

Old and New Masters eBook

Old and New Masters by Robert Wilson Lynd

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DOSTOEVSKY THE SENSATIONALIST

Mr. George Moore once summed up *Crime and Punishment* as “Gaboriau with psychological sauce.” He afterwards apologized for the epigram, but he insisted that all the same there is a certain amount of truth in it. And so there is.

Dostoevsky’s visible world was a world of sensationalism. He may in the last analysis be a great mystic or a great psychologist; but he almost always reveals his genius on a stage crowded with people who behave like the men and women one reads about in the police news. There are more murders and attempted murders in his books than in those of any other great novelist. His people more nearly resemble madmen and wild beasts than normal human beings.

He releases them from most of the ordinary inhibitions. He is fascinated by the loss of self-control—by the disturbance and excitement which this produces, often in the most respectable circles. He is beyond all his rivals the novelist of “scenes.” His characters get drunk, or go mad with jealousy, or fall in epileptic fits, or rave hysterically. If Dostoevsky had had less vision he would have been Strindberg. If his vision had been aesthetic and sensual, he might have been D’Annunzio.

Like them, he is a novelist of torture. Turgenev found in his work something Sadistic, because of the intensity with which he dwells on cruelty and pain. Certainly the lust of cruelty—the lust of destruction for destruction’s sake—is the most conspicuous of the deadly sins in Dostoevsky’s men and women. He may not be a “cruel author.” Mr. J. Middleton Murry, in his very able “critical study,” *Dostoevsky*, denies the charge indignantly. But it is the sensational drama of a cruel world that most persistently haunts his imagination.

Love itself is with him, as with Strindberg and D’Annunzio, for the most part only a sort of rearrangement of hatred. Or, rather, both hatred and love are volcanic outbursts of the same passion. He does also portray an almost Christ-like love, a love that is outside the body and has the nature of a melting and exquisite charity. He sometimes even portrays the two kinds of love in the same person. But they are never in balance; they are always in demoniacal conflict. Their ups and downs are like the ups and downs in a fight between cat and dog. Even the lust is never, or hardly ever, the lust of a more or less sane man. It is always lust with a knife.

Dostoevsky could not have described the sin of Nekhludov in *Resurrection*. His passions are such as come before the criminal rather than the civil courts. His people are possessed with devils as the people in all but religious fiction have long ceased to be. “This is a madhouse,” cries some one in *The Idiot*. The cry is, I fancy, repeated in others of Dostoevsky’s novels. His world is an inferno.



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One result of this is a multiplicity of action. There was never so much talk in any other novels, and there was never so much action. Even the talk is of actions more than of ideas. Dostoevsky's characters describe the execution of a criminal, the whipping of an ass, the torture of a child. He sows violent deeds, not with the hand, but with the sack. Even Prince Myshkin, the Christ-like sufferer in *The Idiot*, narrates atrocities, though he perpetrates none. Here, for example, is a characteristic Dostoevsky story put in the Prince's mouth:

In the evening I stopped for the night at a provincial hotel, and a murder had been committed there the night before.... Two peasants, middle-aged men, friends who had known each other for a long time and were not drunk, had had tea and were meaning to go to bed in the same room. But one had noticed during those last two days that the other was wearing a silver watch on a yellow bead chain, which he seems not to have seen on him before. The man was not a thief; he was an honest man, in fact, and by a peasant's standard by no means poor. But he was so taken with that watch and so fascinated by it that at last he could not restrain himself. He took a knife, and when his friend had turned away, he approached him cautiously from behind, took aim, turned his eyes heavenwards, crossed himself, and praying fervently "God forgive me, for Christ's sake!" he cut his friend's throat at one stroke like a sheep and took his watch.

One would not accept that incident from any Western author. One would not even accept it from Tolstoi or Turgenev. It is too abnormal, too obviously tainted with madness. Yet to Dostoevsky such aberrations of conduct make a continuous and overwhelming appeal. The crimes in his books seem to spring, not from more or less rational causes, but from some seed of lunacy.

He never paints Everyman; he always projects Dostoevsky, or a nightmare of Dostoevsky. That is why *Crime and Punishment* belongs to a lower range of fiction than *Anna Karenina* or *Fathers and Sons*. Raskolnikov's crime is the cold-blooded crime of a diseased mind. It interests us like a story from Suetonius or like *Bluebeard*. But there is no communicable passion in it such as we find in *Agamemnon* or *Othello*. We sympathize, indeed, with the fears, the bravado, the despair that succeed the crime. But when all is said, the central figure of the book is born out of fantasy. He is a grotesque made alive by sheer imaginative intensity and passion. He is as distantly related to the humanity we know in life and the humanity we know in literature as the sober peasant who cut his friend's throat, saying, "God forgive me, for Christ's sake!"

One does not grudge an artist an abnormal character or two. Dostoevsky, however, has created a whole flock of these abnormal characters and watches over them as a hen over her chickens. He invents vicious grotesques as Dickens invents comic grotesques. In *The Brothers Karamazov* he reveals the malignance of Smerdyakov by telling us that he was one who, in his childhood,

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was very fond of hanging cats, and burying them with great ceremony. He used to dress up in a sheet as though it were a surplice, and sang, and waved some object over the dead cat as though it were a censor.

As for the Karamazovs themselves, he portrays the old father and the eldest of his sons hating each other and fighting like brutal maniacs:

Dmitri threw up both hands and suddenly clutched the old man by the two tufts of hair that remained on his temples, tugged at them, and flung him with a crash on the floor. He kicked him two or three times with his heel in the face. The old man moaned shrilly. Ivan, though not so strong as Dmitri, threw his arms round him, and with all his might pulled him away. Alyosha helped him with his slender strength, holding Dmitri in front.

“Madman! You’ve killed him!” cried Ivan.

“Serve him right!” shouted Dmitri, breathlessly. “If I haven’t killed him, I’ll come again and kill him.”

It is easy to see why Dostoevsky has become a popular author. Incident follows breathlessly upon incident. No melodramatist ever poured out incident upon the stage from such a horn of plenty. His people are energetic and untamed, like cowboys or runaway horses. They might be described as runaway human beings.

And Dostoevsky knows how to crowd his stage as only the inveterate melodramatists know. Scenes that in an ordinary novel would take place with two or three figures on the stage are represented in Dostoevsky as taking place before a howling, seething mob. “A dozen men have broken in,” a maid announces in one place in *The Idiot*, “and they are all drunk.” “Show them all in at once,” she is bidden. Dostoevsky is always ready to show them all in at once.

It is one of the triumphs of his genius that, however many persons he introduces, he never allows them to be confused into a hopeless chaos. His story finds its way unimpeded through the mob. On two opposite pages of *The Idiot* one finds the following characters brought in by name: General Epanchin, Prince S., Adelaida Ivanovna, Lizaveta Prokofyevna, Yevgeny Pavlovitch Radomsky, Princess Byelokonsky, Aglaia, Prince Myshkin, Kolya Ivolgin, Ippolit, Varya, Ferdyshchenko, Nastasya Filippovna, Nina Alexandrovna, Ganya, Ptitsyn, and General Ivolgin. And yet practically all of them remain separate and created beings. That is characteristic at once of Dostoevsky’s mastery and his monstrous profusion.

But the secret of Dostoevsky’s appeal is something more than the multitude and thrill of his incidents and characters. So incongruous, indeed, is the sensational framework of his stories with the immense and sombre genius that broods over them that Mr. Murry is inclined to regard the incidents as a sort of wild spiritual algebra rather than as events

occurring on the plane of reality. “Dostoevsky,” he declares, “is not a novelist. What he is is more difficult to define.”



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Mr. Murry boldly faces the difficulty and attempts the definition. To him Dostoevsky's work is "the record of a great mind seeking for a way of life; it is more than a record of struggle, it is the struggle itself." Dostoevsky himself is a man of genius "lifted out of the living world," and unable to descend to it again. Mr. Murry confesses that at times, as he reads him, he is "seized by a supersensual terror."

For an awful moment I seem to see things with the eye of eternity, and have a vision of suns grown cold, and hear the echo of voices calling without sound across the waste and frozen universe. And those voices take shape in certain unforgettable fragments of dialogue that have been spoken by one spirit to another in some ugly, mean tavern, set in surrounding darkness.

Dostoevsky's people, it is suggested, "are not so much men and women as disembodied spirits who have for the moment put on mortality."

They have no physical being. Ultimately they are the creations, not of a man who desired to be, but of a spirit which sought to know. They are the imaginations of a God-tormented mind. ... Because they are possessed they are no longer men and women.

This is all in a measure true. Dostoevsky was no realist. Nor, on the other hand, was he a novelist of horrors for horrors' sake. He could never have written *Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* like Poe for the sake of the aesthetic thrill.

None the less he remains a novelist who dramatized his spiritual experiences through the medium of actions performed by human beings. Clearly he believed that human beings—though not ordinary human beings—were capable of performing the actions he narrates with such energy. Mr. Murry will have it that the actions in the novels take place in a "timeless" world, largely because Dostoevsky has the habit of crowding an impossible rout of incidents into a single day. But surely the Greeks took the same license with events. This habit of packing into a few hours actions enough to fill a lifetime seems to me in Dostoevsky to be a novelist's device rather than the result of a spiritual escape into timelessness.

To say this is not to deny the spiritual content of Dostoevsky's work—the anguish of the imprisoned soul as it battles with doubt and denial and despair. There is in Dostoevsky a suggestion of Caliban trying to discover some better god than Setebos. At the same time one would be going a great deal too far in accepting the description of himself as "a child of unbelief." The ultimate attitude of Dostoevsky is as Christian as the Apostle Peter's, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!" When Dostoevsky writes, "If any one could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I shall prefer to stay with Christ and not with the truth," Mr. Murry interprets this as a denial of Christ. It is surely a kind of faith, though a despairing kind. And beyond the dark night of suffering, and dissipating the night, Dostoevsky still sees the light of

Christian compassion. His work is all earthquake and eclipse and dead stars apart from this.



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He does not, Mr. Murry urges, believe, as has often been said, that men are purified by suffering. It seems to me that Dostoevsky believes that men are purified, if not by their own sufferings, at least by the sufferings of others. Or even by the compassion of others, like Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*. But the truth is, it is by no means easy to systematize the creed of a creature at war with life, as Dostoevsky was—a man tortured by the eternal conflict of the devilish and the divine in his own breast.

His work, like his face, bears the mark of this terrible conflict. The novels are the perfect image of the man. As to the man himself, the Vicomte de Voguee described him as he saw him in the last years of his life:—

Short, lean, neurotic, worn and bowed down with sixty years of misfortune, faded rather than aged, with a look of an invalid of uncertain age, with a long beard and hair still fair, and for all that still breathing forth the “cat-life.” ... The face was that of a Russian peasant; a real Moscow mujik, with a flat nose, small, sharp eyes deeply set, sometimes dark and gloomy, sometimes gentle and mild. The forehead was large and lumpy, the temples were hollow as if hammered in. His drawn, twitching features seemed to press down on his sad-looking mouth.... Eyelids, lips, and every muscle of his face twitched nervously the whole time. When he became excited on a certain point, one could have sworn that one had seen him before seated on a bench in a police-court awaiting trial, or among vagabonds who passed their time begging before the prison doors. At all other times he carried that look of sad and gentle meekness seen on the images of old Slavonic saints.

That is the portrait of the man one sees behind Dostoevsky’s novels—a portrait one might almost have inferred from the novels. It is a figure that at once fascinates and repels. It is a figure that leads one to the edge of the abyss. One cannot live at all times with such an author. But his books will endure as the confession of the most terrible spiritual and imaginative experiences that modern literature has given us.

II

JANE AUSTEN: NATURAL HISTORIAN

Jane Austen has often been praised as a natural historian. She is a naturalist among tame animals. She does not study man (as Dostoevsky does) in his wild state before he has been domesticated. Her men and women are essentially men and women of the fireside.

Nor is Jane Austen entirely a realist in her treatment even of these. She idealizes them to the point of making most of them good-looking, and she hates poverty to such a degree that she seldom can endure to write about anybody who is poor. She is not happy in the company of a character who has not at least a thousand pounds. “People

get so horridly poor and economical in this part of the world," she writes on one occasion, "that I have no



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patience with them. Kent is the only place for happiness; everybody is rich there.” Her novels do not introduce us to the most exalted levels of the aristocracy. They provide us, however, with a natural history of county people and of people who are just below the level of county people and live in the eager hope of being taken notice of by them. There is more caste snobbishness, I think, in Jane Austen’s novels than in any other fiction of equal genius. She, far more than Thackeray, is the novelist of snobs.

How far Jane Austen herself shared the social prejudices of her characters it is not easy to say. Unquestionably, she satirized them. At the same time, she imputes the sense of superior rank not only to her butts, but to her heroes and heroines, as no other novelist has ever done. Emma Woodhouse lamented the deficiency of this sense in Frank Churchill. “His indifference to a confusion of rank,” she thought, “bordered too much on inelegance of mind.” Mr. Darcy, again, even when he melts so far as to become an avowed lover, neither forgets his social position, nor omits to talk about it. “His sense of her inferiority, of its being a degradation ... was dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit.” On discovering, to his amazement, that Elizabeth is offended rather than overwhelmed by his condescension, he defends himself warmly. “Disguise of every sort,” he declares, “is my abhorrence. Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They were natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?”

It is perfectly true that Darcy and Emma Woodhouse are the butts of Miss Austen as well as being among her heroes and heroines. She mocks them—Darcy especially—no less than she admires. She loves to let her wit play about the egoism of social caste. She is quite merciless in deriding, it when it becomes overbearing, as in Lady Catherine de Bourgh, or when it produces flunkeyish reactions, as in Mr. Collins. But I fancy she liked a modest measure of it. Most people do. Jane Austen, in writing so much about the sense of family and position, chose as her theme one of the most widespread passions of civilized human nature.

She was herself a clergyman’s daughter. She was the seventh of a family of eight, born in the parsonage at Steventon, in Hampshire. Her life seems to have been far from exciting. Her father, like the clergy in her novels, was a man of leisure—of so much leisure, as Mr. Cornish reminds us, that he was able to read out Cowper to his family in the mornings. Jane was brought up to be a young lady of leisure. She learned French and Italian and sewing: she was “especially great in satin-stitch.” She excelled at the game of spillikins.



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She must have begun to write at an early age. In later life, she urges an ambitious niece, aged twelve, to give up writing till she is sixteen, adding that “she had herself often wished she had read more and written less in the corresponding years of her life.” She was only twenty when she began to write *First Impressions*, the perfect book which was not published till seventeen years later with the title altered to *Pride and Prejudice*. She wrote secretly for many years. Her family knew of it, but the world did not—not even the servants or the visitors to the house. She used to hide the little sheets of paper on which she was writing when any one approached. She had not, apparently, a room to herself, and must have written under constant threat of interruption. She objected to having a creaking door mended on one occasion, because she knew by it when any one was coming.

She got little encouragement to write. *Pride and Prejudice* was offered to a publisher in 1797: he would not even read it. *Northanger Abbey* was written in the next two years. It was not accepted by a publisher, however, till 1803; and he, having paid ten pounds for it, refused to publish it. One of Miss Austen’s brothers bought back the manuscript at the price at which it had been sold twelve or thirteen years later; but even then it was not published till 1818, when the author was dead.

The first of her books to appear was *Sense and Sensibility*. She had begun to write it immediately after finishing *Pride and Prejudice*. It was published in 1811, a good many years later, when Miss Austen was thirty-six years old. The title-page merely said that it was written “By a Lady.” The author never put her name to any of her books. For an anonymous first novel, it must be admitted, *Sense and Sensibility* was not unsuccessful. It brought Miss Austen L150—“a prodigious recompense,” she thought, “for that which had cost her nothing.” The fact, however, that she had not earned more than L700 from her novels by the time of her death shows that she never became a really popular author in her lifetime.

She was rewarded as poorly in credit as in cash, though the Prince Regent became an enthusiastic admirer of her books, and kept a set of them in each of his residences. It was the Prince Regent’s librarian, the Rev. J.S. Clarke, who, on becoming chaplain to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, made the suggestion to her that “an historical romance, illustrative of the history of the august House of Coburg, would just now be very interesting.” Mr. Collins, had he been able to wean himself from Fordyce’s *Sermons* so far as to allow himself to take an interest in fiction, could hardly have made a proposal more exquisitely grotesque. One is glad the proposal was made, however, not only for its own sake, but because it drew an admirable reply from Miss Austen on the nature of her genius. “I could not sit seriously down,” she declared, “to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and, if it were indispensable for me to keep it up, and never relax into laughing at myself or at other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter.”

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Jane Austen knew herself for what she was, an inveterate laugher. She belonged essentially to the eighteenth century—the century of the wits. She enjoyed the spectacle of men and women making fools of themselves, and she did not hide her enjoyment under a pretence of unobservant good-nature. She observed with malice. It is tolerably certain that Miss Mitford was wrong in accepting the description of her in private life as “perpendicular, precise, taciturn, a poker of whom every one is afraid.” Miss Austen, one is sure, was a lady of good-humour, as well as a novelist of good-humour; but the good-humour had a flavour. It was the good-humour of the satirist, not of the sentimentalizer. One can imagine Jane Austen herself speaking as Elizabeth Bennet once spoke to her monotonously soft-worded sister. “That is the most unforgiving speech,” she said, “that I ever heard you utter. Good girl!”

Miss Austen has even been accused of irreverence, and we occasionally find her in her letters as irreverent in the presence of death as Mr. Shaw. “Only think,” she writes in one letter—a remark she works into a chapter of *Emma*, by the way—“of Mrs. Holder being dead! Poor woman, she has done the only thing in the world she could possibly do to make one cease to abuse her.” And on another occasion she writes: “Mrs. Hall, of Sherborne, was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband.” It is possible that Miss Austen’s sense of the comic ran away with her at times as Emma Woodhouse’s did. I do not know of any similar instance of cruelty in conversation on the part of a likeable person so unpardonable as Emma Woodhouse’s witticism at the expense of Miss Bates at the Box Hill picnic. Miss Austen makes Emma ashamed of her witticism, however, after Mr. Knightley has lectured her for it. She sets a limit to the rights of wit, again, in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth defends her sharp tongue against Darcy. “The wisest and best of men,” ... he protests, “may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke.” “I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good,” says Elizabeth in the course of her answer. “Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, *do* divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.” The six novels that Jane Austen has left us might be described as the record of the diversions of a clergyman’s daughter.

The diversions of Jane Austen were, beyond those of most novelists, the diversions of a spectator. (That is what Scott and Macaulay meant by comparing her to Shakespeare.) Or, rather, they were the diversions of a listener. She observed with her ears rather than with her eyes. With her, conversation was three-fourths of life. Her stories are stories of people who reveal themselves almost exclusively in talk. She wastes no time in telling us what people and places looked like. She will dismiss

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a man or a house or a view or a dinner with an adjective such as “handsome.” There is more description of persons and places in Mr. Shaw’s stage-directions than in all Miss Austen’s novels. She cuts the ’osses and comes to the cackle as no other English novelist of the same eminence has ever done. If we know anything of the setting or character or even the appearance of her men and women, it is due far more to what they say than to anything that is said about them. And yet how perfect is her gallery of portraits! One can guess the very angle of Mr. Collins’s toes.

One seems, too, to be able to follow her characters through the trivial round of the day’s idleness as closely as if one were pursuing them under the guidance of a modern realist. They are the most unoccupied people, I think, who ever lived in literature. They are people in whose lives a slight fall of snow is an event. Louisa Musgrave’s jump on the Cobb at Lyme Regis produces more commotion in the Jane Austen world than murder and arson do in an ordinary novel. Her people do not even seem, for the most part, to be interested in anything but their opinions of each other. They have few passions beyond match-making. They are unconcerned about any of the great events of their time. Almost the only reference in the novels to the Napoleonic Wars is a mention of the prize-money of naval officers. “Many a noble fortune,” says Mr. Shepherd in *Persuasion*, “has been made during the war.” Miss Austen’s principal use of the Navy outside *Mansfield Park* is as a means of portraying the exquisite vanity of Sir Walter Elliott—his inimitable manner of emphasizing the importance of both rank and good looks in the make-up of a gentleman. “The profession has its utility,” he says of the Navy, “but I should be sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it.” He goes on to explain his reasons:

It is in two points offensive to me; I have two strong grounds of objection to it. First as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; and, secondly, as it cuts up a man’s youth and vigour most terribly; a sailor grows older sooner than any other man.

Sir Walter complains that he had once had to give place at dinner to Lord St. Ives, the son of a curate, and “a certain Admiral Baldwin, the most deplorable-looking personage you can imagine: his face the colour of mahogany, rough and rugged to the last degree, all lines and wrinkles, nine grey hairs of a side, and nothing but a dab of powder at top”:

“In the name of heaven, who is that old fellow?” said I to a friend of mine who was standing near (Sir Basil Morley). “Old fellow!” cried Sir Basil, “it is Admiral Baldwin. What do you take his age to be?” “Sixty,” said I, “or perhaps sixty-two.” “Forty,” replied Sir Basil, “forty, and no more.” Picture to yourselves my amazement; I shall not



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easily forget Admiral Baldwin. I never saw quite so wretched an example of what a seafaring life can do; but to a degree, I know, it is the same with them all; they are all knocked about, and exposed to every climate and every weather, till they are not fit to be seen. It is a pity they are not knocked on the head at once, before they reach Admiral Baldwin's age.

That, I think, is an excellent example of Miss Austen's genius for making her characters talk. Luckily, conversation was still formal in her day, and it was as possible for her as for Congreve to make middling men and women talk first-rate prose. She did more than this, however. She was the first English novelist before Meredith to portray charming women with free personalities. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse have an independence (rare in English fiction) of the accident of being fallen in love with. Elizabeth is a delightful prose counterpart of Beatrice.

Miss Austen has another point of resemblance to Meredith besides that which I have mentioned. She loves to portray men puffed up with self-approval. She, too, is a satirist of the male egoist. Her books are the most finished social satires in English fiction. They are so perfect in the delicacy of their raillery as to be charming. One is conscious in them, indeed, of the presence of a sparkling spirit. Miss Austen comes as near being a star as it is possible to come in eighteenth-century conversational prose. She used to say that, if ever she should marry, she would fancy being Mrs. Crabbe. She had much of Crabbe's realism, indeed; but what a dance she led realism with the mocking light of her wit!

III

MR. G.K. CHESTERTON AND MR. HILAIRE BELLOC

1. THE HEAVENLY TWINS

It was Mr. Shaw who, in the course of a memorable controversy, invented a fantastic pantomime animal, which he called the "Chester-Belloc." Some such invention was necessary as a symbol of the literary comradeship of Mr. Hilaire Belloc and Mr. Gilbert Chesterton. For Mr. Belloc and Mr. Chesterton, whatever may be the dissimilarities in the form and spirit of their work, cannot be thought of apart from each other. They are as inseparable as the red and green lights of a ship: the one illumines this side and the other that, but they are both equally concerned with announcing the path of the good ship "Mediaevalism" through the dangerous currents of our times. Fifty years ago, when philology was one of the imaginative arts, it would have been easy enough to gain credit for the theory that they are veritable reincarnations of the Heavenly Twins going about the earth with corrupted names. Chesterton is merely English for Castor, and Belloc is Pollux transmuted into French. Certainly, if the philologist had also been an evangelical

Protestant, he would have felt a double confidence in identifying the two authors with Castor and Pollux as the

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Great Twin Brethren,
Who fought so well for Rome.

A critic was struck some years ago by the propriety of the fact that Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc brought out books of the same kind and the same size, through the same publisher, almost in the same week. Mr. Belloc, to be sure, called his volume of essays *This, That, and the Other*, and Mr. Chesterton called his *A Miscellany of Men*. But if Mr. Chesterton had called his book *This, That, and the Other* and Mr. Belloc had called his *A Miscellany of Men*, it would not have made a pennyworth of difference. Each book is simply a ragbag of essays—the riotous and fantastically joyous essays of Mr. Chesterton, the sardonic and arrogantly gay essays of Mr. Belloc. Each, however, has a unity of outlook, not only an internal unity, but a unity with the other. Each has the outlook of the mediaevalist spirit—the spirit which finds crusades and miracles more natural than peace meetings and the discoveries of science, which gives Heaven and Hell a place on the map of the world, which casts a sinister eye on Turks and Jews, which brings its gaiety to the altar as the tumbler in the story brought his cap and bells, which praises dogma and wine and the rule of the male, which abominates the scientific spirit, and curses the day on which Bacon was born. Probably, neither of the authors would object to being labelled a mediaevalist, except in so far as we all object to having labels affixed to us by other people. Mr. Chesterton's attitude on the matter, indeed, is clear from that sentence in *What's Wrong with the World*, in which he affirms: "Mankind has not passed through the Middle Ages. Rather mankind has retreated from the Middle Ages in reaction and rout." And if, on learning some of the inferences he makes from this, you protest that he is reactionary, and is trying to put back the hands of the clock, he is quite unashamed, and replies that the moderns "are always saying 'you can't put the clock back.' The simple and obvious answer is, 'You can.' A clock, being a piece of human construction, can be restored by the human finger to any figure or hour." The effrontery of an answer like that is so magnificent that it takes one's breath away. The chief difficulty of Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc, however, seems to be that they want their clock to point to two different hours at the same time, neither of which happens to be the hour which the sun has just marked at Greenwich. They want it to point at once to 878 and 1789—to Ethandune and the French Revolution.

Similar though they are in the revolutio-mediaevalist background of their philosophy, however, Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc are as unlike as possible in the spirit in which they proclaim it. If Mr. Chesterton gets up on his box to prophesy against the times, he seems to do so out of a passionate and unreasoning affection for his fellows. If Mr. Belloc denounces the age, he seems also to be denouncing the human race.



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Mr. Chesterton is jovial and democratic; Mr. Belloc is (to some extent) saturnine and autocratic. Mr. Chesterton belongs to the exuberantly lovable tradition of Dickens; indeed, he is, in the opinion of many people, the most exuberantly lovable personality which has expressed itself in English literature since Dickens. Mr. Belloc, on the other hand, has something of the gleaming and solitary fierceness of Swift and Hazlitt. Mr. Chesterton's vision, coloured though it is with the colours of the past, projects itself generously into the future. He is foretelling the eve of the Utopia of the poor and the oppressed when he speaks of the riot that all good men, even the most conservative, really dream of, when the sneer shall be struck from the face of the well-fed; when the wine of honour shall be poured down the throat of despair; when we shall, so far as to the sons of flesh is possible, take tyranny, and usury, and public treason, and bind them into bundles, and burn them.

There is anger, as well as affection, in this eloquence—anger as of a new sort of knight thirsting to spill the blood of a new sort of barbarian in the name of Christ. Mr. Belloc's attack on the barbarians lacks the charity of these fiery sentences. He concludes his essay on the scientific spirit, as embodied in Lombroso, for instance, with the words, "The Ass!" And he seems to sneer the insult where Mr. Chesterton would have roared it. Mr. Chesterton and he may be at one in the way in which they regard the scientific criminologists, eugenists, collectivists, pragmatists, post-impressionists, and most of the other "ists" of recent times, as an army of barbarians invading the territories of mediaeval Christendom. But while Mr. Chesterton is in the gap of danger, waving against his enemies the sword of the spirit, Mr. Belloc stands on a little height apart, aiming at them the more cruel shafts of the intellect. It is not that he is less courageous than Mr. Chesterton, but that he is more contemptuous. Here, for example, is how he meets the barbarian attack, especially as it is delivered by M. Bergson and his school:

In its most grotesque form, it challenges the accuracy of mathematics; in its most vicious, the processes of the human reason. The Barbarian is as proud as a savage in a top hat when he talks of the elliptical or the hyperbolic universe, and tries to picture parallel straight lines converging or diverging—but never doing anything so vulgarly old-fashioned as to remain parallel.

The Barbarian, when he has graduated to be a "pragmatist," struts like a nigger in evening clothes, and believes himself superior to the gift of reason, *etc.*, *etc.*

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It would be unfair to offer this passage as an example of Mr. Belloc's dominating genius, but it is an excellent example of his domineering temper. His genius and his temper, one may add, seem, in these essays, to, be always trying to climb on one another's shoulders, and it is when his genius gets uppermost that he becomes one of the most biting and exhilarating writers of his time. On such occasions his malice ceases to be a talent, and rises into an enthusiasm, as in *The Servants of the Rich*, where, like a mediaeval bard, he shows no hesitation in housing his enemies in the circles of Hell. His gloating proclamation of the eternal doom of the rich men's servants is an infectious piece of humour, at once grim and irresponsible:—

Their doom is an eternal sleeplessness and a nakedness in the gloom.... These are those men who were wont to come into the room of the Poor Guest at early morning, with a steadfast and assured step, and a look of insult. These are those who would take the tattered garments and hold them at arm's length, as much as to say: "What rags these scribblers wear!" and then, casting them over the arm, with a gesture that meant: "Well, they must be brushed, but Heaven knows if they will stand it without coming to pieces!" would next discover in the pockets a great quantity of middle-class things, and notably loose tobacco..... Then one would see him turn one's socks inside out, which is a ritual with the horrid tribe. Then a great bath would be trundled in, and he would set beside it a great can, and silently pronounce the judgment that, whatever else was forgiven the middle-class, one thing would not be forgiven them—the neglect of the bath, of the splashing about of the water, and of the adequate wetting of the towel.

All these things we have suffered, you and I, at their hands. But be comforted. They writhe in Hell with their fellows.

Mr. Belloc is not one of those authors who can be seen at their best in quotations, but even the mutilated fragment just given suggests to some extent the mixture of gaiety and malice that distinguishes his work from the work of any of his contemporaries. His gifts run to satire, as Mr. Chesterton's run to imaginative argument. It is this, perhaps, which accounts for the fact that, of these two authors, who write with their heads in the Middle Ages, it is Mr. Chesterton who is the more comprehensive critic of his own times. He never fights private, but always public, battles in his essays. His mediaevalism seldom degenerates into a prejudice, as it often does with Mr. Belloc. It represents a genuine theory of the human soul, and of human freedom. He laments as he sees men exchanging the authority of a spiritual institution, like the Church, for the authority a carnal institution, like a bureaucracy. He rages as he sees them abandoning charters that gave men rights, and accepting charters

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that only give them prohibitions. It has been the custom for a long time to speak of Mr. Chesterton as an optimist; and there was, indeed, a time when he was so rejoiced by the discovery that the children of men were also the children of God, that he was as aggressively cheerful as Whitman and Browning rolled into one. But he has left all that behind him. The insistent vision of a world in full retreat from the world of Alfred and Charlemagne and the saints and the fight for Jerusalem—from this and the allied world of Danton and Robespierre, and the rush to the Bastille—has driven him back upon a partly well-founded and partly ill-founded Christian pessimism. To him it now seems as if Jerusalem had captured the Christians rather than the Christians Jerusalem. He sees men rushing into Bastilles, not in order to tear them down, but in order to inhabit the accursed cells.

When I say that this pessimism is partly ill-founded, I mean that it is arrived at by comparing the liberties of the Middle Ages with the tyrannies of to-day, instead of by comparing the liberties of the Middle Ages with the liberties of to-day, or the tyrannies of the Middle Ages with the tyrannies of to-day. It is the result, sometimes, of playing with history and, sometimes, of playing with words. Is it not playing with words, for instance, to glorify the charters by which medieval kings guaranteed the rights and privileges of their subjects, and to deny the name of charter to such a law as that by which a modern State guarantees some of the rights and privileges of children—to deny it simply on the ground that the latter expresses itself largely in prohibitions? It may be necessary to forbid a child to go into a gin-palace in order to secure it the privilege of not being driven into a gin-palace. Prohibitions are as necessary to human liberty as permits and licences.

At the same time, quarrel as we may with Mr. Chesterton's mediaevalism, and his application of it to modern problems, we can seldom quarrel with the motive with which he urges it upon us. His high purpose throughout is to keep alive the human view of society, as opposed to the mechanical view to which lazy politicians are naturally inclined. If he has not been able to give us any very, coherent vision of a Utopia of his own, he has, at least, done the world a service in dealing some smashing blows at the Utopia of machinery. None the less, he and Mr. Belloc would be the most dangerous of writers to follow in a literal obedience. In regard to political and social improvements, they are too often merely Devil's Advocates of genius. But that is a necessary function, and they are something more than that. As I have suggested, above all the arguments and the rhetoric and the humours of the little political battles, they do bear aloft a banner with a strange device, reminding us that organized society was made for man, and not man for organized society. That, in the last analysis, is the useful thing for which Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc stand in modern politics. It almost seems at times, however, as though they were ready to see us bound again with the fetters of ancient servitudes, in order to compel us to take part once more in the ancient struggle for freedom.



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2. THE COPIOUSNESS OF MR. BELLOC

Mr. Belloc has during the last four or five years become a public man. Before that he had been acknowledged a man of genius. But even the fact that he had sat in the House of Commons never led any great section of Englishmen to regard him as a figure or an institution. He was generally looked on as one who made his bed aggressively among heretics, as a kind of Rabelaisian dissenter, as a settled interrupter, half-rude and half-jesting. And yet there was always in him something of the pedagogue who has been revealed so famously in these last months. Not only had he a passion for facts and for stringing facts upon theories. He had also a high-headed and dogmatic and assured way of imparting his facts and theories to the human race as it sat—or in so far as it could be persuaded to sit—on its little forms.

It is his schoolmasterishness which chiefly distinguishes the genius of Mr. Belloc from the genius of his great and uproarious comrade, Mr. Chesterton. Mr. Belloc is not a humorist to anything like the same degree as Mr. Chesterton. If Mr. Chesterton were a schoolmaster he would give all the triangles noses and eyes, and he would turn the Latin verbs into nonsense rhymes. Humour is his breath and being. He cannot speak of the Kingdom of Heaven or of Robert Browning without it any more than of asparagus. He is a laughing theologian, a laughing politician, a laughing critic, a laughing philosopher. He retains a fantastic cheerfulness even amid the blind furies—and how blindly furious he can sometimes be!—of controversy. With Mr. Belloc, on the other hand, laughter is a separate and relinquishable gift. He can at will lay aside the mirth of one who has broken bounds for the solemnity of the man in authority. He can be scapegrace prince and sober king by turns, and in such a way that the two personalities seem scarcely to be related to each other. Compared with Mr. Chesterton he is like a man in a mask, or a series of masks. He reveals more of his intellect to the world than of his heart. He is not one of those authors whom one reads with a sense of personal intimacy. He is too arrogant even in his merriment for that.

Perhaps the figure we see reflected most obtrusively in his works is that of a man delighting in immense physical and intellectual energies. It is this that makes him one of the happiest of travellers. On his travels, one feels, every inch and nook of his being is intent upon the passing earth. The world is to him at once a map and a history and a poem and a church and an ale-house. The birds in the greenwood, the beer, the site of an old battle, the meaning of an old road, sacred emblems by the roadside, the comic events of way-faring—he has an equal appetite for them all. Has he not made a perfect book of these things, with a thousand fancies added, in *The Four Men*? In *The Four Men* he has written a travel-book which more than any other of his works has something of the passion of a personal confession. Here the pilgrim becomes nearly genial as he indulges in his humours against the rich and against policemen and in behalf of Sussex against Kent and the rest of the inhabited world.

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Mr. Chesterton has spoken of Mr. Belloc as one who “did and does humanly and heartily love England, not as a duty but as a pleasure, and almost an indulgence.” And *The Four Men* expresses this love humorously, inconsequently, and with a grave stepping eloquence. There are few speeches in modern books better than the conversations in *The Four Men*. Mr. Belloc is not one of those disciples of realism who believe that the art of conversation is dead, and that modern people are only capable of addressing each other in one-line sentences. He has the traditional love of the fine speech such as we find it in the ancient poets and historians and dramatists and satirists. He loves a monologue that passes from mockery to regret, that gathers up by the way anecdote and history and essay and foolery, that is half a narrative of things seen and half an irresponsible imagination. He can describe a runaway horse with the farcical realism of the authors of *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, can parody a judge, can paint a portrait, and can steep a landscape in vision. Two recent critics have described him as “the best English prose writer since Dryden,” but that only means that Mr. Belloc’s rush of genius has quite naturally swept them off their feet.

If Mr. Belloc’s love of country is an indulgence, his moods of suspicion and contempt are something of the same kind. He is nothing of a philanthropist in any sense of the word. He has no illusions about the virtue of the human race. He takes pleasure in scorn, and there is a flavour of bitterness in his jests. His fiction largely belongs to the comedy of corruption. He enjoys—and so do we—the thought of the poet in Sussex who had no money except three shillings, “and a French penny, which last some one had given him out of charity, taking him for a beggar a little way-out of Brightling that very day.” When he describes the popular rejoicings at the result of Mr. Clutterbuck’s election, he comments: “The populace were wild with joy at their victory, and that portion of them who as bitterly mourned defeat would have been roughly handled had they not numbered quite half this vast assembly of human beings.” He is satirist and ironist even more than historian. His ironical essays are the best of their kind that have been written in recent years.

Mr. Mandell and Mr. Shanks in their little study, *Hilaire Belloc: the Man and his Work*, are more successful in their exposition of Mr. Belloc’s theory of history and the theory of politics which has risen out of it—or out of which it has risen—than they are in their definition of him as a man of letters. They have written a lively book on him, but they do not sufficiently communicate an impression of the kind of his exuberance, of his thrusting intellectual ardour, of his pomp as a narrator, of his blind and doctrinaire injustices, of his jesting like a Roman Emperor’s, of the strength of his happiness upon a journey, of his buckishness,



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of the queer lack of surprising phrases in his work, of his measured omniscience, of the immense weight of tradition in the manner of his writing. There are many contemporary writers whose work seems to be a development of journalism. Mr. Belloc's is the child of four literatures, or, maybe, half a dozen. He often writes carelessly, sometimes dully but there is the echo of greatness in his work. He is one of the few contemporary men of genius whose books are under-estimated rather than over-estimated. He is an author who has brought back to the world something of the copiousness, fancy, appetite, power, and unreason of the talk that, one imagines, was once to be heard in the Mermaid Tavern.

3. THE TWO MR. CHESTERTONS

I cannot help wishing at times that Mr. Chesterton could be divided in two. One half of him I should like to challenge to mortal combat as an enemy of the human race. The other half I would carry shoulder-high through the streets. For Mr. Chesterton is at once detestable and splendid. He is detestable as a doctrinaire: he is splendid as a sage and a poet who juggles with stars and can keep seven of them in the air at a time. For, if he is a gamester, it is among the lamps of Heaven. We can see to read by his sport. He writes in flashes, and hidden and fantastic truths suddenly show their faces in the play of his sentences.

Unfortunately, his two personalities have become so confused that his later books sometimes strike one as being not so much a game played with light as a game of hide-and-seek between light and darkness. In the darkness he mutters incantations to the monstrous tyrannies of old time: in the light he is on his knees to liberty. He vacillates between superstition and faith. His is a genius at once enslaved and triumphantly rebel. This fatal duality is seen again and again in his references to the tyrannies of the Middle Ages. Thus he writes: "It need not be repeated that the case despotism is democratic. As a rule its cruelty to the strong is kindness to the weak." I confess I do not know the "rule" to which Mr. Chesterton refers. The picture of the despot as a good creature who shields the poor from the rich is not to be found among the facts of history. The ordinary despot, in his attitude to the common people suffering from the oppressions of their lords, is best portrayed in the fable—if it be a fable—of Marie Antoinette and her flippancy about eating cake.

I fancy, however, Mr. Chesterton's defence of despots is not the result of any real taste for them or acquaintance with their history: it is due simply to his passion for extremes. He likes a man, as the vulgar say, to be either one thing or the other. You must be either a Pope or a revolutionist to please him. He loves the visible rhetoric of things, and the sober suits of comfortable citizens seem dull and neutral in comparison with the red of cardinals on the one hand, and of caps of liberty



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on the other. This, I think, explains Mr. Chesterton's indifference to, if not dislike of, Parliaments. Parliaments are monuments of compromise, and are guilty of the sin of unpicturesqueness. One would imagine that a historian of England who did not care for Parliaments would be as hopelessly out of his element as a historian of Greece who did not care for the arts. And it is because Mr. Chesterton is indifferent to so much in the English genius and character that he has given us in his recent short *History of England*, instead of a History of England, a wild and wonderful pageant of argument. "Already," he cries, as he relates how Parliament "certainly encouraged, and almost certainly obliged" King Richard to break his pledge to the people after the Wat Tyler insurrection:—

Already Parliament is not merely a governing body, but a governing class.

The history of England is to Mr. Chesterton largely the history of the rise of the governing class. He blames John Richard Green for leaving the people out of his history; but Mr. Chesterton himself has left out the people as effectually as any of the historians who went before him. The obsession of "the governing class" has thrust the people into the background. History resolves itself with him into a disgraceful epic of a governing class which despoiled Pope and King with the right hand, and the people with the left. It is a disgraceful epic patched with splendid episodes, but it culminates in an appalling cry of doubt whether, after all, it might not be better for England to perish utterly in the great war while fighting for liberty than to survive to behold the triumph of the "governing class" in a servile State of old-age pensions and Insurance Acts.

This theory of history, as being largely the story of the evolution of the "governing class," is an extremely interesting and even "fruitful" theory. But it is purely fantastic unless we bear in mind that the governing class has been continually compelled to enlarge itself, and that its tendency is reluctantly to go on doing so until in the end it will be coterminous with the "governed class." History is a tale of exploitation, but it is also a tale of liberation, and the over-emphasis that Mr. Chesterton lays on exploitation by Parliaments as compared with exploitation by Popes and Kings, can only be due to infidelity in regard to some of the central principles of freedom. Surely it is possible to condemn the Insurance Act, if it must be condemned, without apologizing either for the Roman Empire or for the Roman ecclesiastical system. Mr. Chesterton, however, believes in giving way to one's prejudices. He says that history should be written backwards; and what does this mean but that it should be dyed in prejudice? thus, he cannot refer to the Hanoverian succession without indulging in a sudden outburst of heated rhetoric such as one might expect rather in a leading article in war-time. He writes:—

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With George there entered England something that had scarcely been seen there before; something hardly mentioned in mediaeval or Renaissance writing, except as one mentions a Hottentot—the barbarian from beyond the Rhine.

