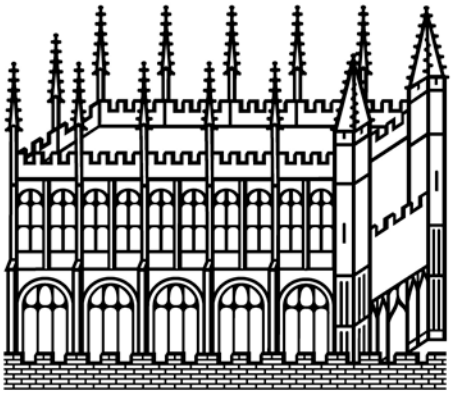

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BY

JOHN FREEMAN

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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JOHN FREEMAN

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MCMXXIV

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY MORRISON AND GIBB LTD., EDINBURGH

TO

THE UNKNOWN EDITOR

UNKNOWN, but not mythic; unmet, perhaps never to be met; a representative figure, yet not a public one; punctual, yet unhurried; capable of reasons, yet wisely withholding them; patient though pursued, faint yet pursuing; silent, an unknown writer as well as unknown editor, subduing himself to his contributors and so subduing them to himself;—a badger, "noblest of English beasts."

I cannot name him, his name is Legion. Features of his show in others' looks, his kindness and forbearance appear in their mortal manners; I see him in their impulses but not in their misgivings, in their loyalties but not in their timidities. I am full of gratitude to him, to them, and if an all but unknown contributor may record particulars I will add that the following essays owe their first appearance to the editors of *The Quarterly Review*, *The London Mercury*, and *The Bookman*.

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I

A CANTERBURY PILGRIM

I

"A CANTERBURY PILGRIM"—for was he not among those that set out in showery April from Southwark at the Tabard, though unaccountably missed by Chaucer in his catalogue of pilgrims? He rode an ass, amusing the others by the contrast of his cheerful bulk swaying over the waggish ears, with the thin strong corpse of the pathetic beast, but amusing himself most of all. Sometimes he or the ass urged forward, sometimes strayed to the rear, but most often he was to be found talking to the Franklin and the liveried Haberdasher, Carpenter, and the rest, or shouting at the "som-del deef" Wife of Bath; yet not always talking or shouting, but at whiles listening and then letting his head fall into thoughtfulness equally brief.

Often had he dreamed of such a pilgrimage, for, like many townsmen, he hated the town because he feared it, and dreams are born of

fears. In a vision of the future he had seen, clearly and painfully, great cities scurfing the land, grey obscure blotches on the green, black islands on every river, smoking and increasing clouds at every port; and in all these cities men huddled together, no longer eager to escape but contented to dwell in them and breed in them and die in yet larger cities than they were born in, if only their homes might be made a little more comfortable, the sense of insecurity diminished, and hunger removed a thought farther away. That vision—a recurring vision like the fear of insanity—and that vision alone had power to sadden him, for although he was nearing fifty he still wondered equally at men's failure to obey their impulses and the failure to follow their reason; and so before he had ridden a mile from London he found himself suddenly shaken from dismal thoughts by the voice of the Franklin and only then realised that he had been wandering. He answered the Franklin with a smile and returned jest for jest as they all moved slowly and disorderly forward.

But of the talk that took place I do not now intend to speak; some of it is written in *The Canterbury Tales*, and what is lost will never be recovered now. An obstinate fate kept him apart from that silent pilgrim of elvish counten-

ance who at the bidding of the seemly host began the "Tale of Sir Thopas"; and the same fate deprived us of the tale told by our friend as he hung over the slender spine of his ass. It was a merry story of unreasonable nonsense, at which the choleric Reeve scoffed, the Clerk listened in critic wise (thinking he had heard parts of it before but never so fantastically told), and the Wife of Bath and various others chuckled. It is a lost tale, but I would rather recover it than much else that was said on this mirthfully pious pilgrimage.

Why was he there, a stranger from another time, setting out with these from their own city —his city also—and ambling thus happily towards Canterbury? He wanted to see Canterbury, but not for that alone would he have burdened his ass and endured so certain an insecurity. More than that, he wanted to join in a pilgrimage, to partake of the discomforts and the felicities of the journey, to break spiritual and material bread with his fellows of all degrees, to feel what they felt, which is not always easy, and to give them what he felt, which is still harder. Yet a pilgrimage to Canterbury, though he delighted in it, was but a makeshift, a shadow of another delight. It was not a pilgrimage that he desired to share in, but a Crusade: Jerusalem

called him, and it was his unspoken regret that he was born too late in time to join in any of those splendid, sacred, vain enterprises against the Eastern thieves of the Lord's tomb. His imagination quickened at any touch of splendid and heroic, and most of all at the thought of those who had gone forth to restore a violated sanctity and expunge a shameful humiliation. Sounds yet filled his ears that had been flung up at the walls of Jerusalem, prayers were still on his lips that had been uttered beneath the walls of Jerusalem, the dazzling was still before his eyes of the spears and shields that had advanced against the walls of Jerusalem. How could he not lament the passage of centuries? He longed for what had gone by partly because it had gone and partly because forgetfulness seemed disloyalty. Two hundred years ago Richard Cœur de Lion had marched magnificently to the Holy Land; but the time of the Crusades was past and a smaller spirit now stirred in men. But religion was still a public thing, and men did not yet scruple to wear their hearts upon their sleeves or nodding from their bonnets; and when he thought of religion and the tomb of his Lord he thought not of a private joy or grief but of a public festival or Lent. Yet beneath his public frankness there was this private

longing—a longing that Christ would come again not in the Future but in a returning Past ; and this private conviction—that the best that had been was indestructible and, might it but be revived, would become precious again to all men, purged of casual faults and the accidents of time. The future was dumb and indifferent or, so far as he saw it, was violently broken off from the past and therefore a betrayal ; his fond eyes were set upon a rebuilding of the past, a return to a freer, simpler, and easier life which instinct and reason alike might justify. For those strong-winged, divine monitors, instinct and reason, held equal though alternating sway over him ; but while instinct prompted him even now to urge this voluble pilgrim company to set their eyes not upon near Canterbury but upon distant Jerusalem, reason bade him stay and share in the life that streamed by his side and be but a man among men with a gift of speech a little fuller, a little richer of humour, than that of those around. Thus sometimes he was saved by instinct, when reason ruled too narrowly, and sometimes by reason when instinct was like a live eel in a horse ; between the two he was sane and passionate, humorous and serious, faithful and critical, a pious rebel—true member of the motley company that made the road

dusty here and muddy there as they stumbled slowly from hole to hole.

Of his satisfaction on reaching Canterbury, the silence that struck him suddenly in the shadow of its walls, the graver silence that glorified the spot where the Martyr had fallen, of the prayers of the pilgrims and their meetings with other pilgrims, and of the journey back to London when other tales were told, we know nothing certainly. What has disappeared in time can only be recaptured by the imagination that broods upon the bosom of that dark until it conceives, and a new creation is born. Even he remembers it now only as a dream, with a surety that once, in the dark backward and abysm of time, he did so join in the common movement and share the devotion, the delight, the weariness, and the blessing of the Canterbury Pilgrims.

II

It is without hesitation that I seize upon the natural piety of Mr. G. K. Chesterton as his primary distinction. His humour, high spirits, vehemence, clearness of vision and perverse reason are conspicuous but secondary qualities, making him something of a poet and more of a critic, but not, as that rarer quality makes him,

a more distinguished character. He laughs with a hint of the riotousness of Rabelais, but he is without the indecency and also, it must be admitted, without the astringent excellences of Rabelais. He has high spirits, truly, but not the creative eagerness which made Dickens's high spirits always welcome or endurable; he is as vehement as Carlyle, but he lacks the vehement poetry of Carlyle; he is clear-sighted, but without the self-immolating passion which made Swift's clearness of vision so impressive and disturbing; he is brilliantly and perversely reasonable, but without the faithful beauty of speech that made Ruskin readable even when most perverse. But all these qualities, which are definitely his own, although in unequal degree, are subdued to his natural piety—a quality that still survives the contempt attached to its name. It knits together the strange disorder of his gifts, and so he sustains the ardour of an apostle even while enjoying part of the satisfaction of an artist. Thus he is able to speak of Mr. Hardy as a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot, without offending the many who worship Mr. Hardy and nothing else in the world; for his phrase is sincere, and those who do not accept it recognise that it is spoken without arrogant and stupid contempt. Moreover, he has already

prepared the reader with a breath of humour by speaking of Meredith and Mr. Hardy as free-thinkers who escaped from the Victorian city and found themselves in the fork of two naturalistic paths; one path going upwards through a forest to lonely, healthy hills, and the other down to a swamp. Mr. Hardy, he says, went down to botanise in the swamp. And again, he suggests that it is not often necessary to invent God in order to prove how unnecessary and undesirable He is; but Mr. Hardy is anthropomorphic out of sheer atheism. Clearness of vision enables Mr. Chesterton to make the further remark, in distinguishing between Meredith and Mr. Hardy, that it was the man with the healthy outlook who had the crabbed and perverse style, and the man with the crabbed and perverse outlook who had the healthy and manly style. Our author is good at distinctions and dichotomies, and fond of contriving meaningless ones; but it is not to call attention to his habit that I refer at this point to his remarks on the two novelists and poets, but to show how naturally he speaks out of a religious mind.

Mr. Chesterton did not go to Jerusalem to find Jerusalem, or even to write *The New Jerusalem*, one of the latest and one of the best of his books; rather was it to compare the visible with

the invisible city. An impulse of old devotion sent and sustained him, and is traceable like a dark vein through the body of the book. He extravagates as amazingly, as amusingly as ever, but that original impulse is nevertheless the life of his story. That he has actually made the pilgrimage, that he has stood before the Holy Sepulchre and ascended the Mount of Olives, that he has seen the city in Christian hands again at last is a deep joy; for his dream is confirmed. Æsthetic incongruities do not disgust him, for what is tawdry cannot be simply tawdry while it remains a symbol of what is eternal; no wonder will seem wonderful, he cries, neither Sepulchre nor Pyramid, skylark nor Sphinx, unless it is looked at in a spirit of historical humility. That, too, is an expression of his humane religion.

He is far from being an impeccable writer, but *The New Jerusalem* is the least faulty of his books and contains pages of his finest prose. I find it hard not to quote more than a few lines from the chapter in which he looks over the buried cities of the Plain:

"There was something already suggested about the steep scenery through which I went as I thought about these things; a sense of silent catastrophe and fundamental cleavage in the deep

division of the cliffs and crags. They were all the more profoundly moving, because my sense of them was almost as subconscious as the subconsciousness about which I was reflecting. I had fallen again into the old habit of forgetting where I was going, and seeing things with one eye off, in a blind abstraction. I awoke from a sort of trance of absent-mindedness in a landscape that might well awaken anybody. It might awaken a man sleeping; but he would think he was still in a nightmare. It might wake the dead, but they would probably think they were in hell. Half-way down the slope the hills had taken on a certain pallor which had about it something primitive, as if the colours were not yet created. There was only a kind of cold and wan blue in the local skies which contrasted with wild skyline. Perhaps we are accustomed to the contrary condition of the clouds moving and mutable and the hills solid and serene; but anyhow there seemed something of the making of a new world about the quiet of the skies and the cold convulsion of the landscape. But if it was between chaos and creation, it was creation by God or at least by the gods, something with an aim in its anarchy. It was very different in the final stage of the descent, where my mind woke up from its meditations. One can only say that the whole landscape was like a leper. It was of a wasting white and silver and grey, with mere dots of decadent vegetation like the green spots of a plague. In

shape it not only rose into horns and crests like waves or clouds, but I believe it actually alters like waves or clouds, visibly but with a loathsome slowness. The swamp is alive. And I found again a certain advantage in forgetfulness; for I saw all this incredible country before I even remembered its name, or the ancient tradition about its nature. Then even the green plague-spots failed, and everything seemed to fall away into a universal blank under the staring sun, as I came, in the great spaces of the circle of a lifeless sea, into the silence of Sodom and Gomorrah."

If He did not come, he adds, to do battle with abominable things, even in the darkness of the brain of man, I know not why He came. The same element of religion, religion as it is found smouldering in the general heart of inarticulate men or flaming in the heart of a few of the articulate, quickens the best of his poems. The Crusader in him has dictated the subject of "Lepanto" and made it a superb lyric, superb in impulse, rhythm, style. It is not a poem about Lepanto, as many men might have written, but a poem in which the name, and the great story clinging around it, have exalted him to the utterance of the magnificence, the heroism, the glory by which the Christian tradition lives in his mind:

" St. Michael's on his Mountain in the sea-roads of the north
(*Don John of Austria is girt and going forth*)
Where the grey seas glitter and the sharp tides shift
And the sea-folk labour and the red sails lift.
He shakes his lance of iron and he claps his wings of stone;
The noise is gone through Normandy; the noise is gone alone;
The North is full of tangled things and texts and aching eyes
And dead is all the innocence of anger and surprise,
And Christian killeth Christian in a narrow dusty room,
And Christian dreadeth Christ that hath a newer face of doom,
And Christian hateth Mary that God kissed in Galilee,
But Don John of Austria is riding to the sea.
Don John calling through the blast and the eclipse,
Crying with the trumpet, with the trumpet of his lips,
Trumpet that sayeth ha!
Domino gloria!
Don John of Austria
Is shouting to the ships."

And when he turns to his own country (in *A Short History of England*) his regard is still religious. Not in any story of mankind, he asserts, has the irony of God chosen the foolish things so catastrophically to confound the wise; for the common crowd of poor and ignorant Englishmen, because they only knew that they were Englishmen, burst through the filthy cobwebs of four hundred years and stood where their fathers stood when they knew that they were Christian men. Mr. Chesterton has but to lift his head and speak suddenly from his heart, and

out of that dark, heaving forest of intuitions and traditions there issues a simple nobility of speech.

That foolish things should be chosen to confound the wise is the theme of *The Ballad of the White Horse,* where it is used with almost equal fervour and facility. Like *The New Jerusalem,* the Ballad has a central religiousness, but except in a few passages it is uninformed by the seriousness of poetry and even wanting in the seriousness of the author's better prose. It is remarkable and sad that the sincerity of the idea should be so wantonly damaged by mere carelessness. Alfred has come down to us, says the author, as Arthur and Roland have come down, by national legends, because he fought for the Christian civilisation against the heathen nihilism ; and that spacious, undying contest dominates and gives unity to the Ballad, as it dominates and gives unity to most of Mr. Chesterton's work in prose and verse. But how dissipated is the impulse, how slack the obedience, how casual the seeing eye, how slovenly the recording hand! The Ballad is almost the worst of Mr. Chesterton's poems, yet has passages of his truest inspiration to rebuke and redeem the whole. He has outraged even the ample indulgences of his metre, and his contempt for form, not a small thing in itself, becomes greatly significant when it spoils his

presentation of a genuine vision. The battle-piece has power and joy and is therefore a credible relation, but best of all is Alfred's expression of the antagonism between faith and nihilism :

> " When all philosophies shall fail,
> This word alone shall fit ;
> That a sage feels too small for life,
> And a fool too large for it."

In his dark vision Alfred utters a prophecy of the ever-recurring invasion :

> " When is great talk of trend and tide,
> And wisdom and destiny,
> Hail that undying heathen
> That is sadder than the sea——"

the old barbarian, whose reincursion will be marked by terror and cruel tales of hereditary curses, by men becoming slaves without a lord, by the revival, in short, of all those ills and enormities against which the great King's lyrist has cried in consistent defiance. There is more of our day than of Alfred's day in this, but the visionary quality of the Ballad is scarcely impaired by this fact ; and in reading it I am constantly reminded that the briefest mental revisitation of vanished England is sufficient to animate our author with at least the indignation of ancient prophecy.

III

Mr. Chesterton has the faculty of pouring all his qualities, good and ill alike, into the merest essay, the slightest whimsey; but while his native religiousness is not often explicit, though generally present, those other qualities of humour, perverse reason and the rest, are nearly always explicit—clamorous, even, as rooks and jays, iterative as the cuckoo. There is a ferment of good things, a froth of poor things, a rich confusion, an uncostly prodigality, a creaking facetiousness; the best is jostled by the worst, what is easy cumbers what is fine. The Canterbury Pilgrim becomes a cheap-jack, and with the weeds of that finely-purposed errand still clinging to him he pours out the unrememberable jocosities of the music-hall. Many of his essays are but a kind of patter, meant to prepare you for the trick that is still and still delayed. Somewhere or other he denies energetically that anything on earth can be uninteresting; but his readers are not always so fortunate as to confirm him. He jokes without difficulty, but not without difficulty do we laugh. All undivine are the garrulities which he dribbles into newspapers, yet they are irritating and deplorable rather than contemptible, for we do not want a man of fine mind and masculine

wits to behave like a red-nosed comedian : it is the waste that enrages. He stands in the middle of the stage, voluble and good-humoured, jingling his keys, screwing up his eyes and smalling his voice ; he aims—if at anything—at a " popular," a democratic art, and as he stands there seems to lack everything but courage. And even while that ineloquent exuberance is calling for a laugh, and a laugh rippling the huge, drowsy audience, it is hard to forget that the comedian is the Pilgrim and Crusader. Is there, then, a hint of unconscious betrayal, a hint which it is impossible to put by ? The hint is also a reminder of how much there is to betray. Is it mere carelessness of his own great gifts, is it uneven sensitiveness, is it singular humility that leads him so often to forget what we cannot forget ?

It is not a question of mere native limitations but of discipline refused ; but the limitations also are remarkable. Read an early book such as *The Defendant*, and then read essays written twenty years later or at any time during the twenty years, and you are soon aware of an obstinately static mind. The subject is the same, the style is the same, the wisdom is the same, the joke is the same. As a man goes on towards the grave, he says, he discovers gradually a philosophy he can really call fresh, a style he

can really call his own, and as he becomes an older man he becomes a new writer. Alas, that it is not true of Mr. Chesterton! Ideas still, as ever, come up like grass — the same ideas; paradoxes still glitter like beetles — the same paradoxes; jokes still trickle and sputter down—the same jokes. He still shows—oh, easily enough!—that things are not what they seem, without showing what they truly are; he still proves that things are misnamed, without breathing the right names; he still chatters amusingly, without saying the things we want to hear, and without telling us of himself of whom we most want to hear. And is it not odd, indeed, that the most garrulous and expansive of authors should never speak of himself? Of his opinions and externalities he speaks incessantly; but of himself, the creature of ancestry, time and eternity, of his own inward life and personal history, he speaks nothing. Scarce any writer of our time has spared so insignificant a fraction of autobiography. To ask Mr. Chesterton for the introspection of Barbellion would be impertinent and stupid; but can we be content with so exhaustive an absence of introspection? Did he never live, feel, think, apprehend, guess, fear until he started writing so bewilderingly upon others' lives and guesses? That he is a Cockney, that he has

lived in Kensington and Battersea, that he has made little tours in France, Palestine, and America—the facts that have meant much to him mean incredibly little to us. Opinions have choked idea, and the autobiography of a pilgrim from one world through another remains unwritten. The incapacity for autobiography is significant, but I hesitate to think that it may signify merely a shallow life. Mr. Chesterton might consciously choose to avoid the common fondness of these bad days, and could, if he liked, retort that Shakespeare, then, was shallow and Rousseau profound; to which I should answer only with a personal avowal of interest in the tree as well as the flower and fruit—in its soil, first fortunate stem and tender leaves, in those obscure, entrancing facts which make Aksakoff more interesting than Macaulay. My complaint may seem to amount to a single foolish charge—that he is not imaginative enough; and I would rather say that his imagination is too lightly overcome by an exorbitant—what? Fancy, intelligence? His novels, which might be all of imagination in their origin and atmosphere, serve but to recall to us the old distinction between imagination and fancy; for imagination, looking brightly in, falls back dismayed from the improvisations of fancy and nonsense. *Why does he write*

this—and this—and this? you ask in perplexity; knowing a merely cynical answer false; yet in avoiding cynicism you are driven to pondering the evils of writing incessantly upon a broomstick, a broomstick that is never thrust into earth and never breaks into rosy flower.

IV

But complaints of every kind vanish when Mr. Chesterton secures a definite subject, and no subject has been so felicitous for him as Dickens. His book on Dickens is one of the best critical studies in the language, for its free humour does not blunt its critical sharpness. It is, indeed, this book that persuades me to plead for an *Autobiography of Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, since the spiritual beginnings of it are dimly perceived in the chapters which tell of his prompt and complete identification with the most imaginative inventions of the great English novelist. In his response to Dickens and his characters, Dickens and his story, Dickens and his style, there is an unfolding of his own personality; and while we learn much of Dickens we learn scarcely less of Mr. Chesterton. His own humour, his own grotesque ingenuity, his own whimsical style, his own natural preferences and antipathies

are revealed in all he says concerning Dickens's humour, ingenuity, style, and preferences; and apart from this special interest, his study of the novelist is comprehensively sympathetic. That Dickens had power, and the wantonness of conscious power, that he rejoiced in the mere excess of power, that he passed from unconscious and heedless art to conscious and careful art, that he was as full of effortless imaginations as the sea is full of life—Mr. Chesterton sees all this not only with the steadiness of a mature man but also with the dancing eyes of a child. Dickens, he cries, did not make a literature but a mythology. Unlike modern metaphysical critics, Mr. Chesterton does not translate his intuitions into abstract terms, but into concrete metaphors and vital images. And, too, he is untouched by that stealthy premonition of age which makes criticism so often tame, or rigid, or foolish, or mean. Even his facetiousness fades, or is subdued to a truer humour, and to glance back at this book over intervening books is to realise with a blissful sigh that jocoseness is not inveterate in him. I know that he kindles the dullest and I can believe that he does not fatigue the alertest reader. A hundred citations might be made, and it is scarcely by way of choice that I quote :

"The chief fountain in Dickens of what I have called cheerfulness, and some prefer to call optimism, is something deeper than a verbal philosophy. It is, after all, an incomparable hunger and pleasure for the vitality and the variety, for the infinite eccentricity of existence." Elsewhere he says that the art of Dickens was that most exquisite art of enjoying everybody. His generalisations are admirable, and it is in generalising what is seen and known rather than in divining what is unknown that he is most luckily employed. Hence when he speaks with enthusiastic affection of Toots he proceeds:

"It may be noticed that the great artists always choose great fools rather than great intellectuals to embody humanity. Hamlet does express the æsthetic dreams and the bewilderments of the intellect; but Bottom the weaver expresses them much better. . . . The great fool is he in whom we cannot tell which is the conscious and which the unconscious humour; we laugh with him and at him at the same time." "Incurably poetic" is his praise of Dickens. True that he condescends to "lessons" from Dickens, but the lesson of his own study is to be read in his constant plea for instinct and its liberties; a plea never more strongly recommended than by the spectacle of his own delighted movement in the sea of Dickens. In

the restless fertility of his mind lies his chief likeness to Dickens, and the chief difference is that while Dickens dances amid diversities of men and women, Mr. Chesterton dances amid our modern diversities of ideas and opinions. But he confronts a whole continent of strangeness, men as well as opinions, when he visits America and becomes aware of human energies in motion ; and in the end, although he speaks of the undiluted poison called progress, he is able to look to America for something healthy and hopeful. He laughs at the Englishman's habit of disdaining what is foreign and carrying his insularity with him whenever he leaves his island, yet he himself is like Johnson in Scotland, looking serenely upon the confusion of all the strange ; and when he returns he candidly reaffirms his conviction that travel narrows the mind.

The advantage of a subject is seen again in his small volume on *The Victorian Age in Literature*. Tenderer is his eye than ours for that age from which so much plaster has been stripped, but which yet stands, a solid, unhaunted house among neglected trees :

> " . . . The old house
> Outmoded, dignified,
> Dark and untenanted,
> With grass growing instead

Of the footsteps of life,
The friendliness, the strife;
In its beds have lain
Youth, love, age, and pain."

Indeed the Victorian age has more than a domestic attraction for him; rather is it as a tournament to old knights, full of causes and charges, compacts and vindications. The strife eddies endlessly around the "Victorian compromise," as he calls it, or the "Victorian rationalism," which seems to be another phrase for the same agitation; Victorian rationalism, he asserts, has done what is perhaps the worst of all damages to religion:

"It has driven it entirely into the power of the religious people. Men like Newman, men like Coventry Patmore, men who would have been mystics in any case, were driven back upon being much more extravagantly religious than they would have been in a religious country. Men like Huxley, men like Kingsley, men like most Victorian men were equally driven back on being irreligious; that is, on doubting things which men's normal imagination does not necessarily doubt. But certainly the most final and forcible fact is that this war ended like the battle of Sheriffmuir, as the poet says; they both did fight, and both did beat, and both did run away. They have left to their descendants a treaty that has become a dull torture. Men may believe

in immortality, and none of the men know why. Men may not believe in miracles, and none of the men know why. The Christian Church had been just strong enough to check the conquest of her chief citadels. The rationalist movement has been just strong enough to conquer some of her outposts, as it seemed, for ever. Neither was strong enough to expel the other ; and Victorian England was in a state which some call liberty and some call lockjaw."

It is in this large easy view of tormented currents that our author excels, and such views dazzle the reader who has been long accustomed to the academic discretions of the lecture and the guide-book. But the *obiter dicta* are of the old acuteness. Browning, for instance, sought God in a series of private interviews ; Carlyle and the Brontës represent romance from the North ; while " the nearest to a general definition of the Æsthetic movement is to call it the romance from the South. It is that warm wind that had never blown so strong since Chaucer, standing in his cold English April, had smelt the spring in Provence." Tennyson is the Englishman taking himself seriously, with " an unfortunate habit of eventually saying very nearly the opposite of what he meant to say," out of mere vagueness of thought. In Tennyson, England had settled

down and become Victorian—the plaster stared brightly from the walls. As acutely does he remark elsewhere, of another eminent Victorian, that when all the rôle of Arnold's real glories has been told there always remains a doubt as to whether he did like mankind. It is the broad test that he is fond of applying to men—are they lovers? Socialists are not lovers—and he hates socialism; men in crowds are not lovers—and he hates crowds; and men in spiritual or mental isolation are not lovers—and he hates whatever isolates, even when it is Arnold or Patmore who is self-isolated. It is a virtue of his *Victorian Age in Literature* that he sees that age in its tendencies as well as in its personalities, and is neither overwhelmed by tendencies nor silenced by personalities. Ultimately, perhaps, it is because the Victorian age is past, is part of the great swaying ocean out of which this insecure coral island of the present has been painfully lifted, that he feels tenderly towards it. His charities and loyalties, as I have said, refer to the past and are in their nature poetic and intuitive. *Gone, gone, gone!* mutters Time in his ear, and not the faintest sardonic note in the voice; and *I love, I love, I love!* breathes our G. K. C. in unending antiphony. Inevitably, if slowly, he becomes a Roman Catholic because England was once

Catholic; true it was hundreds of years ago, but that fact merely tends towards emphasising his dishumour with our own time and his honour of the past. The Church links the future to the past, else there would be no hope for the members of a modern State, his fear for democracy (in the grip of its own organisation) being the fear of godlessness. So far as the American democracy becomes or remains Catholic and Christian, it will remain democratic; but so far as it does not, he perceives, it will become wildly and wickedly undemocratic. For he dreads the Servile State, by whatever means it may come, and dreads it for æsthetic as much as for moral reasons. Indeed, it would not be very difficult to argue that his criticism of modern affairs and follies is primarily æsthetic, and it is part of his true praise that his æsthetic and his moral values are complementary, or even that they are identical.

V

. . . Yes, it is when he writes without a subject, and almost only then, that you observe his mind moving in a vacuum, busily idle; then do his small tricks become gross vices. The definitions that do not define, the inverted commonplaces that are still commonplaces, the sophistica-

tion of plain things into impossible symbols, the very habit of seeking symbols everywhere and playing with time, eternity, and the spirit of man as if they were the small change of a depreciated currency—have we not all writhed at these discursive indiscretions? Never was such a misnomer as *All Things Considered,* for consideration is what he refrains from. I do not object to his dogmatism but to his guesses, not to his conclusions so much as to his arguments, not to his matter so much as to his manner; and in the art of letters, manner counts for infinitely more than our confused man of letters can imagine.

For all his concern with serious things he has an unspeculative mind, and thus his argument is sometimes dull simply because it has no surprises, degenerating into the rapid clutter of a mill. But in the midst of the merest logomachy wise and witty things flit and hover like birds. "Man can be defined as an animal that hates dogmas," he cries. "When, in his own imagination, he sits as God, holding no form of creed but contemplating all, then he is by that very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of the vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of the grass. Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broadminded." Absurdity was never

happier. Grotesque inventions teem in his casual essays, for he is unsurpassed of living writers in his power of making false things absurd as well as false, cruel things foolish as well as cruel. An admirable instance is found in a reference to the *Maid of Orleans* and what is strangely known as the historical method :

" I have no knowledge of history, but I have as much knowledge of reason as Anatole France. And, if anything is irrational, it seems to me that the Renan-France way of dealing with miraculous stories is irrational. The Renan-France method is simply this : you explain supernatural stories that have some foundation simply by inventing natural stories that have no foundation. Suppose that you are confronted with the statement that Jack climbed up the beanstalk into the sky. It is perfectly philosophical to reply that you do not think that he did. It is (in my opinion) even more philosophical to reply that he may have done so. But the Renan-France method is to write like this : ' When we consider Jack's curious and even perilous heredity, which no doubt was derived from a female greengrocer and a profligate priest, we can easily understand how the ideas of heaven and a beanstalk came to be combined in his mind. Moreover, there is little doubt that he must have met some wandering conjurer from India, who told him about the tricks of the

mango plant, and how it is sent up to the sky. We can imagine these two friends, the old man and the young, wandering in the woods together at evening, looking at the red and level clouds, as on that night when the old man pointed to a small beanstalk, and told his too imaginative companion that this also might be made to scale the heavens. And then, when we remember the quite exceptional psychology of Jack, when we remember how there was in him a union of the prosaic, the love of plain vegetables, with an almost irrelevant eagerness for the unattainable, for invisibility and the void, we shall no longer wonder that it was to him especially that was sent this sweet, though merely symbolic, dream of the tree uniting earth and heaven.' That is the way that Renan and France write, only they do it better. But, really, a rationalist like myself becomes a little impatient and feels inclined to say: 'But, hang it all, what do you know about the heredity of Jack or the psychology of Jack? You know nothing about Jack at all, except that some people say that he climbed up a beanstalk. . . . You must interpret him in terms of the beanstalk religion; you cannot merely interpret religion in terms of him. We have the materials of this story, and we can believe them or not. But we have not got the materials to make another story!'"

