PREFACE

The intention of this book is to lay stress on ideas and tendencies that
have to be understood and appreciated, rather than on facts that have to
be learned by heart. Many authors are not mentioned and others receive
scanty treatment, because of the necessities of this method of approach.
The book aims at dealing with the matter of authors more than with their
lives; consequently it contains few dates. All that the reader need
require to help him have been included in a short chronological table at
the end.

To have attempted a severely ordered and analytic treatment of the
subject would have been, for the author at least, impossible within the
limits imposed, and, in any case, would have been foreign to the purpose
indicated by the editors of the Home University Library. The book
pretends no more than to be a general introduction to a very great
subject, and it will have fulfilled all that is intended for it if it
stimulates those who read it to set about reading for themselves the
books of which it treats.

Its debts are many, its chief creditors two teachers, Professor
Grierson at Aberdeen University and Sir Walter Raleigh at Oxford, to the
stimulation of whose books and teaching my pleasure in English
literature and any understanding I have of it are due. To them and to
the other writers (chief of them Professor Herford) whose ideas I have
wittingly or unwittingly incorporated in it, as well as to the kindness
and patience of Professor Gilbert Murray, I wish here to express my
indebtedness.

G.H.M.

MANCHESTER,
_August_, 1911.
There are times in every man's experience when some sudden widening of
the boundaries of his knowledge, some vision of hitherto untried and
unrealized possibilities, has come and seemed to bring with it new life
and the inspiration of fresh and splendid endeavour. It may be some
great book read for the first time not as a book, but as a revelation;
it may be the first realization of the extent and moment of what physical science has to teach us; it may be, like Carlyle's "Everlasting Yea," an ethical illumination, or spiritual like Augustine's or John Wesley's. But whatever it is, it brings with it new eyes, new powers of comprehension, and seems to reveal a treasury of latent and unsuspected talents in the mind and heart. The history of mankind has its parallels to these moments of illumination in the life of the individual. There are times when the boundaries of human experience, always narrow, and fluctuating but little between age and age, suddenly widen themselves, and the spirit of man leaps forward to possess and explore its new domain. These are the great ages of the world. They could be counted, perhaps, on one hand. The age of Pericles in Athens; the less defined age, when Europe passed, spiritually and artistically, from what we call the Dark, to what we call the Middle Ages; the Renaissance; the period of the French Revolution. Two of them, so far as English literature is concerned, fall within the compass of this book, and it is with one of them--the Renaissance--that it begins.

It is as difficult to find a comprehensive formula for what the Renaissance meant as to tie it down to a date. The year 1453 A.D., when the Eastern Empire--the last relic of the continuous spirit of Rome--fell before the Turks, used to be given as the date, and perhaps the word "Renaissance" itself--"a new birth"--is as much as can be accomplished shortly by way of definition. Michelet's resonant "discovery by mankind of himself and of the world" rather expresses what a man of the Renaissance himself must have thought it, than what we in this age can declare it to be. But both endeavours to date and to define
are alike impossible. One cannot fix a term to day or night, and the
ty of the Renaissance as a kind of tropical dawn--a sudden passage
to light from darkness--is not to be considered. The Renaissance was,
and was the result of, a numerous and various series of events which
followed and accompanied one another from the fourteenth to the
beginning of the sixteenth centuries. First and most immediate in its
influence on art and literature and thought, was the rediscovery of the
ancient literatures. In the Middle Ages knowledge of Greek and Latin
literatures had withdrawn itself into monasteries, and there narrowed
till of secular Latin writing scarcely any knowledge remained save of
Vergil (because of his supposed Messianic prophecy) and Statius, and of
Greek, except Aristotle, none at all. What had been lost in the Western
Empire, however, subsisted in the East, and the continual advance of the
Turk on the territories of the Emperors of Constantinople drove westward
to the shelter of Italy and the Church, and to the patronage of the
Medicis, a crowd of scholars who brought with them their manuscripts of
Homer and the dramatists, of Thucydides and Herodotus, and most
momentous perhaps for the age to come, of Plato and Demosthenes and of
the New Testament in its original Greek. The quick and vivid intellect
of Italy, which had been torpid in the decadence of mediaevalism and its
mysticism and piety, seized with avidity the revelation of the classical
world which the scholars and their manuscripts brought. Human life,
which the mediaeval Church had taught them to regard but as a threshold
and stepping-stone to eternity, acquired suddenly a new momentousness
and value; the promises of the Church paled like its lamps at sunrise;
and a new paganism, which had Plato for its high priest, and Demosthenes
and Pericles for its archetypes and examples, ran like wild-fire through
Italy. The Greek spirit seized on art, and produced Raphael, Leonardo,
and Michel Angelo; on literature and philosophy and gave us Pico della
Mirandula, on life and gave us the Medicis and Castiglione and
Machiavelli. Then--the invention not of Italy but of Germany--came the
art of printing, and made this revival of Greek literature quickly
portable into other lands.

Even more momentous was the new knowledge the age brought of the
physical world. The brilliant conjectures of Copernicus paved the way
for Galileo, and the warped and narrow cosmology which conceived the
earth as the centre of the universe, suffered a blow that in shaking it
shook also religion. And while the conjectures of the men of science
were adding regions undreamt of to the physical universe, the
discoverers were enlarging the territories of the earth itself. The
Portuguese, with the aid of sailors trained in the great Mediterranean
ports of Genoa and Venice, pushed the track of exploration down the
western coast of Africa; the Cape was circumnavigated by Vasco da Gama,
and India reached for the first time by Western men by way of the sea.
Columbus reached Trinidad and discovered the "New" World; his successors
pushed past him and touched the Continent. Spanish colonies grew up
along the coasts of North and Central America and in Peru, and the
Portuguese reached Brazil. Cabot and the English voyagers reached
Newfoundland and Labrador; the French made their way up the St.
Lawrence. The discovery of the gold mines brought new and unimagined
possibilities of wealth to the Old World, while the imagination of
Europe, bounded since the beginning of recorded time by the Western
ocean, and with the Mediterranean as its centre, shot out to the romance
and mystery of untried seas.
It is difficult for us in these later days to conceive the profound and stirring influence of such an alteration on thought and literature. To the men at the end of the fifteenth century scarcely a year but brought another bit of received and recognized thinking to the scrap-heap; scarcely a year but some new discovery found itself surpassed and in its turn discarded, or lessened in significance by something still more new. Columbus sailed westward to find a new sea route, and as he imagined, a more expeditious one to "the Indies"; the name West Indies still survives to show the theory on which the early discoverers worked. The rapidity with which knowledge widened can be gathered by a comparison of the maps of the day. In the earlier of them the mythical Brazil, a relic perhaps of the lost Atlantis, lay a regularly and mystically blue island off the west coast of Ireland; then the Azores were discovered and the name fastened on to one of the islands of that archipelago. Then Amerigo reached South America and the name became finally fixed to the country that we know. There is nothing nowadays that can give us a parallel to the stirring and exaltation of the imagination which intoxicated the men of the Renaissance, and gave a new birth to thought and art. The great scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century came to men more prepared for the shock of new surprises, and they carried evidence less tangible and indisputable to the senses. Perhaps if the strivings of science should succeed in proving as evident and comprehensible the existences which spiritualist and psychical research is striving to establish, we should know the thrill that the great twin discoverers, Copernicus and Columbus, brought to Europe.
This rough sketch of the Renaissance has been set down because it is only by realizing the period in its largest and broadest sense that we can understand the beginnings of our own modern literature. The Renaissance reached England late. By the time that the impulse was at its height with Spenser and Shakespeare, it had died out in Italy, and in France to which in its turn Italy had passed the torch, it was already a waning fire. When it came to England it came in a special form shaped by political and social conditions, and by the accidents of temperament and inclination in the men who began the movement. But the essence of the inspiration remained the same as it had been on the Continent, and the twin threads of its two main impulses, the impulse from the study of the classics, and the impulse given to men's minds by the voyages of discovery, runs through all the texture of our Renaissance literature.

Literature as it developed in the reign of Elizabeth ran counter to the hopes and desires of the men who began the movement; the common usage which extends the term Elizabethan backwards outside the limits of the reign itself, has nothing but its carelessness to recommend it. The men of the early renaissance in the reigns of Edward VI. and Mary, belonged to a graver school than their successors. They were no splendid courtiers, nor daring and hardy adventurers, still less swashbucklers, exquisites, or literary dandies. Their names--Sir John Cheke, Roger Ascham, Nicholas Udall, Thomas Wilson, Walter Haddon, belong rather to
the universities and to the coteries of learning, than to the court. To
the nobility, from whose essays and _belles lettres_ Elizabethan poetry
was to develop, they stood in the relation of tutors rather than of
companions, suspecting the extravagances of their pupils rather than
sympathising with their ideals. They were a band of serious and
dignified scholars, men preoccupied with morality and good-citizenship,
and holding those as worth more than the lighter interests of learning
and style. It is perhaps characteristic of the English temper that the
revival of the classical tongues, which in Italy made for paganism, and
the pursuit of pleasure in life and art, in England brought with it in
the first place a new seriousness and gravity of life, and in religion
the Reformation. But in a way the scholars fought against tendencies in
their age, which were both too fast and too strong for them. At a time
when young men were writing poetry modelled on the delicate and
extravagant verse of Italy, were reading Italian novels, and affecting
Italian fashions in speech and dress, they were fighting for sound
education, for good classical scholarship, for the purity of native
English, and behind all these for the native strength and worth of the
English character, which they felt to be endangered by orgies of
reckless assimilation from abroad. The revival of the classics at Oxford
and Cambridge could not produce an Erasmus or a Scaliger; we have no
fine critical scholarship of this age to put beside that of Holland or
France. Sir John Cheke and his followers felt they had a public and
national duty to perform, and their knowledge of the classics only
served them for examples of high living and morality, on which
education, in its sense of the formation of character, could be based.
The literary influence of the revival of letters in England, apart from its moral influence, took two contradictory and opposing forms. In the curricula of schools, logic, which in the Middle Ages had been the groundwork of thought and letters, gave place to rhetoric. The reading of the ancients awakened new delight in the melody and beauty of language: men became intoxicated with words. The practice of rhetoric was universal and it quickly coloured all literature. It was the habit of the rhetoricians to choose some subject for declamation and round it to encourage their pupils to set embellishments and decorations, which commonly proceeded rather from a delight in language for language's sake, than from any effect in enforcing an argument. Their models for these exercises can be traced in their influence on later writers. One of the most popular of them, Erasmus's "Discourse Persuading a Young Man to Marriage," which was translated in an English text-book of rhetoric, reminds one of the first part of Shakespeare's sonnets. The literary affectation called euphuism was directly based on the precepts of the handbooks on rhetoric; its author, John Lyly, only elaborated and made more precise tricks of phrase and writing, which had been used as exercises in the schools of his youth. The prose of his school, with its fantastic delight in exuberance of figure and sound, owed its inspiration, in its form ultimately to Cicero, and in the decorations with which it was embellished, to the elder Pliny and later writers of his kind. The long declamatory speeches and the sententiousness of the early drama were directly modelled on Seneca, through whom was faintly reflected the tragedy of Greece, unknown directly or almost unknown to English readers. Latinism, like every new craze, became a passion, and ran through the less intelligent kinds of writing in a wild excess. Not much of the literature of this time remains in common knowledge, and for
examples of these affectations one must turn over the black letter pages of forgotten books. There high-sounding and familiar words are handled and bandied about with delight, and you can see in volume after volume these minor and forgotten authors gloating over the new found treasure which placed them in their time in the van of literary success. That they are obsolete now, and indeed were obsolete before they were dead, is a warning to authors who intend similar extravagances. Strangeness and exoticism are not lasting wares. By the time of "Love's Labour Lost" they had become nothing more than matter for laughter, and it is only through their reflection and distortion in Shakespeare's pages that we know them now.

Had not a restraining influence, anxiously and even acrimoniously urged, broken in on their endeavours the English language to-day might have been almost as completely latinized as Spanish or Italian. That the essential Saxon purity of our tongue has been preserved is to the credit not of sensible unlettered people eschewing new fashions they could not comprehend, but to the scholars themselves. The chief service that Cheke and Ascham and their fellows rendered to English literature was their crusade against the exaggerated latinity that they had themselves helped to make possible, the crusade against what they called "inkhorn terms."

"I am of this opinion," said Cheke in a prefatory letter to a book translated by a friend of his, "that our own tongue should be written clean and pure, unmixed and unmangled with the borrowing of other tongues, wherein if we take not heed by time, ever borrowing and never paying, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt." Writings in the Saxon vernacular like the sermons of Latimer, who was careful to use
nothing not familiar to the common people, did much to help the scholars to save our prose from the extravagances which they dreaded. Their attack was directed no less against the revival of really obsolete words. It is a paradox worth noting for its strangeness that the first revival of mediaevalism in modern English literature was in the Renaissance itself. Talking in studious archaism seems to have been a fashionable practice in society and court circles. "The fine courtier," says Thomas Wilson in his _Art of Rhetoric_, "will talk nothing but Chaucer." The scholars of the English Renaissance fought not only against the ignorant adoption of their importations, but against the renewal of forgotten habits of speech.

Their efforts failed, and their ideals had to wait for their acceptance till the age of Dryden, when Shakespeare and Spenser and Milton, all of them authors who consistently violated the standards of Cheke, had done their work. The fine courtier who would talk nothing but Chaucer was in Elizabeth's reign the saving of English verse. The beauty and richness of Spenser is based directly on words he got from _Troilus and Cressida_ and the _Canterbury Tales_. Some of the most sonorous and beautiful lines in Shakespeare break every canon laid down by the humanists.

"Th' extravagant and erring spirit hies
To his confine"

is a line, three of the chief words of which are Latin importations that come unfamiliarly, bearing their original interpretation with them.
Milton is packed with similar things: he will talk of a crowded meeting as "frequent" and use constructions which are unintelligible to anyone who does not possess a knowledge--and a good knowledge--of Latin syntax. Yet the effect is a good poetic effect. In attacking latinisms in the language borrowed from older poets Cheke and his companions were attacking the two chief sources of Elizabethan poetic vocabulary. All the sonorousness, beauty and dignity of the poetry and the drama which followed them would have been lost had they succeeded in their object, and their verse would have been constrained into the warped and ugly forms of Sternhold and Hopkins, and those with them who composed the first and worst metrical version of the Psalms. When their idea reappeared for its fulfilment phantasy and imagery had temporarily worn themselves out, and the richer language made simplicity possible and adequate for poetry.

There are other directions in which the classical revival influenced writing that need not detain us here. The attempt to transplant classical metres into English verse which was the concern of a little group of authors who called themselves the Areopagus came to no more success than a similar and contemporary attempt did in France. An earlier and more lasting result of the influence of the classics on new ways of thinking is the _Utopia_ of Sir Thomas More, based on Plato's _Republic_, and followed by similar attempts on the part of other authors, of which the most notable are Harrington's _Oceana_ and Bacon's _New Atlantis_. In one way or another the rediscovery of Plato proved the most valuable part of the Renaissance's gift from Greece. The doctrines of the Symposium coloured in Italy the writings of Castiglione
and Mirandula. In England they gave us Spenser’s "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," and they affected, each in his own way, Sir Philip Sidney, and others of the circle of court writers of his time. More’s book was written in Latin, though there is an English translation almost contemporary. He combines in himself the two strains that we found working in the Renaissance, for besides its origin in Plato, _Utopia_ owes not a little to the influence of the voyages of discovery. In 1507 there was published a little book called an _Introduction to Cosmography_, which gave an account of the four voyages of Amerigo. In the story of the fourth voyage it is narrated that twenty-four men were left in a fort near Cape Bahia. More used this detail as a starting-point, and one of the men whom Amerigo left tells the story of this "Nowhere," a republic partly resembling England but most of all the ideal world of Plato. Partly resembling England, because no man can escape from the influences of his own time, whatever road he takes, whether the road of imagination or any other. His imagination can only build out of the materials afforded him by his own experience: he can alter, he can rearrange, but he cannot in the strictest sense of the word create, and every city of dreams is only the scheme of things as they are remoulded nearer to the desire of a man's heart. In a way More has less invention than some of his subtler followers, but his book is interesting because it is the first example of a kind of writing which has been attractive to many men since his time, and particularly to writers of our own day.

There remains one circumstance in the revival of the classics which had a marked and continuous influence on the literary age that followed. To
get the classics English scholars had as we have seen to go to Italy.
Cheke went there and so did Wilson, and the path of travel across France
and through Lombardy to Florence and Rome was worn hard by the feet of
their followers for over a hundred years after. On the heels of the men
of learning went the men of fashion, eager to learn and copy the new
manners of a society whose moral teacher was Machiavelli, and whose
patterns of splendour were the courts of Florence and Ferrara, and to
learn the trick of verse that in the hands of Petrarch and his followers
had fashioned the sonnet and other new lyric forms. This could not be
without its influence on the manners of the nation, and the scholars who
had been the first to show the way were the first to deplore the
pell-mell assimilation of Italian manners and vices, which was the
unintended result of the inroad on insularity which had already begun.
They saw the danger ahead, and they laboured to meet it as it came.
Ascham in his _Schoolmaster_ railed against the translation of Italian
books, and the corrupt manners of living and false ideas which they
seemed to him to breed. The Italianate Englishman became the chief part
of the stock-in-trade of the satirists and moralists of the day. Stubbs,
a Puritan chronicler, whose book _The Anatomy of Abuses_ is a valuable
aid to the study of Tudor social history, and Harrison, whose
description of England prefaces Holinshed's Chronicles, both deal in
detail with the Italian menace, and condemn in good set terms the
costliness in dress and the looseness in morals which they laid to its
charge. Indeed, the effect on England was profound, and it lasted for
more than two generations. The romantic traveller, Coryat, writing well
within the seventeenth century in praise of the luxuries of Italy (among
which he numbers forks for table use), is as enthusiastic as the authors
who began the imitation of Italian metres in Tottel's _Miscellany_, and
Donne and Hall in their satires written under James wield the rod of censure as sternly as had Ascham a good half century before. No doubt there was something in the danger they dreaded, but the evil was not unmixed with good, for insularity will always be an enemy of good literature. The Elizabethans learned much more than their plots from Italian models, and the worst effects dreaded by the patriots never reached our shores. Italian vice stopped short of real life; poisoning and hired ruffianism flourished only on the stage.

(3)

The influence of the spirit of discovery and adventure, though it is less quickly marked, more pervasive, and less easy to define, is perhaps more universal than that of the classics or of the Italian fashions which came in their train. It runs right through the literature of Elizabeth's age and after it, affecting, each in their special way, all the dramatists, authors who were also adventurers like Raleigh, scholars like Milton, and philosophers like Hobbes and Locke. It reappears in the Romantic revival with Coleridge, whose "Ancient Mariner" owes much to reminiscences of his favourite reading--_Purchas, his Pilgrimes_, and other old books of voyages. The matter of this too-little noticed strain in English literature would suffice to fill a whole book; only a few of the main lines of its influence can be noted here.