Similarly, his characterization of the Revolution of 1688 is largely a result of his dislike of the governing classes at the present hour:—

The Revolution reduced us to a country wholly governed by gentlemen; the popular universities and schools of the Middle Ages, like their guilds and abbeys, had been seized and turned into what they are—factories of gentlemen when they are not merely factories of snobs.

Both of these statements contain a grain of truth, but neither of them contains enough truth to be true. One might describe them as sweetmeats of history of small nutritious value. One might say the same of his comment on the alliance between Chatham and Frederick the Great:—

The cannibal theory of a commonwealth, that it can of its nature eat other commonwealths, had entered Christendom.

How finely said! But, alas! the cannibal theory of a commonwealth existed long before Chatham and Frederick the Great. The instinct to exploit is one of the most venerable instincts of the human race, whether in individual men or in nations of men; and ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek and ancient Roman had exhausted the passion of centuries in obedience to it before the language spoken either by Chatham or by Frederick was born. Christian Spain, Christian France, and Christian England had not in this matter disowned the example of their Jewish and Pagan forerunners.

What we are infinitely grateful to Mr. Chesterton for, however, is that he has sufficient imagination to loathe cannibalism wherever he sees it. True, he seems to forgive certain forms of cannibalism on the ground that it is an exaggeration to describe the flesh of a rich man as the flesh of a human being. But he does rage with genius at the continual eating of men that went on in England, especially after the spoliation of the monasteries in the reign of Henry the Eighth gave full scope to the greed of the strong. He sees that the England which Whig and Tory combined to defend as the perfection of the civilized world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an England governed by men whose chief claim to govern was founded on the fact that they had seized their country and were holding it against their countrymen. Mr. Chesterton rudely shatters the mirror of perfection in which the possessing class have long seen themselves. He writes in a brilliant passage:—

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It could truly be said of the English gentleman, as of another gallant and gracious individual, that his honour stood rooted in dishonour. He was, indeed, somewhat in the position of such an aristocrat of romance, whose splendour has the dark spot of a secret and a sort of blackmail.... His glory did not come from the Crusades, but from the Great Pillage.... The oligarchs were descended from usurers and thieves. That, for good or evil, was the paradox of England; the typical aristocrat was the typical upstart. But the secret was worse; not only was such a family founded on stealing, but the family was stealing still. It is a grim truth that, all through the eighteenth century, all through the great Whig speeches about liberty, all through the great Tory speeches about patriotism, through the period of Wandiwash and Plassey, through the period of Trafalgar and Waterloo, one process was steadily going on in the central senate of the nation. Parliament was passing Bill after Bill for the enclosure by the great landlords of such of the common lands as had survived out of the great communal system of the Middle Ages. It is much more than a pun, it is the prime political irony of our history that the Commons were destroying the commons.

It would be folly to suggest, however, that, conscious though Mr. Chesterton is of the crimes of history, he has turned history into a mere series of floggings of criminals. He is for ever laying down the whip and inviting the criminals to take their seats while he paints gorgeous portraits of them in all the colours of the rainbow. His praise of the mighty rhetoricians of the eighteenth century could in some passages scarcely be more unstinted if he were a Whig of the Whigs. He cannot but admire the rotund speech and swelling adventures of those days. If we go farther back, we find him portraying even the Puritans with a strange splendour of colour:—

They were, above all things, anti-historic, like the Futurists in Italy; and there was this unconscious greatness about them, that their very sacrilege was public and solemn, like a sacrament; and they were ritualists even as iconoclasts. It was, properly considered, but a very secondary example of their strange and violent simplicity that one of them, before a mighty mob at Whitehall, cut off the anointed head of the sacramental man of the Middle Ages. For another, far away in the western shires, cut down the thorn of Glastonbury, from which had grown the whole story of Britain.

This last passage is valuable, not only because it reveals Mr. Chesterton as a marvellous rhetorician doing the honours of prose to his enemies, but because it helps to explain the essentially tragic view he takes of English history. I exaggerated a moment ago when I said that to Mr. Chesterton English history is the story of the rise of a governing class. What it really is to him is the story of a thorn-bush



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cut down by a Puritan. He has hung all the candles of his faith on the sacred thorn, like the lights on a Christmas-tree, and lo! it has been cut down and cast out of England with as little respect as though it were a verse from the Sermon on the Mount. It may be that Mr. Chesterton's sight is erratic, and that what he took to be the sacred thorn was really a Upas-tree. But in a sense that does not matter. He is entitled to his own fable, if he tells it honestly and beautifully; and it is as a tragic fable or romance of the downfall of liberty in England that one reads his *History*. He himself contends in the last chapter of the book that the crisis in English history came "with the fall of Richard II, following on his failures to use mediaeval despotism in the interests of mediaeval democracy." Mr. Chesterton's history would hardly be worth reading, if he had made nothing more of it than is suggested in that sentence. His book (apart from occasional sloughs of sophistry and fallacious argument) remains in the mind as a song of praise and dolour chanted by the imagination about an England that obeyed not God and despised the Tree of Life, but that may yet, he believes, hear once more the ancestral voices, and with her sons arrayed in trade unions and guilds, march riotously back into the Garden of Eden.

IV.

WORDSWORTH

1. HIS PERSONALITY AND GENIUS

Dorothy Wordsworth—whom Professor Harper has praised not beyond reason as "the most delightful, the most fascinating woman who has enriched literary history"—once confessed in a letter about her brother William that "his person is not in his favour," and that he was "certainly rather plain." He is the most difficult of all the great poets whom one reverences to portray as an attractive person. "'Horse-face,' I have heard satirists say," Carlyle wrote of him, recalling a comparison of Hazlitt's; and the horse-face seems to be symbolic of something that we find not only in his personal appearance, but in his personality and his work.

His faults do not soften us, as the faults of so many favourite writers do. They were the faults, not of passion, but of a superior person, who was something of a Sir Willoughby Patterne in his pompous self-satisfaction. "He says," records Lamb in one of his letters, "he does not see much difficulty in writing like Shakespeare, if he had a mind to try it." Lamb adds: "It is clear that nothing is wanting but the mind."

Leigh Hunt, after receiving a visit from Wordsworth in 1815, remarked that "he was as sceptical on the merit of all kinds of poetry but one as Richardson was on those of the novels of Fielding." Keats, who had earlier spoken of the reverence in which he held

Wordsworth, wrote to his brother in 1818: "I am sorry that Wordsworth has left a bad impression wherever he visited in town by his egotism, vanity, and bigotry." There was

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something frigidly unsympathetic in his judgment of others, which was as unattractive as his complacency in regard to his own work. When Trelawny, seeing him at Lausanne and, learning who he was, went up to him as he was about to step into his carriage and asked him what he thought of Shelley as a poet, he replied: "Nothing." Again, Wordsworth spoke with solemn reprobation of certain of Lamb's friendships, after Lamb was dead, as "the indulgences of social humours and fancies which were often injurious to himself and causes of severe regrets to his friends, without really benefiting the object of his misapplied kindness."

Nor was this attitude of Johnny Head-in-Air the mark only of his later years. It appeared in the days when he and Coleridge collaborated in bringing out *Lyrical Ballads*. There is something sublimely egotistical in the way in which he shook his head over *The Ancient Mariner* as a drag upon that miraculous volume. In the course of a letter to his publisher, he wrote:—

From what I can gather it seems that *The Ancyent Marinere* has, on the whole, been an injury to the volume; I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on. If the volume should come to a second edition, I would put in its place some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste.

It is when one reads sentences like these that one begins to take a mischievous delight in the later onslaught of a Scottish reviewer who, indignant that Wordsworth should dare to pretend to be able to appreciate Burns, denounced him as "a retired, pensive, egotistical, *collector of stamps*," and as—

a melancholy, sighing, half-parson sort of gentleman, who lives in a small circle of old maids and sonneteers, and drinks tea now and then with the solemn Laureate.

One feels at times that no ridicule or abuse of this stiff-necked old fraud could be excessive; for, if he were not Wordsworth, as what but a fraud could we picture him in his later years, as he protests against Catholic Emancipation, the extension of the franchise, the freedom of the Press, and popular education? "Can it, in a *general view*," he asks, "be good that an infant should learn much which its *parents do not know*? Will not a child arrogate a superiority unfavourable to love and obedience?" He shuddered again at the likelihood that Mechanics' Institutes would "make discontented spirits and insubordinate and presumptuous workmen." He opposed the admission of Dissenters to Cambridge University, and he "desired that a medical education should be kept beyond the reach of a poor student," on the ground that "the better able the parents are to incur expense, the stronger pledge have we of their children being above meanness and unfeeling and sordid habits." One might go on quoting instance after instance of this piety of success, as it might be called. Time and again the words seem to come



from the mouth, not of one of the inspired men of the modern world, but of some puffed-up elderly gentleman in a novel by Jane Austen. His letter to a young relation who wished to marry his daughter Dora is a letter that Jane Austen might have invented:—



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If you have thoughts of marrying, do look out for some lady with a sufficient fortune for both of you. What I say to you now I would recommend to every naval officer and clergyman who is without prospect of professional advancement. Ladies of some fortune are as easily won as those without, and for the most part as deserving. Check the first liking to those who have nothing.

One is tempted to say that Wordsworth, like so many other poets, died young, and that a pensioner who inherited his name survived him.

When one has told the worst about Wordsworth, however, one is as far as ever from having painted a portrait of him in which anybody could believe while reading the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*—*Ode* as it was simply called when it was first published—or *I wandered lonely as a cloud*, or the sonnet composed on Westminster Bridge. Nor does the portrait of a stern, unbending egotist satisfy us when we remember the life-long devotion that existed between him and Dorothy, and the fact that Coleridge loved him, and that Lamb and Scott were his friends. He may have been a niggard of warm-heartedness to the outside world, but it is clear from his biography that he possessed the genius of a good heart as well as of a great mind.

And he was as conspicuous for the public as for the private virtues. His latest biographer has done well to withdraw our eyes from the portrait of the old man with the stiffened joints and to paint in more glowing colours than any of his predecessors the early Wordsworth who rejoiced in the French Revolution, and, apparently as a consequence, initiated a revolution in English poetry. The later period of the life is not glossed over; it is given, indeed, in cruel detail, and Professor Harper's account of it is the most lively and fascinating part of his admirable book. But it is to the heart of the young revolutionary, who dreamed of becoming a Girondist leader and of seeing England a republic, that he traces all the genius and understanding that we find in the poems.

"Wordsworth's connection," he writes, "with the English 'Jacobins,' with the most extreme element opposed to the war or actively agitating in favour of making England a republic, was much closer than has been generally admitted." He points out that Wordsworth's first books of verse, *An Evening Walk*, and *Descriptive Sketches*, were published by Joseph Johnson, who also published Dr. Priestley, Horne Tooke, and Mary Wollstonecraft, and whose shop was frequented by Godwin and Paine. Professor Harper attempts to strengthen his case by giving brief sketches of famous "Jacobins," whom Wordsworth may or may not have met, but his case is strong enough without their help. Wordsworth's reply—not published at the time, or, indeed, till after his death—to the Bishop of Llandaff's anti-French-Revolution sermon on *The Wisdom and Goodness of God in having made both Rich and Poor*,



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was signed without qualification, “By a Republican.” He refused to join in “the idle Cry of modish lamentation” over the execution of the French King, and defended the other executions in France as necessary. He condemned the hereditary principle, whether in the Monarchy or the House of Lords. The existence of a nobility, he held, “has a necessary, tendency to dishonour labour.” Had he published this pamphlet when it was written, in 1793, he might easily have found himself in prison, like many other sympathizers with the French.

Wordsworth gives us an idea in *The Prelude*—how one wishes one had the original and unamended version of the poem as it was finished in 1805!—of the extreme lengths to which his Republican idealism carried him. When war was declared against France, he tells us, he prayed for French victories, and—

Exulted in the triumph of my soul,
When Englishmen by thousands were o'erthrown,
Left without glory on the field, or driven,
Brave hearts! to shameful flight.

Two years later we, find him at Racedown planning satires against the King, the Prince of Wales, and various public men, one of the couplets on the King and the Duke of Norfolk running:—

Heavens! who sees majesty in George's face?
Or looks at Norfolk, and can dream of grace?

But these lines, he declared, were given to him by Southey.

By 1797 a Government spy seems to have been looking after him and his friends: he was living at the time at Alfoxden, near Coleridge, who, in the previous year, had brought out *The Watchman* to proclaim, as the prospectus said, “the state of the political atmosphere, and preserve Freedom and her Friends from the attacks of Robbers and Assassins.” Wordsworth at a later period did not like the story of the spy, but it is certain that about the time of the visit he got notice to quit Alfoxden, obviously for political reasons, from the lady who owned the estate.

Professor Harper's originality as a biographer, however, does not lie in his narration of facts like these, but in the patience with which he traces the continuance of French sympathies in Wordsworth on into the opening years of the nineteenth century. He has altered the proportions in the Wordsworth legend, and made the youth of the poet as long in the telling as his age. This was all the more necessary because various biographers have followed too closely the example of the official *Life*, the materials for which Wordsworth entrusted to his nephew, the Bishop, who naturally regarded



Wordsworth, the pillar of Church and State, as a more eminent and laudable figure than Wordsworth, the young Revolutionary. Whether the Bishop deliberately hushed up the fact that, during his early travels in France, Wordsworth fell in love with an aristocratic French lady who bore him an illegitimate child, I do not know. Professor Harper, taking a more ruthless view of the



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duties of a biographer, now relates the story, though in a rather vague and mysterious way. One wishes that, having told us so much, he had told us a little more. Even with all we know about the early life of Wordsworth, we are still left guessing at his portrait rather than with a clear idea of it. He was a figure in his youth, a character in his old age. The character we know down to the roots of his hair. But the figure remains something of a secret.

As a poet, Wordsworth may almost be called the first of the democrats. He brought into literature a fresh vision—a vision bathing the world and its inhabitants in a strange and revolutionary light. He was the first great poet of equality and fraternity in the sense that he portrayed the lives of common country, people in their daily surroundings as faithfully as though they had been kings. It would be absurd to suggest that there are no anticipations of this democratic spirit in English literature from Chaucer down to Burns, but Wordsworth, more than any other English writer, deserves the credit of having emancipated the poor man into being a fit subject for noble poetry. How revolutionary a change this was it is difficult to realize at the present day, but Jeffrey's protest against it in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802 enables one to realize to what a degree the poor man was regarded as an outcast from literature when Wordsworth was young. In the course of an attack on *Lyrical Ballads* Jeffrey wrote:—

The love, or grief, or indignation, of an enlightened and refined character is not only expressed in a different language, but is in itself a different emotion from the love, or grief, or anger, of a clown, a tradesman, or a market-wench. The things themselves are radically and obviously distinct.... The poor and vulgar may interest us, in poetry, by their *situation*; but never, we apprehend, by any sentiments that are peculiar to their condition, and still less by any language that is peculiar to it.

When one takes sides with Wordsworth against Jeffrey on this matter it is not because one regards Wordsworth as a portrait-painter without faults. His portraits are marred in several cases by the intrusion of his own personality with its "My good man" and "My little man" air. His human beings have a way of becoming either lifeless or absurd when they talk. *The Leech-Gatherer* and *The Idiot Boy* are not the only poems of Wordsworth that are injured by the insertion of banal dialogue. It is as though there were, despite his passion for liberty, equality, and fraternity, a certain *gaucherie* in his relations with other human beings, and he were at his happiest as a solitary. His nature, we may grant, was of mixed aspects, but, even as early as the 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes* had he not expressed his impatience of human society in a sonnet?—



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I am not one who much or oft delight
To season my fireside with personal talk—
Of friends, who live within an easy walk,
Or neighbours, daily, weekly, in *my* sight:
And, for my chance-acquaintance, ladies bright,
Sons, mothers, maidens withering on the stalk,
These all wear out of me, like forms, with chalk
Painted on rich men's floors, for one feast-night.

Better than such discourse doth silence long,
Long, barren silence, square with my desire;
To sit without emotion, hope, or aim,
In the loved presence of my cottage fire,
And listen to the flapping of the flame,
Or kettle whispering its faint undersong.

With Wordsworth, indeed, the light of revelation did not fall upon human beings so unbrokenly as upon the face of the earth. He knew the birds of the countryside better than the old men, and the flowers far better than the children. He noticed how light plays like a spirit upon all living things. He heard every field and valley echoing with new songs. He saw the daffodils dancing by the lake, the green linnet dancing among the hazel leaves, and the young lambs bounding, as he says in an unexpected line, "as to the tabor's sound," and his heart danced to the same music, like the heart of a mystic caught up in holy rapture. Here rather than in men did he discover the divine speech. His vision of men was always troubled by his consciousness of duties. Nature came to him as a liberator into spiritual existence. Not that he ceased to be a philosopher in his reveries. He was never the half-sensual kind of mystic. He was never a sensualist in anything, indeed. It is significant that he had little sense of smell—the most sensual of the senses. It is, perhaps, because of this that he is comparatively so roseless a poet.

But what an ear he had, what a harvesting eye! One cannot read *The Prelude* or *The Ode* or *Tintern Abbey* without feeling that seldom can there have been a poet with a more exquisite capacity for the enjoyment of joyous things. In his profounder moments he reaches the very sources of joy as few poets have done. He attracts many readers like a prospect of cleansing and healing streams.

And he succeeds in being a great poet in two manners. He is a great poet in the grand tradition of English literature, and he is a great poet in his revolutionary simplicity. *The Idiot Boy*, for all its banalities, is as immortal as *The Ode*, and *The Solitary Reaper* will live side by side with the great sonnets while the love of literature endures. While we read these poems we tell ourselves that it is almost irrelevant to mourn the fact that the man who wrote them gave up his faith in humanity for faith in Church and State. His genius survives in literature: it was only his courage as a politician that perished. At the same time, he wished to impress himself upon

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the world as a politician even more perhaps than as a poet. And, indeed, if he had died at the age at which Byron died, his record in politics would have been as noble as his record in poetry. Happily or unhappily, however, he lived on, a worse politician and a worse poet. His record as both has never before been set forth with the same comprehensiveness as in Professor Harper's important and, after one has ploughed through some heavy pages, fascinating volumes.

2. HIS POLITICS

"Just for a handful of silver he left us." Browning was asked if he really meant the figure in *The Lost Leader* for Wordsworth, and he admitted that, though it was not a portrait, he had Wordsworth vaguely in his mind. We do not nowadays believe that Wordsworth changed his political opinions in order to be made distributor of stamps for the county of Westmoreland, or even (as he afterwards became in addition) for the county of Cumberland. Nor did Browning believe this. He did believe, however, that Wordsworth was a turncoat, a renegade—a poet who began as the champion of liberty and ended as its enemy. This is the general view, and it seems to me to be unassailable.

Mr. A.V. Dicey, in a recent book, *The Statesmanship of Wordsworth*, attempts to portray Wordsworth as a sort of early Mazzini—one who "by many years anticipated, thought out, and announced the doctrine of Nationalism, which during at least fifty years of the nineteenth century (1820-70) governed or told upon the foreign policy of every European country." I think he exaggerates, but it cannot be denied that Wordsworth said many wise things about nationality, and that he showed a true liberal instinct in the French wars, siding with the French in the early days while they were fighting for liberty, and afterwards siding against them when they were fighting for Napoleonic Imperialism. Wordsworth had not yet abandoned his ardour for liberty when, in 1809, he published his *Tract on the Convention of Cintra*. Those who accuse him of apostasy have in mind not his "Tract" and his sonnets of war-time, but the later lapse of faith which resulted in his opposing Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bill, and in his sitting down seriously to write sonnets in favour of capital punishment.

He began with an imagination which emphasized the natural goodness of man: he ended with an imagination which emphasized the natural evil of man. He began with faith in liberty; he ended with faith in restraint. Mr. Dicey admits much of the case against the later Wordsworth, but his very defence of the poet is in itself an accusation. He contends, for instance, that "it was natural that a man, who had in his youth seen face to face the violence of the revolutionary struggle in France, should have felt the danger of the Reform Act becoming the commencement of anarchy and revolution in England." Natural it may have been, but none the less it was a right-about-turn of the spirit. Wordsworth had ceased to believe in liberty.



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There is very little evidence, indeed, that in his later years Wordsworth remained interested in liberty at all. The most important evidence of the kind is that of Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, author of *The Purgatory of Suicides*, who visited him in 1846 after serving a term in prison on a charge of sedition. Wordsworth received him and said to him: "You Chartists are right: you have a right to votes, only you take the wrong way to obtain them. You must avoid physical violence." Referring to the conversation, Mr. Dicey comments:—

At the age of seventy-six the spirit of the old revolutionist and of the friend of the Girondins was still alive. He might not think much of the Whigs, but within four years of his death Wordsworth was certainly no Tory.

There is no reason, however, why we should trouble our heads over the question whether at the age of seventy-six Wordsworth was a Tory or not. It is only by the grace of God that any man escapes being a Tory long before that. What is of interest to us is his attitude in the days of his vitality, not of his senility. In regard to this, I agree that it would be grossly unfair to accuse him of apostasy, simply because he at first hailed the French Revolution as the return of the Golden Age—

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!

—and ten or fifteen years later was to be found gloomily prophesying against a premature peace with Napoleon. One cannot be sure that, if one had been living in those days oneself, one's faith in the Revolution would have survived the September massacres and Napoleon undiminished. Those who had at first believed that the reign of righteousness had suddenly come down from Heaven must have been shocked to find that human nature was still red in tooth and claw in the new era. Not that the massacres immediately alienated Wordsworth. In the year following them he wrote in defence of the French Revolution, and incidentally apologized for the execution of King Louis. "If you had attended," he wrote in his unpublished *Apology for the French Revolution* in 1793, "to the history of the French Revolution as minutely as its importance demands, so far from stopping to bewail his death, you would rather have regretted that the blind fondness of his people had placed a human being in that monstrous situation which rendered him unaccountable before a human tribunal." In *The Prelude*, too (which, it will be remembered, though it was written early, Wordsworth left to be published after his death), we are given a perfect answer to those who would condemn the French Revolution, or any similar uprising, on account of its incidental horrors:—

When a taunt
Was taken up by scoffers in their pride,
Saying, "Behold the harvest that we reap

From popular government and equality,”
I clearly saw that neither



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these nor aught

Of wild belief engrafted on their views
By false philosophy had caused the woe,
But a terrific reservoir of guilt
And ignorance filled up from age to age.
That would no longer hold its loathsome charge,
But burst and spread in deluge through the land.

Mr. Dicey insists that Wordsworth's attitude in regard to the horrors of September proves "the statesmanlike calmness and firmness of his judgment." Wordsworth was hardly calm, but he remained on the side of France with sufficiently firm enthusiasm to pray for the defeat of his own countrymen in the war of 1793. He describes, in *The Prelude*, how he felt at the time in an English country church:—

When, in the congregation bending all
To their great Father, prayers were offered up,
Or praises for our country's victories;
And, 'mid the simple worshippers, perchance
I only, like an uninvited guest
Whom no one owned, sate silent, shall I add,
Fed on the day of vengeance yet to come.

The faith that survived the massacres, however, could not survive Napoleon. Henceforth Wordsworth began to write against France in the name of Nationalism and Liberty.

He now becomes a political thinker—a great political thinker, in the judgment of Mr. Dicey. He sets forth a political philosophy—the philosophy of Nationalism. He grasped the first principle of Nationalism firmly, which is, that nations should be self-governed, even if they are governed badly. He saw that the nation which is oppressed from within is in a far more hopeful condition than the nation which is oppressed from without. In his *Tract* he wrote:—

The difference between inbred oppression and that which is from without [i.e. imposed by foreigners] is *essential*; inasmuch as the former does not exclude, from the minds of the people, the feeling of being self-governed; does not imply (as the latter does, when patiently submitted to) an abandonment of the first duty imposed by the faculty of reason.

And he went on:—



If a country have put on chains of its own forging; in the name of virtue, let it be conscious that to itself it is accountable: let it not have cause to look beyond its own limits for reproof: and—in the name of humanity—if it be self-depressed, let it have its pride and some hope within itself. The poorest peasant, in an unsubdued land, feels this pride. I do not appeal to the example of Britain or of Switzerland, for the one is free, and the other lately was free (and, I trust, will ere long be so again): but talk with the Swede; and you will see the joy he finds in these sensations. With him animal courage (the substitute for many and the friend of all the manly virtues) has space to move in: and is at once elevated by his imagination, and softened by his affections: it is invigorated also; for the

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whole courage of his country is in his breast.

That is an admirable statement of the Liberal faith. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was putting the same truth in a sentence when he said that good government was no substitute for self-government. Wordsworth, however, was not an out-and-out Nationalist. He did not regard the principles of Nationalism as applicable to all nations alike, small and great. He believed in the “balance of power,” in which “the smaller states must disappear, and merge in the large nations of widespread language.” He desired national unity for Germany and for Italy (which was in accordance with the principles of Nationalism), but he also blessed the union of Ireland with Great Britain (which was a violation of the principles of Nationalism). He introduced “certain limitations,” indeed, into the Nationalist creed, which enable even an Imperialist like Mr. Dicey to look like a kind of Nationalist.

At the same time, though he acquiesced in the dishonour of the Irish Union, his patriotism never became perverted into Jingoism. He regarded the war between England and France, not as a war between angel and devil, but as a war between one sinner doing his best and another sinner doing his worst. He was gloomy as a Hebrew prophet in his summoning of England to a change of heart in a sonnet written in 1803:

England! the time is come when thou shouldst wean
Thy heart from its emasculating food;
The truth should now be better understood;
Old things have been unsettled; we have seen
Fair seed-time, better harvest might have been
But for thy trespasses; and, at this day,
If for Greece, Egypt, India, Africa,
Aught good were destined, thou wouldst step between.
England! all nations in this charge agree:
But worse, more ignorant in love and hate,
Far, far more abject is thine Enemy:
Therefore the wise pray for thee, though the freight
Of thy offences be a heavy weight:
Oh grief, that Earth's best hopes rest all with Thee!

All this means merely that the older Wordsworth grew, the more he became concerned with the duties rather than the rights of man. The revolutionary creed seems at times to involve the belief that, if you give men their rights, they will perform their duties as a necessary consequence. The Conservative creed, on the other hand, appears to be based on the theory that men, as a whole, are scarcely fit for rights but must be kept to their duties with a strong hand. Neither belief is entirely true. As Mazzini saw, the French Revolution failed because it emphasized the rights so disproportionately in



comparison with the duties of man. Conservatism fails, on the other hand, because its conception of duty inevitably ceases before long to be an ethical conception: duty in the mouth of reactionaries usually means simply obedience to one's "betters." The melancholy sort of moralist frequently hardens



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into a reactionary of this sort. Burke and Carlyle and Ruskin—all of them blasphemed the spirit of liberty in the name of duty. Mr. Dicey contends that Burke's and Wordsworth's political principles remained essentially consistent throughout. They assuredly did nothing of the sort. Burke's principles during the American War and his principles at the time of the French Revolution were divided from each other like crabbed age and youth. Burke lost his beliefs as he did his youth. And so did Wordsworth. It seems to me rather a waste of time to insist at all costs on the consistency of great men. The great question is, not whether they were consistent, but when they were right. Wordsworth was in the main right in his enthusiasm for the French Revolution, and he was in the main right in his hatred of Napoleonism. But, when once the Napoleonic Wars were over, he had no creed left for mankind. He lived on till 1850, but he ceased to be able to say anything that had the ancient inspiration. He was at his greatest an inspired child of the Revolution. He learned from France that love of liberty which afterwards led him to oppose France. Speaking of those who, like himself, had changed in their feelings towards France, he wrote:—
Though there was a shifting in temper of hostility in their minds as far as regarded persons, they only combated the same enemy opposed to them under a different shape; and that enemy was the spirit of selfish tyranny and lawless ambition.

That is a just defence. But the undeniable fact is that, after that time, Wordsworth ceased to combat the spirit of selfish tyranny and lawless ambition as he once had done. There is no need to blame him: also there is no need to defend him. He was human; he was tired; he was growing old. The chief danger of a book like Mr. Dicey's is that, in accepting its defence of Wordsworth's maturity, we may come to disparage his splendid youth. Mr. Dicey's book, however, is exceedingly interesting in calling attention to the great part politics may play in the life of a poet. Wordsworth said, in 1833, that "although he was known to the world only as a poet, he had given twelve hours' thought to the condition and prospects of society, for one to poetry." He did not retire into a "wise passiveness" as regards the world's affairs until he had written some of the greatest political literature—and, in saying this, I am thinking of his sonnets rather than of his political prose—that has appeared in England since the death of Milton.

V.

KEATS

1. THE BIOGRAPHY



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Sir Sidney Colvin deserves praise for the noble architecture of the temple he has built in honour of Keats. His great book, *John Keats: His Life and Poetry; His Friends, Critics, and After-fame*, is not only a temple, indeed, but a museum. Sir Sidney has brought together here the whole of Keats's world, or at least all the relics of his world that the last of a band of great collectors has been able to recover; and in the result we can accompany Keats through the glad and sad and mad and bad hours of his short and marvellous life as we have never been able to do before under the guidance of a single biographer. We are still left in the dark, it is true, as to Keats's race and descent. Whether Keats's father came to London from Cornwall or not, Sir Sidney has not been able to decide on the rather shaky evidence that has been put forward. If it should hereafter turn out that Keats was a Cornishman at one remove, Matthew Arnold's conjecture as to the "Celtic element" in him, as in other English poets, may revive in the general esteem.

In the present state of our knowledge, however, we must be content to accept Keats as a Londoner without ancestors beyond the father who was head-ostler at the sign of the "Swan and Hoop," Finsbury Pavement, and married his master's daughter. It was at the stable at the "Swan and Hoop"—not a public-house, by the way, but a livery-stable—that Keats was prematurely born at the end of October 1795. He was scarcely nine years old when his father was killed by a fall from a horse. He was only fourteen when his mother (who had re-married unhappily and then been separated from her husband) died, a victim of chronic rheumatism and consumption. It is from his mother that Keats seems to have inherited his impetuous and passionate nature. There is the evidence of a certain wholesale tea-dealer—the respectability of whose trade may have inclined him to censoriousness—to the effect that, both as girl and woman, she "was a person of unbridled temperament, and that in her later years she fell into loose ways, and was no credit to the family." That she had other qualities besides those mentioned by the tea-dealer is shown by the passionate affection that existed between her and her son John. "Once as a young child, when she was ordered to be kept quiet during an illness, he is said to have insisted on keeping watch at her door with an old sword, and allowing no one to go in." As she lay dying, "he sat up whole nights with her in a great chair, would suffer nobody to give her medicine, or even cook her food, but himself, and read novels to her in her intervals of ease." The Keats children were fortunately not left penniless. Their grandfather, the proprietor of the livery-stable, had bequeathed a fortune of L13,000, a little of which was spent on sending Keats to a good school till the age of sixteen, and afterwards enabled him to attend Guy's Hospital as a medical student.



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It is almost impossible to credit the accepted story that he passed all his boyhood without making any attempt at writing poetry. "He did not begin to write," says Sir Sidney Colvin, "till he was near eighteen." If this is so, one feels all the more grateful to his old schoolfellow, Cowden Clarke, who lent him *The Faery Queene*, with a long list of other books, and in doing so presented him with the key that unlocked the unsuspected treasure of his genius. There is only one person, indeed, in all the Keats circle to whom one is more passionately grateful than to Cowden Clarke: that is Fanny Brawne. Keats no doubt had laboured to some purpose—occasionally, to fine purpose—with his genius before the autumn of 1818, when he met Fanny Brawne for the first time. None the less, had he died before that date, he would have been remembered in literature not as a marvellous original artist, but rather as one of those "inheritors of unfulfilled renown" among whom Shelley surprisingly placed him. Fanny Brawne may (or may not) have been the bad fairy of Keats as a man. She was unquestionably his good fairy as a poet.

This is the only matter upon which one is seriously disposed to quarrel with Sir Sidney Colvin as a biographer. He does not emphasize as he ought the debt we are under to Fanny Brawne as the intensifier of Keats's genius—the "minx," as Keats irritably called her, who transformed him in a few months from a poet of still doubtful fame into a master and an immortal. The attachment, Sir Sidney thinks, was a misfortune for him, though he qualifies this by adding that "so probably under the circumstances must any passion for a woman have been." Well, let us test this "misfortune" by its consequences. The meeting with Fanny took place, as I have said, in the autumn of 1818. During the winter Keats continued to write *Hyperion*, which he seems already to have begun. In January 1819 he wrote *The Eve of St. Agnes*. During the spring of that year, he wrote the *Ode to Psyche*, the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the *Ode to a Nightingale*, and *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. In the autumn he finished *Lamia*, and wrote the *Ode to Autumn*. To the same year belongs the second greatest of his sonnets, *Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art*. In other words, practically all the fine gold of Keats's work was produced in the months in which his passion for Fanny Brawne was consuming him as with fire. His greatest poems we clearly owe to that heightened sense of beauty which resulted from his translation into a lover. It seems to me a treachery to Keats's memory to belittle a woman who was at least the occasion of such a passionate expenditure of genius. Sir Sidney Colvin does his best to be fair to Fanny, but his presentation of the story of Keats's love for her will, I am afraid, be regarded by the long line of her disparagers as an endorsement of their blame.



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I can understand the dislike of Fanny Brawne on the part of those who dislike Keats and all his works. But if we accept Keats and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, we had better be honest and also accept Fanny, who inspired them. Keats, it must be remembered, was a sensualist. His poems belong to the literature of the higher sensualism. They reveal him as a man not altogether free from the vulgarities of sensualism, as well as one who was able to transmute it into perfect literature. He seems to have admired women vulgarly as creatures whose hands were waiting to be squeezed, rather than as equal human beings; the eminent exception to this being his sister-in-law, Georgiana. His famous declaration of independence of them—that he would rather give them a sugar-plum than his time—was essentially a cynicism in the exhausted-Don-Juan mood. Hence, Keats was almost doomed to fall in love with provocation rather than with what the Victorians called “soul.” His destiny was not to be a happy lover, but the slave of a “minx.” It was not a slavery without dignity, however. It had the dignity of tragedy. Sir Sidney Colvin regrets that the love-letters of Keats to Fanny were ever published. It would be as reasonable, in my opinion, to regret the publication of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. *La Belle Dame sans Merci* says in literature merely what the love-letters say in autobiography. The love-letters, indeed, like the poem, affect us as great literature does. They unquestionably take us down into the depths of suffering—those depths in which tortured souls cry out almost inarticulately in their anguish. The torture of the dying lover, as he sails for Italy and leaves Fanny, never to see her again, has almost no counterpart in biographical literature. “The thought of leaving Miss Brawne,” he writes to Brown from Yarmouth, “is beyond everything horrible—the sense of darkness coming over me—I eternally see her figure eternally vanishing.” And when he reaches Naples he writes to the same friend:—

I can bear to die—I cannot bear to leave her. O God! God! God! Everything that I have in my trunks that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear. The silk lining she put in my travelling cap scalds my head. My imagination is horribly vivid about her—I see her—I hear her.... O that I could be buried near where she lives! I am afraid to write to her—to receive a letter from her. To see her handwriting would break my heart—even to hear of her anyhow, to see her name written, would be more than I can bear.

Sir Sidney Colvin does not attempt to hide Keats's love-story away in a corner. Where he goes wrong, it seems to me, is in his failure to realize that this love-story was the making of Keats as a man of genius. Had Sir Sidney fully grasped the part played by Fanny Brawne as, for good or evil, the presiding genius of Keats as a poet, he would, I fancy, have found a different explanation of the changes introduced into the later version of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Sir Sidney is all in favour—and there is something to be said for his preference—of the earlier version, which begins:—



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O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering!

But he does not perceive the reasons that led Keats to alter this in the version he published in Leigh Hunt's *Indicator* to:—

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,

and so on. Sir Sidney thinks that this and other changes, “which are all in the direction of the slipshod and the commonplace, were made on Hunt’s suggestion, and that Keats acquiesced from fatigue or indifference.” To accuse Hunt of wishing to alter “knight-at-arms” to “wretched wight” seems to me unwarrantable guessing. Surely a much more likely explanation is that Keats, who in this poem wrote his own biography as an unfortunate lover, came in a realistic mood to dislike “knight-at-arms” as a too romantic image of himself. He decided, I conjecture, that “wretched wight” was a description nearer the bitter truth. Hence his emendation. The other alterations also seem to me to belong to Keats rather than to Hunt. This does not mean that the “knight-at-arms” version is not also beautiful. But, in spite of this, I trust the Delegates of the Oxford University Press will not listen to Sir Sidney Colvin’s appeal to banish the later version from their editions of Keats. Every edition of Keats ought to contain both versions just as it ought to contain both versions of *Hyperion*.

Nothing that I have written will be regarded, I trust, as depreciating the essential excellence, power, and (in its scholarly way) even the greatness of Sir Sidney Colvin’s book. But a certain false emphasis here and there, an intelligible prejudice in favour of believing what is good of his subject, has left his book almost too ready to the hand of those who cannot love a man of genius without desiring to “respectabilize” him. Sir Sidney sees clearly enough the double nature of Keats—his fiery courage, shown in his love of fighting as a schoolboy, his generosity, his virtue of the heart, on the one hand, and his luxurious love of beauty, his tremulous and swooning sensitiveness in the presence of nature and women, his morbidness, his mawkishness, his fascination as by serpents, on the other. But in the resultant portrait, it is a too respectable and virile Keats that emerges. Keats was more virile as a man than is generally understood. He does not owe his immortality to his virility, however. He owes it to his servitude to golden images, to his citizenship of the world of the senses, to his bondage to physical love. Had he lived longer he might have invaded other worlds. His recasting of *Hyperion* opens with a cry of distrust in the artist who is content to live in the little world of his art. His very revulsion against the English of Milton was a revulsion against the dead language of formal beauty. But it is in formal beauty—the formal beauty especially of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, which has never been surpassed in literature—that his own achievement lies. He is great among the pagans, not among the prophets. Unless we keep this clearly in mind our praise of him will not be appreciation. It will be but a sounding funeral speech instead of communion with a lovely and broken spirit, the greatest boast of whose life was: “I have loved the principle of beauty in all things.”



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2. THE MATTHEW ARNOLD VIEW

Matthew Arnold has often been attacked for his essay on Shelley. His essay on Keats, as a matter of fact, is much less sympathetic and penetrating. Here, more than anywhere else in his work, he seems to be a professor with whiskers drinking afternoon tea and discoursing on literature to a circle of schoolgirls. It is not that Matthew Arnold under-estimated Keats. "He is with Shakespeare," he declared; and in another sentence: "In what we call natural magic, he ranks with Shakespeare." One may disagree with this—for in natural magic Keats does not rank even with Shelley—and, at the same time, feel that Matthew Arnold gives Keats too little rather than too much appreciation. He divorced Keats's poetry too gingerly from Keats's life. He did not sufficiently realize the need for understanding all that passion and courage and railing and ecstasy of which the poems are the expression. He was a little shocked; he would have liked to draw a veil; he did not approve of a young man who could make love in language so unlike the measured ardour of one of Miss Austen's heroes. The impression left by the letters to Fanny Brawne, he declared, was "unpleasing." After quoting one of the letters, he goes on to comment:—

One is tempted to say that Keats's love-letter is the love-letter of a surgeon's apprentice. It has in its relaxed self-abandonment something underbred and ignoble, as of a youth ill brought up, without the training which teaches us that we must put some constraint upon our feelings and upon the expression of them. It is the sort of love-letter of a surgeon's apprentice, which one might hear read out in a breach of promise case, or in the Divorce Court.

Applied to the letter which Arnold had just quoted there could not be a more foolish criticism. Keats was dogged by a curious vulgarity (which produced occasional comic effects in his work), but his self-abandonment was not vulgar. It may have been in a sense immoral: he was an artist who practised the philosophy of exquisite moments long before Pater wrote about it. He abandoned himself to the sensations of love and the sensations of an artist like a voluptuary. The best of his work is day-dreams of love and art. The degree to which his genius fed itself upon art and day-dreams of art is suggested by the fact that the most perfect of his early poems, written at the age of twenty, was the sonnet on Chapman's Homer, and that the most perfect of his later poems was the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. His magic was largely artistic magic, not natural magic. He writes about Pan and the nymphs, but we do not feel that they were shapes of earth and air to him, as they were to Shelley; rather they seem like figures copied out of his friends' pictures. Consider, for example, the picture of a nymph who appeared to Endymion:—

It was a nymph uprising to the breast
In the fountain's pebbly margin, and she stood
'Mong lilies, like the youngest of her brood.

To him her dripping hand she softly kist,
And anxiously began to plait and twist



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The gestures of the nymph are as ludicrous as could be found in an Academy or Salon picture. Keats's human or quasi-human beings are seldom more than decorations, but this is a commonplace decoration. The figures in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and the later narratives are a part of the general beauty of the poems; but even there they are made, as it were, to match the furniture. It is the same in all his best poems. Keats's imagination lived in castles, and he loved the properties, and the men and women were among the properties. We may forget the names of Porphyro and Madeline, but we do not forget the background of casement and arras and golden dishes and beautiful sensual things against which we see them, charming figures of love-sickness. Similarly, in *Lamia*, we may remember the name of the serpent-woman's lover with difficulty; but who can forget the colours of her serpent-skin or the furnishing of her couch and of her palace in Corinth:—

That purple-lined palace of sweet sin?

In Keats every palace has a purple lining.

