand style as well as gusto, we condemn him on account of his atrocious English. As we grow older, we think of his English merely as a rather eccentric sort of coat, and we begin to recognize that geniality such as his is a part of critical genius. True, he is not over-genial to new authors. He regards them as he might 1916 claret. Perhaps he is right. Authors undoubtedly get mellower with age. Even great poetry is, we are told, a little crude to the taste till it has stood for a few seasons.

Mr. Gosse is at once more grave and more deferential in his treatment of great authors. One cannot imagine Mr. Saintsbury speaking in a hushed voice before Shakespeare himself. One can almost hear him saying, "Hullo, Shakespeare!" To Mr. Gosse, however, literature is an almost sacred subject. He glows in its presence. He is more lyrical than Mr. Saintsbury, more imaginative and more eloquent. His short history of English literature is a book that fills a young head with enthusiasm. He writes as a servant of the great tradition. He is a Whig, where Mr. Saintsbury is an heretical Jacobite. He is, however, saved from a professorial earnestness by his sharp talent for

portraiture. Mr. Gosse's judgments may or may not last: his portraits certainly will. It is to be hoped that he will one day write his reminiscences. Such a book would, we feel sure, be among the great books of portraiture in the history of English literature. He has already set Patmore and Swinburne before us in comic reality, and who can forget the grotesque figure of Hans Andersen, sketched in a few lines though it is, in *Two Visits to Denmark?* It may be replied that Mr. Gosse has already given us the best of his reminiscences in half a dozen books of essays and biography. Even so, there were probably many things which it was not expedient to tell ten or twenty years ago, but which might well be related for the sake of truth and entertainment to-day. Mr. Gosse in the past has usually told the truth about authors with the gentleness of a modern dentist extracting a tooth. He keeps up a steady conversation of praise while doing the damage. The truth is out before you know. One becomes suddenly aware that the author has ceased to be as coldly perfect as a tailor's model, and is a queer-looking creature with a gap in his jaw. It is possible that the author, were he alive, would feel furious, as a child sometimes feels with the dentist. None the less, Mr. Gosse has done him a service. The man who extracts a truth is as much to be commended as the man who extracts a tooth. It is not the function of the biographer any more than it is that of a dentist to prettify his subject. Each is an enemy of decay, a furtherer of life. There is such a thing as painless biography, but it is the work of quacks. Mr. Gosse is one of those honest dentists who reassure you by allowing it to hurt you "just a little."

This gift for telling the truth is no small achievement in a man of letters. Literature is a broom that sweeps lies out of the mind, and fortunate is the man who wields it. Unhappily, while Mr. Gosse is daring in portraiture, he is the reverse in comment. In comment, as his writings on the war showed, he will fall in with the cant of the times. He can see through the cant of yesterday with a sparkle in his eyes, but he is less critical of the cant of to-day. He is

much given to throwing out saving clauses, as when, writing of Mr. Sassoon's verse, he says: "His temper is not altogether to be applauded, for such sentiments must tend to relax the effort of the struggle, yet they can hardly be reproved when conducted with so much honesty and courage." Mr. Gosse again writes out of the official rather than the imaginative mind when, speaking of the war poets, he observes:

> It was only proper that the earliest of all should be the Poet Laureate's address to England, ending with the prophecy:
>
> Much suffering shall cleanse thee!
> But thou through the flood
> Shalt win to salvation,
> To Beauty through blood.

Had a writer of the age of Charles II. written a verse like that, Mr. Gosse's chortles would have disturbed the somnolent peace of the House of Peers. Even if it had been written in the time of Albert the Good, he would have rent it with the destructive dagger of a phrase. As it is, one is not sure that Mr. Gosse regards this appalling scrap from a bad hymnal as funny. One hopes that he quoted it with malicious intention. But did he? Was it not Mr. Gosse who early in the war glorified the blood that was being shed as a cleansing stream of Condy's Fluid? The truth is, apart from his thoughts about literature, Mr. Gosse thinks much as the leader-writers tell him. He is sensitive to beauty of style and to idiosyncrasy of character, but he lacks philosophy and that tragic sense that gives the deepest sympathy. That, we fancy, is why we would rather read him on Catherine Trotter, the precursor of the bluestockings, than on any subject connected with the war.

Two of the most interesting chapters in Mr. Gosse's *Diversions of a Man of Letters* are the essay on Catherine Trotter and that on "the message of the Wartons." Here he is on ground on which there is no leader-writer to take him by the hand and guide him into saying "the right thing." He writes as a disinterested scholar and an enter-

tainer. He forgets the war and is amused. How many readers are there in England who know that Catherine Trotter "published in 1693 a copy of verses addressed to Mr. Bevil Higgons on the occasion of his recovery from the smallpox," and that "she was then fourteen years of age"? How many know even that she wrote a blank-verse tragedy in five acts, called *Agnes de Castro,* and had it produced at Drury Lane at the age of sixteen? At the age of nineteen she was the friend of Congreve, and was addressed by Farquhar as "one of the fairest of her sex and the best judge." By the age of twenty-five, however, she had apparently written herself out, so far as the stage was concerned, and after her tragedy, *The Revolution in Sweden,* the theatre knows her no more. Though described as "the Sappho of Scotland" by the Queen of Prussia, and by the Duke of Marlborough as "the wisest virgin I ever knew," her fame did not last even as long as her life. She married a clergyman, wrote on philosophy and religion, and lived till seventy. Her later writings, according to Mr. Gosse, "are so dull that merely to think of them brings tears into one's eyes." Her husband, who was a bit of a Jacobite, lost his money on account of his opinions, even though—"a perfect gentleman at heart—'he always prayed for the King and Royal Family by name.'" "Meanwhile," writes Mr. Gosse, "to uplift his spirits in this dreadful condition, he is discovered engaged upon a treatise on the Mosaic deluge, which he could persuade no publisher to print. He reminds us of Dr. Primrose in *The Vicar of Wakefield,* and, like him, Mr. Cockburn probably had strong views on the Whistonian doctrine." Altogether the essay on Catherine Trotter is an admirable example of Mr. Gosse in a playful mood.

The study of Joseph and Thomas Warton as "two pioneers of romanticism" is more serious in purpose, and is a scholarly attempt to discover the first symptoms of romanticism in eighteenth-century literature. Mr. Gosse finds in *The Enthusiast,* written by Joseph Warton at the age of eighteen, "the earliest expression of full revolt

against the classical attitude which had been sovereign in all European literature for nearly a century." He does not pretend that it is a good poem, but "here, for the first time, we find unwaveringly emphasized and repeated what was entirely new in literature, the essence of romantic hysteria." It is in Joseph Warton, according to Mr. Gosse, that we first meet with "the individualist attitude to nature." Readers of Horace Walpole's letters, however, will remember still earlier examples of the romantic attitude to nature. But these were not published for many years afterwards.

The other essays in the book range from the charm of Sterne to the vivacity of Lady Dorothy Nevill, from a eulogy of Poe to a discussion of Disraeli as a novelist. The variety, the scholarship, the portraiture of the book make it a pleasure to read; and, even when Mr. Gosse flatters in his portraits, his sense of truth impels him to draw the features correctly, so that the facts break through the praise. The truth is Mr. Gosse is always doing his best to balance the pleasure of saying the best with the pleasure of saying the worst. His books are all the more vital because they bear the stamp of an appreciative and mildly cruel personality.

## XIX.—AN AMERICAN CRITIC: PROFESSOR IRVING BABBITT

It is rather odd that two of the ablest American critics should also be two of the most unsparing enemies of romanticism in literature. Professor Babbitt and Mr. Paul Elmer More cannot get over the French Revolution. They seem to think that the rights of man have poisoned literature. One suspects that they have their doubts even about the American Revolution; for there, too, the rights of man were asserted against the lust of power. It is only fair to Professor Babbitt to say that he does not defend the lust of power. On the contrary, he damns it, and explains it as the logical and almost inevitable outcome of the rights of man! The steps of the process by which the change is effected are these. First, we have the Rousseaus asserting that the natural man is essentially good, but that he has been depraved by an artificial social system imposed on him from without. Instead of the quarrel between good and evil in his breast, they see only the quarrel between the innate good in man and his evil environment. They hold that all will be well if only he is set free—if his genius or natural impulses are liberated. "Rousseauism is . . . an emancipation of impulse—especially of the impulse of sex." It is a gospel of egoism and leaves little room for conscience. Hence it makes men megalomaniacs, and the lust for dominion is given its head no less than the lust of the flesh. "In the absence of ethical discipline," writes Professor Babbitt in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, "the lust for knowledge and the lust for feeling count very little, at least practically, compared with the third main lust of human nature—the lust for power. Hence the emergence of that most sinister of all types, the efficient megalomaniac." In the result it appears that not only Rousseau

and Hugo, but Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, helped to bring about the European War! Had there been no wars, no tyrants, and no lascivious men before Rousseau, one would have been ready to take Professor Babbitt's indictment more seriously.

Professor Babbitt, however, has a serious philosophic idea at the back of all he says. He believes that man at his noblest lives the life of obligation rather than of impulse, and that romantic literature discourages him in this. He holds that man should rise from the plane of nature to the plane of humanism or the plane of religion, and that to live according to one's temperament, as the romanticists advise, is to sink back from human nature, in the best sense, to animal nature. He takes the view that men of science since Bacon, by the great conquests they have made in the material sphere, have prepared man to take the romantic and boastful view of himself. "If men had not been so heartened by scientific progress they would have been less ready, we may be sure, to listen to Rousseau when he affirmed that they were naturally good." Not that Professor Babbitt looks on us as utterly evil and worthy of damnation. He objects to the gloomy Jonathan-Edwards view, because it helps to precipitate by reaction the opposite extreme—"the boundless sycophancy of human nature from which we are now suffering." It was, perhaps, in reaction against the priests that Rousseau made the most boastful announcements of his righteousness. "Rousseau feels himself so good that he is ready, as he declares, to appear before the Almighty at the sound of the trump of the Last Judgment, with the book of his *Confessions* in his hand, and there to issue a challenge to the whole human race, 'Let a single one assert to Thee if he dare: "I am better than that man."'" Rousseau would have been saved from this fustian virtue, Professor Babbitt thinks, if he had accepted either the classic or the religious view of life: for the classic view imposes on human nature the discipline of decorum, while the religious view imposes the discipline of humility. Human nature, he holds,

requires the restrictions of the everlasting "No." Virtue is a struggle within iron limitations, not an easy gush of feeling. At the same time, Professor Babbitt does not offer us as a cure for our troubles the decorum of the Pharisees and the pseudo-classicists, who bid us obey outward rules instead of imitating a spirit. He wishes our men of letters to rediscover the ethical imagination of the Greeks. "True classicism," he observes, "does not rest on the observance of rules or the imitation of modes, but on an immediate insight into the universal." The romanticists, he thinks, cultivate not the awe we find in the great writers, but mere wonder. He takes Poe as a typical romanticist. "It is not easy to discover in either the personality or writings of Poe an atom of awe or reverence. On the other hand, he both experiences wonder and seeks in his art to be a pure wondersmith."