For the English Renaissance--for Elizabeth's England, action and imagination went hand in hand; the dramatists and poets held up the
mirror to the voyagers. In a sense, the cult of the sea is the oldest
note in English literature. There is not a poem in Anglo-Saxon but
breathes the saltiness and the bitterness of the sea-air. To the old
English the sea was something inexpressibly melancholy and desolate,
mist-shrouded, and lonely, terrible in its grey and shivering spaces;
and their tone about it is always elegiac and plaintive, as a place of
dreary spiritless wandering and unmarked graves. When the English
settled they lost the sense of the sea; they became a little parochial
people, tilling fields and tending cattle, wool-gathering and
wool-bartering, their shipping confined to cross-Channel merchandise,
and coastwise sailing from port to port. Chaucer's shipman, almost the
sole representative of the sea in mediaeval English literature, plied a
costwise trade. But with the Cabots and their followers, Frobisher and
Gilbert and Drake and Hawkins, all this was changed; once more the ocean
became the highway of our national progress and adventure, and by virtue
of our shipping we became competitors for the dominion of the earth. The
rising tide of national enthusiasm and exaltation that this occasioned
flooded popular literature. The voyagers themselves wrote down the
stories of their adventures; and collections of these--Hakluyt's and
Purchas's--were among the most popular books of the age. To them,
indeed, we must look for the first beginnings of our modern English
prose, and some of its noblest passages. The writers, as often as not,
were otherwise utterly unknown--ship's pursers, super-cargoes, and the
like--men without much literary craft or training, whose style is great
because of the greatness of their subject, because they had no literary
artifices to stand between them and the plain and direct telling of a
stirring tale. But the ferment worked outside the actual doings of the
voyagers themselves, and it can be traced beyond definite allusions to
them. Allusions, indeed, are surprisingly few; Drake is scarcely as much as mentioned among the greater writers of the age. None the less there is not one of them that is not deeply touched by his spirit and that of the movement which he led. New lands had been discovered, new territories opened up, wonders exposed which were perhaps only the first fruits of greater wonders to come. Spenser makes the voyagers his warrant for his excursion into fairyland. Some, he says, have condemned his fairy world as an idle fiction,

"But let that man with better sense advise;
That of the world least part to us is red;
And daily how through hardy enterprise
Many great regions are discovered,
Which to late age were never mentioned.
Who ever heard of the 'Indian Peru’?
Or who in venturous vessel measured
The Amazon, huge river, now found true?
Or fruitfullest Virginia who did ever view?

"Yet all these were, when no man did them know,
Yet have from wiser ages hidden been;
And later times things more unknown shall show."

It is in the drama that this spirit of adventure caught from the voyagers gets its full play. "Without the voyagers," says Professor Walter Raleigh,[1] "Marlowe is inconceivable." His imagination in every
one of his plays is preoccupied with the lust of adventure, and the wealth and power adventure brings. Tamburlaine, Eastern conqueror though he is, is at heart an Englishman of the school of Hawkins and Drake. Indeed the comparison must have occurred to his own age, for a historian of the day, the antiquary Stow, declares Drake to have been "as famous in Europe and America as Tamburlaine was in Asia and Africa." The high-sounding names and quests which seem to us to give the play an air of unreality and romance were to the Elizabethans real and actual; things as strange and foreign were to be heard any day amongst the motley crowd in the Bankside outside the theatre door. Tamburlaine's last speech, when he calls for a map and points the way to unrealised conquests, is the very epitome of the age of discovery.

"Lo, here my sons, are all the golden mines,
Inestimable wares and precious stones,
More worth than Asia and all the world beside;
And from the Antarctic Pole eastward behold
As much more land, which never was descried.
Wherein are rocks of pearl that shine as bright
As all the lamps that beautify the sky."

[Footnote 1: To whose terminal essay in "Hakluyt's Voyages" (Maclehose)
I am indebted for much of the matter in this section.]

It is the same in his other plays. Dr. Faustus assigns to his serviceable spirits tasks that might have been studied from the books of
"I'll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new round world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates."

When there is no actual expression of the spirit of adventure, the air
of the sea which it carried with it still blows. Shakespeare, save for
his scenes in _The Tempest_ and in _Pericles_, which seize in all its
dramatic poignancy the terror of storm and shipwreck, has nothing
dealing directly with the sea or with travel; but it comes out, none the
less, in figure and metaphor, and plays like the _Merchant of Venice_
and _Othello_ testify to his accessibility to its spirit. Milton, a
scholar whose mind was occupied by other and more ultimate matters, is
full of allusions to it. Satan's journey through Chaos in _Paradise
Lost_ is the occasion for a whole series of metaphors drawn from
seafaring. In _Samson Agonistes_ Dalila comes in,

"Like a stately ship ...
With all her bravery on and tackle trim
Sails frilled and streamers waving
Courted by all the winds that hold them play."

and Samson speaks of himself as one who,
"Like a foolish pilot have shipwrecked
My vessel trusted to me from above
Gloriously rigged."

The influence of the voyages of discovery persisted long after the first bloom of the Renaissance had flowered and withered. On the reports brought home by the voyagers were founded in part those conceptions of the condition of the "natural" man which form such a large part of the philosophic discussions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hobbes's description of the life of nature as "nasty, solitary, brutish, and short," Locke's theories of civil government, and eighteenth century speculators like Monboddo all took as the basis of their theory the observations of the men of travel. Abroad this connection of travellers and philosophers was no less intimate. Both Montesquieu and Rousseau owed much to the tales of the Iroquois, the North American Indian allies of France. Locke himself is the best example of the closeness of this alliance. He was a diligent student of the texts of the voyagers, and himself edited out of Hakluyt and Purchas the best collection of them current in his day. The purely literary influence of the age of discovery persisted down to _Robinson Crusoe_; in that book by a refinement of satire a return to travel itself (it must be remembered Defoe posed not as a novelist but as an actual traveller) is used to make play with the deductions founded on it. Crusoe's conversation with the man Friday will be found to be a satire of Locke's famous controversy with the Bishop of Worcester. With _Robinson Crusoe_ the influence of the age of discovery finally perishes. An inspiration
hardens into the mere subject matter of books of adventure. We need not follow it further.

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETHAN POETRY AND PROSE

(1)

To understand Elizabethan literature it is necessary to remember that the social status it enjoyed was far different from that of literature in our own day. The splendours of the Medicis in Italy had set up an ideal of courtliness, in which letters formed an integral and indispensable part. For the Renaissance, the man of letters was only one aspect of the gentleman, and the true gentleman, as books so early and late respectively as Castiglione's _Courtier_ and Peacham's _Complete Gentleman_ show, numbered poetry as a necessary part of his accomplishments. In England special circumstances intensified this tendency of the time. The queen was unmarried: she was the first single woman to wear the English crown, and her vanity made her value the devotion of the men about her as something more intimate than mere loyalty or patriotism. She loved personal homage, particularly the homage of half-amatory eulogy in prose and verse. It followed that the ambition of every courtier was to be an author, and of every author to be a courtier; in fact, outside the drama, which was almost the only popular writing at the time, every author was in a greater or less
degree attached to the court. If they were not enjoying its favours they were pleading for them, mingling high and fantastic compliment with bitter reproaches and a tale of misery. And consequently both the poetry and the prose of the time are restricted in their scope and temper to the artificial and romantic, to high-flown eloquence, to the celebration of love and devotion, or to the inculcation of those courtly virtues and accomplishments which composed the perfect pattern of a gentleman. Not that there was not both poetry and prose written outside this charmed circle. The pamphleteers and chroniclers, Dekker and Nash, Holinshed and Harrison and Stow, were setting down their histories and descriptions, and penning those detailed and realistic indictments of the follies and extravagances of fashion, which together with the comedies have enabled us to picture accurately the England and especially the London of Elizabeth's reign. There was fine poetry written by Marlowe and Chapman as well as by Sidney and Spenser, but the court was still the main centre of literary endeavour, and the main incitement to literary fame and success.

But whether an author was a courtier or a Londoner living by his wits, writing was never the main business of his life: all the writers of the time were in one way or another men of action and affairs. As late as Milton it is probably true to say that writing was in the case even of the greatest an avocation, something indulged in at leisure outside a man's main business. All the Elizabethan authors had crowded and various careers. Of Sir Philip Sidney his earliest biographer says, "The truth is his end was not writing, even while he wrote, but both his wit and understanding bent upon his heart to make himself and others not in
words or opinion but in life and action good and great." Ben Jonson was in turn a soldier, a poet, a bricklayer, an actor, and ultimately the first poet laureate. Lodge, after leaving Oxford, passed through the various professions of soldiering, medicine, playwriting, and fiction, and he wrote his novel _Rosalind_, on which Shakespeare based _As You Like It_ while he was sailing on a piratical venture on the Spanish Main. This connection between life and action affected as we have seen the tone and quality of Elizabethan writing. "All the distinguished writers of the period," says Thoreau, "possess a greater vigour and naturalness than the more modern ... you have constantly the warrant of life and experience in what you read. The little that is said is eked out by implication of the much that was done." In another passage the same writer explains the strength and fineness of the writings of Sir Walter Raleigh by this very test of action, "The word which is best said came nearest to not being spoken at all, for it is cousin to a deed which the speaker could have better done. Nay almost it must have taken the place of a deed by some urgent necessity, even by some misfortune, so that the truest writer will be some captive knight after all." This bond between literature and action explains more than the writings of the voyagers or the pamphlets of men who lived in London by what they could make of their fellows. Literature has always a two-fold relation to life as it is lived. It is both a mirror and an escape: in our own day the stirring romances of Stevenson, the full-blooded and vigorous life which beats through the pages of Mr. Kipling, the conscious brutalism of such writers as Mr. Conrad and Mr. Hewlett, the plays of J.M. Synge, occupied with the vigorous and coarse-grained life of tinkers and peasants, are all in their separate ways a reaction against an age in which the overwhelming majority of men and women have
sedentary pursuits. Just in the same way the Elizabethan who passed his
commonly short and crowded life in an atmosphere of throat-cutting and
powder and shot, and in a time when affairs of state were more momentous
for the future of the nation than they have ever been since, needed his
escape from the things which pressed in upon him every day. So grew the
vogue and popularity of pastoral poetry and of pastoral romance.

(2)

It is with two courtiers that modern English poetry begins. The lives of
Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey both ended early and unhappily,
and it was not until ten years after the death of the second of them
that their poems appeared in print. The book that contained them,
Tottel's _Miscellany of Songs and Sonnets_, is one of the landmarks of
English literature. It begins lyrical love poetry in our language. It
begins, too, the imitation and adaptation of foreign and chiefly Italian
metrical forms, many of which have since become characteristic forms of
English verse: so characteristic, that we scarcely think of them as
other than native in origin. To Wyatt belongs the honour of introducing
the sonnet, and to Surrey the more momentous credit of writing, for the
first time in English, blank verse. Wyatt fills the most important place
in the _Miscellany_, and his work, experimental in tone and quality,
formed the example which Surrey and minor writers in the same volume and
all the later poets of the age copied. He tries his hand at
everything--songs, madrigals, elegies, complaints, and sonnets--and he
takes his models from both ancient Rome and modern Italy. Indeed there
is scarcely anything in the volume for which with some trouble and
research one might not find an original in Petrarch, or in the poets of Italy who followed him. But imitation, universal though it is in his work, does not altogether crowd out originality of feeling and poetic temper. At times, he sounds a personal note, his joy on leaving Spain for England, his feelings in the Tower, his life at the Court amongst his books, and as a country gentleman enjoying hunting and other outdoor sports.

"This maketh me at home to hunt and hawk,
And in foul weather at my book to sit,
In frost and snow, then with my bow to stalk,
No man does mark whereas I ride or go:
In lusty leas at liberty I walk."

It is easy to see that poetry as a melodious and enriched expression of a man's own feelings is in its infancy here. The new poets had to find their own language, to enrich with borrowings from other tongues the stock of words suitable for poetry which the dropping of inflection had left to English. Wyatt was at the beginning of the process, and apart from a gracious and courtly temper, his work has, it must be confessed, hardly more than an antiquarian interest. Surrey, it is possible to say on reading his work, went one step further. He allows himself oftener the luxury of a reference to personal feelings, and his poetry contains from place to place a fairly full record of the vicissitudes of his life. A prisoner at Windsor, he recalls his childhood there
"The large green courts where we were wont to hove,
The palme-play, where, despoiled for the game.
With dazzled eyes oft we by gleams of love
Have missed the ball, and got sight of our dame."

Like Wyatt's, his verses are poor stuff, but a sympathetic ear can catch in them something of the accent that distinguishes the verse of Sidney and Spenser. He is greater than Wyatt, not so much for greater skill as for more boldness in experiment. Wyatt in his sonnets had used the Petrarchan or Italian form, the form used later in England by Milton and in the nineteenth century by Rossetti. He built up each poem, that is, in two parts, the octave, a two-rhymed section of eight lines at the beginning, followed by the sestet, a six line close with three rhymes. The form fits itself very well to the double mood which commonly inspires a poet using the sonnet form; the second section as it were both echoing and answering the first, following doubt with hope, or sadness with resignation, or resolving a problem set itself by the heart. Surrey tried another manner, the manner which by its use in Shakespeare's sonnets has come to be regarded as the English form of this kind of lyric. His sonnets are virtually three-stanza poems with a couplet for close, and he allows himself as many rhymes as he chooses. The structure is obviously easier, and it gives a better chance to an inferior workman, but in the hands of a master its harmonies are no less delicate, and its capacity to represent changing modes of thought no less complete than those of the true form of Petrarch. Blank verse, which was Surrey's other gift to English poetry, was in a way a compromise between the two sources from which the English Renaissance
drew its inspiration. Latin and Greek verse is quantitative and rhymeless; Italian verse, built up on the metres of the troubadours and the degeneration of Latin which gave the world the Romance languages, used many elaborate forms of rhyme. Blank verse took from Latin its rhymelessness, but it retained accent instead of quantity as the basis of its line. The line Surrey used is the five-foot or ten-syllable line of what is called "heroic verse"--the line used by Chaucer in his Prologue and most of his tales. Like Milton he deplored rhyme as the invention of a barbarous age, and no doubt he would have rejoiced to go further and banish accent as well as rhymed endings. That, however, was not to be, though in the best blank verse of later time accent and quantity both have their share in the effect. The instrument he forged passed into the hands of the dramatists: Marlowe perfected its rhythm, Shakespeare broke its monotony and varied its cadences by altering the spacing of the accents, and occasionally by adding an extra unaccented syllable. It came back from the drama to poetry with Milton. His blindness and the necessity under which it laid him of keeping in his head long stretches of verse at one time, because he could not look back to see what he had written, probably helped his naturally quick and delicate sense of cadence to vary the pauses, so that a variety of accent and interval might replace the valuable aid to memory which he put aside in putting aside rhyme. Perhaps it is to two accidents, the accident by which blank verse as the medium of the actor had to be retained easily in the memory, and the accident of Milton's blindness, that must be laid the credit of more than a little of the richness of rhythm of this, the chief and greatest instrument of English verse.
The imitation of Italian and French forms which Wyatt and Surrey began, was continued by a host of younger amateurs of poetry. Laborious research has indeed found a Continental original for almost every great poem of the time, and for very many forgotten ones as well. It is easy for the student engaged in this kind of literary exploration to exaggerate the importance of what he finds, and of late years criticism, written mainly by these explorers, has tended to assume that since it can be found that Sidney, and Daniel, and Watson, and all the other writers of mythological poetry and sonnet sequences took their ideas and their phrases from foreign poetry, their work is therefore to be classed merely as imitative literary exercise, that it is frigid, that it contains or conveys no real feeling, and that except in the secondary and derived sense, it is not really lyrical at all. Petrarch, they will tell you, may have felt deeply and sincerely about Laura, but when Sidney uses Petrarch's imagery and even translates his words in order to express his feelings for Stella, he is only a plagiarist and not a lover, and the passion for Lady Rich which is supposed to have inspired his sonnets, nothing more than a not too seriously intended trick to add the excitement of a transcript of real emotion to what was really an academic exercise. If that were indeed so, then Elizabethan poetry is a very much lesser and meaner thing than later ages have thought it. But is it so? Let us look into the matter a little more closely. The unit of all ordinary kinds of writing is the word, and one is not commonly quarrelled with for using words that have belonged to other people. But the unit of the lyric, like the unit of spoken conversation, is not the word but the phrase. Now in daily human intercourse the use, which is universal and habitual, of set forms and phrases of talk is not commonly supposed to detract from, or destroy sincerity. In the crises indeed of
emotion it must be most people’s experience that the natural speech that rises unbidden and easiest to the lips is something quite familiar and commonplace, some form which the accumulated experience of many generations of separate people has found best for such circumstances or such an occasion. The lyric is just in the position of conversation, at such a heightened and emotional moment. It is the speech of deep feeling, that must be articulate or choke, and it falls naturally and inevitably into some form which accumulated passionate moments have created and fixed. The course of emotional experiences differs very little from age to age, and from individual to individual, and so the same phrases may be used quite sincerely and naturally as the direct expression of feeling at its highest point by men apart in country, circumstances, or time. This is not to say that there is no such thing as originality; a poet is a poet first and most of all because he discovers truths that have been known for ages, as things that are fresh and new and vital for himself. He must speak of them in language that has been used by other men just because they are known truths, but he will use that language in a new way, and with a new significance, and it is just in proportion to the freshness, and the air of personal conviction and sincerity which he imparts to it, that he is great.

The point at issue bears very directly on the work of Sir Philip Sidney. In the course of the history of English letters certain authors disengage themselves who have more than a merely literary position: they are symbolic of the whole age in which they live, its life and action, its thoughts and ideals, as well as its mere modes of writing. There are not many of them and they could be easily numbered; Addison, perhaps,
certainly Dr. Johnson, certainly Byron, and in the later age probably Tennyson. But the greatest of them all is Sir Philip Sidney: his symbolical relation to the time in which he lived was realized by his contemporaries, and it has been a commonplace of history and criticism ever since. Elizabeth called him one of the jewels of her crown, and at the age of twenty-three, so fast did genius ripen in that summer time of the Renaissance, William the Silent could speak of him as "one of the ripest statesmen of the age." He travelled widely in Europe, knew many languages, and dreamed of adventure in America and on the high seas. In a court of brilliant figures, his was the most dazzling, and his death at Zutphen only served to intensify the halo of romance which had gathered round his name. His literary exercises were various: in prose he wrote the _Arcadia_ and the _Apology for Poetry_, the one the beginning of a new kind of imaginative writing, and the other the first of the series of those rare and precious commentaries on their own art which some of our English poets have left us. To the _Arcadia_ we shall have to return later in this chapter. It is his other great work, the sequence of sonnets entitled _Astrophel and Stella_, which concerns us here. They celebrate the history of his love for Penelope Devereux, sister of the Earl of Essex, a love brought to disaster by the intervention of Queen Elizabeth with whom he had quarrelled. As poetry they mark an epoch. They are the first direct expression of an intimate and personal experience in English literature, struck off in the white heat of passion, and though they are coloured at times with that over-fantastic imagery which is at once a characteristic fault and excellence of the writing of the time, they never lose the one merit above all others of lyric poetry, the merit of sincerity. The note is struck with certainty and power in the first sonnet of the series:--
"Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,--
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,--
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,--
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain;
Oft turning others' leaves to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful flower upon my sunburned brain.
But words came halting forth ...
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
'Fool,' said my muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'"

And though he turned others' leaves it was quite literally looking in
his heart that he wrote. He analyses the sequence of his feelings with a
vividness and minuteness which assure us of their truth. All that he
tells is the fruit of experience, dearly bought:

"Desire! desire! I have too dearly bought
With price of mangled mind thy worthless ware.
Too long, too long! asleep thou hast me brought,
Who shouldst my mind to higher things prepare."

and earlier in the sequence--
"I now have learned love right and learned even so
As those that being poisoned poison know."