So much may be said in definition of Keats's genius. It was essentially an aesthetic genius. It anticipated both William Morris and Oscar Wilde. There is in Keats a passion for the luxury of the world such as we do not find in Wordsworth or Shelley. He had not that bird-like quality of song which they had—that happiness to be alive and singing between the sky and the green earth. He looked on beautiful things with the intense devotion of the temple-worshipper rather than with the winged pleasure of the great poets. He was love-sick for beauty as Porphyro for Madeline. His attitude to beauty—the secret and immortal beauty—is one of “love shackled with vain-loving.” It is desire of an almost bodily kind. Keats's work, indeed, is in large measure simply the beautiful expression of bodily desire, or of something of the same nature as bodily desire. His conception of love was almost entirely physical. He was greedy for it to the point of green-sickness. His intuition told him that passion so entirely physical had in it something fatal. Love in his poems is poisonous and secret in its beauty. It is passion for a *Lamia*, for *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Keats's ecstasies were swooning ecstasies. They lacked joy. It is not only in the *Ode to a Nightingale* that he seems to praise death more than life. This was temperamental with him. He felt the “cursed spite” of things as melancholily as Hamlet did. He was able to dream a world nearer his happiness than this world of dependence and church bells and “literary jabberers”; and he could come to no terms except with his fancy. I do not mean to suggest that he despised the beauty of the earth. Rather he filled his eyes with it:—

Hill-flowers running wild
In pink and purple chequer—

and:—



Up-pil'd,
The cloudy rack slow journeying in the West,
Like herded elephants.



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But the simple pleasure in colours and shapes grows less in his later poems. It becomes overcast. His great poems have the intensity and sorrow of a farewell.

It would be absurd, however, to paint Keats as a man without vitality, without pugnacity, without merriment. His brother declared that “John was the very soul of manliness and courage, and as much like the Holy Ghost as Johnny Keats”—the Johnny Keats who had allowed himself to be “snuffed out by an article.” As a schoolboy he had been fond of fighting, and as a man he had his share of militancy. He had a quite healthy sense of humour, too—not a subtle sense, but at least sufficient to enable him to regard his work playfully at times, as when he commented on an early version of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* containing the lines:—

And there I shut her wild, wild eyes
With kisses four.

“Why four kisses?” he writes to his brother:—

Why four kisses—you will say—why four? Because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fain said “score” without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the imagination, as the critics say, with judgment. I was obliged to choose an even number, that both eyes might have fair play, and to speak truly I think two apiece quite sufficient. Suppose I had said seven, there would have been three and-a-half apiece—a very awkward affair, and well got out of on my side.

That was written nearly a year after the famous *Quarterly* article on *Endymion*, in which the reviewer had so severely taken to task “Mr. Keats (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody).” It suggests that Keats retained at least a certain share of good spirits, in spite of the *Quarterly* and Fanny Brawne and the approach of death. His observation, too, was often that of a spirited common-sense realist rather than an aesthete, as in his first description of Fanny Brawne:—

She is about my height—with a fine style and countenance of the lengthened sort—she wants sentiment in every feature—she manages to make her hair look well—her nostrils are fine—though a little painful—her mouth is bad and good—her profile is better than her full face, which, indeed, is not full but pale and thin, without showing any bone—her shape is very graceful, and so are her movements—her arms are good, her hands bad-ish—her feet tolerable—she is not seventeen [nineteen?]¹—but she is ignorant monstrous in her behaviour, flying out in all directions, calling people such names—that I was forced lately to make use of the term *minx*; this is, I think, not from any innate vice but from a penchant she has of acting stylishly. I am, however, tired of such style, and shall decline any more of it.



Yet before many months he was writing to the “minx,” “I will imagine you Venus to-night, and pray, pray, pray, pray to your star like a heathen.” Certain it is, as I have already said, that it was after his meeting with Fanny Brawne that he grew, as in a night, into a great poet. Let us not then abuse Keats’s passion for her as vulgar. And let us not attempt to make up for this by ranking him with Shakespeare. He is great among the second, not among the first poets.



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VI

HENRY JAMES

1. THE NOVELIST OF GRAINS AND SCRUPLES

Henry James is an example of a writer who enjoyed immense fame but little popularity. Some of his best books, I believe, never passed into second editions. He was, above all novelists, an esoteric author. His disciples had the pleasure of feeling like persons initiated into mysteries. He was subject, like a religious teacher, to all kinds of conflicting interpretations. He puzzled and exasperated even intelligent people. They often wondered what he meant and whether it was worth writing about. Mr. Wells, or whoever wrote *Boon*, compared him to a hippopotamus picking up a pea.

Certainly he laboured over trifles as though he were trying to pile Pelion on Ossa. He was capable, had he been a poet, of writing an epic made up of incidents chosen from the gossip of an old maid in the upper middle classes. He was the novelist of grains and scruples. I have heard it urged that he was the supreme incarnation of the Nonconformist conscience, perpetually concerned with infinitesimal details of conduct. As a matter of fact, there was much more of the aesthete in him than of the Nonconformist. He lived for his tastes. It is because he is a novelist of tastes rather than of passions that he is unlikely ever to be popular even to the degree to which Meredith is popular.

One imagines him, from his childhood, as a perfect connoisseur, a dilettante. He has told us how, as a child, in New York, Paris, London, and Geneva, he enjoyed more than anything else the “far from showy practice of wondering and dawdling and gaping.” And, while giving us this picture of the small boy that was himself, he comments:

There was the very pattern and measure of all he was to demand: just to *be* somewhere—almost anywhere would do—and somehow receive an impression or an accession, feel a relation or a vibration.

That is the essential Henry James—the collector of impressions and vibrations. “Almost anywhere would do”: that is what makes some of his stories just miss being as insipid as the verse in a magazine. On the other hand, of few of his stories is this true. His personality was too definitely marked to leave any of his work flavourless. His work reflects him as the arrangement of a room may reflect a charming lady. He brings into every little world that he enters the light of a new and refined inquisitiveness. He is as watchful as a cat. Half his pleasure seems to come from waiting for the extraordinary to peep and peer out of the ordinary. That is his adventure. He prefers it to seas of bloodshed. One may quarrel with it, if one demands that art shall be as violent as war and shall not subdue itself to the level of a game. But those who enjoy the spectacle of

a game played with perfect skill will always find reading Henry James an exciting experience.



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It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the literature of Henry James can be finally summed up as a game. He is unquestionably a virtuoso: he uses his genius as an instrument upon which he loves to reveal his dexterity, even when he is shy of revealing his immortal soul. But he is not so inhuman in his art as some of his admirers have held him to be. Mr. Hueffer, I think, has described him as pitiless, and even cruel. But can one call *Daisy Miller* pitiless? Or *What Maisie Knew*? Certainly, those autobiographical volumes, *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, which may be counted among the most wonderful of the author's novels, are pervaded by exquisite affections which to a pitiless nature would have been impossible.

Henry James is even sufficiently human to take sides with his characters. He never does this to the point of lying about them. But he is in his own still way passionately on the side of the finer types. In *The Turn of the Screw*, which seems to me to be the greatest ghost-story in the English language, he has dramatized the duel between good and evil; and the effect of it, at the end of all its horrors, is that of a hymn in praise of courage. One feels—though a more perverse theory of the story has been put forward—that the governess, who fights against the evil in the big house, has the author also fighting as her ally and the children's. Similarly, Maisie has a friend in the author.

He is never more human, perhaps, than when he is writing, not about human beings, but about books. It is not inconceivable that he will live as a critic long after he is forgotten as a novelist. No book of criticism to compare with his *Notes on Novelists* has been published in the present century. He brought his imagination to bear upon books as he brought his critical and analytical faculty to bear upon human beings. Here there was room for real heroes. He idolized his authors as he idolized none of his characters. There is something of moral passion in the reverence with which he writes of the labours of Flaubert and Balzac and Stevenson and even of Zola.

He lied none of them into perfection, it is true. He accepted, and even advertised their limitations. But in each of them he found an example of the hero as artist. His characterization of Flaubert as the "operative conscience or vicarious sacrifice" of a styleless literary age is the pure gold of criticism. "The piety most real to her," Fleda says in *The Spoils of Poynton*, "was to be on one's knees before one's high standard." Henry James himself had that kind of piety. Above all recent men of letters, he was on his knees to his high standard.



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People may wonder whether his standard was not, to an excessive degree, a standard of subtlety rather than of creative imagination—at least, in his later period. And undoubtedly his subtlety was to some extent a matter of make-believe. He loved to take a simple conversation, and, by introducing a few subtle changes, to convert it into a sort of hieroglyphics that need an interpreter. He grew more and more to believe that it was not possible to tell the simple truth except in an involved way. He would define a gesture with as much labour as Shakespeare would devote to the entire portrait of a woman. He was a realist of civilized society in which both speech and action have to be sifted with scientific care before they will yield their grain of motive. The humorous patience with which Henry James seeks for that grain is one of the distinctive features of his genius.

But, it may be asked, are his people real? They certainly are real in the relationships in which he exhibits them, but they are real like people to whom one has been introduced in a foreign city rather than like people who are one's friends. One does not remember them like the characters in Meredith or Mr. Hardy. Henry James, indeed, is himself the outstanding character in his books. That fine and humorous collector of European ladies and gentlemen, that savourer of the little lives of the Old World and the little adventures of those who have escaped from the New, that artist who brooded over his fellows in the spirit less of a poet than a man of science, that sober and fastidious trifler—this is the image which presides over his books, and which gives them their special character, and will attract tiny but enthusiastic companies of readers to them for many years to come.

2. THE ARTIST AT WORK.

Henry James's amanuensis, Miss Theodora Bosanquet, wrote an article a year or two ago in the *Fortnightly Review*, describing how the great man wrote his novels. Since 1895 or 1896 he dictated them, and they were taken down, not in shorthand, but directly on the typewriter. He was particular even about the sort of typewriter. It must be a Remington. "Other kinds sounded different notes, and it was almost impossibly disconcerting for him to dictate to something that made no responsive sound at all." He did not, however, pour himself out to his amanuensis without having made a preliminary survey of the ground. "He liked to 'break ground' by talking to himself day by day about the characters and the construction until the whole thing was clearly before his mind's eye. This preliminary talking out the scheme was, of course, duly recorded by the typewriter. "It is not that he made rough drafts of his novels—sketches to be afterwards amplified. "His method might better be compared with Zola's habit of writing long letters to himself about characters in his next book until they became alive enough for him to begin a novel about them." Henry James has himself, as Miss Bosanquet points out, described his method of work in *The Death of a Lion*, in which it is attributed to his hero, Neil Paraday. "Loose, liberal, confident," he declares of Faraday's "scenario," as one might call it, "it might be passed for a great, gossiping, eloquent letter—the overflow into talk of an artist's amorous plan."

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Almost the chief interest of Henry James's two posthumous novels is the fact that we are given not only the novels themselves—or, rather, the fragments of them that the author had written—but the “great, gossiping, eloquent letters” in which he soliloquized about them. As a rule, these preliminary soliloquies ran to about thirty thousand words, and were destroyed as soon as the novel in hand was finished. So delightful are they—such thrilling revelations of the workings of an artist's mind—that one does not quite know whether or not to congratulate oneself on the fact that the last books have been left mere torsos. Which would one rather have—a complete novel or the torso of a novel with the artist's dream of how to make it perfect? It is not easy to decide. What makes it all the more difficult to decide in the present instance is one's feeling that *The Sense of the Past*, had it been completed, would have been very nearly a masterpiece. In it Henry James hoped to get what he called a “kind of quasi-turn-of-screw effect.” Here, as in *The Turn of the Screw*, he was dealing with a sort of ghosts—whether subjective or objective in their reality does not matter. His hero is a young American who had never been to Europe till he was about thirty, and yet was possessed by that almost sensual sense of the past which made Henry James, as a small boy, put his nose into English books and try to sniff in and smell from their pages the older world from which they came. The inheritance of an old house in a London square—a house in which the clocks had stopped, as it were, in 1820—brings the young man over to England, though the lady with whom he is in love seeks to keep him in America and watch him developing as a new species—a rich, sensitive, and civilized American, untouched and unsubdued by Europe. This young man's emotions in London, amid old things in an atmosphere that also somehow seemed mellow and old, may, I fancy, be taken as a record of the author's own spiritual experiences as he drew in long breaths of appreciation during his almost lifelong wanderings in this hemisphere. For it is important to remember that Henry James never ceased to be a foreigner. He was enchanted by England as by a strange land. He saw it always, like the hero of *The Sense of the Past*, under the charm ... of the queer, incomparable London light—unless one frankly loved it rather as London shade—which he had repeatedly noted as so strange as to be at its finest sinister.”

However else this air might have been described it was signally not the light of freshness, and suggested as little as possible the element in which the first children of nature might have begun to take notice. Ages, generations, inventions, corruptions, had produced it, and it seemed, wherever it rested, to be filtered through the bed of history. It made the objects about show for the time as in something “turned on”—something highly successful that he might have seen at

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the theatre.

Henry James saw old-world objects in exactly that sort of light. He knew in his own nerves how Ralph Pendrel felt on going over his London house. “There wasn’t,” he says, “... an old hinge or an old brass lock that he couldn’t work with love of the act.” He could observe the inanimate things of the Old World almost as if they were living things. No naturalist spying for patient hours upon birds in the hope of discovering their secrets could have had a more curious, more hopeful, and more loitering eye. He found even fairly common things in Europe, as Pendrel found the things in the house he inherited, “all smoothed with service and charged with accumulated messages.”

He was like the worshipper in a Spanish church, who watches for the tear on the cheek or the blood-drop from the wound of some wonder-working effigy of Mother and Son.

In *The Sense of the Past*, Henry James conceived a fantastic romance, in which his hero steps not only into the inheritance of an old house, but into 1820, exchanging personalities with a young man in one of the family portraits, and even wooing the young man’s betrothed. It is a story of “queer” happenings, like the story of a dream or a delusion in which the ruling passion has reached the point of mania. It is the kind of story that has often been written in a gross, mechanical way. Here it is all delicate—a study of nuances and subtle relationships. For Ralph, though perfect in the 1820 manner, has something of the changeling about him—something that gradually makes people think him “queer,” and in the end arouses in him the dim beginnings of nostalgia for his own time. It is a fascinating theme as Henry James works it out—doubly fascinating as he talks about it to himself in the “scenario” that is published along with the story. In the latter we see the author groping for his story, almost like a medium in a trance. Like a medium, he one moment hesitates and is vague, and the next, as he himself would say, fairly pounces on a certainty. No artist ever cried with louder joy at the sight of things coming absolutely right under his hand. Thus, at one moment, the author announces:—

The more I get into my drama the more magnificent upon my word I seem to see it and feel it; with such a tremendous lot of possibilities in it that I positively quake in dread of the muchness with which they threaten me.

At a moment of less illumination he writes:—

There glimmers and then floats shyly back to me from afar, the sense of something like *this*, a bit difficult to put, though entirely expressible with patience, and as I catch hold of the tip of the tail of it yet again strikes me as adding to my action but another admirable twist.



He continually sees himself catching by the tip of the tail the things that solve his difficulties. And what tiny little animals he sometimes manages to catch by the tip of the tail in some of his trances of inspiration! Thus, at one point, he breaks off excitedly about his hero with:—



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As to which, however, on consideration don't I see myself catch a bright betterment by not at all making him use a latch-key?... No, no—no latch-key—but a rat-tat-tat, on his own part, at the big brass knocker.

As the writer searches for the critical action or gesture which is to betray the “abnormalism” of his hero to the 1820 world in which he moves, he cries to himself:—

Find it, find it; get it right, and it will be the making of the story.

At another stage in the story, he comments:—

All that is feasible and convincing; rather beautiful to do being what I mean.

At yet another stage:—

I pull up, too, here, in the midst of my elation—though after a little I shall straighten everything out.

He discusses with himself the question whether Ralph Pendrel, in the 1820 world, is to repeat exactly the experience of the young man in the portrait, and confides to himself:—

Just now, a page or two back, I lost my presence of mind, I let myself be scared, by a momentarily-confused appearance, an assumption, that he doesn't repeat it. I see, on recovery of my wits, not to say of my wit, that he very exactly does.

Nowhere in the “scenario” is the artist's pleasure in his work expressed more finely than in the passage in which Henry James describes his hero at the crisis of his experience, when the latter begins to feel that he is under the observation of his *alter ego*, and is being vaguely threatened. “There must,” the author tells himself—

There must be sequences here of the strongest, I make out—the successive driving in of the successive silver-headed nails at the very points and under the very tops that I reserve for them. That's it, the silver nail, the recurrence of it in the right place, the perfection of the salience of each, and the trick is played.

“Trick,” he says, but Henry James resorted little to tricks, in the ordinary meaning of the word. He scorns the easy and the obvious, as in preparing for the return of the young hero to the modern world—a return made possible by a noble act of self-sacrifice on the part of a second 1820 girl who sends him from her, yet “without an excess of the kind of romanticism I don't want.” There is another woman—the modern woman whom Ralph had loved in America—who might help the machinery of the story (as the author thinks)



if he brought her on the scene at a certain stage. But he thinks of the device only to exclaim against it:—

Can't possibly do anything so artistically base.

The notes for *The Ivory Tower* are equally alluring, though *The Ivory Tower* is not itself so good as *The Sense of the Past*. It is a story of contemporary American life, and we are told that the author laid it aside at the beginning of the war, feeling that “he could no longer work upon a fiction supposed to represent contemporary or recent life.”

Especially interesting is the “scenario,” because of the way in which we find Henry James trying—poor man, he was always an amateur at names!—to get the right names for his characters. He ponders, for instance, on the name of his heroine:—

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I want her name ... her Christian one, to be Moyra, and must have some bright combination with that; the essence of which is a surname of two syllables and ending in a consonant—also beginning with one. I am thinking of Moyra Grabham, the latter excellent thing was in *The Times* of two or three days ago; the only fault is a little too much meaning.

Consciousness in artistry can seldom have descended to minuter details with a larger gesture. One would not have missed these games of genius with syllables and consonants for worlds. Is it all an exquisite farce or is it splendidly heroic? Are we here spectators of the incongruous heroism of an artist who puts a hero's earnestness into getting the last perfection of shine on to a boot or the last fine shade of meaning into the manner in which he says, "No, thank you, no sugar"? No, it is something more than that. It is the heroism of a man who lived at every turn and trifle for his craft—who seems to have had almost no life outside it. In the temple of his art, he found the very dust of the sanctuary holy. He had the perfect piety of the artist in the least as well as in the greatest things.

3. HOW HE WAS BORN AGAIN

As one reads the last fragment of the autobiography of Henry James, one cannot help thinking of him as a convert giving his testimony. Henry James was converted into an Englishman with the same sense of being born again as is felt by many a convert to Christianity. He can speak of the joy of it all only in superlatives. He had the convert's sense of—in his own phrase—"agitations, explorations, initiations (I scarce know how endearingly enough to name them I)." He speaks of "this really prodigious flush" of his first full experience of England. He passes on the effect of his religious rapture when he tells us that "really wherever I looked, and still more wherever I pressed, I sank in and in up to my nose." How breathlessly he conjures up the scene of his dedication, as he calls it, in the coffee-room of a Liverpool hotel on that gusty, "overwhelmingly English" March morning in 1869, on which at the age of almost twenty-six he fortunately and fatally landed on these shores,

with immediate intensities of appreciation, as I may call the muffled accompaniment, for fear of almost indecently overnaming it.

He looks back, with how exquisite a humour and seriousness, on that morning as having finally settled his destiny as an artist. "This doom," he writes:—

This doom of inordinate exposure to appearances, aspects, images, every protrusive item almost, in the great beheld sum of things, I regard ... as having settled upon me once for all while I observed, for instance, that in England the plate of buttered muffins and its cover were sacredly set upon the slop-bowl after hot water had been ingenuously poured into the same, and had seen that circumstance in a perfect cloud of



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accompaniments.

It is characteristic of Henry James that he should associate the hour in which he turned to grace with a plate of buttered muffins. His fiction remained to the end to some extent the tale of a buttered muffin. He made mountains out of muffins all his days. His ecstasy and his curiosity were nine times out of ten larger than their objects. Thus, though he was intensely interested in English life, he was interested in it, not in its largeness as life so much as in its littleness as a museum, almost a museum of *bric-a-brac*. He was enthusiastic about the waiter in the coffee-room in the Liverpool hotel chiefly as an illustration of the works of the English novelists.

Again and again in his reminiscences one comes upon evidence that Henry James arrived in England in the spirit of a collector, a connoisseur, as well as that of a convert. His ecstasy was that of a convert: his curiosity was that of a connoisseur. As he recalls his first experience of a London eating-house of the old sort, with its "small compartments, narrow as horse-stalls," he glories: in the sordidness of it all, because "every face was a documentary scrap."

I said to myself under every shock and at the hint of every savour that this it was for an exhibition to reek with local colour, and one could dispense with a napkin, with a crusty roll, with room for one's elbows or one's feet, with an immunity from intermittance of the "plain boiled" much better than one could dispense with that.

Here, again, one has an instance of the way in which the show of English life revealed itself to Henry James as an exhibition of eating. "As one sat there," he says of his reeking restaurant, "one *understood*." It is in the same mood of the connoisseur on the track of a precious discovery that he recalls "the very first occasion of my sallying forth from Morley's Hotel in Trafalgar Square to dine at a house of sustaining, of inspiring hospitality in the Kensington quarter." What an epicure the man was! "The thrill of sundry invitations to breakfast" still survived on his palate more than forty years afterwards. Not that these meals were recalled as gorges of the stomach: they were merely gorges of sensation, gorges of the sense of the past. The breakfasts associated him "at a jump" with the ghosts of Byron and Sheridan and Rogers. They had also a documentary value as "the exciting note of a social order in which every one wasn't hurled straight, with the momentum of rising, upon an office or a store...." It was one morning, "beside Mrs. Charles Norton's tea-room, in Queen's Gate Terrace," that his "thrilling opportunity" came to sit opposite to Mr. Frederic Harrison, eminent in the eyes of the young American, not for his own sake so much as because recently he had been the subject of Matthew Arnold's banter. Everybody in England, like Mr. Harrison, seemed to Henry James to *be* somebody, or at least to have been talked about by somebody. They were figures, not cyphers. They were characters in a play with cross-references.

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The beauty was ... that people had references, and that a reference was then, to my mind, whether in a person or an object, the most glittering, the most becoming ornament possible, a style of decoration one seemed likely to perceive figures here and there, whether animate or no, quite groan under the accumulation and the weight of.

It is surprising that, loving this new life so ecstatically, James should so seldom attempt to leave any detailed description of it in his reminiscences. He is constantly describing his raptures: he only occasionally describes the thing he was rapturous about. Almost all he tells us about “the extravagant youth of the aesthetic period” is that to live through it “was to seem privileged to such immensities as history would find left her to record but with bated breath.” He recalls again “the particular sweetness of wonder” with which he haunted certain pictures in the National Gallery, but it is himself, not the National Gallery, that he writes about. Of Titian and Rembrandt and Rubens he communicates nothing but the fact that “the cup of sensation was thereby filled to overflowing.” He does, indeed, give a slender description of his first sight of Swinburne in the National Gallery, but the chief fact even of this incident is that “I thrilled ... with the prodigy of this circumstance that I should be admiring Titian in the same breath with Mr. Swinburne.”

Thus the reminiscences are, in a sense, extraordinarily egotistic. This is, however, not to condemn them. Henry James is, as I have already said, his own greatest character, and his portrait of his excitements is one of the most enrapturing things in the literature of autobiography. He makes us share these excitements simply by telling us how excited he was. They are exactly the sort of excitements all of us have felt on being introduced to people and places and pictures we have dreamed about from our youth. Who has not felt the same kind of joy as Henry James felt when George Eliot allowed him to run for the doctor? “I shook off my fellow-visitor,” he relates, “for swifter cleaving of the air, and I recall still feeling that I cleft it even in the dull four-wheeler.” After he had delivered his message, he “cherished for the rest of the day the particular quality of my vibration.” The occasion of the message to the doctor seems strangely comic in the telling. On arriving at George Eliot’s, Henry James found one of G.H. Lewes’s sons lying in horrible pain in the middle of the floor, the heritage of an old accident in the West Indies, or, as Henry James characteristically describes it:—

a suffered onset from an angry bull, I seem to recall, who had tossed or otherwise mauled him, and, though beaten off, left him considerably compromised.



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There is something still more comic than this, however, to be got out of his visits to George Eliot. The visit he paid her at Witley under the “much-waved wing” of the irrepressible Mrs. Greville, who “knew no law but that of innocent and exquisite aberration,” had a superb conclusion, which “left our adventure an approved ruin.” As James was about to leave, and indeed was at the step of the brougham with Mrs. Greville, G.H. Lewes called on him to wait a moment. He returned to the doorstep, and waited till Lewes hurried back across the hall, “shaking high the pair of blue-bound volumes his allusion to the uninvited, the verily importunate loan of which by Mrs. Greville had lingered on the air after his dash in quest of them”:—

“Ah, those books—take them away, please, away, away!” I hear him unreservedly plead while he thrusts them again at me, and I scurry back into our conveyance.

The blue-bound volumes happened to be a copy of Henry James’s own new book—a presentation copy he had given to Mrs. Greville, and she, in turn, with the best intentions, had tried to leave with George Eliot, to be read and admired. George Eliot and Lewes had failed to connect their young visitor with the volumes. Hence a situation so comic that even its victim could not but enjoy it:—

Our hosts hadn’t so much as connected book with author, or author with visitor, or visitor with anything but the convenience of his ridding them of an unconsidered trifle; grudging, as they so justifiedly did, the impingement of such matters on their consciousness. The vivid demonstration of one’s failure to penetrate there had been in the sweep of Lewes’s gesture, which could scarcely have been bettered by his actually wielding a broom.

Henry James Was more fortunate in Tennyson as a host. Tennyson had read at least one of his stories and liked it. All the same, James was disappointed in Tennyson. He expected to find him a poet signed and stamped, and found him only a booming bard. Not only was Tennyson not Tennysonian: he was not quite real. His conversation came as a shock to his guest:—

He struck me as neither knowing nor communicating knowledge.

As Tennyson read *Locksley Hall* to his guests, Henry James had to pinch himself, “not at all to keep from swooning, but much rather to set up some rush of sensibility.” What a lovely touch of malice there is in his description of Tennyson on an occasion on which the ineffable Mrs. Greville quoted some of his own verse to him:—

He took these things with a gruff philosophy, and could always repay them, on the spot, in heavily-shovelled coin of the same mint, since it was a question of his genius.



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Henry James ever retained a beautiful detachment of intellect, even after his conversion. He was a wit as well as an enthusiast. *The Middle Years*, indeed, is precious in every page for its wit as well as for its confessional raptures. It may be objected that Henry James's wit is only a new form of the old-fashioned periphrasis. He might be described as the last of the periphrastic humorists. At the same time, if ever in any book there was to be found the free play of an original genius—a genius however limited and even little—it is surely in the autobiography of Henry James. Those who can read it at all will read it with shining eyes.

VII

BROWNING: THE POET OF LOVE

Browning's reputation has not yet risen again beyond a half-tide. The fact that two books about him were published during the war, however, suggests that there is a revival of interest in his work. It would have been surprising if this had not been so. He is one of the poets who inspire confidence at a time when all the devils are loosed out of Hell. Browning was the great challenger of the multitude of devils. He did not achieve his optimism by ignoring Satan, but by defying him. His courage was not merely of the stomach, but of the daring imagination. There is no more detestable sign of literary humbug than the pretence that Browning was an optimist simply because he did not experience sorrow and indigestion as other people do. I do not mean to deny that he, enjoyed good health. As Professor Phelps, of Yale, says in a recent book, *Robert Browning: How to Know Him*:—

He had a truly wonderful digestion: it was his firm belief that one should eat only what one really enjoyed, desire being the infallible sign that the food was healthful. "My father was a man of *bonne fourchette*," said Barrett Browning to me "he was not very fond of meat, but liked all kinds of Italian dishes, especially with rich sauces. He always ate freely of rich and delicate things. He would make a whole meal off mayonnaise."

Upon which the American professor comments with ingenuous humour of a kind rare in professors in this hemisphere:—

It is pleasant to remember that Emerson, the other great optimist of the century, used to eat pie for breakfast.

The man who does not suffer from pie will hardly suffer from pessimism; but, as Professor Phelps insists, Browning faced greater terrors than pie for breakfast, and his philosophy did not flinch. There was no other English writer of the nineteenth century who to the same degree made all human experiences his own. His poems are not poems about little children who win good-conduct prizes. They are poems of the

agonies of life, poems about tragic severance, poems about failure. They range through the virtues and the vices with the magnificent boldness of Dostoevsky's



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novels. The madman, the atheist, the adulterer, the traitor, the murderer, the beast, are portrayed in them side by side with the hero, the saint, and the perfect woman. There is every sort of rogue here half-way between good and evil, and every sort of half-hero who is either worse than his virtue or better than his sins. Nowhere else in English poetry outside the works of Shakespeare and Chaucer is there such a varied and humorous gallery of portraits. Landor's often quoted comparison of Browning with Chaucer is a piece of perfect and essential criticism:—

Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
No man hath walked along our roads with step
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse.

For Browning was a portrait-painter by genius and a philosopher only by accident. He was a historian even more than a moralist. He was born with a passion for living in other people's experiences. So impartially and eagerly did he make himself a voice of the evil as well as the good in human nature that occasionally one has heard people speculating as to whether he can have led so reputable a life as the biographers make one believe. To speculate in this manner, however, is to blunder into forgetfulness of Browning's own answer, in *How it Strikes a Contemporary*, to all such calumnies on poets.

Of all the fields of human experience, it was love into which the imagination of Browning most fully entered. It may seem an obvious thing to say about almost any poet, but Browning differed from other poets in being able to express, not only the love of his own heart, but the love of the hearts of all sorts of people. He dramatized every kind of love from the spiritual to the sensual. One might say of him that there never was another poet in whom there was so much of the obsession of love and so little of the obsession of sex. Love was for him the crisis and test of a man's life. The disreputable lover has his say in Browning's monologues no less than Count Gismond. Porphyria's lover, mad and a murderer, lives in our imaginations as brightly as the idealistic lover of Cristina.

The dramatic lyric and monologue in which Browning set forth the varieties of passionate experience was an art-form of immense possibilities, which it was a work of genius to discover. To say that Browning, the inventor of this amazingly fine form, was indifferent to form has always seemed to me the extreme of stupidity. At the same time, its very newness puzzles many readers, even to-day. Some people cannot read Browning without note or comment, because they are unable to throw themselves imaginatively into the "I" of each new poem. Our artistic sense is as yet so little developed that many persons are appalled by the energy of imagination which is demanded of them before they are reborn, as it were, into the setting of his dramatic studies. Professor Phelps's book should be of especial service to such readers,



because it will train them in the right method of approach to Browning's best work. It is a very admirable essay in popular literary interpretation. One is astonished by its insight even more than by its recurrent banality. There are sentences that will make the fastidious shrink, such as:—



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The commercial worth of *Pauline* was exactly zero.

And:—

Their (the Brownings') love-letters reveal a drama of noble passion that excels in beauty and intensity the universally popular examples of Heloise and Abelard, Aucassin and Nicolette, Paul and Virginia.

And, again, in the story of the circumstances that led to Browning's death:—

In order to prove to his son that nothing was the matter with him, he ran rapidly up three flights of stairs, the son vainly trying to restrain him. Nothing is more characteristic of the youthful folly of aged folk than their impatient resentment of proffered hygienic advice.

Even the interpretations of the poems sometimes take one's breath away, as when, discussing *The Lost Mistress*, Professor Phelps observes that the lover:—

instead of thinking of his own misery ... endeavours to make the awkward situation easier for the girl by small talk about the sparrows and the leaf-buds.

When one has marvelled one's fill at the professor's phrases and misunderstandings, however, one is compelled to admit that he has written what is probably the best popular introduction to Browning in existence.

Professor Phelps's book is one of those rare essays in popular criticism which will introduce an average reader to a world of new excitements. One of its chief virtues is that it is an anthology as well as a commentary. It contains more than fifty complete poems of Browning quoted in the body of the book. And these include, not merely short poems like *Meeting at Night*, but long poems, such as *Andrea del Sarto*, *Caliban on Setebos*, and *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. This is the right kind of introduction to a great author. The poet is allowed as far as possible to be his own interpreter.

At the outset Professor Phelps quotes in full *Transcendentalism and How it Strikes a Contemporary* as Browning's confession of his aims as an artist. The first of these is Browning's most energetic assertion that the poet is no philosopher concerned with ideas rather than with things—with abstractions rather than with actions. His disciples have written a great many books that seem to reduce him from a poet to a philosopher, and one cannot protest too vehemently against this dulling of an imagination richer than a child's in adventures and in the passion for the detailed and the concrete. In *Transcendentalism* he bids a younger poet answer whether there is more help to be got from Jacob Boehme with his subtle meanings:—



Or some stout Mage like him of Halberstadt,
John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about.

With how magnificent an image he then justifies the poet of "things" as compared with the philosopher of "thoughts":—

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He with a "look you!" vents a brace of rhymes,
And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
Over us, under, round us every side,
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all—
Buries us with a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this poor house of life.

One of the things one constantly marvels at as one reads Browning is the splendid aestheticism with which he lights up prosaic words and pedestrian details with beauty.

The truth is, if we do not realize that he is a great singer and a great painter as well as a, great humorist and realist, we shall have read him in vain. No doubt his phrases are often as grotesque as jagged teeth, as when the mourners are made to say in *A Grammarian's Funeral*:—

Look out if yonder be not day again.
Rimming the rock-row!

Reading the second of these lines one feels as if one of the mourners had stubbed his foot against a sharp stone on the mountain-path. And yet, if Browning invented a harsh speech of his own far common use, he uttered it in all the varied rhythms of genius and passion. There may often be no music in the individual words, but there is always in the poems as a whole a deep undercurrent of music as from some hidden river. His poems have the movement of living things. They are lacking only in smooth and static loveliness. They are full of the hoof-beats of Pegasus.

We find in his poems, indeed, no fastidious escape from life, but an exalted acceptance of it. Browning is one of the very few poets who, echoing the Creator, have declared that the world is good. His sense of the goodness of it even in foulness and in failure is written over half of his poems. *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* is a fable of life triumphant in a world tombstoned with every abominable and hostile thing—a world, too, in which the hero is doomed to perish at devilish hands. Whenever one finds oneself doubting the immensity of Browning's genius, one has only to read *Childe Roland* again to restore one's faith. There never was a landscape so alive with horror as that amid which the knight travelled in quest of the Dark Tower. As detail is added to detail, it becomes horrible as suicide, a shrieking progress of all the torments, till one is wrought up into a very nightmare of apprehension and the Tower itself appears:—

The round squat tower, blind as the fool's heart.

Was there ever such a pause and gathering of courage as in the verses that follow in which the last of the knights takes his resolve?:—



Not see? because of night perhaps?—why, day
Came back again for that! before it left,
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:
The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay—
“Now stab and end the creature—to the heft!”



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Not hear? When noise was everywhere! it tolled
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears,
Of all the lost adventurers my peers—
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
And such was fortunate, yet each of old
Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

There they stood, ranged along the hillside, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set.
And blew. "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*"

There, if anywhere in literature, is the summit of tragic and triumphant music. There, it seems to me, is as profound and imaginative expression of the heroic spirit as is to be found in the English language.

To belittle Browning as an artist after such a poem is to blaspheme against art. To belittle him as an optimist is to play the fool with words. Browning was an optimist only in the sense that he believed in what Stevenson called "the ultimate decency of things," and that he believed in the capacity of the heroic spirit to face any test devised for it by inquisitors or devils. He was not defiant in a fine attitude like Byron. His defiance was rather a form of magnanimity. He is said, on Robert Buchanan's authority, to have thundered "No," when in his later years he was asked if he were a Christian. But his defiance was the defiance of a Christian, the dauntlessness of a knight of the Holy Ghost. Perhaps it is that he was more Christian than the Christians. Like the Pope in *The Ring and the Book*, he loathed the association of Christianity with respectability. Some readers are bewildered by his respectability in trivial things, such as dress, into failing to see his hatred of respectability when accepted as a standard in spiritual things. He is more sympathetic towards the disreputable suicides in *Apparent Failure* than towards the vacillating and respectable lovers in *The Statue and the Bust*. There was at least a hint of heroism in the last madness of the doomed men. Browning again and again protests, as Blake had done earlier, against the mean moral values of his age. Energy to him as to Blake meant endless delight, and especially those two great energies of the spirit—love and heroism. For, though his work is not a philosophic expression of moral ideas, it is an imaginative expression of moral ideas, as a result of which he is, above all, the poet of lovers and heroes. Imagination is a caged bird in these days; with Browning it was a soaring eagle. In some ways Mr. Conrad's is the most heroic imagination in contemporary literature. But he does not take this round globe of light and darkness into his purview as Browning did. The whole earth is to him shadowed with futility. Browning was too lyrical to resign himself to the shadows. He saw the earth through the eyes of a lover till



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the end. He saw death itself as no more than an interlude of pain, darkness, and cold before a lovers' meeting. It may be that it is all a rapturous illusion, and that, after we have laid him aside and slept a night's broken sleep, we sink back again naturally into the little careful hopes and infidelities of everyday. But it seems to me that here is a whole heroic literature to which the world will always do well to turn in days of inexorable pain and horror such as those through which it has but recently passed.

VIII

THE FAME OF J.M. SYNGE

The most masterly piece of literary advertising in modern times was surely Mr. Yeats's enforcement of Synge upon the coteries—or the choruses—as a writer in the great tradition of Homer and Shakespeare. So successful has Mr. Yeats been, indeed, in the exaltation of his friend, that people are in danger of forgetting that it is Mr. Yeats himself, and not Synge, who is the ruling figure in modern Irish literature. One does not criticize Mr. Yeats for this. During the Synge controversy he was a man raising his voice in the heat of battle—a man, too, praising a generous comrade who was but lately dead. The critics outside Ireland, however, have had none of these causes of passion to prevent them from seeing Synge justly. They simply bowed down before the idol that Mr. Yeats had set up before them, and danced themselves into ecstasies round the image of the golden playboy.

Mr. Howe, who wrote a sincere and able book on Synge, may be taken as a representative apostle of the Synge cult. He sets before us a god, not a man—a creator of absolute beauty—and he asks us to accept the common view that *The Playboy of the Western World* is his masterpiece. There can never be any true criticism of Synge till we have got rid of all these obsessions and idolatries. Synge was an extraordinary man of genius, but he was not an extraordinarily great man of genius. He is not the peer of Shakespeare: he is not the peer of Shelley: he is the peer, say, of Stevenson. His was a byway, not a high-road, of genius. That is why he has an immensely more enthusiastic following among clever people than among simple people.

Once and once only Synge achieved a piece of art that was universal in its appeal, satisfying equally the artistic formula of Pater and the artistic formula of Tolstoi. This was *Riders to the Sea*. *Riders to the Sea*, a lyrical pageant of pity made out of the destinies of fisher-folk, is a play that would have been understood in ancient Athens or in Elizabethan London, as well as by an audience of Irish peasants to-day.



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Here, incidentally, we get a foretaste of that preoccupation with death which heightens the tensivity in so much of Synge's work. There is a corpse on the stage in *Riders to the Sea*, and a man laid out as a corpse in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and there is a funeral party in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Synge's imagination dwelt much among the tombs. Even in his comedies, his laughter does not spring from an exuberant joy in life so much as from excitement among the incongruities of a world that is due to death. Hence he cannot be summed up either as a tragic or a comic writer. He is rather a tragic satirist with the soul of a lyric poet.

If he is at his greatest in *Riders to the Sea*, he is at his most personal in *The Well of the Saints*, and this is essentially a tragic satire. It is a symbolic play woven out of the illusions of two blind beggars. Mr. Howe says that "there is nothing for the symbolists in *The Well of the Saints*," but that is because he is anxious to prove that Synge was a great creator of men and women. Synge, in my opinion at least, was nothing of the sort. His genius was a genius of decoration, not of psychology. One might compare it to firelight in a dark room, throwing fantastic shapes on the walls. He loved the fantastic, and he was held by the darkness. Both in speech and in character, it was the bizarre and even the freakish that attracted him. In *Riders to the Sea* he wrote as one who had been touched by the simple tragedy of human life. But, as he went on writing and working, he came to look on life more and more as a pattern of extravagances, and he exchanged the noble style of *Riders to the Sea* for the gauded and overwrought style of *The Playboy*.

"With *The Playboy of the Western World*," says Mr. Howe, "Synge placed himself among the masters." But then Mr. Howe thinks that "Pegeen Mike is one of the most beautiful and living figures in all drama," and that she "is the normal," and that

Synge, with an originality more absolute than Wordsworth's, insisted that his readers should regain their poetic feeling for ordinary life; and presented them with Pegeen with the stink of poteen on her, and a playboy wet and crusted with his father's blood.

The conception of ordinary life—or is it only ordinary Irish life?—in the last half-sentence leaves one meditating.

But, after all, it is not Synge's characters or his plots, but his language, which is his great contribution to literature. I agree with Mr. Howe that the question how far his language is the language of the Irish countryside is a minor one. On the other hand, it is worth noting that he wrote most beautifully in the first enthusiasm of his discovery of the wonders of Irish peasant speech. His first plays express, as it were, the delight of first love. He was always a shaping artist, of course, in search of figures and patterns; but he kept his passion for



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these things subordinate to reality in the early plays. In *The Playboy* he seemed to be determined to write riotously, like a man straining after vitality. He exaggerated everything. He emptied bagfuls of wild phrases—the collections of years—into the conversations of a few minutes. His style became, in a literary sense, vicious, a thing of tricks and conventions: blank-verse rhythms—I am sure there are a hundred blank-verse lines in the play—and otiose adjectives crept in and spoilt it as prose. It became like a parody of the beautiful English Sygne wrote in the noon of his genius.

I cannot understand the special enthusiasm for *The Playboy* except among those who read it before they knew anything of Sygne's earlier and better work. With all its faults, however, it is written by the hand of genius, and the first hearing or reading of it must come as a revelation to those who do not know *Riders to the Sea* or *The Well of the Saints*. Even when it is played, as it is now played, in an expurgated form, and with sentimentality substituted for the tolerant but Mephistophelean malice which Sygne threaded into it, the genius and originality are obvious enough. *The Playboy* is a marvellous confection, but it is to *Riders to the Sea* one turns in search of Sygne the immortal poet.