One of the results of putting wonder above awe is that the romanticists unduly praise the ignorant—the savage, the peasant, and the child. Wordsworth here comes in for denunciation for having hailed a child of six as "Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!" Christ, Professor Babbitt tells us, praised the child not for its capacity for wonder, but for its freedom from sin. The romanticist, on the other hand, loves the spontaneous gush of wonder. He loves day-dreams, Arcadianism, fairy-tale Utopianism. He begins with an uncontrolled fancy and ends with an uncontrolled character. He tries all sorts of false gods—nature-worship, art-worship, humanitarianism, sentimentalism about animals. As regards the last of these, romanticism, according to the author, has meant the rehabilitation of the ass, and the Rousseauists are guilty of onolatry. "Medical men have given a learned name to the malady of those who neglect the members of their own family and gush over animals (zoöphilpsychosis). But Rousseau already exhibits this 'psychosis.' He abandoned his five children one after the other, but had, we are told, an unspeakable affection for his dog." As for the worship of nature, it leads to a "wise passiveness"

instead of the wise energy of knowledge and virtue, and tempts man to idle in pantheistic reveries. "In Rousseau or Walt Whitman it amounts to a sort of ecstatic animality that sets up as a divine illumination." Professor Babbitt distrusts ecstasy as he distrusts Arcadianism. He perceives the mote of Arcadianism even in "the light that never was on sea or land." He has no objection to a "return to nature," if it is for purposes of recreation: he denounces it, however, when it is set up as a cult or "a substitute for philosophy and religion." He denounces, indeed, every kind of "painless substitute for genuine spiritual effort." He admires the difficult virtues, and holds that the gift of sympathy or pity or fraternity is in their absence hardly worth having.

On points of this kind, I fancy, he would have had on his side Wordsworth, Coleridge, Browning, and many of the other "Rousseauists" whom he attacks. Professor Babbitt, however, is a merciless critic, and the writers of the nineteenth century, who seemed to most of us veritable monsters of ethics, are to him simply false prophets of romanticism and scientific complacency. "The nineteenth century," he declares, "may very well prove to have been the most wonderful and the least wise of centuries." He admits the immense materialistic energy of the century, but this did not make up for the lack of a genuine philosophic insight in life and literature. Man is a morally indolent animal, and he was never more so than when he was working "with something approaching frenzy according to the natural law." Faced with the spectacle of a romantic spiritual sloth accompanied by a materialistic, physical, and even intellectual energy, the author warns us that "the discipline that helps a man to self-mastery is found to have a more important bearing on his happiness than the discipline that helps him to a mastery of physical nature." He sees a peril to our civilization in our absorption in the temporal and our failure to discover that "something abiding" on which civilization must rest. He quotes Aristotle's anti-romantic saying that "most men would

rather live in a disorderly than in a sober manner." He feels that in conduct, politics, and the arts, we have, as the saying is, "plumped for" the disorderly manner to-day.

His book is a very useful challenge to the times, though it is a dangerous book to put in the hands of anyone inclined to Conservatism. After all, romanticism was a great liberating force. It liberated men, not from decorum, but from pseudo-decorum—not from humility, but from subserviency. It may be admitted that, without humility and decorum of the true kind, liberty is only pseudo-liberty, equality only pseudo-equality, and fraternity only pseudo-fraternity. I am afraid, however, that in getting rid of the vices of romanticism Professor Babbitt would pour away the baby with the bath water.

Where Professor Babbitt goes wrong is in not realizing that romanticism with its emphasis on rights is a necessary counterpart to classicism with its emphasis on duties. Each of them tries to do without the other. The most notorious romantic lovers were men who failed to realize the necessity of fidelity, just as the minor romantic artists to-day fail to realize the necessity of tradition. On the other hand, the classicist-in-excess prefers a world in which men preserve the decorum of servants to a world in which they might attain to the decorum of equals. Professor Babbitt refers to the pseudo-classical drama of seventeenth-century France, in which men confused nobility of language with the language of the nobility. He himself unfortunately is not free from similar prejudices. He is antipathetic, so far as one can see, to any movement for a better social system than we already possess. He is definitely in reaction against the whole forward movement of the last two centuries. He has pointed out certain flaws in the moderns, but he has failed to appreciate their virtues. Literature to-day is less noble than the literature of Shakespeare, partly, I think, because men have lost the "sense of sin." Without the sense of sin we cannot have the greatest tragedy. The Greeks and Shakespeare perceived the contrast between the pure and the impure, the noble and the

base, as no writer perceives it to-day. Romanticism undoubtedly led to a confusion of moral values. On the other hand, it was a necessary counterblast to formalism. In the great books of the world, in *Isaiah* and the Gospels, the best elements of both the classic and the romantic are found working together in harmony. If Christ were living to-day, is Professor Babbitt quite sure that he himself would not have censured the anthophilpsychosis of "Consider the lilies of the field"?

## XX.—GEORGIANS

### (1) Mr. de la Mare.

MR. WALTER DE LA MARE gives us no Thames of song. His genius is scarcely more than a rill. But how the rill shines! How sweet a music it makes! Into what lands of romance does it flow, and beneath what hedges populous with birds! It seems at times as though it were a little fugitive stream attempting to run as far away as possible from the wilderness of reality and to lose itself in quiet, dreaming places. There never were shyer songs than these.

Mr. de la Mare is at the opposite pole to poets so robustly at ease with experience as Browning and Whitman. He has no cheers of welcome for the labouring universe on its march. He is interested in the daily procession only because he seeks in it one face, one figure. He is love-sick for love, for beauty, and longs to save it from the contamination of the common world. Like the lover in *The Tryst*, he dreams always of a secret place of love and beauty set solitarily beyond the bounds of the time and space we know:

> Beyond the rumour even of Paradise come,
> There, out of all remembrance, make our home:
> Seek we some close hid shadow for our lair,
> Hollowed by Noah's mouse beneath the chair
> Wherein the Omnipotent, in slumber bound,
> Nods till the piteous Trump of Judgment sound.
> Perchance Leviathan of the deep sea
> Would lease a lost mermaiden's grot to me,
> There of your beauty we would joyance make—
> A music wistful for the sea-nymph's sake:
> Haply Elijah, o'er his spokes of fire,
> Cresting steep Leo, or the Heavenly Lyre,
> Spied, tranced in azure of inanest space,
> Some eyrie hostel meet for human grace,
> Where two might happy be—just you and I—
> Lost in the uttermost of Eternity.

This is, no doubt, a far from rare mood in poetry. Even the waltz-songs of the music-halls express, or attempt to express, the longing of lovers for an impossible loneliness. Mr. de la Mare touches our hearts, however, not because he shares our sentimental day-dreams, but because he so mournfully turns back from them to the bitterness of reality:

> No, no. Nor earth, nor air, nor fire, nor deep
> Could lull poor mortal longingness asleep.
> Somewhere there Nothing is; and there lost Man
> Shall win what changeless vague of peace he can

These lines (ending in an unsatisfactory and ineffective vagueness of phrase, which is Mr. de la Mare's peculiar vice as a poet) suggest something of the sad philosophy which runs through the verse in *Motley*. The poems are, for the most part, praise of beauty sought and found in the shadow of death.

Melancholy though it is, however, Mr. de la Mare's book is a book of praise, not of lamentations. He triumphantly announces that, if he were to begin to write of earth's wonders:

> Flit would the ages
> On soundless wings
> Ere unto Z
> My pen drew nigh;
> Leviathan told,
> And the honey-fly.

He cannot come upon a twittering linnet, a "thing of light," in a bush without realizing that—

> All the throbbing world
> Of dew and sun and air
> By this small parcel of life
> Is made more fair.

He bids us in *Farewell:*

> Look thy last on all things lovely
> Every hour. Let no night
> Seal thy sense in deathly slumber
> Till to delight
> Thou have paid thy utmost blessing.

Thus, there is nothing faint-hearted in Mr. de la Mare's melancholy. His sorrow is idealist's sorrow. He has the heart of a worshipper, a lover.

We find evidence of this not least in his war-verses. At the outbreak of the war he evidently shared with other lovers and idealists the feeling of elation in the presence of noble sacrifices made for the world.

> Now each man's mind all Europe is,

he cries, in the first line in *Happy England,* and, as he remembers the peace of England, "her woods and wilds, her loveliness," he exclaims:

> O what a deep contented night
> The sun from out her Eastern seas
> Would bring the dust which in her sight
> Had given its all for these!

So beautiful a spirit as Mr. de la Mare's, however, could not remain content with idealizing from afar the sacrifices and heroism of dying men. In the long poem called *Motley* he turns from the heroism to the madness of war, translating his vision into a fool's song:

> Nay, but a dream I had
> Of a world all mad,
> Not simple happy mad like me,
> Who am mad like an empty scene
> Of water and willow-tree,
> Where the wind hath been;
> But that foul Satan-mad,
> Who rots in his own head. . . .

The fool's vision of men going into battle is not a vision of knights of the Holy Ghost nobly falling in the lists with their country looking on, but of men's bodies—

> Dragging cold cannon through a mire
> Of rain and blood and spouting fire,
> The new moon glinting hard on eyes
> Wide with insanities!

In *The Marionettes* Mr. de la Mare turns to tragic satire for relief from the bitterness of a war-maddened world:

Let the foul scene proceed:
  There's laughter in the wings;
'Tis sawdust that they bleed,
  But a box Death brings.

How rare a skill is theirs
  These extreme pangs to show,
How real a frenzy wears
  Each feigner of woe!

And the poem goes on in perplexity of anger and anguish:

Strange, such a Piece is free,
  While we spectators sit,
Aghast at its agony,
  Yet absorbed in it!

Dark is the outer air,
  Coldly the night draughts blow,
Mutely we stare, and stare,
  At the frenzied Show.

Yet Heaven hath its quiet shroud
  Of deep, immutable blue—
We cry, "The end!" We are bowed
  By the dread, "'Tis true!"

While the Shape who hoofs applause
  Behind our deafened ear,
Hoots—angel-wise—"The Cause!"
  And affrights even fear.

There is something in these lines that reminds one of Mr. Thomas Hardy's black-edged indictment of life.

As we read Mr. de la Mare, indeed, we are reminded again and again of the work of many other poets—of the ballad-writers, the Elizabethan song-writers, Blake and Wordsworth, Mr. Hardy and Mr. W. B. Yeats. In some instances it is as though Mr. de la Mare had deliberately set himself to compose a musical variation on the same theme as one of the older masters. Thus, *April Moon*, which contains the charming verse—

The little moon that April brings,
  More lovely shade than light,
That, setting, silvers lonely hills
  Upon the verge of night—

is merely Wordsworth's "She dwelt among the untrodden ways" turned into new music. New music, we should say, is Mr. de la Mare's chief gift to literature—a music not regular or precise or certain, but none the less a music in which weak rhymes and even weak phrases are jangled into a strange beauty, as in *Alexander*, which begins:

> It was the Great Alexander,
> Capped with a golden helm,
> Sate in the ages, in his floating ship,
> In a dead calm.

One finds Mr. de la Mare's characteristic, unemphatic music again in the opening lines of *Mrs. Grundy:*

> Step very softly, sweet Quiet-foot,
> Stumble not, whisper not, smile not,

where "foot" and "not" are rhymes.

It is the stream of music flowing through his verses rather than any riches of imagery or phrase that makes one rank the author so high among living poets. But music in verse can hardly be separated from intensity and sincerity of vision. This music of Mr. de la Mare's is not a mere craftsman's tune: it is an echo of the spirit. Had he not seen beautiful things passionately, Mr. de la Mare could never have written:

> Thou with thy cheek on mine,
> And dark hair loosed, shalt see
> Take the far stars for fruit
> The cypress tree,
> And in the yew's black
> Shall the moon be.