How exact, how amusing, how deadly an echo!

I think of the excesses of psycho-analysis, of other extravagances wearing a scientific disguise, and with this echo still audible, this mockery still remembered, it is easy to apply its humorous sanity to the solemn nonsense which is so easily welcomed if only it be solemn enough. To make false things absurd is a worthy and delightful exercise for our laughing Crusader.

Mockery slips almost as readily into his verse as into his prose, and it is, indeed, the chief fault of the verse that its best qualities are often prose qualities. It seems strangely indifferent to him whether his medium should be a ballad or a leading article; luckily, his facility is not quite fatal to his poetry, and his most famous things deserve their fame. None the less, the lack of discrimination which assuredly has diminished his influence as a prose-writer has equally damaged his reputation as a poet, for the verse is sometimes so cheap and common that you wonder if the man capable of such commonness is capable of aught better. How those hasty, heedless rhythms, those too expansive, too effusive long lines have betrayed him!

"The shattering fall of crest and crown and shield and cross and cope,
The tearing of the gauds of time, the blight of prince and pope."

Yet he is capable of such phrasing as :

> " Happy, who like Ulysses or that lord
> Who raped the fleece, returning full and sage,
> With usage and the world's wide reason stored,
> With his own kin can wait the end of age.
> When shall I see, when shall I see, God knows !
> My little village smoke ; or pass the door,
> The old dear door of that unhappy house,
> That is to me a kingdom and much more ? "

And again, after many similar questions, I am driven to ask if there is not significance in the fact that his subject is dictated—he is translating from Du Bellay. Is it, in verse as in prose, the resistance of a subject that he needs ? The prose itself, that can be so good, is often so bad ; usually it is simple, unreflective, without qualification and without natural inflection ; metaphor is admitted, but not absorbed in the current until the current is suffused with it, as the flow of beautiful prose is suffused. It carries no suggestion and leaves no rich, rare memory, whatever is remembered being due to repetition and to picturesqueness of simile. Mr. Chesterton has never understood that the writing of English prose, like the writing of English verse, is an art ; an art not unworthy of a man who is genuinely concerned with living men, living things, and living thoughts. He seems never to have seen himself as a writer at all ; in a

strict sense he is an unconscious writer, and not so much faulty as wanting in a sense of the obligations, diligent virtues, and various beauty of prose.

But of his faults and failures I have ungratefully said too much, and I prefer to remember now his generosities, his honesty of mind; I prefer to recall those issues which have found him on the side of honour and courage; I prefer to contemplate him once more as a Crusader against the oppressions of false doctrine and inhumane policy, and to repeat the phrase which Lamb used for a less constant mind—one of the finest and wisest spirits breathing.

II

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

I

On 3rd December 1894, Stevenson died at Samoa. Natives filed round the bed of "The Master" and kept a night-watch beside it, and the day after dug a grave and buried the body on the crest of a hill. A myth was born when Stevenson died, and spread with the news of his death through England and America. The loss of a friend is a sore burden, falling perhaps more lightly upon those near to him in space than upon those far off; for they are indeed the more unhappy whose affections and regrets wander over a vast world and return accusingly home again. Distance and silence are hostile to friendship, and men are but human, and because the old companionship had perforce declined into casual letters and remembrances, the warmest of Stevenson's friends charged themselves, maybe, with neglect; and thus, by the subtlest reaction of loyalty, a prompt effusion of homage began

Potent, indeed, must the personality have been that attracted Henry James and George Meredith, Sir Sidney Colvin and Mr. Edmund Gosse: never man had finer friends than Stevenson, and friend joined with friend in spontaneous praise, easing their regret in tributes that far exceeded those by which his own candid spirit had been at once delighted and embarrassed. The grace, the charm that his presence had shed over any company received immediate publicity, but not less eager was the recognition of his genius and its achievement during a brief twenty years. And so the myth took wing, and the Master in Samoa became equally the Master in England; and now, when there are few living that loved him and remember him in the flesh, and the swift-heeled younger generation presses hard, the myth still wonderfully endures. Those who knew him not but were among his contemporaries are still touched by that grace and charm, by his ardour and brightness and courage; and even if they no longer regard his genius as supreme among modern spirits, they yet preserve fresh and clear the image of an enchanting personality.

But how far does the myth endure for others? I call it a myth without suggesting that it was baseless, for these wide and generous apprehen-

sions are never baseless; but I cannot banish the phantom of Stevenson himself, hovering now over Samoa and now over London and now over Edinburgh, and pondering with witty eyes the caprices of fame. Nor can I banish another phantom that rises obscure and gigantic over Stevenson's shoulder and wears the graver look of Edgar Allan Poe. Stevenson is amused, but Poe looks perplexed and then incredulous, and so draws or dims away, leaving me doubtful if it was indeed his apparition or a delusion. Had either phantom spoken I should have known, but they were silent, Stevenson seeming unconscious of his neighbour and Poe reserved.

II

A schoolboy then in his teens, who had strangely missed reading *Treasure Island*, may I hope be pardoned for his indifference to the warm stir that came up from the south when Stevenson died; but who could remain for long untroubled by the influence of so vital a myth? And yet that other phantom, that intruder, cannot be put by. I will not confront Stevenson's brilliant personality with the enigmatic and desperate character of Poe, but who shall escape reminders on reading some of the best and some

of the worst of Stevenson's stories? *Olalla* and *The Body Snatcher*, *Markheim* and *The Master of Ballantrae*, have divers merits, but are they not all in debt to the American? It is no discredit to borrow of Poe, but to weaken or blur what is borrowed, to make something worse and not something better of it—this, surely, would provoke Poe's æsthetic disdain. *Olalla* is the story of a high Spanish family depraved by inbreeding; centuries that knew nothing of eugenics have dwindled in this family to a mother and son whose nature is brutal, and a lovely hapless daughter who refuses to love and transmit the taint. It is a tragic story, beautifully conceived, carefully planned; but an essayist delighting in words has expressed Olalla's refusal, and the pleading against it, in this style:

"Others, ages dead, have wooed other men with my eyes; other men have heard the pleading of the same voice that now sounds in your ears. The hands of the dead are in my bosom; they move me, they pluck me, they guide me; I am a puppet at their command; and I but reinform features and attributes that have long been laid aside from evil in the quiet of the grave. . . . Shall I bind another spirit, reluctant as my own, into this bewitched and tempest-broken tenement that I now suffer in?"

The Body Snatcher is a story showing, again, how completely Stevenson shared Poe's delight in the macabre, using familiar traditions for the creation of physical horror; but it is still an essayist, a young man in love with the English dictionary, who writes the story, making it ineffective by his ingenuous evasion of common words such as body and corpse, and teasing the ear with the repetition of ensigns of mortality, unholy burden, unnatural burden, ghastly comrade, sad merchandise, and so on. . . . Yes, it is incredible! and incredible, too, how poorly the conception has been used, for the story opens with one theme and ends upon another, starts with sinister drama and ends with solemn farce. It was not from Poe that Stevenson learned how easy it was to spoil a story. And if you turn to *The Master of Ballantrae* you may see that he has but added a fault to an ambitious novel, in that scene of the burial of the Master and the attempted resuscitation; a scene that suggests Poe as Poe never was—at his worst, although it is right to remember that for the episode itself there was an independent origin. Or passing on to *Markheim* and stories in the *New Arabian Nights*, even to part of the machinery of *Treasure Island*, you will observe how patiently, how fondly, how humbly Stevenson subjected himself

to the innovating genius of Poe. An admirable master certainly to follow, and therefore the last in the world to follow subserviently; for nothing that Poe achieved is bettered by Stevenson, and all these reminders fall rather chillingly upon the reader, even while it is noted that he wrote far finer stories than these, things so good as *The Merry Men* and *The Pavilion on the Links.*

As if impatient of the success proper to his calling, Stevenson has diminished the value of many of his novels, not merely by reminders of Poe, but by the moral note which sounds in them, insistent as a drum. The pulpiteer in the writer, honest and unpretentious truly, was all too garrulous and constantly dulled the artist; and thus even in the short stories Stevenson sometimes made his moral explicit and assertive, instead of silently alert and vivifying. *Olalla,* to revert to that beautiful hybrid, is a chief instance, certainly a better instance than *Markheim,* which is a mere tract, or *Will o' the Mill,* which, on the other hand, is a beautiful subdued allegory expressed in a living figure. In *Olalla* the moral emphasis is gained by repeating the farewell of the unhappy girl who has forsworn the joy of her being; and the lightest reader will notice that the repetition spoils the incident, adding the moral only by destroying the truth

and beauty. The same volume contains a welcome fantasy, *The Treasure of Franchard* and once more the moral is crudely stitched on to the comedy—a red-flannel patch on a pleasant Fête Galante frippery.

III

The moralist and the artist in Stevenson maintained a petty war in his members, the moralist never in danger, the artist often wounded but happily never expelled. It was a simple warfare, a clash of hammer and tongs, for both moralist and artist were simple persons and so gained immensely in the general affection. Subtlety may be a sure bond between the artist and a few readers, but simplicity is the spell that draws the many to him. Simplicity shines in the large round moon of Stevenson's moral, simplicity speaks in the *obiter dicta* of his letters and, clearest of all, in the essays. Thus he debates—no, dismisses—the question of the right of the artist to use a gloomy theme, his right, in effect, to create *Jude the Obscure* and *Crime and Punishment*. " My horror of the horrible ! " he cries in one place, distinguishing himself thereby from the radiant and insatiable Shelley ; and elsewhere, " One dank, dispirited word is harmful, a crime of *lèse-humanité*, a piece of acquired

evil; every gay, every bright word or picture, like every pleasant air of music, is a piece of pleasure set afloat." His own view of life, he averred and showed, was the romantically-comic; "beauty touched with sex and laughter; beauty with God's earth for the background," was his search; for tragedy, it seems, did not "come off," unless it was tragedy-in-a-good-humour. It is a courageous avowal, unshared by his fellow-artists, and seeming to us a little narrow and old-fashioned (so brutal is change!) —as odd, in fact, as the æsthetics of the 'nineties; and his loyalty to this avowal was unbroken, except perhaps in *The Master of Ballantrae.* He avoided certain things only partly because he was afraid of them; life was such a solemn, agonistic experience that the highest office of literature was the stimulation of man's moral nature and the drugging of his speculation. Not to concur in this simple and urgent view seems a meanness; and indeed, who that has not thought deeply and sorely would dare to place the spiritual, the imaginative above the conventionally moral, if precedence may be considered at all by mortal men? But the dilemma has been faced by other writers of our time, and I hope we are not the poorer if it has been answered in another way than Stevenson's.

His preference was a wholly native one, candidly declared, for instance, in *The Lantern Bearers*, and implicit almost everywhere; and although it led him into the shallows rather than into the deep, it taught him sympathy and brightness. Superficial he was not, and his own experience had shown him much that he would fain teach others; but his doctrine of the useful led him to disregard whatever did not seem immediately useful. The pursuit of art could not content him; "had I been an engineer, and literature my amusement, it would have been better perhaps," he wrote a little before his death; and his immersion in Samoan affairs, his zest and practical conscience, prove that fondness for action was as instinctive as aversion from speculation.

Only when we hold before our steadied eyes the things with which Stevenson has delighted us do we understand the cost of that delight—by what avoidances or suppressions it was maintained, how many doubts and questions were stunned and tossed into the fire at which our hands are warmed. A wholesome, hearty reactionary, indeed, does Stevenson seem, until you remember that it is unfair to reproach him with the changes of the past thirty years. Put it simply, then, that he was limited not by lack

of experience but by a delusive doctrine of cheerfulness and the inability of men to endure truth. It is a limitation which is at least as conspicuous in the essays as in the stories ; wit, alert phrasing, gaiety of tone, good nature, and good humour are all subordinated to this practical and inadequate morality. Duty, duty—yes ! but is there no duty to the mind, no obedience demanded by one's own precarious, light-seeking thought ? The question pricks again and again :

" A strange picture we make on our way to our chimæras, ceaselessly marching, grudging ourselves the time for rest ; indefatigable, adventurous pioneers. . . . O toiling hands of mortals ! O unwearied feet, travelling ye know not whither. Soon, soon, it seems to you, you must come forth on some conspicuous hilltop, and but a little way farther, against the setting sun, descry the spires of El Dorado. Little do ye know your own blessedness ; for to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour."

But if you transfer the application to the mind you have Stevenson no longer with you ; a term has been set to the journey. Some of the essays published in English and American magazines were written, as Sir Sidney Colvin says, in gloom and sickness. Less inspiriting than your wont, is

Sir Sidney's comment in a letter to the author; but I find them all but boisterous, wonderfully free from gloom and malady. Who is not the better, base as he may be, for hearing that he is "condemned to some nobility," with that implacable hunter, the desire of good, at his heels? Who will not join with this moralist in denouncing the "canting moralists" that objected to seeing themselves, in Stevenson's vivid phrase, as ennobled lemurs, hair-crowned bubbles of dust? He writes a Christmas sermon for his thousands of American readers, a wise and happy sermon; gentleness and cheerfulness, the two perfect duties, are the matter of his praise; and the very note of the sermon as we know it in England, as I hope it is known in America, is heard in these winning adjurations and easy simplicities.

Nevertheless, it is when he forgets his morality and writes pure fond reminiscence that he gives his best—say, *Fontainebleau*, with pleasant things enough but wise things also; as, "To pity Millet is a piece of arrogance; if life be hard for such resolute and pious spirits, it is harder still for us, had we the wit to understand it." As delightful in intimacy is the chapter called *Random Memories*, and with it come to mind those other random essays and the travel books which are but prolonged essays. Possessing a quick sense

of his own individuality, he was able to enjoy *himself* as much, at least, as he enjoyed his friend; hence the brightness of his egotism, securing or pleading for a welcome wherever young men are gathered together. His essays of travel and reminiscence show nothing so clearly as the travels of his own good nature; the sight was clear, the waters lucid, the voice the freshest, the most innocently candid of all. It is but the sedater reader that prefers *The Amateur Emigrant* to the more garrulous books. His purely literary essays please us now by a certain precocity of judgment, a sureness and a breadth that already marked him as a man of letters, even if he is hardly forgivable when he speaks of an earlier and more perfect man of letters, the author of *The Lives of the Poets* as "that stilted and accomplished stylist." He sees his subject so vividly as a picture—"Whitman like a large shaggy dog, just unchained, scouring the beaches of the world and baying at the moon"—that he is apt to love the picture for its brightness at least as much as for its truth, and makes his essays indeed familiar studies in a temperament. They are so good that you wish he had written others when time and experience had touched him more deeply.

IV

Both in essay and short story Stevenson showed his limitations frankly enough, and perhaps saw them too indulgently; but in looking at some of the longer stories his reader is promptly aware of large excellences and but intermitted faults. *Kidnapped*, one of the best stories in the language; *Treasure Island*, a little lower than the best, for the reason already indicated; *Catriona*, an admirable yet inadequate sequel; *Weir of Hermiston*, a bright hope—no more; *The Wrecker*, a confused attempt at incident; and *The Ebb Tide*, a successful attempt—of all these it would be pleasant and superfluous to speak in tribute to their vivacities and virtues, just as it would be unpleasant and superfluous to speak in detail of certain others. They have all one root—Stevenson's fondness for dramatising his adventurous personality. He is John Silver and Pew, Alan Breck, Nares, Pinkerton, Attwater, Ballantrae, Durrisdeer, and even Catriona herself. An ideal of gallantry, figment of recurring and precious dream, held his mind; and since the opportunity of gallant action might not come (and the evil of his ill characters is often but a perverted gallantry), his eager spirit wrapped itself around the persons of these stories

and made them bright and warm. In them he satisfied all his famishing aspirations. Something of that warm glow may have been caught from Scott, but Stevenson's own blood animated his creatures and gave them almost all their attractive grace or force. And for this reason the longer novels are of a piece with the rest of his work, for gallantry, ardour, and simplicity breathe through essay, short story, poems and letters alike. His case is that of the inventive writer of all times: impossible piracies, long-desired journeys, adventures oft-dreamed and forgone — all these may be dramatically experienced and repeated for the pleasure of the dull and the dreamless. More than most romancers he rejoiced in the province of his invention. His genius was never so active as in giving unity of structure and tone to *Kidnapped*, and the complete success of that novel within its own well-defined range is due in part to this identification of himself with the whole story; and thus it was he proved, as the shorter tales tempt one to doubt, that he could tell a story perfectly. The simplicity of his nature served him well in the portraiture of many characters, his attempts at the strange and unusual resulting, on the other hand, in a merely capricious Prince Otto and Seraphina, an unrealisable Catriona.

Excellent, then, in certain characters, Stevenson is yet better in incident, and infinitely resourceful in the artifices of delay, suspense, simulation, deception, and surprise. He follows, in fact, and lifts to frequent perfection the novelist's common practice of displaying simple character through swift-succeeding incident, pricking our sense of the unusual, the wonderful, the splendid, without straining our recognition of never obscure personality. Great is the gain in contrast! The contrast is wanting in *The Wrecker*, an extreme intricacy of incident defeating the simple characterisation and suggesting that Stevenson could not do what infinitely smaller writers so easily do. The failure here is the failure to keep in the key, a natural difficulty for collaborators. A poor sort of yarn, certainly well nourished with facts, was his own phrase for it; yet scarcely well nourished, surely, since the facts are so plainly undigested. Any story, says Stevenson of another novel, "any story can be made *true* in its own key; any story can be made *false* by the choice of a wrong key of detail or style: *Otto* is made to reel like a drunken—I was going to say man, but let us substitute cipher, by the variations of key." An admirable comment, to which it is hard to add more than a word in saying that *Prince Otto* is Stevenson's

chief, if not sole, essay in sentimentalism, and that neither character nor incident yields satisfaction in its pages.

I have referred in but a single phrase to the unfinished *Weir of Hermiston*, upon which so many wistful eyes have been cast. A lost masterpiece, cry some; a bright hope, breathe others; and all agree in lamentation. It is a clear and positive conception, with plain characters as ever and sinister incident and sombre shades spreading over the magnificent landscape. Does it not illustrate Stevenson's fondness for pairing his stories, or his inability to let a story stand alone, whether success or failure? *The Master of Ballantrae* surely is to be matched by *Weir of Hermiston*, as *Kidnapped* certainly begot a weaker *Catriona* and the first *New Arabian Nights* a vain successor. Stevenson was trying once again the note of *The Master of Ballantrae*, and although there is not another shabby Lucifer there is more than a hint of poor Mr. Henry—sullenly true, stupidly still. . . . I grieve for the conclusion that might have been, even while doubting what it would have been. The great natural amphitheatre is set, tragic airs steal up, with shadowy powers and preparations, and the end might have revealed a better *Ballantrae*; but death, harshly or kindly, stayed the conclusion.

V

A reader will not reflect very long upon these novels of Stevenson's without noting another evidence of our author's simplicity, namely, his shy and uncertain attitude towards sex. The total exclusion of women from his finest novels has strangely contributed to their success. I cannot think what he would have made of a sequel to *Treasure Island*, but the sequel to *Kidnapped* shows the havoc that women played with his art; for *Catriona* is no more than a partial success, the natural interest of the story being obscured by a kind of equivocation upon the ancient theme. Was it that the grace and gentleness in Stevenson, the exuberant, the scrupulous tenderness — the most prominent features of the letters—were features of a feminine development, cherished by his friends, admired by his readers, but not supremely valuable in his art? And was his very genuine interest in violent and vivid action, such as abounds in many of the stories, at all incongruous with this development? If women can best be presented by men and men by women in any imaginative art (greater boldness than mine is needed to press the argument), it is possible to explain Stevenson's difficulty with women. Always candid, he has

given the clue in a letter, and writes rather self-consciously: " If I had to begin again . . . I believe I should try to honour Sex more religiously. The worst of our education is that Christianity does not recognise and hallow Sex." The sentiment may be admirable and recommend him to earnest and sensible people; but it is perhaps less characteristic of the born artist than of the born moralist. It is found in a letter to his cousin, and I wonder what vast smile would have wrinkled the face of Henry James, or Meredith, if by Fate's grotesquerie it had fallen into his hands instead?

VI

Admirable is the doctrine which Stevenson asserts in a " Letter to a Young Gentleman who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art "—an essay which is a counterpart of sermons upon that other religion to which we referred a moment ago. In speaking of his own honoured vocation he says: " If a man love the labour of any trade, apart from any question of success or fame, the gods have called him. . . . He may have a taste for all the arts, and I think he often has; but the mark of his calling is this laborious partiality for one." The test is far from perfect, but nothing could more exactly indicate Steven-

son's calling. "Inextinguishable zest in its technical successes," is our author's dysphonious phrase when he proclaims an essential virtue in a writer; and he displays this zest not simply in his work at large nor simply in his talk about it, but especially in one of the *Essays in the Art of Writing*. Readers and writers alike will easily recall the amused shock of hearing Stevenson declare that "the sister arts enjoy the use of a plastic and ductile material, like the modeller's clay; literature alone is condemned to work in mosaic with finite and quite rigid words." Turning to other images he finds that the literary artists are weavers of webs and jugglers with oranges, and his repeated recourse to such figures suggests one of the reasons why his prose so soon fails to satisfy. It suggests, in fact, a mechanical regard of the material and motion of prose, which could not but produce an artificial style of writing; and to this I must return in a moment, only observing now that the essay on "Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature," at any rate, shows a real concern with technical elements, and the keenest desire of the author to distil the last drop of virtue from his own secret capacities. Style engrossed his mind and formed a problem which he approached in continually new ways. "Some artists, having

formed a style, adhere to it through life; but those of a higher order"—it is Stevenson himself that speaks—"cannot rest content. . . . Every fresh work on which they embark is a signal for a fresh engagement of the whole forces of their mind." It is not true of his own work: the whole forces of his mind were assuredly not engaged upon some of the books at which we have glanced; but his argument is not spoilt by an exception. He is lucid and frank in his reference to the realistic method, and especially in his warning against the least appearance of irrelevant dexterity; and in much that he says on questions of this sort you will note with admiration the resonant maturity of the voice of this confident young man of thirty-three.

How passionate was the technical preoccupation may be seen by looking at random among the letters. His zest burns brightly there, the happiest expression of the egotism that endeared him to so many correspondents. He talks much of money (no writer more), of his steady advance from nothing to four thousand a year; he talks no less freely of his own aims and accomplishment; but scarce anything in these hundreds of letters is so much a part of his mind as the casual utterances—brimming over from constant meditation—upon the structure of

stories, the use of language, the technical embarrassments and uncertainties which he confronted with so lively a spirit. The amount of his work was enormous, if you consider the shortness of his life, and were other evidence inadequate his letters would yield profuse witness that his best was achieved only with great pain and travail, even though much of the rest was scarcely "achieved" at all but fell fortuitously together. He is a lesson (he would rejoice to be a lesson !) to those that write, teaching them by his own diligence and ardour that it is only the finest elements in a writer that may survive in his book —may indeed survive his book itself as a memory, a tradition, a lingering fragrance. What he could not teach, nor learn, was the patience of the fields, the order of the seasons; hence the strange fact that he could work almost concurrently at *The Master of Ballantrae* and *The Wrong Box*, at *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives*, too hasty, or too restless, to distinguish between the memorable and the trivial. But this need not be pursued, with the letters before us crammed with autobiography. "I care for nothing but the moral and the dramatic, not a jot for the picturesque or the beautiful, other than about people." He was but thirty when he wrote this, and smarting under the unmerited rebuff to

which *The Amateur Emigrant* had exposed him. To Henley, warning him that the critical spirit killed, he declared: "I *am* not but in my art; it is me; I am the body of it merely." To another: "You have not to represent the world. You have to represent only what you can represent with pleasure and effect. . . . Try to use your faults." A kind of ardour of the blood is, he thinks, the mother of immortal things in the art of letters; but he does not add that it mothers also the puniest of perishing things. "I am at bottom a psychologist, and ashamed of it," he sighs astonishingly, in speaking of one of his ballads; but more piercingly he writes: "As we go on in life, we must part from prettinesses and the graces. We but attain qualities to lose them; life is a series of farewells, even in art." Slowly came this wisdom to Stevenson, and to no man can it come at all except with time and successive failures.

If the pleasures of his work fell early and abundant for Stevenson, the disillusion was late but perhaps hardly less keen, though its expression was naturally less frequent. Two months before his death he wrote to Sir Sidney Colvin almost the last of those many confidences which honoured writer and reader equally: "I am pretty nearly useless at literature. . . . I am a

fictitious article and have long known it." If piety and affection protest, he has yet another touch for acceptance. "It was a very little dose of inspiration, and a pretty little trick of style, long lost, improved by the most heroic industry. . . . I cannot take myself seriously as an artist; the limitations are so obvious." Rare is this insight, rare this candour, among those that wrestle with the subtlest of creative tasks. Dying at a far younger age, Keats wrote: "I think I shall be among the English poets"; and I know not which utterance is the more tragic, Keats's confidence or Stevenson's misgiving.

VII

Yes, it is only in part from his own work that the bright myth has sprung; its true life is lived in the memory of those that knew him in the flesh or in the spirit. Sir Sidney Colvin's recent book gives the purest evidence you could wish of the myth-begetting personality which has manifested for thirty years so independent a vigour; it contains but the latest of innumerable tributes, and I deplore that I cannot now quote from any of them. For those who knew not Stevenson in the flesh, or were boys when he died or long after, the myth is a perplexity.

Seeking its origin in his books, in his novels and short stories and essays, they are obscurely baffled. They turn to his verse, sometimes simple and ingenious, sometimes amusing and lively; and they find its faint radiance dimmed by the far brighter and deeper glow that burns in the heart of another children's poet of our own day. Sometimes a wild beauty may fleck the page with an alien wing:

" Blows the wind to-day, and the sun and the rain are flying,
Blows the wind on the moors to-day and now,
Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are crying,
My heart remembers how! "

Wild or prim, beauty is seldom heard in the verse. And, turning back then to the prose, they find its appeal faint and accidental, wholly a thing of mood and occasion. A page in *The Wrecker* may delight because it prefigures Mr. Conrad, and passages in other books shed a momentary pleasure; but an attentive ear is persuaded that it is a spectacular prose, written for the eye and not for the ear, without continuous rhythm or native music. Stevenson's instinct for prose was restlessly imperfect; he pursued irreconcilables, and there is no one style which you can declare wholly his own, certainly not a good style. Perhaps the best specimen is

found in those few pages in which he is provoked to anger against the Reverend Dr. Hyde. Hyde had written a private letter concerning Damien ; it was wantonly printed in a newspaper, and roused fury in Stevenson because it vilified a man whose memory he adored. No one had a more generous mind than Stevenson ; he kindled at an insult or injustice to another as swiftly as he responded to kindness ; and of all the grounds for admiring Stevenson none is more solid than this. His open letter to Hyde was an attack, a fierce taunt : " with you, at last, I rejoice to feel the button off the foil and to plunge home." Yet even in this attack his style prevailed over him, and there is the strangest contrast between the angry sincerity of what he says and his delicately curious way of saying it. " Style " had enthralled and straitened his mind for so many years that it subdued to its fantasies even his most passionate moments. In *Fontainebleau* he wrote of the excited amateur who has to die in a man before the artist can be born. Wasted precocity ! He was the finest of amateurs, always experimenting, always wanting yet seeming never to know what he wanted, and, of many excellences, wishing for all. He laboured sometimes too little, but more often too much ; he did not know himself and was always trying to

discover himself. He tried by wearing an Indian smoking-cap of tarnished gold, black shirt, linen trousers and leathern gaiters, when he carried a knapsack in France ; he tried at other times by wearing the guise of a literary scene-painter, of a portrait-painter, of an autobiographer ; he tried by writing simple verses for children, the finest boyish improvisations, the most gallant conceptions of historical adventure. All these were more than dramatic inventions, and into each he poured much of himself, glowingly profuse. In the finest of ways he would fain be all things to all men and first a moralist. A mere Englishman may not presume to ask whether it was not some stable racial characteristic that determined this precedence, and indeed no one can sensibly speculate upon the work that Stevenson might have performed or attempted had he been unblessed with the conscience of his own people. And is it not unreasonable, then, to ask Stevenson to be what he did not want to be—a creative artist caring chiefly for the passion and integrity of his creation, and trusting for its purely moral usefulness to the unity of the secret, imaginative world in which the miracle of conception took place? It is our misfortune, if he had the power to do this or that, that he should have done something different ; but I prefer to think of him

as using all his talents to the limits of possibility, hampered sadly by physical weakness, and stimulated by unconquerable ambition and hope.

. . . Less from his books than from the affections of his friends, from the memory of his eager personal grace, was the myth created. Is it a small thing? Surely not. It is not a small thing that a mere three letters distinguish him at once. W. S. and J. M. are not so lucid in their clue, and A. M., W. W., and R. B. are exposed to confusion; but who among millions will not recognise an admired and familiar shade when he reads R. L. S.?

III

WILLIAM COBBETT

I

A HUNDRED years ago he rode out from London in a fog which smoked over him all the way to Newbury. It was the first of many journeys on horseback, which he preferred to a gig, because in a gig he could not see what he loved seeing—the country, with farmers at home, labourers in the fields, shy families around small cottages. He rode erect, a red-faced man of nearly sixty, tall and strongly built, with sharp eyes and a mouth which some thought humorous and some cynical.