IX

VILLON: THE GENIUS OF THE TAVERN

It is to Stevenson's credit that he was rather sorry that he had ever written his essay on Villon. He explains that this was due to the fact that he "regarded Villon as a bad fellow," but one likes to think that his conscience was also a little troubled because through lack of sympathy he had failed to paint a just portrait of a man of genius. Villon was a bad fellow enough in all conscience. He was not so bad, however, as Stevenson made him out. He was, no doubt, a thief; he had killed a man; and it may even be (if we are to read autobiography into one of the most shocking portions of the *Grand Testament*) that he lived for a time on the earnings of "la grosse Margot." But, for all this, he was not the utterly vile person that Stevenson believed. His poetry is not mere whining and whimpering of genius which occasionally changes its mood and sticks its fingers to its nose. It is rather the confession of a man who had wandered over the "crooked hills of delicious pleasure," and had arrived in rags and filth in the famous city of Hell. It is a map of disaster and a chronicle of lost souls. Swinburne defined the genius of Villon more imaginatively than Stevenson when he addressed him in a paradoxical line as:

Bird of the bitter bright grey golden morn,
and spoke of his "poor, perfect voice,"

That rings athwart the sea whence no man steers,
Like joy-bells crossed with death-bells in our ears.



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No man who has ever written has so cunningly mingled joy-bells and death-bells in his music. Here is a realism of damned souls—damned in their merry sins—at which the writer of *Ecclesiastes* merely seems to hint like a detached philosopher. Villon may never have achieved the last faith of the penitent thief. But he was a penitent thief at least in his disillusion. If he continues to sing *Carpe diem* when at the age of thirty he is already an old, diseased man, he sings it almost with a sneer of hatred. It is from the lips of a grinning death's-head—not of a jovial roysterer, as Henley makes it seem in his slang translation—that the *Ballade de bonne Doctrine a ceux de mauvaise Vie* falls, with its refrain of destiny:

Tout aux tavernes et aux filles.

And the *Ballade de la Belle Heaulmiere aux Filles de Joie*, in which Age counsels Youth to take its pleasure and its fee before the evil days come, expresses no more joy of living than the dimmallest *memento mori*.

One must admit, of course, that the obsession of vice is strong in Villon's work. In this he is prophetic of much of the greatest French literature of the nineteenth century. He had consorted with criminals beyond most poets. It is not only that he indulged in the sins of the flesh. It is difficult to imagine that there exists any sin of which he and his companions were not capable. He was apparently a member of the famous band of thieves called the Coquillards, the sign of which was a cockle-shell in the cap, "which was the sign of the Pilgrim." "It was a large business," Mr. Stacpoole says of this organization in his popular life of Villon, "with as many departments as a New York store, and, to extend the simile, its chief aim and object was to make money. Coining, burglary, highway robbery, selling indulgences and false jewellery, card-sharping, and dice-playing with loaded dice, were chief among its industries." Mr. Stacpoole goes on to tone down this catalogue of iniquity with the explanation that the Coquillards were, after all, not nearly such villains as our contemporary milk-adulterators and sweaters of women. He is inclined to think they may have been good fellows, like Robin Hood and his men or the gentlemen of the road in a later century. This may well be, but a gang of Robin Hoods, infesting a hundred taverns in the town and quarrelling in the streets over loose women, is dangerous company for an impressionable young man who had never been taught the Shorter Catechism. Paris, even in the twentieth century, is alleged to be a city of temptation. Paris, in the fifteenth century, must have been as tumultuous with the seven deadly sins as the world before the Flood. Joan of Arc had been burned in the year in which Villon was born, but her death had not made saints of the students of Paris. Living more or less beyond the reach of the civil law, they made a duty of riot, and counted insolence and wine to themselves for righteousness. Villon, we are reminded, had good influences in his life, which might have been expected to moderate the appeal of wildness and folly. He had his dear, illiterate mother, for whom, and at whose request, he wrote that unexpected ballade of prayer to the Mother of God. He had, too, that good man who adopted him, Guillaume de Villon, chaplain of Saint Benoist—



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mon plus que pere
Maistre Guillaume de Villon,
Qui m'a este plus doux que mere;

and who gave him the name that he has made immortal. That he was not altogether unresponsive to these good influences is shown by his references to them in his *Grand Testament*, though Stevenson was inclined to read into the lines on Guillaume the most infernal kind of mockery and derision. One of Villon's bequests to the old man, it will be remembered, was the *Rommant du Pet au Diable*, which Stevenson refers to again and again as an "improper romance." Mr. Stacpoole has done a service to English readers interested in Villon by showing that the *Rommant* was nothing of the sort, but was a little epic—possibly witty enough—on a notorious conflict between the students and civilians of Paris. One may accept the vindication of Villon's goodness of heart, however, without falling in at all points with Mr. Stacpoole's tendency to justify his hero. When, for instance, in the account of Villon's only known act of homicide, the fact that after he had stabbed the priest, Sermoise, he crushed in his head with a stone, is used to prove that he must have been acting on the defensive, because, "since the earliest times, the stone is the weapon used by man to repel attack—chiefly the attack of wolves and dogs"—one cannot quite repress a sceptical smile. I admit that, in the absence of evidence, we have no right to accuse Villon of deliberate murder. But it is the absence of evidence that acquits him, not the fact that he killed his victim with a stone as well as a dagger. Nor does it seem to, me quite fair to blame, as Mr. Stacpoole does by implication, the cold and beautiful Katherine de Vaucelles for Villon's moral downfall. Katherine de Vaucelles—what a poem her very name is!—may, for all one knows, have had the best of reasons for sending her bully to beat the poet "like dirty linen on the washing-board." We do not know, and it is better to leave the matter a mystery than to sentimentalize like Mr. Stacpoole:—

Had he come across just now one of those creative women, one of those women who by the alchemy that lives alone in love can bend a man's character, even though the bending had been ever so little, she might have saved him from the catastrophe towards which he was moving, and which took place in the following December.

All we know is that the lady of miracles did not arrive, and that in her absence Villon and a member of companion gallows-birds occupied the dark of one winter's night in robbing the chapel of the College de Navarre. This was in 1456, and not long afterwards Villon wrote his *Petit Testament*, and skipped from Paris.



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We know little of his wanderings in the next five years, nor do we know whether the greater part of them was spent in crimes or in reputable idleness. Mr. Stacpoole writes a chapter on his visit to Charles of Orleans, but there are few facts for a biographer to go upon during this period. Nothing with a date happened to Villon till the summer of 1461, when Thibault d'Aussigny, Bishop of Orleans, for some cause or other, real or imaginary, had him cast into a pit so deep that he "could not even see the lightning of a thunderstorm," and kept him there for three months with "neither stool to sit nor bed to lie on, and nothing to eat but bits of bread flung down to him by his gaolers." Here, during his three months' imprisonment in the pit, he experienced all that bitterness of life which makes his *Grand Testament* a "De Profundis" without parallel in scapegrace literature. Here, we may imagine with Mr. Stacpoole, his soul grew in the grace of suffering, and the death-bells began to bring a solemn music among the joy-bells of his earlier follies. He is henceforth the companion of lost souls. He is the most melancholy of cynics in the kingdom of death. He has ever before him the vision of men hanging on gibbets. He has all the hatreds of a man tortured and haunted and old.

Not that he ever entirely resigns his carnality. His only complaint against the flesh is that it perishes like the snows of last year. But to recognize even this is to have begun to have a just view of life. He knows that in the tavern is to be found no continuing city. He becomes the servant of truth and beauty as he writes the most revealing and tragic satires on the population of the tavern in the world's literature. What more horrible portrait exists in poetry than that of "la belle Heaulmiere" grown old, as she contemplates her beauty turned to hideousness—her once fair limbs become "speckled like sausages"? "La Grosse Margot" alone is more horrible, and her bully utters his and her doom in the last three awful lines of the ballade which links her name with Villon's:

Ordure amons, ordure nous affuyt;
Nous deffuyons honneur, il nous deffuyt,
En ce bordeau, ou tenons nostre estat.

But there is more than the truth of ugliness in these amazing ballads of which the *Grand Testament* is full. Villon was by nature a worshipper of beauty. The lament over the defeat of his dream of fair lords and ladies by the reality of a withered and dissatisfying world runs like a torment through his verse. No one has ever celebrated the inevitable passing of loveliness in lovelier verse than Villon has done in the *Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis*. I have heard it maintained that Rossetti has translated the radiant beauty of this ballade into his *Ballad of Dead Ladies*. I cannot agree. Even his beautiful translation of the refrain,

But where are the snows of yesteryear,

seems to me to injure simplicity with an ornament, and to turn natural into artificial music. Compare the opening lines in the original and in the translation, and you will see

the difference between the sincere expression of a vision and the beautiful writing of an exercise. Here is Villon's beginning:—



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Dictes-moy ou, n'en quel pays,
Est Flora, la belle Romaine?
Archipiade, ne Thais,
Qui fut sa cousine germaine?

And here is Rossetti's jaunty English:—

Tell me now in what hidden way is
Lady Flora, the lovely Roman?
Where's Hipparchia, and where is Thais,
Neither of them the fairer woman?

One sees how Rossetti is inclined to romanticize that which is already romantic beyond one's dreams in its naked and golden simplicity. I would not quarrel with Rossetti's version, however, if it had not been often put forward as an example of a translation which was equal to the original. It is certainly a wonderful version if we compare it with most of those that have been made from Villon. Mr. Stacpoole's, I fear, have no rivulets of music running through them to make up for their want of prose exactitude. Admittedly, however, translation of Villon is difficult. Some of his most beautiful poems are simple as catalogues of names, and the secret of their beauty is a secret elusive as a fragrance borne on the wind. Mr. Stacpoole may be congratulated on his courage in undertaking an impossible task—a task, moreover, in which he challenges comparison with Rossetti, Swinburne, and Andrew Lang. His book, however, is meant for the general public rather than for poets and scholars—at least, for that intelligent portion of the general public which is interested in literature without being over-critical. For its purpose it may be recommended as an interesting, picturesque, and judicious book. The Villon of Stevenson is little better than a criminal monkey of genius. The Villon of Mr. Stacpoole is at least the makings of a man.

X

POPE

Pope is a poet whose very admirers belittle him. Mr. Saintsbury, for instance, even in the moment of inciting us to read him, observes that "it would be scarcely rash to say that there is not an original thought, sentiment, image, or example of any of the other categories of poetic substance to be found in the half a hundred thousand verses of Pope." And he has still less to say in favour of Pope as a man. He denounces him for "rascality" and goes on with characteristic irresponsibility to suggest that "perhaps ... there is a natural connection between the two kinds of this dexterity of fingering—that of the artist in words, and that of the pickpocket or the forger." If Pope had been a contemporary, Mr. Saintsbury, I imagine, would have stunned him with a huge mattock of adjectives. As it is, he seems to be in two minds whether to bury or to praise him.



Luckily, he has tempered his moral sense with his sense of humour, and so comes to the happy conclusion that as a matter of fact, when we read or read about Pope, “some of the proofs which are most damning morally, positively increase one’s aesthetic delight.”



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One is interested in Pope's virtues as a poet and his vices as a man almost equally. It is his virtues as a man and his vices as a poet that are depressing. He is usually at his worst artistically when he is at his best morally. He achieves wit through malice: he achieves only rhetoric through virtue. It is not that one wishes he had been a bad son or a Uriah Heep in his friendships. It is pleasant to remember the pleasure he gave his mother by allowing her to copy out parts of his translation of the *Iliad*, and one respects him for refusing a pension of £300 a year out of the secret service money from his friend Craggs. But one wishes that he had put neither his filial piety nor his friendship into writing. Mr. Saintsbury, I see, admires "the masterly and delightful craftsmanship in words" of the tribute to Craggs; but then Mr. Saintsbury also admires the *Elegy on an Unfortunate Lady*—a mere attitude in verse, as chill as a weeping angel in a graveyard.

Pope's attractiveness is less that of a real man than of an inhabitant of Lilliput, where it is a matter of no importance whether or not one lives in obedience to the Ten Commandments. We can regard him with amusement as a liar, a forger, a glutton, and a slanderer of his kind. If his letters are the dullest letters ever written by a wit, it is because he reveals in them not his real vices but his imaginary virtues. They only become interesting when we know the secret history of his life and read them as the moralizings of a doll Pecksniff. Historians of literature often assert—mistakenly, I think—that Pliny's letters are dull, because they are merely the literary exercises of a man over-conscious of his virtues. But Pliny's virtues, however tip-tilted, were at least real. Pope's letters are the literary exercises of a man platitudinizing about virtues he did not possess. They have an impersonality, like that of the leading articles in *The Times*. They have all the qualities of the essay except intimate confession. They are irrelevant scrawls which might as readily have been addressed to one correspondent as another. So much so is this, that when Pope published them, he altered the names of the recipients of some of them so as to make it appear that they were written to famous persons when, as a matter of fact, they were written to private and little-known friends.

The story of the way in which he tampered with his letters and arranged for their "unauthorized" publication by a pirate publisher is one of the most amazing in the history of forgery. It was in reference to this that Whitwell Elwin declared that Pope "displayed a complication of imposture, degradation, and effrontery which can only be paralleled in the lives of professional forgers and swindlers." When he published his correspondence with Wycherley, his contemporaries were amazed that the boyish Pope should have written with such an air of patronage to the aged Wycherley

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and that Wycherley should have suffered it. We know, now, however, that the correspondence is only in part genuine, and that Pope used portions of his correspondence with Caryll and published them as though they had been addressed to Wycherley. Wycherley had remonstrated with Pope on the extravagant compliments he paid him: Pope had remonstrated with Caryll on similar grounds. In the Wycherley correspondence, Pope omits Wycherley's remonstrance to him and publishes his own remonstrance to Caryll as a letter from himself to Wycherley.

From that time onwards Pope spared no effort in getting his correspondence "surreptitiously" published. He engaged a go-between, a disreputable actor disguised as a clergyman, to approach Curll, the publisher, with an offer of a stolen collection of letters, and, when the book was announced, he attacked Curll as a villain, and procured a friend in the House of Lords to move a resolution that Curll should be brought before the House on a charge of breach of privilege, one of the letters (it was stated) having been written to Pope by a peer. Curll took a number of copies of the book with him to the Lords, and it was discovered that no such letter was included. But the advertisement was a noble one. Unfortunately, even a man of genius could not devise elaborate schemes of this kind without ultimately falling under suspicion, and Curll wrote a narrative of the events which resulted in seriously discrediting Pope.

Pope was surely one of the least enviable authors who ever lived. He had fame and fortune and friends. But he had not the constitution to enjoy his fortune, and in friendship he had not the gift of fidelity. He secretly published his correspondence with Swift and then set up a pretence that Swift had been the culprit. He earned from Bolingbroke in the end a hatred that pursued him in the grave. He was always begging Swift to go and live with him at Twickenham. But Swift found even a short visit trying. "Two sick friends never did well together," he wrote in 1727, and he has left us verses descriptive of the miseries of great wits in each other's company:—

Pope has the talent well to speak,
But not to reach the ear;
His loudest voice is low and weak,
The Dean too deaf to hear.

Awhile they on each other look,
Then different studies choose;
The Dean sits plodding o'er a book,
Pope walks and courts the muse.

"Mr. Pope," he grumbled some years later, "can neither eat nor drink, loves to be alone, and has always some poetical scheme in his head." Swift, luckily, stayed in Dublin and remained Pope's friend. Lady Mary, Wortley Montagu went to Twickenham and became



Pope's enemy. The reason seems to have been that he was more eager for an exchange of compliments than for friendship. He affected the attitude of a man in love, when Lady Mary saw in him only a monkey in love. He is even said to have thrown his little makeshift of a body, in its canvas bodice and its three pairs of stockings, at her feet, with the result that she burst out laughing. Pope took his revenge in the *Epistle to Martha Blount*, where, describing Lady Mary as Sappho, he declared of another lady that her different aspects agreed as ill with each other—



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As Sappho's diamonds with her dirty smock;
Or Sappho at her toilet's greasy task
With Sappho fragrant at an evening mask;
So morning insects, that in muck begun,
Shine, buzz, and fly-blow in the evening sun.

His relations with his contemporaries were too often begun in compliments only to end in abuse of this kind. Even while he was on good terms with them, he was frequently doing them ill turns. Thus, he persuaded a publisher to get Dennis to write abusively of Addison's *Cato* in order that he might have an excuse in his turn for writing abusively of Dennis, apparently vindicating Addison but secretly taking a revenge of his own. Addison was more embarrassed than pleased by so savage a defence, and hastened to assure Dennis that he had had nothing to do with it. Addison also gave offence to Pope by his too judicious praise of *The Rape of the Lock* and the translation of the *Iliad*. Thus began the maniacal suspicion of Addison, which was expressed with the genius of venom in the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

There was never a poet whose finest work needs such a running commentary of discredit as Pope's. He may be said, indeed, to be the only great poet in reading whom the commentary is as necessary as the text. One can enjoy Shakespeare or Shelley without a note: one is inclined even to resent the intrusion of the commentator into the upper regions of poetry. But Pope's verse is a guide to his age and the incidents of his waspish existence, lacking a key to which one misses three-fourths of the entertainment. The *Dunciad* without footnotes is one of the obscurest poems in existence: with footnotes it becomes a perfect epic of literary entomology. And it is the same with at least half of his work. Thus, in the *Imitations of Horace*, a reference to Russell tells us little till we read in a delightful footnote:

There was a Lord Russell who, by living too luxuriously, had quite spoiled his constitution. He did not love sport, but used to go out with his dogs every day only to hunt for an appetite. If he felt anything of that, he would cry out, "Oh, I have found it!" turn short round and ride home again, though they were in the midst of the finest chase. It was this lord who, when he met a beggar, and was entreated by him to give him something because he was almost famished with hunger, called him a "happy dog."

There may have been a case for neglecting Pope before Mr. Elwin and Mr. Courthope edited and annotated him—though he had been edited well before—but their monumental edition has made him of all English poets one of the most incessantly entertaining.

Pope, however, is a charmer in himself. His venom has graces. He is a stinging insect, but of how brilliant a hue! There are few satires in literature richer in the daintiness of malice than the *Epistle to Martha Blount* and the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*. The "characters" of women in the former are among the most precious of those railleries of

sex in which mankind has always loved to indulge. The summing-up of the perfect woman:



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And mistress of herself, though china fall,

is itself perfect in its wit. And the fickle lady, Narcissa, is a portrait in porcelain:

Narcissa's nature, tolerably mild,
To make a wash, would hardly stew a child;
Has even been proved to grant a lover's prayer.
And paid a tradesman once, to make him stare;...
Now deep in Taylor and the Book of Martyrs,
Now drinking citron with his Grace and Chartres;
Now conscience chills her and now passion burns;
And atheism and religion take their turns;
A very heathen in the carnal part,
Yet still a sad, good Christian at the heart.

The study of Chloe, who "wants a heart," is equally delicate and witty:

Virtue she finds too painful an endeavour,
Content to dwell in decencies for ever—
So very reasonable, so unmoved,
As never yet to love, or to be loved.
She, while her lover pants upon her breast,
Can mark the figures on an Indian chest;
And when she sees her friend in deep despair,
Observes how much a chintz exceeds mohair!...
Would Chloe know if you're alive or dead?
She bids her footman put it in her head.
Chloe is prudent—would you too be wise?
Then never break your heart when Chloe dies.

The *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* is still more dazzling. The venom is passionate without ever ceasing to be witty. Pope has composed a masterpiece of his vanities and hatreds. The characterizations of Addison as Atticus, and of Lord Hervey as Sporus:

Sporus, that mere white curd of ass's milk—

Sporus, "the bug with gilded wings"—are portraits one may almost call beautiful in their bitter phrasing. There is nothing make-believe here as there is in the virtue of the letters. This is Pope's confession, the image of his soul. Elsewhere in Pope the accomplishment is too often rhetorical, though *The Rape of the Lock* is as delicate in artifice as a French fairy-tale, the *Dunciad* an amusing assault of a major Lilliputian on minor Lilliputians, and the *Essay on Criticism*—what a regiment of witty lines to be written by a youth of twenty or twenty-one!—much nearer being a great essay in verse than is generally admitted nowadays. As for the *Essay on Man*, one can read! it more



than once only out of a sense of duty. Pope has nothing to tell us that we want to know about man except in so far as he dislikes him. We praise him as the poet who makes remarks—as the poet, one might almost say, who makes faces. It is when he sits in the scorner's chair, whether in good humour or in bad, that he is the little lord of versifiers.

XI

JAMES ELROY FLECKER



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James Elroy Flecker died in January 1915, having added at least one poem to the perfect anthology of English verse. Probably his work contains a good deal that is permanent besides this. But one is confident at least of the permanence of *The Old Ships*. Readers coming a thousand years hence upon the beauty, the romance and the colour of this poem will turn eagerly, one imagines, in search of other work from the same pen. This was the flower of the poet's genius. It was the exultant and original speech of one who was in a great measure the seer of other men's visions. Flecker was much given to the translation of other poets, and he did not stop at translating their words. He translated their imagination also into careful verse. He was one of those poets whose genius is founded in the love of literature more than in the love of life. He seems less an interpreter of the earth than one who sought after a fantastic world which had been created by Swinburne and the Parnassians and the old painters and the tellers of the *Arabian Nights*.

"He began," Mr. J.C. Squire has said, "by being more interested in his art than in himself." And all but a score or so of his poems suggest that this was his way to the last. He was one of those for whom the visible world exists. But it existed for him less in nature than in art. He does not give one the impression of a poet who observed minutely and delightedly as Mr. W.H. Davies observes. His was a painted world inhabited by a number of chosen and exquisite images. He found the real world by comparison disappointing. "He confessed," we are told, "that he had not greatly liked the East—always excepting, of course, Greece." This was almost a necessity of his genius; and it is interesting to see how in some of his later work his imagination is feeling its way back from the world of illusion to the world of real things—from Bagdad and Babylon to England. His poetry does not as a rule touch the heart; but in *Oak and Olive* and *Brumana* his spectatorial sensuousness at last breaks down and the cry of the exile moves us as in an intimate letter from a friend since dead. Those are not mere rhetorical reproaches to the "traitor pines" which

sang what life has found
The falsest of fair tales;

which had murmured of—

older seas
That beat on vaster sands,

and of—

lands
Where blaze the unimaginable flowers.

It was as though disillusion had given an artist a soul. And when the war came it found him, as he lay dying of consumption in Switzerland, a poet not merely of manly but of

martial utterance. *The Burial in England* is perhaps too much of an *ad hoc* call to be great poetry. But it has many noble and beautiful lines and is certainly of a different world from his mediocre version of *God Save the King*.



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At the same time, I do not wish to suggest that his poetry of illusion is the less important part of his work. The perfection of his genius is to be sought, as a matter of fact, in his romantic eastern work, such as *The Ballad of Iskander*, *A Miracle of Bethlehem*, *Gates of Damascus*, and *Bryan of Brittany*. The false, fair tale of the East had, as it were, released; him from mere flirtation with the senses into the world of the imagination. Of human passions he sang little. He wrote oftener of amorousness than of love, as in *The Ballad of the Student of the South*. His passion for fairy tales, his amorousness of the East, stirred his imagination from idleness among superficial fancies into a brilliant ardour. It was these things that roused him to a nice extravagance with those favourite words and colours and images upon which Mr. Squire comments:

There are words, just as there are images, which he was especially fond of using. There are colours and metals, blue and red, silver and gold, which are present everywhere in his work; the progresses of the sun (he was always a poet of the sunlight rather than a poet of the moonlight) were a continual fascination to him; the images of Fire, of a ship, and of an old white-bearded man recur frequently in his poems.

Mr. Squire contends justly enough that in spite of this Flecker is anything but a monotonous poet. But the image of a ship was almost an obsession with him. It was his favourite toy. Often it is a silver ship. In the blind man's vision in the time of Christ even the Empires of the future are seen sailing like ships. The keeper of the West Gate of Damascus sings of the sea beyond the sea:

when no wind breathes or ripple stirs,
And there on Roman ships, they say, stand rows of metal mariners.

Those lines are worth noting for the way in which they suggest' how much in the nature of toys were the images with which Flecker's imagination was haunted. His world was a world of nursery ships and nursery caravans.

"Haunted" is, perhaps, an exaggeration. His attitude is too impassive for that. He works with the deliberateness of a prose-writer. He is occasionally even prosaic in the bad sense, as when he uses: the word "meticulously," or makes his lost mariners say:

How striking like that boat were we
In the days, sweet days, when we put to sea.

That he was a poet of the fancy rather than of the imagination also tended to keep his poetry near the ground. His love of the ballad-design and "the good coloured things of Earth" was tempered by a kind of infidel humour in his use of them. His ballads are the ballads of a brilliant dilettante, not of a man who is expressing his whole heart and soul and faith, as the old ballad-writers were. In the result he walked a golden pavement rather than mounted into the golden air. He was an artist in ornament, in decoration.

Like the Queen in the *Queen's Song*, he would immortalize the ornament at the cost of slaying the soul.



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Of all recent poets of his kind, Flecker is the most successful. The classical tradition of poetry has been mocked and mutilated by many of the noisy young in the last few years. Flecker was a poet who preserved the ancient balance in days in which want of balance was looked on as a sign of genius. That he was what is called a minor poet cannot be denied, but he was the most beautiful of recent minor poets. His book, indeed, is a treasury of beauty rare in these days. Of that beauty, *The Old Ships* is, as I have said, the splendid example. And, as it is foolish to offer anything except a poet's best as a specimen of his work, one has no alternative but to turn again to those gorgeously-coloured verses which begin:

I have seen old ships sail like swans asleep
Beyond the village which men still call Tyre,
With leaden age o'ercargoed, dipping deep
For Famagusta and the hidden sun
That rings black Cyprus with a lake of fire;
And all those ships were certainly so old—
Who knows how oft with squat and noisy gun,
Questing brown slaves or Syrian oranges,
The pirate Genoese
Hell-raked them till they rolled
Blood, water, fruit and corpses up the hold.
But now through friendly seas they softly run,
Painted the mid-sea blue or shore-sea green,
Still patterned with the vine and grapes in gold.

That is the summary and the summit of Flecker's genius. But the rest of his verse, too, is the work of a true and delightful poet, a faithful priest of literature, an honest craftsman with words.

XII

TURGENEV

Mr. Edward Garnett has recently collected his prefaces to the novels and stories of Turgenev, and refashioned them into a book in praise of the genius of the most charming of Russian authors. I am afraid the word "charming" has lost so much of its stamp and brightness with use as to have become almost meaningless. But we apply it to Turgenev in its fullest sense. We call him charming as Pater called Athens charming. He is one of those authors whose books we love because they reveal a personality sensitive, affectionate, pitiful. There are some persons who, when they come into a room, immediately make us feel happier. Turgenev seems to "come into the room" in his books with just such a welcome presence. That is why I wish Mr. Garnett had made his book a biographical, as well as a critical, study.



He quotes Turgenev as saying: "All my life is in my books." Still, there are a great many facts recorded about him in the letters and reminiscences of those who knew him (and he was known in half the countries of Europe), out of which we can construct a portrait. One finds in the *Life of Sir Charles Dilke*, for instance, that Dilke considered Turgenev "in the front rank" as a conversationalist. This opinion interested one all the more because one had come to think of Turgenev as something of a shy giant. I remember, too, reading in some French book a description of Turgenev as a strange figure in the literary circles of Paris—a large figure with a curious chastity of mind who seemed bewildered by some of the barbarous jests of civilized men of genius.



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There are, indeed, as I have said, plenty of suggestions for a portrait of Turgenev, quite apart from his novels. Mr. Garnett refers to some of them in two excellent biographical chapters. He reminds us, for example, of the immense generosity of Turgenev to his contemporaries and rivals, as when he introduced the work of Tolstoy to a French editor. "Listen," said Turgenev. "Here is 'copy' for your paper of an absolutely first-rate kind. This means that I am not its author. The master—for he is a *real* master—is almost unknown in France; but I assure you, on my soul and conscience, that I do not consider myself worthy to unloose the latchet of his shoes." The letter he addressed to Tolstoy from his death-bed, urging him to return from propaganda to literature, is famous, but it is a thing to which one always returns fondly as an example of the noble disinterestedness of a great man of letters. "I cannot recover," Turgenev wrote:—

That is out of the question. I am writing to you specially to say how glad I am to be your contemporary, and to express my last and sincere request. My friend, return to literary activity! That gift came to you whence comes all the rest. Ah, how happy I should be if I could think my request would have an effect on you!... I can neither walk, nor eat, nor sleep. It is wearisome even to repeat it all! My friend—great writer of our Russian land, listen to my request!... I can write no more; I am tired.

One sometimes wonders how Tolstoy and Dostoevsky could ever have quarrelled with a friend of so beautiful a character as Turgenev. Perhaps it was that there was something barbarous and brutal in each of them that was intolerant of his almost feminine refinement. They were both men of action in literature, militant, and by nature propagandist. And probably Turgenev was as impatient with the faults of their strength as they were with the faults of his weakness. He was a man whom it was possible to disgust. Though he was Zola's friend, he complained that *L'Assommoir* left a bad taste in the mouth. Similarly, he discovered something almost Sadistic in the manner in which Dostoevsky let his imagination dwell on scenes of cruelty and horror. And he was as strongly repelled by Dostoevsky's shrieking Pan-Slavism as by his sensationalism among horrors. One can guess exactly the frame of mind he was in when, in the course of an argument with Dostoevsky, he said: "You see, I consider myself a German." This has been quoted against Turgenev as though he meant it literally, and as though it were a confession of denationalization. His words were more subtle than that in their irony. What they meant was simply: "If to be a Russian is to be a bigot, like most of you Pan-Slav enthusiasts, then I am no Russian, but a European." Has he not put the whole gospel of Nationalism in half a dozen sentences in *Rudin*? He refused, however, to adopt along with his Nationalism the narrowness with which it has been too often associated.

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This refusal was what destroyed his popularity in Russia, in his lifetime. It is because of this refusal that he has been pursued with belittlement by one Russian writer after another since his death. He had that sense of truth which always upsets the orthodox. This sense of truth applied to the portraiture of his contemporaries was felt like an insult in those circles of mixed idealism and make-believe, the circles of the political partisans. A great artist may be a member—and an enthusiastic member—of a political party, but in his art he cannot become a political partisan without ceasing to be an artist. In his novels, Turgenev regarded it as his life-work to portray Russia truthfully, not to paint and powder and “prettify” it for show purposes, and the result was an outburst of fury on the part of those who were asked to look at themselves as real people instead of as the master-pieces of a professional flatterer. When *Fathers and Children* was published in 1862, the only people who were pleased were the enemies of everything in which Turgenev believed. “I received congratulations,” he wrote,

almost caresses, from people of the opposite camp, from enemies. This confused me, wounded me; but my conscience did not reproach me. I knew very well I had carried out honestly the type I had sketched, carried it out not only without prejudice, but positively with sympathy.

This is bound to be the fate of every artist who takes his political party or his church, or any other propagandist group to which he belongs, as his subject. He is a painter, not a vindicator, and he is compelled to exhibit numerous crooked features and faults in such a way as to wound the vanity of his friends and delight the malice of his enemies. Artistic truth is as different from propagandist truth as daylight from limelight, and the artist will always be hated by the propagandist as worse than an enemy—a treacherous friend. Turgenev deliberately accepted as his life-work a course which could only lead to the miseries of being misunderstood. When one thinks of the long years of denunciation and hatred he endured for the sake of his art, one cannot but regard him as one of the heroic figures of the nineteenth century. “He has,” Mr. Garnett tells us, “been accused of timidity and cowardice by uncompromising Radicals and Revolutionaries.... In an access of self-reproach he once declared that his character was comprised in one word—‘poltroon!’” He showed neither timidity nor cowardice, however, in his devotion to truth. His first and last advice to young writers, Mr. Garnett declares, was: “You need truth, remorseless truth, as regards your own sensations.” And if Turgenev was remorseless in nothing else, he was remorseless in this—truth as regards both his own sensations and the sensations of his contemporaries. He seems, if we may judge from a sentence he wrote about *Fathers and Children*, to have regarded himself almost as the first realist.



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“It was a new method,” he said, “as well as a new type I introduced—that of Realizing instead of Idealizing.” His claim has, at least, this truth in it: he was the first artist to apply the realistic method to a world seething with ideas and with political and philosophical unrest. His adoption of the realistic method, however, was the result of necessity no less than of choice. He “simply did not know how to work otherwise,” as he said. He had not the sort of imagination that can invent men and women easily. He had always to draw from the life. “I ought to confess,” he once wrote, “that I never attempted to create a type without having, not an idea, but a living person, in whom the various elements were harmonized together, to work from. I have always needed some groundwork on which I could tread firmly.”

When one has praised Turgenev, however, for the beauty of his character and the beautiful truth of his art, one remembers that he, too, was human and therefore less than perfect. His chief failing was, perhaps, that of all the great artists, he was the most lacking in exuberance. That is why he began to be scorned in a world which rated exuberance higher than beauty or love or pity. The world before the war was afraid above all things of losing vitality, and so it turned to contortionists of genius such as Dostoevsky, or lesser contortionists, like some of the Futurists, for fear restfulness should lead to death. It would be foolish, I know, to pretend to sum up Dostoevsky as a contortionist; but he has that element in him. Mr. Conrad suggests a certain vice of misshapeness in Dostoevsky when he praises the characters of Turgenev in comparison with his. “All his creations, fortunate or unfortunate, oppressed and oppressors,” he says in his fine tribute to Turgenev in Mr. Garnett’s book, “are human beings, not strange beasts in a menagerie, or damned souls knocking themselves about in the stuffy darkness of mystical contradictions.” That is well said. On the other hand, it is only right to remember that, if Turgenev’s characters are human beings, they (at least the male characters) have a way of being curiously ineffectual human beings. He understood the Hamlet in man almost too well. From Rudin to the young revolutionist in *Virgin Soil*, who makes such a mess of his propaganda among the peasantry, how many of his characters are as remarkable for their weakness as their unsuccess! Turgenev was probably conscious of this pessimism of imagination in regard to his fellow man—at least, his Russian fellow man. In *On the Eve*, when he wished to create a central character that would act as an appeal to his countrymen to “conquer their sluggishness, their weakness and apathy” (as Mr. Garnett puts it), he had to choose a Bulgarian, not a Russian, for his hero. Mr. Garnett holds that the characterization of Insarov, the Bulgarian, in *On the Eve*, is a failure, and puts this down to the fact that Turgenev drew him, not from life,



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but from hearsay. I think Mr. Garnett is wrong. I have known the counterpart of Insarov among the members of at least one subject nation, and the portrait seems to me to be essentially true and alive. Luckily, if Turgenev could not put his trust in Russian men, he believed with all his heart in the courage and goodness of Russian women. He was one of the first great novelists to endow his women with independence of soul. With the majority of novelists, women are sexual or sentimental accidents. With Turgenev, women are equal human beings—saviours of men and saviours of the world. *Virgin Soil* becomes a book of hope instead of despair as the triumphant figure of Marianna, the young girl of the Revolution, conquers the imagination. Turgenev, as a creator of noble women, ranks with Browning and Meredith. His realism was not, in the last analysis, a realism of disparagement, but a realism of affection. His farewell words, Mr. Garnett tells us, were: "Live and love others as I have always loved them."

XIII

THE MADNESS OF STRINDBERG

The mirror that Strindberg held up to Nature was a cracked one. It was cracked in a double sense—it was crazy. It gave back broken images of a world which it made look like the chaos of a lunatic dream. Miss Lind-af-Hageby, in her popular biography of Strindberg, is too intent upon saying what can be said in his defence to make a serious attempt to analyse the secret of genius which is implicit in those "115 plays, novels, collections of stories, essays, and poems" which will be gathered into the complete edition of his works shortly to be published in Sweden. The biography will supply the need of that part of the public which has no time to read Strindberg, but has plenty of time to read about him. It will give them a capably potted Strindberg, and will tell them quietly and briefly much that he himself has told violently and at length in *The Son of a Servant*, *The Confession of a Fool*, and, indeed, in nearly everything he wrote. On the other hand, Miss Lind's book has little value as an interpretation. She does not do much to clear up the reasons which have made the writings of this mad Swede matter of interest in every civilized country in the world. She does, indeed, quote the remark of Gorki, who, at the time of Strindberg's death, compared him to the ancient Danubian hero, Danko, "who, in order to help humanity out of the darkness of problems, tore his heart out of his breast, lit it, and holding it high, led the way." "Strindberg," Miss Lind declares, "patiently burnt his heart for the illumination of the people, and on the day when his body was laid low in the soil, the flame of his self-immolation was seen, pure and inextinguishable." This will not do. "Patiently" is impossible; so is "pure and inextinguishable." Strindberg was at once a man of genius (and therefore noble) and a creature of doom (and therefore to be pitied). But to sum him up as a spontaneous martyr in the greatest of great causes is to do injustice to language and to the lives of the saints and heroes. He was a martyr, of course, in the sense in which we call a man

a martyr to toothache. He suffered; but most of his sufferings were due, not to tenderness of soul, but to tenderness of nerves.

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Other artists lay hold upon life through an exceptional sensibility. Strindberg laid hold on life through an exceptional excitability—even an exceptional irritability. In his plays, novels, and essays alike, he is a specialist in the jars of existence. He magnified even the smallest worries until they assumed mountainous proportions. He was the kind of man who, if something went wrong with the kitchen boiler, felt that the Devil and all his angels had been loosed upon him, as upon the righteous Job, with at least the connivance of Heaven. He seems to have regarded the unsatisfactoriness of a servant as a scarcely less tremendous evil than the infidelity of a wife. If you wish to see into twwhat follies of exaggeration Strindberg's want of the sense of proportion led him, you cannot do better than turn to those pages in *Zones of the Spirit* (as the English translation of his *Blue Book* is called), in which he tells us about his domestic troubles at the time of the rehearsals of *The Dream Play*.

My servant left me; my domestic arrangements were upset; within forty days I had six changes of servants—one worse than the other. At last I had to serve myself, lay the table, and light the stove. I ate black broken victuals out of a basket. In short, I had to taste the whole bitterness of life without knowing why.

Much as one may sympathize with a victim of the servant difficulty, one cannot but regard the last sentence as, in the vulgar phrase, rather a tall order. But it becomes taller still before Strindberg has done with it.

Then came the dress-rehearsal of *The Dream Play*. This drama I wrote seven years ago, after a period of forty days' suffering which were among the worst which I had ever undergone. And now again exactly forty days of fasting and pain had passed. There seemed, therefore, to be a secret legislature which promulgates clearly defined sentences. I thought of the forty days of the Flood, the forty years of wandering in the desert, the forty days' fast kept by Moses, Elijah, and Christ.

There you have Strindberg's secret. His work is, for the most part, simply the dramatization of the conflict between man and the irritations of life. The chief of these is, of course, woman. But the lesser irritations never disappear from sight for long. His obsession by them is very noticeable in *The Dream Play* itself—in that scene, for instance, in which the Lawyer and the daughter of Indra having married, the Lawyer begins to complain of the untidiness of their home, and the Daughter to complain of the dirt:

THE DAUGHTER. This is worse than I dreamed!

THE LAWYER. We are not the worst off by far. There is still food in the pot.

THE DAUGHTER. But what sort of food?

THE LAWYER. Cabbage is cheap, nourishing, and good to eat.

THE DAUGHTER. For those who like cabbage—to me it is repulsive.



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THE LAWYER. Why didn't you say so?

THE DAUGHTER. Because I loved you. I wanted to sacrifice my own taste.

THE LAWYER. Then I must sacrifice my taste for cabbage to you—for sacrifices must be mutual.

THE DAUGHTER. What are we to eat then? Fish? But you hate fish?

THE LAWYER. And it is expensive.

THE DAUGHTER. This is worse than I thought it!

THE LAWYER (*kindly*). Yes, you see how hard it is.

And the symbolic representation of married life in terms of fish and cabbage is taken up again a little later:—

THE DAUGHTER. I fear I shall begin to hate you after this!

THE LAWYER. Woe to us, then! But let us forestall hatred. I promise never again to speak of any untidiness—although it is torture to me!

THE DAUGHTER. And I shall eat cabbage, though it means agony to me.

THE LAWYER. A life of common suffering, then! One's pleasure the other one's pain.

One feels that, however true to nature the drift of this may be, it is little more than bacilli of truth seen as immense through a microscope. The agonies and tortures arising from eating cabbage and such things may, no doubt, have tragic consequences enough, but somehow the men whom these things put on the rack refuse to come to life in the imagination on the same tragic plane where Prometheus lies on his crag and Oedipus strikes out his eyes that they may no longer look upon his shame. Strindberg is too anxious to make tragedy out of discomforts instead of out of sorrows. When he is denouncing woman as a creature who loves above all things to deceive her husband, his supreme way of expressing his abhorrence is to declare: "If she can trick him into eating horse-flesh without noticing it, she is happy." Here, and in a score of similar passages, we can see how physical were the demons that endlessly consumed Strindberg's peace of mind.

His attitude to women, as we find it expressed in *The Confession of a Fool*, *The Dance of Death*, and all through his work, is that of a man overwhelmed with the physical. He



raves now with lust, now with disgust—two aspects of the same mood. He turns from love to hatred with a change of front as swift as a drunkard's. He is the Mad Mullah of all the sex-antagonism that has ever troubled men since they began to think of woman as a temptress. He was the most enthusiastic modern exponent of the point-of-view of that Adam who explained: "The woman tempted me." Strindberg deliberately wrote those words on his banner and held them aloft to his generation as the summary of an eternal gospel. Miss Lind-af-Hageby tells us that, at one period of his life, he was sufficiently free from the physical obsessions of sex to preach the equality of men and women and even to herald the coming of woman suffrage.



