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CRITICAL THOUGHTS
IN
CRITICAL DAYS

by

F. L. LUCAS

“Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”—DR. JOHNSON.

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WOKING

TO THE
STRANGER FROM BEYOND THE SEA
WHO CAME
WHEN I MOST NEEDED HER

The P.E.N. is a world association of writers. Its object is to promote and maintain friendship and intellectual co-operation between writers in all countries, in the interests of literature, freedom of artistic expression, and international goodwill.

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CRITICAL THOUGHTS IN CRITICAL DAYS

FOR two years I have hardly read two dozen books. This, to be sure, should fit one finely to write on War and Literature.

It was in the sunlight of a September afternoon that I was hurried away from my bookshelves by a stranger in uniform. Yet seldom sight more welcome than that blue and gold at the door. For I had just acquired a family—three little Boanerges from Tottenham, with their mother; and was finishing a trench under my old apple-tree to stow them in, when the uniform appeared. It was 3.9.39—day of triumph for believers in thirteen—and we had been three hours at war:

True, if I have read little since, I must have written volumes (fascinating, if I may say so); but quite unpublishable. This view of literature, then, must be a distant view, from the stony mountains of Moab towards, not a Promised, but a Remembered Land. That may excuse some faults. It must be written, too, largely in my head at odd moments, driving down country-lanes to my hut, and back again at 1 a.m., when official memoranda can at last be forgotten and thoughts are free. Not, indeed, entirely free. There is a horse-pond half-way. And beyond it a double turn, where three elms loom suddenly, like the Three Fates, in silent and sombre warning out of the night. And then the long blackness of the hill that the Squire's trees overhang, up to the church, with the clock in its dim fat tower the one thing in the village left awake. But after so many hundred nights I can almost leave the driving

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to "my kind and foolish comrade," the Unconscious; and while he drives, he hands to me through the darkness sudden memories of the past—some face, some landscape, some snatch of poetry from less violent years.

Often the news has not been too gay; and the literal gloom of midnight does not brighten it. It is then that the dead writers one has forsaken, do not forsake one, They are dead; and Hitler, regrettably, is not; but they will outlive him.

Sometimes, on summer nights after France had fallen, the blind darkness would whisper the blind Homer's words, of the parting of Hector and Andromache—

For I know,
Surely for sacred Ilios the end draws near,
For Priam, and for all the people of Priam of the Ashen
Spear . . .

And you, a slave in Argos, will weave a mistress' wool,
Or to the spring Messéis, or Hypercia's pool
Go, sick at heart, for water, a drudge beneath the yoke . . .
Ah, deep be the earth of my gravemound above me, ere the day
I hear the sound of your crying, your carrying away.

Sometimes, from the elm-trees' shadow, the grim Sibyl of the *Elder Edda* has intoned her vision of that Twilight of the Gods which at times we seem to be seeing fulfilled before our eyes—

Far things forgotten and things far before me
I see—the mirk Sunset of the Immortals.
Harsh shall the world wax with hatreds and whoredoms,
Brother with brother shall grapple in battle,
An axe-age, a sword-age, when shields shall be shattered,
A wind-age, a wolf-age, ere the world's ending.
Then wakes the World-serpent, then trembles the Tree.
Then fail shall his fetters—the Wolf fare free.

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Or again, in that dripping avenue below the church, the hawk-nosed figure of Thomas Hardy stands and mutters, as I top the hill—

Ere systemed suns were globed and lit,
The slaughters of the race were writ,

And wasting wars, by land and sea,
Fixed, like all else, immutably.

Or that set mouth (wry as with long distaste at man's follies and the cruelties of God), that sits no more in aloof silence on the dais of Trinity, will pass along the hedgerow, as it used to pass on Cambridge roads, alone; and the low, trenchant voice of Housman murmurs again—

“The King with half the east at heel is marched from lands
of morning.

His fighters drink the rivers up, his shafts benight the air.
And he that stands will die for nought, and home there's no
returning.”

The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed
their hair.

Or in answer, on nights when another spring has climbed
our village hill, the burly shade of Chesterton halloos—

There is one creed; 'neath no world-terror's wing
Apples forget to grow on apple-trees.
Only one thing is needful—everything.
The rest is vanity of vanities.

Or maybe, from among the eighteenth-century tombs under
the churchyard yews, the quieter phantom of the Marquis de
Saint-Perm repeats, as to his men beginning to waver under
the guns of long ago—“Eh bien quoi, mes enfants! C'est du
canon. Cela tue. Et voilà tout.”

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They come from very far, the ghosts—from far further now than two years since. The world before the war has grown suddenly very old. It is as if the earth had leapt violently forward, like the Conqueror's horse when it trod on that red ember in the street of burning Mantes and flung him to his death. To-day Keats or Dickens seems aged by a century. There are still men hale among us who remember the conversational acrobatics of Meredith at Box Hill, or that autumn when the full moon through the oriel of Aldworth silvered the great dead brow of Tennyson. But we no longer really believe it. A gulf has yawned between the solid England of Victoria and this Wellsian nightmare. All at once, the Time-machine has raced.

But though the very dead seem older, they remain agelessly immortal. Though they come from mistier distances, they come. After all, the really great are all contemporaries—Hardy and Homer, Horace and Montaigne and Po-chu-i. (Schools and periods matter only to owls.) And in their presence, for a moment, the grief and rage and anxiety of these years—the thought of those grey ratlike hordes swarming obscenely across the lands one loved, over the orchard-grasses of Normandy, over the sleeping dust of comrades beside the Somme, through the lovely hush of Tempe and Thermopylae or the cloudy glories of Hardanger and Jotunheim—even these things, for a moment, are seen from the sad, yet calmer distance of eternity.

Yet it is not all the doing of a neurotic in Berchtesgaden that this delirium has seized mankind. It is only a crisis in a vaster process, at work long before the War and long to outlast it. Our world is shrinking faster and faster: and that

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means earthquakes. It is whirling faster and faster: and that can mean flying in pieces.

The other night another ghost was beside me in the car. The frosted moonlight fell on the stocky figure, the honest, low-browed head, the confident yet kindly mouth of Thomas Babington Macaulay. I have much admiration for Macaulay. No doubt a Philistine. But far better those muscles of Goliath than the prim and peevish airs and sneers of our literary Pharisees. That evening I had been recalling one of Macaulay's less admirable combats, his mauling of poor Southey for daring, in 1830, to doubt of Progress—"If we were to prophesy that in the year 1930 a population of fifty millions, better fed, clad, and lodged than the English of our time, will cover these islands, that Sussex and Huntingdonshire will be wealthier than the wealthiest parts of the West Riding of Yorkshire now are, that cultivation, rich as that of a flower-garden, will be carried up to the very tops of Ben Nevis and Helvellyn, that machines constructed on principles yet undiscovered will be in every house, that there will be no highways but railroads, no travelling but by steam, that our debt, vast as it seems to us, will appear to our great-grandchildren a trifling encumbrance, which might easily be paid off in a year or two, many people would think us insane." Alas, it was not Macaulay that was insane.

And suddenly I realized that he was there beside me. He was visibly delighted—with the car, not with me. "Just as I predicted," said a husky, vigorous voice. "But where's the boiler? Where's the fire?" I explained. He seemed a shade piqued at our stealing this march on him and steam. But only for a moment. "And the National Debt?" he asked hopefully.

"Grown beyond your wildest dreams. Unlike the potato, which does not yet, I am afraid, blossom on the brow of

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Helvellyn; though I do my best on our hilltop there. But the National Debt? I doubt if the Chancellor of the Exchequer himself could quite tell you. It swells, I believe, about a quarter of a million an hour. It must be appreciably bigger since you spoke."

"Ah!" he laughed, after a moment's surprise; even for him. "Just as I said. What of it? 'Fifty millions!' snarled Swift. 'Ruin!' 'A hundred and forty millions!' bellowed Junius. 'Ruin!' 'Two hundred and forty millions!' groaned the ministers of 1783. 'Ruin!' And how d'ye get through it all?" (It was like an indulgent uncle addressing a spendthrift dog of a nephew.)

"On fireworks mostly," I said, as another flash like summer-lightning lit the eastern sky. And I explained that the good-natured, musical and metaphysical countrymen of the Prince Consort had somehow changed rather since 1850. "The good-natured countrymen of Blücher!" came the answer. "It was Carlyle, not I, that thought Germans idealists and the old fox of Sans Souci a 'hero'! But courage! Never mind about the National Debt. You will not lose for that. As any forward schoolboy knows, to deluge Italy with blood, Alboin needed no loans at 5 per cent; and the treasury-bills of Attila never stood at par."

So I had to point out that Progress had now conquered the air also (my guest rubbed his hands) and equipped Alboin and Attila with flying-machines, with which they were reducing the people of England, now only half an island, to marmalade at the rate of some forty thousand a year. "In fact they are doing their best to arrange the ruins of St. Paul's for your New Zealander to sketch from a broken arch of London Bridge this very autumn."

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The ghost turned a shade greyer.