Beautiful as Mr. de la Mare's vision is, however, and beautiful as is his music, we miss in his work that frequent perfection of phrase which is part of the genius of (to take another living writer) Mr. Yeats. One has only to compare Mr. Yeats's *I Heard the Old, Old Men Say* with Mr. de la Mare's *The Old Men* to see how far the latter falls below verbal mastery. Mr. Yeats has found the perfect embodi-

ment for his imagination. Mr. de la Mare seems in comparison to be struggling with his medium, and contrives in his first verse to be no more than just articulate:

> Old and alone, sit we,
> Caged, riddle-rid men,
> Lost to earth's "Listen!" and "See!"
> Thought's "Wherefore?" and "When?"

There is vision in some of the later verses in the poem, but, if we read it alongside of Mr. Yeats's, we get an impression of unsuccess of execution. Whether one can fairly use the word "unsuccess" in reference to verse which succeeds so exquisitely as Mr. de la Mare's in being literature is a nice question. But how else is one to define the peculiar quality of his style—its hesitations, its vaguenesses, its obscurities? On the other hand, even when his lines leave the intellect puzzled and the desire for grammar unsatisfied, a breath of original romance blows through them and appeals to us like the illogical burden of a ballad. Here at least are the rhythms and raptures of poetry, if not always the beaten gold of speech. Sometimes Mr. de la Mare's verse reminds one of piano-music, sometimes of bird-music: it wavers so curiously between what is composed and what is unsophisticated. Not that one ever doubts for a moment that Mr. de la Mare has spent on his work an artist's pains. He has made a craft out of his innocence. If he produces in his verse the effect of the wind among the reeds, it is the result not only of his artlessness, but of his art. He is one of the modern poets who have broken away from the metrical formalities of Swinburne and the older men, and who, of set purpose, have imposed upon poetry the beauty of a slightly irregular pulse.

He is typical of his generation, however, not only in his form, but in the pain of his unbelief (as shown in *Betrayal*), and in that sense of half-revelation that fills him always with wonder and sometimes with hope. His poems tell of the visits of strange presences in dream and vacancy. In *A Vacant Day*, after describing the beauty of a summer

moon, with clear waters flowing under willows, he closes with the verses:

I listened; and my heart was dumb
With praise no language could express;
Longing in vain for him to come
Who had breathed such blessedness.

On this fair world, wherein we pass
So chequered and so brief a stay,
And yearned in spirit to learn, alas!
What kept him still away.

In these poems we find the beauty of gentleness expressing itself as it is doing nowhere else just now in verse. Mr. de la Mare's poetry is not only lovely, but lovable. He has as a personal possession—

The skill of words to sweeten despair,

which will, I am confident, give him a permanent place in English literature.

### (2) The Group.

The latest collection of Georgian verse has had a mixed reception. One or two distinguished critics have written of it in the mood of a challenge to mortal combat. Men have begun to quarrel over the question whether we are living in an age of poetic dearth or of poetic plenty—whether the world is a nest of singing-birds or a cage in which the last canary has been dead for several years.

All this, I think, is a good sign. It means that poetry is interesting people sufficiently to make them wish to argue about it. Better a breeze—even a somewhat excessive breeze—than stagnant air. It is good both for poets and for the reading public. It prevents the poets from resting on their wings, as they might be tempted to do by a consistent calm of praise. It compels them to examine their work more critically. Anyhow, "fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil," and a reasonable amount of sharp censure will do a true poet more good than harm. It will not necessarily

injure even his sales. I understand the latest volume of *Georgian Poetry* is already in greater demand than its predecessor.

It is a good anthology of the poetry of the last two years without being an ideal anthology. Some good poets and some good poems have been omitted. And they have been omitted, in some instances, in favour of inferior work. Many of us would prefer an anthology of the best poems rather than an anthology of authors. At the same time, with all its faults, *Georgian Poetry* still remains the best guide we possess to the poetic activities of the time. I am glad to see that the editor includes the work of a woman in his new volume. This helps to make it more representative than the previous selections. But there are several other living women who are better poets, at the lowest estimate, than at least a quarter of the men who have gained admission.

Mr. W. H. Davies is by now a veteran among the Georgians, and one cannot easily imagine a presence more welcome in a book of verse. Among poets he is a bird singing in a hedge. He communicates the same sense of freshness while he sings. He has also the quick eye of a bird. He is, for all his fairy music, on the look-out for things that will gratify his appetite. He looks to the earth rather than the sky, though he is by no means deaf to the lark that

> Raves in his windy heights above a cloud.

At the same time, at his best, he says nothing about his appetite, and sings in the free spirit of a child at play. His best poems are songs of innocence. At least, that is the predominant element in them. He warned the public in a recent book that he is not so innocent as he sounds. But his genius certainly is. He has written greater poems than any that are included in the present selection. *Birds*, however, is a beautiful example of his gift for joy. We need not fear for contemporary poetry while the hedges contain a poet such as Mr. Davies.

Mr. de la Mare does not sing from a hedge. He is a

child of the arts. He plays an instrument. His music is the music of a lute of which some of the strings have been broken. It is so extraordinarily sweet, indeed, that one has to explain him to oneself as the perfect master of an imperfect instrument. He is at times like Watts's figure of Hope listening to the faint music of the single string that remains unbroken. There is always some element of hope, or of some kindred excuse for joy, even in his deepest melancholy. But it is the joy of a spirit, not of a "supertramp." Prospero might have summoned just such a spirit through the air to make music for him. And Mr. de la Mare's is a spirit perceptible to the ear rather than to the eye. One need not count him the equal of Campion in order to feel that he has something of Campion's beautiful genius for making airs out of words. He has little enough of the Keatsian genius for choosing the word that has the most meaning for the seeing imagination. But there is a secret melody in his words that, when once one has recognized it, one can never forget.

How different the Georgian poets are from each other may be seen if we compare three of the best poems in this book, all of them on similar subjects—Mr. Davies's *Birds*, Mr. de la Mare's *Linnet*, and Mr. Squire's *Birds*. Mr. Squire would feel as out of place in a hedge as would Mr. de la Mare. He has an aquiline love of soaring and surveying immense tracts with keen eyes. He loves to explore both time and the map, but he does this without losing his eyehold on the details of the Noah's Ark of life on the earth beneath him. He does not lose himself in vaporous abstractions; his eye, as well as his mind, is extraordinarily interesting. This poem of his, *Birds*, is peopled with birds. We see them in flight and in their nests. At the same time, the philosophic wonder of Mr. Squire's poem separates him from Mr. Davies and Mr. de la Mare. Mr. Davies, I fancy, loves most to look at birds; Mr. de la Mare to listen to birds; Mr. Squire to brood over them with the philosophic imagination. It would, of course, be absurd to offer this as a final statement of the poetic

attitude of the three writers. It is merely an attempt to differentiate among them in terms of a prominent characteristic of each.

The other poets in the collection include Mr. Robert Graves (with his pleasant bias towards nursery rhymes), Mr. Sassoon (with his sensitive, passionate satire), and Mr. Edward Shanks (with his trembling responsiveness to beauty). It is the first time that Mr. Shanks appears among the Georgians, and his *Night Piece* and *Glow-worm* both show how exquisite is his sensibility. He differs from the other poets by his quasi-analytic method. He seems to be analyzing the beauty of the evening itself in his poems. Mrs. Shove's *A Man Dreams that He is the Creator* is a charming example of fancy toying with a great theme.

### (3) The Young Satirists.

Satire, it has been said, is an ignoble art; and it is probable that there are no satirists in Heaven. Probably there are no doctors either. Satire and medicine are our responses to a diseased world—to our diseased selves. They are responses, however, that make for health. Satire holds the medicine-glass up to human nature. It also holds the mirror up in a limited way. It does not show a man what he looks like when he is both well and good. It does show a man what he looks like, however, when he breaks out into spots or goes yellow, pale, or mottled as a result of making a beast of himself. It reflects only sick men; but it reflects them with a purpose. It would be a crime to permit it, if the world were a hospital for incurables. To write satire is an act of faith, not a luxurious exercise. The despairing Swift was a fighter, as the despairing Anatole France is a fighter. They may have uttered the very Z of melancholy about the animal called man; but at least they were sufficiently optimistic to write satires and to throw themselves into defeated causes.

It would be too much to expect of satire that it alone will cure mankind of the disease of war. It is a good sign,

however, that satires on war have begun to be written. War has affected with horror or disgust a number of great imaginative writers in the last two or three thousand years. The tragic indictment of war in *The Trojan Women* and the satiric indictment in *The Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* are evidence that some men at least saw through the romance of war before the twentieth century. In the war that has just ended, however—or that would have ended if the Peace Conference would let it—we have seen an imaginative revolt against war, not on the part of mere men of letters, but on the part of soldiers. Ballads have survived from other wars, depicting the plight of the mutilated soldier left to beg:

> You haven't an arm and you haven't a leg,
> You're an eyeless, noseless, chickenless egg,
> You ought to be put in a bowl to beg—
> Och, Johnnie, I hardly knew you!

But the recent war has produced a literature of indictment, basing itself neither on the woes of women nor on the wrongs of ex-soldiers, but on the right of common men not to be forced into mutual murder by statesmen who themselves never killed anything more formidable than a pheasant. Soldiers—or some of them—see that wars go on only because the people who cause them do not realize what war is like. I do not mean to suggest that the kings, statesmen and journalists who bring wars about would not themselves take part in the fighting rather than that there should be no fighting at all. The people who cause wars, however, are ultimately the people who endure kings, statesmen and journalists of the exploiting and bullying kind. The satire of the soldiers is an appeal not to the statesmen and journalists, but to the general imagination of mankind. It is an attempt to drag our imaginations away from the heroics of the senate-house into the filth of the slaughter-house. It does not deny the heroism that exists in the slaughter-house any more than it denies the heroism that exists in the hospital ward. But it protests that, just as the heroism of a man dying of cancer must not be taken to

justify cancer, so the heroism of a million men dying of war must not be taken to justify war. There are some who believe that neither war nor cancer is a curable disease. One thing we can be sure of in this connection: we shall never get rid either of war or of cancer if we do not learn to look at them realistically and see how loathsome they are. So long as war was regarded as inevitable, the poet was justified in romanticizing it, as in that epigram in the *Greek Anthology:*

> Demætia sent eight sons to encounter the phalanx of the foe, and she buried them all beneath one stone. No tear did she shed in her mourning, but said this only: "Ho, Sparta, I bore these children for thee."