To follow him a little, noting his vigorous gestures and overhearing his never-fatigued voice, is to learn something of his time, something of rural England, and far more of himself. He casts those sharp eyes over fields and heaths, remarking here loam and flint and there pure chalk; then crying out to himself or his son, Of all the ridiculous things I ever saw! Look

at this house—a sort of church in the Gothic style, with crosses on the tops of different parts; look at the grounds—a mock magnificence; a fountain with a basin less than four feet across, a waterspout like a teapot's, and a bridge over a river which a child of four could jump! And that Gothic arch over the gravel-walk, with a vacant niche above—why, the Gothic arch is made of rotten firewood. Who owns it? Some honest person from the 'Change, a Fund-lord, who builds sham Gothic arches to show the antiquity of his origin. . . . Snorting, he passes on and soon has left me behind to chase a hare—The first hare-hunt I've had since I wore a smock-frock, he explains as I catch up to him. Or it is a grove of trees that enchants him, the very finest oaks, chestnuts, and ashes he ever saw in England; but where is the Locust, the Tree of trees—the Locust, beautiful and imperishable, the tree for ships, door-posts, window-sills, gates, hop-poles, and clothes-posts? Wretched calumniators they who refuse his testimony to the life of the Locust, and idiots they who still plant beggarly Scotch firs upon miserable heaths, to shake their thin beards in the wintry air. Yes, it was a fine run, he repeats, as his thoughts return to the hare and his smock-frock days; and, his voice growing quieter, he recalls the little

hop-garden in which he worked as a child, and tells how often he ran off to follow the hounds, and, returning tired, would fling himself on the slope of a sandhill above the rivulet. There it was that he used to play with his brothers; they would all climb to the top of the steep hill, and then one would draw his arms from the sleeves of the smock and lie down, so that the others might roll him to the bottom like a log—hair, eyes, nose, mouth full of sand by the time he got down. And there's another hill, he adds, rising cone-like from the flat and planted with Scotch firs; here I used to take the eggs and the young of crows and pies. It was a famous hill—*as high as Crooksbury hill* meant the utmost degree of height; and when I returned home after many years' absence the hill was the first thing my eyes sought. And I could not believe my eyes, for it seemed that the famous hill was removed and a little heap put in its place. Why, I had seen in New Brunswick a single rock ten times as big! The post-boy, going downhill, and not a bad road, whisked me in a few minutes to the Bush Inn, from the garden of which I could see the prodigious sandhill where I had begun my gardening works. What a nothing! But now came rushing into my mind, all at once, my pretty little garden, my little blue smock-

frock, my little nailed shoes, my pretty pigeons that I used to feed out of my hands, the last kind words and tears of my gentle and tender-hearted and affectionate mother! I hastened back into the room. If I had looked a moment longer I should have dropped. What a change! I had dined the day before at the Secretary of State's in company with Mr. Pitt, and had been waited upon by men in gaudy livery. I had had nobody to assist me in the world, no teachers of any sort; and I felt proud. The distinctions of rank, birth, and wealth all became nothing in my eyes, and from that moment I resolved never to bend before them.

So talking, he has forgotten his horse and awakes from his reverie to look around. We are nearing the gateway of a fine house as the owner issues from it. It is Squire Twyford. The Squire looks hard at him, scrutiny touched with surprise and jealousy, as much as to say, "I wonder who the devil you can be?" He returns the Squire's glance with a steady look—his head a little on one side, the cheek drawn up from the left corner of the mouth, expressive of anything rather than a sense of inferiority. Come on, Richard! he cries, passing the Squire with no other message than the eloquence of that look; but soon mishapping upon an almost pathless

country he is compelled to pause. The coppice ahead is a mile across, and although leathern leggings will stand anything our coats are of the common kind, and at the end of the scramble they would be as ragged as March ponies in the Forest of Dean. Luckily a couple of boys are found, and then a path, and at last the low-hedged fields again. He calls a young man who, with other turnip-hoers, is sitting at dinner under the bushes ; the young man comes running with his victuals—bread and a large piece of bacon. You do get some bacon, then ? Oh yes ! the labourer replies with an emphatic swag of the head which means, We must and will have that. A salutation and they part, the elder horseman crying, Good God, Richard ! What a difference between this country and the neighbourhood of those corrupt places, Great Bedwin and Cricklade ! What sort of breakfast would this man have had in a mess of cold potatoes ! . . . No society ought to exist where the labourers live in a hog-like sort of way. Talk of villains and serfs, did feudal times ever see any so debased, so absolutely slaves as the poor creatures in the enlightened north who are compelled to work fourteen hours a day in a heat of eighty-four degrees, and are liable to punishment for looking out of the factory window ?

And now, inflamed with sudden passion, he harps upon the labourers' wrongs, contrasting popular conditions in England and America; but even when his voice is most vehement there is a relenting, sidelong gleam in his eye, for artist-like he studies and enjoys his own temper. Why, in America men live freely, and I like to see even waste, because it is evidence of easy and happy life. It is not with a little bit of dry toast so neatly put in a rack, a bit of butter so round and small, a little milkpot so pretty and so empty—an egg for you, the host and hostess not liking eggs; it is not thus that you are received in America. Such an abundance is spread before you that you instantly lose all restraint and are tempted to feast whether you are hungry or not. They are a happy people, Richard. But here, with tax-eaters and everlasting placemen, old grannies and rag-merchants, the bishop-begotten system of Funding has stripped England of every vestige of what was her ancient character. Gracious God! there's not a negro in the West Indies who hasn't more to eat in a day than the average English labourer in a week. Why, I have seen the labourers here yoked like horses to draught work, and their leader with a bell hung round his neck. Let the humanity-men look at home for slaves to free. Going up and

down the country I have longed for the old times when . . .

But a flight of startled birds catching the passionate old man's eye, he pauses, and I finish his sentence with :

"This England, old already, was called Merry."

Merry England now, cries he, with parson-justices, lords of the soil, farmers become gentlefolk or skimmy-dish clerks !

The descent of a hill interrupting his declamation, we move on in silence, but when we all breathe more easily again I guess, from the relaxing lines above his mouth, that the gusty mind is quieter. It is amusing to watch these sudden flaws and calms, betraying the eccentric passage of his thoughts. When I rode to Battle once, he resumes, a man told me that the farmers thereabout were angry over something I had said, and that it would be as well for me not to go to Lewes. That made me resolve to dine at Lewes, though I did not covet the noise of a dinner of two or three hundred persons. There was a Mr. Kemp in the chair, and he actually proposed my health as that of a person likely to point out a remedy for common distresses. That was a signal for the onset, for another farmer then read out a garbled account of what I had said

about the Ellmans and their labourers, and how I had called the Sussex farmers monsters, a race of men that should be totally broken up. Straightway up started a farmer of Rottingdean, for all had been duly prepared, and moved that I should be put out of the room. Some few others, joined by about six or eight of the dark, dirty-faced, half-whiskered tax-eaters from Brighton (which is only eight miles off), joined in this cry. I rose that they might see the man they had to put out. Fortunately for themselves, not one of them attempted to approach me, but a considerable hubbub took place. . . . Perhaps I had laid on the lash without a due regard to mercy, but the fact is I have so long had the misfortune to be compelled to keep a panel of badger-hided fellows like Scarlet in order that I am become heavy-handed, like a drummer that had been used to flog old offenders.—But what happened? asks Richard. Oh, I made a speech, and those who wanted to put me out became as silent and attentive as the rest!

A shower threatening, Richard asks, Shall we wait here a while? nodding to a huge open barn, the only shelter visible. Pshaw, replies his father, I've ridden day after day in soaking rain and never the worse for it. If a man is going to seek shelter because rain threatens! And

he shrugs his shoulders, in the healthy countryman's pride of health and contempt of physical weakness. Good health means good looks, and at once his thought darts to America. Ah, there, he says, there the women are surpassed by none in England! They fade at an earlier age, but till then they are as beautiful as the women in Cornwall, which, to my thinking, contains the prettiest women in our country; and young or old, blooming or fading, well or ill, rich or poor, they still preserve their good humour. In a moment he adds, No man, and certainly no woman, will underrate female beauty, for its great practical advantage is that it unavoidably tends to keep the husband of a pretty woman in good humour with himself.

> "But since, alas! frail beauty must decay,
> Curl'd or uncurl'd since locks will turn to gray,
> Since painted or not painted all shall fade——"

But you know the rest, he mutters, swinging his head round; and when I cry, I thought you hated poetry? he smiles and says, Not Dryden, and half under his breath:

> "Though I am old, for ladies' love unfit,
> The power of beauty I remember yet."

But then, I persist (well remembering, nevertheless, that he of all men had wanted to turn piously aside and pay homage to Burns, in his fiery-

cross mission to Scotland), but then — Shakespeare and Milton . . . Bombast and puns and smut, that's your divine bard ; and as for Milton's barbarous trash, how can it have been tolerated among people who understood astronomy, navigation, and chemistry ? Before I was married I was a mighty playgoer, but since then—— Since then, said I, interrupting in turn, you've jeered at poor Sheridan's "profligate origin." Ah, but that was politics ! is his smiling answer ; and, indeed, the calling of actors is beyond comparison the most degrading, since they perforce submit to hissings and peltings with a smile and a bow. Who would see his son an actor— nay, his daughter an actress ? 'Tis the same with music — a profession, as it is called, for vagabonds ; a great fondness for music is a mark of great weakness, great vacuity of mind.

All this while we have been jogging on, sometimes abreast and sometimes in single file, Richard quickly observing his father's least gestures. The old man's eye darts incessantly upon near and distant fields, and often, if a brief silence happens, he mutters to himself as he notices corn and cabbages, swedes and cattle, churches and mansions, with a sneer or a curse for the Government, or a reminiscence of better days and a better country. The fattest ox that

ever was killed in the world, he exclaims to Richard as I rejoin them, adding, I need hardly say that the owner was a Quaker, and New Jersey had the honour of producing this ox. The name "Quaker" sets him questioning the utility of paid parsons. Parsons? You saw them at Winchester, Richard, when they brought forward their lying address to the Regent—a band of more complete blackguards than I ever before saw; Parson Baines, of Exton, standing up in a chair and spitting in Lord Cochrane's poll, while Cochrane was bending his neck out to speak. Lord Cochrane looked round and said, "By God, sir, if you do that again I'll knock you down!" "You be damned!" said Baines. "I'll spit where I like." There were about twenty of them mounted upon a large table, and there they jumped, stamped, hallooed, roared, thumped with canes and umbrellas, squalled, whistled, and made all sorts of noises. . . . They were Hampshire parsons; and I smile back, Almost your own native county. Well, well, sir, cries he, and even with the parsons I'd rather Surrey or Hampshire than anywhere else in the world.—And following his recollection he adds, In America, speaking generally, I found the birds without song and the flowers without smell. Why, I have heard a thousand linnets

warbling upon one scrubbed oak on the sand-hills in Surrey—and, oh, the carolling in the coppices and the dingles of Hampshire and Sussex and Kent! But linnet and skylark and nightingale and bullfinch and all the rest are wanting in those beautiful woods and orchards of garlands in America. And when those woods and orchards have dropped their bloom all is gone; no shepherd's rose, no honeysuckle, none of that endless variety of beauties that decorate the hedges and the meadows in England; no daisies, no primroses, no cowslips, no bluebells, no daffodils which, as if it were not enough for them to charm the sight and the smell, must also have names to delight the ear. In America there are, indeed, birds which bear the names of robin and goldfinch and all, but, alas! the thing at Westminster has, in like manner, the name of Parliament, and speaks the voice of the people whom it pretends to represent, in much about the same degree that the blackbird speaks the voice of its namesake in England. And always, when I was in America, I used to say to myself, England is my country; I like it best and shall ever like it best.—Shall we reach Farnham to-night? asks his son as he pauses. Yes, surely, Richard; and then, pressing his hat over his eyes, he says no more but rides on as though he saw nothing

but the beloved scenes of childhood and youth, hedged round in his memory with labours of mind and body and beamed upon by anticipations which time has fulfilled, deferred, or disappointed.

Such was William Cobbett.

II

But something more is needed to complete even the free portrait which is the present task.

Born in 1762 at Farnham (Surrey) in a house upon which amused and affectionate eyes may, I think, still fall ; guiltless of any enforced education other than lessons at a dame's school and, on winter evenings, from his father at home ; walking to London when he was about thirteen and spending his last coppers on *A Tale of a Tub* by that earlier pamphleteer whose more powerful and sombre genius was to vivify his own ; enlisting in a lawyer's office and then in that scarcely more unconscionable school, His Majesty's Army ; serving in that Army until 1791, and all the while plucking (or was it not, in a common soldier, poaching ?) grammar, French, and other strange fruits from the wrinkled Tree of Knowledge whose branches did not then, as now, caress and darken the whole earth ; rising to sergeant-major and obtaining his discharge after service in

England and New Brunswick, in order that he might begin his career of political bruiser by charging his late officers with theft; developing a quick discretion for the lack of which martyrs have become martyrs, and evading by flight to France the revenges which he was sensible of provoking; settling at Philadelphia, and there pursuing that querulous and quixotic course for which his temperament found unfailing justification in circumstance; returning to England in 1800, famous and courted; quickly proving himself unpliable to a Tory Government and devoting his powers with greater joy to attack; attacking, then, and attacked, in prison and in peril of prison, broken and renewed, savage and untamable yet with brief revulsions and obscure returns which he is not always able to illustrate; riding through England between 1821 and 1832, sometimes like a farmer and sometimes like a conqueror; entering Parliament in 1832 and emitting prompt contempt upon his fellow-members; incessantly writing and speaking and farming and planting, incessantly boasting and performing; having outlived many enemies and more friends and welcomed hatred as others enjoy servility, at length he died, in 1835, in the full consciousness of a happy life of which the only constant stars had been his faith in himself,

his affection for his family, and his passionate belief in the inheritance of every Englishman in the virtue, abundance, and beauty of his native country.

Cobbett's introduction to his *Advice to Young Men* contains a characteristic vaunt of his activity as a writer. It was an incredible activity. For over thirty years he wrote all but single-handed and published all but uninterruptedly *Cobbett's Political Register*, a weekly review which provoked sometimes the crowd and sometimes the Government, and made its author a constant energy amid the lethargy and corruption of English politics. He has told how it was his practice to dictate the *Register* to his young children, and how proud he was to send what he had dictated without revision to the printer. An earlier journal had been published in America with the title or in the name of *Peter Porcupine* ; it ended with an action by an unhappy leech for libel and a verdict which almost broke Cobbett ; it was revived in London, and gave equal offence. But it was the *Political Register* that brought Cobbett's chief opportunity of suffering for righteousness' sake. The militia at Ely mutinied because of a stoppage for their knapsacks, and four squadrons of the German Legion were called in to suppress the rising. Five of the men

were sentenced to receive five hundred lashes each, and did, in fact, receive as many as their backs could endure. Cobbett, remembering his own eight years in the Army, was maddened.

"Five hundred lashes each! Aye, that is right! Flog them; flog them; flog them! They deserve it, and a great deal more. They deserve a flogging at every meal-time. 'Lash them daily, lash them duly!' What, shall the rascals dare to mutiny, and that too when the German Legion is so near at hand! Lash them, lash them, lash them! They deserve it. Oh yes; they merit a double-tailed cat. Base dogs! What, mutiny for the sake of the price of a knapsack. Lash them! Flog them! Base rascals! Mutiny for the price of a goat's skin; and, then, upon the appearance of the German soldiers, they take a flogging as quietly as so many trunks of trees! I do not know what sort of a place Ely is; but I really would like to know how the inhabitants looked one another in the face while this scene was exhibiting in their town."

For this he was prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to imprisonment and a ruinous fine. Snatched from his farm at Botley, the development of which was another of his extravagances, he spent two years in prison, sustaining himself and his family by the faithful pen and avowing the deadliest vindictiveness towards his enemies.

" I have three sons ; and if any one of them ever forgets this . . . may he become both rotten and mad. May he, after having been a gabbling, slavering half-idiot all the prime of his life, become in his last days loathsome to the sight and stinking to the nostril ! " Each of the sons became a lawyer. Years after he wrote of the effect upon them of the news of his sentence, and added :

" How I despise the wretches who talk of my vindictiveness ; of my exultation at the confusion of those who inflicted those sufferings ! How I despise the base creatures, the crawling slaves, the callous and cowardly hypocrites, who affect to be ' shocked ' (tender souls !) at my expressions of joy, and at the death of Gibbs, Ellenborough, Perceval, Liverpool, Canning, and the rest of the tribe that I have already seen out, and at the fatal workings of that system, for endeavouring to check which I was thus punished ! How I despise these wretches, and how I, above all things, enjoy their ruin, and anticipate their utter beggary ! What ! I am to forgive, am I, injuries like this ; and that, too, without any atonement ? Oh no ! I have not so read the Holy Scriptures."

And when, twenty years after the flogging, his rural rides took him into the eastern counties,

he rode on to Ely in order to see the spot where the German Legion flogged the English militia, and make an opportunity of retelling the story as publicly as he could. He found one of the victims still alive.

About the time of this visit to Ely, Cobbett founded the *Twopenny Trash*, gladly adopting a poor taunt as title; and in it he boasted of the influence of his own writings, which had brought petitions for Parliamentary reform:

"The answers to these petitions were laws to enable Ministers to take, at their pleasure, any man that they might suspect of treasonable intentions; to put him into any jail and any dungeon that they might choose; to keep him there for any time that they might choose . . . on their own mere will, and at their sole pleasure, without regular commitment, without confronting him with his accuser, without letting him know who was his accuser, and without stating even to himself what was his offence."

How modern and familiar an echo does this recital raise; yet it is actually so long ago as 1817 that he is writing of, and not the period of our late war and uneasy peace.

Once again Cobbett found it necessary to fly, and *A Year's Residence in America* (1818) was the happiest result, a book in which his free

humour had easier play and his denunciations were singularly free from bitterness; as, for example, in his reference to "little Jerry Bentham. . . . This everlasting babbler has aimed a sort of stiletto stroke at me; for what God knows, except it be to act a consistent part, by endeavouring to murder the man whom he has so frequently robbed, and whose facts and thoughts, though disguised and disgraced by the robber's quaint phraseology, constitute the better part of his book—Jerry, who was made a reformer by Pitt's refusal to give him a contract to build a penitentiary." Age as well as distance may have lent a little lightness to his attack. In the *English Grammar*, published some years after his brief exile was ended, he chooses passages of prose for castigation not from obscure contemporary writers, but from Johnson and the King's Speech; as to the latter picturing the joint labours of the Ministry in concocting this "pretty stuff. . . . If you should hear them there (in 'the Thieves' Houses') stammering and repeating and putting forth their nonsense, your wonder will be, not that they wrote a King's Speech so badly, but that they contrived to put upon paper sentences sufficiently grammatical to enable us to guess at the meaning." His own first speech in Parliament sounded the same note of pleasant

arrogance: "It appears to me that since I have been sitting here I have heard a great deal of vain and unprofitable conversation." Such phrases did not lose by falling from humorous lips. At seventy he was six feet in height and one of the stoutest men in the House; his hair was milk-white, his complexion still ruddy; but it was his small, sparkling, laughing eyes that chiefly struck an observer. One of his speeches was as delightful (save for the unpitiable victim) as anything that he wrote; it was an attack on Lord Plunkett, who had sworn opposition to the Act of Union and devoted his children to eternal hostility against the invaders of his country's freedom:

"Where is the man who held this language? Is he in England, or is he in Ireland? Is he in the ranks of the Ministerialists opposite, or in the ranks of the repealers around me? He is in Ireland. But what is he there? Is he Lord Chancellor? Yes! This old Hannibal is actually Lord Chancellor of Ireland. . . ."

And he reinforced the onslaught, in which these clublike phrases played only a part, though not the meanest part, by giving the names, the places, and the emoluments of all the Lord Chancellor's sons, the numerous "young Hannibals" who were indeed guiltless only of their country's blood.

III

Cobbett spoke as he wrote, and his writing was but a lightly sophisticated speech. Whether writing or speaking, invective was his chief weapon. Attacking Malthus and all other theorists, absentee parsons, upstart landowners, soldiers turned statesmen and statesmen turned thieves ; denouncing potatoes, tea-drinking, poets and historians, education and educators, aristocrats and democrats ; deploring rural depopulation and urban herding—in all these vigorous exercises he delighted in coarse abuse, and indeed it was wanted in his time to sustain the ancient method of defence. Nicknames gave him a boyish satisfaction—" Dread-death and dread-devil Johnson," and " Stern-path-of-duty-man " Lord Liverpool, and " M. de Snip," an Army clothing contractor and Member of Parliament. He was, in fact, driven to exaggerating the anger or the contempt he felt by his sharp sense of the advantages conferred on his opponents by rank, wealth, and culture.

Yet it would be wrong to think of him as merely a literary or political bully. He loved contention, and none the less remained a true peasant in his domestic affections, satisfactions, and fidelities. I cannot conceive of a political

England in which he would have rested content and inactive ; but he was a born writer, and had his temper been less often exasperated by privilege and injustice he would have written another and still more attractive *Rural Rides*, a yet happier *Year's Residence in America*. A clear hint of the writer that was half lost to letters may be found in one of many passages describing the education of his children :

" The first thing of all was health, which was secured by the deeply interesting and never-ending sports of the field and pleasures of the garden. Luckily these things were treated of in books and pictures of endless variety ; so that on wet days, in long evenings, these came into play. A large, strong table in the middle of the room, their mother sitting at her work, used to be surrounded with them, the baby, if big enough, sat up in a high chair. Here were ink-stands, pens, pencil, indiarubber, and paper, all in abundance, and every one scrabbled about as he or she pleased. There were prints of animals of all sorts ; books treating of them ; others treating of gardening, of flowers, of husbandry, of hunting, coursing, shooting, fishing, planting, and, in short, of everything, with regard to which we had something to do. One would be trying to imitate a bit of my writing, another drawing the pictures of some of our dogs or horses, a

third poking over Bewick's *Quadrupeds* and picking out what he said about them ; but one book of never-failing resource was the French *Maison Rustique*, or Farm House, which, it is said, was the book that first tempted Duquesnois (I think that was the name), the famous physician, in the reign of Louis XIV., to learn to read. . . . I never have been without a copy of this book for forty years, except during the time that I was fleeing from the dungeons of Castlereagh and Sidmouth, in 1817 ; and when I got to Long Island the first book I bought was another *Maison Rustique*."

Best of all had he written an autobiography untinctured by libels and lamentations, for in the writing of such a book, which he seems always on the verge of attempting, he would have had the advantage of a vivid memory and the minutest familiarity with the aspects and conditions of rural life as it touches the farmer and his labourers. Quieter days bringing reflection, and a more frequent reverie over the things which had taken the deepest root in his immature mind, he would have left us a book better than his best passages, flushed with the unaccountable brightness of a child's universe. But, alas! the literature of autobiography remained neglected in England, to be fulfilled in another tongue. For Cobbett's most expressive prose we must turn to a

chapter which rings with the eloquence of an orator :

" Go to the site of some once opulent convent. Look at the cloister, now become in the hands of some rack-renter the receptacle for dung, fodder, and faggot-wood. See the hall where for ages the widow, the orphan, the aged, and the stranger found a table ready spread. See a bit of its wall now helping to make a cattle-shed, the rest having been hauled away to build a warehouse. Recognise in the side of a barn a part of the once magnificent chapel ; and if, chained to the spot by your melancholy musings, you be admonished of the approach of night by the voice of the screech-owl from those arches, which once at the same hour resounded with the vespers of the monk, and which have for seven hundred years been assailed by storms and tempests in vain ; if thus admonished of the necessity of seeking food, shelter, and a bed, lift up your eyes, and look at the whitewashed and dry-rotten shed on the hill called the ' Gentleman's House ' ; and apprised of the ' board wages ' and ' spring guns,' which are the signs of his hospitality, turn your head, jog away from the scene of former comfort and grandeur ; and with old English welcoming in your mind, reach the nearest inn, and then in a room half-warmed and half-lighted, with a reception precisely proportioned to the presumed length of your purse, sit down and

listen to an account of the hypocritical pretences, the base motives, the tyrannical and bloody means, under which, from which, and by which the ruin you have been witnessing was effected, and the hospitality you have lost was for ever banished from the land."

That Ruskin expanded prose of this noble cadence into his own wilder and looser laments need not diminish our sense of its virtue.

Hazlitt reports James Northcote as saying that Cobbett was a giant who tore up a subject by the roots, and used a homely, familiar way of writing, not from necessity or vulgarity, but to show his contempt for aristocratic pride and arrogance. Both Hazlitt and Carlyle contrasted him with Scott, Carlyle seeing in Cobbett the pattern John Bull of his century, strong as the rhinoceros, with singular humanities and genialities shining through his thick skin; one of the healthiest of men, a great improviser, whose writing is wonderful in quality and quantity. " Poor old Cobbett ! " wrote Heine. " England's watch-dog ! I have no love for thee, for every brutish nature revolts me; but I pity thee from my inmost soul as I see how thou strainest in vain to break loose and get at those thieves." All Cobbett is open to us now, and it is not pity that should be given

to the man who wrote to his friends on leaving England :

" I will never become a subject or a citizen in any other State, and will always be a foreigner in every country but England. Any foible that may belong to your character I shall always willingly allow to belong to my own . . . and my beloved countrymen, be you well assured, that the last beatings of my heart will be love for the people, for the happiness and the renown of England ; and hatred of their corrupt, hypocritical, dastardly, and merciless foes."

Like Blake, though wielding weapons all unlike Blake's, he would not cease from mental fight until he too had built a new Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

IV

WALTER DE LA MARE

I

It is easier to speak candidly of the dead than of the living; it is easier to praise the dead, it is easier to be just to the dead than to the living. The art of criticism, which may appear to some a purely intellectual exercise, is primarily a moral exercise, for it is not to be practised except with equal honesty and sensitiveness, equal kindness and confidence; but the natural difficulty of applying critical principles to a dead artist is slight in comparison with that which arises when the subject is a contemporary. Those principles themselves are so variable and variously cherished, and the æstheticism which every artist and every critic broods darkly upon is so purely personal, that the task of finding a common ground and using a common language is perplexing as well as exciting. Criticism is not a science, else young men might learn it; nor an attitude, else old men might grow perfect in it; rather is it an

adventure calling for a touch of gallantry, a touch of forbearance, a gentle use of logic, a free recourse to imagination, and no more than the faintest hint of dogmatism. If something of this delicate adjustment may be spared when the subject is in the past, certainly nothing must be forgotten in following a living creative mind in its mental travels. The subject is no longer an island to be painfully surveyed, but a ship to be followed, a light to be pursued upon the changing currents of the mind.

II

Mr. Walter de la Mare is a poet to whom it is possible to be unjust, equally in praise and in depreciation, for his genius eludes classification. There are many plain things to be remarked as you look at his work, whether in verse or prose, but beyond these you are aware of more subtle and uncertain things to which a reader cannot fully respond unless his temperament is richly accordant with the author's. The discovery of what was called just now a common ground, and a common tongue, is not sufficient for a full apprehension of this poet's uncommon power, and he must be considered as unique, even after he has been considered as traditional.

Twenty-two years have passed since the publication of *Songs of Childhood*. Several of these songs have disappeared from the collected edition of the poems, and others have almost disappeared in the amendment to which they have been somewhat cruelly subjected, the habit of revision having developed in our author from anxious virtue into morbid vice. Such a misgiving as this meticulous habit reveals tends to sophisticate the first simplicities, and to compare the versions of 1902 and 1920 is to become aware that, in trying to make the verses better, the poet has merely made them different. At times the rhythm is faintly altered, at times an earlier awkwardness is removed, an epithet sharpened, an archaic touch annulled; something mature has stepped in, something youthful has passed out, and even the nicest skill does not always conceal the critical mind at work upon a lost imagination. Readers of the earlier versions have lamented these changes, without presuming to question the author's right to make them; and indeed it is not claimed for the 1902 volume that its attractiveness was complete and irresistible. *Songs of Childhood* contained the prophecy, but a reader wanted heavenly inspiration before he could clearly perceive the buried *Motley* in Mr. de la Mare's earliest book. We

need not pursue the point, only noting now the early fondness for names and for Poe, for children and fairies, and the almost deliberate attempt to produce a hypnotic state by the repetition of phrases and sounds. The field of the poet, though a small field (even in later years but little enlarged and nowhere unhedged), as yet was new and strange, thus meeting quite easily one of the primary conditions of romantic art. You may find Dr. Watts in it, and nursery rhymes and fairy tales, hints of Keats and Coleridge; but, in spite of echoes and imperfections, the book has clearly a character of its own, and for some lovers a peculiar and lasting beauty. Readers, nevertheless, for a long time were few and silent, and but for its successors *Songs of Childhood* might have expired, where for so long it languished, in a single edition bearing the forgotten name of " Walter Ramal " for author.

Nor did the *Poems* of 1906 go very far beyond repeating the first promise. The book contained more perfect things—few of the first songs were perfect—and quasi-dramatic Shakespearean reveries which bore little interest save that of autobiography. These reveries proved how well Mr. de la Mare could use the trick of Shakespeare's voice, how well he loved Mercutio, how his heart warmed to Juliet's nurse, and how fond was his

apprehension of Hamlet—matters on which later testimony is abundant, but which in no way speeded his self-discovery in poetry. The process was a slow one, and as natural as the growth of a hawthorn; but that it was not thwarted in the years between the first and second books is proved by the beauty of "The Children of Stare" and other preludes to the finer achievement of later lyrics: witness these two stanzas:

"Green Mistletoe!
Oh, I remember now
A dell of snow,
Frost on the bough,
None there but I;
Snow, snow, and a wintry sky. . . .

And the dusk gathered low,
And the silver moon and stars
On the frozen snow
Drew taper bars,
Kindled winking fires
In the hooded briers."