"Horace Walpole," I added (a little maliciously, recalling how Thomas Babington had trounced poor Horace's memory), "when his old age saw the birth of Montgolfier's balloon, remarked, you remember, that he could rouse no enthusiasm for such 'airy vehicles'; with which, no doubt, in coming days the world would be 'ravaged and butchered more expeditiously than by the old-fashioned clumsy method of navigation.' 'Because,' he added, with terrible clear-sightedness, 'no improvements of science or knowledge make the world one jot wiser.' And how right, too, was Johnson in *Rasselas* about the folly of arming human beastliness with wings, that would enable the savages of the north to swoop from the clouds on the quiet villages of Abyssinia! The savages duly swooped. Six years ago."

"But is not this a dangerous speed?" said my passenger, knitting his brows and changing the subject, as the fog-hung circle of the horse-pond flew by. "We must be going a good sixteen miles an hour. . . ."

"About thirty-five. But, if I may say so, as you are already dead. . . ."

"That would not prevent your killing someone else. Are there many such Jehus at large on your highways? There must be the carnage of a battlefield. . . ."

"There is, I am afraid. About seventy thousand killed every ten years. And two and a half million injured."

For a moment even Macaulay sat speechless. Then—"And yet you go on driving! And your governments allow it! And you allow your governments to allow it! When the Athenians had to sacrifice to the Cretan Minotaur seven youths and maidens each nine years, it seemed an atrocity that thirty

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centuries could not forget. And you—that fools may whisk their folly about the earth at forty miles an hour—every ten years you sacrifice to Juggernaut seventy thousand lives! In England alone! And uncompelled! When you have really developed your flying, I suppose it will be seven hundred thousand lives? You talk of the horrors of your war, and even the dead must feel for you: but the horrors of your peace—they indeed pass understanding.”

The Apostle of Progress flung, outraged, into the night.

And what, dear reader, would you have answered?

“The March of Science!” said Lamb once. “But who shall sound its retreat?” The Djinn has emerged from Solomon’s bottle; and we cannot conjure him in again. Science has given Man, still a callous child, the powers of a God. She has done marvels for the infant’s health—and tossed him lovely toys of dynamite. “Alas!” cried the old lady of the *ancien régime*, less wise than Walpole, when Montgolfier made his balloon, “next they will invent how to live for ever and we—we shall be dead!” It was not precisely the secret of living for ever that aviation was bringing into the world. Even Victor Hugo, nearly a century later, remained as naïve about flying gas-bags—

Où va-t-il, ce navire? Il va, de jour vêtu,
À l’avenir divin et pur, à la vertu,
À la science qu’on voit luire,
À la mort des fléaux, à l’oubli généreux,
À l’abondance, au calme, au rire, à l’homme heureux.

How the devils guffaw and swish their tails when they read that, on literary evenings in Pandemonium! Yet Hugo was a

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great man, and sometimes a great poet. I doubt if we had better join the devils' mirth.

We have invented the petrol-motor—and Caliban has climbed into it and Europe flares red in the wake of Panzer Armies. We have invented the aeroplane—and Caliban soars in it, dropping on our clever heads the two-ton bombs we have likewise contrived for his amusement. We have invented the wireless and from the Propagandaministerium comes—the voice of Caliban. For His are the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory.

Round me in the night, as I drive, lies the England of history, still little changed from what Chaucer and Shakespeare knew—that quiet beauty which yet is dearer to its lovers than the fiercer or gaudier splendour of other lands. Green, mist-soft curves of dale and upland; dove-murmuring coppice and unhurrying stream; county after county, each subtly different, yet all fundamentally akin—a land of strength yet gentleness, of courage yet kindness, of poetry yet common sense. Greece or Norway have stirred me far more. But this is the England that seems one's own, worth a fight to the end.

Yet if I drive a few miles, I come to that other England we all know, the mean squalor of the industrial town, without even the grey dignity of the great city. Could I die for X or Y, or the great sooty Sahara of South London? Yet their pale inhabitants can and do. Heroically. All honour to them!

In vain to scold at Science; to scream like Blake at "the waterwheels of Newton"; to drink to his confusion, like Keats. The trouble is not that men have found Science, but that they have not found sense. True Science has consolations

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almost as deep as poetry. Sickened with A.D. 1941, one can turn back to 40,000 B.C. and watch growing on Wenlock Edge, not the golden broom and snow-white thorn of Housman, but the crimson coral and silvery sea-lilies of a tropic sea; and reflect that, whatever happens now, one day those returning waves will bury the site and memory of the Brown House under cleaner mud.

The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores—

one cannot say they are not needed!

But it remains true that the greatest of the conquests of Science remains to be made—the conquest of Science. Till then it proves a mixed blessing in more ways than one. First, it has armed with appalling weapons what is in the mass a dangerous and vicious animal, though individually often so lovable. Secondly, it has further turned the creature's head by the pace it has added to life. The twentieth century has grown strangely neurotic. Never age so scientific: never age more unscientific, more crazed with credulity, superstition, and fanaticism. Play a gramophone too fast, and it shrieks. So with life; so with art. Thirdly, it is not only the pace that dazes and dizzies men; it is the sense of instability, the disturbance of all balance between past and future. Imagine a world where the only forests were giant fungi, here to-day and gone to-morrow. Can we believe that the change to such impermanence would not leave its mark on the minds of men,

Whom trees that knew your sires, shall cease to know?

The artist, too, comes to feel to-day that he builds on a quicksand and writes on a torrent.

The balance, in living, between past and future is a delicate

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thing. At other times men have leaned back too much, clung too much to yesterday. That is not our danger. Our paradox is that, while every gadget modern cleverness invents is on sale within a year or two to the very Esquimaux, the accumulated wisdom of the past fails to spread at all. "No improvements of science or knowledge make the world one jot wiser." Can Science itself in the end find a remedy? The psychologist? "C'est toujours bien fait d'espérer."

But not for us such dreams: we are fighting for the right to dream at all. To-day remains to be battled through. And from the Science of the present and the red wreck it has made of the world, I turn back to the Art of the past and the wisdom of the dead. May we travel a moment round the remembered shelves I left two years ago? How do the Immortals stand the War? It may throw a little light on the general qualities that make books survive, even through Ages of Darkness.

Here, in the queer curly Greek fount and faded gilt of a past century, stands the first of European writers—to me, in many ways the finest still. No other nation has bred a language like Homer's; no later poets even of his nation, though they might emulate his music, had his mind—its breadth, its depth, its height. I say "Homer," because nineteenth-century theories, largely and typically German, that masterpieces like *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were synthetically manufactured by syndicates, should be left to owls who know nothing of creating anything, except more owls. Possibly one poet may not have written both epics (hard as I find it to believe in two such personalities); but one poet, in essentials, must have written each.

People stare if you speak of "the philosophy of Homer. Yet he remains for me a far wiser philosopher than Plato.

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Those blind eyes, if blind they were, saw so clearly and calmly into the unresting unreason of the Universe. Partly, indeed, Homer's wisdom is the wisdom of his race. The loveliest symbolism for the world's forces that the world has known, it owes to nameless geniuses, forgotten, like enough, before Homer was born. Yet still for me their happy crowned Demeter smiles across the August harvest, or saddens in the gathering September mists. Still Aphrodite Pandemos laughs her reckless laughter, and Aphrodite Urania blesses whom she will bless. Still Ares storms across the plains of Scythia, and Dionysus maddens the fanatic hordes of Nazis towards the gates of India. Superhumanly great, yet at times superhumanly cruel; unutterably beautiful, yet sometimes horrible beyond belief—such was this ancient vision of the immortal powers of the world. These forgotten story-tellers did not argue: they saw. Justice? They saw that men of blood and violence come, blinded by Ate, to violent and bloody ends. They saw the beauty of compassion—that Prayers are the daughters of Zeus. But they saw also another daughter of Zeus, Artemis, the tameless maidenhood of the eternal hills, "rejoicing in her arrows"—those ruthless arrows that bring death not only to the beast in the thicket, but to the daughters of men. The Panglosses of later Greek philosophy, the theologians of early Christianity, shrieked that such tales were immoral. To an amoral Universe they preferred a God as immoral as themselves, whitewashed with mystery. But this mythology older than history has outlived their theologies. The gods of Hellas are still household names throughout the earth, not because they are pretty to paint on the ceilings of restaurants; but because, in their hearts, men feel them true.

It is for men, as Homer felt, to be finer than the gods. His

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gods he largely inherited: his human beings are his own. None has put the nobility and degradation of war, as Homer has put them when, at his story's close, the old Priam and the young Achilles meet—each embittered by loss and sorrow, each torn between chivalry and savagery, admiration and hate. (But it is not the hate that wins.) None has uttered as Homer has the final, more than Christian charity towards guilt—how, when at last the tempests of passion have stormed themselves to sleep, the wise heart sees the fatality of it all. The shame is bitter and passionate in Helen at Troy; but the recognition that our freewill is, after all, a shadow, speaks from the gracious lips of Helen, queen again in Lacedaemon, as it had already spoken in the noble generosity of Priam to her, in the year his city fell—

I lay no blame upon you. On the Gods I lay the blame,
Through whom this war and its sorrows upon my country came

Hitler is less lovely than Helen, less easy to forgive. But when the mind sees clearest, it can see him too as the poor gesturing puppet of an hour; and echo at last the words of Priam.