As soon as it is realized, however, that wars are not inevitable, men cease to idealize Demætia, unless they are sure she did her best to keep the peace. To a realistic poet of war such as Mr. Sassoon, she is an object of pity rather than praise. His sonnet, *Glory of Women,* suggests that there is another point of view besides Demætia's:

> You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
> Or wounded in a mentionable place.
> You worship decorations; you believe
> That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
> You make us shells. You listen with delight,
> By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
> You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
> And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.
>
> You can't believe that British troops "retire"
> When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
> Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.
> *O German mother dreaming by the fire,*
> *While you are knitting socks to send your son*
> *His face is trodden deeper in the mud.*

To Mr. Sassoon and the other war satirists, indeed, those who stay at home and incite others to go out and kill or get killed seem either pitifully stupid or pervertedly criminal. Mr. Sassoon has now collected all his war poems into one volume, and one is struck by the energetic hatred of those who make war in safety that finds expression in them. Most

readers will remember the bitter joy of the dream that one day he might hear "the Yellow Pressmen grunt and squeal," and see the Junkers driven out of Parliament by the returned soldiers. Mr. Sassoon cannot endure the enthusiasm of the stay-at-home—especially the enthusiasm that pretends that soldiers not only behave like music-hall clowns, but are incapable of the more terrible emotional experiences. He would like, I fancy, to forbid civilians to make jokes during war-time. His hatred of the jesting civilian attains passionate expression in the poem called *Blighters:*

> The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
> And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
> Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
> "We're sure the Kaiser loves the dear old Tanks!"
>
> I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
> Lurching to rag-time tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"—
> And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
> To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

Mr. Sassoon himself laughs on occasion, but it is the laughter of a man being driven insane by an insane world. The spectacle of lives being thrown away by the hundred thousand by statesmen and generals without the capacity to run a village flower-show, makes him find relief now and then in a hysteria of mirth, as in *The General:*

> "Good-morning; good-morning!" the General said
> When we met him last week on our way to the Line,
> Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
> And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
> "He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
> As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
>
> * * * * *
>
> But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Mr. Sassoon's verse is also of importance because it paints life in the trenches with a realism not to be found elsewhere in the English poetry of the war. He spares us nothing of:

> The strangled horror
> And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

He gives us every detail of the filth, the dullness, and the agony of the trenches. His book is in its aim destructive. It is a great pamphlet against war. If posterity wishes to know what war was like during this period, it will discover the truth, not in *Barrack-room Ballads*, but in Mr. Sassoon's verse. The best poems in the book are poems of hatred. This means that Mr. Sassoon has still other worlds to conquer in poetry. His poems have not the constructive ardour that we find in the revolutionary poems of Shelley. They are utterances of pain rather than of vision. Many of them, however, rise to a noble pity—*The Prelude*, for instance, and *Aftermath*, the latter of which ends:

> Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz,—
> The night you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?
> Do you remember the rats; and the stench
> Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench,—
> And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
> Do you ever stop and ask, "Is it all going to happen again?"
>
> Do you remember that hour of din before the attack—
> And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then
> As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?
> Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back
> With dying eyes and lolling heads,—those ashen-grey
> Masks of the lad who once were keen and kind and gay?
>
> *Have you forgotten yet? . . .*
> *Look up, and swear by the green of the Spring that you'll never forget.*

Mr. Sitwell's satires—which occupy the most interesting pages of *Argonaut and Juggernaut*—seldom take us into the trenches. Mr. Sitwell gets all the subjects he wants in London clubs and drawing-rooms. These "free-verse" satires do not lend themselves readily to quotation, but both the manner and the mood of them can be guessed from the closing verses of *War-horses*, in which the "septuagenarian butterflies" of Society return to their platitudes and parties after seeing the war through:

But now
They have come out.
They have preened
And dried themselves
After their blood bath.
Old men seem a little younger,
And tortoise-shell combs
Are longer than ever;
Earrings weigh down aged ears;
And Golconda has given them of its best.

They have seen it through!
Theirs is the triumph,
And, beneath
The carved smile of the Mona Lisa,
False teeth
Rattle
Like machine-guns,
In anticipation
Of food and platitudes.
Les Vieilles Dames Sans Merci!

Mr. Sitwell's hatred of war is seldom touched with pity. It is arrogant hatred. There is little emotion in it but that of a young man at war with age. He pictures the dotards of two thousand years ago complaining that Christ did not die—

Like a hero
With an oath on his lips,
Or the refrain from a comic song—
Or a cheerful comment of some kind.

His own verse, however, seems to me to be hardly more in sympathy with the spirit of Christ than with the spirit of those who mocked him. He is moved to write by unbelief in the ideals of other people rather than by the passionate force of ideals of his own. He is a sceptic, not a sufferer. His work proceeds less from his heart than from his brain. It is a clever brain, however, and his satirical poems are harshly entertaining and will infuriate the right people. They may not kill Goliath, but at least they will annoy Goliath's friends. David's weapon, it should be remembered, was a sling, with some pebbles from the brook, not a pea-shooter.

The truth is, so far as I can see, Mr. Sitwell has not begun to take poetry quite seriously. His non-satirical verse is full of bright colour, but it has the brightness, not of the fields and the flowers, but of captive birds in an aviary. It is as though Mr. Sitwell had taken poetry for his hobby. I suspect his Argonauts of being ballet-dancers. He enjoys amusing little decorations—phrases such as "concertina waves" and—

> The ocean at a toy shore
> Yaps like a Pekinese.

His moonlight owl is surely a pretty creature from the unreality of a ballet:

> An owl, horned wizard of the night,
> Flaps through the air so soft and still;
> Moaning, it wings its flight
> Far from the forest cool,
> To find the star-entangled surface of a pool,
> Where it may drink its fill
> Of stars.

At the same time, here and there are evidences that Mr. Sitwell has felt as well as fancied. The opening verse of *Pierrot Old* gives us a real impression of shadows:

> The harvest moon is at its height,
> The evening primrose greets its light
> With grace and joy: then opens up
> The mimic moon within its cup.
> Tall trees, as high as Babel tower,
> Thrown down their shadows to the flower—
> Shadows that shiver—seem to see
> An ending to infinity.

But there is too much of Pan, the fauns and all those other ballet-dancers in his verse. Mr. Sitwell's muse wears some pretty costumes. But one wonders when she will begin to live for something besides clothes.

## XXI.—LABOUR OF AUTHORSHIP

LITERATURE maintains an endless quarrel with idle sentences. Twenty years ago this would have seemed too obvious to bear saying. But in the meantime there has been a good deal of dipping of pens in chaos, and authors have found excuses for themselves in a theory of literature which is impatient of difficult writing. It would not matter if it were only the paunched and flat-footed authors who were proclaiming the importance of writing without style. Unhappily, many excellent writers as well have used their gift of style to publish the praise of stylelessness. Within the last few weeks I have seen it suggested by two different critics that the hasty writing which has left its mark on so much of the work of Scott and Balzac was a good thing and almost a necessity of genius. It is no longer taken for granted, as it was in the days of Stevenson, that the starry word is worth the pains of discovery. Stevenson, indeed, is commonly dismissed as a pretty-pretty writer, a word-taster without intellect or passion, a juggler rather than an artist. Pater's bust also is mutilated by irreverent schoolboys: it is hinted that he may have done well enough for the days of Victoria, but that he will not do at all for the world of George. It is all part of the reaction against style which took place when everybody found out the æsthetes. It was, one may admit, an excellent thing to get rid of the æsthetes, but it was by no means an excellent thing to get rid of the virtue which they tried to bring into English art and literature. The æsthetes were wrong in almost everything they said about art and literature, but they were right in impressing upon the children of men the duty of good drawing and good words. With the condemnation of Oscar Wilde, however, good words became suspected of

kinship with evil deeds. Style was looked on as the sign of minor poets and major vices. Possibly, on the other hand, the reaction against style had nothing to do with the Wilde condemnation. The heresy of stylelessness is considerably older than that. Perhaps it is not quite fair to call it the heresy of stylelessness: it would be more accurate to describe it as the heresy of style without pains. It springs from the idea that great literature is all a matter of first fine careless raptures, and it is supported by the fact that apparently much of the greatest literature is so. If lines like

> Hark, hark! the lark at Heaven's gate sings,

or

> When daffodils begin to peer,

or

> His golden locks time hath to silver turned,

shape themselves in the poet's first thoughts, he would be a manifest fool to trouble himself further. "Genius is the recognition of the perfect line, the perfect phrase, the perfect word, when it appears, and this perfect line or phrase or word is quite as likely to appear in the twinkling of an eye as after a week of vigils. But the point is that it does not invariably so appear. It sometimes cost Flaubert three days' labour to write one perfect sentence. Greater writers have written more hurriedly. But this does not justify lesser writers in writing hurriedly too.

Of all the authors who have exalted the part played in literature by inspiration as compared with labour, none has written more nobly or with better warrant than Shelley. "The mind," he wrote in the *Defence of Poetry*—

> the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; the power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious

poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. I appeal to the greatest poets of the present day, whether it is not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study.

He then goes on to interpret literally Milton's reference to *Paradise Lost* as an "unpremeditated song" "dictated" by the Muse, and to reply scornfully to those "who would allege the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the *Orlando Furioso*." Who is there who would not agree with Shelley quickly if it were a question of having to choose between his inspirational theory of literature and the mechanical theory of the arts advocated by such writers as Sir Joshua Reynolds? Literature without inspiration is obviously even a meaner thing than literature without style. But the notion that any man can become an artist by taking pains is merely an exaggerated protest against the notion that a man can become an artist without taking pains. Anthony Trollope, who settled down industriously to his day's task of literature as to bookkeeping, did not grow into an artist in any large sense; and Zola, with the motto "Nulla dies sine linea" ever facing him on his desk, made himself a prodigious author, indeed, but never more than a second-rate writer. On the other hand, Trollope without industry would have been nobody at all, and Zola without pains might as well have been a waiter. Nor is it only the little or the clumsy artists who have found inspiration in labour. It is a pity we have not first drafts of all the great poems in the world: we might then see how much of the magic of literature is the result of toil and how much of the unprophesied wind of inspiration. Sir Sidney Colvin recently published an early draft of Keats's sonnet, "Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art," which showed that in the case of Keats at least the mind in creation was not "as a fading coal," but as a coal blown to increasing flame and splendour by sheer "labour and study." And the poetry of Keats is full of examples of the inspiration not of first but of second and later thoughts. Henry Stephens, a medical student who lived with him for some

time, declared that an early draft of *Endymion* opened with the line:

A thing of beauty is a constant joy

—a line which, Stephens observed on hearing it, was "a fine line, but wanting something." Keats thought over it for a little, then cried out, "I have it," and wrote in its place:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.

Nor is this an exceptional example of the studied miracles of Keats. The most famous and, worn and cheapened by quotation though it is, the most beautiful of all his phrases—

magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn—

did not reach its perfect shape without hesitation and pondering. He originally wrote "the wide casements" and "keelless seas":

the wide casements, opening on the foam
Of keelless seas, in fairy lands forlorn.

That would probably have seemed beautiful if the perfect version had not spoiled it for us. But does not the final version go to prove that Shelley's assertion that "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline" is far from being true for all poets? On the contrary, it is often the heat of labour which produces the heat of inspiration. Or rather it is often the heat of labour which enables the writer to recall the heat of inspiration. Ben Jonson, who held justly that "the poet must be able by nature and instinct to pour out the treasure of his mind," took care to add the warning that no one must think he "can leap forth suddenly a poet by dreaming he hath been in Parnassus." Poe has uttered a comparable warning against an excessive belief in the theory of the natural inspiration of poets in his *Marginalia,* where he declares that "this untenable and paradoxical idea of the incompatibility of genius and *art*" must be "kick[ed] out of the world's way." Wordsworth's saying that poetry has its origin in "emotion

recollected in tranquillity" also suggests that the inspiration of poetry is an inspiration that may be recaptured by contemplation and labour. How eagerly one would study a Shakespeare manuscript, were it unearthed, in which one could see the shaping imagination of the poet at work upon his lines! Many people have the theory—it is supported by an assertion of Jonson's—that Shakespeare wrote with a current pen, heedless of blots and small changes. He was, it is evident, not one of the correct authors. But it seems unlikely that no pains of rewriting went to the making of the speeches in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Hamlet's address to the skull. Shakespeare, one feels, is richer than any other author in the beauty of first thoughts. But one seems to perceive in much of his work the beauty of second thoughts too. There have been few great writers who have been so incapable of revision as Robert Browning, but Browning with all his genius is not a great stylist to be named with Shakespeare. He did indeed prove himself to be a great stylist in more than one poem, such as *Childe Roland*—which he wrote almost at a sitting. His inspiration, however, seldom raised his work to the same beauty of perfection. He is, in point of mere style, the most imperfect of the great poets. If only Tennyson had had his genius! If only Browning had had Tennyson's desire for golden words!