In the last two sonnets, with crowning truth and pathos he renounces earthly love which reaches but to dust, and which because it fades brings but fading pleasure:

"Then farewell, world! Thy uttermost I see.
Eternal love, maintain thy life in me."

The sonnets were published after Sidney's death, and it is certain that like Shakespeare's they were never intended for publication at all. The point is important because it helps to vindicate Sidney's sincerity, but were any vindication needed another more certain might be found. The _Arcadia_ is strewn with love songs and sonnets, the exercises solely of the literary imagination. Let any one who wishes to gauge the sincerity of the impulse of the Stella sequence compare any of the poems in it with those in the romance.

With Sir Philip Sidney literature was an avocation, constantly indulged in, but outside the main business of his life; with Edmund Spenser public life and affairs were subservient to an overmastering poetic impulse. He did his best to carve out a career for himself like other young men of his time, followed the fortunes of the Earl of Leicester, sought desperately and unavailingly the favour of the Queen, and ultimately accepted a place in her service in Ireland, which meant
banishment as virtually as a place in India would to-day. Henceforward his visits to London and the Court were few; sometimes a lover of travel would visit him in his house in Ireland as Raleigh did, but for the most he was left alone. It was in this atmosphere of loneliness and separation, hostile tribes pinning him in on every side, murder lurking in the woods and marshes round him, that he composed his greatest work. In it at last he died, on the heels of a sudden rising in which his house was burnt and his lands over-run by the wild Irish whom the tyranny of the English planters had driven to vengeance. Spenser was not without interest in his public duties; his _View of the State of Ireland_ shows that. But it shows, too, that he brought to them singularly little sympathy or imagination. Throughout his tone is that of the worst kind of English officialdom; rigid subjection and in the last resort massacre are the remedies he would apply to Irish discontent. He would be a fine text—which might be enforced by modern examples—for a discourse on the evil effects of immersion in the government of a subject race upon men of letters. No man of action can be so consistently and cynically an advocate of brutalism as your man of letters, Spenser, of course, had his excuses; the problem of Ireland was new and it was something remote and difficult; in all but the mere distance for travel, Dublin was as far from London as Bombay is to-day. But to him and his like we must lay down partly the fact that to-day we have still an Irish problem.

But though fate and the necessity of a livelihood drove him to Ireland and the life of a colonist, poetry was his main business. He had been the centre of a brilliant set at Cambridge, one of those coteries whose
fame, if they are brilliant and vivacious enough and have enough
self-confidence, penetrates to the outer world before they leave the
University. The thing happens in our own day, as the case of Oscar Wilde
is witness; it happened in the case of Spenser; and when he and his
friends Gabriel Harvey and Edward Kirke came "down" it was to immediate
fame amongst amateurs of the arts. They corresponded with each other
about literary matters, and Harvey published his part of the
correspondence; they played like Du Bellay in France, with the idea of
writing English verse in the quantitative measures of classical poetry;
Spenser had a love affair in Yorkshire and wrote poetry about it,
letting just enough be known to stimulate the imagination of the public.
They tried their hands at everything, imitated everything, and in all
were brilliant, sparkling, and decorative; they got a kind of entrance
to the circle of the Court. Then Spenser published his _Shepherd's
Calendar_, a series of pastoral eclogues for every month of the year,
after a manner taken from French and Italian pastoral writers, but
coming ultimately from Vergil, and Edward Kirke furnished it with an
elaborate prose commentary. Spenser took the same liberties with the
pastoral form as did Vergil himself; that is to say he used it as a
vehicle for satire and allegory, made it carry political and social
allusions, and planted in it references to his friends. By its
publication Spenser became the first poet of the day. It was followed by
some of his finest and most beautiful things--by the Platonic hymns, by
the _Amoretti_, a series of sonnets inspired by his love for his wife;
by the _Epithalamium_, on the occasion of his marriage to her; by
_Mother Hubbard's Tale_, a satire written when despair at the coldness
of the Queen and the enmity of Burleigh was beginning to take hold on
the poet and endowed with a plainness and vigour foreign to most of his
The poets of the Renaissance were not afraid of big things; every one of them had in his mind as the goal of poetic endeavour the idea of the heroic poem, aimed at doing for his own country what Vergil had intended to do for Rome in the _Aeneid_, to celebrate it--its origin, its prowess, its greatness, and the causes of it, in epic verse. Milton, three-quarters of a century later, turned over in his mind the plan of an English epic on the wars of Arthur, and when he left it was only to forsake the singing of English origins for the more ultimate theme of the origins of mankind. Spenser designed to celebrate the character, the qualities and the training of the English gentleman. And because poetry, unlike philosophy, cannot deal with abstractions but must be vivid and concrete, he was forced to embody his virtues and foes to virtue and to use the way of allegory. His outward plan, with its knights and dragons and desperate adventures, he procured from Ariosto. As for the use of allegory, it was one of the discoveries of the Middle Ages which the Renaissance condescended to retain. Spenser elaborated it beyond the wildest dreams of those students of Holy Writ who had first conceived it. His stories were to be interesting in themselves as tales of adventure, but within them they were to conceal an intricate treatment of the conflict of truth and falsehood in morals and religion. A character might typify at once Protestantism and England and Elizabeth and chastity and half the cardinal virtues, and it would have all the while the objective interest attaching to it as part of a story of adventure. All this must have made the poem difficult enough. Spenser's manner of writing it made it worse still. One is familiar with the type
of novel which only explains itself when the last chapter is
reached--Stevenson's _Wrecker_ is an example. _The Fairy Queen_ was
designed on somewhat the same plan. The last section was to relate and
explain the unrelated and unexplained books which made up the poem, and
at the court to which the separate knights of the separate books--the
Red Cross Knight and the rest--were to bring the fruit of their
adventures, everything was to be made clear. Spenser did not live to
finish his work; _The Fairy Queen_, like the _Aeneid_, is an uncompleted
poem, and it is only from a prefatory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh
issued with the second published section that we know what the poem was
intended to be. Had Spenser not published this explanation, it is
impossible that anybody, even the acutest minded German professor, could
have guessed.

The poem, as we have seen, was composed in Ireland, in the solitude of a
colonists' plantation, and the author was shut off from his fellows
while he wrote. The influence of his surroundings is visible in the
writing. The elaboration of the theme would have been impossible or at
least very unlikely if its author had not been thrown in on himself
during its composition. Its intricacy and involution is the product of
an over-concentration born of empty surroundings. It lacks vigour and
rapidity; it winds itself into itself. The influence of Ireland, too, is
visible in its landscapes, in its description of bogs and desolation, of
dark forests in which lurk savages ready to spring out on those who are
rash enough to wander within their confines. All the scenery in it which
is not imaginary is Irish and not English scenery.
Its reception in England and at the Court was enthusiastic. Men and women read it eagerly and longed for the next section as our grandfathers longed for the next section of _Pickwick_. They really liked it, really loved the intricacy and luxuriousness of it, the heavy exotic language, the thickly painted descriptions, the languorous melody of the verse. Mainly, perhaps, that was so because they were all either in wish or in deed poets themselves. Spenser has always been "the poets' poet." Milton loved him; so did Dryden, who said that Milton confessed to him that Spenser was "his original," a statement which has been pronounced incredible, but is, in truth, perfectly comprehensible, and most likely true. Pope admired him; Keats learned from him the best part of his music. You can trace echoes of him in Mr. Yeats. What is it that gives him this hold on his peers? Well, in the first place his defects do not detract from his purely poetic qualities. The story is impossibly told, but that will only worry those who are looking for a story. The allegory is hopelessly difficult; but as Hazlitt said "the allegory will not bite you"; you can let it alone. The crudeness and bigotry of Spenser's dealings with Catholicism, which are ridiculous when he pictures the monster Error vomiting books and pamphlets, and disgusting when he draws Mary Queen of Scots, do not hinder the pleasure of those who read him for his language and his art. He is great for other reasons than these. First because of the extraordinary smoothness and melody of his verse and the richness of his language--a golden diction that he drew from every source--new words, old words, obsolete words--such a mixture that the purist Ben Jonson remarked acidly that he wrote no language at all. Secondly because of the profusion of his imagery, and the extraordinarily keen sense for beauty and sweetness
that went to its making. In an age of golden language and gallant imagery his was the most golden and the most gallant. And the language of poetry in England is richer and more varied than that in any other country in Europe to-day, because of what he did.

(3)

Elizabethan prose brings us face to face with a difficulty which has to be met by every student of literature. Does the word "literature" cover every kind of writing? Ought we to include in it writing that aims merely at instruction or is merely journey-work, as well as writing that has an artistic intention, or writing that, whether its author knew it or no, is artistic in its result? Of course such a question causes us no sort of difficulty when it concerns itself only with what is being published to-day. We know very well that some things are literature and some merely journalism; that of novels, for instance, some deliberately intend to be works of art and others only to meet a passing desire for amusement or mental occupation. We know that most books serve or attempt to serve only a useful and not a literary purpose. But in reading the books of three centuries ago, unconsciously one's point of view shifts. Antiquity gilds journey-work; remoteness and quaintness of phrasing lend a kind of distinction to what are simply pamphlets or text-books that have been preserved by accident from the ephemeralness which was the common lot of hundreds of their fellows. One comes to regard as literature things that had no kind of literary value for their first audiences; to apply the same seriousness of judgment and the same tests to the pamphlets of Nash and Dekker as to the prose of Sidney and
Bacon. One loses, in fact, that power to distinguish the important from
the trivial which is one of the functions of a sound literary taste.

Now, a study of the minor writing of the past is, of course, well worth
a reader's pains. Pamphlets, chronicle histories, text-books and the
like have an historical importance; they give us glimpses of the manners
and habits and modes of thought of the day. They tell us more about the
outward show of life than do the greater books. If you are interested in
social history, they are the very thing. But the student of literature
ought to beware of them, nor ought he to touch them till he is familiar
with the big and lasting things. A man does not possess English
literature if he knows what Dekker tells of the seven deadly sins of
London and does not know the _Fairy Queen_. Though the wide and curious
interest of the Romantic critics of the nineteenth century found and
illuminated the byways of Elizabethan writing, the safest method of
approach is the method of their predecessors--to keep hold on common
sense, to look at literature, not historically as through the wrong end
of a telescope, but closely and without a sense of intervening time, to
know the best--the "classic"--and study it before the minor things.

In Elizabeth's reign, prose became for the first time, with cheapened
printing, the common vehicle of amusement and information, and the books
that remain to us cover many departments of writing. There are the
historians who set down for us for the first time what they knew of the
erlier history of England. There are the writers, like Harrison and
Stubbs, who described the England of their own day, and there are many
authors, mainly anonymous, who wrote down the accounts of the voyages of
the discoverers in the Western Seas. There are the novelists who
translated stories mainly from Italian sources. But of authors as conscious of a literary intention as the poets were, there are only two, Sidney and Lyly, and of authors who, though their first aim was hardly an artistic one, achieved an artistic result, only Hooker and the translators of the Bible. The Authorized Version of the Bible belongs strictly not to the reign of Elizabeth but to that of James, and we shall have to look at it when we come to discuss the seventeenth century. Hooker, in his book on Ecclesiastical Polity (an endeavour to set forth the grounds of orthodox Anglicanism) employed a generous, flowing, melodious style which has influenced many writers since and is familiar to us to-day in the copy of it used by Ruskin in his earlier works. Lyly and Sidney are worth looking at more closely.

The age was intoxicated with language. It went mad of a mere delight in words. Its writers were using a new tongue, for English was enriched beyond all recognition with borrowings from the ancient authors; and like all artists who become possessed of a new medium, they used it to excess. The early Elizabethans' use of the new prose was very like the use that educated Indians make of English to-day. It is not that these write it incorrectly, but only that they write too richly. And just as fuller use and knowledge teaches them spareness and economy and gives their writing simplicity and vigour, so seventeenth century practice taught Englishmen to write a more direct and undecorated style and gave us the smooth, simple, and vigorous writing of Dryden--the first really modern English prose. But the Elizabethans loved gaudier methods; they liked highly decorative modes of expression, in prose no less than in verse. The first author to give them these things was John Lyly, whose
book _Euphues_ was for the five or six years following its publication a fashionable craze that infected all society and gave its name to a peculiar and highly artificial style of writing that coloured the work of hosts of obscure and forgotten followers. Lyly wrote other things; his comedies may have taught Shakespeare the trick of _Love's Labour Lost_; he attempted a sequel of his most famous work with better success than commonly attends sequels, but for us and for his own generation he is the author of one book. Everybody read it, everybody copied it. The maxims and sentences of advice for gentlemen which it contained were quoted and admired in the Court, where the author, though he never attained the lucrative position he hoped for, did what flattery could do to make a name for himself. The name "Euphuism" became a current description of an artificial way of using words that overflowed out of writing into speech and was in the mouths, while the vogue lasted, of everybody who was anybody in the circle that fluttered round the Queen.

The style of _Euphues_ was parodied by Shakespeare and many attempts have been made to imitate it since. Most of them are inaccurate--Sir Walter Scott's wild attempt the most inaccurate of all. They fail because their authors have imagined that "Euphuism" is simply a highly artificial and "flowery" way of talking. As a matter of fact it is made up of a very exact and very definite series of parts. The writing is done on a plan which has three main characteristics as follows. First, the structure of the sentence is based on antithesis and alliteration; that is to say, it falls into equal parts similar in sound but with a different sense; for example, Euphues is described as a young gallant "of more wit than wealth, yet of more wealth than wisdom." All the
characters in the book, which is roughly in the form of a novel, speak in this way, sometimes in sentences long drawn out which are oppressively monotonous and tedious, and sometimes shortly with a certain approach to epigram. The second characteristic of the style is the reference of every stated fact to some classical authority, that is to say, the author cannot mention friendship without quoting David and Jonathan, nor can lovers in his book accuse each other of faithlessness without quoting the instance of Cressida or Aeneas. This appeal to classical authority and wealth of classical allusion is used to decorate pages which deal with matters of every-day experience. Seneca, for instance, is quoted as reporting "that too much bending breaketh the bow," a fact which might reasonably have been supposed to be known to the author himself. This particular form of writing perhaps influenced those who copied Lyly more than anything else in his book. It is a fashion of the more artificial kind of Elizabethan writing in all schools to employ a wealth of classical allusion. Even the simple narratives in _Hakluyt's Voyages_ are not free from it, and one may hardly hope to read an account of a voyage to the Indies without stumbling on a preliminary reference to the opinions of Aristotle and Plato. Lastly, _Euphues_ is characterised by an extraordinary wealth of allusion to natural history, mostly of a fabulous kind. "I have read that the bull being tied to the fig tree loseth his tail; that the whole herd of deer stand at gaze if they smell a sweet apple; that the dolphin after the sound of music is brought to the shore," and so on. His book is full of these things, and the style weakens and loses its force because of them.
Of course there is much more in his book than this outward decoration. He wrote with the avowed purpose of instructing courtiers and gentlemen how to live. _Euphues_ is full of grave reflections and weighty morals, and is indeed a collection of essays on education, on friendship, on religion and philosophy, and on the favourite occupation and curriculum of Elizabethan youth--foreign travel. The fashions and customs of his countrymen which he condemns in the course of his teaching are the same as those inveighed against by Stubbs and other contemporaries. He disliked manners and fashions copied from Italy; particularly he disliked the extravagant fashions of women. One woman only escapes his censure, and she, of course, is the Queen, whom Euphues and his companion in the book come to England to see. In the main the teaching of Euphues inculcates a humane and liberal, if not very profound creed, and the book shares with _The Fairy Queen_ the honour of the earlier Puritanism--the Puritanism that besides the New Testament had the _Republic_.

But Euphues, though he was in his time the popular idol, was not long in finding a successful rival. Seven years before his death Sir Philip Sidney, in a period of retirement from the Court wrote "_The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia_"; it was published ten years after it had been composed. The _Arcadia_ is the first English example of the prose pastoral romance, as the _Shepherd's Calendar_ is of our pastoral verse. Imitative essays in its style kept appearing for two hundred years after it, till Wordsworth and other poets who knew the country drove its unrealities out of literature. The aim of it and of the school to which it belonged abroad was to find a setting for a story which should leave
the author perfectly free to plant in it any improbability he liked, and
to do what he liked with the relations of his characters. In the shade
of beech trees, the coils of elaborated and intricate love-making wind
and unravel themselves through an endless afternoon. In that art nothing
is too far-fetched, nothing too sentimental, no sorrow too unreal. The
pastoral romance was used, too, to cover other things besides a
sentimental and decorative treatment of love. Authors wrapped up as
shepherds their political friends and enemies, and the pastoral eclogues
in verse which Spenser and others composed are full of personal and
political allusion. Sidney's story carries no politics and he depends
for its interest solely on the wealth of differing episodes and the
stories and arguments of love which it contains. The story would furnish
plot enough for twenty ordinary novels, but probably those who read it
when it was published were attracted by other things than the march of
its incidents. Certainly no one could read it for the plot now. Its
attraction is mainly one of style. It goes, you feel, one degree beyond
_Euphues_ in the direction of freedom and poetry. And just because of
this greater freedom, its characteristics are much less easy to fix than
those of _Euphues_. Perhaps its chief quality is best described as that
of exhaustiveness. Sidney will take a word and toss it to and fro in a
page till its meaning is sucked dry and more than sucked dry. On page
after page the same trick is employed, often in some new and charming
way, but with the inevitable effect of wearying the reader, who tries to
do the unwisest of all things with a book of this kind--to read on. This
trick of bandying words is, of course, common in Shakespeare. Other
marks of Sidney's style belong similarly to poetry rather than to prose.
Chief of them is what Ruskin christened the "pathetic fallacy"--the
assumption (not common in his day) which connects the appearance of
nature with the moods of the artist who looks at it, or demands such a connection. In its day the _Arcadia_ was hailed as a reformation by men nauseated by the rhythmical patterns of Lyly. A modern reader finds himself confronting it in something of the spirit that he would confront the prose romances, say, of William Morris, finding it charming as a poet's essay in prose but no more: not to be ranked with the highest.