And yet no reader of Homer doubts an instant, though Helen was half divine, that Andromache was better; just as Odysseus turned in Ogygia from Calypso and immortality to his mortal Penelope and a rocky island beyond a deadly sea. Euripides was a great poet: but not great enough for Homer's world. He felt outraged by such immorality, like the Elder Brother of the Prodigal Son. Was this calm beauty of Helen to come home, unpunished, un reproached, to Sparta, while the bones of better wives and mothers bleached under the blackened rafters of Troy? He seized his pen and drew a different Helen, a pretty, petty fribble. She too is true to life.

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But to a lower life. Like the characters of a thousand modern novelists. And so, at the end, the reader may wonder "Was it worth all that trouble?"

It is a curious paradox that the religion whose founder said of his crucifiers "they know not what they do," should have been so lavish with eternal torment, while in a pagan poet, older than history, there lived this charity. In the grey mist of Homer's Hades (apart from a few legendary malefactors) all human souls alike are grey. Not there the tremendous nightmare of Dante's vindictiveness; nor even the gentle Virgil's attempt to redress in the next world the iniquities and inequalities of this. Life is not just; nor Death. Often, indeed, the guilty suffer—but so do the innocent. One should make the best of it; not pretend the best of it. In Homer's after-world there is at least no "justice" of Dante's kind, only the impartial silence of an eternal dream. Side by side, there, flit the wraith of the lovely Ariadne and the wraith of that hateful Eriphyle who for a jewelled bauble sold her husband to his death. There the just and the unjust drift mistily together; and all alike are pitiful—

Young brides, and youths unwedded, and old men's weary
years,
And maids in their tender girlhood, with young hearts new
to tears.

Beside the dignity of this universal sadness at the doom of all that lives, do not the later voices crying of judges and punishments grow a little small and shrill?

I have lingered over Homer. No war lessens him; and it is strange how much of later European literature—drama and elegy, oratory and biography, novel and short story—is already foreshadowed in that supreme and sudden dawn.

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Next to the Father of Poetry I kept the Father of History. Herodotus too can stand the War; even a planetary war. He too tells of a desperate fight for freedom against an overweening and overwhelming barbarian. But his book, too, is more than a war; it too is a world and a philosophy, little changed from Homer's four centuries before. Courage, to face life's menaces; loyalty, to share them; a gay curiosity, to forget them—those were his only remedies. There are no better. Our silly modern complexities darken earth and heaven, driving transiently like tangled smoke-wreaths upon a gale: the great simplicities remain. I do not care if Solon never really met Croesus. In these pages they meet immortally, Greek wisdom and barbarian arrogance. If it is an imaginary conversation, it is better than Landor's best (and how good that is, few realize to-day). I do not think Herodotus felt, as his Solon implies, that Life's best gift is Death—only that it more often is so than men willingly admit. (And that is true.) On the contrary, no later historian has ever seemed to me in such a rapture with the world, like a small boy at a great fair—except Froissart. No later historian has combined with an abiding sense of tragedy such *joie de vivre*. And none has been blessed with such a subject—a perfectly just war of defence by the most gifted race earth has seen, headed by an Athens not yet poisoned with power—the Athens of Aeschylus and Aristides—and by a Sparta harsh, but not yet corrupted—the Sparta of Leonidas.

Rubbing shoulders with my Herodotus stood, in solid yellow Victorian calf, the great Dr. Arnold's Thucydides. Reopening Thucydides at odd moments since the War, I have been shocked. He had shrunk. Was the fault mine, or the War's, or his? Surely a smaller, drier man than Herodotus, pretending his was the greater war. And it was not. Salamis

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changed Europe—not Aegospotami. The tragedy of the Athenians at Syracuse is horrible; but it is not the tragedy of Thermopylae. In Thucydides the poetry of Herodotus is gone: in its place sound the throaty cadences of rhetoric. All these frightful generals encouraging their troops with antitheses—one would have fled out of earshot before the battle began. Even the famous Funeral Speech of Pericles left me cold. Imperialism lying in state—beautiful, but already corruption is there. If Thucydides had composed a dialogue of Solon with Croesus, there would have been more tropes and epigrams and figures of speech; but the poetry would have died. A great lover of truth, a clear-eyed analyst (like Machiavelli) of the worst passions and follies of politics; but too much a realist (that is, a man who dwells on only half of reality). Herodotus seems a charming old man who yet remains always young; Thucydides, a man who was never young at all. One can guess which of them educationalists would prefer.

So too with the Attic dramatists I find myself grown, more than ever, something of a heretic. This is not to question their greatness: that would be idiocy. They can be magnificent: but they are not Homer. Even Aeschylus seems to me less wide and less wise; Sophocles, less compassionate; Euripides, less sane. As we descend the Greek centuries, I have a sense of walking downhill, into a smaller, dimmer world. As I enter the theatre of Dionysus, the characters seem smaller too. Even the Titan Prometheus has not the breadth of Achilles; Odysseus has dwindled to a fox, Helen to a flirt, the Atridae to weak or wicked puppet-kings. And I hear long arguments about it and about"; and, as commonly, they are not very good arguments. It was most human that Aeschylus should turn aside to wrestle with that ancient mocking spirit, the

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“problem of evil.” But there is no answer; because there is no problem. Things are so: why should they be otherwise? His solution, like other “justifications,” seems a smaller thing than the acceptance of Homer, or of Job. And the world that is squeezed to a poet’s notions of squaring this old moral circle, becomes a narrower world; just as Dante’s or Milton’s universe, with Hell, Heaven, Purgatory, and Chaos thrown in, remains smaller than Shakespeare’s earth.

Again, in this theatre, so nobly restrained in many ways, none the less some of the restraint and artistic economy of the epic seem gone. There are so many words. When the shade of Homer’s Elpenor asks his old leader only for a grave in the sea-sand and above it the oar with which he rowed among his comrades once, or Odysseus says simply of his perished shipmates “and from them God took their home-coming,” or the mother of Odysseus tells him in Hades that it was not the arrows of Artemis that brought her to the grave, but the memory of her lost son’s gentleness, those few words in their simple grandeur move me beyond words, where I should yawn callously through five pages of ululation by Oedipus or Hecuba. They protest too much. Or turn to our own stage—

“Cover her face: Mine eyes dazell: she di’d yong.”

“I thinke not so: her infelicitie
Seem’d to have yeeres too many.”

You may make fifteen elderly gentlemen say the same thing with variations for ten minutes by the clock: but you are simple if you suppose you will have said more. There are things in Greek tragedy at which I hold my breath; but some

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of its conventions I abhor; I suppose that comes of being too impatient a character.

In Greece as elsewhere, I feel, art reached perfection strangely early. After that, it could develop; not rise. Think of the pediments of Olympia (does their quiet nobility begin to humanize to-day even the barbarians strutting among the pine-whispering sandhills of Alpheius, or have those marble limbs also been swept away into German captivity?). Critics talk of their "awkwardness and lack of mastery"; but I know nothing in later Greek work, not even the marbles of the Parthenon, to equal that grapple of Lapith hero and bestial Centaur, watched in the centre by the God of Light, with the immortal, unalterable calm of eyes that see with the same steadfastness the same conflict in the world to-day.

The Nordic theory of the Nazis does not seem to me, like their theory of race-purity, pure nonsense. The Nazis wish to imagine themselves like Scandinavians. It is their wisest wish. Unfortunately for everybody, they are not. They are as like their models as the vulgarities of Wagner are like an Icelandic saga. But it remains true, I think, that the best in Europe, whether in individual minds like Chaucer or Shakespeare, or in nations like France, comes from a blending of North with South. Once in Greece, twice in Italy, an inrush of the North upon the South has been followed by a great rebirth. Then, after a few centuries, the sun of the Mediterranean reassumes its power and before the dark southern eyes the fair-haired strangers dwindle away. Be that as it may, something fades out of Greece soon after the Persian Wars. Perhaps for a similar reason (for in Athens there was particularly little mixture of race), I cannot share the common

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assumption that Athens is "the Greece of Greece." It was not from there that Greek poetry, outside the drama, came; I am not consoled by Plato and the orators. It is—alas, it was—the same for me in modern Greece. Athens, her museums, above all her Acropolis, were unforgettable. But the real spirit of the land was elsewhere—in the livid, wrinkled crags above the Acheron; in the clouds curled, like golden dragons on golden fleeces, round Helicon and Parnassus; in the brooding oak-woods of Arcadia above the blue depths of Erymanthus; in the white dance of the Aegean round and round the Cyclades; in the infinite peace of Epidaurus between her mountains and the sea, or the rose of sunset on the long snow-ridge of Olympus from the Larissaeon Plain, or the old ferryman asleep in his boat where Peneus steals from Tempe, as hushed as the meadows of Elysium—before the Panzer came.