It would be absurd, however, to suggest that the main labour of an author consists in rewriting. The choice of words may have been made before a single one of them has been written down, as tradition tells us was the case with Menander, who described one of his plays as "finished" before he had written a word of it. It would be foolish, too, to write as though perfection of form in literature were merely a matter of picking and choosing among decorative words. Style is a method, not of decoration, but of expression. It is an attempt to make the beauty and energy of the imagination articulate. It is not any more than is construction the essence of the greatest art: it is, however, a prerequisite of the greatest art. Even

those writers whom we regard as the least decorative labour and sorrow after it as eagerly as the æsthetes. We who do not know Russian do not usually think of Tolstoy as a stylist, but he took far more trouble with his writing than did Oscar Wilde (whose chief fault is, indeed, that in spite of his theories his style is not laboured and artistic but inspirational and indolent). Count Ilya Tolstoy, the son of the novelist, recently published a volume of reminiscences of his father, in which he gave some interesting particulars of Tolstoy's energetic struggle for perfection in writing:

When *Anna Karénina* began to come out in the *Russki Vyéstnik* [he wrote], long galley-proofs were posted to my father, and he looked them through and corrected them. At first, the margins would be marked with the ordinary typographical signs, letters omitted, marks of punctuation, and so on; then individual words would be changed, and then whole sentences; erasures and additions would begin, till in the end the proof-sheet would be reduced to a mass of patches, quite black in places, and it was quite impossible to send it back as it stood because no one but my mother could make head or tail of the tangle of conventional signs, transpositions, and erasures.

My mother would sit up all night copying the whole thing out afresh.

In the morning there lay the pages on her table, neatly piled together, covered all over with her fine, clear handwriting, and everything ready, so that when "Lyóvotchka" came down he could send the proof-sheets out by post.

My father would carry them off to his study to have "just one last look," and by the evening it was worse than before; the whole thing had been rewritten and messed up once more.

"Sonya, my dear, I am very sorry, but I've spoilt all your work again; I promise I won't do it any more," he would say, showing her the passages with a guilty air. "We'll send them off to-morrow without fail." But his to-morrow was put off day by day for weeks or months together.

"There's just one bit I want to look through again," my father would say; but he would get carried away and rewrite the whole thing afresh. There were even occasions when, after posting the proofs, my father would remember some particular words next day and correct them by telegraph.

There, better than in a thousand generalizations, you see what the artistic conscience is. In a world in which

authors, like solicitors, must live, it is, of course, seldom possible to take pains in this measure. Dostoevsky used to groan that his poverty left him no time or chance to write his best as Tolstoy and Turgenev could write theirs. But he at least laboured all that he could. Novel-writing has since his time become as painless as dentistry, and the result may be seen in a host of books that, while affecting to be literature, have no price except as merchandise.

## XXII.—THE THEORY OF POETRY

MATTHEW ARNOLD once advised people who wished to know what was good poetry not to trouble themselves with definitions of poetry, but to learn by heart passages, or even single lines, from the works of the great poets, and to apply these as touchstones. Certainly a book like Mr. Cowl's *Theory of Poetry in England,* which aims at giving us a representative selection of the theoretical things which were said in England about poetry between the time of Elizabeth and the time of Victoria, makes one wonder at the barrenness of men's thoughts about so fruitful a world as that of the poets. Mr. Cowl's book is not intended to be read as an anthology of fine things. Its value is not that of a book of golden thoughts. It is an ordered selection of documents chosen, not for their beauty, but simply for their use as milestones in the progress of English poetic theory. It is a work, not of literature, but of literary history; and students of literary history are under a deep debt of gratitude to the author for bringing together and arranging the documents of the subject in so convenient and lucid a form. The arrangement is under subjects, and chronological. There are forty-one pages on the theory of poetic creation, beginning with George Gascoigne and ending with Matthew Arnold. These are followed by a few pages of representative passages about poetry as an imitative art, the first of the authors quoted being Roger Ascham and the last F. W. H. Myers. The book is divided into twelve sections of this kind, some of which have a tendency to overlap. Thus, in addition to the section on poetry as an imitative art, we have a section on imitation of nature, another on external nature, and another on imitation. Imitation, in the last of these, it is true, means for the most part imitation of the ancients, as

in the sentence in which Thomas Rymer urged the seventeenth-century dramatists to imitate Attic tragedy even to the point of introducing the chorus.

Mr. Cowl's book is interesting, however, less on account of the sections and subsections into which it is divided than because of the manner in which it enables us to follow the flight of English poetry from the romanticism of the Elizabethans to the neo-classicism of the eighteenth century, and from this on to the romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and from this to a later neo-classicism whose prophet was Matthew Arnold. There is not much of poetry captured in these cold-blooded criticisms, but still the shadow of the poetry of his time occasionally falls on the critic's formulæ and aphorisms. How excellently Sir Philip Sidney expresses the truth that the poet does not imitate the world, but creates a world, in his observation that Nature's world "is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden!" This, however, is a fine saying rather than an interpretation. It has no importance as a contribution to the theory of poetry to compare with a passage like that so often quoted from Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

> I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

As a theory of poetic creation this may not apply universally. But what a flood of light it throws on the creative genius of Wordsworth himself! How rich in psychological insight it is, for instance, compared with Dryden's comparable reference to the part played by the memory in poetry:

> The composition of all poems is, or ought to be, of wit; and wit in the poet . . . is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which, like a nimble spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of memory, till it springs the quarry it hunted after.

As a matter of fact, few of these generalizations carry one far. Ben Jonson revealed more of the secret of poetry when he said simply: "It utters somewhat above a mortal mouth." So did Edgar Allan Poe, when he said: "It is no mere appreciation of the beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the beauty above." Coleridge, again, initiates us into the secrets of the poetic imagination when he speaks of it as something which—

> combining many circumstances into one moment of consciousness, tends to produce that ultimate end of all human thought and human feeling, unity, and thereby the reduction of the spirit to its principle and fountain, which is alone truly one.

On the other hand, the most dreadful thing that was ever written about poetry was also written by Coleridge, and is repeated in Mr. Cowl's book:

> How excellently the German *Einbildungskraft* expresses this prime and loftiest faculty, the power of coadunation, the faculty that forms the many into one—*Ineins-bildung!* Eisenoplasy, or esenoplastic power, is contradistinguished from fantasy, either catoptric or metoptric—repeating simply, or by transposition—and, again, involuntary [fantasy] as in dreams, or by an act of the will.

The meaning is simple enough: it is much the same as that of the preceding paragraph. But was there ever a passage written suggesting more forcibly how much easier it is to explain poetry by writing it than by writing about it?

Mr. Cowl's book makes it clear that, fiercely as the critics may dispute about poetry, they are practically all agreed on at least one point—that it is an imitation. The schools have differed less over the question whether it is an imitation than over the question how, in a discussion on the nature of poetry, the word "imitation" must be qualified. Obviously, the poet must imitate something—either what he sees in nature, or what he sees in memory, or what he sees in other poets, or what he sees in his soul, or it may be, all together. There arise schools every now and then—classicists, Parnassians, realists, and so forth—who believe in imitation, but will

not allow it to be a free imitation of things seen in the imaginative world. In the result their work is no true imitation of life. Pope's poetry is not as true an imitation of life as Shakespeare's. Nor is Zola's prose, for all its fidelity, as close an imitation of life as Victor Hugo's. Poetry without romance, without liberation, can never rise above the second order. The poet must be faithful not only to his subject, but to his soul. Poe defined art as the "reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul," and this, though like most definitions of art, incomplete, is true in so far as it reminds us that art at its greatest is the statement of a personal and ideal vision. That is why the reverence of rules in the arts is so dangerous. It puts the standards of poetry not in the hands of the poet, but in the hands of the grammarians. It is a Procrustes' bed which mutilates the poet's vision. Luckily, England has always been a rather lawless country, and we find even Pope insisting that "to judge . . . of Shakespeare by Aristotle's rules is like trying a man by the laws of one country who acted under those of another." Dennis might cry: "Poetry is either an art or whimsy and fanaticism. . . . The great design of the arts is to restore the decays that happened to human nature by the fall, by restoring order." But, on the whole, the English poets and critics have realized the truth that it is not an order imposed from without, but an order imposed from within at which the poet must aim. He aims at bringing order into chaos, but that does not mean that he aims at bringing Aristotle into chaos. He is, in a sense, "beyond good and evil," so far as the orthodoxies of form are concerned. Coleridge put the matter in a nutshell when he remarked that the mistake of the formal critics who condemned Shakespeare as "a sort of African nature, rich in beautiful monsters," lay "in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form." And he states the whole duty of poets as regards form in another sentence in the same lecture:

As it must not, so genius cannot, be lawless; for it is even this that constitutes its genius—the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination.

Mr. Cowl enables us to follow, as in no other book I know, the endless quarrel between romance and the rules, between the spirit and the letter, among the English authorities on poetry. It is a quarrel which will obviously never be finally settled in any country. The mechanical theory is a necessary reaction against romance that has decayed into windiness, extravagance, and incoherence. It brings the poets back to literature again. The romantic theory, on the other hand, is necessary as a reminder that the poet must offer to the world, not a formula, but a vision. It brings the poets back to nature again. No one but a Dennis will hesitate an instant in deciding which of the theories is the more importantly and eternally true.

## XXIII.—THE CRITIC AS DESTROYER

It has been said often enough that all good criticism is praise. Pater boldly called one of his volumes of critical essays *Appreciations*. There are, everyone will agree, brilliant instances of hostility in criticism. The best-known of these in English is Macaulay's essay on Robert Montgomery. In recent years we have witnessed the much more significant assault by Tolstoy upon almost the whole army of the authors of the civilized world from Æschylus down to Mallarmé. *What is Art?* was unquestionably the most remarkable piece of sustained hostile criticism that was ever written. At the same time, it was less a denunciation of individual authors than an attack on the general tendencies of the literary art. Tolstoy quarrelled with Shakespeare not so much for being Shakespeare as for failing to write like the authors of the Gospels. Tolstoy would have made every book a Bible. He raged against men of letters because with them literature was a means not to more abundant life but to more abundant luxury. Like so many inexorable moralists, he was intolerant of all literature that did not serve as a sort of example of his own moral and social theories. That is why he was not a great critic, though he was immeasurably greater than a great critic. One would not turn to him for the perfect appreciation even of one of the authors he spared, such as Hugo or Dickens. The good critic must in some way begin by accepting literature as it is, just as the good lyric poet must begin by accepting life as it is. He may be as full of revolutionary and reforming theories as he likes, but he must not allow any of these to come like a cloud between him and the sun, moon and stars of literature. The man who disparages the beauty of flowers and birds and love and laughter and courage will never be counted

among the lyric poets; and the man who questions the beauty of the inhabited world the imaginative writers have made—a world as unreasonable in its loveliness as the world of nature—is not in the way of becoming a critic of literature.