CHAPTER III

THE DRAMA

(1)

Biologists tell us that the hybrid--the product of a variety of ancestral stocks--is more fertile than an organism with a direct and unmixed ancestry; perhaps the analogy is not too fanciful as the starting-point of a study of Elizabethan drama, which owed its strength and vitality, more than to anything else, to the variety of the discordant and contradictory elements of which it was made up. The drama was the form into which were moulded the thoughts and desires of the best spirits of the time. It was the flower of the age. To appreciate its many-sided significances and achievements it is necessary to disentangle carefully its roots, in religion, in the revival of the classics, in popular entertainments, in imports from abroad, in the air of enterprise and adventure which belonged to the time.
As in Greece, drama in England was in its beginning a religious thing. Its oldest continuous tradition was from the mediaeval Church. Early in the Middle Ages the clergy and their parishioners began the habit, at Christmas, Easter and other holy days, of playing some part of the story of Christ's life suitable to the festival of the day. These plays were liturgical, and originally, no doubt, overshadowed by a choral element. But gradually the inherent human capacity for mimicry and drama took the upper hand; from ceremonies they developed into performances; they passed from the stage in the church porch to the stage in the street. A waggon, the natural human platform for mimicry or oratory, became in England as it was in Greece, the cradle of the drama. This momentous change in the history of the miracle play, which made it in all but its occasion and its subject a secular thing, took place about the end of the twelfth century. The rise of the town guilds gave the plays a new character; the friendly rivalry of leagued craftsmen elaborated their production; and at length elaborate cycles were founded which were performed at Whitsuntide, beginning at sunrise and lasting all through the day right on to dusk. Each town had its own cycle, and of these the cycles of York, Wakefield, Chester and Coventry still remain. So too, does an eye-witness's account of a Chester performance where the plays took place yearly on three days, beginning with Whit Monday. "The manner of these plays were, every company had his pageant or part, a high scaffold with two rooms, a higher and a lower, upon four wheels. In the lower they apparelled themselves and in the higher room they played, being all open on the top that all beholders might hear and see them. They began first at the abbey gates, and when the first pageant was played, it was wheeled to the high cross before the mayor and so to
every street. So every street had a pageant playing upon it at one time, till all the pageants for the day appointed were played." The "companies" were the town guilds and the several "pageants" different scenes in Old or New Testament story. As far as was possible each company took for its pageant some Bible story fitting to its trade; in York the goldsmiths played the three Kings of the East bringing precious gifts, the fishmongers the flood, and the shipwrights the building of Noah's ark. The tone of these plays was not reverent; reverence after all implies near at hand its opposite in unbelief. But they were realistic and they contained within them the seeds of later drama in the aptitude with which they grafted into the sacred story pastoral and city manners taken straight from life. The shepherds who watched by night at Bethlehem were real English shepherds furnished with boisterous and realistic comic relief. Noah was a real shipwright.

"It shall be clinched each ilk and deal. With nails that are both noble and new Thus shall I fix it to the keel, Take here a rivet and there a screw, With there bow there now, work I well, This work, I warrant, both good and true."

Cain and Abel were English farmers just as truly as Bottom and his fellows were English craftsmen. But then Julius Caesar has a doublet and in Dutch pictures the apostles wear broad-brimmed hats. Squeamishness about historical accuracy is of a later date, and when it came we gained in correctness less than we lost in art.
The miracle plays, then, are the oldest antecedent of Elizabethan drama, but it must not be supposed they were over and done with before the great age began. The description of the Chester performances, part of which has been quoted, was written in 1594. Shakespeare must, one would think, have seen the Coventry cycle; at any rate he was familiar, as every one of the time must have been, with the performances; "Out-heroding Herod" bears witness to that. One must conceive the development of the Elizabethan age as something so rapid in its accessibility to new impressions and new manners and learning and modes of thought that for years the old and new subsisted side by side. Think of modern Japan, a welter of old faiths and crafts and ideals and inrushing Western civilization all mixed up and side by side in the strangest contrasts and you will understand what it was. The miracle plays stayed on beside Marlowe and Shakespeare till Puritanism frowned upon them. But when the end came it came quickly. The last recorded performance took place in London when King James entertained Gondomar, the Spanish ambassador. And perhaps we should regard that as a "command" performance, reviving as command performances commonly do, something dead for a generation--in this case, purely out of compliment to the faith and inclination of a distinguished guest.

Next in order of development after the miracle or mystery plays, though contemporary in their popularity, came what we called "moralities" or "moral interludes"--pieces designed to enforce a religious or ethical lesson and perhaps to get back into drama something of the edification which realism had ousted from the miracles. They dealt in allegorical
and figurative personages, expounded wise saws and moral lessons, and
squared rather with the careful self-concern of the newly established
Protestantism than with the frank and joyous jest in life which was more
characteristic of the time. _Everyman_, the oftenest revived and best
known of them, if not the best, is very typical of the class. They had
their influences, less profound than that of the miracles, on the full
drama. It is said the "Vice"—unregeneracy commonly degenerated into
comic relief—is the ancestor of the fool in Shakespeare, but more
likely both are successive creations of a dynasty of actors who
practised the unchanging and immemorial art of the clown. The general
structure of _Everyman_ and some of its fellows, heightened and made
more dramatic, gave us Marlowe's _Faustus_. There perhaps the influence
ends.

The rise of a professional class of actors brought one step nearer the
full growth of drama. Companies of strolling players formed themselves
and passed from town to town, seeking like the industrious amateurs of
the guilds, civic patronage, and performing in town-halls, market-place
booths, or inn yards, whichever served them best. The structure of the
Elizabethan inn yard (you may see some survivals still, and there are
the pictures in _Pickwick_) was very favourable for their purpose. The
galleries round it made seats like our boxes and circle for the more
privileged spectators; in the centre on the floor of the yard stood the
crowd or sat, if they had stools with them. The stage was a platform set
on this floor space with its back against one side of the yard, where
perhaps one of the inn-rooms served as a dressing room. So suitable was
this "fit-up" as actors call it, that when theatres came to be built in
London they were built on the inn-yard pattern. All the playhouses of the Bankside from the "Curtain" to the "Globe" were square or circular places with galleries rising above one another three parts round, a floor space of beaten earth open to the sky in the middle, and jutting out on to it a platform stage with a tiring room capped by a gallery behind it.

The entertainment given by these companies of players (who usually got the patronage and took the title of some lord) was various. They played moralities and interludes, they played formless chronicle history plays like the _Troublesome Reign of King John_, on which Shakespeare worked for his _King John_; but above and before all they were each a company of specialists, every one of whom had his own talent and performance for which he was admired. The Elizabethan stage was the ancestor of our music-hall, and to the modern music-hall rather than to the theatre it bears its affinity. If you wish to realize the aspect of the Globe or the Blackfriars it is to a lower class music-hall you must go. The quality of the audience is a point of agreement. The Globe was frequented by young “bloods” and by the more disreputable portions of the community, racing men (or their equivalents of that day) "coney catchers" and the like; commonly the only women present were women of the town. The similarity extends from the auditorium to the stage. The Elizabethan playgoer delighted in virtuosity; in exhibitions of strength or skill from his actors; the broad sword combat in _Macbeth_, and the wrestling in _As You Like It_, were real trials of skill. The bear in the _Winter's Tale_ was no doubt a real bear got from a bear pit, near by in the Bankside. The comic actors especially were the very
grandfathers of our music-hall stars; Tarleton and Kemp and Cowley, the chief of them, were as much popular favourites and esteemed as separate from the plays they played in as is Harry Lauder. Their songs and tunes were printed and sold in hundreds as broadsheets, just as pirated music-hall songs are sold to-day. This is to be noted because it explains a great deal in the subsequent evolution of the drama. It explains the delight in having everything represented actually on the stage, all murders, battles, duels. It explains the magnificent largesse given by Shakespeare to the professional fool. Work had to be found for him, and Shakespeare, whose difficulties were stepping-stones to his triumphs, gave him Touchstone and Feste, the Porter in _Macbeth_ and the Fool in _Lear_. Others met the problem in an attitude of frank despair. Not all great tragic writers can easily or gracefully wield the pen of comedy, and Marlowe in _Dr. Faustus_ took the course of leaving the low comedy which the audience loved and a high salaried actor demanded, to an inferior collaborator.

Alongside this drama of street platforms and inn-yards and public theatres, there grew another which, blending with it, produced the Elizabethan drama which we know. The public theatres were not the only places at which plays were produced. At the University, at the Inns of Court (which then more than now, were besides centres of study rather exclusive and expensive clubs), and at the Court they were an important part of almost every festival. At these places were produced academic compositions, either allegorical like the masques, copies of which we find in Shakespeare and by Ben Jonson, or comedies modelled on Plautus or Terence, or tragedies modelled on Seneca. The last were incomparably
the most important. The Elizabethan age, which always thought of
literature as a guide or handmaid to life, was naturally attracted to a
poet who dealt in maxims and "sentences"; his rhetoric appealed to men
for whom words and great passages of verse were an intoxication that
only a few to-day can understand or sympathize with; his
bloodthirstiness and gloom to an age so full-blooded as not to shrink
from horrors. Tragedies early began to be written on the strictly
Senecan model, and generally, like Seneca's, with some ulterior
intention. Sackville's _Gorboduc_, the first tragedy in English,
produced at a great festival at the Inner Temple, aimed at inducing
Elizabeth to marry and save the miseries of a disputed succession. To be
put to such a use argues the importance and dignity of this classical
tragedy of the learned societies and the court. None of the pieces
composed in this style were written for the popular theatre, and indeed
they could not have been a success on it. The Elizabethan audience, as
we have seen, loved action, and in these Senecan tragedies the action
took place "off." But they had a strong and abiding influence on the
popular stage; they gave it its ghosts, its supernatural warnings, its
conception of nemesis and revenge, they gave it its love of
introspection and the long passages in which introspection, description
or reflection, either in soliloquy or dialogue, holds up the action;
contradictorily enough they gave it something at least of its melodrama.
Perhaps they helped to enforce the lesson of the miracle plays that a
dramatist's proper business was elaboration rather than invention. None
of the Elizabethan dramatists except Ben Jonson habitually constructed
their own plots. Their method was to take something ready at their hands
and overlay it with realism or poetry or romance. The stories of their
plays, like that of Hamlet's Mousetrap, were "extant and writ in choice
Italian," and very often their methods of preparation were very like his.

Something of the way in which the spirit of adventure of the time affected and finished the drama we have already seen. It is time now to turn to the dramatists themselves.

(2)

Of Marlowe, Kyd, Greene, and Peele, the "University Wits" who fused the academic and the popular drama, and by giving the latter a sense of literature and learning to mould it to finer issues, gave us Shakespeare, only Marlowe can be treated here. Greene and Peele, the former by his comedies, the latter by his historical plays, and Kyd by his tragedies, have their places in the text-books, but they belong to a secondary order of dramatic talent. Marlowe ranks amongst the greatest. It is not merely that historically he is the head and fount of the whole movement, that he changed blank verse, which had been a lumbering instrument before him, into something rich and ringing and rapid and made it the vehicle for the greatest English poetry after him. Historical relations apart, he is great in himself. More than any other English writer of any age, except Byron, he symbolizes the youth of his time; its hot-bloodedness, its lust after knowledge and power and life inspires all his pages. The teaching of Machiavelli, misunderstood for their own purposes by would-be imitators, furnished the reign of Elizabeth with the only political ideals it possessed. The simple
brutalism of the creed, with means justified by ends and the unbridled self-regarding pursuit of power, attracted men for whom the Spanish monarchy and the struggle to overthrow it were the main factors and politics. Marlowe took it and turned it to his own uses. There is in his writings a lust of power, "a hunger and thirst after unrighteousness," a glow of the imagination unhallowed by anything but its own energy which is in the spirit of the time. In _Tamburlaine_ it is the power of conquest, stirred by and reflecting, as we have seen, the great deeds of his day. In _Dr. Faustus_ it is the pride of will and eagerness of curiosity. Faustus is devoured by a tormenting desire to enlarge his knowledge to the utmost bounds of nature and art and to extend his power with his knowledge. His is the spirit of Renaissance scholarship heightened to a passionate excess. The play gleams with the pride of learning and a knowledge which learning brings, and with the nemesis that comes after it. "Oh! gentlemen! hear me with patience and tremble not at my speeches. Though my heart pant and quiver to remember that I have been a student here these thirty years; oh! I would I had never seen Wittemburg, never read book!" And after the agonizing struggle in which Faustus's soul is torn from him to hell, learning comes in at the quiet close.

"Yet, for he was a scholar once admired,
For wondrous knowledge in our German Schools;
We'll give his mangled limbs due burial;
And all the students, clothed in mourning black
Shall wait upon his heavy funeral."
Some one character is a centre of over-mastering pride and ambition in every play. In _The Jew of Malta_ it is the hero Barabbas. In _Edward II._ it is Piers Gaveston. In _Edward II._ indeed, two elements are mixed—the element of Machiavelli and Tamburlaine in Gaveston, and the purely tragic element which evolves from within itself the style in which it shall be treated, in the King. "The reluctant pangs of abdicating Royalty," wrote Charles Lamb in a famous passage, "furnished hints which Shakespeare scarcely improved in his _Richard II._; and the death scene of Marlowe's King moves pity and terror beyond any scene, ancient or modern, with which I am acquainted." Perhaps the play gives the hint of what Marlowe might have become had not the dagger of a groom in a tavern cut short at thirty his burning career.

Even in that time of romance and daring speculation he went further than his fellows. He was said to have been tainted with atheism, to have denied God and the Trinity; had he lived he might have had trouble with the Star Chamber. The free-voyaging intellect of the age found this one way of outlet, but if literary evidences are to be trusted sixteenth and seventeenth century atheism was a very crude business. The _Atheist's Tragedy_ of Tourneur (a dramatist who need not otherwise detain us) gives some measure of its intelligence and depth. Says the villain to the heroine,

"No? Then invoke Your great supposed Protector. I will do't."
to which she:

"Supposed Protector! Are you an atheist, then
I know my fears and prayers are spent in vain."

Marlowe's very faults and extravagances, and they are many, are only the obverse of his greatness. Magnitude and splendour of language when the thought is too shrunken to fill it out, becomes mere inflation. He was a butt of the parodists of the day. And Shakespeare, though he honoured him "on this side idolatry," did his share of ridicule. Ancient Pistol is fed and stuffed with relic and rags of Marlowesque affectation--

"Holla! ye pampered jades of Asia,
Can ye not draw but twenty miles a day."

is a quotation taken straight from _Tamburlaine_.

(3)

A study of Shakespeare, who refuses to be crushed within the limits of a general essay is no part of the plan of this book. We must take up the story of the drama with the reign of James and with the contemporaries of his later period, though of course, a treatment which is conditioned by the order of development is not strictly chronological, and some of
the plays we shall have to refer to belong to the close of the sixteenth century. We are apt to forget that alongside Shakespeare and at his heels other dramatists were supplying material for the theatre. The influence of Marlowe and particularly of Kyd, whose _Spanish Tragedy_ with its crude mechanism of ghosts and madness and revenge caught the popular taste, worked itself out in a score of journeymen dramatists, mere hack writers, who turned their hand to plays as the hacks of to-day turn their hand to novels, and with no more literary merit than that caught as an echo from better men than themselves. One of the worst of these--he is also one of the most typical--was John Marston, a purveyor of tragic gloom and sardonic satire, and an impostor in both, whose tragedy _Antonio and Mellida_ was published in the same year as Shakespeare's _Hamlet_. Both plays owed their style and plot to the same tradition--the tradition created by Kyd's _Spanish Tragedy_--in which ghostly promptings to revenge, terrible crime, and a feigned madman waiting his opportunity are the elements of tragedy. Nothing could be more fruitful in an understanding of the relations of Shakespeare to his age than a comparison of the two. The style of _Antonio and Mellida_ is the style of _The Murder of Gonzago_. There is no subtlety nor introspection, the pale cast of thought falls with no shadow over its scenes. And it is typical of a score of plays of the kind we have and beyond doubt of hundreds that have perished. Shakespeare stands alone.

Beside this journey-work tragedy of revenge and murder which had its root through Kyd and Marlowe in Seneca and in Italian romance, there was a journey-work comedy of low life made up of loosely constructed strings of incidents, buffoonery and romance, that had its roots in a joyous and
fantastic study of the common people. These plays are happy and
high-spirited and, compared with the ordinary run of the tragedies, of
better workmanship. They deal in the familiar situations of low
comedy--the clown, the thrifty citizen and his frivolous wife, the
gallant, the bawd, the good apprentice and the bad portrayed vigorously
and tersely and with a careless kindly gaiety that still charms in the
reading. The best writers in this kind were Middleton and Dekker--and
the best play to read as a sample of it _Eastward Ho!_ in which Marston
put off his affectation of sardonical melancholy and joined with Jonson
and Dekker to produce what is the masterpiece of the non-Shakespearean
comedy of the time.

For all our habit of grouping their works together it is a far cry in
spirit and temperament from the dramatists whose heyday was under
Elizabeth and those who reached their prime under her successor. Quickly
though insensibly the temper of the nation suffered eclipse. The high
hopes and the ardency of the reign of Elizabeth saddened into a profound
pessimism and gloom in that of James. This apparition of unsought
melancholy has been widely noted and generally assumed to be
inexplicable. In broad outline its causes are clear enough, "To travel
hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." The Elizabothans were, if
ever any were, hopeful travellers. The winds blew them to the four
quarters of the world; they navigated all seas; they sacked rich cities.
They beat off the great Armada, and harried the very coasts of Spain.
They pushed discovery to the ends of the world and amassed great wealth.
Under James all these things were over. Peace was made with Spain:
national pride was wounded by the solicitous anxiety of the King for a
Spanish marriage for the heir to the throne. Sir Walter Raleigh, a romantic adventurer lingering beyond his time, was beheaded out of hand by the ungenerous timidity of the monarch to whom had been transferred devotion and loyalty he was unfitted to receive. The Court which had been a centre of flashing and gleaming brilliance degenerated into a knot of sycophants humouring the pragmatic and self-important folly of a king in whom had implanted themselves all the vices of the Scots and none of their virtues. Nothing seemed left remarkable beneath the visiting moon. The bright day was done and they were for the dark. The uprising of Puritanism and the shadow of impending religious strife darkened the temper of the time.

The change affected all literature and particularly the drama, which because it appeals to what all men have in common, commonly reflects soonest a change in the outlook or spirits of a people. The onslights of the dramatists on the Puritans, always implacable enemies of the theatre, became more virulent and envenomed. What a difference between the sunny satire of Sir Andrew Aguecheek and the dark animosity of _The Atheists' Tragedy_ with its Languebeau Snuffe ready to carry out any villainy proposed to him! "I speak sir," says a lady in the same play to a courtier who played with her in an attempt to carry on a quick witted, "conceited" love passage in the vein of _Much Ado_. "I speak, sir, as the fashion now: is, in earnest." The quick-witted, light-hearted age was gone. It is natural that tragedy reflected this melancholy in its deepest form. Gloom deepened and had no light to relieve it, men supped full of horrors--there was no slackening of the tension, no concession to overwrought nerves, no resting-place for the overwrought soul. It is
in the dramatist John Webster that this new spirit has its most powerful exponent.

The influence of Machiavelli, which had given Marlowe tragic figures that were bright and splendid and burning, smouldered in Webster into a duskier and intenser heat. His fame rests on two tragedies, _The White Devil_ and _The Duchess of Malfi_. Both are stories of lust and crime, full of hate and hideous vengeances, and through each runs a vein of bitter and ironical comment on men and women. In them chance plays the part of fate. "Blind accident and blundering mishap--'such a mistake,' says one of the criminals, 'as I have often seen in a play' are the steersmen of their fortunes and the doomsmen of their deeds." His characters are gloomy; meditative and philosophic murderers, cynical informers, sad and loving women, and they are all themselves in every phrase that they utter. But they are studied in earnestness and sincerity. Unquestionably he is the greatest of Shakespeare's successors in the romantic drama, perhaps his only direct imitator. He has single lines worthy to set beside those in _Othello_ or _King Lear_. His dirge in the _Duchess of Malfi_, Charles Lamb thought worthy to be set beside the ditty in _The Tempest_, which reminds Ferdinand of his drowned father. "As that is of the water, watery, so this is of the earth, earthy." He has earned his place among the greatest of our dramatists by his two plays, the theme of which matched his sombre genius and the sombreness of the season in which it flowered.

