UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY
OU_170882
UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OUP—23—4-4-69—5,000.

OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Call No. 809.91 I45M Accession No.

Author W. R. Inge

Title Modernism In Literature

This book should be returned on or before the date last marked below.

THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Presidential Address

1937

MODERNISM IN LITERATURE

BY

THE VERY REV. W. R. INGE

D.D., K.C.V.O.

November, 1937

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

MODERNISM IN LITERATURE

WHAT is 'Modernism'? The barbarous Latin word *modernus* (from *modo*, 'just now') occurs first in the sixth century, in the grammarian Priscian, and Cassiodorus, an official of Theodoric. In the twelfth century it was applied to the Nominalists by the Realists, and Roger Bacon called Alexander of Hales and Albert *duo moderni gloriosi*; even Thomas Aquinas was called a Modernist by the Platonists and Augustinians. During the Renaissance it was applied to the new humanistic ways of thought. In the seventeenth century a 'middle age' was intercalated between 'ancient' and 'modern'. Our own age will perhaps some day be called the middle age, unless they prefer to call it 'the meddle and muddle age'.

In religion the Pope recently gave the name of 'Modernist' to the school of historical criticism and religious philosophy associated with the names of Loisy, Blondel, Le Roy, and Laberthonnière in France, and George Tyrrell in England. It would take me too far from my subject to discuss this movement; I need only say that it was and is sharply opposed to Liberal Protestantism, like that of Harnack and his numerous disciples. In our country the Modern Churchmen's Union, which at first called itself 'Liberal', has now preferred the name of 'Modernist', without any intention of affiliating itself to the school of Loisy. A certain clash of opinions has shown itself in this Society.

In art we all know what 'Modernism' means. It prides itself on a repudiation of all traditions and all accepted canons of beauty, and shows an affinity both with the naïve artistic attempts of savages, and with the newest proletarianism in Russia. A modernist painter will cover his canvas with zigzags or depict a woman with green hair; a modernist sculptor will carve figures apparently suffering from elephantiasis or acromegaly; a modernist architect will put two or three packing-cases together and call it a house or a church. These phenomena are clearly pathological.

But what is Modernism in literature? This is a much more difficult question. Our best writers are moderns without being Modernists. And one of the features of our age is complete intellectual disintegration.

When I sat down to write this lecture I knew very well what were the tendencies against which I wished to lift up my voice. But how to classify them and bring them together—that was not so easy.

I thought of the time-honoured classification of literature as

classical and romantic. And I remembered how one of our impudent young criticasters says somewhere, 'There may be a place for romanticism in life; there is none in letters'. How easily our contemporaries allow themselves to be browbeaten and intimidated by this puppyism! And then I came upon a delightful new book by F. L. Lucas called, *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal.* Was this the diagnosis of the disease? Are we suffering for having discarded romance and gone back to—what? But unfortunately, if Modernism is a vague elusive term, romance and romanticism are even more so. The word began, it seems, as the name of vulgar Latin—*lingua Romanica* as opposed to *lingua Latina.* So it became the collective name of the languages based on Latin—Old French, Provençal, Spanish, and the rest. Then it was applied to the kind of literature written in those languages, chiefly fictitious stories. In the seventeenth century 'romantic' meant fabulous. In the eighteenth century it acquired the meaning which we now give to it; Gothic ruins, picturesque or wild scenery, ghosts and brigands, were romantic. Then, towards the close of the eighteenth century, appeared the unfortunate antithesis of romantic and classical, over which oceans of ink have been shed. Mr. Lucas knows of, and no doubt has read, 11,396 books on the subject.