And lines of other poems show a yet rarer gift of phrase, as "amid the violets, tears of an antique bitterness . . ." There is a charming, old didacticism in the 1906 volume which has dwindled but by no means vanished in the later work, and a gravely religious impulse, nowhere explicit but frequently felt—felt, indeed, more strongly with successive volumes of prose and verse alike.

III

The delayed perfection was found abundantly in *The Listeners* of 1912, and developed so consistently in *Peacock Pie* and *Motley* that it is proper to treat the poetry of these three books as a whole.

Mr. de la Mare's temperament is not fully expressed in his poetry ; a part is uttered in the prose at which we shall be looking in a moment, but scarcely hinted at in the verse. The two characters of Shakespeare already named, Mercutio and Juliet's nurse, are the prototypes of the prose half, but there is no single prototype of the personality which glows ardently and sombrely through the verse, unless, perhaps, you figure to yourself an untragical Hamlet, Hamlet with a mind still narrowly introverted, but turning at first easily and then darkly upon the mirror of itself in nature. No modern poet is less objective, scarce any more severely restricted in subject. A dense thicket has slowly darkened around his mind, concentrating shadow and silence. There is ever a new burrowing into his own personality, an intenser stare into private deeps, a fonder and farther retrospection, a more passionate reversion to a small, grave, haunted child, or faint, haunted spirit. His mind sinks down from the light of

common day to the dusk of early consciousness, and again down to the obscurer unconsciousness, thrusting there perpetually for a door, for any least gap in the blind and dewy hedge. A ghost or " inward presence " urges him into this solitary quest, for it is himself he addresses when he murmurs :

> " Rave how thou wilt ; unmoved, remote,
> That inward presence slumbers not,
> Frets out each secret from thy breast,
> Gives thee no rally, pause, nor rest,
> Scans close thy very thoughts, lest they
> Should sap his patient power away,
> Answers thy wrath with peace, thy cry
> With tenderest taciturnity."

Solemn adjurations of a like intensity teem in his pages, and must have been too hastily put aside by the many readers who discover only a fantastic delight in them. In the image of a dark château, a traveller listening at an unopening door, a stone half-hidden in a graveyard, a fool ringing his bells, a sunken garden's " green and darkling spot," you are conscious of a whispered pleading and protest, a pleading for light, a protest against mortality. His poetry is full of images, and much of it can best be described in an image. No " tame villatic fowl," indeed, his muse is often a solitary robin, singing in winter upon a wall that scarce divides the cottage-garden

from the familiar graveyard. Like the robin, the muse flits from headstone to window-sill, now whistling from cypress shadows, now sending her brightest note through the shut window of the glowing room. Childhood and age, alike low-voiced, inhabit the house, half-lit by the fire's embers, and animated only when dusk calls for candles. A noisy wind may bring the sound but never the air of the hills into the small room, and the gentle voices rise unvexed by what is outside, or at times are shut into an oppression of quiet :

" Unmoved it broods, this all-encompassing hush
Of one who stooping near,
No smallest stir will make
Our fear to wake,
But yet intent
Upon some mystery bent
Hearkens the lightest word we say, or hear."

Stories are told between the silences, songs sung to children, of Martha and Rachel and Ann, the rhymes and tales that brighten so deliciously the pages of *Peacock Pie* ; and the private, stirless air of the room is agitated with fantastic laughter. Sometimes the house is left for a singular landscape, not far beyond the tombs, a forest where the kestrel screams, a small and secret English landscape ; or a fantastic Arabia, briefly visited and never forgotten. But the excursions are short, and never for long do you miss the voice singing a

homely and lovely song, which, when it is ended, leaves the silence as quick and thoughtful as the words.

Of the beauty of this poetry it is impossible to speak. The description of true poetry is at best but a kind of foolish paraphrase—an injury to the poet, a slight to the reader. It is needful but to quote a single stanza, one of a hundred perfect things, and if I choose "The Song of Shadows," it is not only because it seems to me the most beautiful of all, but because it is representative of many.

"Sweep thy faint strings, Musician,
With thy long lean hand:
Downward the starry tapers burn,
Sinks soft the waning sand;
The old hound whimpers couched in sleep,
The embers smoulder low;
Across the walls the shadows
Come, and go."

Our time has seen no finer lyric achieved in the desire to create a joy for ever, a lyric suggesting part of the secret of its beauty in the harmony of sound and hue. Simplicities flow from Mr. de la Mare's muse as surely as the most cunning elaboration, and of each kind examples are easily found:

"An apple, a child, dust
When falls the evening rain,
Wild briar's spiced leaves,
Breathe memories again."

And nothing might be simpler than these four lines, nor anything more beautiful in another mode than this :

" Sweet is the music of Arabia
  In my heart, when out of dreams
I still in the clear mirk of dawn
  Descry her gliding streams :
Hear her strange lutes on the green banks
  Ring loud with the grief and delight
Of the dim-silked, dark-haired Musicians
  In the brooding silence of night."

IV

Although it is proper, as I have said, to regard *Motley* under the same aspect as earlier volumes, it is to be noted that a new element appears in that book and that the conjunction of old and new makes *Motley* the most significant of all the poet's work. The art of the verse has attained another measure of perfection, for it follows more closely than ever a deeper impulse, but it is the deeper impulse itself that sounds the new note.

There are two worlds with which the imaginative mind may be concerned : one is the world which it creates by itself and of itself, the world which has no other reality than an immaterial reality ; and the other is the common moral and

material sphere with which all men are necessarily confronted. Most artists are concerned with one only of these worlds. Blake beheld and apprehended the imaginative and immaterial alone, Browning the moral and material alone. In his earlier poetry Mr. de la Mare was preoccupied—haunted, even—by the imaginative world, which he saw often as a bright, sometimes as a dark sphere, chequered with sunlight and moonlight falling between shadows, and peopled with those fantastic figures—in human shape or winged—which spring suddenly from the fulness of the mind. But in *Motley* he dwells no longer utterly in that brilliant and flushing world ; he is compelled by a new urgency to absent himself from felicity and breathe the air of commoner reality. He begins to meet the questions that we all meet, the difficulties, the desolation, the despair ; he tries to apprehend the world in which we all move—what it is, who are they that throng it, and the eternal whence and whither of their passage. Part of the peculiar intimacy which *Motley* allows to the reader comes from the fact that the poet is so sharply and so bitterly aware of the exile from the imaginative world. It is an intermitted exile, and so these departures and returns, despairs and renewals, yield him and us the solace of an exquisitely human tenderness.

The painfulness is not yet prolonged, the edge of bliss resumed is not yet dulled, and in this alternation between the two spheres lies the open secret of the beauty of *Motley*. So he passes from :

> " When music sounds, all that I was I am
> Ere to this haunt of brooding dust I came ;
> While from Time's woods break into distant song
> The swift-winged hours, as I hasten along——"

to the sorrowfulness of :

> " Some win peace who spend
> The skill of words to sweeten despair
> Of finding consolation where
> Life has but one dark end ;
> Who, in rapt solitude, tell o'er
> A tale as lovely as forlore,
> Into the midnight air."

Speech so plain as this makes interpretation vain, and not less vain when you read, in a poem itself called " The Exile " :

> " Betrayed and fugitive, I still must roam
> A world where sin, and beauty, whisper of Home."

It is far from being a matter for disappointment or remonstrance that Mr. de la Mare has won this painful freedom of passing between two worlds.

V

Although I have spoken of part of Mr. de la Mare's mind being uttered in prose, it is not

possible to survey his work in isolated fragments, and therefore a reference to the prose falls conveniently here. *Henry Brocken*, indeed, is a prose exercise of his poetic instinct, unwisely diverted into this medium, rather than an exercise of powers which could find utterance in prose alone. It is an essay upon the eternal theme of the wanderer, a journey backwards through the imaginative kingdom of other writers—Poe, Charlotte Brontë, Cervantes, and so on; and thus is akin to the "Characters from Shakespeare's Plays" which were found in his second volume of poems. Admirably written, with a fervid ingenuity and a fondness like that of a child for remembered stories, *Henry Brocken* reveals its author only in that fondness. *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* followed for the delight of many children, but with a reminder that the literary preferences of the child are beyond prediction. Happy are they whose perfect childishness finds an equal wondering joy in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Three Mulla-Mulgars!* I cannot pretend to show why other children do not find satisfaction in either, and nevertheless slake their capricious appetites with *Peacock Pie*, a tale of Tchehov, Mr. Hudson's *Purple Land*, and Mangan's *Dark Rosaleen*. Maybe it is the slight allegorical hint, the touch of the emblem, that repels the graceless

children who do not care for Mr. de la Mare's story of the three monkeys ; maybe it is an inexplicit but acute sense of the gulf between the fantastic and the imaginative.

When the third novel, *The Return*, was published, there was found little of the merely fantastic and nothing that might have gone into verse. *The Return* was an essay in quite another manner, and suggested that the author had strayed into a field over which the spirit of Henry James had passed. There was no lack of welcome for this novel but, for all its welcome, it slid very quietly into the minds of readers, and perhaps needed more than a single reading before its singular beauty and strength could be realised. It is the story of a man who, recovering from an illness, strays one afternoon into a graveyard and sits by the unconsecrated grave of one Sabathier ; drowsing there, and awakening into a sense of strangeness, he grows conscious of something akin to demoniacal possession, which touches not simply his mind but changes also his face into the abhorred likeness of the buried outcast. Consummate is the skill with which this incredible possibility is made convincing to the victim, his sceptical wife, his friends, and—most difficult of all—to the reader. The single, profound impression of interfusing spiritual and physical

is not maintained equally throughout the book, but this metaphysic dominates the whole without rendering the story less than imaginative. The difficult abyss between imagination and invention might be surveyed in the first and second parts of *The Return*; certainly, in the first, imagination is absolute. Spiritual horror peers through, and spiritual beauty expels the horror, and the story of that wrestling with principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world pierces and dismays the reader. It is the more wonderful since this tragic battle is set within a commonplace suburban home, with a detestable wife and a too briefly seen, adorable child for witnesses. In one short scene there is an almost unendurable anguish of recognition, when poor Arthur Lawford is suddenly confronted with the child to whom, for her sake only, he shows his changed face as that of the doctor :

" Alice turned, dismayed, and looked steadily, almost with hostility, at the stranger, so curiously transfixed and isolated in her small old play-room. And in this scornful yet pleading confrontation her eye fell suddenly on the pin in his scarf—the claw and the pearl she had known all her life. From that her gaze flitted, like some wild, demented thing's, over face, hair, hands, clothes, attitude, expression ; and her heart stood still in

an awful, inarticulate dread of the unknown. She turned slowly towards her mother, groped forward a few steps, turned once more, stretching out her hands towards the vague, still figure whose eyes had called so piteously to her out of their depths, and fell fainting in the doorway."

As tender, as perfect, is the later scene when the child secretly visits him; but this I cannot quote here, for to isolate would be to spoil it. That the evil metempsychosis is defeated is the least significant fact in the story; the significance lies in the struggle, the lonely courage, the beauty springing up in the bleakness of a narrow and material neighbourhood. To speak in an image of *The Return* is to say that in the cold, owlish darkness of the mind a light shines, making that darkness suddenly crystal with beamy reflections —every wet spray beaded with tiny mirrors yet with no clear light anywhere. Oddly enough, where the story is apparently autobiographical, it diminishes the impression of the rest; but perhaps it is not odd that voluble characters should be a distraction, even if one of them speaks with the roving and restless curiosity which so exactly suggests the author's talk. But even when these incessant verticulations are most bewildering, deep and simple things are said— "The more one thinks about life the worse it

becomes," and that of poor Sabathier, "What peace did he find who couldn't, perhaps, like you, face the last good-bye?"

Leaving aside for a moment his last novel, it is necessary to refer to certain other prose writings in which Mr. de la Mare reveals qualities not hitherto noted. There are queerish short stories, fugitive review articles (I remember some upon such authors as Defoe and Ruskin which it is a pity to reread only in memory), and a memorial lecture upon Rupert Brooke; and in most of these the quality to be instantly felt is the inquisitiveness with which he approaches every subject as a problem to be studied and never solved. His usual method is to confuse his lights, to throw upon his theme a shaking pattern of warring beams; and his effect is to complicate even while he illumes, to increase questions a thousandfold, to suggest without affirming, and to multiply images until the syntactical resources of the English language are only not quite exhausted. *Parerga* though they be, they are all so plainly individual, and so plainly the humbler complement to his poetry — the work of a Mercutio pricked with questions—that the recent collection of the short stories is amply justified in the eyes of readers and critics alike. One of the stories, "The Almond Tree," demands a special

tribute here ; it is simple in manner, touching in its burden, completely truthful, completely beautiful—exquisite as the snow sparkling on every page. And one of the essays, the address on Rupert Brooke, is likewise luminous and uncomplicated ; it is acute as well as affectionate in admiration, and discriminates precisely the chief of the lost poet's gifts, namely, the intellectual imagination which underlay both his irony and his zest.

VI

In looking at Mr. de la Mare's most recent work in verse and prose, I cannot evade an impression that the change which was lightly apparent in *Motley* has been strongly developed in the brief intervening years. In *The Veil* he is seen often painfully far from his imaginative sphere, reverting to it in desire but bitterly alienated ; treading the harsher ways of the common sphere, unable to accept it, unable to escape from it, seeing it as a moral enormity and that other as a spiritual sweetness, but no longer passing as it were at will from this to that. The simplicities and the ingenuities of joy have alike waned ; doubts rise and do not sink again, but are met by affirmations, or softened by consolatory whispers. The heart of furious fancies has been

startled by a vision that is no cloudy fancy—the callous, rude-carven image of time, with change and sorrow in tributary posture at his feet. Enchantment is forgone or forgotten, and interpretation begins.

The publication of *The Memoirs of a Midget* had already prompted such misgivings as these, when *The Veil* following showed that the new attitude was not a casual one, or a dramatic assumption, but an inward change or growth. Had the author wanted to prove the unkindness of fate or circumstance towards the tenderest of sensitive things, the natural cruelty of human hearts, the sadder cruelty of egoism, his choice of theme and his treatment of character would have made the new novel an exhaustive proof. But he did not want to prove anything, certainly not anything desperate, bitter, relaxing; and hence it seems that the melancholy frustations of *The Memoirs of a Midget*, and the mere insistent painfulness, are but an involuntary utterance of the unhappiness with which Mr. de la Mare, stung by a sense of the irreconcilable, has contemplated life in its ruins—life of which all the beauty and energy have dwindled into the simple "making the best of a bad job." A midgetary Jude the Obscure might hardly breathe an air of crueller sorrow than the poor nymph of our

author's imagination; the parable of life is moralised to a purpose as sombre as that of Mr. Hardy himself, whose spiritual influence, indeed, is the only one to which the younger writer has made obeisance.

All this may be read more clearly in the novel than in the latest verse, because the novel presents its theme with a fuller consistency than is possible in a collection of lyrics, and also by reason of the great contrast between the earlier chapters of the novel, with their beauty of reminiscence, and the extravagance of invention in the later chapters. Almost anywhere you may find passages which recall Mr. Doughty's serene fairy landscapes, or tempt you to cry, "A new Nymphidia!" so bright, so precise, so minute are the passionate beauties of Mr. de la Mare's prose. But the surviving impression is the moral; far off is the crystal, imaginative kingdom when the last page of the book is turned; and it is in a world of cold dun light that the reader wakes with the haunting evil of Fanny Bowater, the futility of Mr. Anon, the worldliness of all the worldly, the weakness of all the unworldly, echoing or darkening around him.

The Veil is less completely dominated by the new spirit and offers more frequent contrasts. To speak of some poems as being poems of dis-

illusion is to suggest that the others, in the more familiar mode, are poems of illusion, and that would be false to poet and critic alike ; but nevertheless there are not only signs of change, there is also, as I have said before, an evident consciousness of change. Mr. de la Mare still writes out of the old enchantment :

" Dim-berried is the mistletoe
With globes of sheenless grey,
The holly mid ten thousand thorns
Smoulders its fires away ;
And in the manger Jesus sleeps
This Christmas Day. . . .

Now night is astir with burning stars
In darkness of the snow ;
Burdened with frankincense and myrrh
And gold the Strangers go
Into a dusk where one dim lamp
Burns faintly, Lo ! "

He returns to the lost world :

" Coral and clear emerald,
And amber from the sea,
Lilac-coloured amethyst,
Chalcedony ;
The lovely Spirit of Air
Floats on a cloud and doth ride,
Clad in the beauties of earth
Like a bride."

But now it is a revisitation and no longer inhabitation. Many of the poems in the volume called *The Veil* suggest that the veil has been

rent, and within is a fireless altar, an empty shrine. Empty with loveliness, is his own phrase, which may be transferred to the world in which he is moving ; for whatever of exquisite he reveals in these poems brings with it the sorrowful persuasion of emptiness and forlornness. " Is it to Vacancy, I these tidings tell ? " is his question in a lyric curiously entitled " The Monologue," and he even deplores an answer, and would only cling to Faith " for sanity's sake." One of the most beautiful of all his beautiful things is " Not That Way," and yet even here is the reiterating lament :

> " Alas, that beauty hangs her flowers
> For lure of his demoniac powers."

His most piercing cry is a question, heard in the haunting shriek of the owl ; or if he answers his own riddle of the universe, it is to say of man :

> " Oh, rather, idly breaks he in
> To an Eden innocent of sin ;
> And, prouder than to be afraid,
> Forgets his Maker in the made."

The image that he sees is not the old sweet beckoning image ; it is named Despair ; and he no longer speaks quietly to a friendly Familiar but calls loudly, unavailingly, " O Master, thick cloud shuts thee out ! " It is to this solemn effect that Mr. de la Mare has turned from crea-

tion to interpretation, and the mere fact that a fine mind should reveal this great change in such a discouragement and misgiving betrays the modern philosophy in its clearest direction.

A careful reader will look for a development in style when the change of spirit is so conspicuous; and here also the prose and verse bear witness. The prose of *The Memoirs of a Midget* is highly concentrated, and takes small heed to the weakness of mortality; it is so tense, so packed, so vividly and restlessly pictorial, that you rise from a prolonged reading with eyes smarting as though you had peered too closely at a pattern which a midget only might study with ease. In this minute agility the mind sees no point of rest, and while the prose thus matches the extravagant consciousness, the very ecstasy of self-consciousness, of the star-crossed Midget, it fatigues or bewilders the grosser reader. And in considering the "style" of the book in more than a restricted technical sense, the humblest admirer may be disconcerted by the incessant moralisation of the Midget's world, a moralisation to which not herself alone but most of the characters—that is, most of the women—contribute. Might not the disease of thought have been soothed a little? Might not the moral impression have been silently presented in cir-

cumstance and character, instead of in explicit challenge and pleading? To utter such doubts is to say again that the first part of this novel triumphs in its silence, and the second fails because of its too obstinate questioning. Memorably beautiful, nevertheless, are a hundred passages in which Mr. de la Mare writes as he has never written before:

"But think! There may never come another hour like this. Know, know now, that you have made me happy. I can never be so alone again. I share my secretest thoughts, my imagination with you; isn't that a kind of love? I assure you that it is. Once I heard my mother talking, and sometimes I have wondered myself, if I am quite like—oh, you know what they say: a freak of Nature. Tell me: if by some enchantment I were really and indeed come from those snow mountains of yours, and that sea, would you recognise me? Would you? No, no; it's only a story—why, even all this green and loveliness is only skin deep. If the Old World were just to shrug its shoulders, Mr. Anon, we should all, big and little, be clean gone."

In the verse, again, the evidence of technical change following the spiritual change is clear, and already perceptible in the poems written for the drawings of Miss Pamela Bianco. In those

lovely illustrative verses there are the signs of perfection over-perfected, the main delight being that of style rather than conception, a technical more than an imaginative astonishment :

> " As I did rove in blinded night,
> Raying the sward, in slender ring,
> A cirque I saw whose crystal light
> Tranced my despair with glittering.
>
> Slender its gold. In hues of dream
> Its jewels burned, smiting my eyes,
> Like wings that flit about the stream
> That waters Paradise.
>
> Sorrow broke in my heart to see
> A thing so lovely ; and I heard
> Cry from its dark security
> A 'wildered bird."

In many poems in *The Veil* this technical innovation has become a little wilful, a little perverse even, the beauty achieved being beauty self-conscious, wrought with hands and not breathed up from the sod. Mr. de la Mare's early uncertainty of style slowly passed away in the growth of a rare sureness and originality ; he made his own idiom, by which all his verse may be instantly recognised even by those who know but a little of it. His ear is exquisite, his fingering of syllables full of assurance ; but in *The Veil* originality, or the consciousness of mastery,

sometimes edges out beauty, makes rhythm curt, and contracts imagination to fantasy.

> " Wings diaphanous, beating bee-like,
> Wand within fingers, locks enspangled,
> Icicle foot, lip sharp as scarlet,
> She lifted her eyes in her pitch-black hollow—
> Green as stalks of weeds in water—
> Breathed : stirred."

And from a darker invention :

> " And the wanderer
> Back to flesh house must return ;
> Lone soul—in horror to see,
> Than dream more meagre and awful,
> Reality."

The chief technical influence seen in Mr. de la Mare's verse before *The Veil* was that of Coleridge, whose wave-like music and translucent brightness are echoed and reflected even in certain of the latest poems, such as " Sunk Lyonesse " :

> " And the ocean water stirs
> In salt-worn casemate and porch.
> Plies the blunt-snouted fish
> With fire in his skull for torch.
> And the ringing wires resound ;
> And the unearthly lovely weep,
> In lament of the music they make
> In the sullen courts of sleep."

But the influence of Coleridge is chief no longer, and now (if any be chief where none is very strong) it is Mr. Bridges who affects his verse

most plainly, with that manner of strange rhythm and odd phrasing which the Poet Laureate has used to test the affection of those that love his earlier work. With the conception, let us say in short, the style has become intellectualised; both are less instinctive, more deliberate; there is less to charm, more to stimulate, though it be only curiosity or perplexity that is stimulated. "Sweet and amusing," in Gilbert White's phrase, are the earlier verses, but the later are dark in spirit and harsher in style. It may be that they are transitional and that the next volume will extend the movement at which it is possible to look too doubtfully now, forgetting that the present has grown out of the past and will itself soon be a station of the past; for criticism limps and stumbles at best, and can seldom anticipate the motion of an original mind. Sometimes it may luckily forecast the flight of the creative instinct, sometimes predict the course of the rational mind; but an impossible felicity is wanted to discover the future of such an alternation or fusion of the two as Mr. de la Mare's latest work suggests.

Nor is it possible to attempt conclusions upon his present position in English poetry. His task as a lyrical writer is far different from that of Mr. Hardy and Mr. Doughty. The largeness

of conception upon which the vast events of *The Dynasts* are so easily borne, and which informs scarcely less amply the shorter poems of Mr. Hardy, is no more within Mr. de la Mare's range than is the elemental, mythopœic movement of *The Dawn in Britain.* But it is his work, before that of any other contemporary, that springs to the memory if it be asked what lyrical, what purely subjective poems may best endure the neighbourhood of these epical nobilities. And there is satisfaction in noting how general has been its acceptance, how warm its welcome. Recognition has not needed the waspish provocation of attack; criticism has been but praise, never a whisper of dissent has broken the concord; and we may point to his poetry for current evidence that the best that is given to readers is the most honoured of all giving.

V

MAURICE HEWLETT

I

For many years narrative poetry in this country has been neglected for lyrical poetry, the best work of the present generation having taken quite naturally a lyric form for reasons which it would be interesting to ponder and very difficult to determine. One reason may be postulated, a reason founded in the movement and psychology of the time—that the burdens which oppress the minds of men have driven them into seeking means of escape; and hence there have been sudden aspirations and up-leapings in which temporal bonds are broken or forgotten, and the imagination moves entranced in a world of its unique creation, knowing no music but that of its own voice and wings, and no constraint but that of loyalty to its own severe though uncodified law. The narrative tradition of English poetry died a lingering, certain death in the immense collection of Tennyson's verse,

for Swinburne's narratives were but extravagant lyrics; and, when English poetry revived and spoke once more of obstinate questionings or questionings put by, the lyric form triumphed and narrative was reserved for the inferiorities of prose minds that hankered after verse. The sombre imaginations of Mr. Thomas Hardy had for many years found expression in prose narrative, but when the custom of prose gave place at length to the instinct of verse, it was not narrative but lyrical verse that became his best medium; for even the too-sardonic meditations and tart gibes that may seem, in "Satires of Circumstance," to have little of the maturity and nothing of the serenity of art, do not fall into a patient discovery of incident and character, but are set forth nakedly as unrelated incidents. It is true that we have been asked to admire certain brisk recitals of incident by other authors, but they are palpably inferior efforts and meant merely to please a reader quickly tired by serious things. They hardly affect the suggestion now put forward which, in terms of scientific cacophony, may be stated as the neglect of the objective for the subjective, in the poetry of the present generation.

II

It is because a chief recent attempt at a narrative in verse has been overlooked that the reader is now asked to consider certain poems by Mr. Maurice Hewlett; and it may seem strange to speak of any of Mr. Hewlett's work as having been overlooked when it is remembered that quite apart from his reputation as a novelist he is welcomed as an essayist of a singular quality, and a poet whose verse on classical themes has commanded respect without winning a very prompt affection. But the very variety of interest is itself a possible hindrance to the appreciation of the rarest aspect of Mr. Hewlett's genius. Other men have written admirable romances, others have achieved at least an equal intimacy in essays, and others again have recast ancient myths in modern shape; but it is Mr. Hewlett's praise that he has done something better than his best in these forms. Nor is it a question of form alone, for the poems we are now to look at have another distinction; a distinction inherent in their subject and in the manner of presenting that subject to readers ready to welcome it, if only the true character and scope of the poems be recognised.

They are poems, then, of a completely

English character, presenting their theme with the frankness and urgency of a gospel or a political tract, yet never wholly denying their imaginative origin. There is a great deal of poetry, from Chaucer's to Meredith's, in which the English landscape is rendered with imaginative fondness and fidelity; and no lover of the native country, or of native poetry, can fail to perceive in greater and lesser English poets alike—in Shakespeare and Pope, Keats and Marvell, Milton and Mr. Bridges—not simply the affection but also the very features of the land itself, the special quality of hills and hedgerows and streams and woods, which these poets have mysteriously evoked, renewed and reinspired. How large a part the English landscape has taken in forming the English spirit, we who are naturally intimate with both cannot easily decide; but the long experience of the war, with its memories of painful exile and reverting desire, has helped us to apprehend a little consciously, perhaps, the strength of this most ancient of affinities. Keats, when he wrote *Endymion*, was unaware of any desire but the desire to approach or create beauty, his own passion turning quite simply to the simplest and subtlest observation of the beauty of woods and meadows; but in his relation of all that he thus

discovered he achieved something beyond his own intention, creating an image of the physical and spiritual character of the English landscape as surely as did Constable in another medium, or any water-colourist of the great age ; and Keats is but one of a score of instances, which it would be easy and delightful to recount, of the same imaginative loyalty and creativeness.

Hitherto, however, there has been a singular deficiency in all this activity. The image thus reflected, or the landscape thus presented, has been strangely silent and solitary ; it has been strangely unhistoried. Birds' voices are heard there but not men's ; cattle are seen moving, but not labourers ; spiritual visions sweep the hills, but visions of the human past have less often been recorded. It is as though trees were more enduring than men, thoughts more significant than actions, dreams of the future more potent than continuous memories of the past. The physical character of their native landscape has entered deeply into the English poets, and their apprehension of it has become half mystical ; until at length it might be said that their primary power is manifest in a lyrical meditation upon the beauty of the English country, and the imaginative exaltation of that beauty into a pure spiritual aura.

I do not suggest this as a fault but as a special feature of English poetry, and I pass on to another suggestion—that Mr. Hewlett is the most eminent if not quite the only one of modern poets by whom this tradition has been broken, in his return to an older tradition. *The Song of the Plow*, his longest and finest poem, does not lack the sudden lyricism of landscape beautifully rendered, but it is not to this that his powers are most freely given. He calls his poem the English chronicle, and himself suggests that his point of view is novel, showing it succinctly in the briefest of " arguments " :

" A certain man, being in bondage to a proud Conqueror, maintained his customs, nourisht his virtues, obeyed his tyrants, and at the end of a thousand years found himself worse off than he was in the beginning of his servitude. He then lifted his head, lookt his master in the face, and his chains fell off him."

Expanding the argument, he points out that this country holds two classes of persons, a governing class and a governed class ; and he sees these, indeed, not simply as separate classes but as separate nations. He does not mean this politically, but emphasises the distinction in saying that by race the governed are British, with a strong English mixture of blood, while the

governing race is even yet preponderatingly Latin-French with a Scandinavian admixture. All the apparatus and circumstance of government are still Norman.

Now his poem is a passionate historical survey of the subordinate people from the time of the conquest by the Norman race, which has never ceased to be foreign to the governed race; and his own point of view throughout is that of the subordinate multitude. Indeed, he humorously remarks that only a sense of decorum forbade his entitling *The Song of the Plow* by a more literal title—*The Hodgiad.* But although his hero is Hodge the conquered, he has shunned the merely pathetic interest which the simple annals of the poor might so easily sustain; and in this he is again distinguished from such another sincere poet as Crabbe, whose eye was all for the individual and not in the least for the general. It is a somewhat odd circumstance that this English chronicle of a subject race should not have been written by an unredeemed member of that race; but a high intelligence and knowledge, as well as instinctive sympathy, were needed for the task, and it is not unfitting that the assertion of the rights of the subject race should come from one who has enjoyed a larger freedom than theirs. Crabbe

had not the imaginative view of the past which is essential to this task, and for all his sympathy (sympathy tinctured with satire and always narrowly sombre) he had little but pity for individual griefs and no sense at all of what his own time was beginning to term the rights of man. For us to-day his poetry survives less by its human sympathy than by its power of presenting landscape, thus maintaining, if with a sharply individual difference, the tradition at which we have glanced. More precisely it is when his sad and savage landscape is used for the frame of saturnine characters—characters frequently presented with scientific coldness and acuteness—that his poetry makes its strongest appeal.