But the drama could not survive long the altered times, and the voluminous plays of Beaumont and Fletcher mark the beginning of the end.
They are the decadence of Elizabethan drama. Decadence is a term often used loosely and therefore hard to define, but we may say broadly that an art is decadent when any particular one of the elements which go to its making occurs in excess and disturbs the balance of forces which keeps the work a coherent and intact whole. Poetry is decadent when the sound is allowed to outrun the sense or when the suggestions, say, of colour, which it contains are allowed to crowd out its deeper implications. Thus we can call such a poem as this one well-known of O'Shaughnessy's

"We are the music-makers,
We are the dreamers of dreams,"

decadent because it conveys nothing but the mere delight in an obvious rhythm of words, or such a poem as Morris's "Two red roses across the moon:" because a meaningless refrain, merely pleasing in its word texture, breaks in at intervals on the reader. The drama of Beaumont and Fletcher is decadent in two ways. In the first place those variations and licences with which Shakespeare in his later plays diversified the blank verse handed on to him by Marlowe, they use without any restraint or measure. "Weak" endings and "double" endings, _i.e._ lines which end either on a conjunction or proposition or some other unstressed word, or lines in which there is a syllable too many—abound in their plays. They destroyed blank verse as a musical and resonant poetic instrument by letting this element of variety outrun the sparing and skilful use which alone could justify it. But they were decadent in other and deeper ways than that. Sentiment in their plays usurps the place of character.
Eloquent and moving speeches and fine figures are no longer subservient
to the presentation of character in action, but are set down for their
own sake, "What strange self-trumpeters and tongue-bullies all the brave
soldiers of Beaumont and Fletcher are," said Coleridge. When they die
they die to the music of their own virtue. When dreadful deeds are done
they are described not with that authentic and lurid vividness which
throws light on the working of the human heart in Shakespeare or Webster
but in tedious rhetoric. Resignation, not fortitude, is the authors'
forte and they play upon it amazingly. The sterner tones of their
predecessors melt into the long drawn broken accent of pathos and woe.
This delight not in action or in emotion arising from action but in
passivity of suffering is only one aspect of a certain mental flaccidity
in grain. Shakespeare may be free and even coarse. Beaumont and Fletcher
cultivate indecency. They made their subject not their master but their
plaything, or an occasion for the convenient exercise of their own
powers of figure and rhetoric.

Of their followers, Massinger, Ford and Shirley, no more need be said
than they carried one step further the faults of their masters. Emotion
and tragic passion give way to wire-drawn sentiment. Tragedy takes on
the air of a masquerade. With them romantic drama died a natural death
and the Puritans' closing of the theatre only gave it a _coup de grace_.
In England it has had no second birth.

(4)
Outside the direct romantic succession there worked another author whose lack of sympathy with it, as well as his close connection with the age which followed, justifies his separate treatment. Ben Jonson shows a marked contrast to Shakespeare in his character, his accomplishments, and his attitude to letters, while his career was more varied than Shakespeare's own. The first "classic" in English writing, he was a "romantic" in action. In his adventurous youth he was by turns scholar, soldier, bricklayer, actor. He trailed a pike with Leicester in the Low Countries; on his return to England fought a duel and killed his man, only escaping hanging by benefit of clergy; at the end of his life he was Poet Laureate. Such a career is sufficiently diversified, and it forms a striking contrast to the plainness and severity of his work. But it must not lead us to forget or under-estimate his learning and knowledge. Not Gray nor Tennyson, nor Swinburne--perhaps not even Milton--was a better scholar. He is one of the earliest of English writers to hold and express different theories about literature. He consciously appointed himself a teacher; was a missionary of literature with a definite creed.

But though in a general way his dramatic principles are opposed to the romantic tendencies of his age, he is by no means blindly classical. He never consented to be bound by the "Unities"--that conception of dramatic construction evolved out of Aristotle and Horace and elaborated in the Renaissance till, in its strictest form, it laid down that the whole scene of a play should be in one place, its whole action deal with one single series of events, and the time it represented as elapsing be no greater than the time it took in playing. He was always pre-eminently
an Englishman of his own day with a scholar's rather than a poet's
temper, hating extravagance, hating bombast and cant, and only limited
because in ruling out these things he ruled out much else that was
essential to the spirit of the time. As a craftsman he was
uncompromising; he never bowed to the tastes of the public and never
veiled his scorn of those--Shakespeare among them--whom he conceived to
do so; but he knew and valued his own work, as his famous last word to
an audience who might be unsympathetic stands to witness,

"By God 'tis good, and if you like it you may."

Compare the temper it reveals with the titles of the two contemporary
comedies of his gentler and greater brother, the one _As You Like It_,
the other _What You Will_. Of the two attitudes towards the public, and
they might stand as typical of two kinds of artists, neither perhaps can
claim complete sincerity. A truculent and noisy disclaimer of their
favours is not a bad tone to assume towards an audience; in the end it
is apt to succeed as well as the sub-ironical compliance which is its
opposite.

Jonson's theory of comedy and the consciousness with which he set it
against the practice of his contemporaries and particularly of
Shakespeare receive explicit statement in the prologue to _Every Man Out
of His Humour_--one of his earlier plays. "I travail with another
objection, Signor, which I fear will be enforced against the author ere
I can be delivered of it," says Mitis. "What's that, sir?" replies
Cordatus. Mitis:--"That the argument of his comedy might have been of some other nature, as of a duke to be in love with a countess, and that countess to be in love with the duke's son, and the son to love the lady's waiting maid; some such cross-wooing, better than to be thus near and familiarly allied to the times." Cordatus: "You say well, but I would fain hear one of these autumn-judgments define _Quin sit comoedia_? If he cannot, let him concern himself with Cicero's definition, till he have strength to propose to himself a better, who would have a comedy to be _invitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis_; a thing throughout pleasant and ridiculous and accommodated to the correction of manners." That was what he meant his comedy to be, and so he conceived the popular comedy of the day, _Twelfth Night_ and _Much Ado_. Shakespeare might play with dukes and countesses, serving-women and pages, clowns and disguises; he would come down more near and ally himself familiarly with the times. So comedy was to be medicinal, to purge contemporary London of its follies and its sins; and it was to be constructed with regularity and elaboration, respectful to the Unities if not ruled by them, and built up of characters each the embodiment of some "humour" or eccentricity, and each when his eccentricity is displaying itself at its fullest, outwitted and exposed. This conception of "humours," based on a physiology which was already obsolescent, takes heavily from the realism of Jonson's methods, nor does his use of a careful vocabulary of contemporary colloquialism and slang save him from a certain dryness and tediousness to modern readers. The truth is he was less a satirist of contemporary manners than a satirist in the abstract who followed the models of classical writers in this style, and he found the vices and follies of his own day hardly adequate to the intricacy and
elaborateness of the plots which he constructed for their exposure. At
the first glance his people are contemporary types, at the second they
betray themselves for what they are really--cock-shies set up by the new
comedy of Greece that every "classical" satirist in Rome or France or
England has had his shot at since. One wonders whether Ben Jonson, for
all his satirical intention, had as much observation--as much of an eye
for contemporary types--as Shakespeare's rustics and roysterers prove
him to have had. It follows that all but one or two of his plays, when
they are put on the stage to-day are apt to come to one with a sense of
remoteness and other-worldliness which we hardly feel with Shakespeare
or Moliere. His muse moves along the high-road of comedy which is the
Roman road, and she carries in her train types that have done service to
many since the ancients fashioned them years ago. Jealous husbands,
foolish pragmatic fathers, a dissolute son, a boastful soldier, a
cunning slave--they all are merely counters by which the game of comedy
used to be played. In England, since Shakespeare took his hold on the
stage, that road has been stopped for us, that game has ceased to amuse.

Ben Jonson, then, in a certain degree failed in his intention. Had he
kept closer to contemporary life, instead of merely grafting on to it
types he had learned from books, he might have made himself an English
Moliere--without Moliere's breadth and clarity--but with a corresponding
vigour and strength which would have kept his work sweet. And he might
have founded a school of comedy that would have got its roots deeper
into our national life than the trivial and licentious Restoration
comedy ever succeeded in doing. As it is, his importance is mostly
historical. One must credit him with being the first of the English
classics--of the age which gave us Dryden and Swift and Pope. Perhaps that is enough in his praise.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

With the seventeenth century the great school of imaginative writers that made glorious the last years of Elizabeth's reign, had passed away. Spenser was dead before 1600, Sir Philip Sidney a dozen years earlier, and though Shakespeare and Drayton and many other men whom we class roughly as Elizabethan lived on to work under James, their temper and their ideals belong to the earlier day. The seventeenth century, not in England only but in Europe, brought a new way of thinking with it, and gave a new direction to human interest and to human affairs. It is not perhaps easy to define nor is it visible in the greater writers of the time. Milton, for instance, and Sir Thomas Browne are both of them too big, and in their genius too far separated from their fellows to give us much clue to altered conditions. It is commonly in the work of lesser and forgotten writers that the spirit of an age has its fullest expression. Genius is a law to itself; it moves in another dimension; it is out of time. To define this seventeenth century spirit, then, one must look at the literature of the age as a whole. What is there that one finds in it which marks a change in temperament and outlook from the
Renaissance, and the time which immediately followed it?

Putting it very broadly one may say that literature in the seventeenth century becomes for the first time essentially modern in spirit. We began our survey of modern English literature at the Renaissance because the discovery of the New World, and the widening of human experience and knowledge, which that and the revival of classical learning implied, mark a definite break from a way of thought which had been continuous since the break up of the Roman Empire. The men of the Renaissance felt themselves to be modern. They started afresh, owing nothing to their immediate forbears, and when they talked, say, of Chaucer, they did so in very much the same accent as we do to-day. He was mediaeval and obsolete; the interest which he possessed was a purely literary interest; his readers did not meet him easily on the same plane of thought, or forget the lapse of time which separated him from them. And in another way too, the Renaissance began modern writing. Inflections had been dropped. The revival of the classics had enriched our vocabulary, and the English language, after a gradual impoverishment which followed the obsolescence one after another of the local dialects, attained a fairly fixed form. There is more difference between the language of the English writings of Sir Thomas More and that of the prose of Chaucer than there is between that of More and of Ruskin. But it is not till the seventeenth century that the modern spirit, in the fullest sense of the word, comes into being. Defined it means a spirit of observation, of preoccupation with detail, of stress laid on matter of fact, of analysis of feelings and mental processes, of free argument upon institutions and government. In relation to knowledge, it is the
spirit of science, and the study of science, which is the essential intellectual fact in modern history, dates from just this time, from Bacon and Newton and Descartes. In relation to literature, it is the spirit of criticism, and criticism in England is the creation of the seventeenth century. The positive temper, the attitude of realism, is everywhere in the ascendant. The sixteenth century made voyages of discovery; the seventeenth sat down to take stock of the riches it had gathered. For the first time in English literature writing becomes a vehicle for storing and conveying facts.

It would be easy to give instances: one must suffice here. Biography, which is one of the most characteristic kinds of English writing, was unknown to the moderns as late as the sixteenth century. Partly the awakened interest in the careers of the ancient statesmen and soldiers which the study of Plutarch had excited, and partly the general interest in, and craving for, facts set men writing down the lives of their fellows. The earliest English biographies date from this time. In the beginning they were concerned, like Plutarch, with men of action, and when Sir Fulke Greville wrote a brief account of his friend Sir Philip Sidney it was the courtier and the soldier, and not the author, that he designed to celebrate. But soon men of letters came within their scope, and though the interest in the lives of authors came too late to give us the contemporary life of Shakespeare we so much long for, it was early enough to make possible those masterpieces of condensed biography in which Isaak Walton celebrates Herbert and Donne. Fuller and Aubrey, to name only two authors, spent lives of laborious industry in hunting down and chronicling the smallest facts about the worthies of their day and
the time immediately before them. Autobiography followed where biography led. Lord Herbert of Cherbury and Margaret Duchess of Newcastle, as well as less reputable persons, followed the new mode. By the time of the Restoration Pepys and Evelyn were keeping their diaries, and Fox his journal. Just as in poetry the lyric, that is the expression of personal feeling, became more widely practised, more subtle and more sincere, in prose the letter, the journal, and the autobiography formed themselves to meet the new and growing demand for analysis of the feelings and the intimate thoughts and sensations of real men and women. A minor form of literature which had a brief but popular vogue ministered less directly to the same need. The "Character," a brief descriptive essay on a contemporary type—a tobacco seller, an old college butler or the like—was popular because in its own way it matched the newly awakened taste for realism and fact. The drama which in the hands of Ben Jonson had attacked folly and wickedness proper to no place or time, descended to the drawing-rooms of the day, and Congreve occupied himself with the portrayal of the social frauds and foolishnesses perpetrated by actual living men and women of fashion in contemporary London. Satire ceased to be a mere expression of a vague discontent, and became a weapon against opposing men and policies. The new generation of readers were nothing if not critical. They were for testing directly institutions whether they were literary, social, or political. They wanted facts, and they wanted to take a side.

In the distinct and separate realm of poetry a revolution no less remarkable took place. Spenser had been both a poet and a Puritan: he had designed to show by his great poem the training and fashioning of a
Puritan English gentleman. But the alliance between poetry and
Puritanism which he typified failed to survive his death. The
essentially pagan spirit of the Renaissance which caused him no doubts
nor difficulties proved too strong for his readers and his followers,
and the emancipated artistic enthusiasm in which it worked alienated
from secular poetry men with deep and strong religious convictions.
Religion and morality and poetry, which in Sidney and Spenser had gone
hand in hand, separated from each other. Poems like _Venus and Adonis_
or like Shakespeare's sonnets could hardly be squared with the sterner
temper which persecution began to breed. Even within orthodox
Anglicanism poetry and religion began to be deemed no fit company for
each other. When George Herbert left off courtier and took orders he
burnt his earlier love poetry, and only the persuasion of his friends
prevented Donne from following the same course. Pure poetry became more
and more an exotic. All Milton's belongs to his earlier youth; his
middle age was occupied with controversy and propaganda in prose; when
he returned to poetry in blindness and old age it was "to justify the
ways of God to man"--to use poetry, that is, for a spiritual and moral
rather than an artistic end.

Though the age was curious and inquiring, though poetry and prose tended
more and more to be enlisted in the service of non-artistic enthusiasms
and to be made the vehicle of deeper emotions and interests than perhaps
a northern people could ever find in art, pure and simple, it was not
like the time that followed it, a "prosaic" age. Enthusiasm burned
fierce and clear, displaying itself in the passionate polemic of Milton,
in the fanaticism of Bunyan and Fox, hardly more than in the gentle,
steadfast search for knowledge in Burton, and the wide and vigilant
curiousness of Bacon. Its eager experimentalism tried the impossible;
wrote poems and then gave them a weight of meaning they could not carry,
as when Fletcher in _The Purple Island_ designed to allegorize all that
the physiology of his day knew of the human body, or Donne sought to
convey abstruse scientific fact in a lyric. It gave men a passion for
pure learning, set Jonson to turn himself from a bricklayer into the
best equipped scholar of his day, and Fuller and Camden grubbing among
English records and gathering for the first time materials of scientific
value for English history. Enthusiasm gave us poetry that was at once
full of learning and of imagination, poetry that was harsh and brutal
in its roughness and at the same time impassioned. And it set up a
school of prose that combined colloquial readiness and fluency,
pregnancy and high sentiment with a cumbrous pedantry of learning which
was the fruit of its own excess.

The form in which enthusiasm manifested itself most fiercely was as we
have seen not favourable to literature. Puritanism drove itself like a
wedge into the art of the time, broadening as it went. Had there been no
more in it than the moral earnestness and religiousness of Sidney and
Spenser, Cavalier would not have differed from Roundhead, and there
might have been no civil war; each party was endowed deeply with the
religious sense and Charles I. was a sincerely pious man. But while
Spenser and Sidney held that life as a preparation for eternity must be
ordered and strenuous and devout but that care for the hereafter was not
incompatible with a frank and full enjoyment of life as it is lived,
Puritanism as it developed in the middle classes became a sterner and
darker creed. The doctrine of original sin, face to face with the fact
that art, like other pleasures, was naturally and readily entered into
and enjoyed, forced them to the plain conclusion that art was an evil
thing. As early as Shakespeare's youth they had been strong enough to
keep the theatres outside London walls; at the time of the Civil War
they closed them altogether, and the feud which had lasted for over a
generation between them and the dramatists ended in the destruction of
the literary drama. In the brief years of their ascendancy they produced
no literature, for Milton is much too large to be tied down to their
negative creed, and, indeed, in many of his qualities, his love of music
and his sensuousness for instance, he is antagonistic to the temper of
his day. With the Restoration their earnest and strenuous spirit fled to
America. It is noteworthy that it had no literary manifestation there
till two centuries after the time of its passage. Hawthorne's novels are
the fruit--the one ripe fruit in art--of the Puritan imagination.

(2)

If the reader adopts the seventeenth century habit himself and takes
stock of what the Elizabethans accomplished in poetry, he will recognize
speedily that their work reached various stages of completeness. They
perfected the poetic drama and its instrument, blank verse; they
perfected, though not in the severer Italian form, the sonnet; they
wrote with extraordinary delicacy and finish short lyrics in which a
simple and freer manner drawn from the classics took the place of the
mediaeval intricacies of the ballad and the rondeau. And in the forms
which they failed to bring to perfection they did beautiful and noble
work. The splendour of _The Fairy Queen_ is in separate passages; as a whole it is over tortuous and slow; its affectations, its sensuousness, the mere difficulty of reading it, makes us feel it a collection of great passages, strung it is true on a large conception, rather than a great work. The Elizabethans, that is, had not discovered the secret of the long poem; the abstract idea of the "heroic" epic which was in all their minds had to wait for embodiment till _Paradise Lost_. In a way their treatment of the pastoral or eclogue form was imperfect too. They used it well but not so well as their models, Vergil and Theocritus; they had not quite mastered the convention on which it is built.

The seventeenth century, taking stock in some such fashion of its artistic possessions, found some things it were vain to try to do. It could add nothing to the accomplishment of the English sonnet, so it hardly tried; with the exception of a few sonnets in the Italian form of Milton, the century can show us nothing in this mode of verse. The literary drama was brought to perfection in the early years of it by the surviving Elizabethans; later decades could add nothing to it but licence, and as we saw, the licences they added hastened its destruction. But in other forms the poets of the new time experimented eagerly, and in the stress of experiment, poetry which under Elizabeth had been integral and coherent split into different schools. As the period of the Renaissance was also that of the Reformation it was only natural a determined effort should sooner or later be made to use poetry for religious purposes. The earliest English hymn writing, our first devotional verse in the vernacular, belongs to this time, and a Catholic and religious school of lyricism grew and flourished beside the pagan
neo-classical writers. From the tumult of experiment three schools disengage themselves, the school of Spenser, the school of Jonson, and the school of Donne.