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But his abiding view of woman was that of the plain man of the nineteenth century. He must either be praising her as a ministering angel or denouncing her as a ministering devil—preferably the latter. It would be nonsense, however, to pretend that Strindberg did not see at least one class of women clearly and truly. The accuracy with which he portrays woman the parasite, the man-eater, the siren, is quite terrible. No writer of his day was so shudderingly conscious of every gesture, movement, and intonation with which the spider-woman sets out to lure the mate she is going to devour. It may be that he prophesies against the sins of women rather than subtly analyses and describes them as a better artist would have done. *The Confessions of a Fool* is less a revelation of the soul of his first wife than an attack on her. But we must, in fairness to Strindberg, remember that in his violences against women he merely gives us a new rendering of an indictment that goes back to the beginning of history. The world to him was a long lane of oglings, down which man must fly in terror with his eyes shut and his ears covered. His foolishness as a prophet consists, not in his suspicions of woman regarded as an animal, but in his frothing at the mouth at the idea that she should claim to be treated as something higher than an animal. None the less, he denied to the end that he was a woman-hater. His denial, however, was grimly unflattering:—
I have said that the child is a little criminal, incapable of self-guidance, but I love children all the same. I have said that woman is—what she is, but I have always loved some woman, and been a father. Whoever, therefore, calls me a woman-hater is a blockhead, a liar, or a noodle. Or all three together.

Sex, of course, was the greatest cross Strindberg had to bear. But there were hundreds of other little changing crosses, from persecution mania to poverty, which supplanted each other from day to day on his back. He suffered continually both from the way he was made and from the way the world was made. His novels and plays are a literature of suffering. He reveals himself there as a man pursued by furies, a man without rest. He flies to a thousand distractions and hiding-places—drink and lust and piano-playing, Chinese and chemistry, painting and acting, alchemy and poison, and religion. Some of these, no doubt, he honestly turns to for a living. But in his rush from one thing to another he shows the restlessness of a man goaded to madness. Not that his life is to be regarded as entirely miserable. He obviously gets a good deal of pleasure even out of his acutest pain. “I find the joy of life in its violent and cruel struggles,” he tells us in the preface to *Miss Julia*, “and my pleasure lies in knowing something and learning something.” He is always consumed with the greed of knowledge—a phase of his greed of domination. It is this that enables him to turn his inferno into a purgatory.



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In his later period, indeed, he is optimist enough to believe that the sufferings of life cleanse and ennoble. By tortuous ways of sin he at last achieves the simple faith of a Christian. He originally revolted from this faith more through irritation than from principle. One feels that, with happier nerves and a happier environment, he might easily have passed his boyhood as the model pupil in the Sunday-school. It is significant that we find him in *The Confession of a Fool* reciting Longfellow's *Excelsior* to the first and worst of his wives. Strindberg may have been possessed of a devil; he undoubtedly liked to play the part of a devil; but at heart he was constantly returning to the Longfellow sentiment, though, of course, his hungry intellectual curiosity was something that Longfellow never knew. In his volume of fables, *In Midsummer Days*, we see how essentially good and simple were his ideas when he could rid himself of sex mania and persecution mania. Probably his love of children always kept him more or less in chains to virtue. Ultimately he yielded himself a victim, not to the furies, but to the still more remorseless pursuit of the Hound of Heaven. On his death-bed, Miss Lind tells us, he held up the Bible and said: "This alone is right." Through his works, however, he serves virtue best, not by directly praising it, but by his eagerly earnest account of the madness of the seven deadly sins, as well as of the seventy-seven deadly irritations. He has not the originality of fancy or imagination to paint virtue well. His genius was the genius of frank and destructive criticism. His work is a jumble of ideas and an autobiography of raw nerves rather than a revelation of the emotions of men and women. His great claim on our attention, however, is that his autobiography is true as far as the power of truth was in him. His pilgrim's progress through madness to salvation is neither a pretty nor a sensational lie. It is a genuine document. That is why, badly constructed though his plays and novels are, some of them have a fair chance of being read a hundred years hence. As a writer of personal literature, he was one of the bold and original men of his time.

XIV

"THE PRINCE OF FRENCH POETS"

It is difficult nowadays to conceive that, within half a century of his death, Ronsard's fame suffered so dark an eclipse that no new edition of his works was called for between 1629 and 1857. When he died, he was, as M. Jusserand reminds us, the most illustrious man of letters in Europe. He seemed, too, to have all those gifts of charm—charm of mood and music—which make immortality certain. And yet, in the rule-of-thumb ages that were to follow, he sank into such disesteem in his own country that Boileau had not a good word for him, and Voltaire roundly said of him that he "spoiled the language." Later, we have Arnauld asserting that France had only done herself dishonour by her enthusiasm for "the wretched poetry of Ronsard." Fenelon, as M. Jusserand tells us, discusses Ronsard as a linguist, and ignores him as a poet.



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It was the romantic; revival of the nineteenth century that placed Ronsard on a throne again. Even to-day, however, there are pessimistic Frenchmen who doubt whether their country has ever produced a great poet. Mr. Bennet has told us of one who, on being asked who was the greatest of French poets, replied: "Victor Hugo, hélas!" And in the days when Hugo was still but a youth the doubt must have been still more painful. So keenly was the want of a national poet felt that, if one could not have been discovered, the French would have had to invent him. It was necessary for the enthusiastic young romanticists to possess a great indigenous figure to stand beside those imported idols—Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe, and Dante. Sainte-Beuve, who brought out a Ronsard anthology with a critical essay in 1828, showed them where to look. After that, it was as though French literature had begun with Ronsard. He was the "ideal ancestor." He was, as it were, a re-discovered fatherland. But his praise since then has been no mere task of patriotism. It has been a deep enthusiasm for literature. "You cannot imagine," wrote Flaubert, in 1852, "what a poet Ronsard is. What a poet! What a poet! What wings!... This morning, at half-past twelve, I read a poem aloud which almost upset my nerves, it gave me so much pleasure." That may be taken as the characteristic French view of Ronsard. It may be an exaggerated view. It may be fading to some extent before modern influences. But it is unlikely that Ronsard's reputation in his own country will ever again be other than that of a great poet.

At the same time, it is not easy, on literary grounds, to acquiesce in all the praises that have been heaped upon him. One would imagine from Flaubert's exclamations that Ronsard had a range like Shelley's, whereas, in fact, he was more comparable with the English cavalier poets. He had the cavalier poet's gift of making love seem a profession rather than a passion. He was always very much a gentleman, both in his moods and his philosophy. A great deal of his best poetry is merely a variation on *carpe diem*. On the other hand, though he never went very deep or very high, he did express real sentiments and emotions in poetry. Few poets have sung the regret for youth more sincerely and more beautifully, and, with Ronsard, regret for the lost wonder of his own youth was perhaps the acutest emotion he ever knew. He was himself, in his early years, one of those glorious youths who have the genius of charm and comeliness, of grace and strength and the arts. He excelled at football as in lute-playing. He danced, fenced, and rode better than the best; and, with his noble countenance, his strong limbs, his fair beard, and his "eyes full of gentle gravity," he must have been the picture of the perfect courtier and soldier. Above all, we are told, his conversation was delightful. He had "the gift of pleasing." When he went to Scotland in 1537 with Madeleine, the



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King's daughter, to attend as page her tragic marriage with James V, James was so attracted by him that he did not allow him to leave the country for two years. With every gift of popularity and success, with the world apparently already at his feet, Ronsard was suddenly struck down by an illness that crippled his whole life. He became deaf, or half-deaf. His body was tortured with arthritis and recurrent attacks of gout. His career as a courtier lay in ruins before him.

Possibly, had it not been so, his genius as a poet would have spent itself in mere politeness. The loss of his physical splendour and the death of more than one of his companions, however, filled him with an extreme sense of the transitoriness of the beauty of the world—of youth and fame and flowers—and turned him both to serious epicureanism and to serious writing. By the year 1550 he was leading the young men of France in a great literary renaissance—a reaction against the lifeless jingle of ballades and punning rhymes. Like du Bellay, he asked himself and his contemporaries: “Are we, then, less than the Greeks and Romans?” And he set out to lay the foundations in France of a literature as individual in its genius as the ancient classics. M. Jusserand, in a most interesting chapter, relates the story of the battles over form and language which were fought by French men of letters in the days of La Pleiade. In an age of awakenings, of conquests, of philosophies, of discussions on everything under the sun, the literature of tricksters was ultimately bound to give way before the bold originality and the sincerities of the new school. But Ronsard had to endure a whole parliament of mockery before the day of victory.

Of his life, apart from his work in literature, there is little to tell. For a man who lived in France in days when Protestantism and Catholicism were murderously at one another's throats, he had a peculiarly uneventful career. This, too, though he threw himself earnestly into the battle against the heretics. He had begun by sympathizing with Protestantism, because it promised much-needed reforms in the Church; but the sympathy was short-lived. In 1553, though a layman, he was himself filling various ecclesiastical offices. He drew the salaries of several priories during his life, more lowly paid priests apparently doing the work. Though an earnest Catholic, however, Ronsard was never faithless to friends who took the other side. He published his kindly feelings towards Odet de Coligny, the Admiral's cardinal brother, for instance, who had adopted Protestantism and married, and, though he could write bloodily enough against his sectarian enemies, the cry for tolerance, for pity, for peace, seems continually to force itself to his lips amid the wars of the time. M. Jusserand lays great stress on the plain-spokenness of Ronsard. He praises especially the courage with which the poet often spoke out his mind to kings and churchmen, though

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no man could write odes fuller of exaggerated adulation when they were wanted. He sometimes counselled kings, we are told, "in a tone that, after all our revolutions, no writer would dare to employ to-day." Perhaps M. Jusserand over-estimates the boldness with which his hero could remind kings that they, like common mortals, were made of mud. He has done so, I imagine, largely in order to clear him from the charge of being a flatterer. It is interesting to be reminded, by the way, that one of his essays in flattery was an edition of his works dedicated, by order of Catherine de Medicis, to Elizabeth of England, whom he compared to all the incomparables, adding a eulogy of "Mylord Robert Du-Dle comte de l'Encestre" as the ornament of the English, the wonder of the world. Elizabeth was delighted, and gave the poet a diamond for his pretty book.

But Ronsard does not live in literature mainly as a flatterer. Nor is he remembered as a keeper of the conscience of princes, or as a religious controversialist. If nothing but his love-poems had survived, we should have almost all his work that is of literary importance. He fell in love in the grand manner three times, and from these three passions most of his good poetry flowed. First there was Cassandre, the beautiful girl of Florentine extraction, whom he saw singing to her lute, when he was only twenty-two, and loved to distraction. She married another and became the star of Ronsard's song. She was the irruptive heroine of that witty and delightful sonnet on the *Iliad*:—

Je veux lire en trois jours l'Iliade d'Homere,
Et pour ce, Corydon, ferme bien l'huis sur moi;
Si rien me vient troubler, je t'assure ma foi,
Tu sentiras combien pesante est ma colere.

Je ne veux seulement que notre chambriere
Vienne faire mon lit, ton compagnon ni toi;
Je veux trois jours entiers demeurer a recoi,
Pour folatrer apres une semaine entiere.

Mais, si quelqu'un venait de la part de Cassandre,
Ouvre-lui tot la porte, et ne le fais attendre,
Soudain entre en ma chambre et me viens accouter.

Je veux tant seulement a lui seul me montrer;
Au reste, si un dieu voulait pour moi descendre
Du ciel, ferme la porte et ne le laisse entrer.

Nine years after Cassandre came Marie, the fifteen-year-old daughter of an Angevin villager, nut-brown, smiling, and with cheeks the colour of a May rose. She died young, but not before she had made Ronsard suffer by coquetting with another lover. What is



more important still, not before she had inspired him to write that sonnet which has about it so much of the charm of the morning:—

Mignonne, levez-vous, vous etes paresseuse,
Ja la gaie alouette au ciel a fredonne,
Et ja le rossignol doucement jargonne,
Dessus l'epine assis, sa complainte amoureuse.

Sus! debout allons voir l'herbelette perleuse,
Et votre beau rosier de boutons couronne,
Et vos oeillets aimes auxquels aviez donne
Hier au soir de l'eau d'une main si soigneuse.



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Harsoir en vous couchant vous jurates vos yeux
D'etre plus tot que moi ce matin eveillee:
Mais le dormir de l'aube, aux filles gracieux,

Vous tient d'un doux sommeil encor les yeux silleee.
Ca, ca, que je les baise, et votre beau tetin,
Cent fois, pour vous apprendre a vous lever matin.

Ronsard was old and grey—at least, he was old before his time and grey—when he met Helene de Sorgeres, maid of honour to the Queen, and began the third of his grand passions. He lived all the life of a young lover over again. They went to dances together, Helene in a mask. Helene gave her poet a crown of myrtle and laurel. They had childish quarrels and swore eternal fidelity. It was for her that Ronsard made the most exquisite of his sonnets: *Quand vous serez bien vieille*—a sonnet of which Mr. Yeats has written a magical version in English.

It is in referring to the sonnets for Helene that M. Jusserand calls attention to the realism of Ronsard's poetry. He points out that one seems to see the women Ronsard loves far more clearly than the heroines of many other poets. He notes the same genius of realism again when he is relating how Ronsard, on the eve of his death, as he was transported from priory to priory, in hope of relief in each new place, wrote a poem of farewell to his friends, in which he described the skeleton horrors of his state with a minute carefulness, Ronsard, indeed, showed himself a very personal chronicler throughout his work. "He cannot hide the fact that he likes to sleep on the left side, that he hates cats, dislikes servants 'with slow hands,' believes in omens, adores physical exercises and gardening, and prefers, especially in summer, vegetables to meat." M. Jusserand, I may add, has written the just and scholarly praise of a most winning poet. His book, which appears in the *Grands Ecrivains Francais* series, is not only a good biographical study, but an admirable narrative of literary and national history.

XV

ROSSETTI AND RITUAL

Rossetti's great gift to his time was the gift of beauty, of beauty to be worshipped in the sacred hush of a temple. His work is not richer in the essentials of beauty than Browning's—it is not, indeed, nearly so rich; but, while Browning served beauty joyously, a god in a firmament of gods, Rossetti burned a lonely candle to it as to the only true god. To Browning, the temple of beauty was but a house in a living world; to Rossetti, the world outside the temple was, for the most part, a dead world. *Jenny* may, seem to stand in vivid contradiction of this. But *Jenny* was an exceptional excursion into life, and hardly expresses the Rossetti that was a power in art and literature. Him we find best,

perhaps, in *The Blessed Damozel*, written when he was little more than a boy. And this is not surprising, for the arrogant love of beauty,



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out of which the aesthetic sort of art and literature has been born, is essentially a boy's love. Poets who are sick with this passion must either die young, like Keats, or survive merely to echo their younger selves, like Swinburne. They are splendid in youth, like Aucassin, whose swooning passion for Nicolette is symbolical of their almost painful desire of beauty. In *Hand and Soul*, Rossetti tells us of Chiaro dell Erma that "he would feel faint in sunsets and at the sight of stately persons." Keats's Odes express the same ecstasy of faintness, and Rossetti himself was obviously a close nineteenth-century counterpart of Chiaro. Even when he troubles about the soul—and he constantly troubles about it—he never seems to be able altogether to escape out of what may be called the higher sensationalism into genuine mysticism. His work is earth-born: it is rich in earthly desire. His symbols were not wings to enable the soul to escape into a divine world of beauty. They were the playthings of a grown man, loved for their own beauty more than for any beauty they could help the spirit to reach. Rossetti belongs to the ornamental school of poetry. He writes more like a man who has gone into a library than like one who has gone out to Nature, and ornamentalism in poetry is simply the result of seeing life, not directly, but through the coloured glass of literature and the other arts. Rossetti was the forerunner of all those artists and authors of recent times, who, in greater or less degree, looked on art as a weaving of patterns, an arrangement of wonderful words and sounds and colours. Pater in his early writings, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and all those others who dreamed that it was the artist's province to enrich the world with beautiful furniture—for conduct itself seemed, in the philosophy of these writers, to aspire after the quality of tapestry—are implicit in *The Blessed Damozel* and *Troy Town*. It is not that Rossetti could command words like Pater or Wilde. His phrasing, if personal, is curiously empty of the graces. He often does achieve graces of phrase; but some of his most haunting poems owe their power over us to their general pattern, and not to any persistent fine workmanship. How beautiful *Troy Town* is, for instance, and yet how lacking in beautiful verses! The poet was easily content in his choice of words who could leave a verse like:—

Venus looked on Helen's gift;
(*O Troy Town!*)
Looked and smiled with subtle drift,
Saw the work of her heart's desire:—
"There thou kneel'st for Love to lift!"
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)



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Rossetti never wrote; a poem that was fine throughout. There is nothing to correspond to *The Skylark* or the *Ode to a Grecian Urn* or *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* in his work. The truth is, he was not a great poet, because he was not a singer. He was capable of decorations in verse, but he was not capable of song. His sonnets, it may be argued, are more than decorations. But even they are laden with beauty; they are never, as it were, light and alight with it, as are *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* and *Where lies the land to which yon ship must go?* They have flagging pulses like desire itself, and are often weary before the fourteenth line. Only rarely do we get a last six lines like:—

O love, my love! if I no more should see
Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,
Nor image of thine eyes in any spring,—
How then should sound upon Life's darkening slope
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,
The wind of Death's imperishable wing?

And, beautiful as this is, is not the imagery of the closing lines a little more deliberate than we are conscious of in the great work of the great singers? One never feels that the leaves and the winds in themselves were sufficiently full of meaning and delight for Rossetti. He loved them as pictorial properties—as a designer rather than a poet loves them.

In his use of the very mysteries of Christianity, he is intoxicated chiefly by the beauty of the designs by which the painters have expressed their vision of religion. His *Ave* is a praise of the beauty of art more than a praise of the beauty of divinity. In it we are told how, on the eve of the Annunciation,

Far off the trees were as pale wands,
Against the fervid sky: the sea
Sighed further off eternally
As human sorrow sighs in sleep.

The poem is not a hymn but a decorated theme. And yet there is a sincere vain-longing running through Rossetti's work that keeps it from being artificial or pretentious. This was no less real for being vague. His work is an attempt to satisfy his vain-longing with rites of words and colour. He always sought to bring peace to his soul by means of ritual. When he was dying, he was anxious to see a confessor. "I can make nothing of Christianity," he said, "but I only want a confessor to give me absolution for my sins." That was typical of his attitude to life. He loved its ceremonies more—at least, more vividly—than he loved its soul. One is never done hearing about his demand for "fundamental brainwork" in art. But his own poetry is poor enough in brainwork. It is the poetry, of one who, like Keats, hungered for a "life of sensations rather than of thoughts." It is the poetry of grief, of regret—the grief and regret of one who was a

master of sensuous beauty, and who reveals sensuous beauty rather than any deeper secret even in touching spiritual themes. Poetry with him is a dyed and embroidered garment which weighs the spirit down rather than winged sandals like Shelley's, which set the spirit free.

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Yet his influence on art and literature has been immense. He, far more than Keats or Swinburne, was the prophet of that ritualism which has been a dominant characteristic in modern poetry, whether it is the Pagan ritualism of Mr. Yeats or the Catholic ritualism of Francis Thompson. One need not believe that he was an important direct influence on either of these poets. But his work as poet and painter prepared the world for ritualism in literature. No doubt the medievalism of Scott and the decorative imagination of Keats were also largely responsible for the change in the literary atmosphere; but Rossetti was more distinctively a symbolist and ritualist than any other English man of letters who lived in the early or middle part of the nineteenth century.

People used to debate whether he was greater as a painter or as a poet, and he was not always sure himself. When, however, he said to Burne-Jones, in 1857: "If any man has any poetry in him, he should paint; for it has all been said and written, and they have scarcely begun to paint it," he gave convincing proof that painting, and not poetry, was his essential gift. He may be denounced for his bad drawing and twenty other faults as an artist; but it is his paintings that show him as a discoverer and a man of high genius. At the same time, how well he can also paint in verse, as in those ever-moving lines on Jenny's wanderings in the Haymarket:—

Jenny, you know the city now.
A child can tell the tale there, how
Some things which are not yet enrol'd
In market-lists are bought and sold,
Even till the early Sunday light,
When Saturday night is market-night
Everywhere, be it dry or wet,
And market-night in the Haymarket.
Our learned London children know,
Poor Jenny, all your pride and woe;
Have seen your lifted silken skirt
Advertise dainties through the dirt;
Have seen your coach wheels splash rebuke
On virtue; and have learned your look
When wealth and health slipped past, you stare
Along the streets alone, and there,
Round the long park, across the bridge,
The cold lamps at the pavement's edge
Wind on together and apart,
A fiery serpent for your heart.

In most of his poems, unfortunately, the design, as a whole, rambles. His imagination worked best when limited by the four sides of a canvas.



XVI

MR. BERNARD SHAW

Mr. Shaw came for a short time recently to be regarded less as an author than as an incident in the European War. In the opinion of many people, it seemed as if the Allies were fighting against a combination composed of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Mr. Shaw. Mr. Shaw's gift of infuriating people is unailing. He is one of those rare public men who can hardly express an opinion on potato-culture—and



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he does express an opinion on everything—without making a multitude of people shake their fists in impotent anger. His life—at least, his public life—has been a jibe opposed to a rage. He has gone about, like a pickpocket of illusions, from the world of literature to the world of morals, and from the world of morals to the world of politics, and, everywhere he has gone, an innumerable growl has followed him.

Not that he has not had his disciples—men and women who believe that what Mr. Shaw says on any conceivable subject is far more important than what *The Times* or the *Manchester Guardian* says. He has never founded a church, however, because he has always been able to laugh at his disciples as unfeelingly as at anybody else. He has courted unpopularity as other men have courted popularity. He has refused to assume the vacuous countenance either of an idol or a worshipper, and in the result those of us to whom life without reverence seems like life in ruins are filled at times with a wild lust to denounce and belittle him. He has been called more names than any other man of letters alive. When all the other names have been exhausted and we are about to become inarticulate, we even denounce him as a bore. But this is only the Billingsgate of our exasperation. Mr. Shaw is not a bore, whatever else he may be. He has succeeded in the mere business of interesting us beyond any other writer of his time.

He has succeeded in interesting us largely by inventing himself as a public figure, as Oscar Wilde and Stevenson did before him. Whether he could have helped becoming a figure, even if he had never painted that elongated comic portrait of himself, it is difficult to say. Probably he was doomed to be a figure just as Dr. Johnson was. If he had not told us legends about himself, other people would have told them, and they could scarcely have told them so well: that would have been the chief difference. Even if Mr. Shaw's plays should ever become as dead as the essays in *The Rambler*, his lineaments and his laughter will survive in a hundred stories which will bring the feet of pilgrims to Adelphi Terrace in search of a ghost with its beard on fire.

His critics often accuse him, in regard to the invention of the Shaw myth, of having designed a poster rather than painted a portrait. And Mr. Shaw always hastens to agree with those who declare he is an advertiser in an age of advertisement. M. Hamon quotes him as saying:—

Stop advertising myself! On the contrary, I must do it more than ever. Look at Pears's Soap. There is a solid house if you like, but every wall is still plastered with their advertisements. If I were to give up advertising, my business would immediately begin to fall off. You blame me for having declared myself to be the most remarkable man of my time. But the claim is an arguable one. Why should I not say it when I believe that it is true?



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One suspects that there is as much fun as commerce in Mr. Shaw's advertisement. Mr. Shaw would advertise himself in this sense even if he were the inmate of a workhouse. He is something of a natural peacock. He is in the line of all those tramps and stage Irishmen who have gone through! life with so fine a swagger of words. This only means that in his life he is an artist.

He is an artist in his life to an even greater extent than he is a moralist in his art. The mistake his depreciators make, however, is in thinking that his story ends here. The truth about Mr. Shaw is not quite so simple as that. The truth about Mr. Shaw cannot be told until we realize that he is an artist, not only in the invention of his own life, but in the observation of the lives of other people. His Broadbent is as wonderful a figure as his George Bernard Shaw. Not that his portraiture is always faithful. He sees men and women too frequently in the refracting shallows of theories. He is a doctrinaire, and his characters are often comic statements of his doctrines rather than the reflections of men and women. "When I present true human nature," he observes in one of the many passages in which he justifies himself, "the audience thinks it is being made fun of. In reality I am simply a very careful writer of natural history." One is bound to contradict him. Mr. Shaw often thinks he is presenting true human nature when he is merely presenting his opinions about human nature—the human nature of soldiers, of artists, of women. Or, rather, when he is presenting a queer fizzing mixture of human nature and his opinions about it.

This may be sometimes actually a virtue in his comedy. Certainly, from the time of Aristophanes onwards, comedy has again and again been a vehicle of opinions as well as a branch of natural history. But it is not always a virtue. Thus in *The Doctors Dilemma*, when Dubedat is dying, his self-defence and his egoism are for the most part admirably true both to human nature and to Mr. Shaw's view of the human nature of artists. But when he goes on with his last breath to utter his artistic creed: "I believe in Michael Angelo, Velasquez, and Rembrandt; in the might of design, the mystery of colour, the redemption of all things by Beauty everlasting, and the message of Art that has made these hands blessed. Amen, Amen," these sentences are no more natural or naturalistic than the death-bed utterances in one of Mr. G.R. Sims's ballads. Dubedat would not have thought these things, he would not have said these things; in saying them he becomes a mere mechanical figure, without any admixture of humanity, repeating Mr. Shaw's opinion of the nature of the creed of artists. There is a similar falsification in the same play in the characterization of the newspaper man who is present at Dubedat's death and immediately afterwards is anxious to interview the widow. "Do you think," he asks, "she would give me a few words on 'How it Feels to be a



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Widow?’ Rather a good title for an article, isn’t it?” These sentences are bad because into an atmosphere of more or less naturalistic comedy they simply introduce a farcical exaggeration of Mr. Shaw’s opinion of the incompetence and impudence of journalists. Mr. Shaw’s comedies are repeatedly injured by a hurried alteration of atmosphere in this manner. Comedy, as well as tragedy, must create some kind of illusion, and the destruction of the illusion, even for the sake of a joke, may mean the destruction of laughter. But, compared with the degree of reality in his characterization, the proportion of unreality is not overwhelming. It has been enormously exaggerated.

After all, if the character of the newspaper man in *The Doctor’s Dilemma* is machine-made, the much more important character of B.B., the soothing and incompetent doctor, is a creation of the true comic genius.

Nine people out of ten harp on Mr. Shaw’s errors. It is much more necessary that we should recognize that, amid all his falsifications, doctrinal and jocular, he has a genuine comic sense of character. “Most French critics,” M. Hamon tells us ... “declare that Bernard Shaw does depict characters. M. Remy de Gourmont writes: ‘Moliere has never drawn a doctor more comically “the doctor” than Paramore, nor more characteristic figures of women than those in the same play, *The Philanderer*. The character-drawing is admirable.’” M. Hamon himself goes on, however, to suggest an important contrast between the characterization in Mr. Shaw and the characterization in Moliere:—

In Shaw’s plays the characters are less representative of vices or passions than those of Moliere, and more representative of class, profession, or sect. Moliere depicts the miser, the jealous man, the misanthrope, the hypocrite; whereas Shaw depicts the bourgeois, the rebel, the capitalist, the workman, the Socialist, the doctor. A few only of these latter types are given us by Moliere.

M. Hamon’s comparison, made in the course of a long book, between the genius of Mr. Shaw and the genius of Moliere is extraordinarily detailed. Perhaps the detail is overdone in such a passage as that which informs us regarding the work of both authors that “suicide is never one of the central features of the comedy; if mentioned, it is only to be made fun of.” The comparison, however, between the sins that have been alleged against both Moliere and Mr. Shaw—sins of style, of form, of morals, of disrespect, of irreligion, of anti-romanticism, of farce, and so forth—is a suggestive contribution to criticism. I am not sure that the comparison would not have been more effectively put in a chapter than a book, but it is only fair to remember that M. Hamon’s book is intended as a biography and general criticism of Mr. Shaw as well as a comparison between his work and Moliere’s. It contains, it must be confessed, a great deal that is not new to English readers, but then so do all books about Mr. Shaw. And it has also this fault that, though it is about a master of laughter, it does not contain even

the shadow of a smile. Mr. Shaw is made an idol in spite of himself: M. Hamon's volume is an offering at a shrine.



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The true things it contains, however, make it worth reading. M. Hamon sees, for instance, what many critics have failed to see, that in his dramatic work Mr. Shaw is less a wit than a humorist:—

In Shaw's work we find few studied jests, few epigrams even, except those which are the necessary outcome of the characters and the situations. He does not labour to be witty, nor does he play upon words.... Shaw's brilliancy does not consist in wit, but in humour.

Mr. Shaw was at one time commonly regarded as a wit of the school of Oscar Wilde. That view, I imagine, is seldom found nowadays, but even now many people do not realize that humour, and not wit, is the ruling characteristic of Mr. Shaw's plays. He is not content with witty conversation about life, as Wilde was: he has an actual comic vision of human society.

His humour, it is true, is not the sympathetic humour of Elia or Dickens; but then neither was Moliere's. As M. Hamon reminds us, Moliere anticipated Mr. Shaw in outraging the sentiment, for instance, which has gathered round the family. "Moliere and Shaw," as he puts it with quaint seriousness, "appear to be unaware of what a father is, what a father is worth."

The defence of Mr. Shaw, however, does not depend on any real or imaginary resemblance of his plays to Moliere's. His joy and his misery before the ludicrous spectacle of human life are his own, and his expression of them is his own. He has studied with his own eyes the swollen-bellied pretences of preachers and poets and rich men and lovers and politicians, and he has derided them as they have never been derided on the English stage before. He has derided them with both an artistic and a moral energy. He has brought them all into a Palace of Truth, where they have revealed themselves with an unaccustomed and startling frankness. He has done this sometimes with all the exuberance of mirth, sometimes with all the bitterness of a satirist. Even his bitterness is never venomous, however. He is genial beyond the majority of inveterate controversialists and propagandists. He does not hesitate to wound and he does not hesitate to misunderstand, but he is free from malice. The geniality of his comedy, on the other hand, is often more offensive than malice, because it is from an orthodox point of view geniality in the wrong place. It is like a grin in church, a laugh at a marriage service.

It is this that has caused all the trouble about Mr. Shaw's writings on the war. He saw, not the war so much as the international diplomacy that led up to the war, under the anti-romantic and satirical comic vision. I do not mean that he was not intensely serious in all that he wrote about the war. But his seriousness is essentially the seriousness of (in the higher sense of the word) the comic artist, of the disillusionist. He sees current history from the absolutely opposite point of view, say, to the lyric poet. He was so occupied with his satiric vision of the pretences of the diplomatic world that, though his

attitude to the war was as anti-Prussian as M. Vandervelde's, a great number of people thought he must be a pro-German.



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The fact is, in war time more than at any other time, people dread the vision of the satirist and the sceptic. It is a vision of only one-half of the truth, and of the half that the average man always feels to be more or less irrelevant. And, even at this, it is not infallible. This is not to disparage Mr. Shaw's contributions to the discussion of politics. That contribution has been brilliant, challenging, and humane, and not more wayward than the contribution of the partisan and the sentimentalist. It may be said of Mr. Shaw that in his politics, as in his plays, he has sought Utopia along the path of disillusion as other men have sought it along the path of idealism and romance.

XVII

MR. MASEFIELD'S SECRET

Mr. Masefield, as a poet, has the secret of popularity. Has he also the secret of poetry? I confess his poems often seem to me to invite the admirably just verdict which Jeffrey delivered on Wordsworth's *Excursion*: "This will never do." We miss in his lines the onward march of poetry. His individual phrases carry no cargoes of wonder. His art is not of the triumphant order that lifts us off our feet. As we read the first half of his narrative sea-poem, *Dauber*, we are again and again moved to impatience by the sheer literary left-handedness of the author. There are so many unnecessary words, so many unnecessary sentences. Of the latter we have an example in the poet's reflection as he describes the "fiery fishes" that raced Dauber's ship by night in the southern seas:—

What unknown joy was in those fish unknown!

It is one of those superfluous thoughts which appear to be suggested less by the thing described than by the need of filling up the last line of the verse. Similarly, when Dauber, as the ship's lampman and painter is nicknamed, regards the miracle of a ship at sea in moonlight, and exclaims:—

My Lord, my God, how beautiful it is!

we feel that he is only lengthening into a measured line the "My God, how beautiful it is!" of prose. A line like this, indeed, is merely prose that has learned the goose-step of poetry.

Perhaps one would not resent it—and many others like it—so much if it were not that Mr. Masefield so manifestly aims at realism of effect. His narrative is meant to be as faithful to commonplace facts as a policeman's evidence in a court of law. We are not spared even the old familiar expletives. When Dauber's paintings, for example—for he is an artist as well as an artisan—have been destroyed by the malice of the crew, and he questions the Bosun about it,



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

Similarly, when the Mate, taking up the brush, makes a sketch of a ship for Dauber's better instruction,

"God, sir," the Bosun said, "You do her fine!"
"Aye!" said the Mate, "I do so, by the Lord!"



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And when the whole crew gathers round to impress upon Dauber the fact of his incompetence,

“You hear?” the Bosun cried, “You cannot do it!”
“A gospel truth,” the Cook said, “true as hell!”

Here, obviously, the very letter of realism is intended.

Here, too, it may be added, we have as well-meaning an array of oaths as was ever set out in literature. When Mr. Kipling repeats a soldier’s oath, he seems to do so with a chuckle of appreciation. When Mr. Masefield puts down the oaths of sailors, he does so rather as a melancholy duty. He swears, not like a trooper, but like a virtuous man. He does not, as so many realists do, love the innumerable coarsenesses of life which he chronicles; that is what makes his oaths often seem as innocent as the conversation of elderly sinners echoed on the lips of children. He has a splendid innocence of purpose, indeed. He wishes to give us the prosaic truth of actual things as a kind of correspondence to the poetic truth of spiritual things of which they are the setting and the frame. Or it may be that he repeats these oaths and all the rest of it simply as a part of the technicalities of life at sea.

He certainly shows a passion for technicalities hardly less than Mr. Kipling’s own. He tells us, for instance, how, in the height of the fury of frost and surge and gale round Cape Horn,

at last, at last
They frapped the cringled crojick’s icy pelt;
In frozen bulge and bunt they made it fast.

And, again, when the storm was over and Dauber had won the respect of his mates by his manhood, we have an almost unintelligible verse describing how the Bosun, in a mood of friendship, set out to teach him some of the cunning of the sea:—

Then, while the Dauber counted, Bosun took
Some marline from his pocket. “Here,” he said,
“You want to know square sennit? So fash. Look!
Eight foxes take, and stop the ends with thread.
I’ve known an engineer would give his head
To know square sennit.” As the Bose began,
The Dauber felt promoted to a man.

Mr. Masefield has generously provided six pages of glossary at the end of his poem, where we are told the meaning of “futtock-shrouds,” “poop-break,” “scuttlebutt,” “mud-hooks,” and other items in the jargon of the sea.



So much for Mr. Masefield's literary method. Let me be equally frank about his genius, and confess at once that, in any serious estimate of this, all I have said will scarcely be more relevant than the charge against Burke that he had a clumsy delivery. Mr. Masefield has given us in *Dauber* a poem of genius, one of the great storm-pieces of modern literature, a poem that for imaginative infectiousness challenges comparison with the prose of Mr. Conrad's *Typhoon*. To criticize its style takes us no nearer its ultimate secret than piling up examples

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of bathos takes us to the secret of Wordsworth, or talking about maniacal construction and characterization takes us to the secret of Dostoevsky. There is no use pretending that the methods of these writers are good because their achievements are good. On the other hand, compared with the marvel of achievement, the faultiness of method in each case sinks into a matter almost of indifference. Mr. Masefield gives us in *Dauber* a book of revelation. If he does this in verse that is often merely prose crooked into rhyme—if he does it with a hero who is at first almost as bowelless a human being and as much an appeal for pity as Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*—that is his affair. In art, more than anywhere else, the end justifies the means, and the end of *Dauber* is vision—intense, terrible, pitiful, heroic vision. Here we have in literature what poor Dauber himself aimed at putting down on his inexpert canvases:—

A revealing
Of passionate men in battle with the sea,
High on an unseen stage, shaking and reeling;
And men through him would understand their feeling,
Their might, their misery, their tragic power,
And all by suffering pain a little hour.

That verse suggests both the kind and the degree of Mr. Masefield's sensitiveness as a recorder of the life of the sea. His is the witness less of a doer than of a sufferer. He is not a reveller in life: he is one, rather, who has found himself tossed about in the foaming tides of anguish, and who clings with a desperate faith to some last spar of beauty or heroism. He is a martyr to the physical as well as to the spiritual pain of the world. He communicates to us, not only the horror of humiliation, but the horror of a numbed boy, "cut to the ghost" by the polar gale, as high in the yards Dauber fights against the ship's doom, having been

ordered up when sails and spars
Were flying and going mad among the stars,

How well, too, he imparts the dread and the danger of the coming storm, as the ship gets nearer the Horn:

All through the windless night the clipper rolled
In a great swell with oily gradual heaves,
Which rolled her down until her time-bells tolled,
Clang, and the weltering water moaned like beeves.

And the next verse reiterates the prophecies of the moving waters:



Like the march of doom
Came those great powers of marching silences;
Then fog came down, dead-cold, and hid the seas.

The night was spent in dread of fog, in dread of ice, and the ship seemed to respond to the dread of the men as her horn called out into the impenetrable wilderness of mists and waters:

She bayed there like a solitary hound
Lost in a covert.

Morning came, bringing no release from fear:



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So the night passed, but then no morning broke—
Only a something showed that night was dead.
A sea-bird, cackling like a devil, spoke,
And the fog drew away and hung like lead.
Like mighty cliffs it shaped, sullen and red;
Like glowering gods at watch it did appear,
And sometimes drew away, and then drew near.

Then suddenly swooped down the immense black fiend of the storm, catching, as the Bosun put it, the ship “in her ball-dress.”

The blackness crunched all memory of the sun.

Henceforth we have a tale of white fear changing into heroism as Dauber clambers to his giddy place in the rigging, and goes out on the yard to his task,

Sick at the mighty space of air displayed
Below his feet, where soaring birds were wheeling.

It was all a “withering rush of death,” an orgy of snow, ice, and howling seas.

The snow whirled, the ship bowed to it, the gear lashed,
The sea-tops were cut off and flung down smashed;
Tatters of shouts were flung, the rags of yells—
And clang, clang, clang, below beat the two bells.

How magnificent a flash of the fury of the storm we get when the Dauber looks down from his scramblings among rigging and snapped spars, and sees the deck

Filled with white water, as though heaped with snow.

In that line we seem to behold the beautiful face of danger—a beauty that is in some way complementary to the beauty of the endurance of ships and the endurance of men. For the ship is saved, and so is the Dauber’s soul, and the men who had been bullies in hours of peace reveal themselves as heroes in stress and peril.

Dauber, it will be seen, is more than an exciting story of a storm. It is a spiritual vision of life. It is a soul’s confession. It is Mr. Masefield’s *De Profundis*. It is a parable of trial—a chant of the soul that has “emerged out of the iron time.” It is a praise of life, not for its own sake, but for the spiritual mastery which its storms and dangers bring. It is a paean of survival: the ship weathers the storm to go boldly forward again:—

A great grey sea was running up the sky,
Desolate birds flew past; their mewings came
As that lone water’s spiritual cry,



Its forlorn voice, its essence, its soul's name.
The ship limped in the water as if lame,
Then, in the forenoon watch, to a great shout,
More sail was made, the reefs were shaken out.

Not even the death of the Dauber in a wretched accident defeats our sense of divine and ultimate victory. To some readers this fatality may seem a mere luxury of pathos. But it is an essential part of the scheme of the poem. The poet must state his acceptance of life, not only in its splendid and tragic dangers, but in its cruelty and pathetic wastefulness. He must know the worst of it in order to put the best of it to the proof. The worst passes, the best continues—that is the secret enthusiasm of Mr. Masefield's song. Our final vision is of the ship in safety, holding her course to harbour in a fair wind:—



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Shattering the sea-tops into golden rain.
The waves bowed down before her like blown grain.

And as she sits in Valparaiso harbour, a beautiful thing at peace under the beautiful shadow of "the mountain tower, snow to the peak," our imagination is lifted to the hills-to where

All night long
The pointed mountain pointed at the stars,
Frozen, alert, austere.

It is a fine symbol of the aspiration of this book of men's "might, their misery, their tragic power." There is something essentially Christian and simple in Mr. Masfield's presentation of life. Conscious though he is of the pain of the world—and aloof from the world though this consciousness sometimes makes him appear—he is full of an extraordinary pity and brotherliness for men. He wanders among them, not with the condescension of so many earnest writers, but with the humility almost of one of the early Franciscans. One may amuse oneself by fancying that there is something in the manner of St. Francis even in Mr. Masfield's attitude to his little brothers the swear-words. He may not love them by nature, but he is kind to them by grace. They strike one as being the most innocent swear-words in literature.

XVIII

MR. W.B. YEATS

1. HIS OWN ACCOUNT OF HIMSELF

Mr. W.B. Yeats has created, if not a new world, a new star. He is not a reporter of life as it is, to the extent that Shakespeare or Browning is. One is not quite certain that his kingdom is of the green earth. He is like a man who has seen the earth not directly but in a crystal. He has a vision of real things, but in unreal circumstances. His poetry repels many people at first because it is unlike any other poetry. They are suspicious of it as of a new sect in religion. They have been accustomed to bow in other temples. They resent the ritual, the incantations, the unearthly light and colour of the temple of this innovating high priest.

They resent, most of all, the self-consciousness of the priest himself. For Mr. Yeats's is not a genius with natural readiness of speech. His sentences do not pour from him in stormy floods. It is as though he had to pursue and capture them one by one, like butterflies. Or, perhaps, it is that he has not been content with the simple utterance of his vision. He has reshaped and embroidered it, and has sung of passion in a mask. There are many who see in his poetry only the mask, and who are apparently blind to

the passion of sorrowful ecstasy that sets *The Wind Among the Reeds* apart from every other book that has ever been written in English. They imagine that the book amounts to little more than the attitude of a stylist, a trifle with Celtic nomenclature and fairy legend.



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One may agree that some of the less-inspired poems are works of intellectual craftsmanship rather than of immediate genius, and that here and there the originality of the poet's vision is clouded by reminiscences of the aesthetic painters. But the greatest poems in the book are a new thing in literature, a "rapturous music" not heard before. One is not surprised to learn from Mr. Yeats's autobiographical volume, *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, that, when he began to write poetry as a boy, "my lines but seldom scanned, for I could not understand the prosody in the books, although there were many lines that, taken by themselves, had music." His genius, as a matter of fact, was unconsciously seeking after new forms. Those who have read the first draft of *Innisfree* will remember how it gives one the impression of a new imagination stumbling into utterance. Mr. Yeats has laboured his verse into perfect music with a deliberateness like that of Flaubert in writing prose.