Mr. Hewlett might have become another George Crabbe, another chronicler of village life, but for his nimbler spirit and larger sense of history; for his shorter narrative, *The Village Wife's Lament*, shows that it is not because his mind is cold that the merely pathetic interest has been avoided in *The Song of the Plow*. But pathos would have been an infelicity in a chronicle beginning:

> "I sing the Man, I sing the Plow
> Ten centuries at work, and Thee,
> England——"

a chronicle meant to show the passing years as they might have appeared to Hodge himself, misty and full of dim rumours, with occasional remote flashes of "things in the doing." It is not our author's purpose to exclude the greater things in the doing, or to speak as an apostate of the true glories of the English achievement; but all these are seen not through the eyes of king or cardinal or ambassador, but through the eyes of the humblest of subjects.

> "I sing the grumbled low refrain,
> The broken heartstrings' undertones."

But you may not forget that it is a poet that speaks, one who remains a poet even while he feels Hodge's wrongs as his own; and hence this chronicle, which might else have been unendurably desolate or unendurably dull, has the quality of poetry which alone may sweeten such a story with a touch of immortality.

> "Yet in the village you might muse
> Under the silver evening star:
> The men, the houses, shrouded yews,
> The long church folding into the night
> Still in the holding of Saint Use
> As in days when his shrine was bright.
> Still on his milestone, feeling the peace
> Of the level evening light,
> His stick between his gnarly knees,
> Gaffer sits in hempen smock
> With clear blue eyes for all he sees
> 'Neath craggy brows like weather'd rock:

Small white houses about a green,
Dust behind from a homing flock;
Ducks on the pond's edge nibble and preen
Their necks; in the great elm's heavy shade
A dim couple, the king and queen
Of life-to-come, young man, young maid."

Constantly is the strictness of the narrative thus lyrically relieved, but the strictness of history is more closely observed. Readers will not want an assurance that Mr. Hewlett knows a great deal of history, and his chronicle, though it is called a song, is quite truly a chronicle, beginning (after an exquisitely stopped prelude) with the year 1066, stepping on the whole faithfully down to the end of the nineteenth century, and ending in a magnificent envoy of nearer and darker days. From Senlac to New Domesday the burden is the same, an undersong of oppression, labour, endurance, and hope; the great events sweeping by like waves that draw the weedy depths all one way yet are themselves obscurely shapen by the unchanging obstacles beneath the surface. The events flow over—a succession of battles, ambitions, intrigues, laws, and law-breakings; but as they flow on, one giving place to another, the ancient figure of this epic narrative abides, slowly adding dignity to strength, consciousness to unconsciousness, voice to passion, and emerging at length, incompletely but recog-

nisably, into the morning which this poet, if no other, looks upon with eyes teased equally by certitude and impatience.

The great vision unfolds, at first dusky and dubious, clung to with obstinate faith and at last proclaimed with the assurance of old prophecy ; and it is this clear visionary quality above all that makes the chronicle a poem, the narrative a song. Whether the vision appears a radiance or a mockery now, the character of the poem is untouched ; for that character is based, as every true vision and every true poem must be based, upon the spiritual apprehension of the poet. In 1916 it was easier to share in the radiance than it is now, when so often the mockery seems all that we know of hope ; but the charge is to be made against the time, against its sickness and dismay, rather than against the heralds of ultimate strength and brightness. It is to be remembered, too, that this narrative is not dramatic, nor is it concerned with the uprising, in our modern sense, of mass against class. The hero is Hodge and not an indistinguishable multitude, the agricultural labourer and not the industrial serf or industrial dictator. Mr. Hewlett's interest is in rural England far more than in the industrial state of which we are all alike suddenly shocked into great fear. He might

conceivably join with Dean Inge in deploring the herding of men into cities, and their strangely willing subdual to a social regimen of their own or their masters' making; but questions of this kind are not his anxiety, his affection being given, as regards the distant past and the present equally, to the men he knows—the rural workers whose fight is with the elements on one hand, and a far older foe than industrialism on the other.

Over all kings one king was supreme, "Immortal hunger," that drove Hodge forth on Saint Calixtus' day 1066, and every day after.

> "What's to him this Dance of Death,
> Or this young man that jigs for his lord,
> Young Taillefer, as the tale saith . . .
> What's it to him how the flood veers,
> Spilling on Senlac's bare ledge?
> 'Tis nine by the sun, as it appears,
> Time for nuncheon under the hedge.
> Loose your kerchief of bread and porret,
> Sit you down and cut you a wedge."

The Norman Dance of Death dies away, and Hodge has but changed his old lord for a new; the saints of Holy Church are unchanged, and "the chief of saints for workday stuff" is eternal, the saint whom Mr. Hewlett smilingly insists is good Saint Use—Use-and-Wont or Custom, kindly more than unkindly Saint as you are persuaded in the notes to this poem:

" Holding to him these days of dread,
Hodge the bondman may work at ease
And munch at ease his leek and bread,
Let rime or flower be on the thorn
And English Harold alive or dead."

It will be admitted that Mr. Hewlett's is a cheerful eye ; and little as it may recommend a serious work to say so, he has easily avoided a carefully nourished gloom and would fain see both past and future in the simplest morning light. In his work there is, in truth, a real simplicity and candour of view, an honest disdain of making times and things appear worse than they are, and a steady refusal, in spite of all untowardness, to affect a philosophic despair which is not in his own nature.

Remarkable is the skill with which the plain facts of the text-books are expressed in the brief rhythms of Mr. Hewlett's verse. The text-book, for all that it deals with human affairs, can be very dull, but this verse-chronicle never succeeds in being dull, although it must be confessed that it is not always perfectly easy reading. Compression of incident, curtness of phrase, oddity of rhythm, archaistic vocabulary, rapidity of allusion, startling modernity of style—these are found sometimes here, sometimes there, and sometimes all together ; and thus the reading becomes at times an excitement of the brain as much as an

unloosening of the imagination. Mr. Hewlett's highly individualised prose style is familiar to all readers—its swiftness, its masterful and whimsical energy, its staccato abruptness and often excessive emphasis—and now and then the worst as well as the best qualities of the prose are audible in the more sensitive medium of his verse. But his faults are casual and not constant; he escapes that most common of narrative defects, languor; and even apart from the lyrical upsoarings already noted, there is the abundant reward of felicitous and vivid verse.

The precise form of that verse is, I believe, new in English poetry—the *terza rima* of Dante in Italian and of Shelley in English, abridged from a ten to an eight-syllable line, and written paragraphically (as blank verse must be written) rather than in the form of stanzas. It is a bold experiment, for hitherto there has not been a long English poem of high quality in *terza rima*; and, though others should fail to make good use of the form, Mr. Hewlett has certainly justified the violence with which he has wrenched it to his own admirable purpose, and diminished the elegiac gravity into which the decasyllabic *terza rima* tends to fall in English hands. But of technique this is more than enough, all that might be remarked further being the rather

curious fact that for the recital of the plain story of Hodge and his masters our author should have had recourse to a new arrangement of a foreign verse form, instead of relying, as he might so lightly have done, upon traditional English metres. I think his invention was a wise one, since it is a harmony of his own mind and since by its means he escapes the monotony which is apt to beset a long narrative poem.

III

I spoke a moment ago of the skill with which the plain facts of the text-books had been expressed in this quick and nervous verse; and there are certain facts, indeed, which in that verse assume a higher emotional quality than can well be suggested by the sober pacings of historians' prose. To take a ready instance, the calamity of the Black Death is conveyed by the text-books in such prose passages as might dutifully attempt to sustain the horror which was felt in 1918 when the Registrar-General's statistics told the story of the influenza epidemic.

"In the years which followed the battle of Crecy, England, in common with Europe in general, was visited by the appalling pestilence known as the Black Death. It appeared in England in

1347 and 1348, and recurred at intervals during the next twenty years. So terrible was the visitation that in the rural districts it may be estimated from the evidence that not less than one-third—perhaps a full half—of the population was swept away. The fields were left untilled, and there was a terrible scarcity of food."

And the advantage of the poetic method is seen when the full consequence of the Black Death comes to be remarked, for in this chronicle it is the soul's as well as the body's weariness that urges the Peasants' Revolt, and a spiritual as well as a physical ease that follows the revolt.

> "As in the woodland after rain
> The birds pipe a more liquid note,
> So rising from his fever and pain
> Tuneth good Hodge a mellower throat."

True that the method is inadequate when the story is of Houses and Monarchs, and regrettably inadequate when Elizabeth's whole reign, its immediate splendour and ultimate influence, are dismissed in a few lines with a few names; for Hodge too had his part, though Mr. Hewlett believes that

> "Hodge knew you not, nor guessed the alarms
> That flew about your island hold;
> He had his griefs for his own harms,
> Left to the penury and cold
> Of lessening wages, stinted room."

It is our author himself who is stinting room here, but it is only fair to remember, nevertheless, that it is the peasant and not the prince that is his hero. In justification of an equally cursory treatment of the Stuarts and the Protector he is able to plead, in his admirable notes, the obliteration of the peasant during that anarchic time ; but the reader may be excused for thinking that there is something too summary in the mere curt recapitulation, for example, of a few facts of Charles the Second's reign, and a characterisation so formal as that of " the Wastrel " whose heart was " as fond, untrue and vile as even a Stuart's can be." The entire period from the death of Elizabeth to the accession of George the Third is compressed within six hundred lines, and no skill in contraction can make the result an adequate relation. The Revolution, for instance, had an inevitable influence upon social conditions, for it was in every sense a revolution and left nothing untouched by its deep-moving wave. What is lost by Mr. Hewlett's excessive concision, in fact, is the sense of continuity in change, even the sense of change itself ; and, although this may be less a part of history than of what is loosely called the philosophy of history, it is a part which the chronicler cannot fairly ignore. Mr. Hewlett contents himself with observing of

Dutch William that he died "and left us where we stood rigid in constitutional bars." Even less is vouchsafed of Queen Anne, and no word of the colonial expansion which was going on all the time, and had a significance, both instant and distant, for Hodge and his lord alike.

It is to be concluded from these ungracious cavils that our author is so completely possessed by a single aspect of his theme that the obliteration of the peasant which he asserts seems almost to involve a brief eclipse of the poet—a misadventure which I am bound to lament. Beautiful, then, is the quick reaction of such a passage as that beginning:

> "When winds are high and lands adust,
> And day no longer than the night,
> When grass-spears dimple the earth's crust,
> Pricking the glebe with points of light."

George Fox and Bunyan and Wesley, to whom our author's impulsive homage is given, are become the peasant's priests and prophets in Book IX., of which these are the opening lines; and Mr. Hewlett's method is seen approaching its best exercise in the ardour of his contrast of them with "the high world" of the Walpoles and the Gunnings, and quite at its best in the harmony of historic fact with the liberty of poetry in the tenth Book, "The Last Theft." The iniquities

of Enclosure Acts may seem dull matter for the Muse, but what is not dull in Cobbett's prose is assuredly not dull in our author's indignant verse ; and this Book at least is exempt from the defect of which I have now to speak.

For, as the chronicle draws nearer to modern times, to that great glory or great disaster, the transformation to industrialism, it is inevitable that difficulties should darken the author's path ; his problem being always, I take it, to preserve his story as a romance and prevent its degradation into a verse tract, since a narrative poem without the touch of romance would be as a smoky town lacking the winnowing of the winds. It is a serious problem for a poet facing the stark social conditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it is easy to note passages where the dangers have pressed irresistibly.

> " When Arthur Young,
> Concerned with economic ruin,
> Cried up the properties of dung
> Which in hedg'd land your yield quadruples,
> He served the gamester and the bung,
> And had no lack of ardent pupils.
> The Open Lands must go, all said ;
> This was no age for reverent scruples ;
> Saint Use-and-Wont was dying or dead."

The Muse, he says, abridges all that we need not understand, and the abridgment here can hardly

be too severe for the ends of poetry, yet easily too severe for the purposes of the political "case." The heading of Book XI. is Waterloo and Peterloo, and there is far more romance in Waterloo than in Peterloo; but Mr. Hewlett's scheme demands that Peterloo shall be predominant. Hence there is a somewhat close and dusty air of defunct politicians and faded issues in this Book. Even when he speaks of the great figures it is with a desire to dismiss them quickly, as in his disdainful phrase of "the wooden Duke," the scorner of those who served him; although it is true that adoration speaks when he turns from Wellington to another:

> "Happier was Nelson, whose pure flame
> Spir'd upwards one short hour supreme,
> And flashing left no shade of blame
> Upon a life spent like a dream."

What, in a word, he has failed to do is to convince us that it is possible to treat strictly political issues in any manner of poetry but satirical; for the idealism which is so active in the earlier Books of *The Song of the Plow* is defeated in the political murkiness of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He opens his twelfth Book exquisitely with:

> "O quiet land I love so well,
> And see so lovely as I roam
> By woody holt or grassy swell,

Or where the sun strikes new-turn'd loam
To gleaming bronze, or by the shore
Follow the yellow'd curves of foam,
And see the wrinkl'd sand grow frore."

But can he lyricise the breaking up of the old Poor Law, or the tyranny of the Trade Unions, or the contentions of Free Trade and Tariff Reform? It is even this and much more that he has tried, for his Muse believes nothing to be impossible, and even sings of A.D. 1851:

"Yet trade goes briskly; we grow rich
Tho' land lie lean and peasants dwindle;
Within another hemistich
You'll hear enough your thoughts to kindle.
They raise the Glasshouse on the green
To hymn the triumph of the spindle
Over the plow."

If our thoughts refuse to kindle it is from no want of good will, but from a mere lugubrious dampness; seventy years ago our hearts might have burned within us, but 1921 sees us sure of nothing, suspicious of every triumph, and prone to lament the things once praised. But when Mr. Hewlett himself, out of mere human hatred, grows satirical, he becomes more and not less a poet, forgetting his text and denouncing what he hates, "the copulation of original sin and the printing press" that resulted in the modern newspaper.

"Out then, ye Dungflies, buzz and breed;
Cozen 'em, tempt 'em, bleed 'em, flay 'em!
We are the mongers that they need,
Offal and carrion to purvey 'em.
Base is the slave whom doubts deter:
Men whisper rumours—why not bray 'em?
'Pictures in Court—The Ha'p'ny Blur!'"

It is the sign of his profound sincerity that this contemptuous invocation leads him at once and quite naturally to a sadder and fonder appeal.

"The land is sick and full of fears.
And you, O hopeless, heartsick ye,
Sick with your surfeit of salt tears
And heritage of agony.
What have we made of you, O Earth,
Since of your lap you made us free?"

In his earlier pages Mr. Hewlett has shown the life of the peasant as wholly divorced from the life of those called great, but in his later Books he shows—perhaps not quite intentionally but I think none the less truly—the gradual intermixture of lower with upper, mass with class; turning the many small lights of the story upon the slow emergence of Hodge, and his first participation in the conscious life of the race. That, indeed, is his great theme, developed from the chaos of obscure beginnings into the more assured movement of our own time. If it be a reproach to history when history becomes partisan and historians human, the reproach

loses its slight sting when it is turned against a poet; and whatever we have found to regret in the later Books of this chronicle is due rather to the intractable nature of the subject than to the author's failure to keep his own eye and heart engaged. Not a word, however, may be uttered by me except in praise of the Envoy, "New Domesday." There he looks upon Hodge and the world from his intimate corner of southern England, and sees him called to take a part in a larger quarrel than his own quarrel of centuries. Hodge, he says, knew little of chancelleries and international wrangles, but knew one certain thing—"The mighty have oppressed the weak." I wish I had space to quote the passages which have moved my own mind, but it must be enough to say that the song rises with the event, and to add a single passage without comment.

"As up by Kennetside I rode
From Newbury to Savernake,
I thought what sounds had charged her flood
Since Norman William's sword fell slack—
What cheers of triumph and what groans
This funded earth had echoed back,
This soil made deep with English bones,
Made rich with blood of Englishmen,
Whose rede lies graven in the stones
A-litter on the hillside! Then,
Grieving the willow-border'd mead,
Grieving the flower-haunted fen,

> The broad-eav'd farms, the nobly-treed,
> The eddying river stemm'd with mills,
> My eyes sought comfort in their need
> And found the everlasting hills
> And rested there. . . .
> Then, where the forest on the ridge
> Thrusts his green shoulder to the plain,
> I saw the end of Privilege."

It would be a half-excusable mistake, though still a mistake, if *The Song of the Plow* were to be visited in time to come for the birds singing thus sweetly in its branches; for the attraction of such music, with its traditional echoes and familiar refrains, is permanent and irresistible.

I have preferred, in this rapid sketch of a sketch, to regard *The Song of the Plow* in relation to its subject rather than in its purely æsthetic character, but under each aspect it is a fruitful matter for meditation. Under the former, it represents the influence of a great inspiration upon a writer who, among many admirable efforts, has nowhere else found a theme to exercise and exalt his finest powers; and under the purely æsthetic aspect it represents an attempt to widen and invigorate the body of native poetry by means of the intensest of English subjects and the most individual of English verse. French influence, which has often been so readily admitted into English verse, and classic influences,

which have so strongly marked Mr. Hewlett's own earlier poetry, are here absent; and whatever success has been achieved in *The Song of the Plow*—and it is considerable—is a success of English poetry at once in the strictest and the widest sense of the term.

IV

The Village Wife's Lament is a poem of another form and a smaller scope, but, like *The Song of the Plow*, it is written to fulfil a purpose not purely and not at all consciously æsthetic; and so it might share the neglect or the censure of those whose standards are purely æsthetic. It is a dramatic ballad, and the author does not hold himself answerable for all that it expresses concerning aggressive war; but his village wife is made to utter thoughts which he believes to be common to people of her inexpressive kind. "If I know anything of village people I know this, that they shape their lives according to Nature, and are outraged to the root of their being by the frustration of Nature's laws and the stultification of man's function in the scheme of things." It is, then, a poet's business to divine the inarticulate, the thoughts which lie too deep for syllabling; and such an attempt is made here.

In a recent "Prolegomena to the Ballad" our author has stated his own attitude more plainly, saying that his thoughts upon the English and Scots ballads have turned to what underlies the lovely poetry in them, to the men who made them and the people for whom they were made.

"If you can happen upon a ballad plainly composed by a peasant, or for a peasant audience, . . . you are taken immediately into the heart of a deeply interesting and most unknown people —deeply interesting because the peasantry in England by birth and birthright is aboriginal; most unknown owing to its consistent ill-treatment or neglect by the ruling races here throughout history."

Mr. Hewlett is not a peasant, but he has boldly attempted to sink his own sophisticated personality (using the phrase as inoffensively as he has used it of Clare) into the simple, dumb personality of the peasant, and give it a tongue; and thus *The Village Wife's Lament*, although it is not folk-poetry in authorship is poetry intended for the folk. Some of it the peasant might not care to read, although Mr. Hewlett seems to believe that his village wife has a fondness for nature poetry such as only an eager, accomplished lyrist could sing; but the lyrical

poet in Mr. Hewlett will not be suppressed and needs must pour out pleasure for some who are not peasants. He is not, I believe, of those who still assert an expiring orthodoxy in the theory that folk-ballads grew mysteriously out of the communal mind, and not from the sudden imagination of a poet ; but truly does he interpret the natural mind in his deliberate attempt at a narrative which shall be as "native" as any ballad whose origin is distant and dark.

The village wives watch sons and husbands marching off to the war :

> "The lads go by, the colours fly,
> Drums rattle, bugles bray;
> We only cry, Let mine not die—
> No thought for whom he slay.
> But woman bares a martyr breast,
> And herself points the flame:
> Her son, a hero or a beast,
> Will never be the same."

There is the sharpest of poignance in the simple lines of other stanzas :

> "I lookt forth from my bed
> To the cold square of the light—
> Unto God I said,
> 'Show me why men must fight.'"

And more than all in a single quatrain in which the heart's impeachment is loud :

" They say, let love and light be given
So we keep Liberty:
But I say there is no more Heaven
If men must so be free."

Is this beyond the village wife's conception? Not so, answers our author, for she is " as one wise suddenly, who never understood." It is possible to dispute the term " dramatic," but with that one small point conceded I think there is no other dispute.

Mr. Hewlett has a religious mind, and in the grave music of his " Wiltshire Plainsong " he pleads (" Dedication to the Dead "):

" Let there be one found to record
Your deeds who are content to tread
The way of death, a nameless horde,
Unribbon'd and unheralded."

He knows that he is called to write the holy dues of them that fought the Holy War, for he has gained by everything that the dead have lost:

" Chiefest to love that country more
Which breeds such men for such a use."

It is a great call, and his response in these three books is to subdue himself to the task and let the breath of common aspiration, challenge, sorrow, and despair speak through his lips. The task is hard, for poetry as it has developed in England is the most individual and isolated of all the

arts by which the spirit of man is expressed. In other books Mr. Hewlett's own style, whether of verse or prose, is bold, restless, assertive, provocative ; but in these the theme has mastered him. He has heard the undertones of the dead as well as the humble living, and in his evocation of a voice he has added to the purest and oldest tradition of English poetry.

POSTSCRIPT.—This essay was published in *The Quarterly Review* some time before Maurice Hewlett's death, and a suggestion that the tense should be altered here and there has reminded me too sharply of his loss to modern letters. It seems a cruelty to alter *is* to *was*, and so I prefer to let the essay stand untouched. Indeed, it would be more than a cruelty—an impossibility, needing a mental retrospect and revision which could be achieved only by rewriting the essay from beginning to end, with a constantly renewed admonition that Hewlett is dead. Such an admonition, involving such a dismissal, I could not listen to.

The little that I saw of Maurice Hewlett, the friendship sustained mostly by letters, was enough at least to show me his warmth, his integrity, and his independence. Later years found him living a good deal in isolation and

spending himself freely in the cause of those whom he protagonised in the poems referred to here. He still laboured at many things, and it is a satisfaction to see now that his later poems are the best of all he did. They cannot be the most widely read of his scattered work in verse and prose, but they lifted him, I believe, to a place in English letters which his more popular work could not give him. It is a singular case: from being nearly the most popular novelist of his day he became but one of the less popular, for modes changed and the sex and sociological novel left him behind; and only when that decline had set in—he was too candid to misunderstand or bewail it—did he discover and complete a task far better than the best that had gone before. To few men is it given to realise their possibilities; most fall short and, if they are conscious of the fact, regard it with repining; but in these poems of his native country Maurice Hewlett stretched his powers to their full exercise, and had no room for repining.

His own hopes of what I have called his "English" poems were at once humble and fond. A month before the end of the war he wrote in a letter: "What possesses me now entirely, thrilled as I am by the tragedy of man in its last act, is to hymn the astonishing race to

which we belong—a thing I have been trying to do ever since I found myself actually living upon the bones and dust of our ancestors. I hope to have done something towards it, but feel that there is a great thing left for me, or a much better man. Haig will be made a Marquis, and Lloyd George, perhaps, a Duke. But greater, infinitely greater than all these people seems to me Private or Lance-Corporal Atkins. He and his folk at home—whether in pastoral Wilts or suburban Anerley—oh, what a people! So many virtues, so few graces! Such a golden core and such an unlikely husk! . . . And here I am, encamped upon his dust. We are here, you must know, in the thickest of the remains of Neolithic man. There is one of his towns a mile from this house. In this hour of success I feel the thing so strongly that, although I meant to write you quite a different sort of letter, all this has come out of the inkpot. It arose out of your saying that I was attempting a new thing in poetry. That's true. I don't know that we have ever had a poet who wanted to sing about the people of a county. It's a perfectly different thing from Shakespeare's historical plays. At least I feel about W. S. that he loved the land more than the folk. I think that *I* love the land for the sake of the folk. The land is what it is because it

exhales them. I don't know whether I can work that out—but I must try it."

In the shadow of the later, his earlier poems pleased him no more. "It wasn't so much the fundamental brain work which was lacking, as (I fear) fundamental heart work. If I can live a little while by those two [*The Song of the Plow* and *The Village Wife's Lament*], I shall be content to let nearly everything else go by, for I love English country people much more than I love myself. Whether I shall reach them by anything I do, or may hereafter do, I dare not say. I would sooner touch the uninstructed and uninspired by poetry than do anything in the world." In another letter he spoke yet more lightly of the work which he had outgrown: "My pseudo-Hellenics may go to, or remain in, Hades, so far as I am concerned."

Not that he was satisfied with his finest poem. He thought that if he had been as long in writing as he had been in meditating *The Song of the Plow* he could have kept a better length, and that the poem would have gained by more drastic revision—had he been equal to it. "But I wasn't, at the time—so I risked immortality, and perhaps produced a shot at an epic rather than an epic. . . . I do think I understand the west-country peasant, and even that I ought to.

I don't know that my forefathers were much removed from that degree themselves. They were of Somerset, and puritans—so much I know of them. I like to believe that they were of Hodge's stock." In looks, temperament, and restless energy he was wholly unlike Hodge, and perhaps had persuaded himself to forget the difference; but however deep the difference remained, he could both understand and love. Knowing what he had meant to do, and knowing what he still wanted to attempt, he could look critically at his shot at an epic; but the criticism of readers is likely to be more indulgent, and he will "live a little while," and longer perhaps than many more ambitious and confident writers.

VI

EDMUND GOSSE

I

GOSSEPERITY, to use an infant's chance and happy coinage, is the quality which one is tempted to linger over, after a mental review of books with which familiarity has grown during twenty years' reading without contempt ensuing. All sorts of things are involved or implied in the word, but they assemble quite naturally into an image that remains, at the end of this long staring, individual and human. Mr. Gosse himself has harped upon the gosseperity of his criticism, saying that his pathway through the maze of fifty years of letters has been a vibration to the appeal of certain elements; and before defining these attractive elements it is proper to remember that the responsive vibration is avowedly though not very strenuously personal.

II

I speak of his criticism first because it is by this that he is best known, although there is

something yet better. Not wholly a critic at large, he has yet worn the trammels of responsibility very lightly, so that they have been if not invisible, at any rate iridescent and graceful. He has always felt himself a representative writer, and his readers have come to regard him therefore as an institution, set up for the illumination of contemporary literature. His seriousness has been free from offence, free above all from that worst offence, self-consciousness; and since literary self-consciousness is pleasant only in the very young, and deplorable in seniors, Mr. Gosse is to be thanked for his example of the good manners which it is too daring to take always for granted in any view of contemporary writers.

This is lowly and negative praise, perhaps, but criticism is commonly a lowly and negative practice that provokes reminiscence of the greatest of those who practised it, and who was so great because he was so bad a critic. I refer to Johnson, who wrote of the amiable Shenstone:

"Whether to plant a walk in undulating curves, and to place a bench at every turn where there is an object to catch the view; to make water run where it will be heard, and to stagnate where it will be seen; to leave intervals where the eye will be pleased, and to thicken the plantation where there is something to be hidden,

demands very great powers of mind, I will not inquire; perhaps a sullen and surly speculator may think such performances rather the sport than the business of human reason."

Is it not an exact image of the traditional office of the critic? Is it not his chief and easiest business to make water run where it will be heard and to stagnate where it will be seen, starred maybe with water-flowers and stirred with the slow movement of swans? Beyond this green-arrased enclosure and heavy air the wind of creation sweeps over vast tracts, but it is seldom that the diligent gardener leaves his shallow rivers and waterfalls and faces the vivifying airs without. Yet the speculator need not be surly, for there is delight in flowers and gardens as well as in hills and heavens, and criticism may yield at least its ingenuities and pleasant perversities, and a sweet-smelling intimacy of critic and audience, with anxious author hovering shade-like behind. Intimacy of a unique kind is indeed almost the best gift of criticism when we walk in these sinuous, herb-fringed ways, and nod and shake our heads in a kind contest of preferences and abhorrences.

Leaving images, let us say that Mr. Gosse is a complete example of the type of critic here imagined, and that if there yet survives another

and rarer kind of criticism than he has followed, and to which I must refer in a moment, it is a kind so little honoured in England that he is not to be blamed for shunning it. Nearly all his life he has been engaged in a vivacious commentary upon the best that has been uttered in imaginative literature, and he has spared but little for the lower orders of letters. He has preferred the best with a natural instinct, and if he has lacked anything conspicuously it is that vehement and irrational pleasure which it is delightful to witness even when we cannot share it. Is it a fault? If it is, Mr. Gosse has the compensation of being all the safer as a guide for those who love guides, and by being so sure a traditionalist he compels his few dissenting readers to try their defences afresh.

III

Perhaps it is best to look at his critical work under two aspects, for part of it is found in literary histories and formal biographies, and part in those happy character-studies for which we cannot be too grateful. Between the two, and falling I will not say precisely where, are those weekly exercises in urbane journalism, those punctually performed tasks, of which it

would be true but inadequate to say that the best are too good for the sabbath mortuary, and that a collection provokes a lament that they must needs be so fragmentary. It is here as much as anywhere that you will find instances of your author's wit, of that adroit phrasing, that smiling and acute precision, which comes partly from the long use of words, and partly from a perpetual conversation with wise and ingenious spirits. By no means a common gift, and in danger of appearing supercilious in its exercise, it is a gift that Mr. Gosse has used with such good humour that an occasional departure from good humour seems almost startling, and is all the more effective. Turn to a collection of these Sunday Lessons at random and you will rejoice in " the mean and flatulent society which surrounded " Poe ; in the needed phrase concerning Miss Ashford (a forgotten recent discovery), " It is almost as shocking that an infant should be vulgar as that a soldier should be cowardly or a nun unchaste " ; in the phrase concerning George Wyndham, " He moved like a greyhound among those heavy beasts of burden, our politicians " ; in the kindred image of Tolstoi, " Intellectually, spiritually, during the close of his life Tolstoi was a hippopotamus rolling about in a clouded pool " ; and in the ironically am-

biguous phrase of Mrs. Asquith and her memoirs, "You must love her ere to you she shall seem worthy to be loved." These weekly essays are the mere marginal notes of a zealous mind, but one cannot treat them lightly because of their own lightness; they lure wise men from golf and women from languor, and serve to annul the long divorce between literature and journalism.