At the outset of the century Spenser's influence was triumphant and predominant; his was the main stream with which the other poetic influences of the time merely mingled. His popularity is referable to qualities other than those which belonged peculiarly to his talent as a poet. Puritans loved his religious ardour, and in those Puritan households where the stricter conception of the diabolical nature of all poetry had not penetrated, his works were read--standing on a shelf, may be, between the new translation of the Bible and Sylvester's translation of the French poet Du Bartas' work on the creation, that had a large popularity at that time as family reading. Probably the Puritans were as blind to the sensuousness of Spenser's language and imagery as they were (and are) to the same qualities in the Bible itself. _The Fairy Queen_ would easily achieve innocuousness amongst those who can find nothing but an allegory of the Church in the "Song of Songs." His followers made their allegory a great deal plainer than he had done his. In his poem called _The Purple Island_, Phineas Fletcher, a Puritan imitator of Spenser in Cambridge, essayed to set forth the struggle of the soul at grip with evil, a battle in which the body--the "Purple Island"--is the field. To a modern reader it is a desolating and at times a mildly amusing book, in which everything from the liver to the seven deadly sins is personified; in which after four books of allegorized contemporary anatomy and physiology, the will (Voletta) engages in a struggle with Satan and conquers by the help of Christ and King James!
The allegory is clever--too clever--and the author can paint a pleasant picture, but on the whole he was happier in his pastoral work. His brother Giles made a better attempt at the Spenserian manner. His long poem, _Christ's Victory and Death_, shows for all its carefully Protestant tone high qualities of mysticism; across it Spenser and Milton join hands.

It was, however, in pastoral poetry that Spenser's influence found its pleasantest outlet. One might hesitate to advise a reader to embark on either of the Fletchers. There is no reason why any modern should not read and enjoy Browne or Wither, in whose softly flowing verse the sweetness and contentment of the countryside, that "merry England" which was the background of all sectarian and intellectual strife and labour, finds as in a placid stream a calm reflection and picture of itself. The seventeenth century gave birth to many things that only came to maturity in the nineteenth; if you care for that kind of literary study which searches out origins and digs for hints and models of accented styles, you will find in Browne that which influenced more than any other single thing the early work of Keats. Browne has another claim to immortality; if it be true as is now thought that he was the author of the epitaph on the Countess of Pembroke:

"Underneath this sable hearse
Lies the subject of all verse,
Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother.
Death, ere thou hast slain another
Fair and learned and good as she,
Time shall throw a dart at thee."

then he achieved the miracle of a quintessential statement of the spirit of the English Renaissance. For the breath of it stirs in these slow quiet moving lines, and its few and simple words implicate the soul of a period.

By the end of the first quarter of the century the influence of Spenser and the school which worked under it had died out. Its place was taken by the twin schools of Jonson and Donne. Jonson's poetic method is something like his dramatic; he formed himself as exactly as possible on classical models. Horace had written satires and elegies, and epistles and complimentary verses, and Jonson quite consciously and deliberately followed where Horace led. He wrote elegies on the great, letters and courtly compliments and love-lyrics to his friends, satires with an air of general censure. But though he was classical, his style was never latinized. In all of them he strove to pour into an ancient form language that was as intense and vigorous and as purely English as the earliest trumpeters of the Renaissance in England could have wished. The result is not entirely successful. He seldom fails to reproduce classic dignity and good sense; on the other hand he seldom succeeds in achieving classic grace and ease. Occasionally, as in his best known lyric, he is perfect and achieves an air of spontaneity little short of marvellous, when we know that his images and even his words in the song are all plagiarized from other men. His expression is always clear and vigorous and his sense good and noble. The native earnestness and sincerity of the man shines through as it does in his dramas and his
prose. In an age of fantastic and meaningless eulogy--eulogy so amazing in its unexpectedness and abstruseness that the wonder is not so much that it should have been written as that it could have been thought of--Jonson maintains his personal dignity and his good sense. You feel his compliments are such as the best should be, not necessarily understood and properly valued by the public, but of a discriminating sort that by their very comprehending sincerity would be most warmly appreciated by the people to whom they were addressed. His verses to Shakespeare and his prose commentaries on him too, are models of what self-respecting admiration should be, generous in its praise of excellence, candid in its statement of defects. They are the kind of compliments that Shakespeare himself, if he had grace enough, must have loved to receive.

Very different from his direct and dignified manner is the closely packed style of Donne, who, Milton apart, is the greatest English writer of the century, though his obscurity has kept him out of general reading. No poetry in English, not even Browning, is more difficult to understand. The obscurity of Donne and Browning proceed from such similar causes that they are worth examining together. In both, as in the obscure passages in Shakespeare's later plays, obscurity arises not because the poet says too little but because he attempts to say too much. He huddles a new thought on the one before it, before the first has had time to express itself; he sees things or analyses emotions so swiftly and subtly himself that he forgets the slower comprehensions of his readers; he is for analysing things far deeper than the ordinary mind commonly can. His wide and curious knowledge finds terms and
likenesses to express his meaning unknown to us; he sees things from a
dozen points of view at once and tumbles a hint of each separate vision
in a heap out on to the page; his restless intellect finds new and
subtler shades of emotion and thought invisible to other pairs of eyes,
and cannot, because speech is modelled on the average of our
intelligences, find words to express them; he is always trembling on the
brink of the inarticulate. All this applies to both Donne and Browning,
and the comparison could be pushed further still. Both draw the
knowledge which is the main cause of their obscurity from the same
source, the bypaths of mediaevalism. Browning's _Sordello_ is obscure
because he knows too much about mediaeval Italian history; Donne's
_Anniversary_ because he is too deeply read in mediaeval scholasticism
and speculation. Both make themselves more difficult to the reader who
is familiar with the poetry of their contemporaries by the disconcerting
freshness of their point of view. Seventeenth century love poetry was
idyllic and idealist; Donne's is passionate and realistic to the point
of cynicism. To read him after reading Browne or Jonson is to have the
same shock as reading Browning after Tennyson. Both poets are salutary
in the strong and biting antidote they bring to sentimentalism in
thought and melodious facility in writing. They are the corrective of
lazy thinking and lazy composition.

Elizabethan love poetry was written on a convention which though it was
used with manliness and entire sincerity by Sidney did not escape the
fate of its kind. Dante's love for Beatrice, Petrarch's for Laura, the
gallant and passionate adoration of Sidney for his Stella became the
models for a dismal succession of imaginary woes. They were all figments
of the mind, perhaps hardly that; they all use the same terms and write in fixed strains, epicurean and sensuous like Ronsard, ideal and intellectualized like Dante, sentimental and adoring like Petrarch. Into this enclosed garden of sentiment and illusion Donne burst passionately and rudely, pulling up the gay-coloured tangled weeds that choked thoughts, planting, as one of his followers said, the seeds of fresh invention. Where his forerunners had been idealist, epicurean, or adoring, he was brutal, cynical and immitigably realist. He could begin a poem, "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me live"; he could be as resolutely free from illusion as Shakespeare when he addressed his Dark Lady--

"Hope not for mind in women; at their best,
Sweetness and wit they're but mummy possest."

And where the sonneteers pretended to a sincerity which was none of theirs, he was, like Browning, unaffectedly a dramatic lyrist. "I did best," he said, "when I had least truth for my subject."

His love poetry was written in his turbulent and brilliant youth, and the poetic talent which made it turned in his later years to express itself in hymns and religious poetry. But there is no essential distinction between the two halves of his work. It is all of a piece. The same swift and subtle spirit which analyses experiences of passion, analyses, in his later poetry, those of religion. His devotional poems, though they probe and question, are none the less never sermons, but
rather confessions or prayers. His intense individuality, eager always, as his best critic has said, "to find a North-West passage of his own,"[2] pressed its curious and sceptical questioning into every corner of love and life and religion, explored unsuspected depths, exploited new discovered paradoxes, and turned its discoveries always into poetry of the closely-packed artificial style which was all its own. Simplicity indeed would have been for him an affectation; his elaborateness is not like that of his followers, constructed painfully in a vicious desire to compass the unexpected, but the natural overflow of an amazingly fertile and ingenious mind. The curiosity, the desire for truth, the search after minute and detailed knowledge of his age is all in his verse. He bears the spirit of his time not less markedly than Bacon does, or Newton, or Descartes.

[Footnote 2: Prof. Grierson in _Cambridge History of English Literature_.]

The work of the followers of Donne and Jonson leads straight to the new school, Jonson's by giving that school a model on which to work, Donne's by producing an era of extravagance and absurdity which made a literary revolution imperative. The school of Donne--the "fantastics" as they have been called (Dr. Johnson called them the metaphysical poets), produced in Herbert and Vaughan, our two noblest writers of religious verse, the flower of a mode of writing which ended in the somewhat exotic religiousness of Crashaw. In the hands of Cowley the use of far-sought and intricate imagery became a trick, and the fantastic school, the soul of sincerity gone out of it, died when he died. To the
followers of Jonson we owe that delightful and simple lyric poetry which
fills our anthologies, their courtly lyricism receiving a new impulse in
the intenser loyalty of troubled times. The most finished of them is
perhaps Carew; the best, because of the freshness and variety of his
subject-matter and his easy grace, Herrick. At the end of them came
Waller and gave to the five-accented rhymed verse (the heroic couplet)
that trick of regularity and balance which gave us the classical school.

The prose literature of the seventeenth century is extraordinarily rich
and varied, and a study of it would cover a wide field of human
knowledge. The new and unsuspected harmonies discovered by the
Elizabethans were applied indeed to all the tasks of which prose is
capable, from telling stories to setting down the results of speculation
which was revolutionizing science and philosophy. For the first time
the vernacular and not Latin became the language of scientific research,
and though Bacon in his _Novum Organum_ adhered to the older mode its
disappearance was rapid. English was proving itself too flexible an
instrument for conveying ideas to be longer neglected. It was applied
too to preaching of a more formal and grandiose kind than the plain and
homely Latimer ever dreamed of. The preachers, though their
golden-mouthed oratory, which blended in its combination of vigour and
cadence the euphuistic and colloquial styles of the Elizabethans, is in
itself a glory of English literature, belong by their matter too
exclusively to the province of Church history to be dealt with here. The
men of science and philosophy, Newton, Hobbes, and Locke, are in a like
way outside our province. For the purpose of the literary student the achievement of the seventeenth century can be judged in four separate men or books—in the Bible, in Francis Bacon, and in Burton and Browne.

In a way the Bible, like the preachers, lies outside the domain of literary study in the narrow sense; but its sheer literary magnitude, the abiding significance of it in our subsequent history, social, political, and artistic as well as religious, compel us to turn aside to examine the causes that have produced such great results. The Authorized Version is not, of course, a purely seventeenth century work. Though the scholars[3] who wrote and compiled it had before them all the previous vernacular texts and chose the best readings where they found them or devised new ones in accordance with the original, the basis is undoubtedly the Tudor version of Tindall. It has, none the less, the qualities of the time of its publication. It could hardly have been done earlier; had it been so, it would not have been done half so well. In it English has lost both its roughness and its affectation and retained its strength; the Bible is the supreme example of early English prose style. The reason is not far to seek. Of all recipes for good or noble writing that which enjoins the writer to be careful about the matter and never mind the manner, is the most sure. The translators had the handling of matter of the gravest dignity and momentousness, and their sense of reverence kept them right in their treatment of it. They cared passionately for the truth; they were virtually anonymous and not ambitious of originality or literary fame; they had no desire to stand between the book and its readers. It followed that they cultivated that naked plainness and spareness which makes their work supreme. The
Authorized Version is the last and greatest of those English translations which were the fruit of Renaissance scholarship and pioneering. It is the first and greatest piece of English prose.

[Footnote 3: There is a graphic little pen-picture of their method in Selden's "Table Talk."]

Its influence is one of those things on which it is profitless to comment or enlarge simply because they are an understood part of every man's experience. In its own time it helped to weld England, for where before one Bible was read at home and another in churches, all now read the new version. Its supremacy was instantaneous and unchallenged, and it quickly coloured speech and literature; it could produce a Bunyan in the century of its birth. To it belongs the native dignity and eloquence of peasant speech. It runs like a golden thread through all our writing subsequent to its coming; men so diverse as Huxley and Carlyle have paid their tribute to its power; Ruskin counted it the one essential part of its education. It will be a bad day for the mere quality of our language when it ceases to be read.

At the time the translators were sitting, Francis Bacon was at the height of his fame. By profession a lawyer--time-serving and over-compliant to wealth and influence--he gives singularly little evidence of it in the style of his books. Lawyers, from the necessity they are under of exerting persuasion, of planting an unfamiliar argument in the minds of hearers of whose favour they are doubtful, but
whose sympathy they must gain, are usually of purpose diffuse. They cultivate the gift, possessed by Edmund Burke above all other English authors, of putting the same thing freshly and in different forms a great many times in succession. They value copiousness and fertility of illustration. Nothing could be more unlike this normal legal manner than the style of Bacon. "No man," says Ben Jonson, speaking in one of those vivid little notes of his, of his oratorical method, "no man ever coughed or turned aside from him without loss." He is a master of the aphoristic style. He compresses his wisdom into the quintessential form of an epigram; so complete and concentrated is his form of statement, so shortly is everything put, that the mere transition from one thought to another gives his prose a curious air of disjointedness as if he flitted arbitrarily from one thing to another, and jotted down anything that came into his head. His writing has clarity and lucidity, it abounds in terseness of expression and in exact and discriminating phraseology, and in the minor arts of composition--in the use of quotations for instance--it can be extraordinarily felicitous. But it lacks spaciousness and ease and rhythm; it makes too inexorable a demand on the attention, and the harassed reader soon finds himself longing for those breathing spaces which consideration or perhaps looseness of thought has implanted in the prose of other writers.

His _Essays_, the work by which he is best known, were in their origin merely jottings gradually cohered and enlarged into the series we know. In them he had the advantage of a subject which he had studied closely through life. He counted himself a master in the art of managing men, and "Human Nature and how to manage it" would be a good title for his
book. Men are studied in the spirit of Machiavelli, whose philosophy of government appealed so powerfully to the Elizabethan mind. Taken together the essays which deal with public matters are in effect a kind of manual for statesmen and princes, instructing them how to acquire power and how to keep it, deliberating how far they may go safely in the direction of self-interest, and to what degree the principle of self-interest must be subordinated to the wider interests of the people who are ruled. Democracy, which in England was to make its splendid beginnings in the seventeenth century, finds little to foretell it in the works of Bacon. Though he never advocates cruelty or oppression and is wise enough to see that no statesman can entirely set aside moral considerations, his ethical tone is hardly elevating; the moral obliquity of his public life is to a certain extent explained, in all but its grosser elements, in his published writings. The essays, of course, contain much more than this; the spirit of curious and restless enquiry which animated Bacon finds expression in those on "Health," or "Gardens" and "Plantations" and others of the kind; and a deeper vein of earnestness runs through some of them--those for instance on "Friendship," or "Truth" and on "Death."

The _Essays_ sum up in a condensed form the intellectual interests which find larger treatment in his other works. His _Henry VII._, the first piece of scientific history in the English language (indeed in the modern world) is concerned with a king whose practice was the outcome of a political theory identical with Bacon's own. The _Advancement of Learning_ is a brilliant popular exposition of the cause of scientific enquiry and of the inductive or investigatory method of research. The
_New Atlantis_ is the picture of an ideal community whose common purpose
is scientific investigation. Bacon's name is not upon the roll of those
who have enlarged by brilliant conjectures or discoveries the store of
human knowledge; his own investigations so far as they are recorded are
all of a trivial nature. The truth about him is that he was a
brilliantly clever populariser of the cause of science, a kind of
seventeenth century Huxley, concerned rather to lay down large general
principles for the guidance of the work of others, than to be a serious
worker himself. The superstition of later times, acting on and
refracting his amazing intellectual gifts, has raised him to a godlike
eminence which is by right none of his; it has even credited him with
the authorship of Shakespeare, and in its wilder moments with the
composition of all that is of supreme worth in Elizabethan literature.
It is not necessary to take these delusions seriously. The ignorance of
mediaevalism was in the habit of crediting Vergil with the construction
of the Roman aqueducts and temples whose ruins are scattered over
Europe. The modern Baconians reach much the same intellectual level.

A similar enthusiasm for knowledge and at any rate a pretence to science
belong to the author of the _Anatomy of Melancholy_, Robert Burton. His
one book is surely the most amazing in English prose. Its professed
object was simple and comprehensive; it was to analyze human melancholy,
to describe its effects, and prescribe for its removal. But as his task
grew, melancholy came to mean to Burton all the ills that flesh is heir
to. He tracked it in obscure and unsuspected forms; drew illustrations
from a range of authors so much wider than the compass of the reading
of even the most learned since, that he is generally credited with the
invention of a large part of his quotations. Ancients and moderns, poets
and prose writers, schoolmen and dramatists are all drawn upon for the
copious store of his examples; they are always cited with an air of
quietly humorous shrewdness in the comments and enclosed in a prose that
is straightforward, simple and vigorous, and can on occasion command
both rhythm and beauty of phrase. It is a mistake to regard Burton from
the point of view (due largely to Charles Lamb) of tolerant or loving
delight in quaintness for quaintness' sake. His book is anything but
scientific in form, but it is far from being the work of a recluse or a
fool. Behind his lack of system, he takes a broad and psychologically an
essentially just view of human ills, and modern medicine has gone far in
its admiration of what is at bottom a most comprehensive and subtle
treatise in diagnosis.

A writer of a very different quality is Sir Thomas Browne. Of all the
men of his time, he is the only one of whom one can say for certain that
he held the manner of saying a thing more important than the thing said.
He is our first deliberate and conscious stylist, the forerunner of
Charles Lamb, of Stevenson (whose _Virginibus Puerisque_ is modelled on
his method of treatment) and of the stylistic school of our own day. His
eloquence is too studied to rise to the greatest heights, and his
speculation, though curious and discursive, never really results in deep
thinking. He is content to embroider his pattern out of the stray
fancies of an imaginative nature. His best known work, the _Religio
Medici_, is a random confession of belief and thoughts, full of the
inconsequent speculations of a man with some knowledge of science but
not deeply or earnestly interested about it, content rather to follow
the wayward imaginations of a mind naturally gifted with a certain poetic quality, than to engage in serious intellectual exercise. Such work could never maintain its hold on taste if it were not carefully finished and constructed with elaborate care. Browne, if he was not a great writer, was a literary artist of a high quality. He exploits a quaint and lovable egoism with extraordinary skill; and though his delicately figured and latinized sentences commonly sound platitudinous and trivial when they are translated into rough Saxon prose, as they stand they are rich and melodious enough.

(4)

In a century of surpassing richness in prose and poetry, one author stands by himself. John Milton refuses to be classed with any of the schools. Though Dryden tells us Milton confessed to him that Spenser was his "original," he has no connection--other than a general similarity of purpose, moral and religious--with Spenser's followers. To the fantastics he paid in his youth the doubtful compliment of one or two half-contemptuous imitations and never touched them again. He had no turn for the love lyrics or the courtliness of the school of Jonson. In everything he did he was himself and his own master; he devised his own subjects and wrote his own style. He stands alone and must be judged alone.