But when we ask for definitions we are in utter confusion. 'Romanticism is disease, classicism is health', says Goethe. But what definition of romance could exclude *Faust* and the *Sorrows of Werther*? And is *The Ancient Mariner* morbid? Heine's description is 'a reawakening of the middle ages, a passion-flower blooming from the blood of Christ'. Mrs. Ward Campbell also calls Christ 'the first and greatest of the romantics'. She says, 'Romance is inseparable from a certain kind of faith in man, a mystical faith perhaps, not depending upon mundane manifestations of his power, but upon some sense of the inherent greatness of his soul—a hope perhaps that he is more than mortal. We are thrilled with romance when things have brought us some unexpected revelation of the value of human life. This spirit develops through the ages in close association with those twin children of imagination, religion and poetry.' She goes on to say that the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles 'lack tenderness, and except in a very limited direction they lack passion'. It was Christ who 'raised the value of the human being' as a human being. 'What He did for poetry is a subject of inexhaustible interest.' 'The lamp of love and hope, with its faith in the divinity of man, inspired all the middle ages. The romance of the middle ages was the romance of Christ.'

In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* we find 'that rare compound of mystical, religious, and human passion which descended to Marlowe and, only a little changed, to Shakespeare'.

Mrs. Ward Campbell, in *Shelley and the Unromantics*, expresses my notion of romanticism better than Mr. Lucas or the numerous writers whom he quotes. It is enough to say in answer to Heine, and to Sismondi, who defines it as a mixture of religion, love, and chivalry, that there is nothing medieval in Werther, and not much religion in Byron or William Morris.

Those who hate Rousseau (as I do) sometimes identify him with romanticism, and romanticism with revolution. But, as Mr. Lucas says, we cannot picture Newman or Christina Rossetti waving red flags. Other inadequate definitions are 'emotion against reason; everything excessive is poetic' (George Sand); 'the addition of strangeness to beauty' (Pater); 'the renascence of wonder' (Watts-Dunton); 'the opposite of realism' (Abercrombie). The word can mean as many inconsistent and irrelevant things as 'democracy' in the mouth of an American. It will not help us much to-day.

But we must pause over Mr. Lucas's own definition. 'Romanticism is a dream-picture of life, providing sustenance and fulfilment for impulses cramped by society and reality.' The author is a Freudian, and uses Freud's theories and terminology, in which I cannot follow him. But that romance is often a kind of day-dream, an escape, is, I think, true. This may account for the unfortunate habits of many romantics, who, desiring to live in happy dreams, resorted to opium, like de Quincey, Coleridge, Wilkie Collins, and Francis Thompson; to chloral, like Rossetti, or to alcohol, like Lamb. The French romantics were on the whole a disreputable crew, much worse than ours. For we can point to Scott, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, and others, who might have defied a mad-doctor to do his worst, and were even un-romantic enough to live happily with their wives.

The swing of the pendulum explains many things in human life, and another useful principle is that great periods supervene upon the partial fusion of two currents. Thus classical Greece was born of the conquest of a Mediterranean people by northern Aryans; Christianity of the fusion of Hellenistic with Semitic (Jewish) religious traditions; the Renaissance of the superposition of revived Hellenism upon the 'romantic' (if we like to use the word) civilization of the Middle Ages. The late-flowering English Renaissance cannot be called either classical or romantic, for it was both. The Elizabethans gave due honour to the imagination, but it was curbed by sanity and a sense of proportion.

But the time came when the three absolute Values—Truth, Goodness, and Beauty—lost their ideality. Truth came to mean prose. 'Truth and actions are what they are,' said Bishop Butler, 'and the consequences of them will be what they will be; why then should we wish to be deceived?' D'Alembert (quoted by Mr. Lucas) claims it as a triumph of his time that nothing is now said in poetry that is not sensible enough to be said in prose. Goodness came to mean conventional propriety; she crowned a man adorned with a periwig (*perruquisme* in French). Beauty fared rather better, since fine things were still produced; but it was absolutely blind on one side. 'Take away these *magots!*' said Louis XIV when he was shown Dutch paintings. And Molière interpreted his age when he spoke of—

> Le fade goût des monuments gothiques,
> Ces monstres odieux des siècles ignorants.

For Voltaire, Shakespeare is a 'low savage, whose works are an enormous dunghill of abominable balderdash'. Mr. Lucas quotes from Francis Fawkes (1761) his version of the Song of Deborah: 'He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish':

> He asked refreshment from the limpid wave;
> The milky beverage to the chief she gave.