If this seems a great deal to say of such small articles, of others, the weightier essays that a publisher will one day be ranging with the "works" of Edmund Gosse, there is much more to be said, though little need to say it except for the sake of emphasis. Looking casually at the mere titles of a few among many, I recollect how well he has summarised the tendencies of modern English literature in a book published in 1898, half justifying his abrupt method by saying that the only way of approach is to regard literary expression in England as part of the history of a vast, living organism, subject to an obscure law of growth. True that nothing will justify his astonishing exclusion of Cobbett from such a survey, but even this may be overlooked (like an eccentric relation of whom it is agreed to say nothing, though you may think the more), because of the precision and "velocity" with which he removes you from one pinnacle to

another. Rapid summarisation is among his best gifts—so rapid as to be heedless at times, as when he strangely remarks that Macaulay's essays have not the delicate, palpitating life of Lamb's or Stevenson's, and harsh at others, as when he jeers at Carlyle, whom he dislikes so much that he declines to give the correct title of one of his most famous books. This is both unfair and unusual in our author. But it would in turn be much less than fair to hover over these specks, and a better opportunity of valuing his work of this sort is afforded by his history of eighteenth-century literature, for he is more at home in a study of the formalising than the energising periods of our intellectual history. Thus he has concentrated upon Gray, in an edition of his poems and letters which pricked the attention of a later editor and called forth comments for our amusement. If Mr. Gosse had retorted upon his critic we might have been entertained with another case of "the reciprocal civility of authors," which is, as Johnson says, "one of the most risible scenes in the farce of life." Avoiding further digression, however, one thing must be said at once of his literary histories: he has never forgotten that it is literature he is dealing with, and neither through carelessness nor barbarous incapacity does he vex us by writing

badly or dully, as certain literary historians have so rudely assumed the liberty of doing. Assuredly Mr. Gosse's history of eighteenth-century literature has more of the true character of literature than most histories and a happier vivacity than most novels. If we find less to deplore in Swift and more to delight in Pepys than our historian finds, it is but because of the unimaginable touch of time, while other pages, on Dryden and Pope for instance, by a more stable felicity are as true and just in 1924 as they were in 1888.

The critic of to-day is seldom heeded by the readers of to-morrow. Dryden, Johnson, Lamb, Hazlitt, Arnold, Pater and Leslie Stephen almost exhaust the names of critical essayists of the past who are still read as well as honoured. Criticism is indeed:

> "Like the snowflake in the river
> A moment white—then melts for ever."

It is seldom taken seriously enough; the young are too enthusiastic or too cynical, and cannot see their subject in relation to personality and common life. Experience of life, steadiness as well as sensitiveness, humour as well as fondness, humbleness as well as scepticism, are needed in the critic of literature: how far they are indispensable in other arts I cannot presume to

say. Something rocklike is wanted in the critic, with which to oppose the durable characteristics of the subject. Viewed thus, the task of criticism is assuredly one that Mr. Gosse may claim to have attempted with due equipment, and a degree of success which is acknowledged at once when we ask ourselves what satisfaction and what pleasure he has given us.

IV

Formal history, tracing a somewhat abstract development, is not Mr. Gosse's best exercise in criticism. He needs and rejoices in a more personal study, found on a large scale in the *Life and Letters of John Donne*, and on a smaller scale in *Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor*, and even better, it seems to me, in the revival of the brief character study. The *Donne* is his most considerable attempt, the *Browne* one of the most charming, and they form but a fraction of his work. As Cobbett said of himself, for a man to write so much and write so well, " there must be something more than genius: there must be industry . . . people must say to themselves, 'What wise conduct there must have been in the employing of the time of this man! How sober, how sparing in diet, how early a riser!' "

Mr. Gosse has fallen far short of Cobbett's gigantic immodesty, and told his readers nothing of his way of employing time, preferring to leave them to deduce what must be from what is. It is, indeed, a fault that a man who tells us so much of others and " gives away " his friends so candidly, though handling them with gentleness as if they were so many cruses of spikenard, should tell us so little of himself and that little involuntarily and only as the exaction of our own acuteness. That he has written of his infancy only makes it more vexatious that he should say nothing of himself since infancy ; just as, when he writes of others, he neither pours himself out in sudden, splendid disregard of his immediate subject, nor confronts with his own character the character he portrays. Too loyal is his self-subdual for those who would read their author as well as *his* author, and who, when charmed by some witty or sagacious phrase, some discovery of Sir Thomas or Jeremy Taylor, of Swinburne or Patmore, cannot but cry out, " But who is it that says so ? Who, who, who is Mr. Gosse ? "

Something autobiographical quite plainly appears in the *Sir Thomas Browne,* in the chapter touching that delicious medley, " Vulgar Errors." Dissemble as he will the knowledge with which a long life has saturated him, and the scientific

stain that touched him in his boyhood and still spreads a fading tinge upon his mind, something yet slips in, enabling him to comment most ingeniously upon Browne's ingenuities and to look at his solemn speculations with a quick sense of the absurd. You are promptly reminded of *Father and Son*, and the small boy who stared so patiently through the microscope at watery miracles, when you find Mr. Gosse putting Browne right upon the optical system of lampreys and snails and demolishing his timid arguments in favour of basilisks :

" It appears that sailors and travellers were in the habit of bringing the skins of basilisks home with them from the tropics ; Browne speaks of these as 'artificial impostures,' but we may question whether they were not in some instances the skins of such iguanoid saurians as we have mentioned above. Very effective basilisks, however, could be constructed out of the dried bodies of thornbackrays, with their immense breadth of fin and winding snaky tail."

It is an almost complete exception, however ; only when he is speaking of his contemporaries and friends, and even then sparingly, does he permit his own whims, affections, prejudices, or detestations to melt the frosts of time. A man is known by the company he keeps, and Mr. Gosse

can ask for no better fortune than to be known and judged by his friends. Henry James and Coventry Patmore, Swinburne and Stevenson, to win and even retain the friendship of these brilliant diverse beings, and of others still or lately with us, is a high felicity for mortal man; nor are some of his subjects likely to gain finer tributes from any, friends or strangers, than Mr. Gosse has written. Written? It is better to say drawn, for he has practised an art of literary portraiture which is one of the happiest labours of the brooding mind and is, indeed, not unworthy of comparison with the art practised by the haughty masters of the brush. A quick human concern sets Mr. Gosse's pen tingling when he looks at a friend. His touch is gentle but never unnaturally docile; without the fierceness of Carlyle or the sharp-toothed energy of Hazlitt, he yet has a sure and patient way of adding here a little and there a little, an anecdote, a suggestion, a speculation, until, at a sudden shake, the kaleidoscopic pieces leap of themselves into relation and verisimilitude. His method helps him to a greater success in the "character" of fifty pages than in the volume of five hundred, in the sketch of Swinburne in 1912 than in the formal biography of 1917. Hard will it be for the hastiest reader to forget this:

"He did not know fatigue; his agility and brightness were almost mechanical. I never heard him complain of a headache or of a tooth-ache. He required very little sleep, and occasionally when I have parted from him in the evening after saying 'Good-night,' he has simply sat back in the deep sofa in his sitting-room, his little feet close together, his arms against his side, folded in his frock-coat like a grasshopper in its wing-covers, and fallen asleep, apparently for the night, before I could blow out the candles and steal forth from the door."

Or the opening paragraph of the *George Eliot*:

"In and after 1876, when I was in the habit of walking from the north-west of London towards Whitehall, I met several times, driven slowly homewards, a victoria which contained a strange pair in whose appearance I took a violent interest. The man, prematurely ageing, was hirsute, rugged, satyr-like, gazing vivaciously to left and right; this was George Henry Lewes. His companion was a large, thick-set sibyl, dreamy and immobile, whose massive features, somewhat grim when seen in profile, were incongruously bordered by a hat, always in the height of the Paris fashion, which in those days commonly included an immense ostrich feather; this was George Eliot. The contrast between the solemnity of the face and the frivolity of the headgear had something pathetic and provincial about it."

Of Henry James's visible features he writes :

" His outward appearance developed in accordance with his moral and intellectual expansion. I have said that in early life Henry James was not 'impressive' ; as time went on his appearance became, on the contrary, excessively noticeable and arresting. He removed the beard which had long disguised his face, and so revealed the strong lines of mouth and chin, which responded to the majesty of the skull. In the breadth and smoothness of the head—Henry James became almost wholly bald early in life—there was at length something sacerdotal. As time went on he grew less and less Anglo-Saxon in appearance and more Latin. I remember once seeing a Canon preaching in the cathedral of Toulouse who was the picture of Henry James, in his unction, his gravity, and his vehemence. Sometimes there could be noted—what Henry would have hated to think existing—a theatrical look which struck the eye, as though he might be some retired *jeune premier* of the Française, *jeune* no longer ; and often the prelatical expression faded into a fleeting likeness to one or other celebrated Frenchman of letters (never to any Englishman or American), somewhat of Lacordaire in the intolerable scrutiny of the eyes, somewhat of Sainte-Beuve, too, in all except the mouth, which, though mobile and elastic, gave the impression in rest of being small.

All these comparisons and suggestions, however, must be taken as the barest hints, intended to mark the tendency of Henry James's radically powerful and unique outer appearance. The beautiful modelling of the brows, waxing and waning under the stress of excitement, is a point which singularly dwells in the memory."

It is the personality that engages him, rather than the work. No one has done better with Patmore, the small volume published in 1905 being in some respects a pure model of the literary portrait; but the elucidation of Patmore's daring metaphysic, and the study of his style and metrical genius, are tasks almost unattempted. With the Swinburne, again, there is a similar deficiency, and although it is a lesser lack in regard to the idea of the poetry, it is a sad lack in regard to Swinburne's verse-form, to which we are happily reawakening now out of a long and heavy sleep. And as to Henry James, Mr. Gosse has given us a shining image of the outer man in his most attractive relations, but of the inner man, of the singular spider-like psychologist who created *What Maisie Knew* and *The Wings of the Dove*, he has given us not the slightest hint, breathed not the shyest or slyest suspicion. To whom so much is given, of him is much required; and although it is currish

to cavil and plead indignantly for what is not vouchsafed, the plea persists until indignation subsides in despair. It is but a single instance of a habit, and at the risk of heathen repetition I regret that, here as elsewhere, the admirable essayist should have avoided considering the idea of creative art, the outline, shape, or harmony previsioned by every appointed writer. Mr. Gosse is certainly an acute critic, but his practice is as narrow as it is acute. If there is criticism of another kind, criticism that seeks the roots of the mountains, criticism that asks and suggests what is the place of art in life and what is the meaning of beauty, criticism that gropes for a relation between psychology and æsthetics, the reader has perhaps no right to complain that Mr. Gosse has neglected it and preferred a native mode, and that he is merely cawing or chirruping when he hovers a moment over this spiny thicket, in an essay concerning Fluctuations of Taste. Commonly he does not utter questions, but passes through the world unchallenging and unchallenged. Neither theories nor passions knock at his bosom ; what his authors have sighed in secret does not greatly disturb him, nor would his discretions disturb them. He is the least restless, the most contented of writers ; he moves about in worlds unrealised, heedless of the

clamours or the prostrations or the hewings and diggings of those who desperately seek another righteousness. Thus he has developed a blessed gift of taking things for granted, especially the things that others have broken their peace upon. He never perverts : simple things remain simple when he has said his say, and he does not try to prove that the simplicity is in reality a subtler complexity. His indeed is an enchanted ease, for he pretends not to remove difficulties which he has never met ; he comments upon rather than interprets his subject. He has learnt of the eighteenth century all that it could teach him ; for though literature has not indeed been life to him, it is the microscope (the microscope again !) through which he has looked at life and attempted to follow its story.

V

It is perhaps merely wilful to trace this avoidance of speculation and want of temerity to the early years of which *Father and Son* tells so much, yet that candid autobiography shows the small Edmund as the most dutiful of children, perfectly amenable, and so quietly suppressed as to be unconscious of suppression. Could it be that even then, in that patient pious little boy, something was done to death which not all the liberty

of after years has had power to revive? The short-sighted child became and for years remained what his father wanted him to be—a disciple: as naturalist, painter of specimens, pietist, a disciple of his father. When freedom came he rejoiced in it, and rubbed shoulders with the world, an eager, excited youth rubbing against the great friendly commonalty of men; but speculation had been strangled in his father and was still-born in him, and he could not recover what he had lost.

He approaches most nearly to what it is still useful to call a criticism of life in a book begotten (surely !) under the influence of Landor; I refer to the ironic fantasy of *Hypolympia*. This happy imaginary conversation between gods in exile deserves a far wider public than it has ever won, and if a reader thinks it yields too clear an echo of Heine's imaginative story, or of Richard Garnett's *Twilight of the Gods*, I can only answer, so much the better. Here Mr. Gosse fingers lightly but never frivolously the hopes and misgivings which shape the path of life. Selene, searching for the nightingale she has just heard, is admonished by Phœbus, whom she will not hear:

"To comprehend it might even be to discover that it does not exist. Whereas to come here

night after night, in the fragrant darkness, to see the unhallowed lump of fire creep out of the lake, to listen for the first clucks and shakes of the sweet little purifying song, and to watch the orb growing steadily more hyaline and lucent under its sway, how delicious! The absolute harmony and concord of nature would be then patent and recurrent before us. My poor sister! However, it is consoling to reflect that she is almost certain not to be able to find that bird."

Irony, assuredly, is a quality which Mr. Gosse has developed for himself, a gift which the sedulous extortions of his youth could not kill; and as distinct from unbarbed wit, of which there is much in this small book, it relates the mature critic without a purpose to the child bowed down with the purpose of others. The wit is as far as can be from madness, or the comprehension of madness. He does not like what he calls the new poetry when he writes *Hypolympia* in 1900, nor the great, eccentric verse of *Mansoul* when he writes in 1921; rather does he seek to remind English poetry of its traditions and confine it like a lunatic in a Victorian strait-jacket. Thus it is that he has made no discoveries; his geese are not swans, they are not even geese.

He is not, if I may pursue and conclude this criticism of a critic, he is not one of those scholars

who are the gross feeders of literature, gobbling down everything noisily and indiscriminately; nor a worm boring into a subject and lying coffined in the perishing wood; nor an adventurer setting out in his cockle-shell for a New America; nor a Crusoe civilising solitude; nor a Caliban haunting it and receiving the stranger with blows and abuse; he is not a new Christian calling men from the spirit's or the mind's destruction; nor a quack persuading them that black is white and hypnosis is heaven; he is not—to shake off these negative Furies—he is not anything wilder than a literary historian and portrait painter, of shrewd eye and deft practice, seizing and fixing rather than interpreting and questioning the visible features and using, for this purpose, the English language as though he loved it, having wooed and won it to his use through long assiduous years.

VI

Mr. Gosse's most famous book is unlike the rest. *Father and Son* has stolen into men's affections by achieving what all of us would like to achieve, and some few attempt—the portrait of his own childhood. It was overshadowed by his father, who in turn was darkened by a modern

form of Calvinism that rose between him and the sun. The story is told simply and freshly in pages which increase their charm on re-reading. It has been thought that there was something the reverse of pious in the frank unveiling by a son of his father's stern and oppressive virtues, even when it was remembered that the book was first published anonymously. But it is right to remember also that Mr. Gosse did not seek shelter in anonymity, for nothing is said in *Father and Son* exceeding the candour of its author's *Life of Philip Henry Gosse,* which preceded it by several years. There are episodes in *Father and Son* which are recited more circumstantially, and therefore better, in the formal *Life,* and the candour of the earlier confirms the honesty of the later book and so justifies our author completely, his choice being to write fully and frankly, or not at all. Happy for us was his choice, since it brought us his best book.

It was a holy, unnatural childhood, not to be understood except by those who have known in early years the double isolation of piety and poverty. But Mr. Gosse does not sentimentalise, or exaggerate childish woes or joys. The sentimentalist's error is popular, but gross. We were not so unhappy in childhood as now we think we were; we had not yet learned our

adult deluding arts of introspection. Looking back from this ignoble eminence of middle age and comfort, we shrink from the thought of the very things that once gave us pleasure ; we were not fools then, but now, for we forget the singular capacity of the child for immuring itself from the world and living in a better world of its own ; we forget that in this at least the child was a poet. It woke to something new each morning, and if it went to bed in tears it was quickly consoled by memories and dreams. Our own distance from childhood, our inward sereness, is to be measured by the facility with which we conjure up a sentimental pity or envy for childhood. Mr. Gosse shows nothing of this modern folly. He looks back with comprehension, and his sense of an underlying conflict and invisible divergence in that narrow waveless circle of worship and work prevents his seeing tragedy only ; there was, he owns, an extraordinary mixture of tragedy and comedy. He looks back and smiles, and even when he cannot smile he is not bitter or vehement. He professes to have written the diagnosis of a dying Puritanism, a record of educational and religious conditions, affecting not to see that he has written a beautiful idyll of childhood.

He can smile because it is all so far off that

it seems to have happened to some one else and left scarce a trace in himself. A dutifully subdued creature was this that hung his pale shaking blossoms against the dark wall of a father's will, and rebellion was scarcely ever within his conscious thought; but when he escaped to London he escaped into himself and at length disengaged himself from many of the first fatal influences. Of the religious child nothing seems to have survived in the man; he reversed the pilgrim's progress and travelled from the world to come into this pleasant shining world. A new creature was born and nursed upon a humanism which he discovered for himself. What survived is, as I have already suggested, a touch of scientific habit and an intellectual timidity, together with an intense susceptibility to cruelty. The pages upon his mother's physical sufferings, found in *Father and Son* and in the earlier formal *Life*, are so tenderly set that it is not easy to speak of them without spoiling; and the same sensitiveness is shown in such an unexpected place as the *Jeremy Taylor*. Here he praises Taylor's work as being akin in spirit to that of the discovery of anæsthetic surgery, and says it would be impossible to estimate the alleviation which the prose-poet's tolerant theory of conscience has brought to multitudes of men—" the blessed anæsthetics

which this great innovator introduced into the practice of religious surgery. What the world has gained in loss of pain is incalculable." Such a reference serves to link the older man with the young child, and flushes with sudden warm light the steady pages of a literary monograph. But the links are few and frail; the writer we are looking at now has grown up somewhat strangely from the boy, and it is hard to believe that he was ever a child at all. Childhood itself died before the man was born; but the man has drawn its remembered image and superscription, and made us thankful.

VII

Mr. Gosse's first poems were published precisely fifty years since, and in a preface to the Collected Edition of 1911 he has spoken in modest and affectionate depreciation of his verses. "I put them forth with a strange timidity," he avowed, and the whole volume presented the mind of a man who had already done his best work in another medium and was to perfect his prose habit in a yet more delightful activity. He explains the intellectual topography of his verse, indicating it with almost superfluous details: almost superfluous, because the poetry is of too frank a nature to darken origins and

likeness. It is good enough to remind us of something yet better, for in his choice of subject, in his natural tendency to an equable, unstartling felicity, as well as in his love of English landscape, his poetry is akin to the purest and happiest of Tennyson's. Poetry has been a refuge rather than a passion ; it has had his reverent ceremonial homage, but not his whole heart. Mr. Bridges is the poet that Mr. Gosse might have become, the poet of our native blessed landscape, the poet of comely things, of conduct which is the whole of life. With a neat metrical ingenuity, and in the case of the Laureate with an exquisite and even excessive invention, both poets revive the accomplished and delightful formalism of Pope and the best of his contemporaries and early successors. Even the romantic echo which is heard so clearly in many of Mr. Gosse's verses does not confuse the eighteenth-century suggestion. His most easily and beautifully phrased verse is found in the most rigid of forms, the sonnet, with lines like :

> " What can'st thou give to me or him in me ?
> A name in story and a light in song " ;

or in this of the tomb of Sophocles :

> " He awakes no more,
> Wrapped up in silence at the grave's cold core,
> Nor sees the sun whirl round in the white dome " ;

and in the elaborated simplicity of :

> " This lute has outsung Egypt ; all the lives
> Of violent passion, and the vast calm art
> That lasts in granite only, all lie dead ;
> This little bird of song alone survives,
> As fresh as when its fluting smote the heart
> Last time the brown slave wore it garlanded."

Passages like these, perhaps, depend for their main attraction upon an assumed familiarity with a thousand things of the kind ; but the charm of " Lying in the Grass " is an intrinsic and spontaneous charm. Had I space and leave to print the whole poem here no comment upon the rest would be needed, for it is representative : its scene is perfectly Gosse-like, and the moving figures are the natural figures of the scene—the three mowers and

> " A fourth is mowing, and that fourth am I,"

and the children in the hay that " dig themselves warm graves." And not less characteristically, the scene is moralised without loss of attractive sincerity. For poetry, in the hands of this critic, is a great and unfailing civilising influence, and has nothing to do with wanton languors or stony rigours ; it echoes neither " Laus Veneris " nor " The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." Others' poetry may confound and shake us, but this confirms and mollifies. The most ruthless founder of a republic would not exclude Mr. Gosse.

VII

COVENTRY PATMORE

I

COVENTRY KERSEY DIGHTON PATMORE was born on 23rd July 1823. The calendar alone is faithful in its mute reminder that a hundred years have passed, for men's affections are not occupied with Patmore's work, and it would be foolish to speak of his name in connection with a centenary "celebration." He is celebrated but as a lonely hill in a quiet land, shown on the map, and visited merely by those to whom the hill air, and its solitude, are a stimulation and a delight. The greatness that his admirers have never ceased to claim for him may have been silently acknowledged, but has never been widely felt; and for most readers he remains a name in a catalogue, an illustration, a cipher, a shade.

Great poets are creatures of their age, even if they show greatness equally in expressing and transcending it. Patmore and Tennyson were both Victorian poets and in the truest sense the

voices of their time ; and they each, but in different degree, transcended their time. Tennyson was a dominating figure, standing firm amid his generation, and only distinguished by his loftiness of thought and grave attitude of a spiritual legislator ; but Patmore was isolated alike by his genius and by the intense arrogance of his regard of a world surging turbulently beneath him. He expressed his time in *The Angel in the House,* he transcended it in *The Unknown Eros,* standing scornfully or sorrowfully remote in many odes in the latter, consciously and even proudly alien in certain prose essays. Exceptions to these general statements may be noted, but the statements represent the broad facts.

It is not altogether fanciful to read his character in his face. The portraits, especially that by Mr. Sargent, by which he is best known, show a mind alert, bold and perverse, a spirit impetuous and unconciliating. The eyes are gem-like, but the light in them is not cold, and it is that quick light that redeems the countenance from hardness. Nor is it fanciful, perhaps, to read his history into his face. The son of Peter G. Patmore, who was concerned as second in John Scott's duel with Lockhart's friend, Christie ; educated at home and in Paris, and thus escaping,

I cannot say whether unfortunately, the influence of Oxford and Cambridge in the 'forties; entering the Civil Service through the British Museum, that great nursery of men of letters; marrying once, twice, thrice, and each time gaining in temporalities and inward happiness; joining the Roman Catholic Church at the point of his second marriage; publishing the first part of *The Angel in the House* when he was but thirty-one and tasting briefly the sweets of popularity; staying silent from 1863 to 1877, and finding then scarce any audience; reconciling himself to obscurity, and a little disdainful of what was denied him; saddening as he looked out upon his time but serene in obedience to silent admonitions; contented meanwhile to publish his wilful, epigrammatic essays of a beautiful prose texture, and at length slipping almost unperceived and almost unhonoured out of life at the age of seventy-three—that all this should be traceable in the portraits is impossible, but there is still a strong harmony of the painter's counterfeit and the image called up by the reader's inward eye. Patmore was the least impersonal of writers, and so his work somewhat easily yields us an image of deep shadows and high lights, to set beside the likeness made in the most personal of mediums—the painter's.

II

As I have said, he was a very young man when he published *The Angel in the House*, and added his still, domestic voice to the larger utterance of other singers. Tennyson, the Brownings, and Arnold were already famous, the eloquence of Ruskin and Carlyle was already familiar, philosophy already knew Mill, and science was shortly to give birth to *The Origin of Species*. Patmore, in fact, rose amid the rich chaos of Victorian literature at its central point. The angel of his title has been commonly held to refer to the lady of the poem, but more reasonably to the unknown Eros of the odes. The poem still provokes the amusement of those who indolently fail to relate it to the rest of Patmore's work, and, because it seems so easy to understand, do not think it worth understanding. The same hasty indolence prevents their reading the later odes, which are not at all easy to understand ; and hence the author has been dismissed, even by intelligent people, as too simple altogether and by others as too obscure. Certain professors of literature, including even Mr. Saintsbury, have treated him as a minor-minor poet, a chicken clucking between Tennyson's feet, a mote dancing in Ruskin's ray. The courtship of a

dean's daughter, the marriage, the honeymoon journey, the unadventurous adventure of merely faithful wedlock—who will not smile at the tameness of a domestic epic? Habitual readers of verse are fondest of lyrical and dramatic poetry; the social recitals of Cowper and Crabbe no longer delight and are the mild pleasure of lax moods only. And again, the common attitude to marriage being no longer quite inflexible, the Oriental view of woman being equally immoral and outworn, it is no wonder if the central idea of the narrative is itself a count against this poem. Patmore wrote it while he was still a Protestant, but the inward rigidity which it discloses, and which I cannot deny or diminish, suggests that he was already prepared for the conversion that followed it.

It is by a miracle, then, that the poem remains not only readable but even delightful, tinctured faintly with dogma but quite blessedly with humour. It sailed, somewhat slowly, into popular favour, but with the rise of Swinburne and the passionate lyricism of *Poems and Ballads*, Patmore's note was contemned or merely unheard. His song was like a robin or, in his own phrase, a heavenly-minded thrush; and the exuberant clamour of a new and earthly music, the audacity of that heady, intemperate beauty, drew away

the attention of critical readers until at length popularity, too, waned and neglect followed. Forty years ago his very name, says Mr. Gosse, was ridiculed; the wonderful odes had been published only a few years before, but they shared in the neglect or the contumely cast upon the earlier poems.

The Angel in the House is the simplest of things, and its depths are as lucid as the mental atmosphere in which it was conceived. Patmore's temper was vehement, so strongly marked and, in later years, so independent of opinion that it seems hardly possible that his early work should have been so smoothly acceptable as it proved. He was made up of contradictions. He could not easily bear restraint, yet invoked it in his essays; he was proud, but exalted humility; his mind was critical but capricious; he had a great deal of ability in the practical affairs of life yet despised science; he was faithful in his affections and steady in his persuasions, yet forsook his native creed when he had reached mature years, without avowing an adequate reason; and after that change, though still inwardly defiant, he was so subdued to authority that he burnt some hundreds of copies of *The Angel in the House* lest they should offend—singular misgiving! Long after, as we shall note,

he destroyed for a similar reason the manuscript of an unpublished essay. His intellectual apprehensions were swift, but his passions were gusty, and he was at the mercy of both. There was a war in his members.

His early poem, however, does not reflect this war, but rather a glittering peace. It is the expression of a mind at home in a world of its own, not wholly our common world and not wholly an alien world, but his own intersecting our common world. He makes the best of both worlds for the characters of his poem. The privileges of cultivated life, the ardours of virgin love, the sunny obscurities of poetic vision and mystic religion—these compose the twin-featured subject of his muse. In form, the verse deludes with its ease, an ease that never degenerates into carelessness or slides into vacancy; there is, on the contrary, a token of patience in the neat development of the story, with cantos and prologues, preludes and epigrams; narrative and comment advancing cunningly together. Perfect quatrains fall as thick as apples in autumn:

> "One of those lovely things she was
> In whose least action there can be
> Nothing so transient but it has
> An air of immortality."

It is characteristic of Patmore that in his idealisa-

tion of love he yet speaks of sleeping "undisturbed" by love, and there is a touch of wisdom in his lines:

> "Love wakes men, once a lifetime each;
> They lift their heavy lids, and look;
> And, lo, what one sweet page can teach,
> They read with joy, then shut the book.
> And some give thanks, and some blaspheme,
> And most forget; but, either way,
> That and the Child's unheeded dream
> Is all the light of all their day."

There is, again, an aspect with which this idealisation seems not to be quite incongruous, the innocence with which eight lines are used to tell the "first expense for this sweet Stranger, now my three days' wife"—the purchase of sandshoes. "I'm ready, Felix, will you pay?" It was such a passage as this, and such an impression as several parts of the poem convey, that urged Swinburne to his parody, "The Person of the House," one of the happiest inventions of the *Heptalogia*:

> "The sickly airs had died of damp;
> Through huddling leaves the holy chime
> Flagged; I, expecting Mrs. Gamp,
> Thought—'Will the woman come in time?'"

And Dr. Garnett, too, must have been smiling over such phrases, when he said that Patmore had no perception of the sublime in other men's

writings (a hard piece of justice, perhaps), or of the ridiculous in his own.

The Angel in the House revealed Patmore's vision of life in its most blessedly human relation. The later odes, and much of his prose work, were meant to express his vision of life in its rarer relation to the divine, but before approaching these there is *The Victories of Love* to note; firstly, to say that the metrical form is slightly different and shows a maturer ease, which is sometimes ease in "sinking"; and secondly, that there is heard a new note, now recognised as most purely Patmorean, the note of poignance, sounded more sharply in the odes, but already clear enough. *The Angel in the House* told joyously of a union of happiness; its successor, of a union in which "less than highest is good and may be high." Love's not time's fool, says Shakespeare, and Patmore here bends all his serious sweetness upon the singing of love as the stealthy sly master of time and fate. There is so much simple beauty and sincerity in the poem that it is not hard to endure the singular essence of Victorian convention which, otherwise, might bring opprobrium upon it now, when other manners disguise conventions a little more pliable. But Patmore cared nothing for convention as convention; he did not esteem marriage as a

remedy against sin but as a sacrament, and all the vivid arts of his verse were subordinate to that passionate idea. He was as deeply concerned with questions of sex as any modern novelist, and he brought to them a keen, cold, and radiant psychology. Indeed, in all his earlier work there is, besides the fluent narrative interest, this far profounder interest of a psychology which is beyond the touch of any older poet of his time, and which only Meredith, of his immediate successors, was able to approach ; while the continuous narrative itself formed a constant, firm background for the psychological development that was inevitably wanting in the discontinuous form of the odes.