No author, however, can ever escape from the influences of his time, and, just as much as his lesser contemporaries, Milton has his place in
literary history and derives from the great original impulse which set
in motion all the enterprises of the century. He is the last and
greatest figure in the English Renaissance. The new passion for art and
letters which in its earnest fumbling beginnings gave us the prose of
Cheke and Ascham and the poetry of Surrey and Sackville, comes to a full
and splendid and perfect end in his work. In it the Renaissance and the
Reformation, imperfectly fused by Sidney and Spenser, blend in their
just proportions. The transplantation into English of classical forms
which had been the aim of Sidney and the endeavour of Jonson he finally
accomplished; in his work the dream of all the poets of the
Renaissance--the heroic poem--finds its fulfilment. There was no poet of
the time but wanted to do for his country what Vergil had planned to do
for Rome, to sing its origins, and to celebrate its morality and its
citizenship in the epic form. Spenser had tried it in _The Fairy Queen_
and failed splendidly. Where he failed, Milton succeeded, though his
poem is not on the origins of England but on the ultimate subject of the
origins of mankind. We know from his notebooks that he turned over in
his mind a national subject and that the Arthurian legend for a while
appealed to him. But to Milton's earnest temper nothing that was not
true was a fit subject for poetry. It was inevitable he should lay it
aside. The Arthurian story he knew to be a myth and a myth was a lie;
the story of the Fall, on the other hand, he accepted in common with his
time for literal fact. It is to be noted as characteristic of his
confident and assured egotism that he accepted no less sincerely and
literally the imaginative structure which he himself reared on it.
However that may be, the solid fact about him is that in this
"adventurous song" with its pursuit of
"Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,"

he succeeded in his attempt, that alone among the moderns he contrived
to write an epic which stands on the same eminence as the ancient
writings of the kind, and that he found time in a life, which hardly
extended to old age as we know it, to write, besides noble lyrics and a
series of fiercely argumentative prose treatises, two other masterpieces
in the grand style, a tragedy modelled on the Greeks and a second epic
on the "compact" style of the book of Job. No English poet can compare
with him in majesty or completeness.

An adequate study of his achievement is impossible within the limits of
the few pages that are all a book like this can spare to a single
author. Readers who desire it will find it in the work of his two best
critics, Mark Pattison and Sir Walter Raleigh.[4] All that can be done
here is to call attention to some of his most striking qualities.
Foremost, of course, is the temper of the man. From the beginning he
was sure of himself and sure of his mission; he had his purpose plain
and clear. There is no mental development, hardly, visible in his work,
only training, undertaken anxiously and prayerfully and with a clearly
conceived end. He designed to write a masterpiece and he would not start
till he was ready. The first twenty years of his life were spent in
assiduous reading; for twenty more he was immersed in the dust and toil
of political conflict, using his pen and his extraordinary equipment of
learning and eloquence to defend the cause of liberty, civil and
religious, and to attack its enemies; not till he was past middle age
had he reached the leisure and the preparedness necessary to accomplish his self-imposed work. But all the time, as we know, he had it in his mind. In _Lycidas_, written in his Cambridge days, he apologizes to his readers for plucking the fruit of his poetry before it is ripe. In passage after passage in his prose works he begs for his reader's patience for a little while longer till his preparation be complete. When the time came at last for beginning he was in no doubt; in his very opening lines he intends, he says, to soar no "middle flight." This self-assured unrelenting certainty of his, carried into his prose essays in argument, produces sometimes strange results. One is peculiarly interesting to us now in view of current controversy. He was unhappily married, and because he was unhappy the law of divorce must be changed. A modern--George Eliot for instance--would have pleaded the artistic temperament and been content to remain outside the law. Milton always argued from himself to mankind at large.

[Footnote 4: "Milton," E.M.L., and "Milton" (Edward Arnold).]

In everything he did, he put forth all his strength. Each of his poems, long or short, is by itself a perfect whole, wrought complete. The reader always must feel that the planning of each is the work of conscious, deliberate, and selecting art. Milton never digresses; he never violates harmony of sound or sense; his poems have all their regular movement from quiet beginning through a rising and breaking wave of passion and splendour to quiet close. His art is nowhere better seen than in his endings.
Is it _Lycidas_? After the thunder of approaching vengeance on the hireling shepherds of the Church, comes sunset and quiet:

"And now the sun had stretch'd out all the hills,
And now was dropt into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new."

Is it _Paradise Lost_? After the agonies of expulsion and the flaming sword--

"Some natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;
The world was all before them where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide;
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way."

Is it finally _Samson Agonistes_?

"His servants he with new acquaint,
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismist,
And calm of mind all passion spent."
“Calm of mind, all passion spent,” it is the essence of Milton’s art.

He worked in large ideas and painted splendid canvases; it was necessary for him to invent a style which should be capable of sustained and lofty dignity, which should be ornate enough to maintain the interest of the reader and charm him and at the same time not so ornate as to give an air of meretricious decoration to what was largely and simply conceived. Particularly it was necessary for him to avoid those incursions of vulgar associations which words carelessly used will bring in their train. He succeeded brilliantly in this difficult task. The unit of the Miltonic style is not the phrase but the word, each word fastidiously chosen, commonly with some air of an original and lost meaning about it, and all set in a verse in which he contrived by an artful variation of pause and stress to give the variety which other writers had from rhyme. In this as in his structure he accomplished what the Renaissance had only dreamed. Though he had imitators (the poetic diction of the age following is modelled on him) he had no followers. No one has been big enough to find his secret since.

CHAPTER V

THE AGE OF GOOD SENSE

The student of literature, when he passes in his reading from the age of Shakespeare and Milton to that of Dryden and Pope, will be conscious of
certain sharply defined differences between the temper and styles of
the writers of the two periods. If besides being a student of literature
he is also (for this is a different thing) a student of literary
criticism he will find that these differences have led to the affixing
of certain labels—that the school to which writers of the former period
belong is called "Romantic" and that of the latter "Classic," this
"Classic" school being again overthrown towards the end of the
eighteenth century by a set of writers who unlike the Elizabethans gave
the name "Romantic" to themselves. What is he to understand by these two
labels; what are the characteristics of "Classicism" and how far is it
opposite to and conflicting with "Romanticism"? The question is
difficult because the names are used vaguely and they do not adequately
cover everything that is commonly put under them. It would be difficult,
for instance, to find anything in Ben Jonson which proclaims him as
belonging to a different school from Dryden, and perhaps the same could
be said in the second and self-styled period of Romanticism of the work
of Crabbe. But in the main the differences are real and easily visible,
even though they hardly convince us that the names chosen are the
happiest that could be found by way of description.

This period of Dryden and Pope on which we are now entering sometimes
styled itself the Augustan Age of English poetry. It grounded its claim
to classicism on a fancied resemblance to the Roman poets of the golden
age of Latin poetry, the reign of the Emperor Augustus. Its authors saw
themselves each as a second Vergil, a second Ovid, most of all a second
Horace, and they believed that their relation to the big world, their
assured position in society, heightened the resemblances. They
endeavoured to form their poetry on the lines laid down in the critical
writing of the original Augustan age as elaborated and interpreted in
Renaissance criticism. It was tacitly assumed--some of them openly
asserted it--that the kinds, modes of treatment and all the minor
details of literature, figures of speech, use of epithets and the rest,
had been settled by the ancients once and for all. What the Greeks began
the critics and authors of the time of Augustus had settled in its
completed form, and the scholars of the Renaissance had only interpreted
their findings for modern use. There was the tragedy, which had certain
proper parts and a certain fixed order of treatment laid down for it;
there was the heroic poem, which had a story or "fable," which must be
treated in a certain fixed manner, and so on. The authors of the
"Classic" period so christened themselves because they observed these
rules. And they fancied that they had the temper of the Augustan
time--the temper displayed in the works of Horace more than in those of
any one else--its urbanity, its love of good sense and moderation, its
instinctive distrust of emotion, and its invincible good breeding. If
you had asked them to state as simply and broadly as possible their
purpose they would have said it was to follow nature, and if you had
enquired what they meant by nature it would turn out that they thought
of it mainly as the opposite of art and the negation of what was
fantastic, tortured, or far sought in thinking or writing. The later
"Romantic" Revival, when it called itself a return to nature, was only
claiming the intention which the classical school itself had proclaimed
as its main endeavour. The explanation of that paradox we shall see
presently; in the meantime it is worth looking at some of the
characteristics of classicism as they appear in the work of the
"Classic" authors.
In the first place the "Classic" writers aimed at simplicity of style, at a normal standard of writing. They were intolerant of individual eccentricities; they endeavoured, and with success, to infuse into English letters something of the academic spirit that was already controlling their fellow-craftsmen in France. For this end amongst others they and the men of science founded the Royal Society, an academic committee which has been restricted since to the physical and natural sciences and been supplemented by similar bodies representing literature and learning only in our own day. Clearness, plainness, conversational ease and directness were the aims the society set before its members where their writing was concerned. "The Royal Society," wrote the Bishop of Rochester, its first historian, "have exacted from all their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear sense, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can; and preferring the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants before that of wits and scholars."

Artisans, countrymen, and merchants--the ideal had been already accepted in France, Malesherbes striving to use no word that was not in the vocabulary of the day labourers of Paris, Moliere making his washerwoman first critic of his comedies. It meant for England the disuse of the turgidities and involutions which had marked the prose of the preachers and moralists of the times of James and Charles I.; scholars and men of letters were arising who would have taken John Bunyan, the unlettered tinker of Bedford, for their model rather than the learned physician Sir Thomas Browne.
But genius like Bunyan's apart, there is nothing in the world more
difficult than to write with the easy and forthright simplicity of talk,
as any one may see who tries for himself—or even compares the
letter-writing with the conversation of his friends. So that this desire
of simplicity, of clarity, of lucidity led at once to a more deliberate
art. Dryden and Swift and Addison were assiduous in their labour with
the file; they excel all their predecessors in polish as much as the
writers of the first Augustan age excelled theirs in the same quality.
Not that it was all the result of deliberate art; in a way it was in the
air, and quite unlearned people—journalists and pamphleteers and the
like who wrote unconsciously and hurriedly to buy their supper—partook
of it as well as leisured people and conscious artists. Defoe is as
plain and easy and polished as Swift, yet it is certain his amazing
activity and productiveness never permitted him to look back over a
sentence he had written. Something had happened, that is, to the English
language. The assimilation of Latinisms and the revival of obsolete
terms of speech had ceased; it had become finally a more or less fixed
form, shedding so much of its imports as it had failed to make part of
itself and acquiring a grammatical and syntactical fixity which it had
not possessed in Elizabethan times. When Shakespeare wrote

"What cares these roarers for the name of king."

he was using, as students of his language never tire of pointing out to
us, a perfectly correct local grammatical form. Fifty years after that
line was written, at the Restoration, local forms had dropped out of
written English. We had acquired a normal standard of language, and
either genius or labour was polishing it for literary uses.

What they did for prose these "Classic" writers did even more
exactly--and less happily--for verse. Fashions often become exaggerated
before their disappearance, and the decadence of Elizabethan romanticism
had produced poetry the wildness and extravagance of whose images was
well-nigh unbounded. The passion for intricate and far-sought metaphor
which had possessed Donne was accompanied in his work and even more in
that of his followers with a passion for what was elusive and recondite
in thought and emotion and with an increasing habit of rudeness and
wilful difficultness in language and versification. Against these
ultimate licences of a great artistic period, the classical writers
invoked the qualities of smoothness and lucidity, in the same way, so
they fancied, as Vergil might have invoked them against Lucretius. In
the treatment of thought and feeling they wanted clearness, they wanted
ideas which the mass of men would readily apprehend and assent to, and
they wanted not hints or half-spoken suggestions but complete statement.
In the place of the logical subtleties which Donne and his school had
sought in the scholastic writers of the Middle Ages, they brought back
the typically Renaissance study of rhetoric; the characteristic of all
the poetry of the period is that it has a rhetorical quality. It is
never intimate and never profound, but it has point and wit, and it
appeals with confidence to the balanced judgment which men who distrust
emotion and have no patience with subtleties intellectual, emotional, or
merely verbal, have in common. Alongside of this lucidity, this air of
complete statement in substance they strove for and achieved smoothness
in form. To the poet Waller, the immediate predecessor of Dryden, the classical writers themselves ascribed the honour of the innovation. In fact Waller was only carrying out the ideals counselled and followed by Ben Jonson. It was in the school of Waller and Dryden and not in that of the minor writers who called themselves his followers that he came to his own.

What then are the main differences between classicism of the best period--the classicism whose characteristics we have been describing--and the Romanticism which came before and after? In the first place we must put the quality we have described as that of complete statement. Classical poetry is, so to speak, "all there." Its meaning is all of it on the surface; it conveys nothing but what it says, and what it says, it says completely. It is always vigorous and direct, often pointed and aphoristic, never merely suggestive, never given to half statement, and never obscure. You feel that as an instrument of expression it is sharp and polished and shining; it is always bright and defined in detail. The Great Romantics go to work in other ways. Their poetry is a thing of half lights and half spoken suggestions, of hints that imagination will piece together, of words that are charged with an added meaning of sound over sense, a thing that stirs the vague and impalpable restlessness of memory or terror or desire that lies down beneath in the minds of men. It rouses what a philosopher has called the "Transcendental feeling," the solemn sense of the immediate presence of "that which was and is and ever shall be," to induce which is the property of the highest poetry. You will find nothing in classical poetry so poignant or highly wrought as Webster's
"Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young,"

and the answer,

"I think not so: her infelicity
Seemed to have years too many,"

or so subtle in its suggestion, sense echoing back to primeval terrors
and despairs, as this from _Macbeth_: 

"Stones have been known to move and trees to speak;
Augurs and understood relations have
By magot-pies, and choughs, and rooks brought forth
The secret'st man of blood."

or so intoxicating to the imagination and the senses as an ode of Keats
or a sonnet by Rossetti. But you will find eloquent and pointed
statements of thoughts and feelings that are common to most of us--the
expression of ordinary human nature--

"What oft was thought but ne'er so well exprest,"

"Wit and fine writing" consisting, as Addison put it in a review of
Pope's first published poem, not so much "in advancing things that are new, as in giving things that are known an agreeable turn."

Though in this largest sense the "classic" writers eschewed the vagueness of romanticism, in another and more restricted way they cultivated it. They were not realists as all good romanticists have to be. They had no love for oddities or idiosyncrasies or exceptions. They loved uniformity, they had no use for truth in detail. They liked the broad generalised, descriptive style of Milton, for instance, better than the closely packed style of Shakespeare, which gets its effects from a series of minute observations huddled one after the other and giving the reader, so to speak, the materials for his own impression, rather than rendering, as does Milton, the expression itself.

Every literary discovery hardens ultimately into a convention; it has its day and then its work is done, and it has to be destroyed so that the ascending spirit of humanity can find a better means of self-expression. Out of the writing which aimed at simplicity and truth to nature grew "Poetic Diction," a special treasury of words and phrases deemed suitable for poetry, providing poets with a common stock of imagery, removing from them the necessity of seeing life and nature each one for himself. The poetry which Dryden and Pope wrought out of their mental vigour, their followers wrote to pattern. Poetry became reduced, as it never was before and has never been since, to a formula. The Elizabethan sonneteers, as we saw, used a vocabulary and phraseology in common with their fellows in Italy and France, and none the less produced fine poetry. But they used it to express things they really
felt. The truth is it is not the fact of a poetic diction which matters
so much as its quality—whether it squares with sincerity, whether it is
capable of expressing powerfully and directly one's deepest feelings.
The history of literature can show poetic dictions—special vocabularies
and forms for poetry—that have these qualities; the diction, for
instance, of the Greek choruses, or of the Scottish poets who followed
Chaucer, or of the troubadours. That of the classic writers of an
Augustan age was not of such a kind. Words clothe thought; poetic
diction had the artifice of the crinoline; it would stand by itself. The
Romantics in their return to nature had necessarily to abolish it.

But when all is said in criticism the poetry of the earlier half of the
eighteenth century excels all other English poetry in two respects. Two
qualities belong to it by virtue of the metre in which it is most of it
written—rapidity and antithesis. Its antithesis made it an incomparable
vehicle for satire, its rapidity for narrative. Outside its limits we
have hardly any even passable satirical verse; within them there are
half-a-dozen works of the highest excellence in this kind. And if we
except Chaucer, there is no one else in the whole range of English
poetry who have the narrative gift so completely as the classic poets.
Bentleys will always exist who will assure us with civility that Pope's
_Homer_., though "very pretty," bears little relation to the Greek, and
that Dryden's _Vergil_., though vigorous and virile, is a poor
representation of its original. The truth remains that for a reader who
knows no ancient languages either of those translations will probably
give a better idea of their originals than any other rendering in
English that we possess. The foundation of their method has been
vindicated in the best modern translations from the Greek.

(2)

The term "eighteenth century" in the vocabulary of the literary historian is commonly as vaguely used as the term Elizabethan. It borrows as much as forty years from the seventeenth and gives away ten to the nineteenth. The whole of the work of Dryden, whom we must count as the first of the "classic" school, was accomplished before chronologically it had begun. As a man and as an author he was very intimately related to his changing times; he adapted himself to them with a versatility as remarkable as that of the Vicar of Bray, and, it may be added, as simple-minded. He mourned in verse the death of Cromwell and the death of his successor, successively defended the theological positions of the Church of England and the Church of Rome, changed his religion and became Poet Laureate to James II., and acquiesced with perfect equanimity in the Revolution which brought in his successor. This instability of conviction, though it gave a handle to his opponents in controversy, does not appear to have caused any serious scandal or disgust among his contemporaries, and it has certainly had little effect on the judgment of later times. It has raised none of the reproaches which have been cast at the suspected apostasy of Wordsworth. Dryden had little interest in political or religious questions; his instinct, one must conceive, was to conform to the prevailing mode and to trouble himself no further about the matter. Defoe told the truth about him when he wrote that "Dryden might have been told his fate that, having his extraordinary genius slung and
pitched upon a swivel, it would certainly turn round as fast as the times, and instruct him how to write elegies to Oliver Cromwell and King Charles the Second with all the coherence imaginable; how to write _Religio Laici_ and the _Hind and the Panther_ and yet be the same man, every day to change his principle, change his religion, change his coat, change his master, and yet never change his nature.” He never changed his nature, he was as free from cynicism as a barrister who represents successively opposing parties in suits or politics; and when he wrote polemics in prose or verse he lent his talents as a barrister lends his for a fee. His one intellectual interest was in his art, and it is in his comments on his art—the essays and prefaces in the composition of which he amused the leisure left in the busy life of a dramatist and a poet of officialdom—that his most charming and delicate work is to be found. In a way they begin modern English prose; earlier writing furnishes no equal to their colloquial ease and the grace of their expression. And they contain some of the most acute criticism in our language—“classical” in its tone (_i.e._, with a preference for conformity) but with its respect for order and tradition always tempered by good sense and wit, and informed and guided throughout by a taste whose catholicity and sureness was unmatched in the England of his time. The preface to his _Fables_ contains some excellent notes on Chaucer. They may be read as a sample of the breadth and perspicuity of his critical perceptions.

His chief poetical works were most of them occasional—designed either to celebrate some remarkable event or to take a side and interpret a policy in the conflict, political or religious, of the time.
_Absalom and Achitophel_ and _The Medal_ were levelled at the Shaftesbury-Monmouth intrigues in the closing years of Charles II. _Religio Laici_ celebrated the excellence of the Church of England in its character of _via media_ between the opposite extravagances of Papacy and Presbyterianism. _The Hind and the Panther_ found this perfection spotted. The Church of England has become the Panther, whose coat is a varied pattern of heresy and truth beside the spotless purity of the Hind, the Church of Rome. _Astrea Reddux_ welcomed the returning Charles; _Annus Mirabilis_ commemorated a year of fire and victories.

Besides these he wrote many dramas in verse, a number of translations, and some shorter poems, of which the odes are the most remarkable.