A violent reaction was overdue, and it came. The first revolt was pure sentimentalism. 'Check not the kindly gush', says Sir Charles Grandison to a young lady. But readers of Margery Kempe will remember that the kindly gush flowed in torrents in the Middle Ages. It was as fashionable as the fainting (or feinting) fits of early nineteenth-century romanticism. The romantics soon came to live in a state of self-induced intoxication; 'feeling' was everything. Some of them walked with hands pressed on their chests to prevent the explosion of so much pent-up emotion.

Well, this affectation could not last long. It was, especially in France before the Revolution, in part at least the effect of the boredom which always afflicts a functionless class. The English aristocracy were not functionless; we could not say of them that their only pursuit was pleasure, though with some of them their only pleasure was, and still is, pursuit. England escaped the worst extravagances of romanticism; but I think it is true that after the collapse of the false romanticism of Walpole and Ossian and Chatterton, and Ashridge and Fonthill and Capability Brown, a wholesome romanticism might have lived longer but for the untimely deaths of Keats and Shelley, the septic dissolution of

Coleridge's genius, and the extinction of the inspiration of Wordsworth.

What followed was not a return to classicism, but a new development due to *science*, the grim Calvinistic God of the Victorian age. Zola was, for a whole generation, the prophet of naturalism in literature. There was to be no more free activity of the imagination. The novelist collected documents from the criminal courts or other sources and transcribed them. Human life being essentially mean, base, and dirty, it ought to be so described. We are invited to be present at farm-yard operations, and to watch an abandoned woman dying of confluent small-pox.

I am not sure that Zola founded a school in France; Charles Reade founded none in England. There are plenty of unpleasant books in French, but they are deliberately pornographic. Other influences invaded our literature, first Scandinavian, the school of Ibsen, and then Russian. I recognize the genius of some Russian writers, but their mentality seems to me quite alien to the West. Men and women seem to act from motives unintelligible to us. The *idiot-motiv* takes the place of the *bête humaine motiv.* I know that Wordsworth wrote a poem, which I cannot admire, called 'The Idiot Boy'; but the *idiot-motiv* comes from Russia. This is certainly not classical; we might call it romantic, if we hold that 'dreaming' is the essence of romance. In that case, much of modernist romanticism is a kind of nightmare; but I think *naturalism* is the right word.

The influence of science has been permanent, but it has partly changed its character. The human soul was the *last* part of nature to be investigated by science. For psychology is essentially a branch of natural science. If it aspires to be a philosophy, it encroaches beyond its proper sphere. Many modern writers think that they can explain mysticism as a branch of psychology. It cannot be done. The mystic cares nothing for states of consciousness as a subjective study. His claim, his conviction, is that he comes into contact with absolute truth and reality. But psychology is the favourite subject of the modern novel and of much modern poetry. The psychological novel, true to its naturalist prejudices, excludes religion and idealism; imagination has very little scope.

Meanwhile, the popular taste is still thoroughly romantic. It demands sentiment and emotion; it likes a little religion of a vague kind, and especially a great deal of sex, depicted romantically rather than physiologically.

On this last subject it is necessary to say something. Victorian literature left one rather large side of human nature unexplored—

namely, all the things that decent people know of but do not talk about. We all admit that Victorian prudery was carried to absurd lengths. Publishers and authors catered for a middle-class public, and the middle class disliked all the disreputable vices which had run riot during the regency and reign of George IV. There was a mania for covering everything up, from the *postscaenia vitae*, as Lucretius calls them, to chairs and mantelpieces. Ladies were not allowed to have legs, but only limbs, and even their ankles must be suspected, not displayed. The Americans draped even the 'limbs' of their pianos, and they still think it indecent to call a barn-door cock anything but a 'rooster', a ridiculous word which I was sorry to see the other day in an English writer who ought to have known much better. I forget whether it was Thackeray or Trollope who was compelled by his publisher to alter 'fat stomach' into 'deep chest'. And it was no publisher who made Thackeray write—

> But my trembling hand Up the beaker tilted,
> And the glass of ale Every drop I spilt it:
> Spilt it every drop (Dames who read my volumes
> Pardon such a word) On my what d'ye call 'ems.