But from the long decline of Greece two books stand out in memory now. As the stories of her gods and heroes were fashioned by nameless geniuses before her history dawned, so, after it had set, the tale of her great men was told by one who was also a master, though a smaller one—Plutarch of Chaeroneia. How great Plutarch was, Shakespeare and Montaigne knew; I do not believe the twentieth century would have become what it is, had more of its young been bred on him. The first thing in education is character; knowledge, only the second. The proper study of boyhood is man.

But though I am infinitely grateful to have been bred on Greek and Latin, I gasp now at the books they chose to make us read. Why, until I went to the University, the *Palatine Anthology* was only a name to me. Nine-tenths of that vast collection is mediocre or worse; but perhaps one twenty-fifth seems to me so perfect that if I had only one more book

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to read, I would as soon read that as any; and if I had to explain what poetry is to a Martian, I could choose no better type, not only of the poet's language, but of the poet's way of looking upon life. It can stand even translation. For it is not true that the best poetry cannot be translated; only the best poetry can be translated—the poetry that depends not only on the music of words and their associations, but also on deeper things. The human heart can speak even in Bantu. And now that once more, for a space, Greek freedom has perished, I think of the words of Simonides on the Greek fallen of an older war.

We died in the glen of Dirphys. Here, by our country's giving,

This tomb was heaped above us, high on Euripus' shore.

'Twas not unearned. We lost the loveliness of living,

We took instead upon us the bursting storm of war.

The Nazis, when not busy being Nordic, think they are the new Rome. When their race has produced a Camillus or a Fabricius, a Scipio or—best of all—a Brutus, the world may listen. Meanwhile the claim should not prejudice us against Rome. The Roman Empire no doubt was as vulgar, almost, as the Third Reich. But not the Roman Republic.

As in Greece, so in Rome few of her acknowledged poets were as great as the nameless minds that moulded the early legends of the race—legends no longer of Faun and Dryad, but of human character and courage. Coriolanus and Regulus will be remembered as long as Pandora or Persephone. Such tales may be true or false: that does not affect the essential poetry of the hearts that dreamed or acted them. It was no wholly prosaic race that, when Hannibal glittered before Rome, put up to auction the very site of his camp. Rome, far less gifted than Greece, had yet certain qualities of character

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(until they rotted) that Greece paid dearly for lacking. Rome produced no satisfying epic; but her true epic is in the early books of Livy and the majestic gloom of Tacitus; just as the true epic of our eighteenth century is found, not in imitations of Milton, but in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

Yet there is no longer the magic of Greek. A few passages haunt the memory from that Lucretius who consoled Frederick of Prussia, when even Prussia was half civilized—these, and a few cadences of Virgil's music, and the wisdom of Horace, and that one elegy of Propertius on his murdered mistress sleeping by the apple-orchards of the Anio, and a few epitaphs that the spade has revealed from the Euphrates to the Tay, and that last passionate cry of the *Pervigilium Veneris* as twilight darkens over the pagan world.

True, I have read again with wonder passages of Ovid and Seneca and Lucan. One forgets how brilliant they could be. Because they could only be brilliant. Brains they possessed, as Meredith and Wilde and Shaw possessed them. And brains are never common; therefore something survives. But brains are not enough. "Funny man, Meredith," Hardy used to say, "he'd get a good situation and then he'd start being clever about it." (But *Love in the Valley* will remain.)

Still there was one writer of the Empire who pursued the epigrams of his age, yet has outlived it because he has also passion enough to seem vital still, not just a stuffed hedgehog floodlit in a glass-case, all points and no life. The learned owe an apology to Tacitus. They picked holes in his accuracy; they protested that Tiberius or Domitian could not have been so black as painted, since after all the Empire functioned (just as British Blimps thought Mussolini's train-services covered all his sins). To-day we have found out a little more than these

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cloistered gentlemen about the *Führerprinzip* and the "efficiency" of New Orders. We have seen Nero and Caligula too close. Tacitus knew well enough that the old order had rotted past repair; but he knew better than we did how horrible the alternative. And because, like Herodotus, he was poet as well as historian, he made that horror tragic. For the historian who would last must remember what is usually forgotten in universities, that History also has a Muse and the books of the first European history were wisely dedicated to all the Nine. Science in history has become an indispensable servant: she remains an insufferable mistress. Napoleon, unlike most modern dictators, was comparatively cultured and comparatively tolerant; a dozen scientific histories of the Caesars would have left him unperturbed; but on Tacitus and his picture of tyrants the Emperor burst one day at the Institut into a passionate tirade. And the old Mercier murmured: "Parbleu, il faut avouer que cet homme-là a bien l'esprit de corps!" Though their tone contrasts as widely as the gloom of Heraclitus with the smile of Democritus, the decline of Rome was fortunate at least in finding two such historians as Tacitus and Gibbon.

The main interest of the Dark Ages at the moment is that we shudder on the verge of another. That hardly endears them. Yet even from that darkness there rose, far away beneath the Northern Lights, the Icelandic Sagas. Sometimes in this Wolf-age no literature seems to me so real as this of a thousand years ago. I see again the little Icelandic ship of seven years since that took me there, and the twilight of midnight on the yellow cliffs of the Westman Isles, and the place of Njal's burning, and the graves of Gudrun and Kiartan Olafsson

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under the dreamy eternity of Iceland skies. And I see the hollow-eyed death's head of the Nazi major who sailed in the same ship, with his unlovely little son, in quest of Nordic culture, as a crocodile might lift its armoured snout and snuff towards a dead eagle's eyrie. Vikings and concentration camps! It is at least something that American guns stand between Iceland and the defilement of Norway and of Greece.

The Sagas live for me because they tell of men rammed with life, though dryly scant of words—rebellious, and ironic, and contemptuous of fanatics and owls. A far finer race than the unsmiling Anglo-Saxon, despite the nobility of *Beowulf* and the goodness of Alfred. "Lo, from days of old we have heard of twelve heroes, famous under the stars, thegns of the Lord. Far-famed folk-leaders were they, bold on the war-path"—who are these braves? The Twelve Apostles! "Andreas the beast of battle" or "the young hero" who strips himself "firm and unflinching" and "mounts the high cross" might come out of some Gospel according to Herr Rosenberg. These Teutons could not understand, any more than my German major, the spirit of Iceland—or of France.

I do not care if I never read again the *Chanson de Roland*. But I am glad to have read it once. Lines of it still come back to-day—above all, four on the sword of Charlemain—

Li num's Joiuse l'espée fut dunez.
Barun franceis ne l'deivent oublier.
Enseigne en unt de "Munjoie!" crier;
Pur ço ne s'poet nule gent cuntrester.

Upon that sword the name "Joyeuse" was set—
Let not the lords of France that name forget.
Loud let their warcry of "Montjoie!" be hurled;
Against it stands no race in all the world.

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That was before Vichy set to turning its national festivals into "days of mourning," in the strange hope that France would rise again like a Phoenix (or a Prussian eagle?) out of ashes and sackcloth.

But here in the *Chanson*, from the slime and rubble that had overwhelmed the world of Rome, a new ideal has begun to spring. Through the centuries it spreads, growing more graceful in the lovely thirteenth-century *Aucassin and Nicolette*, more elaborate in Froissart and Malory. Somehow, out of generations of blood and barbarity, men have come to learn again what to-day so many of them have again forgotten—that strength is not enough without gentleness, nor courage without courtesy. Beside the lament of Andromache and Helen above Hector dead can stand the lament of Sir Ector for the dead Sir Lancelot: "and thou were the courteoust knight that ever bare shield. And thou were the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrad horse. And thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman. And thou were the kindest man that ever struck with sword."

No doubt, when Malory wrote that, Malory's ideal was already dying. No doubt it is easy to be cynical about chivalry. It did not save the Middle Ages from sickening cruelties. In these very years (so men, at least, could believe) the princes of the House of York murdered their captive king in the Tower and their young prince—that "shadow like an angel with bright hair"—in cold blood after Tewkesbury field. But better a brutal society with an ideal of chivalry it half betrays, than a brutal society with an ideal of brutality. I should not want, like T. E. Lawrence, to carry Malory for sole company in the desert. A great stylist, he was unfortunately not content to translate his originals; he rewrote them in a rambling,

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chaotic compilation. None the less, if Malory were a little more read in his own country, perhaps we should not have colonels of the British army scolding in the press of this year 1941 at the charity which saved the children of a conquered enemy from starving in 1919, nor editors of a paper like the *Sunday Times* printing them with all the approval of prominence. One does not triumph over beastliness by turning beast.

Nor let us suppose that the medieval literature of chivalry failed to affect medieval life. More than once Froissart observes indignantly that, while English, French, and Scots are courteous enemies, the Germans are not. "Car mieux vaudroit un gentil homme être pris des mécréans, tous payens ou Sarrasins, que des Allemands; car Allemands contraignent les gentils hommes en double prison de ceps de fer, de bois, de grésillons, et de toutes autres prisons hors de mesure et de raison. . . . Au voir (vrai) dire en moult (beaucoup) de choses Allemands sont gens hors de riuelle de raison, et c'est merveille pour quoi nuls ne conversent avec eux ni qu'on les souffre à armer avec eux, comme font François et Anglois, qui font courtoisie, ainsi qu'ils ont toujours fait." It seems a pity to damn whole nations. There were good men even in the Cities of the Plain. But it is depressing to find German traits so similar six centuries apart.