Reveries is the beautiful and fascinating story of his childhood and youth, and the development of his genius. "I remember," he tells us, "little of childhood but its pain. I have grown happier with every year of life, as though gradually conquering something in myself." But there is not much of the shadow of pain on these pages. They are full of the portraits of fantastically remembered relations and of stories of home and school related with fantastic humour. It is difficult to believe that Mr. Yeats as a schoolboy "followed the career of a certain professional runner for months, buying papers that would tell me if he had won or lost," but here we see him even in the thick of a fight like a boy in a school story. His father, however, seems to have had infinitely more influence over him than his school environment.

It was his father who grew so angry when the infant poet was taught at school to sing "Little drops of water," and who indignantly forbade him to write a school essay on the subject of the capacity of men to rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things. Mr. Yeats's upbringing in the home of an artist anti-Victorian to the finger-tips was obviously such as would lead a boy to live self-consciously, and Mr. Yeats tells us that when he was a boy at school he used to feel "as proud of myself as a March cock when it crows to its first sunrise." He remembers how one day he looked at his schoolfellows on the playing-field and said to himself, "If when I grow up I am as clever among grown-up men as I am among these boys, I shall be a famous man." Another sentence about these days suggests what a difficult inarticulate genius was his. "My thoughts," he says, "were a great excitement, but when I tried to do anything with them, it was like trying to pack a balloon into a shed in a high wind."

Though he was always near the bottom of his class, and was useless at games—"I cannot," he writes, "remember that I ever kicked a goal or made a run"—he showed some promise as a naturalist, and used to look for butterflies, moths, and beetles in Richmond Park. Later, when living on the Dublin coast, he "planned some day to write a book about the changes through a twelvemonth among the creatures of some hole in the rock."



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These passages in his autobiography are specially interesting as evidence to refute the absurd theory that Mr. Yeats is a mere vague day-dreamer among poets. The truth is, Mr. Yeats's early poems show that he was a boy of eager curiosity and observation—a boy with a remarkable intellectual machine, as well as a visionary who was one day to build a new altar to beauty. He has never been entirely aloof from the common world. Though at times he has conceived it to be the calling of a man of letters to live apart like a monk, he has mingled with human interests to a far greater extent than most people realize. He has nearly always been a politician and always a fighter.

At the same time, we need not read far in his autobiography to discover why people who hate self-consciousness in artists are so hostile to him.

Reveries Over Childhood and Youth is the autobiography of one who was always more self-conscious than his fellows. Mr. Yeats describes himself as a youth in Dublin:—

sometimes walking with an artificial stride in memory of Hamlet, and stopping at shop windows to look at my tie, gathered into a loose sailor-knot, and to regret that it could not be always blown out by the wind like Byron's tie in the picture.

Even the fits of abstraction of the young poet must often have been regarded as self-conscious attitudinizing by his neighbours—especially by the “stupid stout woman” who lived in the villa next to his father's, and who, as he amusingly relates, mocked him aloud:—

I had a study with a window opposite some window of hers, and one night when I was writing, I heard voices full of derision, and saw the stout woman and her family standing at the window. I have a way of acting what I write, and speaking it aloud without knowing what I am doing. Perhaps I was on my hands and knees, or looking down over the back of a chair, talking into what I imagined an abyss.

It will be seen that Mr. Yeats is as interesting a figure to himself as he is to Mr. George Moore. If he were not he would not have troubled to write his autobiography. And that would have been a loss to literature. *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* is a book of extraordinary freshness. It does not, like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, set forth the full account of the great influences that shaped a poet's career. But it is a delightful study of early influences, and depicts a dedicated poet in his boyhood as this has never been done before in English prose.

Of all the influences that have shaped his career, none was more important than the Irish atmosphere to which he early returned from London. He is distinctively an Irish poet, though we find him in his youth writing plays and poems in imitation of Shelley and Spenser. Irish places have done more to influence his imagination even than the masterpieces of English literature.



It was apparently while he was living in Sligo, not far from the lakes, that he conceived the longing which he afterwards expressed with such originality of charm in *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*:—

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My father had read to me some passage out of *Walden*, and I planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree....

I thought that, having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom.

It is the little world of Sligo, indeed, that provides all the spacious and twilit landscape in Mr. Yeats's verse. Here were those fishermen and raths and mountains of the Sidhe and desolate lakes which repeat themselves as images through his work. Here, too, he had relatives eccentric and adventurous to excite his imagination, such as the

Merchant skipper that leaped overboard
After a ragged hat in Biscay Bay.

Mr. Yeats's relations seem in his autobiography as real as the characters in fiction. Each of them is magnificently stamped with romance or comedy—the hypochondriac uncle, for example, who—

passed from winter to summer through a series of woollens that had always to be weighed; for in April or May, or whatever the date was, he had to be sure that he carried the exact number of ounces he had carried upon that date since boyhood.

For a time Mr. Yeats thought of following his father's example and becoming a painter. It was while attending an art school in Dublin that he first met A.E. He gives us a curious description of A.E. as he was then:—

He did not paint the model as we tried to, for some other image rose always before his eyes (a St. John in the Desert I remember), and already he spoke to us of his visions. His conversation, so lucid and vehement to-day, was all but incomprehensible, though now and again some phrase could be understood and repeated. One day he announced that he was leaving the Art Schools because his will was weak, and the arts or any other emotional pursuit would but weaken it further.

Mr. Yeats's memoirs, however, are not confined to prose. His volume of verse called *Responsibilities* is almost equally autobiographical. Much of it is a record of quarrels with contemporaries—quarrels about Synge, about Hugh Lane and his pictures, about all sorts of things. He aims barbed epigrams at his adversaries. Very Yeatsian is an epigram "to a poet, who would have me praise certain bad poets, imitators of his and mine":—

You say, as I have often given tongue
In praise of what another's said or sung,



'Twere politic to do the like by these;
But have you known a dog to praise his fleas?

In an earlier version, the last line was still more arrogant:—

But where's the wild dog that has praised his fleas?

There is a noble arrogance again in the lines called *A Coat*:—



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I made my song a coat,
Covered with embroideries,
Out of old mythologies,
From heel to throat.
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eye,
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

Mr. Yeats still gives some of his songs the old embroidered vesture. But his work is now more frankly personal than it used to be—at once harsher and simpler. One would not give *Responsibilities* to a reader who knew nothing of Mr. Yeats's previous work. There is too much raging at the world in it, too little of the perfected beauty of *The Wind Among the Reeds*. One finds ugly words like “wive” and “thigh” inopportunistly used, and the retort to Mr. George Moore's *Hail and Farewell*, though legitimately offensive, is obscure in statement. Still, there is enough beauty in the book to make it precious to the lover of literature. An Elizabethan might have made the music of the first verse of *A Woman Homer Sung*.

And what splendour of praise and censure Mr. Yeats gives us in *The Second Troy*:—

Why should I blame her, that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways.
Or hurled the little streets against the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary, and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?

It is curious to note in how much of his verse Mr. Yeats repeats his protest against the political passion of Ireland which once meant so much to him. *All Things can Tempt Me* expresses this artistic mood of revolt with its fierce beginning:—

All things can tempt me from this craft of verse;
One time it was a woman's face, or worse,
The seeming needs of my fool-driven land.



Some of the most excellent pages of *Reveries*, however, are those which recall certain famous figures in Irish Nationalism like John O'Leary and J.F. Taylor, the orator whose temper so stood in his way.

Mr. Yeats recalls a wonderful speech Taylor once made at a meeting in Dublin at which a Lord Chancellor had apparently referred in a belittling way to Irish nationality and the Irish language:



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Taylor began hesitating and stopping for words, but after speaking very badly for a little, straightened his figure and spoke as out of a dream: "I am carried to another age, a nobler court, and another Lord Chancellor is speaking. I am at the court of the first Pharaoh." Thereupon he put into the mouth of that Egyptian all his audience had listened to, but now it was spoken to the children of Israel. "If you have any spirituality as you boast, why not use our great empire to spread it through the world, why still cling to that beggarly nationality of yours? what are its history and its works weighed with those of Egypt?" Then his voice changed and sank: "I see a man at the edge of the crowd; he is standing listening there, but he will not obey"; and then, with his voice rising to a cry, "had he obeyed he would never have come down the mountain carrying in his arms the tables of the Law in the language of the outlaw."

That Mr. Yeats, in spite of his secession from politics, loves the old passionate Ireland, is clear from the poem called *September, 1913*, with its refrain:—

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone
And with O'Leary in the grave.

And to this Mr. Yeats has since added a significant note:—

"Romantic Ireland's dead and gone" sounds old-fashioned now. It seemed true in 1913, but I did not foresee 1916. The late Dublin Rebellion, whatever one may say of its wisdom, will long be remembered for its heroism. "They weighed so lightly what they gave," and gave, too, in some cases without hope of success.

Mr. Yeats is by nature a poet of the heroic world—a hater of the burges and of the till. He boasts in *Responsibilities* of ancestors who left him

blood
That has not passed through any huckster's loin.

There may be a good deal of vanity and gesticulation in all this, but it is the vanity and gesticulation of a man of genius. As we cannot have the genius of Mr. Yeats without the gestures, we may as well take the gestures in good part.

2. HIS POETRY

It is distinctly surprising to find Mr. Yeats compared to Milton and Jeremy Taylor, and Mr. Forrest Reid, who makes the comparison, does not ask us to apply it at all points. There is a remoteness about Milton's genius, however, an austere and rarefied beauty, to which Mr. Reid discovers certain likenesses in the work of Mr. Yeats. Mr. Yeats is certainly a little remote. He is so remote that some people regard his work with mixed feelings, as a rather uncanny thing. The reason may partly be that Mr. Yeats is not a singer in the ordinary tradition of poets. His poems are incantations rather than songs.

They seem to call for an order of priests and priestesses to chant them. There are one or two of his early poems, like *Down by the Sally Garden*, that might conceivably be sung at a fair or even at a ballad-concert.

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But, as Mr. Yeats has grown older, he has become more and more determinedly the magician in his robes. Even in his prose he does not lay aside his robes; it is written in the tones of the sanctuary: it is prose for worshippers. To such an extent is this so that many who do not realize that Mr. Yeats is a great artist cannot read much of his prose without convincing themselves that he is a great humbug. It is easy to understand how readers accustomed to the rationalism of the end of the century refused to take seriously a poet who wrote “spooky” explanations of his poems, such as Mr. Yeats wrote in his notes to *The Wind Among the Reeds*, the most entirely good of his books. Consider, for example, the note which he wrote on that charming if somewhat perplexing poem, *The Jester*. “I dreamed,” writes Mr. Yeats:—
I dreamed this story exactly as I have written it, and dreamed another long dream after it, trying to make out its meaning, and whether I was to write it in prose or verse. The first dream was more a vision than a dream, for it was beautiful and coherent, and gave me a sense of illumination and exaltation that one gets from visions, while the second dream was confused and meaningless. The poem has always meant a great deal to me, though, as is the way with symbolic poems, it has not always meant quite the same thing. Blake would have said, “The authors are in eternity”; and I am quite sure they can only be questioned in dreams.

Why, even those of us who count Mr. Yeats one of the immortals while he is still alive, are inclined to shy at a claim at once so solemn and so irrational as this. It reads almost like a confession of witchcraft.

Luckily, Mr. Yeats’s commerce with dreams and fairies and other spirits has not all been of this evidential and disputable kind. His confessions do not convince us of his magical experiences, but his poems do. Here we have the true narrative of fairyland, the initiation into other-worldly beauty. Here we have the magician crying out against

All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old,

and attempting to invoke a new—or an old—and more beautiful world into being.

The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told,

he cries, and over against the unshapely earth he sets up the “happy townland” of which he sings in one of his later and most lovely poems. It would not be easy to write a prose paraphrase of *The Happy Townland*, but who is there who can permanently resist the spell of this poem, especially of the first verse and its refrain?—

There’s many a strong farmer
Whose heart would break in two,
If he could see the townland
That we are riding to;



Boughs have their fruit and blossom
At all times of the year;
Rivers are running over
With red beer and brown beer.
An old man plays the bagpipes
In a golden and silver wood;
Queens, their eyes blue like the ice,
Are dancing in a crowd.



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The little fox he murmured,
"O what of the world's bane?"
The sun was laughing sweetly,
The moon plucked at my rein;
But the little red fox murmured,
"O, do not pluck at his rein,
He is riding to the townland
That is the world's bane."

You may interpret the little red fox and the sun and the moon as you please, but is it not all as beautiful as the ringing of bells?

But Mr. Yeats, in his desire for this other world of colour and music, is no scorner of the everyday earth. His early poems especially, as Mr. Reid points out, give evidence of a wondering observation of Nature almost Wordsworthian. In *The Stolen Child*, which tells of a human child that is enticed away by the fairies, the magic of the earth the child is leaving is the means by which Mr. Yeats suggests to us the magic of the world into which it is going, as in the last verse of the poem:—

Away with us he's going, The solemn eyed: He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside; Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast, Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal-chest. *For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild With a faery, hand in hand,
From a world more full of weeping than he can understand.*

There is no painting here, no adjective-work. But no painting or adjectives could better suggest all that the world and the loss of the world mean to an imaginative child than this brief collection of simple things. To read *The Stolen Child* is to realize both that Mr. Yeats brought a new and delicate music into literature and that his genius had its birth in a sense of the beauty of common things. Even when in his early poems the adjectives seem to be chosen with the too delicate care of an artist, as when he notes how—

in autumnal solitudes
Arise the leopard-coloured trees,

his observation of the world about him is but proved the more conclusively. The trees in autumn *are* leopard-coloured, though a poet cannot say so without becoming dangerously ornamental.

What I have written so far, however, might convey the impression that in Mr. Yeats's poetry we have a child's rather than a man's vision at work. One might even gather that he was a passionless singer with his head in the moon. This is exactly the misunderstanding which has led many people to think of him as a minor poet.



The truth is Mr. Yeats is too original and, as it were, secret a poet to capture all at once the imagination that has already fixed the outlines of its kingdom amid the masterpieces of literature. His is a genius outside the landmarks. There is no prototype in Shelley or Keats, any more than there is in Shakespeare, for such a poem as that which was at first called *Breasal the Fisherman*, but is now called simply *The Fisherman*:

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Although you hide in the ebb and flow
Of the pale tide when the moon has set,
The people of coming days will know
About the casting out of my net,
And how you have leaped times out of mind
Over the little silver cords.
And think that you were hard and unkind,
And blame you with many bitter words.

There, in music as simple as a fable of Aesop, Mr. Yeats has figured the pride of genius and the passion of defeated love in words that are beautiful in themselves, but trebly beautiful in their significances.

Beautifully new, again, is the poem beginning, "I wander by the edge," which expresses the desolation of love as it is expressed in few modern poems:

I wander by the edge Of this desolate lake Where wind cries in the sedge: *Until the axle break That keeps the stars in their round And hands hurl in the deep The banners of East and West And the girdle of light is unbound, Your breast will not lie by the breast Of your beloved in sleep.*

Rhythms like these did not exist in the English language until Mr. Yeats invented them, and their very novelty concealed for a time the passion that is immortal in them. It is by now a threadbare saying of Wordsworth that every great artist has himself to create the taste by which he is enjoyed, but it is worth quoting once more because it is especially relevant to a discussion of the genius of Mr. Yeats. What previous artist, for example, had created the taste which would be prepared to respond imaginatively to such a revelation of a lover's triumph in the nonpareil beauty of his mistress as we have in the poem that ends:—

I cried in my dream, "*O women bid the young men lay
Their heads on your knees, and drown their eyes with your hair,
Or remembering hers they will find no other face fair
Till all the valleys of the world have been withered away,*"

One may doubt at times whether Mr. Yeats does not too consciously show himself an artist of the aesthetic school in some of his epithets, such as "cloud-pale" and "dream-dimmed." His too frequent repetition of similar epithets makes woman stand out of his poems at times like a decoration, as in the pictures of Rossetti and Burne-Jones, rather than in the vehement beauty of life. It is as if the passion in his verse were again and again entangled in the devices of art. If we take his love-poems as a whole, however, the passion in them is at once vehement and beautiful.



The world has not yet sufficiently realized how deep is the passion that has given shape to Mr. Yeats's verse. *The Wind Among the Reeds* is a book of love-poetry quite unlike all other books of love-poetry. It utters the same moods of triumph in the beloved's beauty, of despair, of desire, of boastfulness of the poet's immortality, that we find in the love-poetry of other ages. But here are new images, almost a new language. Sometimes we have an image which fills the mind like the image in some little Chinese lyric, as in the poem *He Reproves the Curlew*:—



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O, curlew, cry no more in the air,
Or only to the waters of the West;
Because your crying brings to my mind
Passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair
That was shaken out over my breast:
There is enough evil in the crying of the wind.

This passion of loss, this sense of the beloved as of something secret and far and scarcely to be attained, like the Holy Grail, is the dominant theme of the poems, even in *The Song of Wandering Aengus*, that poem of almost playful beauty, which tells of the “little silver trout” that became

—a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair,
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

What a sense of long pursuit, of a life's quest, we get in the exquisite last verse—a verse which must be among the best-known of Mr. Yeats's writings after *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* and *Had I the Heaven's Embroidered Cloths*:—

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

This is the magic of fairyland again. It seems a little distant from human passions. It is a wonderful example, however, of Mr. Yeats's genius for transforming passion into elfin dreams. The emotion is at once deeper and nearer human experience in the later poem called *The Folly of Being Comforted*. I have known readers who professed to find this poem obscure. To me it seems a miracle of phrasing and portraiture. I know no better example of the nobleness of Mr. Yeats's verse and his incomparable music.

XIX

TCHEHOV: THE PERFECT STORY-TELLER

It is the custom when praising a Russian writer to do so at the expense of all other Russian writers. It is as though most of us were monotheists in our devotion to authors,



and could not endure to see any respect paid to the rivals of the god of the moment. And so one year Tolstoy is laid prone as Dagon, and, another year, Turgenev. And, no doubt, the day will come when Dostoevsky will fall from his huge eminence.

Perhaps the luckiest of all the Russian authors in this respect is Tchekov. He is so obviously not a god. He does not deliver messages to us from the mountain-top like Tolstoy, or reveal himself beautifully in sunset and star like Turgenev, or announce himself now in the hurricane and now in the thunderstorm like Dostoevsky. He is a man and a medical doctor. He pays professional visits. We may define his genius more exactly by saying that his is a general practice. There has, I think, never been so wonderful an examination of common people in literature as in



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the short stories of Tchegov. His world is thronged with the average man and the average woman. Other writers have also put ordinary people into books. They have written plays longer than *Hamlet*, and novels longer than *Don Quixote*, about ordinary people. They have piled such a heap of details on the ordinary man's back as almost to squash him out of existence. In the result the reader as well as the ordinary man has a sense of oppression. He begins to long for the restoration of the big subject to literature.

Henry James complained of the littleness of the subject in *Madame Bovary*. He regarded it as one of the miracles of art that so great a book should have been written about so small a woman. *Tom Jones*, on the other hand, is a portrait of a common man of the size of which few people complain. But then *Tom Jones* is a comedy, and we enjoy the continual relief of laughter. It is the tragic realists for whom the common man is a theme so perilous in its temptations to dullness. At the same time he is a theme that they were bound to treat. He is himself, indeed, the sole source and subject of tragic realism in literature. Were it not for the oppression of his futile and philoprogenitive presence, imaginative writers would be poets and romancers.

The problem of the novelist of contemporary life for whom ordinary people are more intensely real than the few magnificent personalities is how to portray ordinary people in such a way that they will become better company than they are in life. Tchegov, I think, solves the problem better than any of the other novelists. He sees, for one thing, that no man is uninteresting when he is seen as a person stumbling towards some goal, just as no man is uninteresting when his hat is blown off and he has to scuttle after it down the street. There is bound to be a break in the meanest life.

Tchegov will seek out the key situation in the life of a cabman or a charwoman, and make them glow for a brief moment in the tender light of his sympathy. He does not run sympathy as a "stunt" like so many popular novelists. He sympathizes merely in the sense that he understands in his heart as well as in his brain. He has the most unbiassed attitude, I think, of any author in the world. Mr. Edward Garnett, in his introduction to Mrs. Garnett's translation of Tchegov's tales, speaks admirably of his "profundity of acceptance." There is no writer who is less inclined to use italics in his record of human life. Perhaps Mr. Garnett goes too far when he says that Tchegov "stands close to all his characters, watching them quietly and registering their circumstances and feelings with such finality that to pass judgment on them appears supererogatory." Tchegov's judgment is at times clear enough—as clear as if it followed a summing-up from the bench. He portrays his characters instead of labelling them; but the portrait itself is the judgment. His humour makes him tolerant, but, though he describes moral and material ugliness with tolerance, he never leaves us in any doubt as to their being ugly. His attitude to a large part of life might be described as one of good-natured disgust.



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In one of the newly-translated stories, *Ariadne*, he shows us a woman from the point of view of a disgusted lover. It is a sensitive man's picture of a woman who was even more greedy than beautiful. "This thirst for personal success ... makes people cold, and Ariadne was cold—to me, to nature, and to music." Tchegov extends towards her so little charity that he makes her run away to Italy with a bourgeois who had "a neck like goose-skin and a big Adam's apple," and who, as he talked, "breathed hard, breathing straight in my face and smelling of boiled beef." As the more sensitive lover who supplanted the bourgeois looks back, her incessant gluttony is more vivid in his thoughts than her charm:

She would sleep every day till two or three o'clock; she had her coffee and lunch in bed. At dinner she would eat soup, lobster, fish, meat, asparagus, game, and after she had gone to bed I used to bring up something, for instance, roast beef, and she would eat it with a melancholy, careworn expression, and if she waked in the night she would eat apples or oranges.

The story, it is only fair to say, is given in the words of a lover dissatisfied with lust, and the judgment may therefore be regarded as the lover's rather than as Tchegov's. Tchegov sets down the judgment, however, in a mood of acute perceptiveness of everything that is jarring and vulgar in sexual vanity. Ariadne's desire to please is never permitted to please us as, say, Beatrix Esmond's is. Her will to fascinate does not fascinate when it is refracted in Tchegov's critical mind:

She waked up every morning with the one thought of "pleasing." It was the aim and object of her life. If I told her that in such a house, in such a street, there lived a man who was not attracted by her, it would have caused her real suffering. She wanted every day to enchant, to captivate, to drive men crazy. The fact that I was in her power and reduced to a complete nonentity before her charms gave her the same sort of satisfaction that victors used to get in tournaments.... She had an extraordinary opinion of her own charms; she imagined that if somewhere, in some great assembly, men could have seen how beautifully she was made and the colour of her skin, she would have vanquished all Italy, the whole world. Her talk of her figure, of her skin, offended me, and observing this, she would, when she was angry, say all sorts of vulgar things taunting me.

A few strokes of cruelty are added to the portrait:

Even at a good-humoured moment, she could always insult a servant or kill an insect without a pang; she liked bull-fights, liked to read about murders, and was angry when prisoners were acquitted.

As one reads *Ariadne*, one feels that those who say the artist is not a judge are in error. What he must avoid becoming is a prosecuting—perhaps even a defending—counsel.



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Egoism seems to be the quality which offends Tchekhov most. He is no more in love with it when it masquerades as virtue than when it parades as vice. *An Artist's Story*—a beautiful sad story, which might almost have been written by Turgenev—contains a fine critical portrait of a woman absorbed in the egoism of good works. She is always looking after the poor, serving on committees, full of enthusiasm for nursing and education. She lacks only that charity of the heart which loves human beings, not because they are poor, but because they are human beings. She is by nature a “boss.” She “bosses” her mother and her younger sister, and when the artist falls in love with the latter, the stronger will of the woman of high principles immediately separates lovers so frivolous that they had never sat on a committee in their lives. When, the evening after the artist confesses his love, he waits for the girl to come to him in the garden of her house, he waits in vain. He goes into the house to look for her, but does not find her. Then through one of the doors he overhears the voice of the lady of the good works:

“God ... sent ... a crow,” she said in a loud, emphatic voice, probably dictating—“God sent a crow a piece of cheese.... A crow ... A piece of cheese ... Who’s there?” she called suddenly, hearing my steps.

“It’s I.”

“Ah! Excuse me, I cannot come out to open this minute; I’m giving Dasha her lesson.”

“Is Ekaterina Pavlovna in the garden?”

“No, she went away with my sister this morning to our aunt in the province of Penza. And in the winter they will probably go abroad,” she added after a pause. “God sent ... the crow ... a piece ... of cheese....’ Have you written it?”

I went into the hall and stared vacantly at the pond and the village, and the sound reached me of “A piece of cheese ... God sent the crow a piece of cheese.”

And I went back by the way I had come here for the first time—first from the yard into the garden past the house, then into the avenue of lime-trees.... At this point I was overtaken by a small boy who gave me a note. “I told my sister everything and she insisted on my parting from you,” I read. “I could not wound her by disobeying. God will give you happiness. Forgive me. If only you knew how bitterly my mother and I are crying!”

The people who cannot wound others—those are the people whose sharp pangs we feel in our breasts as we read the stories of Tchekhov. The people who wound—it is they whom he paints (or, rather, as Mr. Garnett suggests, etches) with such felicitous and



untiring irony. But, though he often makes his people beautiful in their sorrow, he more often than not sets their sad figures against a common and ugly background. In *Anyuta*, the medical student and his mistress live in a room disgusting in its squalor:

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Crumpled bed-clothes, pillows thrown about, boots, clothes, a big filthy slop—pail filled with soap-suds in which cigarette-ends were swimming, and the litter on the floor—all seemed as though purposely jumbled together in one confusion....

And, if the surroundings are no more beautiful than those in which a great part of the human race lives, neither are the people more beautiful than ordinary people. In *The Trousseau*, the poor thin girl who spends her life making a trousseau for a marriage that will never take place becomes ridiculous as she flushes at the entrance of a stranger into her mother's house:

Her long nose, which was slightly pitted with small-pox, turned red first, and then the flush passed up to her eyes and her forehead.

I do not know if a blush of this sort is possible, but the thought of it is distressing.

The woman in *The Darling*, who marries more than once and simply cannot live without some one to love and to be an echo to, is "not half bad" to look at. But she is ludicrous even when most unselfish and adoring—especially when she rubs with eau-de-Cologne her little, thin, yellow-faced, coughing husband with "the curls combed forward on his forehead," and wraps him in her warm shawls to an accompaniment of endearments. "You're such a sweet pet!" she used to say with perfect sincerity, stroking his hair. "You're such a pretty dear!"

Thus sympathy and disgust live in a curious harmony in Tchegov's stories. And, as he seldom allows disgust entirely to drive out sympathy in himself, he seldom allows it to do so in his readers either. His world may be full of unswept rooms and unwashed men and women, but the presiding genius in it is the genius of gentleness and love and laughter. It is a dark world, but Tchegov brings light into it. There is no other author who gives so little offence as he shows us offensive things and people. He is a writer who desires above all things to see what men and women are really like—to extenuate nothing and to set down naught in malice. As a result, he is a pessimist, but a pessimist who is black without being bitter. I know no writer who leaves one with the same vision of men and women as lost sheep.

We are now apparently to have a complete edition of the tales of Tchegov in English from Mrs. Garnett. It will deserve a place, both for the author's and the translator's sake, beside her Turgenev and Dostoevsky. In lifelikeness and graciousness her work as a translator always reaches a high level. Her latest volumes confirm one in the opinion that Tchegov is, for his variety, abundance, tenderness and knowledge of the heart of the "rapacious and unclean animal" called man, the greatest short-story writer who has yet appeared on the planet.



BOOKRAGS

XX

LADY GREGORY



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It was Mr. Bernard Shaw who, in commenting on the rowdy reception of the Irish players in some American theatres, spoke of Lady Gregory as “the greatest living Irishwoman.” She is certainly a remarkable enough writer to put a generous critic a little off his balance. Equal mistress in comedy and tragedy, essayist, gatherer of the humours of folk-lore, imaginative translator of heroic literature, venturesome translator of Moliere, she has contributed a greater variety of grotesque and beautiful things to Anglo-Irish literature than any of her contemporaries.

She owes her chief fame, perhaps, to the way in which, along with Mr. G.A. Birmingham and the authors of *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, she has kept alive the tradition of Ireland as a country in which Laughter has frequent occasion to hold both his sides. She surpasses the others in the quality of her comedy, however. Not that she is more comic, but that she is more comprehensively true to life. Mr. Birmingham has given us farce with a salt of reality; Miss Somerville and Miss Ross, practical jokers of literature, turned to reality as upper-class patrons of the comic; but Lady Gregory has gone to reality as to a cave of treasure. She is one of the discoverers of Ireland. Her genius, like Synge’s, opened its eyes one day and saw spread below it the immense sea of Irish common speech, with its colour, its laughter, and its music. It is a sort of second birth which many Irish men and women of the last generation or so have experienced. The beggar on the road, the piper at the door, the old people in the workhouse, are henceforth accepted as a sort of aristocracy in exile.

Lady Gregory obviously sought out their company as the heirs to a great inheritance—an inheritance of imaginative and humorous speech. Not that she plundered them of their fantastic tropes so greedily as Synge did. She studied rather their common turn of phrase, its heights and its hollows, its exquisite illogic, its passionate underflow of poetry. Has she not herself told us how she could not get on with the character of Bartley Fallon in *Spreading the News*, till one day she met a melancholy man by the sea at Duras, who, after describing the crosses he endured at home, said: “But I’m thinking if I went to America, it’s long ago I’d be dead. And it’s a great expense for a poor man to be buried in America.” Out of sentences like these—sentences seized upon with the genius of the note-book—she has made much of what is most delightful in her plays. Her sentences are steeped and dyed in life, even when her situations are as mad as hatters.



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Some one has said that every great writer invents a new language. Lady Gregory, whom it would be unfair to praise as a great writer, has at least qualified as one by inventing a new language out of her knowledge of Irish peasant speech. This, perhaps, is her chief literary peril. Having discovered the beautiful dialect of the Kiltartan peasantry, she was not content to leave it a peasant dialect—as we find it in her best dramatic work, *Seven Short Plays*; but she set about transforming it into a tongue into which all literature and emotion might apparently be translated. Thus, she gave us Moliere in Kiltartan—a ridiculously successful piece of work—and she gave us Finn and Cuchullain in modified Kiltartan, and this, too, was successful, sometimes very beautifully so. Here, however, she had masterpieces to begin with. In *Irish Folk-History Plays*, on the other hand, we find her embarking, not upon translation, but upon original heroic drama, in the Kiltartan language. The result is unreality as unreal as if Meredith had made a farm-labourer talk like Diana of the Crossways. Take, for instance, the first of the plays, *Grania*, which is founded on the story of the pursuit of Diarmuid and Grania by Finn MacCool, to whom Grania had been betrothed. When Finn, disguised as a blind beggar, visits the lovers in their tent, Grania, who does not recognize him, bids him give Finn this message from her:—

Give heed to what I say now. If you have one eye is blind, let it be turned to the place where we are, and that he might ask news of. And if you have one seeing eye, cast it upon me, and tell Finn you saw a woman no way sad or afraid, but as airy and high-minded as a mountain-filly would be challenging the winds of March!

I flatly refuse to take the high-minded mountain filly seriously as a tragic heroine, and I confess I hold Finn equally suspect, disguised as a beggar though he is, when he speaks of himself to Grania as a hard man—“as hard as a barren step-mother’s slap, or a highway gander’s gob.” After all, in heroic literature, we must have the illusion of the heroic. If we can get the peasant statement of the heroic, that is excellent; its sincerity brings its illusion. But a mere imitation of the peasant statement of the heroic, such as Lady Gregory seems to aim at giving us in these sentences, is as pinchbeck and unreal as Macpherson’s *Ossian*. It reaches a grotesque absurdity when at the close of Act II Finn comes back to the door of the tent and, in order to stir up Diarmuid’s jealousy, says:—

It is what they were saying a while ago, the King of Foreign is grunting and sighing, grunting and sighing, around and about the big red sally tree beside the stream!

To write like that is to use not a style but a jargon.



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If you want a standard of reality with which to compare these passages of Abbey-Theatre rhetoric, you have only to turn to Lady Gregory's own notes at the end of *Irish Folk-History Plays*, where she records a number of peasant utterances on Irish history. Here, and not in the plays—in the tragic plays, at any rate—is the real “folk-history” of her book to be found. One may take, as an example, the note on *Kincora*, where some one tells of the Battle of Clontarf, in which Brian Boru defeated the Danes:—

Clontarf was on the head of a game of chess. The generals of the Danes were beaten at it, and they were vexed. It was Broder, that the Brodericks are descended from, that put a dagger through Brian's heart, and he attending to his prayers. What the Danes left in Ireland were hens and weasels. And when the cock crows in the morning the country people will always say: “It is for Denmark they are crowing; crowing they are to be back in Denmark.”

Lady Gregory reveals more of life—leaping, imaginative life—in that little note than in all the three acts about Grania and the three about Brian. It is because the characters in the comic plays in the book are nearer the peasantry in stature and in outlook that she is so much more successful with them than with the heroes and heroines of the tragedies. She describes the former plays as “tragic comedies”; but in the first and best of them, *The Canavans*, it is difficult to see where the tragedy comes in. *The Canavans* is really a farce of the days of Elizabeth. The principal character is a cowardly miller, who ensues nothing but his own safety in the war of loyalties and disloyalties which is destroying Ireland. He is equally afraid of the wrath of the neighbours on the one hand, and the wrath of the Government on the other. Consequently, he is at his wits' end when his brother Antony comes seeking shelter in his house, after deserting from the English Army. When the soldiers come looking for Antony, so helpless with terror is the miller, that he flies into hiding among his sacks, and his brother has to impersonate him in the interview with the officer who carries out the search. The situation obviously lends itself to comic elaborations, and Lady Gregory misses none of her opportunities. She flies off from every semblance of reality at a tangent, however, in a later scene, where Antony disguises himself as Queen Elizabeth, supposed to have come on a secret visit of inspection to Ireland, and takes in both his brother and the officer (who is himself a Canavan, anglicized under the name of Headley). This is a sheer invention of the theatre; it turns the play from living speech into machinery. *The Canavans*, however, has enough of present-day reality to make us forgive its occasional stage-Elizabethanism. On the whole, its humours gain nothing from their historical setting.



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The White Cockade, the second of the tragic comedies, is a play about the flight of King James II after the Battle of the Boyne, and it, too, is lifeless and mechanical in so far as it is historical. King James himself is a good comic figure of a conventional sort, as he is discovered hiding in the barrel; but Sarsfield, who is meant to be heroic, is all joints and sawdust; and the mad Jacobite lady is a puppet who might have been invented by any writer of plays. "When my *White Cockade* was produced," Lady Gregory tells us, "I was pleased to hear that Mr. Synge had said my method had made the writing of historical drama again possible." But surely, granted the possession of the dramatic gift, the historical imagination is the only thing that makes the writing of historical drama possible. Lady Gregory does not seem to me to possess the historical imagination. Not that I believe in archaeology in the theatre; but, apart from her peasant characters, she cannot give us the illusion of reality about the figures in these historical plays. If we want the illusion of reality, we shall have to turn from *The White Cockade* to the impossible scene outside the post-office and the butcher's shop in *Hyacinth Halvey*. As for the third of the tragic comedies, *The Deliverer*, it is a most interesting curiosity. In it we have an allegory of the fate of Parnell in a setting of the Egypt of the time of Moses. Moses himself—or the King's nursling, as he is called—is Parnell; and he and the other characters talk Kiltartan as to the manner born. *The Deliverer* is grotesque and, in its way, impressive, though the conclusion, in which the King's nursling is thrown to the King's cats by his rebellious followers, invites parody. The second volume of the *Irish Folk-History Plays*, even if it reveals only Lady Gregory's talent rather than her genius, is full of odd and entertaining things, and the notes at the end of both of these volumes, short though they are, do give us the franchise of a wonderful world of folk-history.

XXI

MR. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM

Mr. Cunninghame Graham is a grandee of contemporary literature. He is also a grandee of revolutionary politics. Both in literature and in politics he is a figure of challenge for the love of challenge more than any other man now writing. Other men challenge us with Utopias, with moral laws and so forth. But Mr. Graham has little of the prophet or the moralist about him. He expresses himself better in terms of his hostilities than in terms of visionary cities and moralities such as Plato and Shelley and Mazzini have built for us out of light and fire. It is a temperament, indeed, not a vision or a logic, that Mr. Graham has brought to literature. He blows his fantastic trumpet outside the walls of a score of Jerichos:—Jerichos of empire, of cruelty, of self-righteousness, of standardized civilization—and he seems to do so for the sheer soldierly joy of the thing. One feels that if all the walls of all the Jerichos were suddenly to collapse before his trumpet-call he would be the loneliest man alive. For he is one of those for whom, above all, "the fight's the thing."



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It would be difficult to find any single purpose running through the sketches which fill most of his books. His characteristic book is a medley of cosmopolitan “things seen” and comments grouped together under a title in which irony lurks. Take the volume called *Charity*, for example. Both the title of the book and the subject-matter of several of the sketches may be regarded as a challenge to the unco’ guid (if there are any left) and to respectability (from which even the humblest are no longer safe). On the other hand, his title may be the merest lucky-bag accident. It seems likely enough, however, that in choosing it the author had in mind the fact that the supreme word of charitableness in the history of man was spoken concerning a woman who was taken in adultery. It is scarcely an accident that in *Charity* a number of the chapters relate to women who make a profession of sin.

Mr. Graham is unique in his treatment of these members of the human family. If he does not throw stones at them, as the Pharisees of virtue did, neither does he glorify them as the Pharisees of vice have done in a later generation. He simply accepts them as he would accept a broken-down nation or a wounded animal, and presents them as characters in the human drama. It would be more accurate to say “as figures in the human picture,” for he is far more of a painter than a dramatist. But the point to be emphasized is that these stories are records, tragic, grim or humorous, as the portraits in Chaucer are—acceptances of life as it is—at least, of life as it is outside the vision of policemen and other pillars of established interests. For Mr. Graham can forgive you for anything but two things—being successful (in the vulgar sense of the term) or being a policeman.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that Mr. Graham achieves the very finest things in charity. It is the charity of tolerance, or the minor charity, that is most frequent in his pages. The larger charity which we find in Tolstoi and the great teachers is not here. We could not imagine Mr. Graham forgetting himself so far in his human sympathies as Ruskin did when he stooped and kissed the filthy beggar outside the church door in Rome. Nor do we find in any of these sketches of outcasts that sense of humanity bruised and exiled that we get in such a story as Maupassant’s *Boule de Suif*. Mr. Graham gloriously insists upon our recognizing our human relations, but many of them he introduces to us as first cousins once removed rather than as brothers and sisters by the grace of God.

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He does more than this in his preface, indeed, a marvellous piece of reality and irony which tells how a courtesan in Gibraltar fell madly in love with a gentleman-sponger who lived on her money while he could, and then took the first boat home with discreet heartlessness on coming into a bequest from a far-off cousin. “Good God, a pretty sight I should have looked....” he explained to a kindred spirit as they paced the deck of the boat to get an appetite. “I like her well enough, but what I say is, Charity begins at home, my boy. Ah, there’s the dinner bell!” Mr. Graham has a noble courtesy, an unerring chivalry that makes him range himself on the side of the bottom dog, a detestation of anything like bullying—every gift of charity, indeed, except the shy genius of pity. For lack of this last, some of his sketches, such as *Un Autre Monsieur*, are mere anecdotes and decorations.

Possibly, it is as a romantic decorator that Mr. Graham, in his art as opposed to his politics, would prefer to be judged. He has dredged half the world for his themes and colours, and Spain and Paraguay and Morocco and Scotland and London’s tangled streets all provide settings for his romantic rearrangements of life in this book. He has a taste for uncivil scenes, as Henley had a taste for uncivil words. Even a London street becomes a scene of this kind as he pictures it in his imagination with huge motorbuses, like demons of violence, smashing their way through the traffic. Or he takes us to some South American forest, where the vampire bats suck the blood of horses during the night. Or he introduces us to a Spanish hidalgo, “tall, wry-necked, and awkwardly built, with a nose like a lamprey and feet like coracles.” (For there is the same note of violence, of exaggeration, in his treatment of persons as of places.) Even in Scotland, he takes us by preference to some lost mansion standing in grotesque contrast to the “great drabness of prosperity which overspreads the world.” He is a great scene-painter of wildernesses and lawless places, indeed. He is a Bohemian, a lover of adventures in wild and sunny lands, and even the men and women are apt to become features in the strange scenery of his pilgrimages rather than dominating portraits. In his descriptions he uses a splendid rhetoric such as no other living writer of English commands. He has revived rhetoric as a literary instrument. Aubrey Beardsley called Turner a rhetorician in paint. If we were to speak of Mr. Graham as a painter in rhetoric, we should be doing more than making a phrase.

But Mr. Graham cannot be summed up in a phrase. To meet him in his books is one of the desirable experiences of contemporary literature, as to hear him speak is one of the desirable experiences of modern politics. Protest, daring, chivalry, the passion for the colour of life and the colour of words—he is the impersonation of these things in a world that is muddling its way half-heartedly towards the Promised Land.



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XXII

SWINBURNE

1. THE EXOTIC BIRD

Swinburne was an absurd character. He was a bird of showy strut and plumage. One could not but admire his glorious feathers; but, as soon as he began to moult—and he had already moulted excessively by the time Watts-Dunton took him under his roof—one saw how very little body there was underneath. Mr. Gosse in his biography compared Swinburne to a coloured and exotic bird—a “scarlet and azure macaw,” to be precise—and the comparison remains in one’s imagination. Watts-Dunton, finding the poor creature moulted and “off its feed,” carried it down to Putney, resolved to domesticate it. He watched over it as a farmer’s wife watches over a sick hen. He taught it to eat out of his hand. He taught it to speak—to repeat things after him, even “God Save the Queen.” Some people say that he ruined the bird by these methods. Others maintain that, on the contrary, but for him the bird would have died of a disease akin to the staggers. They say, moreover, that the tameness and docility of the bird, while he was looking after it, have been greatly exaggerated, and they deny that it was entirely bald of its old gay feathers.