The utterly unmentionable word was 'trousers'.

I can well remember the beginning of the removal of these taboos. As children, we were not encouraged to read *Adam Bede* or *Ruth*. When Hardy published *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a bishop (a very sensible bishop too) wrote to *The Times* to say that he had thrown the book out of a railway-carriage window. *Tess*, of course, was perfectly proper; it was unlucky that Thomas Hardy was unable to smile at the outcry, which almost reduced him to silence in prose. But the reaction has now gone too far. Art may be almost anything we like, except ugly, vulgar, and caddish. Nature has invested with awe and sanctity the unfathomable mysteries connected with birth and death. If these are stripped of their covering, the former becomes humiliating, the latter horrible. There is no use in arguing about such things. They are so; and all decent people know that they are. What is the use of shouting on the housetops things that we all know, and have agreed not to talk about? Gross want of taste comes very near to blasphemy against human nature. And this, as I hope to show, is the great sin of Modernism.

I have not read *Ulysses* or any of the works of D. H. Lawrence, so I must not speak of them; but there are others who seem to take a pleasure in tearing away all veils. I confess that I copied the

bishop whom I referred to just now, and threw my copy of one of them into the Adriatic.

There are other writers who would never commit offences against literary decency, but who, in my opinion, transgress both the rules of art and the interests of morality by exaggerating enormously the part which sex plays in a normal and healthy human life. We can only speak from our own experience of our fellow men, and certainly I should say that within my observation love and marriage are incidents, usually happy incidents, in the experience of a man and woman, but not devastating eruptions of an irresistible force. And the whole attitude of many modern writers to adultery is, to me, shameful and disgusting. Here, no doubt, it is the influence of continental fiction which has drawn our modernist writers away from the honourable tradition of English fiction from Scott downwards.

We must do our contemporaries the justice to recognize that in painting human life as it is, and not as it ought to be (that is how they put it to themselves), they honestly wish to call attention to social evils which perhaps might be curable if we were willing to look them in the face. A great many Englishmen are parsons *manqués*—indeed, a curiously large number of our great writers were 'intended for the Church' and gave up their intention. Our novelists generally end by becoming preachers, not to the benefit of their art. Tendentious novels aiming at political reforms were, till lately, very common and have been very popular. The discovery of 'the poor', as subjects for careful study and as a theme for comedy or more often for tragedy, is one of the features of nineteenth-century literature. Scott, Dickens, Wells, Bennett, yes, and Kipling, all played their part. Some useful bits of legislation were actually brought about in this way.

There is also a genuinely scientific interest in the psychological novel. The novelist, while exploring the motives of his imaginary characters, may at least throw a good deal of light upon his own, and possibly on some dark corners of human nature.

Further, graphic and accurate descriptions of life as lived in certain strata of society, at a certain time, and in a certain place, have a great value as documents of social history. Many books which would otherwise lose their interest will probably live as contributions to that kind of history which we now think most important. Such books as Wells's *Mr. Britling* are invaluable as a picture of the mentality of our countrymen in the earlier part of the Great War. This is of course no new feature in fiction; what is comparatively new is the attempt to draw accurately passing

phases in the life of civilization. Some very successful novels have followed the fortunes of a house, or a family.

But I have an indictment to bring against our modern writers as a whole, not excluding the most famous and the most popular. Thackeray was absurdly called a cynic because his *Vanity Fair* is 'a novel without a hero'. But even in *Vanity Fair* there is the excellent Dobbin; and in his other novels there is generally at least one character whom we are meant to love and can love. The same is true of all the writers in the great English tradition. But modern fiction paints human character as a drab, dull, ignoble thing. I do not wish to be unfair to great writers who have given me much pleasure, and for whom I have a great respect. But pass in review all the works of Bernard Shaw, Wells, Galsworthy, Aldous Huxley, and such minor lights (a very minor light in my opinion) as Arnold Bennett. Can you recall a single really noble character in any of them? Most of them write as if there was no such thing as religion or high-minded idealism. Their view of human nature seems to me ignoble. One of the characteristics of our race in the past has been its robust individualism, its faith in human nature, and in the power and value of independent action. It was the philosophy of a free country. But of late everything has tended to mechanize society, to cramp and destroy liberty, both in action and thought, to exalt the idea of the State and of collectivism. Carlyle contrasted the teaching of the Gospel, that social evils were the result of individual sin, that we had the remedy in our own hands by cleansing the inside of the cup that the outside might be clean also, with the gospel of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that the individual is always innocent, and society guilty, so that reformation must come from the outside, working inwards. This last theory is of course the basis of socialism. At first it sounds hopeful and optimistic, even charitable to human nature; but, as Anatole France says, 'if you begin by assuming that human nature is fundamentally good, you will end by wanting to kill all who disagree with you'.