But there is nothing depressing about Froissart. What life, what zest, what curiosity! For instance, in his picture of the vast preparations for invading England, at l'Ecluse in the Low Countries—"sachez que l'oubliance du voir et la plaisance du considérer y étoit si grande que qui eût eu les fièvres ou le mal des dents, il eût perdu la maladie pour aller de l'un à l'autre. Et comptoient ces compagnons de France, qui les ouoit (entendait) parler l'un et l'autre, Angleterre pour

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perdue et exillée sans recouvrer, tous les hommes morts, et femmes et enfants dessous âge amenés en France et tenus en servitude." Such joy of seeing seldom exists outside journalists to-day. Perhaps, for that reason, journalism is the most living as well as the liveliest part of modern literature.

The same French gaiety animates a greater English contemporary of Froissart—and has got him into trouble with our owls. Chaucer lacks "high seriousness"? Somehow, in these frivolous years of war, I do not feel him so. Patience wears thin, I find, with poets whining over metaphysical catastrophes, or ferocious mistresses, or swooning in aesthetic ecstasies. But rereading passages of Chaucer's levity, one claws oneself, like his cook, for very joy. This trifler had seen a prison-cell, and the Black Death, and those months when, as Froissart says, it seemed as if wild risings of the poor beasts that tilled the soil might root out all gentry from Western Europe. But he left solemnity to Langland, that melancholy drudge who seems all thumbs, though with a pathetic kind of November beauty. There are indeed writers who laugh because they do not see deep enough; and writers who laugh because they see too deep. On Chaucer's forehead across the gloomy valley of the Dark Ages shines again the humanity of the ancient world. Again the tides of battle roar round Troy gates; and through them comes a fair face even falser than Helen's; yet towards his fallen Cryseyde Chaucer feels the same large-hearted pity as Homer for the Spartan queen—towards Cryseyde, indeed, he is more Shakespearian in understanding than Shakespeare himself was to be.

The Wife of Bath was not a very good woman. And yet is there not some good in such valiant vitality? And anyway what

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a joy to listen to! And the Canon was not a very holy man; but what joy to see a man so drip with Niagaras of sweat! And the Pardoner was an odious rogue; and yet what joy to watch the creature's grotesque activity, nodding and bobbing above his dupes like a pigeon on a barn! Chaucer would have got "joy" out of Dr. Goebbels in person. Not "serious"? Do not be too sure. The Pardoner would probably, from the point of view of business, have preferred a dozen Langlands. Chaucer, like the ancients, is an answer to the notion, sometimes held in decadent circles like the Goncourts', that to be a genius it is vital to have six diseases and seven neuroses. A far smaller poet than Dante at his great moments; and yet, taken as a whole, how human and how sane beside that warped zealot with his mixture of nobility and savagery, of passion and (in the *Vita Nuova*) sentimentality, of hell-fire and soup!

Compared with Chaucer, Gower in his turn is dwarfed; yet Gower too can still be apt to-day—

For vain honour or for the worldes good
They that whilom the stronge warres made,
Where be they now? Bethink wel in thy mood,
The day is gone, the night is dark and fade.
Her (their) cruelty which made them thanne glade,
They sorwen now, and yet have nought the more.
The blood is shed which no man may restore.

And Dunbar also—

Sum takis be (by) sie and be land,
And nevir fra taking can hald thair hand,
Quhill (Till) he be tit (tied) to ane tre;
And syne they gar him understand,
In taking sowld (should) discretoun be.

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Indeed, when I think of them at their best, as in the finer Ballads, I find it hard to leave the Middle Ages. Has literature ever pulsed with quite the same superb energy again? True they could be merciless bores—their readers too had iron stomachs. But with the later gain in grace there came a certain loss of vitality. It survives in some Elizabethans like Marlowe. Unfortunately Marlowe writes too much of the time as if he were drunk. Spenser, on the other hand, seen in retrospect through the haze of war, seems something of an owl—an unusually lovely and melodious white owl. In Elysium Chaucer and Shakespeare sit smiling together: Spenser broods under the Elm of Dreams alone.

Yet even Shakespeare changes perpetually with the changes of the world. To the eighteenth century he was a versified compendium of moral and political wisdom, the Solomon of poetry. To the Romantics he was a divine spirit—sometimes, as with Coleridge, a rather nauseous sort of seraph, with all his improprieties laid on the shoulders of the Elizabethan actors who, poor things, had no haloes to lose. To the twentieth century, influenced by Shaw, Wells, and Aldous Huxley, he has tended to become instead a musical genius, who sang like an angel and thought like poor Poll. “Only three characters”—“no ideas worth twopence”—but what “words, words, words!”

If this last view were true, it is hard to see why a poetic anthology of Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans should not be a better book than Shakespeare. There are cadences as sweet in Beaumont and Fletcher, lines yet more terrible in Webster, metaphors as amazing in Beddoes. Certainly it remains true, though Communists have certified Shakespeare's Marxism and Fascists staged *Coriolanus* as propaganda, that

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never writer cared less about what are horribly called "ideologies." He was, in the great Lord Halifax's sense, "a trimmer"—a man of the centre, with a loathing for tyrants and a smiling distrust for mobs. Sometimes he cared too little for ideas. He will huddle up the end of a comedy with some monstrous marriage in a way more fundamentally frivolous than anything in Chaucer.

And yet if he cared little what party men were loyal to, the Few or the Many, Republic or Empire, Red Rose or White, he cared greatly that men should be loyal. If he cared little what causes men fought for (too little in a play like *Henry V*), he cared intensely that they should fight with courage, honour, and mercy. He was a great heart, as well as a great mouth. And because of that he could make great men talk and live as if they were really great. Shakespeare surpassed his fellow-Elizabethans, not because he was a greater thinker or could turn a lovelier line, but because, over and above his technical gifts, he was a finer person. Who else among them could have conceived Hamlet or Imogen?

Webster's *White Devil* at her trial in Rome is to me a more dazzling piece of evil than *Lady Macbeth*; but an episode like that where Antony's generosity breaks the heart of Enobarbus lay beyond Webster's reach. Ben Jonson's *Muse*, again, like his wife, was "a shrew, but honest"; his touch is too dry and hard. The "gentle" Shakespeare sounds mealy-mouthed to a generation that piques itself on being "tough-minded"; but it was the word of men who knew—

that noble countenance

Wherein the worship of the whole world lies.

So with that other noble countenance of the same century—*Pierre Ronsard*. Shakespeare one guesses at, behind his

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curtain; Ronsard one learns to know as a friend; yet both leave that impression of fineness which I believe essential to the finest literature.

Vous ne devez pourtant, et fussiez-vous princesse,
Jamais vous repentir d'avoir aimé Ronsard.

Because—

O beaux yeux qui m'étiez si cruels et si doux,
Vous m'ôtâtes du coeur tout vulgaire penser.

No doubt in youth he was a pedant; no doubt he wasted himself too much on baggages and blue-stockings who but for him would be forgotten dust; but I know no lovelier voice than seems to murmur of itself from his printed page. Sanity, gaiety, pity—these three cannot make poetry, without genius also; yet without them genius itself becomes only a beautiful horror, an accomplished curse.

But a closer friend even than Ronsard to me—the companion, in fact, who most often drives with me through the night—is his contemporary, Michel de Montaigne. I found him first in hospital during the last world-war; now he accompanies me through another; but he is used to wars. Born in an age as brutal as ours, the product of “race-defilement,” with a Jewish refugee mother; living in a divided France, part in the grip of an invader, part poisoned by the rottenness of the last Valois; in a Europe torn between grappling fanaticisms and darkened by the giant shadow of Spain, under an autocrat whose only recorded laughter was at the news of St. Bartholomew; going to bed each night, for years, without knowing whether he would wake to find his roof in flames—through it all Montaigne still kept his liveliness, his poetry, his head and heart. “Sçachons gré au sort de nous avoir fait

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vivre en un siècle non mort, languissant, ny oysif. Les bons historiens fuyent, comme une eau dormante et mer morte, des narrations calmes, pour regagner les seditions, les guerres, où ils sçavent que nous les appellons." So wrote what Pascal (that maniac of genius) called "le mol et lâche Montaigne." A curious consolation: but it served. I have often recalled those words since 1939.

I like Montaigne because he was so alive; because, though sceptical and ironical, he never became cynical; because, though seeing through so many things, he still held life an art, and the finest of them all, instead of brooding on its nastiness like Swift, or Mr. Aldous Huxley in his more poisoned moods, or that type of pre-war poetry which sat croaking and grovelling in the dust, like a great wet hen huddled on a clutch of addled eggs. Montaigne would have none of this "esprit maladif, rabat-ioye." "Quand ie danse, ie danse; quand ie dors, ie dors." Pleasures are wind? "Mais quoi! Nous sommes par tout vent; et le vent, encore plus sagement que nous, s'ayme à bruire, à s'agiter." "Je veux qu'on agisse sans cesse, que la mort me treuve plantant mes chous" (already the garden of Candide). To-day the bigotries of Philip are dust in the Escorial, and the perfidies of Catherine de Médicis in St. Denys, and the Inquisition a faded nightmare in the tapestries of history; whatever new horrors reign in their stead, these at least are gone down to execration or oblivion; but that little candle still twinkles high in the tower-window of Montaigne.