III

The odes contained in *The Unknown Eros* of 1877 form a body of metaphysical poetry which, although sufficiently distinct from the earlier verse, is yet plainly nursed by the mind that produced *The Victories of Love.* The human foreshadowing the divine, the divine completing itself in the human—this is not an innovation of the odes, but a full flowering of what was already budding in the narratives. Loosely it might be said that in his two chief books Patmore did not write two poems but one poem ; more precisely,

the sexual idea, and the distinction of masculine and feminine, pervades all he writes, whether creative or critical, verse or prose, and whether his immediate subject is the character of Keats or the contemplation of God. He was born to mysticism, and it was probably with a secret satisfaction, foreseen when his first wife said, "When I am gone *they* will get you," that his thoughts turned towards the Church of the spiritual doctors he loved. Those mystical writers had for him the authority of the great poets, and the great poets themselves he held in no higher honour than the mystics.

His second marriage redeemed his widowed years from a loneliness that might have proved tragic, and his conversion at the same time coincides also, as Mr. Gosse points out, with the appearance of an unmistakable gesture—that of a man who, having tasted popularity, contemns it; having been recognised by his peers, disdains them; and having come in contact with those who alone possessed the "distinction" he prized, slowly disengages himself from them and grosser contacts alike. His native aristocracy of mind was sharpened by a derogation of the great coarse world, which he came at length to descry as swimming remotely in its own fog. Dyspathetic is the one word which describes

Patmore's attitude to his country and his time. Yet by the side of this stiff and confident disparagement a candid humility was preserved; his intense personality was sunken in an "heroic good"; life became pure spirit, materiality thinned and faded, and the relations of men and women were etherealised into an ever bolder prefiguration of a divine order. Perhaps there is something odd, at first sight, in a mystic who accepts as easily as Patmore did the amenities of the external world; for while we allow that a beggar may be indifferent to things beyond his reach, we fail, rather illogically, to recognise a kindred indifference in the man who possesses what most covet. Yet the sincerity of Patmore's vision may not be doubted; like all originals he became more and more surely that which he essentially was.

Yet unlike many of those who use symbols, he did not despise his symbols; the body that figured his parable was nobly honoured as:

> "Creation's and Creator's crowning good."

Never was there a saner and healthier mind than Patmore's, and he used the most daring images without the least hint of self-consciousness or morbid inhibition. Something of Donne had always lurked in his temperament, and now

something of Donne was expressed in his imaginations ; and happily for those that read him for his poetry alone and not for his idea, this something includes the intensity which leaves Donne and Patmore almost isolated among the English poets.

The odes, then, make a double appeal, although it is wrong to attempt to distinguish the parts. They appeal to the spiritual core of every uncorrupted heart, and also to the æsthetic mind that lives by the apprehension of beauty. Patmore himself would not welcome even the convenience of such a distinction, but it is inevitable. Many of the odes are political, the first of them provoking new laments that so fine a poet should write so ill of his country ; yet even here he ends with a frankly smiling phrase :

> " Grant that I remain
> Content to ask unlikely gifts in vain."

Almost every one is a metaphysical ode, and a particular idea is repeated time after time, as if to show how naturally the poet plunged into contemplation of the little that exceeds the great :

> " 'Tis but in such captivity
> The unbounded Heavens know what they be ! "

Who can express, he asks elsewhere :

> " How full of bonds and simpleness
> Is God,
> How narrow is He ? "

To see things thus subtly is to see them simply, for a true metaphysical view does not complicate, but shapes and orders the disarray of thought, as a magnet orders the confusion of metal fragments. Patmore relates the seen to the unseen, the shadow to the substance, and beholds all in the radiance of a sudden extraordinary light.

> " Shall I, the gnat which dances in Thy ray,
> Dare to be reverent ? Therefore dare I say,
> I cannot guess the good that I desire."

In another kind there is the beauty of :

> " I, singularly moved
> To love the lovely that are not beloved,
> Of all the seasons, most
> Love Winter, and to trace
> The sense of the Trophonian pallor on her face."

For although the subtilising of sex is a chief purpose of his writing, it is not the only gift in his giving ; more easily received, more conspicuously precious, is the tenderness, the poignance already noted in *The Victories of Love*, which makes " The Azalea," " Tristitia," " Departure," and other odes almost unbearable in their fingering of the sensitive mind. " It is not true that love will do no wrong," and " Tears of recognition never dry," are lines better known in this way than any others of Patmore's ; and I will not add to them here. But it would be wrong to say nothing at this point on the supreme

merit of the odes, the merit of style. Consider it in the notation of natural phenomena :

" In nook of pale or crevice of crude bark,
Thou canst not miss,
If close thou spy, to mark
The ghostly chrysalis,
That, if thou touch it, stirs in its dream dark."

Patmore objected to a preoccupation with small detail and thought that a poet should refrain from microscopic art ; and so it is right that against this faithful minuteness should be set " Wind and Wave," with its hint of the unfathomable and immense, or even better, the opening of the ode, *To the Unknown Eros.*

" What rumour'd heavens are these
Which not a poet sings,
O, Unknown Eros ! What this breeze
Of sudden wings
Speeding at far returns of time from interstellar space
To fan my very face,
And gone as fleet,
Through delicatest ether feathering soft their solitary beat ? "

The irregular ode is a perfect medium for Patmore's oracular mood. It was not his invention, but he used it uniquely, and it is the best example of his theory of verse as a sequence of inflexions of the normal. As a recent critic suggests, it represents the liberation of the strict form of the narratives, and achieves perfect beauty in

its equal reliance upon law and liberty. It is the most delicately rhythmic of all verse forms, the resilience of the line being subtly increased by alliteration, commonly subdued though essential, and yet scarcely losing its power when confessed :

> " And minatory murmurs, answering, mar
> The Night, both near and far."

All his technical excellence, and larger excellence as well, will be found in *Amelia*, one of the longest and tenderest of the odes. It is only a little less homely than *The Angel in the House*, starting with the soberest of phrases, " Whene'er mine eyes do my Amelia greet," and yet it is one of the noblest of love poems since Spenser's. Style makes it great, though I hasten to add that it was conceived in a great mood and could not have been conceived greatly at all in another mood ; and it is, ultimately, style, expressed in the complete harmony of the rational with the intuitive faculty, that makes Patmore a great English poet.

" ' I think the odes,' said one of his children, ' are very like Holy Scripture in being so simple that any one might imagine they understood all there is, and so profound that few will really do so. They are also like Scripture in the way Shakespeare is, namely, in being intensely human,

and in not saying the words allowed to express the thing, but the *thing* itself.' "

The author himself in a moment of unusual exhilaration cried, " I have hit upon *the* finest metre that ever was invented, and on *the* finest mine of wholly unworked material that ever fell to the lot of an English poet ! "

Yet he knew himself unregarded, and was proudly content. " No plaint be mine of listeners none ! " he muses, and at another time answers a reproach that he does unwisely in speaking plain truths, which should be cloaked in a dead language, " Alas, and is not mine a language dead ? " It is the line with which *The Unknown Eros* concludes. He lived nearly twenty years after publishing the odes, but wrote no more verse ; and if before his mortal voice was still he reflected again upon his dead language of verse, he may have smiled to remember that the dead languages have never died.

IV

He forsook verse, but remained a poet in his prose. In one lost essay, the fruit of ten years' meditation, he pursued the familiar sex symbol, and Mr. Gosse has told of the lamentable destruction of " Sponsa Dei," the entire manuscript

being burned as the result of the author's conversation with Father Gerard Hopkins; for Hopkins, himself a poet of incalculable because unintelligible genius, had said, "That's telling secrets," when he read the essay and saw how it developed Patmore's central theme. Ready as the author was to fulfil the highest office of a poet by telling secrets that were lawful, the peril of telling secrets that his Church might think it unlawful to tell was too great; and thus the most uncontrollable of men sacrificed at a word what might have been, for all we know now, a work as original in thought as, Mr. Gosse assures us, it was rare in style.

Of Patmore's prose there are, however, abundant specimens available. The volumes of essays and sentences on literary and other matters are witnesses to his remarkable expressiveness, for the whole man, save that rarest part which verse alone could reveal, is here frankly discovered; wise and tender, proud and petulant, hard to please and lavishing praise; readier to repulse than to welcome, to offend than to satisfy; narrow and aspiring, a man of extremes. I cannot pretend that his character seems wholly amiable in its attraction, for his independence was shown in asperity, and his sense of right and wrong, both in spiritual and æsthetic matters,

perceived no ambiguities. Cold yet flamelike, and suggesting to Mr. Sargent a drawing of his head as Ezekiel (an odd tribute, perhaps), he reflects a white intense light from his own personality upon many of his subjects, while upon others he is merely freakish and perverse. Blake, in his view, drivelled, Herrick was a gilded insect, Emerson apparently a mill-wheel clacking in vacancy, Shelley a beautiful, effeminate, feeble-minded boy; the subordination of women to men was a privilege, for woman is the last and lowest of all spiritual creatures; and perhaps the only real use of natural science was to supply similes for poets. So might we pick out with indulgence or amusement the things we would not care to say even to ourselves; but the essays nevertheless gleam with wisdom, with those starry refractions which excite as well as bewilder us, and which it is hard to refrain from quoting here.

Yet a doubt emerges after reading many of them, I mean in particular the essays dealing with other than literary matters. These strictly irrational utterances and remote speculations, the prompting, indeed, of aerie monitors, are more proper for verse than prose, and in fact are already contained, explicit or implicit, in the odes. It is easy to accept the incomprehensible

when the noblest rhythm of verse awakens and sustains the attention and gives thought the speed of wings; but the idea expressed as a sudden revelation in an ode may seem a mere paradox in the curt prose of *Religio Poetæ*. True the prose is brilliant and hard as a jewel, but it provokes dissent and resistance as the verse seldom does. But for these essays we should not have seen so clearly Patmore's limitations, we should not have known that in aspiring towards an unapprehended world, of which the highest of earthly things are but symbols, he was contracted more and more narrowly into himself until, in his last years, his thought was but a thin rod of light springing from the nether to the upper darkness.

Nevertheless, he was a whole and consistent being. He is rightly called a mystic, and is in no sense a merely intellectual writer of mystical sympathies. He is no more an English Maeterlinck than Maeterlinck is a Belgian Shakespeare, and it would be preposterous to confuse him with writers who are willing to give mysticism a trial, as if it were a second-hand coat that could be cut down to fit, or stretched to disguise the gross protuberance of age. Mr. Osbert Burdett attributes to him a system of thought, but the intellectual coherence which that implies was not

within Patmore's reach; his constancy was emotional and founded in character, and he was incapable of rationalising the impulses of his heart.

V

It is not easy to forbear a question as to his position as an English poet, now that a hundred years have passed since his birth and nearly thirty since his death. In 1886 he wrote:

"I have written little, but it is all my best; I have never spoken when I had nothing to say, nor spared time or labour to make my words true. I have respected posterity; and, should there be a posterity which cares for letters, I dare to hope that it will respect me."

In the case of certain of his great contemporaries, Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne, much of their prolific work can be disregarded, and enough will yet remain to compare with Patmore's entire production. They dealt with varied subjects, their sympathies were diffused over the colonies and outliers of the intellectual empire; but Patmore's virtue is shown in concentration. He is the peer of the greatest of them in his utterance of ecstasy and the nobility of his style. He alone is a metaphysical poet

and is not properly comparable with them at all, but with Meredith. Being metaphysicals, Patmore and Meredith perceived the world, both intellectually and spiritually, as other than it seemed ; to the one it was less real, to the other more real than its appearance. Patmore saw man in the visible world as the beloved of God, his soul as the bride of God ; Meredith saw him as a brave or fretful being, " come out of brutishness " indeed but still subject to " the sacred reality " — inscrutable Earth. Each poet at length was absorbed in his theme, but while Patmore's music became aerial and fine and so died away, Meredith's became perplexed until its obscurity matched perfectly the obscurity of his faith. But all these comparisons are foolish, for genius is unique and therefore incomparable, and the final impression of Coventry Patmore's poetry is an impression of pure genius. It fulfils Swinburne's strict test by eluding all tests and outsoaring criticism.

VIII

COMPTON MACKENZIE

I

WISE men have foretold the death of imaginative literature. Spider-like, science will seize the body of this gilded fly, stab it methodically into numbness, and then, feeding upon its vitals, will exhaust and destroy the useless thing. With sedulous precision the scientist will do what the artist, alas! has failed to do more than vaguely and uncertainly: he will reinterpret life, he will rediscover man's relation to a vaster Universe. Ignoring or spurning all attempts at the æsthetic apprehension of the significance of life and time, he will at length announce his own positive formulæ by which all phenomena and all relations must be valued. It is the scientist who will feel and communicate, with a dry ecstasy wholly his own, the isolation of man amid the meanness or the majesty of the world. That language which we yet speak, stiff with ancestral associations, will be discarded; obscure symbols, their order

intelligible perhaps to another scientist but to no one else, will be used to express the secrets of life and riddles of death Thebes never knew. The watcher of the skies will be no Keats: back to his galley-pots will every Keats be driven. In the midst of that web called science the spider will sit with vigilant eyes, holding their cunning in momentary suspense, swelling with vaster and vaster accumulations.

It is not poetry alone that is threatened, for imaginative art is not confined to poetry. The strange thing is that when Mr. Hardy has carried an imaginative view of life to a finer expression than most other artists of his time, and shown how readily (even too readily) prose may accept the strict shackles of scientific precision, that prose itself should find no younger masters ready to use and develop it; as if his forsaking of prose for verse were no simple forsaking, but rather a subtle betrayal. Unique success is his in combining the imaginative with the scientific, the emotional with the rational, in his novels; his younger contemporaries seem to have failed equally in both directions.

It would be absurd to charge this dereliction to any single novelist or group of novelists, but it is noticeable that where gifts are eminent the failure is eminent: hence this preface to remarks

upon the novels of Mr. Compton Mackenzie. Diligent, observant, experienced, inexhaustible, or at any rate unexhausted, he has made his opportunities and gained a hearing; indeed, as he reminds us in the second volume of *Sinister Street*, he has won the greater advantage of a hearing refused, the libraries having so ineffably rejected the first volume. Nevertheless, from him that hath not—— What is it, in fact, that has deprived him of the truest fruit of the gifts which he has? I make no attempt to disguise the fact that Mr. Mackenzie appears to be a writer who is not an imaginative artist, yet who might have been an imaginative artist; a novelist who has not concerned himself with life at all save in its external and mechanic motions. He has not confined himself to a single manner: his first book, *The Passionate Elopement*, was an eighteenth-century story in a style familiarised by less capable and less versatile practitioners. Little indeed was to be expected from an author whose first book contained such writing as:

"Presently he saw her join a blue mask and lose herself in the flickering throng. Last time he had remarked particularly that her *vis-à-vis* wore brown and gold, yet the two figures were alike in movement and gesture, and he could swear the hands were identical. It was the same

without a doubt. Charles bit his nails with vexation, and fretted confoundedly.

"'My dear boy, my dear Charles, pray do not gnaw your fingers. Narcissus admired himself, 'tis true, but without carrying his devotion to cannibality.'

"Charles turned to the well-known voice of Mr. Ripple.

"'A thousand pardons, dear Beau, I was vexed by a trifle. The masquerade comports itself with tolerable success.'"

—and the glitter and varnish of an upholstered narrative casually spangled with Meredithean brightness. But Mr. Mackenzie's second novel, *Carnival*, disappointed expectation by being readable. Like some of its successors, it might be mistaken for realistic, while another, ***Guy and Pauline***, might be termed idyllic by those who love the phrase. He moves and changes, he is a part of all that he has met; and you wonder at length what *he* is. For myself, I am reminded frequently of an ingenious character seen in provincial music-halls, who to the eyes of a happy audience swiftly and imperceptibly invests and divests himself of many costumes of marvellous hue—one growing plain as another is impetuously flung off, blue gloves giving place to pink, a crimson shirt to an emerald, a

shooting-jacket to a dinner-jacket—until I laugh unrestrainably.

II

Mr. Mackenzie has not sought a fugitive and cloistered virtue; his characters, as Johnson said of Gilbert Walmsley, mingle in the great world without exemption from its follies and its vices. He loves their activities; he sets them going and follows their whirring motion with the ruthless gaiety of a child playing with toys, who stops them, breaks them, and sometimes sets them going again. He understands mechanics and they must move, and when they are run down in one book he winds them up again for another; he hurries hither and thither, clutching at the skirts of perpetual motion like that other pageant master, Time. His scene is the capitals of Europe or a railway train between them, and he shares with his characters, of whatever age, their brilliant and childish youth. He invents untiringly, and seldom vexes himself or his readers with description; but if he pauses to paint he paints with unmistakable bright colours. He writes clearly: there is seldom a slovenly sentence, never a memorable one. He has a cruelly accurate ear for slang, and presents vulgarity with fond verisimilitude. Femininity

haunts him, his flowers, even, remind him of frills; for something of extreme youth clings to his books—its zestfulness, curiosity, indiscriminateness, and its unregretful volatility. But when, you may ask, remembering at once his gifts and his opportunities, his gifts and the world amid which they are exercised, when will he grow up? When, rather, will he grow down and strike first roots into the dark earth of the mind? When, amid all his brisk preoccupations with men and women, will he touch life?

Leaving generalisation, it is interesting to look at one of the simplest of Mr. Mackenzie's novels, *Guy and Pauline*, published in 1915, and conspicuously dedicated to the Commander-in-Chief and the General Staff of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. It is the story of Guy Hazlewood (wound up again after *Sinister Street*) and a rector's daughter. Guy, returned from Macedonian Relief Fund work, is charmed by a watery Oxfordshire house called Plashers Mead, and settles there to write poetry. The rectory family are his neighbours, and with the rector's daughters, Margaret, Monica, and Pauline, he quickly obtains a brotherly footing, and then becomes engaged to the youngest. The rector is a shadowy gardener with a singular fondness for answering every question, upon whatever

subject and of whatever importance, by a reference to a blossoming or decaying plant; an idiosyncrasy which is supposed to endear him to his family. And it is an " endearing " book, for everybody is unvaryingly sweet; the adjective is as common and as adhesive as mud. The three girls form a group of the kind for which the far more finely observant and delicate art of Miss Viola Meynell (among living novelists) has already obtained and exhausted our sympathy; and ungracious as the comparison must seem to both writers, it is irresistible and fatal. Linked sweetness too long drawn out becomes tiresome, and the indistinct softness of the style makes the book something more than tiresome.

" Pauline hurried through a shower to church on Easter morning, and shook mingled tears and raindrops from herself when she saw that Guy was come to Communion. So then that angel had travelled from her bedside last night to hover over Guy and bid him wake early next morning, because it was Easter Day. With never so holy a calm had she knelt in the jewelled shadows of that chancel or returned from the altar to find her pew imparadised. When the people came out of church the sun was shining, and on the trees and on the tombstones a multitude of birds were singing. Never had Pauline felt the spirit of Eastertide uplift her with such a

joy, joy for her lover beside her, joy for summer close at hand, joy for all the joy that Easter could bring to the soul."

Elsewhere :

" The apple trees were already frilled with a foam of blossom ; and on quivering boughs linnets with breasts rose-burnt by the winds of March throbbed out their carol. Chaffinches with flashing prelude of silver wings flourished a burst of song that broke as with too intolerable a triumph : then sought another tree and poured forth the triumphant song again. Thrushes, blackbirds, and warblers quired deep-throated melodies against the multitudinous trebles of those undistinguished myriads that with choric pæan saluted May ; and on sudden diminuendoes could be heard the rustling canzonets of the gold-finches, rising and falling with reedy cadences."

The story is clogged by Guy's meditations upon " poetical ambition "—he is in the early 'twenties —and yet, with all these grievous handicaps, it survives with sufficient force to express the poignancy with which an incomplete passion may sink to oblivion. In Pauline, Mr. Mackenzie has succeeded in showing with simplicity and truth the quick development of a child to a passionate, then a despairing, and at last a forsaken woman ; and in Guy the æsthetic frog

swollen to a fraction larger than his nature and then relapsing into insignificance. I am not sure that the best of this novelist's achievement is not seen in the isolation of these characters, the sufficiency of quiet incident, and the sense—faintly yet perceptibly communicated—that the tragedy of separation is implicit in the persons of his story. The atmosphere may seem close, the setting fanciful, scenes, characters, and action diminished and slightly prettified; yet there is genuine movement, rise and decline. The occasion of Guy's last parting from Pauline is worth noting, if only because Guy happens to be but the present name of Mr. Mackenzie's invariable young man from Oxford; let it be remembered, however, that Guy reappears years after in *Sylvia and Michael* as a larger shadow and dies with the Serbians before Nish.

"'Even if temporarily I were interested in another girl, you may be quite sure that she would always be second to you.'

"'But you might be interested?' Pauline asked breathlessly.

"'I must be free if I'm going to be an artist.'

"'Free?' she echoed slowly."

There remains a negative merit. If the artist, as a hundred critics have asserted and a thousand

authors forgotten, is proved by what he omits, it must be counted to Mr. Mackenzie for a virtue that this book of four hundred pages does not contain a single seduction, and that, despite the obvious piquancy of a contrast between Plashers Mead and a London night-club, he has so easily and so blessedly avoided it.

III

The point is the more proper for remembrance inasmuch as such forbearance is the last straining of the quality of mercy in this author. Mr. Mackenzie commonly prefers cities to country scenes, although a country scene in his earliest novel yielded him his first opportunity of teasing innocent readers with an unsavoury interior. Since he is a cultured writer you might imagine that Hogarth had tutored him ; but Hogarth is immensely masculine, and the origin of our novelist's inspiration need be sought no further back than the 'nineties. Nothing is more surprising, at any rate to men approaching middle age, than the fitful incandescence of that spark with which the 'nineties were tinily illuminated. The inferior intelligence and the yet more inferior imagination which impelled certain artists — pleased with the phrase decadent—to magnify

the ferment of youthful senses, may now seem even more trivial in their fruition than an Olympian judgment would allow. But it is hard to be impartial when a purely remote contemplation is forbidden by the flashing reflections from living writers who are only in a narrow sense contemporary writers. Coventry Patmore, chief poet and almost chief artist in that church of which we hear so much in Mr. Mackenzie's novels, asserted with more force than originality that what is morally bad is necessarily bad art ; and he proceeded to say, less tritely, that the delicate indecency of so much modern art was partly due to deficient virility which, in proportion to its strength, is naturally modest. Pleading for plain speaking, he maintained that indecency, which only a fool could identify with plain speaking, is an endeavour to irritate sensations and appetites in the absence of natural passion ; that which passes with so many for power and ardour being really, in his certain and indignant eyes, impotence and coldness. The distinction between plain speaking and delicate indecency is to be remembered when Mr. Mackenzie's most ambitious attempts at the English novel, *Sinister Street* and *Sylvia Scarlett*, are considered. There may be coarseness of expression, a fondness for trivial bluntness of phrase ; but it would be

stupid to see in that more than coarseness or bluntness. The theme of *Sinister Street*, says the author, is the youth of a man who will presumably be a priest; a theme developed in nearly four hundred thousand words by something like the process of "annual elongation" which Johnson observed in a Hebridean road. The development is upon familiar biographical lines —the lonely children, the local school and lesser public school, Oxford, and the betrayed passion for a prostitute; an enormous and minute chronicle—of what? Of the externals of a boy's life, of the customs of school, flirtation with vulgar girls, evasions of school tasks, the ways of a decrepit group surviving from the 'nineties, Catholic ritual, and a little introspection here and there; and then, in the second volume, of the same externals of Oxford life drawn to the same scale. Such a scheme must needs attract the tens who have been to public school and University, and delight the tens of thousands who have not.

Sinister Street is vast in size and meagre in content; it is packed with superfluities. Three-fourths of it is inessential to the author's declared intention; it is no more than a guide-book cleverly designed (*e.g.* the first week at Oxford) to evoke an illusion of Oxford in Pimlico and

Shepherd's Bush; and concentrating upon the remaining fourth, you feel that your author has been aware of little more than the physiology of adolescence and the usual facile religious reactions. Boys from seventeen to twenty-three, girls from sixteen to any age, may find in Henry Meats *alias* Brother Aloysius, in Arthur Wilmot the last of the Decadents, in the Lilys and the Daisys of the streets, in the whole rank multitude of Mr. Mackenzie's "underworld," the irritation of sensation which adolescents naturally seek. Here may curiosity be half-satisfied, half-stimulated. A Guide to Prostitution could add little to the informations of *Sinister Street*: the dress, the habitation, even the finances of those who have "gone gay," are meticulously recorded. Passed, I am afraid, are the Orient promenade and the underground gilded sty, but their glory is not departed, it is merely transferred, and *Sinister Street* remains sufficiently lively and up to date to provoke the youngest and make the oldest feel young again. Do you ask why God gives brains for such a use? I cannot even guess. Mr. Mackenzie astonishingly blazons his book with Keats's famous analysis: "The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, etc."

—an astonishing phrase for index to this book; whether used in simplicity or in subtle defiance, this also I cannot guess. Clear enough is it that what passes for imagination is no other than the froth of yeasty waves of youth. . . . It is a book written, if offence may be disavowed and avoided, by a boy for boys. Mr. Mackenzie himself, in his introductory letter, refers to his study of Russian writers (this in explanation of the length of his novels), and in his epilogical letter he apparently regards the book as a work of art. An author's opinion of his own intention is to be respected, for who shall challenge it? It does but afford an additional ground for judgment and surprise.

IV

To consider *Sinister Street* a mere aberration is an extravagant possibility, but possibility itself is left panting behind *Sylvia Scarlett.* Here, again, the author is generous of space, and here he has not been content to write a guide-book; he has chosen a woman for his central figure, and she, unlike the male protagonists of the other books, is no coloured cloudy reflection of a reflection. She is no minikin Michael or Guy or Maurice, but a semblable moving figure. Sinister Street is her place of origin, Vanity Fair her

scene of action—a world of music-halls where farce passes for fantasy and women's dress for an exciting theme. Farce? Sylvia is not only farcical in herself, but is, like Falstaff, creative—the cause of farce in others; and though Book One opens so admirably with a paragraph showing how well the author can follow a good model, farce ensues and recurs and makes her chronicle an amusing thing.

But it is amusing only so long as coarseness is not strained through a child's mind, coarseness of phrase only or more significant coarseness of invention. I say more significant, for whether that worse coarseness is intended or involuntary must be immaterial, save as indicating the particular code against which the offence is primarily committed, the code of manners or the code of art. There is here no such gentleness in the treatment of childhood as distinguishes the earlier chapters of *Carnival*. . . . The point need not be stressed. I dislike the current practice of setting one's wits against the author whose work happens to be the subject of discussion; I do not want to produce an artificial dilemma and pretend that Mr. Mackenzie is inevitably trapped by it. Put it, then, that there are certain obligations of civilised life, and certain obligations of that flower of civilised life which we call art; put it that an

irrelevant coarseness of phrase or incident outrages the former, and that an intention to commit such an outrage, or an insensibility of having committed it, is equally an offence against the less assertive but not less imperative obligations of art. In a word, the sin is vulgarity, two-edged vulgarity it may be, an offence against both canons or, if you will, both conventions; and the further weight hangs on the charge that it is here committed in the person of a child and is, therefore, wanton. Shall I add that the immanence of farce just spoken of does in a little degree mitigate the cruelty by generalising the vulgarity? Here is rude, healthy Smollett out-Smolletted, reduced to the uncostly and only half-odious horseplay of a music-hall:

"The encouragement put a fine spirit into Danny's blows; he hammered the unfortunate Cohen round and round the room, upsetting table and chairs and washstand until with a stinging blow he knocked him backwards into the slop-pail, in which he sat so heavily that when he tried to rise the slop-pail stuck and gave him the appearance of a large baboon crawling with elevated rump on all fours. Danny kicked off the slop-pail, and invited Cohen to stand up to him; but when he did get on his feet, he ran to the door and reached the stairs just as Mrs. Gonner was wearily ascending to find out what

was happening. He tried to stop himself by clutching the knob of the baluster, which broke; the result was that he dragged Mrs. Gonner with him in a glissade which ended behind the counter. The confusion in the shop became general; Mr. Gonner cut his thumb, and the sight of the blood caused a woman who was eating a sausage to choke; another customer took advantage of the row to snatch a side of bacon and try to escape, but another customer with a finer moral sense prevented him; a dog who was sniffing in the entrance saw the bacon on the floor and tried to seize it, but getting his tail trodden upon by somebody, he took fright and bit a small boy, who was waiting to change a shilling into coppers. Meanwhile Sylvia, who expected every minute that Jubie and her pugilistic brother would come back and increase the confusion with possibly unpleasant consequences for herself, took advantage of Danny's being occupied in an argument with Cohen and the two Gonners to put on her hat and escape from the shop. She jumped on the first omnibus and congratulated herself when she looked round and saw a policeman entering the eating-house."