I think there has been a great disillusionment about the prospects of social reform from outside. Before the war our prophets had already begun to speak with less confidence. Some thought that such writers as Shaw and Wells had already given their message. The effect of the war, and of all the miseries that followed it, was to increase this loss of nerve. The results were manifested in two directions. Some writers began to attack not the Victorian order but civilization itself. The habits and the art of the noble savage once more appealed to some, like the painter Gauguin in France,

who went to Tahiti, and I believe D. H. Lawrence. Others, without seeing any hope of remedy, lash out against civilization, like Aldous Huxley and Richard Aldington. In another direction writers transfer their interests from sociology to individual psychology. The great vogue of Freud gave an impetus to this study, but not, I think, a wholesome one. Freud has no use for religion, unlike his rival Jung; and he suffers from a morbid obsession with sex which is so obvious that such unsavoury and ridiculous theories as his 'Oedipus complex' ought not to have been taken seriously. This, I think, will be a passing fashion; but the dethronement of human nature, and the apparent intention to adopt the policy of the beehive or the termitary as the ideal for human societies, is a serious phenomenon, all the more because the devil may offer the nations security and aggrandisement as the price of freedom. 'All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me', in the guise of the God-State.

I have been reading Amiel again, and have been struck with the almost uncanny prescience with which he diagnoses evils which, at the time when he wrote, were still inchoate. It was in 1880 that he wrote the passage which follows, after reading a novel by Stendhal, *La Chartreuse de Parme*.

> Stendhal opens the series of the naturalistic novels, which suppress the intervention of the moral sense and mock the pretensions of free will. People are irresponsible; they are ruled by their passions, and the spectacle of the human passions is the delight of the observer and the pasturage of the artist. Stendhal is the novelist after Taine's heart, the faithful painter who is neither moved nor indignant, who is amused by everything, the rascal and the slut as well as by the good man and the decent woman, but who has neither belief nor preference nor ideal. Literature here is subordinated to natural history, to science; it is no longer one of the humanities, it no longer honours man with a rank apart; it ranges him with the ants, the beavers, and the monkeys. This indifferent non-morality encourages a taste for immorality, for the base has more savour than virtue. The vice of this whole school is cynicism, contempt for man, who is degraded to the rank of the brute; it is the cult of force, indifference to the soul, a lack of generosity, respect, nobility, which is visible despite all protestations to the contrary, in other words, inhumanity. One cannot be a materialist with impunity; refined as one's culture may be, one is gross nevertheless. A free mind is a great thing, surely, but elevation of heart, belief in the good, the capacity for enthusiasm and devotion, the thirst for perfection and sanctity, is a still finer thing.

I would only add that, since 'elevation of heart and belief in the good' are facts which we can see all around us in the world unless

we have been very unlucky, to ignore them and write as if they did not exist is to proclaim oneself an imperfect artist.

Perhaps they will defend themselves by saying that they draw life as they see it, and that the people whom they meet are convinced that religion is moribund. The fault is partly in the traditionalists, who have long insisted that the truth of Christianity stands or falls with the literal truth of certain events in the past and future. It is a peculiarity of theological architecture that the foundations are ingeniously supported by the superstructure. If men would approach the matter from the other side, and say that dogmas are often *unconscious* rationalizations of genuine religious experience, they would find themselves on firmer ground. And I do not think that either Shaw or Wells is really irreligious—nor Aldous Huxley. Hardy, I am afraid, was oppressed in his later books by the consciousness of fatality in a godless world.