Somehow I do not find such friends in the seventeenth century (always excepting Dorothy Osborne and dear ridiculous old Fuller). I can enjoy poets whose personalities I detest;

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but aesthetic admiration with personal sympathy—these are the perfection of a book. Yet seventeenth-century writers tend to be a little hard, or odd, or fanatical, or (by reaction) frivolous. The golden dawn of the Renaissance has faded: the calm sunset splendour of the eighteenth century has yet to come. Melancholy Burton is a little mad; so is Bunyan; Sir Thomas Browne's company is rather like that of a charming old mummy; Samuel Butler never learnt that even good jokes can last too long. Herrick is supernaturally natural; but it is doubtful if that pleasant elderly round hobgoblin had a soul. The young Milton is a young archangel; but his arteries hardened early and his touch grew marble, till he turned, still living, into a noble monument. He has been decried as bogus by creatures too small themselves to see the size of anything great; still I prefer him flesh and blood, in his youthful work.

Then there are Donne and Dryden, idols of the generation before the war. Great writers both, but not divine. Donne was dear to an age that canted ceaselessly about sincerity, because he was harsh. Truth is often harsh: so, of course, what is harsh must be true. And he was doubly dear because difficult—as if there were anything easier for a writer than to be difficult, or more difficult than to be easy. As well think a man a great mind because one sees him doing crosswords in the train. More than ever now, Donne seems great, not by being a Metaphysical (Milton's "Fantastic" is a better name), but in spite of being a Metaphysical—at moments when that cynical, cruel, clever smile fades away and he cries out as directly as Burns, but more wittily. Dryden too was praised as having no ideals, no romance, no "yearnings". He was not so bad, nor so good, as such critics supposed. "Poet squab" as they called him in his own day, had a fine, a clear, at times

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a noble voice; though when he measures himself against Chaucer or Milton, it is best to look away.

Indeed about the wits of Charles and the greater wits of Louis (except Molière) there clings a *sécheresse* that reminds me of Madame du Deffand's judgment on Madame de Maintenon: "Il me reste de cette lecture beaucoup d'opinion de son esprit, peu d'estime de son coeur, et nul goût pour sa personne." And yet style is there. Not for us to belittle the seventeenth century. It too saw an aggressor threaten Europe; but he was the master of Racine and Molière, Vauban and Fénelon, not of Himmler and Rosenberg.

Ces belles Montbazon et ces Châtillon brillantes,
Dansant avec Louis sous des berceaux de fleurs,

have an appeal not obvious in Herr Julius Streicher. And if England then endured a dictator, it was a dictator who did not reign by torture, but abolished it; who did not persecute nor "appease," but spoke with no stammering voice the anger of England against the butchers of the Pays de Vaud.

All the same I always come back to the eighteenth century with a sense of coming home. To visit Milton in Bunhill Fields would be an august, but awful venture. To call on Mr. Pepys at the Admiralty would be delightful; but how many things one could hardly talk of! The wits of Whitehall would grow wearisome, like the sun on brass; Versailles must have been full of a boredom relieved only by malice. But with Fontenelle, or Diderot, or Hume, or Madame d'Épinay—how easy to talk to them, after the first superficial formality! These people had taken the measure of life. They might lapse into easier optimism than we; but at heart they knew. They knew to

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how many things the only answer is a smile, a shrug of the shoulders, the touch of a hand.

Arlequin. Dans cent ans d'ici nous serons tout de même.

Silvia. Sans doute.

Arlequin. Il n'y a donc rien à craindre, m'amie; tenons nous donc joyeux.

Silvia. Nous souffrirons peut-être un peu; voilà tout.

Voilà tout. So simple, so graceful, with not a word too many. It is astonishing to reflect that it is also true; as if a china shepherdess suddenly came to life and tripped along the mantelpiece. Only a minor writer, Marivaux; but of an age that saw strangely clear. "Nous sommes pauvres avec les richesses de tout l'univers; et bientôt, à force d'avoir des soldats, nous n'aurons plus que les soldats, et nous serons comme les Tartares." Thus Montesquieu foretold "total war." But meanwhile even war was still human. "Je voyais," writes that delightful type of his century, the Prince de Ligne, from the siege of Belgrade, "avec un grand plaisir militaire et une grande peine philosophique s'élever dans l'air 12000 bombes que j'ai fait lancer sur ces pauvres infidèles." In 1759 a jeweller of Grenoble offered the French War Ministry the formula for an inextinguishable fire. Experiments succeeded. But Louis XV had the man sent home to Grenoble, with a pension to hold his tongue. And yet Louis XV is hardly the eighteenth century at its best.

That society perished; in France it perished horribly; but in the the world of 1941 I remember with gratitude not only the glittering swordsmanship of Voltaire, the granite integrity of Johnson, the smiling wisdom of Gibbon and Montesquieu, but also the brave grace of so many men and women long

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forgotten—what the Chevalier de Boufflers calls in speaking of his mother and his wife, “cette noble égalité d’humeur, cette franche liberté d’esprit . . . et ces caprices innocents, et ces traits inattendus, et cette grâce indéfinissable, et en même temps *cette simplicité incorruptible*.” “Je me regrette,” smiled the young Vicomtesse d’Houdetot as she lay dying. Well she might.

But it is hard for man to be happy unless drunk—with youth or passion, faith or art or work. The age tried to live too dryly (though it produced the loveliest thing man has ever produced, the music of Mozart). Rousseau was bound to come. And the Romantics had one great advantage—they wrote far better poetry. It is foolish, I think, to sneer at Romanticism like that clique of pre-War intellectuals who called themselves “Classicists,” though Johnson would have spurned them with disgust and Pope composed them another *Dunciad*.

Yet here I find I have all the wrong preferences: and the War has only made them more incorrigible. Wordsworth tears one between admiration and repulsion. It is like eating an excellent apple in woollen gloves. Apart from the miracle of the *Ancient Mariner*, the years seem to make Coleridge only shabbier and flabbier. The ecstasies of Shelley were always unbearable. And even ecstasies about Keats strike cold to-day. If he had written more things like “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”! But much of the rest seems too lush; one cannot but remember at moments George Moore’s remark about the “pussy-cat on a sunny lawn.” Yet it was a brutal remark, when one thinks through what mazes of agony that sunny lawn led at last to the Pyramid of Sestius. One day out in the Campagna the dying Keats came on a great scarlet Cardinal snaring little birds

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with a decoy-owl and a looking-glass. No poet's brain ever conceived grimmer symbol of Life and the Poet.

But in the stress of to-day other, less remembered poets are with me more—the leonine grace of Landor, the great moments of the energy of Byron, the harsh yet kindly good sense of Crabbe, or some wild meteor that flares for an instant through the midnight imagination of Beddoes. And as the century passes, the metaphysical mopings of the Amiels and Senancours, Cloughs and Arnolds, produce now, I find, some of the irritation roused in Johnson by poor Bozzy's venturings into the same intense inane. Lost their faith, had they? They had not found Hitler. Unjust, no doubt. All sorrows are relative. Yet, as a result, "Dover Beach" grows a little faint; but not—far from it—"Sohrab and Rustum."

This is not just a raw craving for nothing but *Marseillaises*. Other work of the period in very different mood still keeps its power. But then the style must be supremely good—the Mozartian grace of Musset, the flawless crystal mirror of "The Lady of Shalott," the bitter perfection of *Madame Bovary*. It is the too aesthetic, sensuous, posing style that drops to-day to dust. Despite his gifts, I could not now with much patience read Pater—too like the lovely corpse of his absurd Emerald Uthwart; nor Rossetti's *House of Life*, despite its magnificent moments. But "The King's Tragedy" endures.

Alone among them all Thomas Hardy foresaw and forefelt what was to come. His work stands unchanged, like some prehistoric rampart, vivid yearlong with the grass and gorse of centuries, never young, never older, under the restless skies of Egdon Heath. Sometimes lofty-minded rabbits nibble disparagingly there: but their toothwork leaves no trace. From the Victorians he and Morris stand out for me—men full of

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wisdom and pity; though Morris was the happier because, like a Renaissance genius, he mastered a dozen manual arts at once (whereas Hardy dropped his architecture); and that is healthier than the cramped, dyspeptic specialism of modern writers, chained like galley-slaves to their pens. The world has never cared for *Sigurd the Volsung* (with all its imperfections, perhaps the most heroic poem on earth); but I have been consoled by finding that the same was felt about it by men better than the world—McTaggart the philosopher and Lawrence of Arabia.