Sylvia herself is capable enough as well as universally attractive. The citation just made is from a passage following the second amorous attack upon her, when Danny Lewis threatens her with a knife, and she parries with the water

in her bedroom. An earlier lover had retired from a similar contest with his underlip bitten through. When, some time after the knife-and-water episode, Sylvia meets the Oxford type in Philip Iredale, she is sent by him (being still but sixteen) for a year's schooling and then marries him. Coquetting with the Church is followed by flight—alone, it must be added ; and indeed Sylvia's whole recorded life is fugitive, a pilgrimage between this world and some other. Three months later her husband's Oxford composure is shocked by :

" ' You *must* divorce me now. I've not been able to earn enough to pay you back more than this [ten pounds] for your bad bargain. I don't think I've given any more pleasure to the men who have paid less for me than you did, if that's any consolation.' "

Adventures repeat themselves. A huge Russian officer bursts into Sylvia's room one night and is pitched out of the window by a couple of acrobats. The war begins and spreads itself over Europe as a background for her passages and parleyings ; and maybe the Commander-in-Chief and the General Staff of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force have beguiled many a tiresome after-war hour in pursuing Sylvia's wander-

ings between places familiarised by their own late anxieties. Sylvia is differentiated from the other women of these novels, not only by her superior capacity for experiences, but even more by her superior volubility. She is, consciously, mind as well as body, and as the narrative goes on and on she develops a passion for monologue—terrifying in any woman, and rare among women whose occupation Sylvia Scarlett's own name is perhaps meant assonantally to suggest. These monologues, recurrent as the farce and more deadly, might be called shortly the jargon. "I represent the original conception of the Hetæra," she asserts.

"He'll think of me, if he ever thinks of me at all, as one of the great multitude of wronged women. I shall think of him, though as a matter of fact I shall avoid thinking of him, either as what might have been—a false concept, for, of course, what might have been is fundamentally inconceivable—or as what he was—a sentimental fool."

She meditates upon the art of Botticelli, whose appeal she seems to think is only childlike, upon the conflict of nationality with civilisation. She reads Tolstoi and Dostoieffsky, putting Apuleius by, goes to confession, analyses her sensations,

details the errancy of her parentage, and seeks to shock the priest who, when Sylvia acutely suggests that God is "almost vulgarly anthropomorphic," can only murmur, "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?" But here is a brief specimen of the almost unbroken monologue to which the priest of the wisest of the churches can make no answer but a profession of the power of the Church:

"'I suppose my running away was the direct result of my bringing up, because whenever I had been brought face to face with a difficult situation I ran away. However, this time I was determined from some perverted pride to make myself more utterly myself than I had ever done. It's hard to explain how my mind worked. You must remember I was only nineteen, and already at thirty-one I am as far from understanding all my motives then as if I were trying to understand somebody who was not myself at all. Anyhow, I simply went on the streets. For three months I mortified my flesh by being a harlot. Can you understand that? Can you possibly understand the deliberate infliction of such a discipline, not to humiliate one's pride but to exalt it? Can you understand that I emerged from that three months of incredible horror with a complete personality? . . .'

"Sylvia did not wait for the priest to answer

this question, partly because she did not want to be disillusioned by finding so soon that he had not comprehended anything of her emotions or actions, partly because there seemed more important revelations of herself still to be made."

—Farce at least is unpretentious, but this crude jargon, this retroverted intellectualism, is offensive beyond farce, odious beyond "delicate indecency."

V

It may not be wholly due to perversity if the characteristics of these long biographical novels should overshadow the sharp merits of, say, *Carnival*. *Carnival*, even better than *Guy and Pauline*, may serve as a measure of Mr. Mackenzie's decline from his promise; since although its conclusion is a disharmony, its best chapters are good enough to cause a reader to sigh over the later novels. Was it, indeed, quite a worthless aim to follow in the footsteps of George Gissing? *Carnival* suggests that a new Gissing might have grown up before our eyes, with a touch of the same veracity, the same mordancy, and a little less than the same humourless and dishumoured regard for what is wry and hapless; but *Carnival* stands alone, and the exactions of that difficult sincerity have been put by. . . . Or take, again,

Poor Relations, one of Mr. Mackenzie's later inventions. With its ease and brilliant vivacities, with the comedy of its conception, what a delightful play it would make! But might not the comedy have depended—as comedy must—more surely upon character and less upon incident? The author of *Sylvia Scarlett* has imposed a too-swift facility upon the author of *Poor Relations*. If practice makes perfect, then nothing was wanting to the completeness of *Poor Relations*—but how much is wanting! Admirable are the opening notes, but of the rest too much is a brisk falsetto. There is excess in the situations, excess in the characterisation, excess in the style:

"When he looked at the old lady he could not discover anything except a cold egotism in every fold of those flabby cheeks where the powder lay like drifted snow in the ruts of a sunless lane."

It is equally the virtue and the fault of Mr. Mackenzie that he provokes melancholy regrets, even in the middle of frequent chuckles; and when the chuckling has died away the shadow of *Sylvia Scarlett* falls upon the book, just as with the same unhappy denigration it is flung backwards over the better qualities of the earlier *Carnival*.

Yet *Poor Relations*, like *Guy and Pauline*, is free from what we have seen to be the worst flaw of the longer novels, the crude determination to shock, which breaks most starkly through the superficialities of *Sylvia Scarlett*. That, to revert to our broad and primitive distinction, is a breach of the code of art rather than the code of morals, an eruptive *épatism* which would disfigure a better book, if it could be found there. Can you conceive a more attractive subject, if you are but three-and-twenty, than the philosophic harlot? Or an easier? I do not suppose that it is less interesting to be on the streets than to be in the Ministry of Labour; neither occupation can be objectionable as subject of a novel. It would be untrue to say that the subject of a novel is a thing of complete indifference, and that the treatment is everything; for a writer would not do wisely to forfeit the advantage which a subject might offer him. But neither would he do wisely in exploiting a subject only to excite the curiosity or astonish the simplicity of his reader. Merely adventitious at best is the gain. It is to reduce subject and treatment to their lowest terms, and reject the implicit conditions which confront every writer who would explore the imaginative world where there can be no laws save honour, loyalty, and delicacy. The scientific writer is secured

against deceiving himself or his readers for long; his assumptions can be verified, his deductions precisely analysed, his whole professions rationally weighed. The imaginative and the quasi-imaginative writer have no such security, nor their readers such protection. Traditional values may be inapplicable, and it is hard to discriminate novelty from originality; a book that shocks may be as profoundly conceived as *Jude the Obscure*, as cheaply fashioned as *Sylvia Scarlett*. Incident may be prodigal equally in Dostoieffsky and Mr. Compton Mackenzie, but significance of incident may vary infinitely. Mr. Mackenzie's incidents have no significance; they remain incidents. His thoughts are significant only in so far as they indicate a modern intellectual disvertebration; his view of character is significant only in so far as it betrays an adolescent apprehension. Who is Sylvia? you ask, and your author is silent. What is she? and the answer is dispersed among eight hundred garrulous pages.

VI

Yes, it must be repeated, Mr. Mackenzie has conspicuous gifts, and as the letters with which *Sinister Street* opens and closes indicate, he is aware of them, and has not undertaken these

enormous fictions without a sense of his task. But he has too often accepted the easier way. He can invest his scene with an illusion of activity, if not of reality, but he is unable to picture reality, for he does not distinguish ; neither does he create a reality, a world for himself, amenable to its own laws, establishing its own consistency. That would be a wonderful but a hard thing. Amid the booths of his Vanity Fair he moves, not soberly and critically as Christian and Faithful moved, but as one swiftly enchanted by externals. He approaches the field of imaginative art, and I cannot say that his powers and pretensions are such as must discourage entry ; but for imagination he learns to substitute invention, chooses the superficial, and does not even trouble to secure the consistency of his characters. He might have chosen otherwise. His alertness, his preoccupation with externals, his fullness of incident, his soft fluency of style might have been flogged into subordination ; he need not have been very serious to have taken his work seriously. But all that he promises now is, if the tempting derangement of a line by a modern poet be pardonable :

"A torment of intolerable tales."

Mr. Mackenzie has divagated. The task of

presenting reality is left to the scientific mind, and the task of creating another reality is left to the poetic mind.

All this, I must frankly say, was written before *The Seven Ages of Woman* appeared, with its reminder that Mr. Mackenzie's instability makes expectation foolish. *The Seven Ages of Woman* shows a happy avoidance of the shocking, for he has compelled his hand to the simplest of chronicles, the chronicle of a life that opens in 1860 and has not closed with the story in 1920. The simple narrative is a pleasure to read, even when it is remembered that precisely the same chronological device was used by Miss May Sinclair (in *Harriet Frean*) a year or two ago, with a touch far firmer and an effect, it must be owned, much more gloomy. A falsetto note still pierces the dialogue, the development is still unsteady, but there are passages of truth and tenderness which one is surprised and thankful to discover.

IX

THE ENGLISH ESSAYIST

I

MR. SAINTSBURY'S phrase, "Works of prose art," lingers on the mind as the definition of Bacon's best work and a generalisation of the essay itself. Split and refine it as we may, it has still an essential truth; the essay is a piece of prose art, and when we have marked its chief distinctions and pursued its main diversions we shall find that its development has been towards a finer order, a more conscious art, a heightening and ultimately a completer fusion of those twin faculties of the mind, imagination and reason.

The essay comes somewhat slowly into the story of English letters. Romantic narrative, miracle play, drama—these confusedly preceded, and the essay followed with an uncertain apprehension of the aims and powers of those other forms; and clearly the essay could have no place until the first exuberance of invention and imagination had passed, and men began to rub

their eyes and look a little narrowly at what had been achieved and at what was left to do. Yet the essay has seldom been solely critical in any age, and in noting this we approach the first fork in our road ; on one side the merely critical, the slightly curious or slightly arid abstraction—moral or æsthetic—and on the other the more serenely imaginative and mobile form which later ages were to bring to full development. Bacon's *Essays* belong to the moral and intellectual division, though not exclusively to that ; the pregnancy of his phrase, his voluptuous verbal beauty and purely sensuous indulgences, noticeable in so many passages of music and solid colour, are a token that his was indeed a complex spirit. Nevertheless, the real preoccupation of his essays is not sensuous or æsthetic, but moral and rational. Ask what is the most characteristic expression in Elizabethan letters of the mind of a liberal scholar, and the answer will probably be Bacon's *Essays*. Sedate and grave in his thoughts, splendid in his mode, he loves to invest his inspired and commonplace utterances alike in a gorgeous cloak. *Decadent!* a paradoxical writer might murmur as he notes the frequent overweighting of the idea by the expression, and reminds us thereby that decadence in literature is somewhat older than the already antique

'nineties at which we glance now with amusement, anon with contempt. Bacon's commonplaces, looked at closely, are among the worst, being moral commonplaces — midgetary moralities augustly presented and speaking big. But it was not simply his delight in splendour which urged his noblest phrasing, it was equally his desire to use the magnificence of his time in the service of reason and order.

We are helped in thus seeing Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, by the familiar portrait which so comprehensively tells us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about our author. The gravity is there, the weighty preoccupation, the slyness of after-thoughts unexpressed, the richness of tone and hue—all these are seen more and more plainly as you stare back at his stare ; and they are qualities that make him an essayist of real interest to the lightest as well as the profoundest reader. But they also make him a particular kind of essayist—not an intimate but a reserved figure, not a talker but a writer, not a babbler but a rhetorician, not a companion but a teacher, not a friend but a great chancellor, not a familiar forgetting his dignity but a supple statesman asserting it ; preferring to suppress, equivocate, and dissemble, and to justify every obliquity—anything rather than candidly pour

himself out and leave the justification to the reader. The experience of a lifetime is the well from which his *aurea dicta* are solemnly drawn ; and who does not know the varied kinds of Bacon's experience ? *Corruption's Nuncio*, we might call him, thinking of his sins and splendours, his meanness and magniloquence. He writes a whole essay " Of Cunning," beginning by a distinction between cunning and wisdom and forgetting the distinction long before he ends, the essay becoming a half-candid apology for cunning ; he writes a sombre and noble eulogy of death, spending all he has in adorning those commonplaces that are never staled ; but one thing he never attempts to do, rather does he avoid it—he never speaks out from the tiny callous kernel of his heart. It is not the true spendthrift of himself who writes : " Nakedness is uncomely as well in mind as in body ; and it addeth no small reverence to men's names, manners, and actions, if they be not altogether open " ; and in the same essay proceeds to vindicate simulation and dissimulation. The intellectual spendthrift is the true essayist, if only he have enough of himself to spend ; but Bacon was a miser of himself, sitting furred and gilded and cold, like some gorgeous Renaissance figure of a dusky painting, counting over his gains with pursed lips

and sidelong eye, his fingers trembling, jewels flashing, and lips shaping a careful phrase for the enrichment of hungry Time.

He may have taught Ben Jonson, a slightly younger man, the secret of sententiousness, or at least its value, as well as the use of the flower-like decoration of simple prose; for Bacon himself might be heard in the closing note of this from the *Discoveries*: "What a deal of cold business doth a man misspend the better part of life in! in scattering compliments, tendering visits, gathering and venting news, following feasts and plays, making a little winter love in a dark corner." Conciseness is his aim, in a degree that even Bacon never cared for, and all the weightiness of the penurious chancellor is found in these little essays of his thriftless contemporary. If, however, Jonson's style offers reminders of the greater essayist, it presents differences far more positive. He empties himself prodigally before you and does not scruple to tell precisely those things which Bacon hid. The conversations at Hawthornden, as related by Drummond, reveal sharply enough his huge sense of his own worth and others' worthlessness, for nothing that is not Ben Jonson's pleases him freely, and there is mere currishness in his constant diminution of every figure within his recollection; but

in the *Discoveries* his freedoms are pleasanter. He still sneers, and sneers even at Montaigne for an essayist; but happily he is more truly at ease when he speaks of his own life. Not for Jonson any vaunting or practice of dissimulation. "At last they upbraided my poverty. I confess she is my Domestic, sober of diet, simple of habit, frugal, painful; a good Counsellor to me, that keeps me from Cruelty, Pride, or other more delicate impertinences which are the Nurse-children of Riches." He writes an essay on Style, and still it is of Ben Jonson he writes, saying how he loves a pure and neat language, how often a barbarous phrase has made him out of love with good sense; their writings need sunshine, he cries, as he thinks of delinquent authors. Himself dominates his writing, and constantly you are aware of that vivacious figure, that Stentor voice of authority, that rude yet delicate power of picture, that fond assertion of his own tastes, which we faintly conjure up when we look on any portrait of Jonson. He gibes at Montaigne, but follows him.

II

Many of the authors of what is conveniently called miscellaneous prose, in the years suc-

ceeding Jonson's death, are strictly essayists, and of all the truest essayist and finest master of our medium was Sir Thomas Browne. It is unnecessary to point out that he too takes a place in our second and more native class of essayist —those who follow the imaginative and mobile personal form. Browne plays upon his own being like a splendid musician who is able to evoke the solemn and the playful, the wise and the tender, from the depths and shallows of his inward life; and then, turning to a vaster instrument, with equal serenity he summons the august, dreadful yet unoppressive echo-voices of death and time. Now 'tis like all instruments, now like a lonely flute. In the midst of the largest of his generalisations you never lose sight of himself; in his most fantastic speculations a clear-smiling, grave spirit is distinct and individual. Shut your eyes as a phrase from *Urn Burial* or *Religio Medici* unfolds upon the air, and you see at once the courtly, masculine face, the eyes of smouldering fancies and passionate, tranquil curiosity that make Sir Thomas Browne living and dear more than dead and remembered. Does he write for any but himself? true essayist, it is thus that he writes for us. After three centuries we should be little engrossed in any writer who is not engrossed in himself. Ideas

may attract, history and science may touch a faded figure with spectral incandescence, but only that which is human lives on in human affections. It is a pitiful truism to say that Browne's primary quality is Browne. Seventeenth century morals (whether Christian or non-Christian), cinerary rites—these would not of themselves distract the twentieth century from thinking of its own morals and incineration; but Browne has done something with the essay which no other writer has done so potently—he has deepened the form as an English tradition and exalted it as an English art. "Vain ashes," he writes—"Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times and sexes, have found unto themselves a fruitless continuation, and only arise unto late posterity, as Emblems of mortal vanities, Antidotes against pride, vain-glory, and madding vices." It is singular enough that his own skull should have been gnawed out of the grave—a fate that he shrank from as a "tragical abomination"; but is it an antidote against pride? Would he have been humbled to know it, or provoked to a new and yet more gorgeous dehortation upon chance, and the insecurity of death? And for ourselves, we peer at his pages for a sight of him, and we find his skull at our feet. Gentlest of mockeries!

III

In pursuing our theme along these not too densely hedged paths, we must not be beguiled into mere vague extension, else we should be sweeping all the pamphleteers that succeeded Browne into our narrow scope. The pamphlet is not an essay except by a fortunate accident, and the air of dispute and violent wrangling amid which the pamphleteer's voice is heard is not the air in which literature survives when the subject of contention is itself burnt out. Dryden is one who outrides the dispute he engaged in, but in citing Dryden here I am naming simply the chief and not the sole late seventeenth-century essayist, and first if not the chief of those who practised purely critical writing. The famous *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, born of a dispute with Sir Robert Howard and giving birth in turn to other provocative treatises, is the admired example of the best work of the critical kind, and it followed hard upon an essay which, for other qualities, deserves nearly as much praise—Cowley's *Discourse Concerning Oliver Cromwell*. In each case there is reason harnessed to imagination, a criticism of affairs or a criticism of ideas; each is a work of prose art, each shows a beautiful art of prose. The chief difference between Jonson

and Browne on one side, and Cowley and Dryden on the other, is that the latter do not speak so freely of themselves; they are not involuntary revealers of their own business and bosoms, they are not portrait artists, they are not their own texts. If therefore they lose or refrain from the last charm, it must be owned that they do not pretend to it. You cannot read Dryden's very features into his *Dramatic Poesy*, and, Dryden being Dryden, it is to be doubted whether that essay would be better if you could. He has much, but not *that* charm, not *that* power over us; while Cowley has powers of humour, satire, and an admiring scorn, but not the gift of showing in a few brief pages the shape and shadow of his inward being; he does not step out of or even into his own pages and set them shaking in our hand. Dryden's intellectual force could not but make itself everywhere apparent in his *Dramatic Poesy*, but this is a mere general quality, not a personal and identifiable characteristic; and general qualities may exist in abundance, yet the personal features, the human lineaments, faculties, and humours remain vague and uncomposed. But, as we have said, Dryden was doing one kind and not another kind of thing—the intellectual, the critical essay, the essay of ideas, the essay which ought to be

understandable almost as well in French as in English. And this indeed points to a quick test, for the essay of the singularly personal kind, the essay of self-portraiture (whether quite involuntary or quite deliberate), as Browne and Lamb used it, is perhaps inevitably untranslatable. Our homage, nevertheless, can be offered to Dryden as the father of that " criticism of ideas " which critics of our day deplore the want of and which, indeed, our literary tradition seems natively incapable of begetting. What Dryden himself can give us is this intellectual criticism in a prose which delights us in its own way scarcely less than Jonson's in another. It is a prose that fits its subject like a glove, like the skin to the flesh of the hand ; but at times its rational strictness is broken and the phrases leap :

" My Lord,—This worthless present was designed you, long before it was a Play ; when it was only a confused mass of thoughts tumbling over one another in the dark : when the Fancy was yet in its first work, moving the sleeping Images of Things towards the light, there to be distinguished ; and then, either chosen or rejected by the Judgement. It was yours, my Lord ! before I could call it mine."

If Dryden told cousin Swift that he would never be a poet, as he is supposed to have said,

he could not have told him he would never be a prose writer. Swift's prose was miscellaneous enough, but he does not permit us to confine him within our notion of essays, and if he can fairly be called an essayist it is mainly because he was one of the begetters of another kind of essay, the periodical essay—the light-armed, light-headed infantry of prose literature; and might we but add light-hearted, that would indeed be final praise, but except in the Roger de Coverley series it had no heart at all. Truth reminds us, however, that Swift was begetting something far unlike himself, far different from his own sombre and burdened imaginations. Here, in the prattling shallows of Addison's wit, in the gay impulses of Steele's good-nature, in the light, neat, sociable prose of both, the new kind of essay was created in sudden perfection. Literature as a handmaid, waiting-wench to fashion, conventions, morals, mere dresser to a patched and painted actress, or moving among the teacups and gossips of a society in which it seemeth always afternoon—these are the new offices to which imagination and "wit" are subdued. Genius has come to town and put off its native rudeness and power, and put on urban airs and graces, the airs of the flirt in a metropolis that has just discovered the meaning of

"polite" and "charming," the graces of an impertinent dependent. There is masterly portraiture in the *Spectator* and *Tatler*, delicate engraving, faint felicities of pencil and needle, but it is rather a portraiture of society than of the artists themselves; they are sunken in the crowd for which they speak, they are not the perfect egotists who are to be identified with the perfect essayists. It is perhaps not very strange that the age in which everybody wrote essays and the form was sharpened for the use of a society just finding its feet or its head, was an age in which a level was reached and the peaks sank to the level. When all wrote well none wrote supremely.

IV

It is to Johnson that we must look for supremacy in another kind, and to Goldsmith for a gift as unique as Johnson's if less powerful. Johnson made a new thing when he followed the periodical essay of the *Rambler* with the mature improvisations—it is their charm that they are scarcely more — of *The Lives of the Poets*. They form the model of the biographical essay, in which the features of the subject are drawn sometimes minutely and sometimes freely, and behind these the features of the writer him-

self, the avowed portrait dimming away into the careless and unconscious portrait of the artist ; or if the self-portraiture is less unstudied, as in that beautiful tribute to Gilbert Walmsley occurring in the life of Smith, it is no whit less delightful. Johnson's large and eloquent personality continually overflowed, and on the waves the light and fragile memories of the immemorable, the Smiths and Dukes and Sprats of his fortuitous collection, floated securely. It is only because so many have tried their nervous hands at the biographical essay, in artless imitation, that Johnson's work is not unique ; but it is still unapproached.

And so we might turn to Goldsmith, deliciously satirical, the most innocent of men, writing his *Citizen of the World* as though he were standing outside the world and looking on amused ; ostensibly following the critical type of our classification, but with imagination continually breaking through. The shadow of the pathetic which has always been cast on Goldsmith's figure, heaven knows why, by writers on his time, has obscured some of his independent merits, and the *Citizen* has been stupidly overlooked because its author has been sentimentalised. From Goldsmith, again, it is a single flying leap to Lamb and Hazlitt, and a new development

of the essay. Imagination continually breaking through might be said of Lamb also, but I do not pretend to define Lamb's mode. Lamb is no Lamb but a thing of nimbler nature—sometimes a mocking cuckoo, sometimes a wise white owl, blinking his enormous golden orbs against an intrusive light and whirring into the soft dusky privacy of the mind; sometimes a robin, friendliest of domestic voices, kindest of winter's colours; and sometimes a rich-throated blackbird flitting with his prose elegies about the graves of the poets he loved—Sidney and Cotton and Coleridge and the rest; the purest of egotists, the most candid of self-revealers, the best loved of all lovers. It is easier, though hardly more useful, to find a metaphor for Hazlitt —that vigorous, restless, watchful, and growling hound, who barks out his short, crisp sentences, snaps here, fondles there, never sleeps, has a merry eye for a few and a flashing eye for most, flings himself with wild fangs upon a Gifford and heaves at last with angry gratification. He, too, is his own eternal subject; his essays are the irritable plate on which his features have been recorded, both consciously and unconsciously, during long years of self-communion. Extravagancies of metaphor, however, are to be avoided, and we may leave Hazlitt (never quite

adequately admired), and stay scarce a moment to mark De Quincey's intricate confusion of sound with colour, the rich hues wreathed in cloud, in those disorderly conceptions which at once fascinate and fatigue us, and prove that in him one of the greatest essayists was strangled, alas, and not fulfilled—an impish and unstable figure playing upon his own fantastic personality as though it were another's. We may leave, too, the Quarterly and Edinburgh reviewers of his day, by whom the essay was more and more steadily reduced to journalism, sometimes critical, sometimes dishonest, sometimes merely uncritical; but we cannot so easily leave his impressive contemporary Landor, who achieved a new form for the essay when he wrote and rewrote his all but endless *Imaginary Conversations*, mingling by mere hap the imaginative and the rational in capricious proportion and using a prose that no one since has bettered. Yet it would be foolish to attempt the definition of Landor's mode or the praise of his style, that can be dull when the subject is tedious, and serene and noble when the theme is right. With Landor it is not enough that he should write of himself, for even then he is sometimes merely solemn and garrulous, and perhaps he needs the warmth of a mental opposition; but his best passages may occur almost

anywhere, and include such phrasing as this that echoes along the vaulting of the senses :

" He who hath lived in this country, can enjoy no distant one. He breathes here another air ; he lives more life ; a brighter sun invigorates his studies, and serener stars influence his repose. Barbary hath also the blessing of climate ; and although I do not desire to be there again, I sometimes feel a kind of regret at leaving it. A bell warbles the more mellifluously in the air when the sound of the stroke is over, and when another swims out from underneath it, and pants upon the element that gave it birth. In like manner the recollection of a thing is frequently more pleasing than the actuality ; what is harsh is dropped in the space between."

Landor might have told more of himself if he had been less sharply aware of himself and had cared less to support an ideal disdain which we cannot wholly admire ; but he is still an essayist of the true personal order, still the self-portrayer, with a restless world sinking into sullen cloud behind his briefly tranquillised figure.

But injustice will yet be done if we pursue this light-heeled journey with no more than an unreflecting glance at Matthew Arnold, and forget the sallies that shook, or at least vexed, the intellectual world of fifty years ago. Arnold

enjoyed the air of dispute and was never so happy as in asserting that others were wrong and foolish and perturbed about nothing, and thus he hangs half-way between the critical and the personal, friendlier than he cares to show, yet guarding his inward flame somewhat too jealously from the casual breath of others. And in speaking of Arnold, as of Walter Pater, the reference is likely to sound purely and completely one of personal fondness, the regard for Pater especially being grounded partly upon a sympathy with his general æsthetic attitude, and partly upon an admiration of his silent, smouldering passion for English prose. The sympathy and the admiration alike are nourished by "Sebastian Van Storck" and the rest of his *Imaginary Portraits*, as well as those many essays, long or short, from *Marius* to the child in the house, wherein Pater is disclosing, in subdued and burning hue, the movement of his sense-exalted, sense-confounded spirit.

These I cannot linger over; they are chiefly essayists of the imaginative division, and when they touch criticism it is of the order that a few stern readers abhor and most admire, being the result of the confronting of their own and their subjects' personalities, the opposition of their stars or the conjunction of their loves.

Precisely the same thing is to be seen in others of their time and later, in Coventry Patmore and Alice Meynell, and in certain living writers who practise an honoured art and remember that it is an art, a service and a dignity—I refer to Mr. George Moore and Mr. Max Beerbohm; and in speaking of these latter writers, I remember first of all that they have achieved felicity irrespective of a lucky choice of subject. Like a dim-silked, dark-hued Mandarin, moving amid the strange confusion of an Occidental procession, "Max" keeps a fine reserve that is itself more expressive than others' loquacity, and achieves the last distinction by forbearance, elision, and a civil avoidance of paunchy superfluity. But Mr. Moore—I find no single similitude for him. The chameleon is not more changeable, the snake with his annual sloughing of faded vesture is not more subtly renewed, the cock that crows against the sun lifts no prouder head, the stoat has no slyer motion, the kestrel no more watchful eye nor idler-seeming poise, the wandering mew no lonelier note nor her shadow a briefer visitation, than Mr. George Moore in the abundant prose that began, for our purpose, in *Essays and Opinions* and grew perfect a generation later in *Avowals*. To gloat over these, co-rivals and twin incomparables, would be to forgo the

pleasure of pondering even a brief word upon others of our day who, like them, have given of their best to this winning and wanton form: wanton, it may be called, because it is the peculiar form in which the mind independently roams, sinks and soars, and pursues its delightful porpoise-way through territorial waters. The essayist that lately died with W. H. Hudson is an example of one kind, the essayist that continually renews a sprightly youth in Mr. Saintsbury is another kind, and between the two there are how many contemporaries, critical or imaginative, strict or desultory, for whose lightest page we are all grateful. Hudson identified himself with his subject and thereby the more completely and purely expressed himself; Mr. Saintsbury, in his *Scrap Books* (for example) of the last few years, has given us something almost unique in its careless fulness, its readiness of resource, its Johnsonian echo of humorous and sane dogmatism.

V

But here the boldest of writers must pause, when he finds himself among contemporaries who are plainly of the elect company of their predecessors, and especially if he has looked even a little critically at some and indulgently

at others, avowing thereby his own likings more than any abstract standard of judgment. The phrase used by a modern poet, Mr. W. H. Davies, "short men that sit tall," may be adopted to describe the aspiring humbleness that befits such a writer, as he looks out upon his world. Thorns outline the fields, and there is indeed as much of rebuke as of stimulation in the view, sting and sweetness equally palpable. But no man can be forbidden the indulgence of his own thoughts, and criticism is subdued in pleasure when the English essay is followed from the time of Queen Elizabeth down to our own vivid and voracious day. If pleasure is then my only excuse, it may be stated boldly that no other is needed and a cat may still look at a king if only he refrain from snarling at kingship and kingdoms; a task or pastime for which I have not the least inclination.

My simple theme, then, reiterated to tediousness but now concluded, is that the mere egotism of the author, freely confessed or subtly dissembled, forms the chief delight of the English essay and the chief interest of the portraits in the present volume. Musing upon his own thoughts and instincts, upon whatever in himself is powerful though inarticulate, upon his own passions and humours, the true essayist awakes

in his readers the admiration of a soldier for his captain, the fondness of a lover for his last beloved. Intimacies stir and run out beneath the common soil, experience rains down and quickens the roots, and the thoughts of the author at length become the thoughts of the reader, his passions become our passions, his humours ours, his virtues and follies ours; for the main concern of any reader is with the author himself, and there is no bond so secure, no link so unrusting, as this that gleams between them. The literature of the last hundred years has seen the triumph of the novel, vast satrapies overrun and a border-war with science beginning, like that deadly Flanders war of trench and gas; and the essay has been left unattempted by alert spirits that might have won. Nevertheless, the essay lives and thrives. Resuming metaphor for the last time it may be said that, like a huge oak, whose guttered trunk and fungus'd shoulder darkens the hill, the English novel stands boldly yet, his thin hair shaking in the cold winds; but the essay is like a thicket, changing and never dying, with dusks and deeps within, refuge of birds and shy wild beasts, home of strange and familiar voices.