So far I have been speaking of moderns, not modernists. I do not think we have any reason to be other than proud of the literature of the present century, though the great quantity of very good second-class work prevents the high summits from looking as imposing as they did in other times. We do not always do justice to the excellence of the English style which our best prose writers have achieved—some of the best, as it happens, are Americans. There is a workmanlike lucidity about it which may have been based on good journalism, but it is none the worse for that. I think the best modern English is as good as Steele and Addison, in whose time the beauty of English prose is often said to have culminated.

If I ever thought of making this lecture an attack upon Modernism in literature, it was not of these great names that I was thinking. I was thinking rather of tendencies which Mr. Lucas and Mr. Alfred Noyes have chastised with refreshing vigour. Mr. Noyes finds that truth has been split into countless fragments, as the result of which people are whirled into the idiotic folly of eccentric movements in art and letters. Is this, he asks, the beginning of the end of modern civilization? I do not think so; to fear this is to take the shock caused by the war as a fatal constitutional disease. Human nature has a marvellous power of righting itself; expel it with a pitchfork, says the old proverb, it will always come back. If the matter were not so tragic, one might smile at the notion that the most deep-rooted racial habits—religion, private ownership, the family, and patriotism—can be uprooted in one generation by a gang of revolutionaries. Russia, if I am not mistaken, has been through the fever,

and is coming out into something more like her old self. I have no doubt that cubism and futurism and most of *vers libre* will soon pass into limbo.

But though we may be confident that the rebellion, in literature as in art and politics, will soon work itself out, it must be admitted that it has been more blatant and offensive than other revolts against the ideas and canons of earlier generations. We all like to put the household gods of our parents in a cupboard or on a scrap-heap; but earlier rebellions have generally claimed to be *revivals*; some of our young lions, on the contrary, are out only to destroy and insult. Noyes speaks of 'a hundred thousand rebels all chanting exactly the same thing, a perennial song of hate against the things that are more excellent'. I doubt if there are as many as a hundred thousand. It is a log-rolling business; they review each other's books, and by sheer arrogance intimidate both editors and readers.

There is no old and new literature; there is only literature. There is a vital tradition in literature as in art. St. Paul speaks of the many-coloured wisdom of God. There is a many-coloured beauty in poetry. Both wisdom and beauty are revelations of the Divine, objectively real, because they are visions of Him who is objectively real, the *Valor valorum* of Nicholas Cusanus. 'Poetry', says Professor Ker, 'has not to be invented anew and is not to be trifled with. Anyone can preach up the ancients. But the poet who belongs to a great tradition of art is in a different case altogether. His poetic life is larger than himself, and it is a real life.'

Those only can contribute anything of value to the future of their country to whom her past is dear. There can be no entirely fresh beginnings in an old civilization. We must allow, as I have said already, for natural swings of the pendulum. The eighteenth century could not appreciate Gothic art or romantic literature; the nineteenth left off reading Pope and Dryden. But to refuse a meed of respect to great periods of literary production is sheer barbarism and vulgarity.

What is the true rank of the Victorian age in literature? I will content myself with quoting the words of that very fine critic of our literature, the Frenchman Cazamian.

> During the middle and the final years of the nineteenth century the English mind knows deeper and fuller vibrations than at any other moment in the history of its growth; one feels in it at once the refreshed and still living remembrance of its Elizabethan youth, the lucid self-mastery which it owes to the long schooling of classicism, and the renewed vigour of the romantic revival. All these influences and these

memories combine in the thought and the art of a literary age which, when the ephemeral injustice of reaction has spent itself, will probably come to be looked upon as the most powerful and the greatest among all the periods of English culture.

This is the period against which every ass now lifts up his heel. It was no reactionary, it was Mazzini, who protested with the righteous indignation of a noble soul against such sacrilege.