At first the twentieth century seemed as if it might continue the nineteenth. It was not gifts that were wanting to men like Chesterton, Belloc, Shaw, de la Mare; though it is as hard on a writer to succeed a great age as to be the son of a great father. But we were doomed to be children of wrath. Our lives have passed in wars or expectation of wars. And what a strange, squalid Feast of Fools seem now those twenty wasted years between the two Armageddons! First, the Armistice; the pathetic, well-meaning face of Wilson amid the packed cheers of Piccadilly; then, as the dream-cheers died away, processions of politicians leaving innumerable stations for innumerable conferences (good for the hotel-keepers); then the peoples of Europe beginning to pelt, with less pomp, after scraps of paper that inflated and inflated and floated into the blue and burst (so that the War which began with one scrap of paper ended with trillions). Indeed by now, to pseudo-intellectual eyes, everything had turned into scraps of paper—honour and honesty, truth and beauty, grace and goodness, loyalty and compassion. Not life only dropped to dust. The dead too, who had been naïve enough to believe

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in such things in the century before, were now dug up and gibbeted, like the dead Cromwell at Tyburn, amid the titters of a cultivated mob. The crackle of machine-guns gave place to the crackle of burning laurels. It was so easy to ape Lytton Strachey, so hard to equal him; so easy to acquire, not a smile like his, but a sneer.* The fields of literature became a sort of Debunker's Hill, where victory was cheap and certain, the enemy being safely dead; a kind of Valhalla where heroes of the pen might feast eternally on immortal Bores. But to praise Caesar was now to bury oneself. Over fiction too there crawled a London fog, in which all characters were cats or cads, and all were grey.

Inevitably the inhabitants of this City of Dreadful Blight turned feverishly to gather their rosebuds. But even as they gathered them, their cynic fingers twitched them, petal by petal, to heaps of withered leaves. The thorns remained. And so even Love was a fraud. Why believe in that, when all else was gone?

When Love came home from Flanders,
 (Now twenty bitter years),
There were wise tongues whispered slanders,
 There were bright eyes laughed their sneers.
The gold of his locks was whitened,
 His old impostures done:
No more should minds enlightened
 On Love's fool's errands run.
No more his wings rose gleaming
 Above that wasted world,
Where youth was cured of dreaming
 And lips that kissed, half curled.

* I have said harsh things here of pseudo-intellectuals. I mean them. But I do not mean them of true intellectuals like Lytton Strachey or Roger Fry or their immediate circle, whose worth and kindness I knew too well, whatever our differences of opinion.

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Even Nature grew a bore. She was full of vain repetitions as her cuckoos, as stupid and as cruel—even to some of the loveliest and best of that poisoned generation.

“I’m tired of Spring returning
With its April foolery still,
Of flowers, and young things yearning
For Life, that comes to kill.”

Bitter, her blue eyes faltered.
Now, a new spring’s astir.
But she—her view is altered.
Its flowers are over her.

And so in these years nature too was educated up to the general neurosis. The sunlight began to “creak”; the multitudinous seas (imitating the poet) learned to “yap like a Pekinese”; the skies filled with “epileptic larks”; the nightingales of Aeschylus now exhibited to a ravished public their “droppings.” For to the sewer all things are sewer.

Ever odder and more foolish grew the carnival-procession of this Vanity Fair—bright young things waving travel-journals in which they made a buffoonery of Saga Iceland, or yawned at the Acropolis of Athens, or exhausted the world in eighty pages, and the reader in less; and hollow men whimpering under prickly pear-trees, conceited still amid their grovellings because a prickly pear remains an exotic and highly intellectual plant; and literary critics of the selectest Minority, tight-lipped Calvins of Art, teaching the young to love literature by first loathing nine-tenths of it, and carrying their white and lofty foreheads with the self-important anguish of waiters staggering under towers of exquisitely brittle crockery. And since “Intellect” gave such dusty answers, no wonder

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there was a growing rush in the opposite direction, to the hog-troughs of the Unconscious. Under this slimy influence the revels grew wilder still. There appeared neo-primitive men bawling about "dark loins of Egypt" and the dead abominations of Aztec gods (and across their sadist caperings fell, as yet unnoticed, the shadow of the Swastika); and neo-mediaevalists homesick for the healthy intolerance of the Middle Ages, in a world loathsome with liberalism (and Adolf Hitler already sat contriving their heart's desire); and sophisticated gentlemen back from Spain full of the mystic beauty of bull-fights and the lovely colour of horses disembowelled (and soon in Spain it was to be better to be born horse or bull than man). And to complete this Bedlam here and there came floating down a buzz of gibberish from some choicer spirit withdrawn into an Ivory Tower of Babel, bumbling to himself in some conscientiously incomprehensible private language, while disciples flattened devoutly eavesdropping ears against the chinks below.

But though men may flee from the real world, the world, like the poor, is always there. On the cynical twenties followed the fanatical thirties. Behind this jamboree of the "intelligentsia" there loomed the serried columns, like marching ants, of the Left and Right—dour young proletarians to whose bloodshot eyes all stars were red, with a camp-following of parlour Communists with boy-scout daydreams about barricades and a touching faith that by being vulgar they were being of the people; and on the other side more sinister hordes of brutes in shirts, headed by German professors dancing round a genealogical tree of cardboard labelled "Aryan" or handing out pamphlets on the eugenic benefits of bombing slums.

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But Vanity Fair had no ears for that tramp of marching feet. The fun grew only wilder with the entry of a new masquerade, the Surrealists, drunk on the lowest dregs of the Unconscious—a procession of asses with the wings of bats, of jabberwocks necklaced with entrails and riding on grand pianos. What had seemed a scene from Breughel became a nightmare from Hieronymus Bosch.

And yet an even stranger sight came next. All this jackanapery had enacted itself far enough from the eyes, ears, or ideas of the honest British public, which asked only to go on in peace with its work and its cup-ties and its dirt-tracks and its dogs. Nor did it much interest the gentlemen of England who might visit this sort of foolery a little in youth, by way of intellectual wild oats at the University, but soon settled down to the more serious business of City or County. But now into the midst of this Carnival of Fools there marched with the solemnity of Mayor and Corporation, the great Conservative Party. In a long crocodile they came, pacing slowly backwards, with umbrellas held tightly before their eyes and their ears stuffed with pieces of paper signed "Adolf Hitler" against the cries of peoples tortured and betrayed. One might have thought the English would have had enough of such scraps of paper, since twenty years before, instead of adoring them like the Brazen Serpent in that Wilderness which Europe was become. But no. And then, one day, this serpent struck. And in a twinkling the Feast of Fools stood empty. It was time.

In France the interbellum had produced one typical masterpiece—*À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. It helps a little to explain why we are now "*À la recherche de la France perdue*." Proust's great book, though modern, remains highly civilized ("water-

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jelly" it was accordingly called by D. H. Lawrence). It is a cankered rose, not stinging-nettle or toadstool. Yet it is the masterpiece of a crumbling world. For Proust all human relations are illusory as a madman babbling to his furniture. Love has only one reality—its agonies. Happiness has only one use—to bring after it that unhappiness which goads our indolence to analyse. Life has only one kind of Paradise—"des Paradis perdus."

It is the cry of a great weariness. And the only truly old are the tired. For this section of France, death—and Vichy—were near. "C'est avec une dureté triomphale qu'il répétait sur un ton uniforme, légèrement bégayant et aux sourdes résonnances sépulchrales: 'Hannibal de Bréauté, mort! Antoine de Mouchy, mort! Charles Swann, mort! . . .'" And there was none now to cry "Debout les morts!"

No wonder to the Nazis France seemed finished. And yet, in contrast to them, how intelligent this sick dreamer in his asphyxiating bedroom, how sensitive, how brave—a dying man painting with indomitable delicacy his desert world! It was not indeed always as desert as his logic painted it—"sans doute ce n'est pas le bon sens qui est la chose du monde la plus répandue, c'est la bonté. Dans les coins les plus lointains, les plus perdus (how this word recurs!), on s'émerveille de la voir fleurir d'elle-même, comme dans un vallon écarté un coquelicot pareil à ceux du reste du monde, lui qui ne les a jamais vus, et n'a connu que le vent qui fait frissonner parfois son rouge chaperon solitaire." All quite inconsistent, for him. But what a writer! His heart was better than his theories. Here for a moment, behind the *pourritures* of his Baalbec and his Faubourg St. Germain, one feels that solid worth of the French people on which France will one day be built again.

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But not in a day. On the delicate decadence of Proust followed, inevitably, a decadence less delicate—Céline. It is a brilliantly clever book, that *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* which would better have called itself *Voyage au Bout de la Boue*. Proust's world falls to dust; Céline's, to slime. Before that final sneer all withers; above all, the courage of the Marne and Verdun. We are coming near to Vichy now—that Vichy, with the conscience of Talleyrand and the brains of the last Bourbons, which even handed back its German refugees to the Nazi butcher. Once, before the writers of France had learned to laugh at courage, Marot had written—

Prenez hault cuer doncques, France et Bretagne,
Car si en camp tenez fiere façon,
Fondre verrez devant vous Allemagne,
Comme au soleil blanche neige et glaçon.

But "high hearts" and "proud bearing" are not the Vichy way: if they read anything but the Führer's speeches, it should surely be Villon:

L'ung vault l'autre; c'est a mau chat mau rat.
Ordure aimons, ordure a nous assuit;
Nous deffuyons onneur, il nous desfuit,
En ce bordeau où tenons nostre etat.