There you have a brief statement of the great Swinburne question, which, it seems likely, will last as long as the name of Swinburne is remembered. It is not a question of any importance; but that will not prevent us from arguing it hotly. The world takes a malicious joy in jibing at men of genius and their associates, and a generous joy in defending them from jibes. Further, the discussion that interests the greatest number of people is discussion that has come down to a personal level. Ten people will be bored by an argument as to the nature of Swinburne’s genius for one who will be bored by an argument as to the nature of Swinburne’s submissiveness to Watts-Dunton. Was Watts-Dunton, in a phrase deprecated by the editors of a recent book of letters, a “kind of amiable Svengali”? Did he allow Swinburne to have a will of his own? Did Swinburne, in going to Putney, go to the Devil? Or did not Watts-Dunton rather play the part of the good Samaritan? Unfortunately, all those who have hitherto attempted to describe the relations of the two men have succeeded only in making them both appear ridiculous. Mr. Gosse, a man of letters with a sting, has done it cleverly. The others, like the editors to whom I have referred, have done it inadvertently. They write too solemnly. If Swinburne had lost a trouser-button, they would not have felt it inappropriate, one feels, for the Archbishop of Canterbury to hurry to the scene and go down on his knees on the floor to look for it... Well, no doubt, Swinburne was an absurd character. And so was Watts-Dunton. And so, perhaps, is the Archbishop of Canterbury.



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Most of us have, at one time or another, fallen under the spell of Swinburne owing to the genius with which he turned into music the enthusiasm of the heretic. He fluttered through the sooty and Sabbatic air of the Victorian era, uttering melodious cries of protest against everything in morals, politics, and religion for which Queen Victoria seemed to stand. He was like a rebellious boy who takes more pleasure in breaking the Sabbath than in the voice of nightingales. He was one of the few Englishmen of genius who have understood the French zest for shocking the bourgeois. He had little of his own to express, but he discovered the heretic's gospel in Gautier, and Baudelaire and set it forth in English in music that he might have learned from the Sirens who sang to Ulysses. He revelled in blasphemous and licentious fancies that would have made Byron's hair stand on end. Nowadays, much of the blasphemy and licentiousness seems flat and unprofitable as Government beer. But in those days it seemed heady as wine and beautiful as a mediaeval tale. There was always in Swinburne more of pose than of passion. That is why we have to some extent grown tired of him. But in the atmosphere of Victorianism his pose was original and astonishing. He was anti-Christ in a world that had annexed Christ rather than served him. Nowadays, there is such an abundance of anti-Christ's that the part seems hardly worth playing by a man of first-rate ability. Consequently, we have to remember the circumstances in which they were written in order to appreciate to the full many of Swinburne's poems and even some of the amusing outbursts of heresy in his letters. Still, even to-day, one cannot but enjoy the gusto with which he praised Trelawney—Shelley's and Byron's Trelawney—"the most splendid old man I have seen since Landor and my own grandfather":—

Of the excellence of his principles I will say but this: that I did think, by the grace of Saban (unto whom, and not unto me, be the glory and thanksgiving. Amen: Selah), I was a good atheist and a good republican; but in the company of this magnificent old rebel, a lifelong incarnation of the divine right of insurrection, I felt myself, by comparison, a Theist and a Royalist.

In another letter he writes in the same gay, under-graduatish strain of marriage:—

When I hear that a personal friend has fallen into matrimonial courses, I feel the same sorrow as if I had heard of his lapsing into theism—a holy sorrow, unmixed with anger; for who am I to judge him? I think at such a sight, as the preacher—was it not Baxter?—at the sight of a thief or murderer led to the gallows: "There, but for the grace of—, goes A.C.S.," and drop a tear over fallen man.

There was, it is only fair to say, a great deal in Swinburne's insurrectionism that was noble, or, at least, in tune with nobleness. But it is impossible to persuade oneself that he was ever



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among the genuine poets of liberty. He loved insurrectionism for its own sake. He revelled in it in the spirit of a rhetorician rather than of a martyr. He was a glorious humbug, a sort of inverted Pecksniff. Even his republicanism cannot have gone very deep if it is true, as certain of his editors declare, that having been born within the precincts of Belgravia “was an event not entirely displeasing to a man of his aristocratic leanings.” Swinburne, it seems, was easily pleased. One of his proudest boasts was that he and Victor Hugo bore a close resemblance to each other in one respect: both of them were almost dead when they were born, “certainly not expected to live an hour.” There was also one great difference between them. Swinburne never grew up.

His letters, some of which Messrs. Hake and Compton Rickett have given us, are interesting and amusing, but they do not increase one’s opinion of Swinburne’s mind. He reveals himself as a sensitive critic in his remarks on the proofs of Rossetti’s poems, in his comments on Morris, and in his references to Tennyson’s dramas. But, as a rule, his intemperance of praise and blame makes his judgments appear mere eccentricities of the blood. He could not praise Falstaff, for instance, without speaking of “the ever dear and honoured presence of Falstaff,” and applauding the “sweet, sound, ripe toothsome, wholesome kernel” of Falstaff’s character as well as humour. He even defied the opinion of his idol, Victor Hugo, and contended that Falstaff was not really a coward. All the world will agree that Swinburne was right in glorifying Falstaff. He glorified him, however, on the wrong plane. He mixed his planes in the same way in his paean over Captain Webb’s feat in swimming the English Channel. “I consider it,” he said, “as the greatest glory that has befallen England since the publication of Shelley’s greatest poem, whatever that may have been.” This is shouting, not speech. But then, as I have said, Swinburne never grew up. He never learned to speak. He was ever a shouter. The question that has so far not been settled is: Did Watts-Dunton put his hand over Swinburne’s mouth and forcibly stop him from shouting? As we know, he certainly stopped him from swearing before ladies, except in French. But, as for shouting, Swinburne had already exhausted himself when he went to the Pines. Meanwhile, questions of this sort have begun to absorb us to such a degree that we are apt to forget that Swinburne after all was a man of genius—a man with an entrancing gift of melody—spiritually an echo, perhaps, but aesthetically a discoverer, a new creature, the most amazing ecstatician of our time.

2. GENIUS WITHOUT EYES



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Swinburne, says Mr. Gosse, "was not quite like a human being." That is chiefly what is the matter with his poetry. He did not write quite like a human being. He wrote like a musical instrument. There are few poets whose work is less expressive of personal passions. He was much given to ecstasies, but it is remarkable that most of these were echoes of other people's ecstasies. He sought after rapture both in politics and poetry, and he took as his masters Mazzini in the one and Victor Hugo in the other. He has been described as one who, while conversing, even in his later years, kept "bobbing all the while like a cork on the sea of his enthusiasms." And, in a great deal of his rapture, there is much of the levity as well as the "bobbing" quality of the cork. He who sang the hymns of the Republic in his youth, ended his life as rhetorician-in-chief of the Jingoists against the Irish and the Boers. Nor does one feel that there was any philosophic basis for the change in his attitude as there was for a similar change in the attitude of Burke and Wordsworth in their later years. He was influenced more by persons than by principles. One does not find any real vision of a Republic in his work as one finds it in the work of Shelley. He had little of the saintliness of spirit which marks the true Republican and which turns politics into music in *The Masque of Anarchy*. His was not one of those tortured souls, like Francis Adams's, which desire the pulling-down of the pillars of the old, bad world more than love or fame. There is no utterance of the spirit in such lines as:—

Let our flag run out straight in the wind!
The old red shall be floated again
When the ranks that are thin shall be thinned,
When the names that are twenty are ten;

When the devil's riddle is mastered
And the galley-bench creaks with a Pope,
We shall see Buonaparte the bastard
Kick heels with his throat in a rope.

It is possible for those who agree with the sentiments to derive a certain satisfaction from verse of this sort as from a vehement leading article. But there is nothing here beyond the rhetoric of the hot fit. There is nothing to call back the hot fit in anybody older than a boy.

Even when Swinburne was writing out of his personal experience, he contrived somehow to empty his verse of personality and to put sentimentalism and rhetoric in its place. We have an instance of this in the story of the love-affair recorded by Mr. Gosse. Swinburne, at the age of twenty-five, fell in love with a kinswoman of Sir John Simon, the pathologist. "She gave him roses, she played and sang to him, and he conceived from her gracious ways an encouragement which she was far from seriously intending." Swinburne proposed to her, and, possibly from nervousness, she burst out laughing. He was only human in feeling bitterly offended, and "they parted on the worst



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of terms.” He went off to Northumberland to escape from his wretchedness, and there he wrote *The Triumph of Time*, which Mr. Gosse maintains is “the most profound and the most touching of all his personal poems.” He assured Mr. Gosse, fourteen years afterwards, that “the stanzas of this wonderful lyric represented with the exactest fidelity the emotions which passed through his mind when his anger had died down, and when nothing remained but the infinite pity and the pain.” Beautiful though the poem intermittently is, however, it seems to me to lack that radiance of personal emotion which we find in the great love poems. There is much decoration of music of a kind of which Swinburne and Poe alone possessed the secret, as in the verse beginning:—

There lived in France a singer of old
By the tideless, dolorous, midland sea.
In a land of sand and ruin and gold
There shone one woman and none but she.

But is there more than the decoration of music in the verses which express the poet's last farewell to his passion?

I shall go my ways, tread out my measure,
Fill the days of my daily breath
With fugitive things not good to treasure,
Do as the world doth, say as it saith;
But if we had loved each other—O sweet,
Had you felt, lying under the palms of your feet,
The heart of my heart, beating harder with pleasure,
To feel you tread it to dust and death—

Ah, had I not taken my life up and given
All that life gives and the years let go,
The wine and honey, the balm and leaven,
The dreams reared high and the hopes brought low?
Come life, come death, not a word be said;
Should I lose you living, and vex you dead?
I shall never tell you on earth, and in heaven,
If I cry to you then, will you care to know?

Browning, unquestionably, could have expressed Swinburne's passion better than Swinburne did it himself. He would not have been content with a sequence of vague phrases that made music. With him each phrase would have been dramatic and charged with a personal image or a personal memory.



Swinburne, however, was a great musician in verse and beyond belittlement in this regard. It would be incongruous to attempt a close comparison between him and Longfellow, but he was like Longfellow in having a sense of music out of all proportion to the imaginative content of his verse. There was never a distinguished poet whose work endures logical analysis so badly. Mr. Arthur Symons, in a recent essay, refers scornfully to those who say that “the dazzling brilliance of Swinburne’s form is apt to disguise a certain thinness or poverty of substance.” But he produces no evidence on the other side. He merely calls on us to observe the way in which Swinburne scatters phrases and epithets of “imaginative subtlety” by the way, while most poets “present



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us with their best effects deliberately.” It seems to me, on the contrary, that Swinburne’s phrasing is far from subtle. He induces moods of excitement and sadness by his musical scheme rather than by individual phrases. Who can resist, for example, the spell of the opening verses of *Before the Mirror*, the poem of enchantment addressed to Whistler’s *Little White Girl*? One hesitates to quote again lines so well known. But it is as good an example as one can find of the pleasure-giving qualities of Swinburne’s music, apart from his phrases and images:—

White rose in red rose-garden
Is not so white;
Snowdrops that plead for pardon
And pine from fright,
Because the hard East blows
Over their maiden rows,
Grow not as thy face grows from pale to bright.
Behind the veil, forbidden,
Shut up from sight,
Love, is there sorrow hidden,
Is there delight?
Is joy thy dower or grief,
White rose of weary leaf,
Late rose whose life is brief, whose loves are light?

The snowdrop image in the first verse is, charming as is the sound of the lines, nonsense. The picture of the snowdrops pleading for pardon and pining from fright would have been impossible to a poet with the realizing genius of the great writers. Swinburne’s sense of rhythm, however, was divorced in large measure from his sense of reality. He was a poet without the poet’s gift of sight. William Morris complained that Swinburne’s poems did not make pictures. Swinburne had not the necessary sense of the lovely form of the things around him. His attitude to Nature was lacking, as Mr. Gosse suggests, in that realism which gives coherence to poetry. To quote Mr. Gosse’s own words:—

Swinburne did not live, like Wordsworth, in a perpetual communion with Nature, but exceptional, and even rare, moments of concentrated observation wakened in him an ecstasy which he was careful to brood upon, to revive, and perhaps, at last, to exaggerate. As a rule, he saw little of the world around him, but what he did see was presented to him in a blaze of limelight.

Nearly all his poems are a little too long, a little tedious, for the simple reason that the muzziness of vision in them, limelight and all, is bewildering to the intelligence. There are few of his poems which close in splendour equal to the splendour of their opening



verses. *The Garden of Proserpine* is one of the few that keep the good wine for the last. Here, however, as in the rest of his poems, we find beautiful passages rather than beauty informing the whole poem. Swinburne's poems have no spinal cord. One feels this even in that most beautiful of his lyrics, the first chorus in *Atalanta in Calydon*. But how many poets are there who could have sustained for long the miracle of "When the hounds of spring are on winter traces," and the verse that follows? Mrs. Disney Leith

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tells us in a charming book of recollections and letters that the first time Swinburne recited this poem to her was on horseback, and one wonders whether he had the ecstasy of the gallop and the music of racing horses in his blood when he wrote the poem. His poems are essentially expressions of ecstasy. His capacity for ecstasy was the most genuine thing about him. A thunderstorm gave him "a more vivid pleasure than music or wine." His pleasure in thunder, in the gallop of horses, in the sea, was, however, one fancies, largely an intoxication of music. It is like one's own enjoyment of his poems. This, too, is simply an intoxication of music.

The first series of *Poems and Ballads*, it must be admitted, owed its success for many years to other things besides the music. It broke in upon the bourgeois moralities of nineteenth-century England like a defiance. It expressed in gorgeous wordiness the mood of every green-sick youth of imagination who sees that beauty is being banished from the world in the name of goodness. One has only to look at the grey and yellow and purple brick houses built during the reign of Victoria to see that the green-sick youth had a good right to protest. A world that makes goodness the enemy of beauty and freedom is a blasphemous denial of both goodness and beauty, and young men will turn from it in disgust to the praise of Venus or any other god or goddess that welcomes beauty at the altar. The first volume of *Poems and Ballads* was a challenge to the lie of tall-hatted religion. There is much truth in Mr. Gosse's saying that "the poet is not a lotus-eater who has never known the Gospel, but an evangelist turned inside out." He had been brought up Puritanically by his mother, who kept all fiction from him in his childhood, but grounded him with the happiest results in the Bible and Shakespeare. "This acquaintance with the text of the Bible," says Mr. Gosse, "he retained to the end of his life, and he was accustomed to be emphatic about the advantage he had received from the beauty of its language." His early poems, however, were not a protest against the atmosphere of his home, but against the atmosphere of what can only be described by the worn-out word "respectability." Mrs. Disney Leith declares that she never met a character more "reverent-minded." And, certainly, the irreverence of his most pagan poems is largely an irreverence of gesture. He delighted in shocking his contemporaries, and planned shocking them still further with a volume called *Lesbia Brandon*, which he never published; but at heart he never freed himself from the Hebrew awe in presence of good and evil. His *Aholibah* is a poem that is as moral in one sense as it is lascivious in another. As Mr. Gosse says, "his imagination was always swinging, like a pendulum, between the North and the South, between Paganism and Puritanism, between resignation to the instincts and an ascetic repudiation of their authority." It is



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the conflict between the two moods that is the most interesting feature in Swinburne's verse, apart from its purely artistic qualities. Some writers find Swinburne as great a magician as ever in those poems in which he is free from the obsession of the flesh. But I doubt if Swinburne ever rose to the same great heights in his later work as in the two first series of *Poems and Ballads*. Those who praise him as a thinker quote *Hertha* as a masterpiece of philosophy in music, and it was Swinburne's own favourite among his poems. But I confess I find it a too long sermon. Swinburne's philosophy and religion were as vague as his vision of the world about him. "I might call myself, if I wished," he wrote in 1875, "a kind of Christian (of the Church of Blake and Shelley), but assuredly in no sense a Theist."

Mr. Gosse has written Swinburne's life with distinction and understanding; but it was so eventless a life that the biographer's is not an easy task. The book contains plenty of entertainment, however. It is amusing to read of the author of *Anactoria* as a child going about with Bowdler's Shakespeare under his arm and, in later years, assisting Jowett in the preparation of a *Child's Bible*.

XXIII

THE WORK OF T.M. KETTLE

To have written books and to have died in battle has been a common enough fate in the last few years. But not many of the young men who have fallen in the war have left us with such a sense of perished genius as Lieutenant T.M. Kettle, who was killed at Ginchy. He was one of those men who have almost too many gifts to succeed. He had the gift of letters and the gift of politics; he was a mathematician, an economist, a barrister, and a philosopher; he was a Bohemian as well as a scholar; as one listened to him, one suspected at times that he must be one of the most brilliant conversationalists of the age. He lived in a blaze of adoration as a student, and, though this adoration was tempered by the abuse of opponents in his later years, he still had a way of going about as a conqueror with his charm. Had he only had a little ordinariness in his composition to harden him, he would almost certainly have ended as the leading Irish statesman of his day. He was undoubtedly ambitious of success in the grand style. But with his ambition went the mood of Ecclesiastes, which reminded him of the vanity of ambition. In his youth he adhered to Herbert Spencer's much-quoted saying: "What I need to realize is how infinitesimal is the importance of anything I can do, and how infinitely important it is that I should do it." But, while with Spencer this was a call to action, with Kettle it was rather a call to meditation, to discussion. He was the Hamlet of modern Ireland. And it is interesting to remember that in one of his early essays he defended Hamlet against the common charge of "inability to act," and protested that he was the victim,



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not of a vacillating will, but of the fates. He contended that, so great were the issues and so dubious the evidence, Hamlet had every right to hesitate. "The commercial blandness," he wrote, "with which people talk of Hamlet's 'plain duty' makes one wonder if they recognize such a thing as plain morality. The 'removal' of an uncle without due process of law and on the unsupported evidence of an unsubpoenable ghost; the widowing of a mother and her casting-off as unspeakably vile, are treated as enterprises about which a man has no right to hesitate or even to feel unhappy." This is not mere speciousness. There is the commonsense of pessimism in it too.

The normal Irish man of letters begins as something of a Utopian. Kettle was always too much of a pessimist—he himself would have said a realist—to yield easily to romance. As a very young man he edited in Dublin a paper called *The Nationist*, for which he claimed, above all things, that it stood for "realism" in politics. Some men are driven into revolution by despair: it was as though Kettle had been driven into reform by despair. He admired the Utopians, but he could not share their faith. "If one never got tired," he wrote in a sketch of the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart in 1907, "one would always be with the revolutionaries, the re-makers, with Fourier and Kropotkin. But the soul's energy is strictly limited; and with weariness there comes the need for compromise, for 'machines,' for reputation, for routine. Fatigue is the beginning of political wisdom." One finds the same strain of melancholy transmuting itself into gaiety with an epigram in much of his work. His appreciation of Anatole France is the appreciation of a kindred spirit. In an essay called *The Fatigue of Anatole France* in *The Day's Burden* he defended his author's pessimistic attitude as he might have defended his own:

A pessimism, stabbed and gashed with the radiance of epigrams, as a thundercloud is stabbed by lightning, is a type of spiritual life far from contemptible. A reasonable sadness, chastened by the music of consummate prose, is an attitude and an achievement that will help many men to bear with more resignation the burden of our century.

How wonderfully, again, he portrays the Hamlet doubts of Anatole France, when, speaking of his bust, he says: "It is the face of a soldier ready to die for a flag in which he does not entirely believe." And he goes on:

He looks out at you like a veteran of the lost cause of intellect, to whose soul the trumpet of defeat strikes with as mournful and vehement a music as to that of Pascal himself, but who thinks that a wise man may be permitted to hearten himself up in evil days with an anecdote after the manner of his master Rabelais.

Kettle himself practised just such a gloom shot with gaiety. He did not, however, share Anatole France's gaiety of unbelief. In some ways he was more



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nearly akin to Villiers de l'Isle Adam, with his religion and his love of the fine gesture. Had he been a Frenchman of an earlier generation, he would have been famous for his talk, like Villiers, in the cafes. Most people who knew him contend that he talked even better than he wrote; but one gets a good enough example of his ruling mood and attitude in the fine essay called *On Saying Good-bye*. Meditating on life as “a sustained good-bye,” he writes:

Life is a cheap *table d'hote* in a rather dirty restaurant, with
Time changing the plates before you have had enough of anything.

We were bewildered at school to be told that walking was a perpetual falling. But life is, in a far more significant way, a perpetual dying. Death is not an eccentricity, but a settled habit of the universe. The drums of to-day call to us, as they call to young Fortinbras in the fifth act of *Hamlet*, over corpses piled up in such abundance as to be almost ridiculous. We praise the pioneer, but we praise him on wrong grounds. His strength lies not in his leaning out to new things—that may be mere curiosity—but in his power to abandon old things. All his courage is a courage of adieus.

This meditateness on the passing nature of things is one of the old moods of mankind. Kettle, however, was one of the men of our time in whom it has achieved imaginative expression. I remember his once saying, in regard to some hostile criticisms that had been passed on his own “power to abandon old things”: “The whole world is nothing but the story of a renegade. The bud is renegade to the tree, and the flower to the bud, and the fruit to the flower.” Though he rejoiced in change as a politician, however, he bewailed the necessity of change as a philosopher. His praise of death in the essay I have just quoted from is the praise of something that will put an end to changes and goodbyes

There is only one journey, as it seems to me ... in which we attain our ideal of going away and going home at the same time. Death, normally encountered, has all the attractions of suicide without any of its horrors. The old woman—

an old woman previously mentioned who complained that “the only bothersome thing about walking was that the miles began at the wrong end”—

the old woman when she comes to that road will find the miles beginning at the right end. We shall all bid our first real adieu to those brother-jesters of ours, Time; and Space; and though the handkerchiefs flutter, no lack of courage will have power to cheat or defeat us. “However amusing the comedy may have been,” wrote Pascal, “there is always blood in the fifth act. They scatter a little dust in your face; and then all is over for ever.” Blood there may be, but blood does not necessarily mean tragedy. The

wisdom of humility bids us pray that in that fifth act we may have good lines and a timely exit; but, fine or feeble, there

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is comfort in breaking the parting word into its two significant halves, a Dieu. Since life has been a constant slipping from one good-bye to another, why should we fear that sole good-bye which promises to cancel all its forerunners?

There you have a passage which, in the light of events, seems strangely prophetic. Kettle certainly got his “good lines” at Ginchy. He gave his life greatly for his ideal of a free Ireland in a free Europe.

This suggests that underlying his Hamlet there was a man of action as surely as there was a jester. He was a man with a genius for rising to the occasion—for saying the fine word and doing the fine thing. He compromised often, in accordance with his “realistic” view of things; but he never compromised in his belief in the necessity of large and European ideals in Ireland. He stood by all good causes, not as an extremist, but as a helper somewhat disillusioned. But his disillusionment never made him feeble in the middle of the fight. He was the sworn foe of the belittlers of Ireland. One will get an idea of the passion with which he fought for the traditional Ireland, as well as for the Ireland of coming days, if one turns to his rhymed reply to a living English poet who had urged the Irish to forget their history and gently cease to be a nation. The last lines of this poem—*Reason in Rhyme*, as he called it—are his testament to England no less than his call to Europeanism is his testament to Ireland:

Bond, from the toil of hate we may not cease:
Free, we are free to be your friend.
And when you make your banquet, and we come.
Soldier with equal soldier must we sit,
Closing a battle, not forgetting it.
With not a name to hide,
This mate and mother of valiant “rebels” dead
Must come with all her history on her head.
We keep the past for pride:
No deepest peace shall strike our poets dumb:
No rawest squad of all Death’s volunteers,
No rudest men who died
To tear your flag down in the bitter years.
But shall have praise, and three times thrice again,
When at the table men shall drink with men.

That was Kettle’s mood to the last. This was the mood that made him regard with such horror the execution of Pearse and Connolly, and the other leaders of the Dublin insurrection. He regarded these men as having all but destroyed his dream of an Ireland enjoying the freedom of Europe. But he did not believe that any English Government possessed the right to be merciless in Ireland. The murder of Sheehy-Skeffington, who was his brother-in-law, cast another shadow over his imagination from



which he never recovered. Only a week before he died he wrote to me from France: "The Skeffington case oppresses me with horror." When I saw him in the previous July, he talked like a man whose heart Easter Week and its terrible retributions had broken. But there must have been exaltation in those days just before his death, as one gathers from the last, or all but the last, of his letters home:



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We are moving up to-night into the battle of the Somme. The bombardment, destruction, and bloodshed are beyond all imagination, nor did I ever think that the valour of simple men could be quite as beautiful as that of my Dublin Fusiliers. I have had two chances of leaving them—one on sick leave and one to take a staff job. I have chosen to stay with my comrades.

There at the end you have the grand gesture. There you have the “good lines” that Kettle had always desired.

XXIV

MR. J.C. SQUIRE

It would not have been easy a few years ago to foresee the achievement of Mr. Squire as a poet. He laboured under the disadvantage of being also a wit. It used to be said of Ibsen that a Pegasus had once been shot under him, and one was alarmed lest the reverse of this was about to happen to Mr. Squire, and lest a writer who began in the gaiety of the comic spirit should end soberly astride Pegasus. When, in *Tricks of the Trade*, he announced that he was going to write no more parodies, one had a depressed feeling that he was about to give up to poetry what was meant for mankind. Yet, on reading Mr. Squire's collected poems in *Poems: First Series*, it is difficult not to admit that it was to write serious verse even more than parody and political epigram that he was born.

He has arranged the poems in the book in the order of their composition, so that we can follow the development of his powers and see him, as it were, learning to fly. To read him is again and again to be reminded of Donne. Like Donne, he is largely self-occupied, examining the horrors of his own soul, overburdened at times with thought, an intellect at odds with the spirit. Like Donne, he will have none of the merely poetic, either in music or in imagery. He beats out a music of his own and he beats out an imagery of his own. In his early work, this sometimes resulted in his poems being unable to rise far from the ground. They seemed to be labouring on unaccustomed wings towards the ether. What other living poet has ever given a poem such a title as *Antinomies on a Railway Station*? What other has examined himself with the same X-rays sort of realism as Mr. Squire has done in *The Mind of Man*? The latter, like many of Mr. Squire's poems, is an expression of fastidious disgust with life. The early Mr. Squire was a master of disgust, and we see the same mood dominant even in the *Ode: In a Restaurant*, where the poet suddenly breaks out:—

Soul! This life is very strange,
And circumstances very foul
Attend the belly's stormy howl.



The ode, however, is not merely, or even primarily, an expression of disgust. Here, too, we see Mr. Squire's passion for romance and energy. Here, too, we see him as a fisherman of strange imagery, as when he describes the sounds of the restaurant band as they float in upon him from another room and die again:—



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Like keen-drawn threads of ink dropped into a glass
Of water, which curl and relax and soften and pass.

The *Ode: In a Restaurant* is perhaps the summit of Mr. Squire's writing as a poet at odds with himself, a poet who floats above the obscene and dull realities of every day, "like a draggled seagull over dreary flats of mud." He has already escaped into bluer levels in the poem, *On a friend Recently Dead*, written in the same or the following year. Here he ceases to be a poet floating and bumping against a ceiling. He is now ranging the heaven of the emancipated poets. Even when he writes of the common and prosaic things he now charges them with significance for the emotions. He is no longer a satirist and philosopher, but a lover. How well he conjures up the picture of the room in which his friend used to sit and talk:—

Capricious friend!
Here in this room, not long before the end,
Here in this very room six months ago
You poised your foot and joked and chuckled so.
Beyond the window shook the ash-tree bough,
You saw books, pictures, as I see them now.
The sofa then was blue, the telephone
Listened upon the desk and softly shone
Even as now the fire-irons in the grate,
And the little brass pendulum swung, a seal of fate
Stamping the minutes; and the curtains on window and door
Just moved in the air; and on the dark boards of the floor
These same discreetly-coloured rugs were lying ...
And then you never had a thought of dying.

How much richer, too, by this time Mr. Squire's imagery has become! His observation is both exact and imaginative when he notes how—

the frail ash-tree hisses
With a soft sharpness like a fall of mounded grain.

Elsewhere in the same poem Mr. Squire has given us a fine new image of the brevity of man's life:—

And I, I see myself as one of a heap of stones,
Wetted a moment to life as the flying wave goes over.

It was not, however, till *The Lily of Malud* appeared that readers of poetry in general realized that Mr. Squire was a poet of the imagination even more than of the intellect. This is a flower that has blossomed out of the vast swamps of the anthropologists. It is



the song of the ritual of initiation. Mr. Squire's power in the sphere both of the grotesque and of lovely imagery is revealed in the triumphant close of this poem:—

And the surly thick-lipped men, as they sit about their huts
Making drums out of guts, grunting gruffly now and then,
Carving sticks of ivory, stretching shields of wrinkled skin,
Smoothing sinister and thin squatting gods of ebony,
Chip and grunt and do not see.



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But each mother, silently,
Longer than her wont stays shut in the dimness of her hut,
For she feels a brooding cloud of memory in the air,
A lingering thing there that makes her sit bowed
With hollow shining eyes, as the night-fire dies.
And stare softly at the ember, and try to remember
Something sorrowful and far, something sweet and vaguely seen
Like an early evening star when the sky is pale green:
A quiet silver tower that climbed in an hour,
Or a ghost like a flower, or a flower like a queen:
Something holy in the past that came and did not last,
But she knows not what it was.

It is easy to see in the last lines that Mr. Squire has escaped finally from the idealist's disgust to the idealist's exaltation. He has learned to express the beautiful mystery of life and he is no longer haunted in his nerves by the ugliness of circumstances. Not that he has shut himself up in an enchanted world: he still remains a poet of this agonizing earth. In *The Stronghold* he summons up a vision of "easeful death," only to turn aside from it as Christian turned aside from the temptations on his way:—

But, O, if you find that castle,
Draw back your foot from the gateway,
Let not its peace invite you,
Let not its offerings tempt you,
For faded and decayed like a garment,
Love to a dust will have fallen,
And song and laughter will have gone with sorrow,
And hope will have gone with pain;
And of all the throbbing heart's high courage
Nothing will remain.

And these later poems are not only nobler in passion than the early introspective work; they are also more moving. Few of the "in memoriam" poems of the war touch the heart as does that poem, *To a Bulldog*, with its moving close:—

And though you run expectant as you always do
To the uniforms we meet,
You will never find Willy among all the soldiers
Even in the longest street.

Nor in any crowd: yet, strange and bitter thought,
Even now were the old words said,
If I tried the old trick, and said "Where's Willy?"
You would quiver and lift your head.



And your brown eyes would look to ask if I was serious,
And wait for the word to spring.
Sleep undisturbed: I shan't say that again,
You innocent old thing.

I must sit, not speaking, on the sofa,
While you lie there asleep on the floor;
For he's suffered a thing that dogs couldn't dream of,
And he won't be coming here any more.

Of the new poems in the book, one of the most beautiful is *August Moon*. The last verses provide an excellent example of Mr. Squire's gift both as a painter of things and a creator of atmosphere:—

A golden half-moon in the sky, and broken gold in the water.



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In the water, tranquilly severing, joining, gold:
Three or four little plates of gold on the river:
A little motion of gold between the dark images
Of two tall posts that stand in the grey water.
A woman's laugh and children going home.
A whispering couple, leaning over the railings,
And somewhere, a little splash as a dog goes in.

I have always known all this, it has always been,
There is no change anywhere, nothing will ever change.

I heard a story, a crazy and tiresome myth.

Listen! Behind the twilight a deep, low sound
Like the constant shutting of very distant doors.

Doors that are letting people over there
Out to some other place beyond the end of the sky.

The contrast between the beauty of the stillness of the moonlit world and the insane intrusion of the war into it has not, I think, been suggested so expressively in any other poem.

Now that these poems have been collected into a single volume it is possible to measure the author's stature. His book will, I believe, come as a revelation to the majority of readers. A poet of original music, of an original mind, of an original imagination, Mr. Squire has now taken a secure place among the men of genius of to-day. *Poems: First Series*, is literary treasure so novel and so abundant that I can no longer regret, as I once did, that Mr. Squire has said farewell to the brilliant lighter-hearted moods of *Steps to Parnassus* and *Tricks of the Trade*. He has brought us gifts better even than those.

XXV

R. JOSEPH CONRAD

1. THE MAKING OF AN AUTHOR

Mr. Joseph Conrad is one of the strangest figures in literature. He has called himself "the most unliterary of writers." He did not even begin to write till he was half-way between thirty and forty. I do not like to be more precise about the date, because there seems to be some doubt as to the year in which Mr. Conrad was born. Mr. Hugh Walpole, in his brief critical study of Mr. Conrad, gives the date as the 6th of December, 1857; the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says 1856; Mr. Conrad himself declares in his



reminiscences that he was “nine years old or thereabouts” in 1868, which would bring the year of his birth nearer 1859. Of one thing, however, there is no question. He grew up without any impulse to be a writer. He apparently never even wrote bad verse in his teens. Before he began to write *Almayer’s Folly* he “had written nothing but letters and not very many of these.” “I never,” he declares, “made a note of a fact, of an impression, or of an anecdote in my life. The ambition of being an author had never turned up among those precious imaginary existences one creates fondly for oneself in the stillness and immobility of a daydream.”



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At the same time, Mr. Conrad's is not a genius without parentage or pedigree. His father was not only a revolutionary, but in some degree a man of letters. Mr. Conrad tells us that his own acquaintance with English literature began at the age of eight with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which his father had translated into Polish. He has given us a picture of the child he then was (dressed in a black blouse with a white border in mourning for his mother) as he knelt in his father's study chair, "with my elbows on the table and my head held in both hands over the pile of loose pages." While he was still a boy he read Hugo and *Don Quixote* and Dickens, and a great deal of history, poetry, and travel. He had also been fascinated by the map. It may be said of him even in his childhood, as Sir Thomas Browne has said in general of every human being, that Africa and all her prodigies were within him. No passage in his autobiography suggests the first prophecy of his career so markedly as that in which he writes: "It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now: 'When I grow up I shall go *there*.'" Mr. Conrad's genius, his consciousness of his destiny, may be said to have come to birth in that hour. What but the second sight of genius could have told this inland child that he would one day escape from the torturing round of rebellion in which the soul of his people was imprisoned to the sunless jungles and secret rivers of Africa, where he would find an imperishable booty of wonder and monstrous fear? Many people regard *Heart of Darkness* as his greatest story. *Heart of Darkness* surely began to be written on the day on which the boy of nine "or thereabouts" put his finger on the blank space of the map of Africa and prophesied.

He was in no hurry, however, to accomplish his destiny. Mr. Conrad has never been in a hurry, even in telling a story. He has waited on fate rather than run to meet it. "I was never," he declares, "one of those wonderful fellows that would go afloat in a washtub for the sake of the fun." On the other hand, he seems always to have followed in his own determined fashion certain sudden intuitions, much as great generals and saints do. Alexander or Napoleon could not have seized the future with a more splendid defiance of reason than did Mr. Conrad, when, though he did not yet know six words of English, he came to the resolve: "If a seaman, then an English seaman." He has always been obedient to a star. He likes to picture himself as a lazy creature, but he is really one of the most dogged day-labourers who have ever served literature. In *Typhoon* and *Youth* he has written of the triumph of the spirit of man over tempest and



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fire. We may see in these stories not only the record of Mr. Conrad's twenty years' toil as a seaman, but the image of his desperate doggedness as an author writing in a foreign tongue. "Line by line," he writes, "rather than page by page, was the growth of *Almayer's Folly*." He has earned his fame in the sweat of his brow. He speaks of the terrible bodily fatigue that is the lot of the imaginative writer even more than of the manual labourer. "I have," he adds, "carried bags of wheat on my back, bent almost double under a ship's deck-beams, from six in the morning till six in the evening (with an hour and a half off for meals), so I ought to know." He declares, indeed, that the strain of creative effort necessary in imaginative writing is "something for which a material parallel can only be found in the everlasting sombre stress of the westward winter passage round Cape Horn." This is to make the profession of literature a branch of the heroic life. And that, for all his smiling disparagement of himself as a Sybarite, is what Mr. Conrad has done.

It is all the more curious that he should ever have been regarded as one who had added to the literature of despair. He is a tragic writer, it is true; he is the only novelist now writing in English with the grand tragic sense. He is nearer Webster than Shakespeare, perhaps, in the mood of his tragedy; he lifts the curtain upon a world in which the noble and the beautiful go down before an almost meaningless malice. In *The End of the Tether*, in *Freya of the Seven Isles*, in *Victory*, it is as though a very Nero of malice who took a special delight in the ruin of great spirits governed events. On the other hand, as in *Samson Agonistes*, so in the stories of Mr. Conrad we are confronted with the curious paradox that some deathless quality in the dying hero forbids us utterly to despair. Mr. Hardy has written the tragedy of man's weakness; Mr. Conrad has written the tragedy of man's strength "with courage never to submit or yield." Though Mr. Conrad possesses the tragic sense in a degree that puts him among the great poets, and above any of his living rivals, however, the mass of his work cannot be called tragic. *Youth*, *Typhoon*, *Lord Jim*, *The Secret Sharer*, *The Shadow Line*—are not all these fables of conquest and redemption? Man in Mr. Conrad's stories is always a defier of the devils, and the devils are usually put to flight.

Though he is eager to disclaim being a moralist or even having any liking for moralists, it is clear that he is an exceedingly passionate moralist and is in more ardent imaginative sympathy with the duties of man and Burke than with the rights of man and Shelley. Had it not been so, he might have been a political visionary and stayed at home. As it is, this son of a Polish rebel broke away from the wavering aspirations and public dreams of his revolutionary countrymen, and found salvation as an artist in the companionship of simple men at sea.



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Some such tremendous breach with the past was necessary in order that Mr. Conrad might be able to achieve his destiny as an artist. No one but an inland child could, perhaps, have come to the sea with such a passion of discovery. The sea to most of us is a glory, but it is a glory of our everyday earth. Mr. Conrad, in his discovery of the sea, broke into a new and wonder-studded world, like some great adventurer of the Renaissance. He was like a man coming out of a pit into the light. That, I admit, is too simple an image to express all that going to sea meant to Mr. Conrad. But some such image seems to me to be necessary to express that element in his writing which reminds one of the vision of a man who has lived much underground. He is a dark man who carries the shadows and the mysteries of the pit about with him. He initiates us in his stories into the romance of Erebus. He leads us through a haunted world in which something worse than a ghost may spring on us out of the darkness. Ironical, sad, a spectator, he is nevertheless a writer who exalts rather than dispirits. His genius moves enlargingly among us, a very spendthrift of treasure—treasure of recollection, observation, imagery, tenderness, and humour. It is a strange thing that it was not until he published *Chance* that the world in general began to recognize how great a writer was enriching our time. Perhaps his own reserve was partly to blame for this. He tells us that all the “characters” he ever got on his discharge from a ship contained the words “strictly sober,” and he claims that he has observed the same sobriety—“asceticism of sentiment,” he calls it—in his literary work as at sea. He has been compared to Dostoevsky, but in his quietism he is the very opposite of Dostoevsky—an author, indeed, of whom he has written impatiently. At the same time, Mr. Conrad keeps open house in his pages as Dostoevsky did for strange demons and goblins—that population of grotesque characters that links the modern realistic novel to the fairy tale. His tales are tales of wonder. He is not only a philosopher of the bold heart under a sky of despair, but one of the magicians of literature. That is why one reads the volume called *Youth* for the third and fourth time with even more enthusiasm than when one reads it for the first.

2. TALES OF MYSTERY

Mr. Joseph Conrad is a writer with a lure. Every novelist of genius is that, of course, to some extent. But Mr. Conrad is more than most. He has a lure like some lost shore in the tropics. He compels to adventure. There is no other living writer who is sensitive in anything like the same degree to the sheer mysteriousness of the earth. Every man who breathes, every woman who crosses the street, every wind that blows, every ship that sails, every tide that fills, every wave that breaks, is for him alive with mystery as a lantern is alive with light—a little light in an immense darkness. Or perhaps



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it is more subtle than that. With Mr. Conrad it is as though mystery, instead of dwelling in people and things like a light, hung about them like an aura. Mr. Kipling communicates to us aggressively what our eyes can see. Mr. Conrad communicates to us tentatively what only his eyes can see, and in so doing gives a new significance to things. Occasionally he leaves us puzzled as to where in the world the significance can lie. But of the presence of this significance, this mystery, we are as uncannily certain as of some noise that we have heard at night. It is like the “mana” which savages at once reverence and fear in a thousand objects. It is unlike “mana,” however, in that it is a quality not of sacredness, but of romance. It is as though for Mr. Conrad a ghost of romance inhabited every tree and every stream, every ship and every human being. His function in literature is the announcement of this ghost. In all his work there is some haunting and indefinable element that draws us into a kind of ghost-story atmosphere as we read. His ships and men are, in an old sense of the word, possessed.

One might compare Mr. Conrad in this respect with his master—his master, at least, in the art of the long novel—Henry James. I do not mean that in the matter of his genius Mr. Conrad is not entirely original. Henry James could no more have written Mr. Conrad’s stories than Mr. Conrad could have written Henry James’s. His manner of discovering significance in insignificant things, however, is of the school of Henry James. Like Henry James, he is a psychologist in everything down to descriptions of the weather. It can hardly be questioned that he has learned more of the business of psychology from Henry James than from any other writer. As one reads a story like *Chance*, however, one feels that in psychology Mr. Conrad is something of an amateur of genius, while Henry James is a professor. Mr. Conrad never gives the impression of having used the dissecting-knife and the microscope and the test-tubes as Henry James does. He seems rather to be one of the splendid guessers. Not that Henry James is timid in speculations. He can sally out into the borderland and come back with his bag of ghosts like a very hero of credulity. Even when he tells a ghost story, however—and *The Turn of the Screw* is one of the great ghost stories of literature—he remains supremely master of his materials. He has an efficiency that is scientific as compared with the vaguer broodings of Mr. Conrad. Where Mr. Conrad will drift into discovery, Henry James will sail more cunningly to his end with chart and compass.