Another argument which tells in favour of the theory that the best criticism is praise is the fact that almost all the memorable examples of critical folly have been denunciations. One remembers that Carlyle dismissed Herbert Spencer as a "never-ending ass." One remembers that Byron thought nothing of Keats—"Jack Ketch," as he called him. One remembers that the critics damned Wagner's operas as a new form of sin. One remembers that Ruskin denounced one of Whistler's nocturnes as a pot of paint flung in the face of the British public. In the world of science we have a thousand similar examples of new genius being hailed by the critics as folly and charlatanry. Only the other day a biographer of Lord Lister was reminding us how, at the British Association in 1869, Lister's antiseptic treatment was attacked as a "return to the dark ages of surgery," the "carbolic mania," and "a professional criminality." The history of science, art, music and literature is strewn with the wrecks of such hostile criticisms. It is an appalling spectacle for anyone interested in defending the intelligence of the human race. So appalling is it, indeed, that most of us nowadays labour under such a terror of accidentally condemning something good that we have not the courage to condemn anything at all. We think of the way in which Browning was once taunted for his obscurity, and we cannot find it in our hearts to censure Mr. Doughty. We recall the ignorant attacks on Manet and Monet, and we will not risk an onslaught on the follies of Picasso and the worse-than-Picassos of contemporary art. We grow a monstrous and unhealthy plant of tolerance in our souls, and its branches drop colourless good words on the just and on the unjust—on everybody, indeed, except Miss Marie Corelli, Mr. Hall Caine, and a few others whom we know to be second-rate because they

have large circulations. This is really a disastrous state of affairs for literature and the other arts. If criticism is, generally speaking, praise, it is, more definitely, praise of the right things. Praise for the sake of praise is as great an evil as blame for the sake of blame. Indiscriminate praise, in so far as it is the result of distrust of one's own judgment or of laziness or of insincerity, is one of the deadly sins in criticism. It is also one of the deadly dull sins. Its effect is to make criticism ever more unreadable, and in the end even the publishers, who love foolish sentences to quote about bad books, will open their eyes to the futility of it. They will realize that, when once criticism has become unreal and unreadable, people will no more be bothered with it than they will with drinking lukewarm water. I speak of the publisher in especial, because there is no doubt that it is with the idea of putting the publishers in a good, open-handed humour that so many papers and reviews have turned criticism into a kind of stagnant pond. Publishers, fortunately, are coming more and more to see that this kind of criticism is of no use to them. Reviews in certain papers, they will tell you, do not sell books. And the papers to which they refer in such cases are always papers in which praise is lavishly served out to everybody, like spoonfuls of treacle-and-brimstone to the school-children in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Criticism, then, is praise, but it is praise of literature. There is all the difference in the world between that and the praise of what pretends to be literature. True criticism is a search for beauty and truth and an announcement of them. It does not care twopence whether the method of their revelation is new or old, academic or futuristic. It only asks that the revelation shall be genuine. It is concerned with form, because beauty and truth demand perfect expression. But it is a mere heresy in æsthetics to say that perfect expression is the whole of art that matters. It is the spirit that breaks through the form that is the main interest of criticism. Form, we know, has a permanence of its own: so much so that it has again and again been worshipped by

the idolaters of art as being in itself more enduring than the thing which it embodies. Robert Burns, by his genius for perfect statement, can give immortality to the joys of being drunk with whiskey as the average hymn-writer cannot give immortality to the joys of being drunk with the love of God. Style, then, does seem actually to be a form of life. The critic may not ignore it any more than he may exaggerate its place in the arts. As a matter of fact, he could not ignore it if he would, for style and spirit have a way of corresponding to one another like health and sunlight.

It is to combat the stylelessness of many contemporary writers that the destructive kind of criticism is just now most necessary. For, dangerous as the heresy of style was forty or fifty years ago, the newer heresy of stylelessness is more dangerous still. It has become the custom even of men who write well to be as ashamed of their style as a schoolboy is of being caught in an obvious piece of goodness. They keep silent about it as though it were a kind of powdering or painting. They do not realize that it is merely a form of ordinary truthfulness—the truthfulness of the word about the thought. They forget that one has no more right to misuse words than to beat one's wife. Someone has said that in the last analysis style is a moral quality. It is a sincerity, a refusal to bow the knee to the superficial, a passion for justice in language. Stylelessness, where it is not, like colour-blindness, an accident of nature, is for the most part merely an echo of the commercial man's world of hustle. It is like the rushing to and fro of motor-buses which save minutes but waste our peace. It is like the swift making of furniture with unseasoned wood. It is a kind of introduction of the quick-lunch system into literature. One cannot altogether acquit Mr. Masefield of a hasty stylelessness in some of those long poems which the world has been reading in the last year or two. His line in *The Everlasting Mercy:*

> And yet men ask, "Are barmaids chaste?"

is a masterpiece of inexpertness. And the couplet:

> The Bosun turned: "I'll give you a thick ear!
> Do it? I didn't. Get to hell from here!"

is like a Sunday-school teacher's lame attempt to repeat a blasphemous story. Mr. Masefield, on the other hand, is, we always feel, wrestling with language. If he writes in a hurry, it is not because he is indifferent, but because his soul is full of something that he is eager to express. He does not gabble; he is, as it were, a man stammering out a vision. So vastly greater are his virtues than his faults as a poet, indeed, that the latter would only be worth the briefest mention if it were not for the danger of their infecting other writers who envy him his method but do not possess his conscience. One cannot contemplate with equanimity the prospect of a Masefield school of poetry with all Mr. Masefield's ineptitudes and none of his genius.

Criticism, however, it is to be feared, is a fight for a lost cause if it essays to prevent the founding of schools upon the faults of good writers. Criticism will never kill the copyist. Nothing but the end of the world can do that. Still, whatever the practical results of his work may be, it is the function of the critic to keep the standard of writing high—to insist that the authors shall write well, even if his own sentences are like torn strips of newspaper for commonness. He is the enemy of sloppiness in others—especially of that airy sloppiness which so often nowadays runs to four or five hundred pages in a novel. It was amazing to find with what airiness so promising a writer as Mr. Compton Mackenzie gave us some years ago *Sinister Street*, a novel containing thousands of sentences that only seemed to be there because he had not thought it worth his while to leave them out, and thousands of others that seemed to be mere hurried attempts to express realities upon which he was unable to spend more time. Here is a writer who began literature with a sense of words, and who is declining into content with wordiness. It is simply another instance of the ridiculous rush of writing that is going on all about us—

a rush to satisfy a public which demands quantity rather than quality in its books. I do not say that Mr. Mackenzie consciously wrote down to the public, but the atmosphere obviously affected him. Otherwise he would hardly have let his book go out into the world till he had rewritten it—till he had separated his necessary from his unnecessary sentences and given his conversations the tones of reality.

There is no need, however, for criticism to lash out indiscriminately at all hurried writing. There are a multitude of books turned out every year which make no claim to be literature—the "thrillers," for example, of Mr. Phillips Oppenheim and of that capable firm of feuilletonists, Coralie Stanton and Heath Hosken. I do not think literature stands to gain anything even though all the critics in Europe were suddenly to assail this kind of writing. It is a frankly commercial affair, and we have no more right to demand style from those who live by it than from the authors of the weather reports in the newspapers. Often, one notices, when the golden youth, fresh from college and the reading of Shelley and Anatole France, commences literary critic, he begins damning the sensational novelists as though it were their business to write like Jane Austen. This is a mere waste of literary standards, which need only be applied to what pretends to be literature. That is why one is often impelled to attack really excellent writers, like Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch or Mr. Galsworthy, as one would never dream of attacking, say, Mr. William Le Queux. To attack Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch is, indeed, a form of appreciation, for the only just criticism that can be levelled against him is that his later fiction does not seem to be written with that singleness of imagination and that deliberate rightness of phrase which made *Noughts and Crosses* and *The Ship of Stars* books to be kept beyond the end of the year. If one attacks Mr. Galsworthy, again, it is usually because one admires his best work so wholeheartedly that one is not willing to accept from him anything but the best. One cannot, however, be content to see the author of *The Man of Property* dropping

into the platitudes and the false fancifulness of *The Inn of Tranquillity*. It is the false pretences in literature which criticism must seek to destroy. Recognizing Mr. Galsworthy's genius for the realistic representation of men and women, it must not be blinded by that genius to the essential second-rateness and sentimentality of much of his presentation of ideas. He is a man of genius in the grey humility with which he confesses the injustice of an age through the figures of men and women. He achieves too much of a pulpit complacency—therefore of condescendingness—therefore of falseness to the deep intimacy of good literature—when he begins to moralize about time and the universe. One finds the same complacency, the same condescendingness, in a far higher degree in the essays of Mr. A. C. Benson. Mr. Benson, I imagine, began writing with a considerable literary gift, but his later work seems to have little in it but a good man's pretentiousness. It has the air of going profoundly into the secrecies of love and joy and truth, but it contains hardly a sentence that would waken a ruffle on the surface of the shallowest spirit. It is not of the literature that awakens, indeed, but of the literature that puts to sleep—a danger to the simple unless it is properly labelled and recognizable. Sleeping-draughts may help a sick man through a bad night, but one does not praise them as a general substitute for wine or water. Nor will Mr. Benson escape just criticism on the score of his manner of writing. He is a master of the otiose word, the superfluous sentence. He pours out pages as easily as a bird sings, but, alas! it is a clockwork bird in this instance. He lacks the true innocent absorption in his task which makes happy writing and happy reading.

It is not always the authors, on the other hand, whose pretences it is the work of criticism to destroy. It is frequently the wild claims of the partisans of an author that must be put to the test. This sort of pretentiousness often appears during "booms," when some author is talked of as though he were the only man who had ever written well. How many of these booms have we had in recent years—

booms of Wilde, of Synge, of Donne, of Dostoevsky! On the whole, no doubt, they do more good than harm. They create a vivid enthusiasm for literature that affects many people who might not otherwise know that to read a fine book is as exciting an experience as going to a horse-race. Hundreds of people would not have the courage to sit down to read a book like *The Brothers Karamazov* unless they were compelled to do so as a matter of fashionable duty. On the other hand, booms more than anything else make for false estimates. It seems impossible with many people to praise Dostoevsky without saying that he is greater than Tolstoy and Turgenev. Oscar Wilde enthusiasts, again, invite us to rejoice, not only over that pearl of triviality, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but over a blaze of paste jewellery like *Salomé*. Similarly, Donne worshippers are not content to ask us to praise Donne's gifts of fancy, analysis and idiosyncratic music. They insist that we shall also admit that he knew the human heart better than Shakespeare. It may be all we like sheep have gone astray in this kind of literary riot. And so long as the exaggeration of a good writer's genius is an honest personal affair, one resents it no more than one resents the large nose or the bandy legs of a friend. It is when men begin to exaggerate in herds—to repeat like a lesson learned the enthusiasm of others—that the boom becomes offensive. It is as if men who had not large noses were to begin to pretend that they had, or as if men whose legs were not bandy were to pretend that they were, for fashion's sake. Insincerity is the one entirely hideous artistic sin—whether in the creation or in the appreciation of art. The man who enjoys reading *The Family Herald*, and admits it, is nearer a true artistic sense than the man who is bored by Henry James and denies it: though, perhaps, hypocrisy is a kind of homage paid to art as well as to virtue. Still, the affectation of literary rapture offends like every other affectation. It was the chorus of imitative rapture over Synge a few years ago that helped most to bring about a speedy reaction against him. Synge was

undoubtedly a man of fine genius—the genius of gloomy comedy and ironic tragedy. His mind delved for strangenesses in speech and imagination among people whom the new age had hardly touched, and his discoveries were sufficiently magnificent to make the eyes of any lover of language brighten. His work showed less of the mastery of life, however, than of the mastery of a theme. It was a curious by-world of literature, a little literature of death's-heads, and, therefore, no more to be mentioned with the work of the greatest than the stories of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Unfortunately, some disturbances in Dublin at the first production of *The Playboy* turned the play into a battle-cry, and the artists, headed by Mr. Yeats, used Synge to belabour the Philistinism of the mob. In the excitement of the fight they were soon talking about Synge as though Dublin had rejected a Shakespeare. Mr. Yeats even used the word "Homeric" about him—surely the most inappropriate word it would be possible to imagine. Before long Mr. Yeats's enthusiasm had spread to England, where people who ignored the real magic of Synge's work, as it is to be found in *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and *The Well of the Saints*, went into ecstasies over the inferior *Playboy*. Such a boom meant not the appreciation of Synge but a glorification of his more negligible work. It was almost as if we were to boom Swinburne on the score of his later political poetry. Criticism makes for the destruction of such booms. I do not mean that the critic has not the right to fling about superlatives like any other man. Criticism, in one aspect, is the art of flinging about superlatives finely. But they must be personal superlatives, not boom superlatives. Even when they are showered on an author who is the just victim of a boom—and, on a reasonable estimate, at least fifty per cent. of the booms have some justification—they are as unbeautiful as rotten apples unless they have this personal kind of honesty.