But no, they cannot read Villon at Vichy: even Villon mourned the Maid of Lorraine.

I am not saying, as it may seem, that France made her "Voyage au Bout de la Nuit" because Céline wrote it; nor that our hollow men of Munich were engendered of our own rat-poets and literary quislings. I say that both were part of the same larger thing—of something rotten in France and

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England. I grant most willingly that much admirable writing was produced in those twenty years. To name only one who is newly dead, there was that noble old knight-errant who never betrayed his high calling—Henry Nevinson. But decent writers tended to find themselves in a No Man's Land between the crude Many and the finicking Few. The "Progress" of the period was set dead for the City of Destruction.

"The herring," say the Turks, "rots from the head." In France the political head was luminous with rottenness; in England the head still remained more thick than rotten. For years in its fuddled way the British ruling party had sacrificed country to class. But when it came to selling England open-eyed, that was another matter. They would give their lives sooner. They would even give their money. To Munich and Compiègne France was led by many knaves and some fools. England by many fools and some knaves. On that difference, and the Channel, and Fighter Command, turned the destinies of Man.

I do not think that the future historian, studying the "advanced" art of that era, will fail to see the connection with its history. Like peace, and war, life too is "indivisible." *Tout se tient*. A public tends to get the literature it deserves: a literature to get the public it deserves. The values men pursue in each, affect the other. They turn in a vicious, or a virtuous, circle. Only a fine society could have bred Homer: and he left it finer for hearing him. From Homer's day to the nineteenth century it was never doubted how deeply books moulded men. Pagan philosophers and Christian ecclesiastics deplored it: they were the last to deny. One may hold, on the contrary, that Euripides understood men and morals a good deal better than Plato; that Aucassin preferring Hell with

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Nicolette and the grace and gaiety of life to a Heaven of joyless bigots was choosing a better part than the orthodoxy of his day. In any case these rebel writers were not turning away from the problems of life: they were trying to face them better.

It was in the nineteenth century that the chatter began about "Art for Art's sake" and the Ivory Tower which Alfred de Vigny built himself for austerer ends was converted gradually to an aesthetes' boudoir. The poet, whom Plato vainly tried to banish from the republic, now banished himself. Art became the opium of the "intellectual." A blob of mud was pronounced as good a subject as a Sibyl of Michelangelo. Strange willingness to abdicate a great power. But no doubt it seemed lofty to be above good and evil; and pleasant to shelve responsibility. The butterfly travels light: they forgot that it cannot soar high.

But the totalitarian states of to-day have never shared this illusion. The Nazis are of Plato's mind that even a new kind of music may overset a state. It would, indeed, be interesting to know how much they themselves owe to Wagner. Certainly they have robbed Poland of Chopin and the rest of her culture (thoughtfully providing pornography by way of *Ersatz*) as wolfishly as they have robbed her of her land. First they burnt their own books; then Warsaw and Rotterdam. It is interesting that savages should have more respect for the power of literature than most of the literary. When I wrote in 1933 that the Nemesis of the decadent intellectual was the Nazi brute, and that it would be better for Europe that the French should march into Berlin every five years than to let Hitler rearm, the first was thought as fantastic as the second blood-thirsty. But I do not see to-day much cause to recant.

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I am not suggesting that the highest form of literature is the tract. Those teach most who preach least; who influence less by what they say than by what they are. For me, Milton does more "to justify the ways of God," if that were possible, in one perfect *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* than in all the special pleading of *Paradise Lost*. And he has done far less to make a little juster the ways of Man, than Homer or Shakespeare who hardly seem to teach at all.

Nor am I suggesting that the finest personality makes the best writer. It is not enough to have a sense of values: one must be able to express them. It is not enough to produce Schiller's noble bores. Nor does it follow that a fine writer will be hero or angel in real life.

Think how Bacon shined,
The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind.

A man may easily have more than one personality; and the one that writes may be very different from the one that lives. Villon may have been an ugly customer on a dark night; but the Villon who wrote of the dead women of yesteryear, was moved to that pity for the world which lives deep in the greatest writers, from Homer to Shakespeare and Hardy—

Tears of eternity and sorrow
Not mine, but man's.

Parson Sterne may often have been a poor creature; but not the Sterne that created my Uncle Toby. Conversely there are "modern" writers with the most estimable personalities in private life; though no one who cares to read character through style can have been much surprised to hear that Mr. Ezra Pound had become the lackey of Mussolini on the radio of Rome. *Tout se tient*.

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But I do say that to ignore the values of real life in judging the values of literature, to talk as if art were a sublime bag of tricks, to care nothing whether a book is sordid, or whimpering, or cruel, is a new *trahison des clercs*, which has cursed our century. This does not mean returning to the prejudices of 1850 and screaming at *Jane Eyre* as immoral; the trouble with such judges was not that they treated literature as bearing on life, but that their view of life happened to be stupid. But I do hold, to make things perfectly clear by a concrete instance, that a critic could justly say of a work like *The Plumed Serpent* of D. H. Lawrence—"This book pleases many who are gifted: therefore it must have power to please. Even if fashion changes, that power will have been proved. But we should consider also, before we call this a book the world should value, whether men are as yet so safely civilized that it is well to feed them with daydreams of cruelty and barbarism. We should ask whether this strange figure in the wilderness, with its megalomania, its homesickness for savagery, its hatred of self-control and compassion and the intellect, was not in fact the John Baptist of Adolf Hitler. 'About the world I feel that nothing but a quite bloody, merciless, almost anarchistic revolution will be any good for this country; a fearful chaos of smashing up . . . and yet somehow I don't want to be in it.' So naïvely he wrote, in a letter. As regards Europe, his wish has been strangely fulfilled; as regards himself also. It would perhaps be harsh (for he was a sick man, warped in mind and body), but it would not be unjust, to add that, in his degree, he contributed to that coming chaos.

We fed the heart on fantasies:
The heart's grown brutal from the fare."

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But in recent years how many intellectual reviewers of work like his (except Mr. Desmond MacCarthy) would have cared or dared to take such a line? It would have been Victorian. Better dead! About moral issues the advanced critic had grown a moral coward. He preferred that criticism should go on wasting yet another century wrangling about aesthetics.

For our criticism has tried to do what it cannot do, and left undone what it should. For ages it was supposed that there existed an absolute Beauty, a sort of alabaster lady throned on a cloud; and that this alabaster lady would avert her face in horror from anyone, say, who wrote in rhyme (or in blank verse, according to prejudice), or spread the action of a play over twenty-four and a half hours, or three miles. There have been interminable wrangles whether a writer ought to take an ancient or a modern subject, whether a painter should or should not tell a story. Tasso was driven mad by such people and Corneille stuffed into an artistic strait-waistcoat. Finally it began to dawn that the alabaster lady does not exist; that taste is personal and beauty relative; that the only test of the pleasing is that it pleases; and that to argue on the subject is as intelligent as to argue whether spring or autumn is lovelier, waxy or mealy potatoes nicer. The Rules collapsed. Art became an Abbey of Thelema. Aesthetic criticism was seen (by some) to be a personal confession, an interpretation; not a judgment from the bench. Psychologists indeed can still sensibly argue *why* a thing pleases—why, for instance, there should be a craze for crime-stories; but *what* pleases, becomes a matter for experiment and observation, not for angry theories.

But the "effects" of art are one thing: its consequences another. The views and values held, or merely implied, by an

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artist remain highly relevant matters for judgment. They are interesting in themselves: they are important in their influence. On this side of things critics like Johnson and Sainte-Beuve instinctively concentrated. It may seem a highly medical view of Art. Why not? What in the world matters, as Montaigne so often repeated, so much as health—of body and soul? If there is anything in common between the dead writers who have been with me through these years of war, it is this—that great writing comes from *une âme bien née*, whether it be Homer or Herodotus, Horace or Tacitus, Chaucer or Shakespeare, Montaigne or Ronsard. Can you take from the work of Michelangelo the character of Michelangelo? It would be easier to rip the keystones from the vault of the Sistine Chapel.

I do not think that posterity will blush for the England of 1940: but I doubt if it will remember with much pride the England of 1919–39. We thought we could live snugly as rats in a cheese on what the dead of Flanders had left us. We thought we could conjure devils with paper incantations from an unarmed Geneva. We thought we could watch with feet on the mantelpiece, while the shrieks of the pogrom rose next door, and console ourselves for the murder of the weak by reading in *The Times* that, after all, they had no real business to exist. And so to the final degradation of 1938. "Peace with honour" he called it. And we cheered!

It was only consistent that in our advanced literature also our spacious sensibilities should swallow any cheapness or cowardice or charlatanism or cruelty, provided they were slick, or amusing, or simply pretentious enough to dupe the snob. *Tout se tient*. They were all such interesting sensations. One could not have too many sensations. What is art but a

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series of exquisite moments? We forgot that there are moments after. We forgot that law of cause and consequence, which the Greeks saw as an old woman, lame and hobbling—and yet one day her knock sounds on the door. We forgot Nemesis. But she did not forget us.

THE END