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One is aware of a certain deliberate indolent hither-and-thitherness in the psychological progress of Mr. Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, for instance, which is never to be found even in the most elusive of Henry James's novels. Both of them are, of course, in love with the elusive. To each of them a bird in the bush is worth two in the hand. But while Henry James's birds perch in the cultivated bushes of botanical gardens, Mr. Conrad's call from the heart of natural thickets—often from the depths of the jungle. The progress of the steamer up the jungle river in *Heart of Darkness* is symbolic of his method as a writer. He goes on and on, with the ogres of romance always lying in wait round the next bend. He can describe things seen as well as any man, but it is his especial genius to use things seen in such a way as to suggest the unseen things that are waiting round the corner. Even when he is portraying human beings, like Flora de Barrel—the daughter of the defalcating financier and wife of the ship's captain, who is the heroine of *Chance*—he often permits us just such glimpses of them as we get of persons hurrying round a corner. He gives us a picture of disappearing heels as the portrait of a personality. He suggests the soul of wonder in a man not by showing him realistically as he is so much as by suggesting a mysterious something hidden, something on the horizon, a shadowy island seen at twilight. One result of this is that his human beings are seldom as rotund as life. They are emanations of personality rather than collections of legs, arms, and bowels. They are, if you like, ghostly. That is why they will never be quoted like Hamlet and my Uncle Toby and Sam Weller. But how wonderful they are in their environment of the unusual! How wonderful as seen in the light of the strange eyes of their creator! "Having grown extremely sensitive (an effect of irritation) to the tonalities, I may say, of the affair"—so the narrator of *Chance* begins one of his sentences; and it is not in the invention of new persons or incidents, but in just such a sensitiveness to the tonalities of this and that affair that Mr. Conrad wins his laurels as a writer of novels. He would be sensitive, I do not doubt, to the tonalities of the way in which a waitress in a Lyons tea-shop would serve a lumpy-shouldered City man with tea and toasted scone. His sensitiveness only becomes matter for enthusiasm, however, when it is concerned with little man in conflict with destiny—when, bare down to the immortal soul, he grapples with fate and throws it, or is beaten back by it into a savage of the first days.



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Some of his best work is contained in the two stories *Typhoon* and *The Secret Sharer*, the latter of which appeared in the volume called *'Twiixt Land and Sea*. And each of these is a fable of man's mysterious quarrel with fate told with the Conrad sensitiveness, the dark Conrad irony, and the Conrad zest for courage. These stories are so great that while we read them we almost forget the word "psychology." We are swept off our feet by a tide of heroic literature. Each of the stories, complex though Mr. Conrad's interest in the central situation may be, is radically as heroic and simple as the story of Jack's fight with the giants or of the defence of the round-house in *Kidnapped*. In each of them the soul of man challenges fate with its terrors: it dares all, it risks all, it invades and defeats the darkness. *Typhoon* was, I fancy, not consciously intended as a dramatization of the struggle between the soul and the Prince of the power of the air. But it is because it is eternally true as such a dramatization that it is—let us not shrink from praise—one of the most overwhelmingly fine short stories in literature. It is the story of an unconquerable soul even more than of an unconquerable ship. One feels that the ship's struggles have angels and demons for spectators, as time and again the storm smashes her and time and again she rises alive out of the pit of the waters. They are an affair of cosmic relevance as the captain and the mate cling on, watching the agonies of the steamer.

Opening their eyes, they saw the masses of piled-up foam dashing to and fro amongst what looked like fragments of the ship. She had given way as if driven straight in. Their panting hearts yielded before the tremendous blow; and all at once she sprang up again to her desperate plunging, as if trying to scramble out from under the ruins. The seas in the dark seemed to rush from all sides to keep her back where she might perish. There was hate in the way she was handled, and a ferocity in the blows that fell. She was like a living creature thrown to the rage of a mob: hustled terribly, struck at, borne up, flung down, leaped upon.

It is in the midst of these blinding, deafening, whirling, drowning terrors that we seem to see the captain and the mate as figures symbolic of Mr. Conrad's heroic philosophy of life.

He [the mate] poked his head forward, groping for the ear of his commander. His lips touched it, big, fleshy, very wet. He cried in an agitated tone, "Our boats are going now, sir."

And again he heard that voice, forced and ringing feebly, but with a penetrating effect of quietness in the enormous discord of noises, as if sent out from some remote spot of peace beyond the black wastes of the gale; again he heard a man's voice—the frail and indomitable sound that can be made to carry an infinity of thought, resolution, and purpose, that shall

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be pronouncing confident words on the last day, when the heavens fall and justice is done—again he heard it, and it was crying to him, as if from very, very far: “All right.”

Mr. Conrad's work, I have already suggested, belongs to the literature of confidence. It is the literature of great hearts braving the perils of the darkness. He is imaginatively never so much at home as in the night, but he is aware not only of the night, but of the stars. Like a cheer out of the dark comes that wonderful scene in *The Secret Sharer* in which, at infinite risk, the ship is sailed in close under the looming land in order that the captain may give the hidden manslayer a chance of escaping unnoticed to the land. This is a story in which the “tonalities of the affair” are much more subtle than in *Typhoon*. It is a study in eccentric human relations—the relations between the captain and the manslayer who comes naked out of the seas as if from nowhere one tropical night, and is huddled away with his secrets in the captain's cabin. It is for the most part a comedy of the abnormal—an ironic fable of splendid purposeless fears and risks. Towards the end, however, we lose our concern with nerves and relationships and such things, and our hearts pause as the moment approaches when the captain ventures his ship in order to save the interloper's life. That is a moment with all romance in it. As the ship swerves round into safety just in the nick of time, we have a story transfigured into the music of the triumphant soul. Mr. Conrad, as we see in *Freya of the Seven Isles* and elsewhere, is not blind to the commonness of tragic ruin—tragic ruin against which no high-heartedness seems to avail. He is, indeed, inclined rather than otherwise to represent fate as a monstrous spider, unaccountable, often maleficent, hard to run away from. But he loves the fantastic comedy of the high heart which persists in the heroic game against the spider till the bitter end. His *Youth* is just such a comedy of the peacockry of adventure amid the traps and disasters of fate.

All this being so, it may be thought that I have underestimated the flesh-and-blood qualities in Mr. Conrad's work. I certainly do not want to give the impression that his men are less than men. They are as manly men as ever breathed. But Mr. Conrad seldom attempts to give us the complete synthesis of a man. He deals rather in aspects of personality. His longer books would hold us better if there were some overmastering characters in them. In reading such a book as *Under Western Eyes* we feel as though we had here a precious alphabet of analysis, but that it has not been used to spell a magnificent man.



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Worse than this, Mr. Conrad's long stories at times come out as awkwardly as an elephant being steered backwards through a gate. He pauses frequently to impress upon us not only the romance of the fact he is stating but the romance of the circumstances in which somebody discovered it. In *Chance* and *Lord Jim* he is not content to tell us a straightforward story: he must show us at length the processes by which it was pieced together. This method has its advantages. It gives us the feeling, as I have said, that we are voyaging into strange seas and harbours in search of mysterious clues. But the fatigue of reconstruction is apt to tell on us before the end. One gets tired of the thing just as one does of interviewing a host of strangers. That is why some people fail to get through Mr. Conrad's long novels. They are books of a thousand fascinations, but the best imagination in them is by the way. Besides this, they have little of the economy of dramatic writing, but are profusely descriptive, and most people are timid of an epic of description.

Mr. Conrad's best work, then, is to be found, I agree with most people in believing, in three of his volumes of short stories—in *Typhoon*, *Youth*, and *'Twi*xt *Land and Sea*. His fame will, I imagine, rest chiefly on these, just as the fame of Wordsworth and Keats rests on their shorter poems. Here is the pure gold of his romance—written in terms largely of the life of the old sailing-ship. Here he has written little epics of man's destiny, tragic, ironic, and heroic, which are unique in modern (and, it is safe to say, in all) literature.

XXVI

MR. RUDYARD KIPLING

1. THE GOOD STORY-TELLER

Mr. Kipling is an author whom one has loved and hated a good deal. One has loved him as the eternal schoolboy revelling in smells and bad language and dangerous living. One has loved him less, but one has at least listened to him, as the knowing youth who could tell one all about the ladies of Simla. One has found him rather adorable as the favourite uncle with the funny animal stories. One has been amazed by his magnificent make-believe as he has told one about dim forgotten peoples that have disappeared under the ground. One has detested him, on the other hand, as the evangelist with the umbrella—the little Anglo-Indian Prussian who sing hymns of hate and Hempire.

Luckily, this last Kipling is allowed an entirely free voice only in verse. If one avoids *Barrack Room Ballads* and *The Seven Seas*, one misses the worst of him. He visits the prose stories, too, it is true, but he does not dominate them in the same degree. Prose is his easy chair, in which his genius as a humorist and anecdotalist can expand. Verse is a platform that tempts him at one moment into the performance of music-hall turns



and the next into stump orations the spiritual home of which is Hyde Park Corner rather than Parnassus. *Recessional* surprises one like a noble recantation of nearly all the other verse Mr. Kipling has written. But, apart from *Recessional*, most of his political verse is a mere quickstep of bragging and sneering.



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His prose, certainly, stands a third or a fourth reading, as his verse does not. Even in a world which Henry James and Mr. Conrad have taught to study motives and atmospheres with an almost scientific carefulness, Mr. Kipling's "well-hammered anecdotes," as Mr. George Moore once described the stories, still refuse to bore us.

At the same time, they make a different appeal to us from their appeal of twenty or twenty-five years ago. In the early days, we half-worshipped Mr. Kipling because he told us true stories. Now we enjoy him because he tells us amusing stories. He conquered us at first by making us think him a realist. He was the man who knew. We listened to him like children drinking in travellers' tales. He bluffed us with his cocksure way of talking about things, and by addressing us in a mysterious jargon which we regarded as a proof of his intimacy with the barrack-room, the engine-room, the racecourse, and the lives of generals, Hindus, artists, and East-enders. That was Mr. Kipling's trick. He assumed the realistic manner as Jacob assumed the hairy hands of Esau. He compelled us to believe him by describing with elaborate detail the setting of his story. And, having once got us in the mood of belief, he proceeded to spin a yarn that as often as not was as unlike life as *A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*. His characters are inventions, not portraits. Even the dialects they speak—dialects which used to be enthusiastically spoken of as masterly achievements of realism—are ludicrously false to life, as a page of Mulvaney's or Ortheris's talk will quickly make clear to any one who knows the real thing. But with what humour the stories are told! Mr. Kipling does undoubtedly possess the genius of humour and energy. There are false touches in the boys' conversation in *The Drums of the Fore and Aft*, but the humour and energy with which the progress of the regiment to the frontier, its disgrace and its rescue by the drunken children, are described, make it one of the most admirable short stories of our time.

His humour, it must be admitted, is akin to the picaresque. It is amusing to reflect as one looks round the disreputable company of Mr. Kipling's characters, that his work has now been given a place in the library of law and order. When *Stalky and Co.* was published, parents and schoolmasters protested in alarm, and it seemed doubtful for a time whether Mr. Kipling was to be reckoned among the enemies of society. If I am not mistaken, *The Spectator* came down on the side of Mr. Kipling, and his reputation as a respectable author was saved.



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But the parents and the schoolmasters were not nervous without cause. Mr. Kipling is an anarchist in his preferences to a degree that no bench of bishops could approve. He is, within limits, on the side of the Ishmaelites—the bad boys of the school, the “rips” of the regiment. His books are the praise of the Ishmaelitish life in a world of law and order. They are seldom the praise of a law and order life in a world of law and order. Mr. Kipling demands only one loyalty (beyond mutual loyalty) from his characters. His schoolboys may break every rule in the place, provided that somewhere deep down in their hearts they are loyal to the “Head.” His pet soldiers may steal dogs or get drunk, or behave brutally to their heart’s content, on condition that they cherish a sentimental affection for the Colonel. Critics used to explain this aspect of Mr. Kipling’s work by saying that he likes to show the heart of good in things evil. But that is not really a characteristic of his work. What he is most interested in is neither good nor evil but simply roguery. As an artist, he is a barn rebel and lover of mischief. As a politician he is on the side of the judges and the lawyers. It was his politics and not his art that ultimately made him the idol of the genteel world.

2. THE POET OF LIFE WITH A CAPITAL HELL

Everybody who is older than a schoolboy remembers how Mr. Rudyard Kipling was once a modern. He might, indeed, have been described at the time as a Post-Imperialist. Raucous and young, he had left behind him the ornate Imperialism of Disraeli, on the one hand, and the cultured Imperialism of Tennyson, on the other. He sang of Imperialism as it was, or was about to be—vulgar and canting and bloody—and a world that was preparing itself for an Imperialism that would be vulgar and canting and bloody bade him welcome. In one breath he would give you an invocation to Jehovah. In the next, with a dig in the ribs, he would be getting round the roguish side of you with the assurance that:—

If you’ve ever stole a pheasant-egg behind the keeper’s back,
If you’ve ever snigged the washin’ from the line,
If you’ve ever crammed a gander in your bloomin’ ’aversack,
You will understand this little song o’ mine.

This jumble—which seems so curious nowadays—of delight in piety and delight in twopence-coloured mischiefs came as a glorious novelty and respite to the oppressed race of Victorians. Hitherto they had been building up an Empire decently and in order; no doubt, many reprehensible things were being done, but they were being done quietly: outwardly, so far as was possible, a respectable front was preserved. It was Mr. Kipling’s distinction to tear off the mask of Imperialism as a needless and irritating encumbrance; he had too much sense of reality—too much humour, indeed—to want to portray Empire-builders as a company of plaster saints. Like an *enfant*



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terrible, he was ready to proclaim aloud a host of things which had, until then, been kept as decorously in the dark as the skeleton in the family cupboard. The thousand and one incidents of lust and loot, of dishonesty and brutality and drunkenness—all of those things to which builders of Empire, like many other human beings, are at times prone—he never dreamed of treating as matters to be hushed up, or, apparently, indeed, to be regretted. He accepted them quite frankly as all in the day's work; there was even a suspicion of enthusiasm in the heartiness with which he referred to them. Simple old clergymen, with a sentimental vision of an Imperialism that meant a chain of mission-stations (painted red) encircling the earth, suddenly found themselves called upon to sing a new psalm:—

Ow, the loot!
Bloomin' loot!
That's the thing to make the boys git up an' shoot!
It's the same with dogs an' men,
If you'd make 'em come again.
Clap 'em forward with a Loo! Loo! Lulu! Loot!
Whoopee! Tear 'im, puppy! Loo! Loo! Lulu! Loot! Loot! Loot!

Frankly, I wish Mr. Kipling had always written in this strain. It might have frightened the clergymen away. Unfortunately, no sooner had the old-fashioned among his readers begun to show signs of nervousness than he would suddenly feel in the mood for a tune on his Old Testament harp, and, taking it down, would twang from its strings a lay of duty. "Take up," he would sing—

Take up the White Man's burden,
Send forth the best ye breed,
Go, bind your sons to exile,
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Little Willie, in the tracts, scarcely dreamed of a thornier path of self-sacrifice. No wonder the sentimentalists were soon all dancing to the new music—music which, perhaps, had more of the harmonium than the harp in it, but was none the less suited on that account to its revivalistic purpose.

At the same time, much as we may have been attracted to Mr. Kipling in his Sabbath moods, it was with what we may call his Saturday night moods that he first won the enthusiasm of the young men. They loved him for his bad language long before he had ever preached a sermon or written a leading article in verse. His literary adaptation of



the unmeasured talk of the barrack-room seemed to initiate them into a life at once more real and more adventurous than the quiet three-meals-a-day ritual of their homes. He sang of men who defied the laws of man; still more exciting, he sang of men who defied the laws of God. Every oath he loosed rang heroically in the ear like a challenge to the universe; for his characters talked in a daring, swearing fashion that was new in literature. One remembers the bright-eyed enthusiasm with which very young men used to repeat to each other lines like the one in *The Ballad of "The Bolivar,"* which runs

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Boys, the wheel has gone to Hell—rig the winches aft!

Not that anybody knew, or cared, what “rigging the winches aft” meant. It was the familiar and fearless commerce with hell that seemed to give literature a new horizon. Similarly, it was the eternal flames in the background that made the tattered figure of Gunga Din, the water-carrier, so favourite a theme with virgins and boys. With what delight they would quote the verse:—

So I'll meet 'im later on,
At the place where 'e is gone—
Where it's always double drill and no canteen;
'E'll be squattin' on the coals,
Givin' drink to poor damned souls.
An' I'll get a swig in hell from Gunga Din!

Ever since the days of Aucassin, indeed, who praised hell as the place whither were bound the men of fashion and the good scholars and the courteous fair ladies, youth has taken a strange, heretical delight in hell and damnation. Mr. Kipling offered new meats to the old taste.

Gentlemen-rankers, out on the spree,
Damned from here to eternity,

began to wear halos in the undergraduate imagination. Those “seven men from out of Hell” who went

Rolling down the Ratcliff Road,
Drunk, and raising Cain,

were men with whom youth would have rejoiced to shake hands. One even wrote bad verses oneself in those days, in which one loved to picture oneself as

Cursed with the curse of Reuben,
Seared with the brand of Cain,

though so far one's most desperate adventure into reality had been the consumption of a small claret hot with a slice of lemon in it in a back-street public-house. Thus Mr. Kipling brought a new violence and wonder, a sort of debased Byronism, into the imagination of youth; at least, he put a crown upon the violence and wonder which youth had long previously discovered for itself in penny dreadfuls and in its rebellion against conventions and orthodoxies.

It may be protested, however, that this is an incomplete account of Mr. Kipling's genius as a poet. He does something more in his verse, it may be urged, than drone on the harmonium of Imperialism, and transmute the language of the Ratcliff Road into polite



literature. That is quite true. He owes his fame partly also to the brilliance with which he talked adventure and talked “shop” to a generation that was exceptionally greedy for both. He, more than any other writer of his time, set to banjo-music the restlessness of the young man who would not stay at home—the romance of the man who lived and laboured at least a thousand miles away from the home of his fathers. He excited the imagination of youth with deft questions such as—

Do you know the pile-built village, where the sago-dealers trade—
Do you know the reek of fish and wet bamboo?



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If you did not know all about the sago-dealers and the fish and the wet bamboo, Mr. Kipling had a way of making you feel unpardonably ignorant; and the moral of your ignorance always was that you must “go—go—go away from here.” Hence an immense increase in the number of passages booked to the colonies. Mr. Kipling, in his verse, simply acted as a gorgeous poster-artist of Empire. And even those who resisted his call to adventure were hypnotized by his easy and lavish manner of talking “shop.” He could talk the “shop” of the army, the sea, the engine-room, the art-school, the charwoman; he was a perfect young Bacon of omniscience. How we thrilled at the unintelligible jingle of the *Anchor Song*, with its cunning blend of “shop” and adventure:

Heh! Tally on. Aft and walk away with her!
Handsome to the cathead, now! O tally on the fall!
Stop, seize, and fish, and easy on the davit-guy.
Up, well up, the fluke of her, and inboard haul!

Well, ah, fare you well for the Channel wind's took hold of us,
Choking down our voices as we snatch the gaskets free,
And its blowing up for night.
And she's dropping light on light,
And she's snorting and she's snatching for a breath of open sea.

The worst of Mr. Kipling is that, in verse like this, he is not only omniscient; he is knowing. He mistakes knowingness for knowledge. He even mistakes it for wisdom at times, as when he writes, not of ships, but of women. His knowing attitude to women makes some of his verse—not very much, to be quite fair—absolutely detestable. *The Ladies* seems to me the vulgarest poem written by a man of genius in our time. As one reads it, one feels how right Oscar Wilde was when he said that Mr. Kipling had seen many strange things through keyholes. Mr. Kipling's defenders may reply that, in poems like this, he is merely dramatizing the point of view of the barrack-room. But it is unfair to saddle the barrack-room with responsibility for the view of women which appears here and elsewhere in the author's verse. One is conscious of a kind of malign cynicism in Mr. Kipling's own attitude, as one reads *The Young British Soldier*, with a verse like—

If your wife should go wrong with a comrade, be loth
To shoot when you catch 'em—you'll swing, on my oath!—
Make 'im take 'er and keep 'er; that's hell for them both,
And you're shut o' the curse of a soldier.

That seems to me fairly to represent the level of Mr. Kipling's poetic wisdom in regard to the relations between the sexes. It is the logical result of the keyhole view of life. And, similarly, his Imperialism is a mean and miserable thing because it is the result of a keyhole view of humanity. Spiritually, Mr. Kipling may be said to have seen thousands



of miles and thousands of places through keyholes. In him, wide wanderings have produced the narrow mind, and an Empire has become as petty a thing as the hoard in a miser's garret. Many of his poems are simply miser's shrieks when the hoard seems to be threatened. He cannot even praise the flag of his country without a shrill note of malice:—



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Winds of the world, give answer! They are whimpering to and fro—
And what should they know of England who only England know?
The poor little street-bred people, that vapour, and fume, and brag,
They are lifting their heads in the stillness, to yelp at the English flag!

Mr. Kipling is a good judge of yelping.

The truth is, Mr. Kipling has put the worst of his genius into his poetry. His verses have brazen “go” and lively colour and something of the music of travel; but they are too illiberal, too snappish, too knowing, to afford deep or permanent pleasure to the human spirit.

XXVII

MR. THOMAS HARDY

1. HIS GENIUS AS A POET

Mr. Thomas Hardy, in the opinion of some, is greater as a poet than as a novelist. That is one of the mild heresies in which the amateur of letters loves to indulge. It has about as much truth in it as the statement that Milton was greater as a controversialist than as a poet, or that Lamb's plays are better than his essays. Mr. Hardy has undoubtedly made an original contribution to the poetry of his time. But he has given us no verse that more than hints at the height and depth of the tragic vision which is expressed in *Jude the Obscure*. He is not by temperament a singer. His music is a still small voice unevenly matched against his consciousness of midnight and storm. It is a flutter of wings in the rain over a tomb. His sense of beauty is frail and midge-like compared with his sense of everlasting frustration. The conceptions in his novels are infinitely more poetic than the conceptions in his verse. In *Tess* and *Jude* destiny presides with something of the grandeur of the ancient gods. Except in *The Dynasts* and a few of the lyrics, there is none of this brooding majesty in his verse. And even in *The Dynasts*, majestic as the scheme of it is, there seems to me to be more creative imagination in the prose passages than in the poetry.

Truth to tell, Mr. Hardy is neither sufficiently articulate nor sufficiently fastidious to be a great poet. He does not express life easily in beautiful words or in images. There is scarcely a magical image in the hundred or so poems in the book of his selected verse. Thus he writes in *I Found Her Out There* of one who:—

would sigh at the tale
Of sunk Lyonesse
As a wind-tugged tress
Flapped her cheek like a flail.



There could not be an uglier and more prosaic exaggeration than is contained in the image in the last line. And prose intrudes in the choice of words as well as in images. Take, for example, the use of the word “domiciled” in the passage in the same poem about—

that western sea,
As it swells and sobs,
Where she once domiciled.

There are infelicities of the same kind in the first verse of the poem called *At an Inn*:—



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When we, as strangers, sought
Their catering care,
Veiled smiles bespoke their thought
Of what we were.

They warmed as they opined
Us more than friends—
That we had all resigned
For love's dear ends.

“Catering care” is an appalling phrase.

I do not wish to over-emphasize the significance of flaws of this kind. But, at a time when all the world is eager to do honour to Mr. Hardy's poems, it is surely well to refrain from doing equal honour to his faults. We shall not appreciate the splendid interpretation of earth in *The Return of the Native* more highly for persuading ourselves that:—

Intermissive aim at the thing sufficeth,

is a line of good poetry. Similarly the critic, if he is to enjoy the best of Mr. Hardy, must also be resolute not to shut his eyes to the worst in such a verse as that with which *A Broken Appointment* begins:—

You did not come,
And marching time drew on, and wore me numb,—
Yet less for loss of your dear presence there
Than that I thus found lacking in your make
That high compassion which can overbear
Reluctance for pure loving kindness' sake
Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its sum,
You did not come.

There are hints of the grand style of lyric poetry in these lines, but phrases like “in your make” and “as the hope-hour stroked its sum” are discords that bring it tumbling to the levels of Victorian commonplace.

What one does bless Mr. Hardy for, however, both in his verse and in his prose, is his bleak sincerity. He writes out of the reality of his experience. He has a temperament sensitive beyond that of all but a few recent writers to the pain and passion of human beings. Especially is he sensitive to the pain and passion of frustrated lovers. At least half his poems, I fancy, are poems of frustration. And they, hold us under the spell of reality like a tragedy in a neighbour's house, even when they leave us most mournful over the emptiness of the world. One can see how very mournful Mr. Hardy's genius is



if one compares it with that of Browning, his master in the art of the dramatic lyric. Browning is also a poet of frustrated lovers. One can remember poem after poem of his with a theme that might easily have served for Mr. Hardy—*Too Late*, *Cristina*, *The Lost Mistress*, *The Last Ride Together*, *The Statue and the Bust*, to name a few. But what a sense of triumph there is in Browning's tragedies! Even when he writes of the feeble-hearted, as in *The Statue and the Bust*, he leaves us with the feeling that we are in the presence of weakness in a world in which courage prevails. His world is a place of opulence, not of poverty. Compare *The Last Ride Together* with Mr. Hardy's *The Phantom Horsewoman*, and you will see a vast energy and beauty issuing from loss in the one, while in the other there is little but a sad shadow. To have loved even for an hour is with Browning to live for ever after in the inheritance of a mighty achievement. To have loved for an hour is, in Mr. Hardy's imagination, to have deepened the sadness even more than the beauty of one's memories.



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Not that Mr. Hardy's is quite so miserable a genius as is commonly supposed. It is false to picture him as always on his knees before the grave-worm. His faith in beauty and joy may be only a thin flame, but it is never extinguished. His beautiful lyric, *I Look into my Glass*, is the cry of a soul dark but not utterly darkened:—

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say: "Would God, it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!"

For then, I, undistrest,
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.

That is certainly worlds apart from the unquenchable joy of Browning's "All the breath and the bloom of the world in the bag of one bee"; but it is also far removed from the "Lo! you may always end it where you will" of *The City of Dreadful Night*. And despair is by no means triumphant in what is perhaps the most attractive of all Mr. Hardy's poems, *The Oxen*:—

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock,
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If some one said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"



I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

The mood of faith, however—or, rather, of delight in the memory of faith—is not Mr. Hardy’s prevailing mood. At the same time, his unfaith relates to the duration of love rather than to human destiny. He believes in “the world’s amendment.” He can enter upon a war without ironical doubts, as we see in the song *Men who March Away*. More than this, he can look forward beyond war to the coming of a new patriotism of the world. “How long,” he cries, in a poem written some years ago:—

How long, O ruling Teutons, Slavs, and Gaels,
Must your wrath reasonings trade on lives like these,
That are as puppets in a playing hand?
When shall the saner softer polities
Whereof we dream, have sway in each proud land,
And Patriotism, grown Godlike, scorn to stand
Bondslave to realms, but circle earth and seas?

But, perhaps, his characteristic attitude to war is to be found, not in lines like these, but in that melancholy poem, *The Souls of the Slain*, in which the souls of the dead soldiers return to their country and question a “senior soul-flame” as to how their friends and relatives have kept their doughty deeds in remembrance:—



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“And, General, how hold out our sweethearts,
Sworn loyal as doves?”
“Many mourn; many think
It is not unattractive to prink
Them in sable for heroes. Some fickle and fleet hearts
Have found them new loves.”

“And our wives?” quoth another, resignedly,
“Dwell they on our deeds?”
“Deeds of home; that live yet
Fresh as new—deeds of fondness or fret,
Ancient words that were kindly expressed or unkindly,
These, these have their heeds.”

Mr. Hardy has too bitter a sense of reality to believe much in the glory of war. His imagination has always been curiously interested in soldiers, but that is more because they have added a touch of colour to the tragic game of life than because he is on the side of the military show. One has only to read *The Dynasts* along with *Barrack-room Ballads* to see that the attitude of Mr. Hardy to war is the attitude of the brooding artist in contrast with that of the music-hall politician. Not that Mr. Kipling did not tell us some truths about the fate of our fellows, but he related them to an atmosphere that savoured of beer and tobacco rather than of eternity. The real world to Mr. Hardy is the world of ancient human things, in which war has come to be a hideous irrelevance. That is what he makes emphatically clear in *In the Time of the Breaking of Nations*:—

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch grass:
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by;
War's annals will fade into night
Ere their story die

It may be thought, on the other hand, that Mr. Hardy's poems about war are no more expressive of tragic futility than his poems about love. Futility and frustration are ever-recurring themes in both. His lovers, like his soldiers, rot in the grave defeated of their glory. Lovers are always severed both in life and in death:—



Rain on the windows, creaking doors,
With blasts that besom the green,
And I am here, and you are there,
And a hundred miles between!

In *Beyond the Last Lamp* we have the same mournful cry over severance. There are few sadder poems than this with its tristful refrain, even in the works of Mr. Hardy. It is too long to quote in full, but one may give the last verses of this lyric of lovers in a lane:

When I re-trod that watery way
Some hours beyond the droop of day,
Still I found pacing there the twain
Just as slowly, just as sadly,
Heedless of the night and rain.
One could but wonder who they were
And what wild woe detained them there.



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Though thirty years of blur and blot
Have slid since I beheld that spot,
And saw in curious converse there
 Moving slowly, moving sadly,
 That mysterious tragic pair,
Its olden look may linger on—
All but the couple; they have gone.

Whither? Who knows, indeed.... And yet
To me, when nights are weird and wet,
Without those comrades there at tryst
 Creeping slowly, creeping sadly,
 That love-lane does not exist.
There they seem brooding on their pain,
And will, while such a lane remain.

And death is no kinder than life to lovers:—

I shall rot here, with those whom in their day
 You never knew.
And alien ones who, ere they chilled to clay,
 Met not my view,
Will in yon distant grave-place ever neighbour you.

No shade of pinnacle or tree or tower,
 While earth endures,
Will fall on my mound and within the hour
 Steal on to yours;
One robin never haunt our two green covertures.

Mr. Hardy, fortunately, has the genius to express the burden and the mystery even of a world grey with rain and commonplace in achievement. There is a beauty of sorrow in these poems in which “life with the sad, seared face” mirrors itself without disguise. They bring us face to face with an experience intenser than our own. There is nothing common in the tragic image of dullness in *A Common-place Day*:—

The day is turning ghost,
And scuttles from the kalendar in fits and furtively,
 To join the anonymous host
Of those that throng oblivion; ceding his place, maybe,
 To one of like degree....

Nothing of tiniest worth
Have I wrought, pondered, planned; no one thing asking blame or praise,



Since the pale corpse-like birth
Of this diurnal unit, bearing blanks in all its rays—
Dullest of dull-hued days!

Wanly upon the panes
The rain slides, as have slid since morn my colourless thoughts; and yet
Here, while Day's presence wanes,
And over him the sepulchre-lid is slowly lowered and set,
He wakens my regret.

In the poem which contains these verses the emotion of the poet gives words often undistinguished an almost Elizabethan rhythm. Mr. Hardy, indeed, is a poet who often achieves music of verses, though he seldom achieves music of phrase.

We must, then, be grateful without niggardliness for the gift of his verse. On the larger canvas of his prose we find a vision more abundant, more varied, more touched with humour. But his poems are the genuine confessions of a soul, the meditations of a man of genius, brooding not without bitterness but with pity on the paths that lead to the grave, and the figures that flit along them so solitarily and so ineffectually.



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2. A POET IN WINTER

In the last poem in his last book, *Moments of Vision*, Mr. Hardy meditates on his own immortality, as all men of genius probably do at one time or another. *Afterwards*, the poem in which he does so, is interesting, not only for this reason, but because it contains implicitly a definition and a defence of the author's achievement in literature. The poem is too long to quote in full, but the first three verses will be sufficient to illustrate what I have said:

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,
And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the people say:
"He was a man who used to notice such things"?

If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid's soundless blink,
The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn, will a gazer think:
"To him this must have been a familiar sight"?

If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm,
When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn,
Will they say: "He strove that such innocent creatures should come to no harm,
But he could do little for them; and now he is gone"?

Even without the two other verses, we have here a remarkable attempt on the part of an artist to paint a portrait, as it were, of his own genius.

Mr. Hardy's genius is essentially that of a man who "used to notice such things" as the fluttering of the green leaves in May, and to whom the swift passage of a night-jar in the twilight has "been a familiar sight." He is one of the most sensitive observers of nature who have written English prose. It may even be that he will be remembered longer for his studies of nature than for his studies of human nature. His days are among his greatest characters, as in the wonderful scene on the heath in the opening of *The Return of the Native*. He would have written well of the world, one can imagine, even if he had found it uninhabited. But his sensitiveness is not merely sensitiveness of the eye: it is also sensitiveness of the heart. He has, indeed, that hypersensitive sort of temperament, as the verse about the hedgehog suggests, which is the victim at once of pity and of a feeling of hopeless helplessness. Never anywhere else has there been such a world of pity put into a quotation as Mr. Hardy has put into that line and a half from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which he placed on the title-page of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*:—

Poor wounded name, my bosom as a bed
Shall lodge thee!

In the use to which he put these words Mr. Hardy may be said to have added to the poetry of Shakespeare. He gave them a new imaginative context, and poured his own heart into them. For the same helpless pity which he feels for dumb creatures he feels for men and women:



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... He strove that such innocent creatures should come to no harm,
But he could do little for them.

It is the spirit of pity brooding over the landscape in Mr. Hardy's books that makes them an original and beautiful contribution to literature, in spite of his endless errors as an artist.

His last book is a reiteration both of his genius and of his errors. As we read the hundred and sixty or so poems it contains we get the impression of genius presiding over a multitude of errors. There are not half a dozen poems in the book the discovery of which, should the author's name be forgotten, would send the critics in quest of other work from the same magician's hand. One feels safe in prophesying immortality for only two, *The Oxen* and *In Time of "the Breaking of Nations"*; and these have already appeared in the selection of the author's poems published in the Golden Treasury Series. The fact that the entirely new poems contain nothing on the plane of immortality, however, does not mean that *Moments of Vision* is a book of verse about which one has the right to be indifferent. No writer who is so concerned as Mr. Hardy with setting down what his eyes and heart have told him can be regarded with indifference. Mr. Hardy's art is lame, but it carries the burden of genius. He may be a stammerer as a poet, but he stammers in words of his own concerning a vision of his own. When he notes the bird flying past in the dusk, "like an eyelid's soundless blink," he does not achieve music, but he chronicles an experience, not merely echoes one, with such exact truth as to make it immortally a part of all experience. There is nothing borrowed or secondhand, again, in Mr. Hardy's grim vision of the yew-trees in the churchyard by moonlight in *Jubilate*:

The yew-tree arms, glued hard to the stiff, stark air,
Hung still in the village sky as theatre-scenes.

Mr. Hardy may not enable us to hear the music which is more than the music of the earth, but he enables us to see what he saw. He communicates his spectacle of the world. He builds his house lopsided, harsh, and with the windows in unusual places; but it is his own house, the house of a seer, of a personality. That is what we are aware of in such a poem as *On Sturminster Foot Bridge*, in which perfect and precise observation of nature is allied to intolerably prosaic utterance. The first verse of this poem runs:

Reticulations creep upon the slack stream's face
When the wind skims irritably past.
The current clucks smartly into each hollow place
That years of flood have scabbled in the pier's sodden base;
The floating-lily leaves rot fast.



One could make as good music as that out of a milk-cart. One would accept such musicless verse only from a man of genius. But even here Mr. Hardy takes us home with him and makes us stand by his side and listen to the clucking stream. He takes us home with him again in the poem called *Overlooking the River Stour*, which begins:



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The swallows flew in the curves of an eight
Above the river-gleam
In the wet June's last beam:
Like little crossbows animate,
The swallows flew in the curves of an eight
Above the river-gleam.

Planing up shavings made of spray,
A moor-hen darted out
From the bank thereabout.
And through the stream-shine ripped her way;
Planing up shavings made of spray,
A moor-hen darted out.

In this poem we find observation leaping into song in one line and hobbling into a hard-wrought image in another. Both the line in which the first appears, however—

Like little crossbows animate,

and the line in which the second happens—

Planing up shavings made of spray,

equally make us feel how watchful and earnest an observer is Mr. Hardy. He is a man, we realize, to whom bird and river, heath and stone, road and field and tree, mean immensely more than to his fellows. I do not suggest that he observes nature without bias—that he mirrors the procession of visible things with the delight of a child or a lyric poet. He makes nature his mirror as well as himself a mirror of nature. He colours it with all his sadness, his helplessness, his (if one may invent the word and use it without offence) warpedness. If I am not mistaken, he once compared a bleak morning in *The Woodlanders* to the face of a still-born baby. He loves to dwell on the uncomfortable moods of nature—on such things as:—

... the watery light
Of the moon in its old age;

concerning which moon he goes on to describe how:

Green-rheumed clouds were hurrying past where mute and cold it globed
Like a dying dolphin's eye seen through a lapping wave.

This, I fear, is a failure, but it is a failure in a common mood of the author's. It is a mood in which nature looks out at us, almost ludicrous in its melancholy. In such a poem as that from which I have quoted, it is as though we saw nature with a drip on the end of its



nose. Mr. Hardy's is something different from a tragic vision. It is a desolate, disheartening, and, in a way, morbid vision. We wander with him too often under—

Gaunt trees that interlace,
Through whose flayed fingers I see too clearly
The nakedness of the place.

And Mr. Hardy's vision of the life of men and women transgresses similarly into a denial of gladness. His gloom, we feel, goes too far. It goes so far that we are tempted at times to think of it as a factitious gloom. He writes a poem called *Honeymoon Time at an Inn*, and this is the characteristic atmosphere in which he introduces us to the bridegroom and bride:

At the shiver of morning, a little before the false dawn,
The moon was at the window-square,
Deedily brooding in deformed decay—
The curve hewn off her cheek as by an adze;
At the shiver of morning, a little before the false dawn,
So the moon looked in there.



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There are no happy lovers or happy marriages in Mr. Hardy's world. Such people as are happy would not be happy if only they knew the truth. Many of Mr. Hardy's poems are, as I have already said, dramatic lyrics on the pattern invented by Robert Browning—short stories in verse. But there is a certain air of triumph even in Browning's tragic figures. Mr. Hardy's figures are the inmates of despair. Browning's love-poems belong to heroic literature. Mr. Hardy's love-poems belong to the literature of downheartedness. Browning's men and women are men and women who have had the courage of their love, or who are shown at least against a background of Browning's own courage. Mr. Hardy's men and women do not know the wild faith of love. They have not the courage even of their sins. They are helpless as fishes in a net—a scarcely rebellious population of the ill-matched and the ill-starred.

Many of the poems in his last book fail through a lack of imaginative energy. It is imaginative energy that makes the reading of a great tragedy like *King Lear* not a depressing, but an exalting experience. But is there anything save depression to be got from reading such a poem as *A Caged Goldfinch*:—

Within a churchyard, on a recent grave,
I saw a little cage
That jailed a goldfinch. All was silence, save
Its hops from stage to stage.

There was inquiry in its wistful eye.
And once it tried to sing;
Of him or her who placed it there, and why,
No one knew anything.

True, a woman was found drowned the day ensuing,
And some at times averred
The grave to be her false one's, who when wooing
Gave her the bird.

Apart even from the ludicrous associations which modern slang has given the last phrase, making it look like a queer pun, this poem seems to one to drive sorrow over the edge of the ridiculous. That goldfinch has surely escaped from a Max-Beerbohm parody. The ingenuity with which Mr. Hardy plots tragic situations for his characters in some of his other poems is, indeed, in repeated danger of misleading him into parody. One of his poems tells, for instance, how a stranger finds an old man scrubbing a Statue of Liberty in a city square, and, hearing he does it for love, hails him as "Liberty's knight divine." The old man confesses that he does not care twopence for Liberty, and declares that he keeps the statue clean in memory of his beautiful daughter, who had sat as a model for it—a girl fair in fame as in form. In the interests of his plot and his dismal philosophy, Mr. Hardy identifies the stranger with the sculptor of the statue, and



dismisses us with his blighting aside on the old man's credulous love of his dead daughter:

Answer I gave not. Of that form
The carver was I at his side;
His child my model, held so saintly,
Grand in feature.
Gross in nature,
In the dens of vice had died.



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This is worse than optimism.

It is only fair to say that, though poem after poem—including the one about the fat young man whom the doctors gave only six months to live unless he walked a great deal, and who therefore was compelled to refuse a drive in the poet's phaeton, though night was closing over the heath—dramatizes the meaningless miseries of life, there is also to be found in some of the poems a faint sunset-glow of hope, almost of faith. There have been compensations, we realize in *I Travel as a Phantom Now*, even in this world of skeletons. Mr. Hardy's fatalism concerning God seems not very far from faith in God in that beautiful Christmas poem, *The Oxen*. Still, the ultimate mood of the poems is not faith. It is one of pity, so despairing as to be almost nihilism. There is mockery in it without the merriment of mockery. The general atmosphere of the poems, it seems to me, is to be found perfectly expressed in the last three lines of one of the poems, which is about a churchyard, a dead woman, a living rival, and the ghost of a soldier:

There was a cry by the white-flowered mound,
There was a laugh from underground,
There was a deeper gloom around.

How much of the art of Thomas Hardy is suggested in those lines! The laugh from underground, the deeper gloom—are they not all but omnipresent throughout his later and greatest work? The war could not deepen such pessimism. As a matter of fact, Mr. Hardy's war poetry is more cheerful, because more heroic, than his poetry about the normal world. Destiny was already crueller than any war-lord. The Prussian, to such an imagination, could be no more than a fly—a poisonous fly—on the wheel of destiny's disastrous car.