It may be thought that an attitude of criticism like this may easily sink into Pharisaism—a sort of "superior-person" aloofness from other people. And no doubt the

critic, like other people, needs to beat his breast and pray, "God be merciful to me, a—critic." On the whole, however, the critic is far less of a professional fault-finder than is sometimes imagined. He is first of all a virtue-finder, a singer of praise. He is not concerned with getting rid of the dross except in so far as it hides the gold. In other words, the destructive side of criticism is purely a subsidiary affair. None of the best critics have been men of destructive minds. They are like gardeners whose business is more with the flowers than with the weeds. If I may change the metaphor, the whole truth about criticism is contained in the Eastern proverb which declares that "Love is the net of Truth." It is as a lover that the critic, like the lyric poet and the mystic, will be most excellently symbolized.

## XXIV.—BOOK REVIEWING

I NOTICE that in Mr. Secker's *Art and Craft of Letters* series no volume on book-reviewing has yet been announced. A volume on criticism has been published, it is true, but book-reviewing is something different from criticism. It swings somewhere between criticism on the one hand and reporting on the other. When Mr. Arthur Bourchier a few years ago, in the course of a dispute about Mr. Walkley's criticisms, spoke of the dramatic critic as a dramatic reporter, he did a very insolent thing. But there was a certain reasonableness in his phrase. The critic on the Press is a news-gatherer as surely as the man who is sent to describe a public meeting or a strike. Whether he is asked to write a report on a play of Mr. Shaw's or an exhibition of etchings by Mr. Bone or a volume of short stories by Mr. Conrad or a speech by Mr. Asquith or a strike on the Clyde, his function is the same. It is primarily to give an account, a description, of what he has seen or heard or read. This may seem to many people—especially to critics—a degrading conception of a book-reviewer's work. But it is quite the contrary. A great deal of book-reviewing at the present time is dead matter. Book-reviews ought at least to be alive as news.

At present everybody is ready to write book-reviews. This is because nearly everybody believes that they are the easiest kind of thing to write. People who would shrink from offering to write poems or leading articles or descriptive sketches of football matches, have an idea that reviewing books is something with the capacity for which every man is born, as he is born with the capacity for talking prose. They think it is as easy as having opinions. It is simply making a few remarks at the end of a couple of hours spent with a book in an armchair. Many men and women

—novelists, barristers, professors and others—review books in their spare time, as they look on this as work they can do when their brains are too tired to do anything which is of genuine importance. A great deal of book-reviewing is done contemptuously, as though to review books well were not as difficult as to do anything else well. This is perhaps due in some measure to the fact that, for the amount of hard work it involves, book-reviewing is one of the worst-paid branches of journalism. The hero of Mr. Beresford's new novel, *The Invisible Event,* makes an income of £250 a year as an outside reviewer, and it is by no means every outside reviewer who makes as much as that from reviewing alone. It is not that there is not an immense public which reads book-reviews. Mr. T. P. O'Connor showed an admirable journalistic instinct when twenty years or so ago he filled the front page of the *Weekly Sun* with a long book-review. The sale of the *Times Literary Supplement,* since it became a separate publication, is evidence that, for good or bad, many thousands of readers have acquired the habit of reading criticism of current literature.

But I do not think that the mediocre quality of most book-reviewing is due to low payment. It is a result, I believe, of a wrong conception of what a book-review should be. My own opinion is that a review should be, from one point of view, a portrait of a book. It should present the book instead of merely presenting remarks about the book. In reviewing, portraiture is more important than opinion. One has to get the reflexion of the book, and not a mere comment on it, down on paper. Obviously, one must not press this theory of portraiture too far. It is useful chiefly as a protest against the curse of comment. Many clever writers, when they come to write book-reviews, instead of portraying the book, waste their time in remarks to the effect that the book should never have been written, and so forth. That, in fact, is the usual attitude of clever reviewers when they begin. They are so horrified to find that Mr. William Le Queux does not write like Dostoevsky and that Mrs. Florence Barclay lacks the grandeur of Æschylus that

they run amok among their contemporaries with something of the furious destructiveness of Don Quixote on his adventures. It is the noble intolerance of youth; but how unreasonable it is! Suppose a portrait painter were suddenly to take his sitter by the throat on the ground that he had no right to exist. One would say to him that that was not his business: his business is to take the man's existence for granted, and to paint him till he becomes in a new sense alive. If he is worthless, paint his worthlessness, but do not merely comment on it. There is no reason why a portrait should be flattering, but it should be a portrait. It may be a portrait in the grand manner, or a portrait in caricature: if it expresses its subject honestly and delightfully, that is all we can ask of it. A critical portrait of a book by Mr. Le Queux may be amazingly alive: a censorious comment can only be dull. Mr. Hubert Bland was at one time an almost ideal portrait painter of commonplace novels. He obviously liked them, as the caricaturist likes the people in the street. The novels themselves might not be readable, but Mr. Bland's reviews of them were. He could reveal their characteristics in a few strokes, which would tell you more of what you wanted to know about them than a whole dictionary of adjectives of praise and blame. One could tell at a glance whether the book had any literary value, whether it was worth turning to as a stimulant, whether it was even intelligent of its kind. One would not like to see Mr. Bland's method too slavishly adopted by reviewers: it was suitable only for portraying certain kinds of books. But it is worth recalling as the method of a man who, dealing with books that were for the most part insipid and worthless, made his reviews delightfully alive as well as admirably interpretative.

The comparison of a review to a portrait fixes attention on one essential quality of a book-review. A reviewer should never forget his responsibility to his subject. He must allow nothing to distract him from his main task of setting down the features of his book vividly and recognizably. One may say this even while admitting that the

most delightful book-reviews of modern times—for the literary causeries of Anatole France may fairly be classified as book-reviews—were the revolt of an escaped angel against the limitations of a journalistic form. But Anatole France happens to be a man of genius, and genius is a justification of any method. In the hands of a pinchbeck Anatole France, how unendurable the review conceived as a causerie would become! Anatole France observes that "all books in general, and even the most admirable, seem to me infinitely less precious for what they contain than for what he who reads puts into them." That, in a sense, is true. But no reviewer ought to believe it. His duty is to his author: whatever he "puts into" him is a subsidiary matter. "The critic," says Anatole France again, "must imbue himself thoroughly with the idea that every book has as many different aspects as it has readers, and that a poem, like a landscape, is transformed in all the eyes that see it, in all the souls that conceive it." Here he gets nearer the idea of criticism as portraiture, and practically every critic of importance has been a portrait-painter. In this respect Sainte-Beuve is at one with Macaulay, Pater with Matthew Arnold, Anatole France (occasionally) with Henry James. They may portray authors rather than books, artists rather than their works, but this only means that criticism at its highest is a study of the mind of the artist as reflected in his art.

Clearly, if the reviewer can paint the portrait of an author, he is achieving something better even than the portrait of a book. But what, at all costs, he must avoid doing is to substitute for a portrait of one kind or another the rag-bag of his own moral, political or religious opinions. It is one of the most difficult things in the world for anyone who happens to hold strong opinions not to make the mind of Shakespeare himself a pulpit from which to roar them at the world. Reviewers with theories about morality and religion can seldom be induced to come to the point of portraiture until they have enjoyed a preliminary half-column of self-explanation. In their eyes a review is a

moral essay rather than an imaginative interpretation. In dissenting from this view, one is not pleading for a race of reviewers without moral or religious ideas, or even prepossessions. One is merely urging that in a review, as in a novel or a play, the moral should be seated at the heart instead of sprawling all over the surface. In the well-worn phrase, it should be implicit, not explicit. Undoubtedly a rare critic of genius can make an interesting review-article out of a statement of his moral and political ideas. But that only justifies the article as an essay, not as a review. To many reviewers—especially in the bright days of youth—it seems an immensely more important thing to write a good essay than a good review. And so it is, but not when a review is wanted. It is a far, far better thing to write a good essay about America than a good review of a book about America. But the one should not be substituted for the other. If one takes up a review of a book on America by Mr. Wells or Mr. Bennett, it is in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred in order to find out what the author thinks, not what the reviewer thinks. If the reviewer begins with a paragraph of general remarks about America—or, worse still, about some abstract thing like liberty—he is almost invariably wasting paper. I believe it is a sound rule to destroy all preliminary paragraphs of this kind. They are detestable in almost all writing, but most detestable of all in book-reviews, where it is important to plunge all at once into the middle of things. I say this, though there is an occasional book-reviewer whose preliminary paragraphs I would not miss for worlds. But one has even known book-reviewers who wrote delightful articles, though they made scarcely any reference to the books under review at all.

To my mind, nothing more clearly shows the general misconception of the purpose of a book-review than the attitude of the majority of journalists to the quotational review. It is the custom to despise the quotational review—to dismiss it as mere "gutting." As a consequence, it is generally very badly done. It is done as if under the impression that it does not matter what quotations one gives

so long as one fills the space. One great paper lends support to this contemptuous attitude towards quotational criticism by refusing to pay its contributors for space taken up by quotations. A London evening newspaper was once guilty of the same folly. A reviewer on the staff of the latter confessed to me that to the present day he finds it impossible, without an effort, to make quotations in a review, because of the memory of those days when to quote was to add to one's poverty. Despised work is seldom done well, and it is not surprising that it is almost more seldom that one finds a quotational review well done than any other sort. Yet how critically illuminating a quotation may be! There are many books in regard to which quotation is the only criticism necessary. Books of memoirs and books of verse—the least artistic as well as the most artistic forms of literature—both lend themselves to it. To criticise verse without giving quotations is to leave one largely in ignorance of the quality of the verse. The selection of passages to quote is at least as fine a test of artistic judgment as any comment the critic can make. In regard to books of memoirs, gossip, and so forth, one does not ask for a test of delicate artistic judgment. Books of this kind should simply be rummaged for entertaining "news." To review them well is to make an anthology of (in a wide sense) amusing passages. There is no other way to portray them. And yet I have known a very brilliant reviewer take a book of gossip about the German Court and, instead of quoting any of the numerous things that would interest people, fill half a column with abuse of the way in which the book was written, of the inconsequence of the chapters, of the second-handness of many of the anecdotes. Now, I do not object to any of these charges being brought. It is well that "made" books should not be palmed off on the public as literature. On the other hand, a mediocre book (from the point of view of literature or history) is no excuse for a mediocre review. No matter how mediocre a book is, if it is on a subject of great interest, it usually contains enough vital matter to make an exciting half-

column. Many reviewers despise a bad book so heartily that, instead of squeezing every drop of interest out of it, as they ought to do, they refrain from squeezing a single drop of interest out of it. They are frequently people who suffer from anecdotophobia. "Scorn not the anecdote" is a motto that might be modestly hung up in the heart of every reviewer. After all, Montaigne did not scorn it, and there is no reason why the modern journalist should be ashamed of following so respectable an example. One can quite easily understand how the gluttony of many publishers for anecdotes has driven writers with a respect for their intellect into revolt. But let us not be unjust to the anecdote because it has been cheapened through no fault of its own. We may be sure of one thing. A review—a review, at any rate, of a book of memoirs or any similar kind of non-literary book—which contains an anecdote is better than a review which does not contain an anecdote. If an anecdotal review is bad, it is because it is badly done, not because it is anecdotal. This, one might imagine, is too obvious to require saying; but many men of brains go through life without ever being able to see it.