Because we now stand on the threshold of a new epoch, which but for them we should not have reached, shall we now decry those who were unable to do more for us than to cast their giant forms into the gulf that held us all doubting? I feel the necessity of protesting earnestly against the reaction set on foot by certain thinkers against the mighty souled, which serves as a cloak for the cavilling spirit of mediocrity. There is something hard, repulsive, and ungrateful in the destructive instinct which so often forgets what has been done by the great men who preceded us, to demand of them merely what might have been done. Those only should dare to utter the sacred name of Progress whose souls possess intelligence enough to comprehend the past, and whose hearts possess sufficient poetic religion to reverence its greatness. The temple of the true believer is not the chapel of a sect; it is a vast Pantheon.

I will not expatiate on the original performances of the rebels in poetry. One good reason is that I have not read them. In literature I prefer the dead lion to the live dog, and the scraps of modernist poetry that have come my way seem to sound the depths of vulgarity, ugliness, and bad taste. But about their abuse of their great predecessors I must say a few words.

Their favourite butt is Tennyson, who after Milton and Shelley is probably the greatest artist in verbal music who ever wrote in English. 'He represented his own age', of course; who can do much more? and, as I have said, it was a very great age. But he represented it in its self-criticism, by his unsparing denunciations of what seemed to him to be false and wrong in it. He can be as fierce as Ruskin. 'He brings the new science into his poetry.' He does it sparingly; but Tyndall said that he understood the drift of modern science better than any poet since Lucretius. As for his originality, he had to educate his public, like Wordsworth and Browning; his first critics thought him unintelligible, and Coleridge, in one of the worst blunders ever made by a critic, said that he did not understand metre. He took infinite trouble with his poetry, repeatedly altering and correcting, generally for the better. Perhaps this is part of the indictment against him, for modernist poetry can hardly have cost its creator much labour.

The dislike of Tennyson is no doubt in part literary Bolshevism. He is part of the culture which the revolution wishes to destroy, as the early Christians, I am sorry to say, smashed the statues of Greek gods and heroes, and the soldiers of Cromwell defaced old churches. Every now and then the subman within us, who wishes to destroy whatever others revere, breaks out. The damage which he does, so far as it goes, is irreparable.

But if I am not mistaken, the special gravamen against Tennyson is that he wrote the *Idylls of the King*. I can remember when these little green volumes came out one by one, and the *furore* which they caused among all educated people. There was hardly a dissentient voice. Now even the admirers of Tennyson do not say much about the *Idylls*. Why?

The subject perhaps was not happily chosen. We remember that Milton thought of taking King Arthur and his knights as the subject of his Epic, and his very odd reason for changing his mind. His reason was that he could not be sure of the historicity of King Arthur, whereas there could be no doubt that Adam and Eve, Satan and Raphael, were real persons. What Milton would have made of the Round Table I cannot guess. He was neither a fighting man nor a mystic—hardly the man to sing of tournaments or of the quest of the Holy Grail.

Tennyson meant his poem to be an allegory, like Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. But it is not a successful allegory, and most readers forget that it is meant to be an allegory. Sir Thomas Malory's Round Table is too great a work of genius to suffer being Victorianized. As for the character of King Arthur, absurdly compared to the Prince Consort, that excellent but faintly ridiculous figure who in some ways was too good for his generation, I cannot join those who decry it. The critics object to the Queen being shown up as an adulteress, and cannot forgive Tennyson for *not* exposing the King to derision as a cuckold. On this I need say no more.

But we do not throw aside *Paradise Lost* because the subject is impossible. We read it for its marvellous style. And I say deliberately that the style of the *Idylls* is almost as great as that of Milton. We must read them slowly to appreciate it.

Well, I hope it will be understood that I have been first remonstrating respectfully with our leading writers for not bringing out in their books the divine and noble side of human nature, and then saying what I think, not at all respectfully, of an arrogant and blatant clique of critics and poetasters. I hope it is quite clear that I have not spoken disrespectfully of any of our genuine living poets, nor of writers in prose who are undoubtedly modern,

since they are still alive, but not modernist in my sense. Whether we are on the eve of a great literary revival, such as followed the war with Napoleon, I cannot guess. I hardly think it. The century of hope has been followed by a century of deep uncertainty and dark forebodings. Civilization will have to be more sure of itself before it can produce another crop of exquisite flowers.