One of the chief virtues of the anecdote is that it brings the reviewer down from his generalizations to individual instances. Generalizations mixed with instances make a fine sort of review, but to flow on for a column of generalizations without ever pausing to light them into life with instances, concrete examples, anecdotes, is to write not a book-review but a sermon. Of the two, the sermon is much the easier to write: it does not involve the trouble of constant reference to one's authorities. Perhaps, however, someone with practice in writing sermons will argue that the sermon without instances is as somniferous as the book-review with the same want. Whether that is so or not, the book-review is not, as a rule, a place for abstract argument. Not that one wants to shut out controversy. There is no pleasanter review to read than a controversial review. Even here, however, one demands portrait as well as argument. It is, in nine cases out of ten, waste of time to assail a theory

when you can portray a man. It always seems to me to be hopelessly wrong for the reviewer of biographies, critical studies, or books of a similar kind, to allow his mind to wander from the main figure in the book to the discussion of some theory or other that has been incidentally put forward. Thus, in a review of a book on Stevenson, the important thing is to reconstruct the figure of Stevenson, the man and the artist. This is much more vitally interesting and relevant than theorizing on such questions as whether the writing of prose or of poetry is the more difficult art, or what are the essential characteristics of romance. These and many other questions may arise, and it is the proper task of the reviewer to discuss them, so long as their discussion is kept subordinate to the portraiture of the central figure. But they must not be allowed to push the leading character in the whole business right out of the review. If they are brought in at all, they must be brought in, like moral sentiments, inoffensively by the way.

In pleading that a review should be a portrait of a book to a vastly greater degree than it is a direct comment on a book, I am not pleading that it should be a mere bald summary. The summary kind of review is no more a portrait than is the Scotland Yard description of a man wanted by the police. Portraiture implies selection and a new emphasis. The synopsis of the plot of a novel is as far from being a good review as is a paragraph of general comment on it. The review must justify itself, not as a reflection of dead bones, but by a new life of its own.

Further, I am not pleading for the suppression of comment and, if need be, condemnation. But either to praise or condemn without instances is dull. Neither the one nor the other is the chief thing in the review. They are the crown of the review, but not its life. There are many critics to whom condemnation of books they do not like seems the chief end of man. They regard themselves as engaged upon a holy war against the Devil and his works. Horace complained that it was only poets who were not allowed to be mediocre. The modern critic—I should say

the modern critic of the censorious kind, not the critic who looks on it as his duty to puff out meaningless superlatives over every book that appears—will not allow any author to be mediocre. The war against mediocrity is a necessary war, but I cannot help thinking that mediocrity is more likely to yield to humour than to contemptuous abuse. Apart from this, it is the reviewer's part to maintain high standards for work that aims at being literature, rather than to career about, like a destroying angel, among books that have no such aim. Criticism, Anatole France has said, is the record of the soul's adventures among masterpieces. Reviewing, alas! is for the most part the record of the soul's adventures among books that are the reverse of masterpieces. What, then, are his standards to be? Well, a man must judge linen as linen, cotton as cotton, and shoddy as shoddy. It is ridiculous to denounce any of them for not being silk. To do so is not to apply high standards so much as to apply wrong standards. One has no right as a reviewer to judge a book by any standard save that which the author aims at reaching. As a private reader, one has the right to say of a novel by Mr. Joseph Hocking, for instance: "This is not literature. This is not realism. This does not interest me. This is awful." I do not say that these sentences can be fairly used of any of Mr. Hocking's novels. I merely take him as an example of a popular novelist who would be bound to be condemned if judged by comparison with Flaubert or Meredith or even Mr. Galsworthy. But the reviewer is not asked to state whether he finds Mr. Hocking readable so much as to state the kind of readableness at which Mr. Hocking aims and the measure of his success in achieving it. It is the reviewer's business to discover the quality of a book rather than to keep announcing that the quality does not appeal to him. Not that he need conceal the fact that it has failed to appeal to him, but he should remember that this is a comparatively irrelevant matter. He may make it as clear as day—indeed, he ought to make it as clear as day, if it is his opinion—that he regards the novels of Charles Garvice as shoddy, but he ought also

to make it clear whether they are the kind of shoddy that serves its purpose.

Is this to lower literary standards? I do not think so, for, in cases of this kind, one is not judging literature, but popular books. Those to whom popular books are anathema have a temperament which will always find it difficult to fall in with the limitations of the work of a general reviewer. The curious thing is that this intolerance of easy writing is most generally found among those who are most opposed to intolerance in the sphere of morals. It is as though they had escaped from one sort of Puritanism into another. Personally, I do not see why, if we should be tolerant of the breach of a moral commandment, we should not be equally tolerant of the breach of a literary commandment. We should gently scan, not only our brother man, but our brother author. The æsthete of to-day, however, will look kindly on adultery, but show all the harshness of a Pilgrim Father in his condemnation of a split infinitive. I cannot see the logic of this. If irregular and commonplace people have the right to exist, surely irregular and commonplace books have a right to exist by their side.

The reviewer, however, is often led into a false attitude to a book, not by its bad quality, but by some irrelevant quality—some underlying moral or political idea. He denounces a novel the moral ideas of which offend him, without giving sufficient consideration to the success or failure of the novelist in the effort to make his characters live. Similarly, he praises a novel with the moral ideas of which he agrees, without reflecting that perhaps it is as a tract rather than as a work of art that it has given him pleasure. Both the praise and blame which have been heaped upon Mr. Kipling are largely due to appreciation or dislike of his politics. The Imperialist finds his heart beating faster as he reads *The English Flag*, and he praises Mr. Kipling as an artist when it is really Mr. Kipling as a propagandist who has moved him. The anti-Imperialist, on the other hand, is often led by detestation of Mr. Kipling's politics to deny even the palpable fact that

Mr. Kipling is a very brilliant short-story teller. It is for the reviewer to raise himself above such prejudices and to discover what are Mr. Kipling's ideas apart from his art, and what is his art apart from his ideas.

The relation between one and the other is also clearly a relevant matter for discussion. But the confusion of one with the other is fatal. In the field of morals we are perhaps led astray in our judgments even more frequently than in matters of politics. Mr. Shaw's plays are often denounced by critics whom they have made laugh till their sides ached, and the reason is that, after leaving the theatre, the critics remember that they do not like Mr. Shaw's moral ideas. In the same way, it seems to me, a great deal of the praise that has been given to Mr. D. H. Lawrence as an artist ought really to be given to him as a distributor of certain moral ideas. That he has studied wonderfully one aspect of human nature, that he can describe wonderfully some aspects of external nature, I know; but I doubt whether his art is fine enough or sympathetic enough to make enthusiastic anyone who differs from the moral attitude, as it may be called, of his stories. This is the real test of a work of art—has it sufficient imaginative vitality to capture the imagination of artistic readers who are not in sympathy with its point of view? The *Book of Job* survives the test: it is a book to the spell of which no imaginative man could be indifferent, whether Christian, Jew or atheist. Similarly, Shelley is read and written about with enthusiasm by many who hold moral, religious and political ideas directly contrary to his own. Mr. Kipling's *Recessional*, with its sombre imaginative glow, its recapturing of Old Testament prides and fears, commands the praise of thousands to whom much of the rest of his poetry is the abominable thing. It is the reviewer's task to discover imagination even in those who are the enemies of the ideas he cherishes. In so far as he cannot do this, he fails in his business as a critic of the arts.

It may be said in answer to all this, however, that to appeal for tolerance in book-reviewers is not necessary.

The Press is already overcrowded with laudations of commonplace books. Not a day passes but at least a dozen books are praised as having "not a dull moment," being "readable from cover to cover," and as reminding the reviewer of Stevenson, Meredith, Oscar Wilde, Paul de Kock, and Jane Austen. That is not the kind of tolerance which one is eager to see. That kind of review is scarcely different from a publisher's advertisement. Besides, it usually sins in being mere summary and comment, or even comment without summary. It is a thoughtless scattering of acceptable words and is as unlike the review conceived as a portrait as is the hostile kind of commentatory review which I have been discussing. It is generally the comment of a lazy brain, instead of being, like the other, the comment of a clever brain. Praise is the vice of the commonplace reviewer, just as censoriousness is the vice of the more clever sort. Not that one wishes either praise or censure to be stinted. One is merely anxious not to see them misapplied. It is a vice, not a virtue, of reviewing to be lukewarm either in the one or the other. What one desires most of all in a reviewer, after a capacity to portray books, is the courage of his opinions, so that, whether he is face to face with an old reputation like Mr. Conrad's or a new reputation like Mr. Mackenzie's, he will boldly express his enthusiasms and his dissatisfactions without regard to the estimate of the author, which is, for the moment, "in the air." What seems to be wanted, then, in a book-reviewer is that, without being servile, he should be swift to praise, and that, without being censorious, he should have the courage to blame. While tolerant of kinds in literature, he should be intolerant of pretentiousness. He should be less patient, for instance, of a pseudo-Milton than of a writer who frankly aimed at nothing higher than a book of music-hall songs. He should be more eager to define the qualities of a book than to heap comment upon comment. If—I hope the image is not too strained—he draws a book from the life, he will produce a better review than if he spends his time calling it names, whether foul or fair.

But what of the equipment of the reviewer? it may be asked. What of his standards? One of the faults of modern reviewing seems to me to be that the standards of many critics are derived almost entirely from the literature of the last thirty years. This is especially so with some American critics, who rush feverishly into print with volumes spotted with the names of modern writers as Christmas pudding is spotted with currants. To read them is to get the impression that the world is only a hundred years old. It seems to me that Matthew Arnold was right when he urged men to turn to the classics for their standards. His definition of the classics may have been too narrow, and nothing could be more utterly dead than a criticism which tries to measure imaginative literature by an academic standard or the rules of Aristotle. But it is only those to whom the classics are themselves dead who are likely to lay this academic dead hand on new literature. Besides, even the most academic standards are valuable in a world in which chaos is hailed with enthusiasm both in art and in politics. But, when all is said, the taste which is the essential quality of a critic is something with which he is born. It is something which is not born of reading Sophocles and Plato and does not perish of reading Miss Marie Corelli. This taste must illuminate all the reviewer's portraits. Without it, he had far better be a coach-builder than a reviewer of books. It is this taste in the background that gives distinction to a tolerant and humorous review of even the most unambitious detective story.

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