His qualities as a poet fitted very exactly the work he set himself to do. His work is always plain and easily understood; he had a fine faculty for narration, and the vigorous rapidity and point of his style enabled him to sketch a character or sum up a dialectical position very surely and effectively. His writing has a kind of spare and masculine force about it. It is this vigour and the impression which he gives of intellectual strength and of a logical grasp of his subject, that beyond question has kept alive work which, if ever poetry was, was ephemeral in its origin. The careers of the unscrupulous Caroline peers would have been closed for us were they not visible in the reflected light of his denunciation of them. Though Buckingham is forgotten and Shaftesbury's name swallowed up in that of his more philanthropic descendant, we can read of Achitophel and Zimri still, and feel something of the strength and heat which he caught from a fiercely fought conflict and transmitted with his own gravity and purposefulness into verse. The Thirty-nine
Articles are not a proper subject for poetry, but the sustained and serious allegory which Dryden weaves round theological discussion preserves his treatment of them from the fate of the controversialists who opposed him. His work has wit and vitality enough to keep it sweet.

Strength and wit enter in different proportions into the work of his successor, Alexander Pope--a poet whom admirers in his own age held to be the greatest in our language. No one would think of making such a claim now, but the detraction which he suffered at the hands of Wordsworth and the Romantics, ought not to make us forget that Pope, though not our greatest, not even perhaps a great, poet is incomparably our most brilliant versifier. Dryden's strength turns in his work into something more fragile and delicate, polished with infinite care like lacquer, and wrought like filigree work to the last point of conscious and perfected art. He was not a great thinker; the thoughts which he embodies in his philosophical poems--the _Essay on Man_ and the rest, are almost ludicrously out of proportion to the solemnity of the titles which introduce them, nor does he except very rarely get beyond the conceptions common to the average man when he attempts introspection or meditates on his own destiny. The reader in search of philosophy will find little to stimulate him and in the facile Deism of the time probably something to smile at. Pope has no message to us now. But he will find views current in his time or borrowed from other authors put with perfect felicity and wit, and he will recognize the justice of Addison's comment that Pope's wit and fine writing consist "not so much in advancing things that are new, as in giving things that are known an agreeable turn." And he will not fall into the error of dubbing the
author a minor poet because he is neither subtle nor imaginative nor profound. A great poet would not have written like Pope—one must grant it; but a minor poet could not.

It is characteristic of Pope's type of mind and kind of art that there is no development visible in his work. Other poets, Shakespeare, for instance, and Keats, have written work of the highest quality when they were young, but they have had crudenesses to shed—things to get rid of as their strength and perceptions grew. But Pope, like Minerva, was full grown and full armed from the beginning. If we did not know that his _Essay on Criticism_ was his first poem it would be impossible to place it in the canon of his work; it might come in anywhere and so might everything else that he wrote. From the beginning his craftsmanship was perfect; from the beginning he took his subject-matter from others as he found it and worked it up into aphorism and epigram till each line shone like a cut jewel and the essential commonplaceness and poverty of his material was obscured by the glitter the craftsmanship lent to it.

Subject apart, however, he was quite sure of his medium from the beginning; it was not long before he found the way to use it to most brilliant purpose. _The Rape of the Lock_ and the satirical poems come later in his career.

As a satirist Pope, though he did not hit so hard as Dryden, struck more deftly and probed deeper. He wielded a rapier where the other used a broadsword, and though both used their weapons with the highest skill and the metaphor must not be imagined to impute clumsiness to Dryden, the rapier made the cleaner cut. Both employed a method in satire which
their successors (a poor set) in England have not been intelligent enough to use. They allow every possible good point to the object of their attack. They appear to deal him an even and regretful justice. His good points, they put it in effect, being so many, how much blacker and more deplorable his meannesses and faults! They do not do this out of charity; there was very little of the milk of human kindness in Pope. Deformity in his case, as in so many in truth and fiction, seemed to bring envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness in its train. The method is employed simply because it gives the maximum satirical effect. That is why Pope's epistle to Arbuthnot, with its characterisation of Addison, is the most damming piece of invective in our language.

_The Rape of the Lock_ is an exquisite piece of workmanship, breathing the very spirit of the time. You can fancy it like some clock made by one of the Louis XIV. craftsmen, encrusted with a heap of ormolu mock-heroics and impertinences and set perfectly to the time of day. From no other poem could you gather so fully and perfectly the temper of the society in which our "classic" poetry was brought to perfection, its elegant assiduity in trifles, its brilliant artifice, its paint and powder and patches and high-heeled shoes, its measured strutting walk in life as well as in verse. _The Rape of the Lock_ is a mock-heroic poem; that is to say it applies the form and treatment which the "classic" critics of the seventeenth century had laid down as belonging to the "heroic" or "epic" style to a trifling circumstance--the loss by a young lady of fashion of a lock of hair. And it is the one instance in which this "recipe" for a heroic poem which the French critics handed on to Dryden, and Dryden left to his descendants, has been used well-enough to
keep the work done with it in memory. In a way it condemns the poetical
type of the time; when forms are fixed, new writing is less likely to
be creative and more likely to exhaust itself in the ingenious but
trifling exercises of parody and burlesque. _The Rape of the Lock_ is
brilliant but it is only play.

The accepted theory which assumed that the forms of poetry had been
settled in the past and existed to be applied, though it concerned
itself mainly with the ancient writers, included also two moderns in its
scope. You were orthodox if you wrote tragedy and epic as Horace told
you and satire as he had shown you; you were also orthodox if you wrote
in the styles of Spenser or Milton. Spenser, though his predecessors
were counted barbaric and his followers tortured and obscure, never fell
out of admiration; indeed in every age of English poetry after him the
greatest poet in it is always to be found copying him or expressing
their love for him—Milton declaring to Dryden that Spenser was his
"original," Pope reading and praising him, Keats writing his earliest
work in close imitation. His characteristic style and stanza were
recognised by the classic school as a distinct "kind" of poetry which
might be used where the theme fitted instead of the heroic manner, and
Spensian imitations abound. Sometimes they are serious; sometimes,
like Shenstone's _Schoolmistress_, they are mocking and another
illustration of the dangerous ease with which a conscious and sustained
effort to write in a fixed and acquired style runs to seed in burlesque.
Milton's fame never passed through the period of obscurity that
sometimes has been imagined for him. He had the discerning admiration of
Dryden and others before his death. But to Addison belongs the credit of
introducing him to the writers of this time; his papers in the _Spectator_ on _Paradise Lost_, with their eulogy of its author’s sublimity, spurred the interest of the poets among his readers. From Milton the eighteenth century got the chief and most ponderous part of its poetic diction, high-sounding periphrases and borrowings from Latin used without the gravity and sincerity and fullness of thought of the master who brought them in. When they wrote blank verse, the classic poets wrote it in the Milton manner.

The use of these two styles may be studied in the writings of one man, James Thomson. For besides acquiring a kind of anonymous immortality with patriots as the author of "Rule, Britannia," Thomson wrote two poems respectively in the Spenserian and the Miltonic manner, the former _The Castle of Indolence_, the latter _The Seasons_. The Spenserian manner is caught very effectively, but the adoption of the style of _Paradise Lost_, with its allusiveness, circumlocution and weight, removes any freshness the _Seasons_ might have had, had the circumstances in them been put down as they were observed. As it is, hardly anything is directly named; birds are always the "feathered tribe" and everything else has a similar polite generality for its title. Thomson was a simple-minded man, with a faculty for watching and enjoying nature which belonged to few in his sophisticated age; it is unfortunate he should have spent his working hours in rendering the fruit of country rambles freshly observed into a cold and stilted diction. It suited the eighteenth century reader well, for not understanding nature herself he was naturally obliged to read her in translations.
The chief merits of "classic" poetry--its clearness, its vigour, its direct statement--are such as belong theoretically rather to prose than to poetry. In fact, it was in prose that the most vigorous intellect of the time found itself. We have seen how Dryden, reversing the habit of other poets, succeeded in expressing his personality not in poetry which was his vocation, but in prose which was the amusement of his leisure hours. Spenser had put his politics into prose and his ideals into verse; Dryden wrote his politics--to order--in verse, and in prose set down the thoughts and fancies which were the deepest part of him because they were about his art. The metaphor of parentage, though honoured by use, fits badly on to literary history; none the less the tradition which describes him as the father of modern English prose is very near the truth. He puts into practice for the first time the ideals, described in the first chapter of this book, which were set up by the scholars who let into English the light of the Renaissance. With the exception of the dialogue on Dramatic Poesy, his work is almost all of it occasional, the fruit of the mood of a moment, and written rather in the form of a _causerie_, a kind of informal talk, than of a considered essay. And it is all couched in clear, flowing, rather loosely jointed English, carefully avoiding rhetoric and eloquence and striving always to reproduce the ease and flow of cultured conversation, rather than the tighter, more closely knit style of consciously "literary" prose. His methods were the methods of the four great prose-writers who followed him--Defoe, Addison, Steele, and Swift.
Of these Defoe was the eldest and in some ways the most remarkable. He has been called the earliest professional author in our language, and if that is not strictly true, he is at any rate the earliest literary journalist. His output of work was enormous; he wrote on any and every subject; there was no event whether in politics or letters or discovery but he was not ready with something pat on it before the public interest faded. It followed that at a time when imprisonment, mutilation, and the pillory took the place of our modern libel actions he had an adventurous career. In politics he followed the Whig cause and served the Government with his pen, notably by his writings in support of the union with Scotland, in which he won over the Scots by his description of the commercial advantage which would follow the abolition of the border.

This line of argument, taken at a time when the governing of political tendencies by commercial interests was by no means the accepted commonplace it is now, proves him a man of an active and original mind. His originality, indeed, sometimes over-reaching the comprehension both of the public and his superiors; he was imprisoned for an attack on the Hanoverian succession, which was intended ironically; apparently he was ignorant of what every journalist ought to know that irony is at once the most dangerous and the most ineffectual weapon in the whole armoury of the press. The fertility and ingenuity of his intellect may be best gauged by the number of modern enterprises and contrivances that are foreshadowed in his work. Here are a few, all utterly unknown in his own day, collected by a student of his works; a Board of Trade register for seamen; factories for goods: agricultural credit banks; a commission of enquiry into bankruptcy; and a system of national poor relief. They show
him to have been an independent and courageous thinker where social questions were concerned.

He was nearly sixty before he had published his first novel, _Robinson Crusoe_, the book by which he is universally known, and on which with the seven other novels which followed it the foundation of his literary fame rests. But his earlier works--they are reputed to number over two hundred--possess no less remarkable literary qualities. It is not too much to say that all the gifts which are habitually recommended for cultivation by those who aspire to journalistic success are to be found in his prose. He has in the first place the gift of perfect lucidity no matter how complicated the subject he is expounding; such a book as his _Complete English Tradesman_ is full of passages in which complex and difficult subject-matter is set forth so plainly and clearly that the least literate of his readers could have no doubt of his understanding it. He has also an amazingly exact acquaintance with the technicalities of all kinds of trades and professions; none of our writers, not even Shakespeare, shows half such a knowledge of the circumstances of life among different ranks and conditions of men; none of them has realized with such fidelity how so many different persons lived and moved. His gift of narrative and description is masterly, as readers of his novels know (we shall have to come back to it in discussing the growth of the English novel); several of his works show him to have been endowed with a fine faculty of psychological observation. Without the least consciousness of the value of what he was writing, nor indeed with any deliberate artistic intention, he made himself one of the masters of English prose.
Defoe had been the champion of the Whigs; on the Tory side the ablest pen was that of Jonathan Swift. His works proclaim him to have had an intellect less wide in its range than that of his antagonist but more vigorous and powerful. He wrote, too, more carefully. In his youth he had been private secretary to Sir William Temple, a writer now as good as forgotten because of the triviality of his matter, but in his day esteemed because of the easy urbanity and polish of his prose. From him Swift learned the labour of the file, and he declared in later life that it was "generally believed that this author has advanced our English tongue to as great a perfection as it can well bear." In fact he added to the ease and cadences he had learned from Temple qualities of vigour and directness of his own which put his work far above his master's. And he dealt with more important subject-matter than the academic exercises on which Temple exercised his fastidious and meticulous powers of revision.

In temperament he is opposed to all the writers of his time. There is no doubt but there was some radical disorder in his system; brain disease clouded his intellect in his old age, and his last years were death in life; right through his life he was a savagely irritable, sardonic, dark and violent man, impatient of the slightest contradiction or thwarting, and given to explosive and instantaneous rage. He delighted in flouting convention, gloried in outraging decency. The rage, which, as he said himself, tore his heart out, carried him to strange excesses. There is something ironical (he would himself have appreciated it) in the popularity of _Gulliver's Travels_ as a children's book--that ascending
wave of savagery and satire which overwhelms policy and learning to
break against the ultimate citadel of humanity itself. In none of his
contemporaries (except perhaps in the sentimentalities of Steele) can
one detect the traces of emotion; to read Swift is to be conscious of
intense feeling on almost every page. The surface of his style may be
smooth and equable but the central fires of passion are never far
beneath, and through cracks and fissures come intermittent bursts of
flame. Defoe's irony is so measured and studiously commonplace that
perhaps those who imprisoned him because they believed him to be serious
are hardly to be blamed; Swift's quivers and reddens with anger in every
line.

But his pen seldom slips from the strong grasp of his controlling art.
The extraordinary skill and closeness of his allegorical
writings--unmatched in their kind--is witness to the care and sustained
labour which went to their making. He is content with no general
correspondences; his allegory does not fade away into a story in which
only the main characters have a secondary significance; the minutest
circumstances have a bearing in the satire and the moral. In _The Tale
of a Tub_ and in _Gulliver's Travels_--particularly in the former--the
multitude as well as the aptness of the parallels between the imaginary
narrative and the facts it is meant to represent is unrivalled in works
of the kind. Only the highest mental powers, working with intense
fervour and concentration, could have achieved the sustained brilliancy
of the result. "What a genius I had when I wrote that book!" Swift is
said to have exclaimed in his old age when he re-read _The Tale of a
Tub_, and certainly the book is a marvel of constructive skill, all the
more striking because it makes allegory out of history and consequently
is denied that freedom of narrative so brilliantly employed in the
_Travels_.

Informing all his writings too, besides intense feeling and an
omnipresent and controlling art, is strong common sense. His aphorisms,
both those collected under the heading of _Thoughts on Various
Subjects_, and countless others scattered up and down his pages, are a
treasury of sound, if a little sardonic, practical wisdom. His most
insistent prejudices foreshadow in their essential sanity and justness
those of that great master of life, Dr. Johnson. He could not endure
over-politeness, a vice which must have been very oppressive in society
of his day. He savagely resented and condemned a display of
affection--particularly marital affection--in public. In an age when it
was the normal social system of settling quarrels, he condemned
duelling; and he said some very wise things--things that might still be
said--on modern education. In economics he was as right-hearted as
Ruskin and as wrong-headed. Carlyle, who was in so many respects an echo
of him, found in a passage in his works a "dim anticipation" of his
philosophy of clothes.

The leading literary invention of the period--after that of the heroic
couplet for verse--was the prose periodical essay. Defoe, it is hardly
necessary to say, began it; it was his nature to be first with any new
thing: but its establishment as a prevailing literary mode is due to two
authors, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Of the two famous
series--the _Tatler_ and the _Spectator_--for which they were both
responsible, Steele must take the first credit; he began them, and
though Addison came in and by the deftness and lightness of his writing
took the lion's share of their popularity, both the plan and the
characters round whom the bulk of the essays in the _Spectator_ came to
revolve was the creation of his collaborator. Steele we know very
intimately from his own writings and from Thackeray's portrait of him.
He was an emotional, full-blooded kind of man, reckless and dissipated
but fundamentally honest and good-hearted--a type very common in his day
as the novels show, but not otherwise to be found in the ranks of its
writers. What there is of pathos and sentiment, and most of what there
is of humour in the _Tatler_ and the _Spectator_ are his. And he created
the _dramatis personae_ out of whose adventures the slender thread of
continuity which binds the essays together is woven. Addison, though
less open to the onslaughts of the conventional moralist, was a less
lovable personality. Constitutionally endowed with little vitality, he
suffered mentally as well as bodily from languor and lassitude. His
lack of enthusiasm, his cold-blooded formalism, caused comment even in
an age which prided itself in self-command and decorum.

His very malevolence proceeded from a flaccidity which meanly envied the
activities and enthusiasms of other men. As a writer he was superficial;
he had not the requisite energy for forming a clear or profound judgment
on any question of difficulty; Johnson's comment, "He thinks justly but
he thinks faintly" sums up the truth about him. His good qualities were
of a slighter kind than Swift's; he was a quiet and accurate observer of
manners and fashions in life and conversation, and he had the gift of a
style--what Johnson calls "The Middle Style"--very exactly suited to the
kind of work on which he was habitually engaged, "always equable, always
easy, without glowing words or pointed sentences" but polished, lucid,
and urbane.

Steele and Addison were conscious moralists as well as literary men.
They desired to purge society from Restoration licences; to their
efforts we must credit the alteration in morality which _The School for
Scandal_ shows over _The Way of the World_. Their professed object as
they stated themselves was "to banish vice and ignorance out of the
territories of Great Britain, (nothing less!) and to bring philosophy
out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs
and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee-houses." In fact their satires
were politically nearer home, and the chief objects of their aversion
were the Tory squires whom it was their business as Whigs to deride. On
the Coverley papers in the _Spectator_ rests the chief part of their
literary fame; these belong rather to the special history of the novel
than to that of the periodical essay.

CHAPTER VI

DR. JOHNSON AND HIS TIME

By 1730 the authors whose work made the "classic" school in England were
dead or had ceased writing; by the same date Samuel Johnson had begun
his career as a man of letters. The difference between the period of his
maturity and the period we have been examining is not perhaps easy to
define; but it exists and it can be felt unmistakably in reading. For
one thing "Classicism" had become completely naturalized; it had ceased
to regard the French as arbiters of elegance and literary taste; indeed
Johnson himself never spoke of them without disdain and hated them as
much as he hated Scotsmen. Writing, like dress and the common way of
life, became plainer and graver and thought stronger and deeper. In
manners and speech something of the brutalism which was at the root of
the English character at the time began to colour the refinement of the
preceding age. Dilettantism gave way to learning and speculation; in the
place of Bolingbroke came Adam Smith; in the place of Addison, Johnson.
In a way it is the solidest and sanest time in English letters. Yet in
the midst of its urbanity and order forces were gathering for its
destruction. The ballad-mongers were busy; Blake was drawing and
rhyming; Burns was giving songs and lays to his country-side. In the
distance--Johnson could not hear them--sounded, like the horns of
elf-land faintly blowing, the trumpet calls of romance.

If the whole story of Dr. Johnson's life were the story of his published
books it would be very difficult to understand his pre-eminent and
symbolic position in literary history. His best known work--it still
remains so--was his dictionary, and dictionaries, for all the licence
they give and Johnson took for the expression of a personality, are the
business of purely mechanical talents. A lesser man than he might have
cheated us of such delights as the definitions of "oats," or "net" or
"pension," but his book would certainly have been no worse as a book. In
his early years he wrote two satires in verse in imitation of Juvenal;
they were followed later by two series of periodical essays on the model
of the _Spectator_; neither of them—the _Rambler_ nor the _Idler_—were at all successful. _Rasselas_, a tale with a purpose, is melancholy reading; the _Journey to the Western Hebrides_ has been utterly eclipsed by Boswell’s livelier and more human chronicle of the same events. The _Lives of the Poets_, his greatest work, was composed with pain and difficulty when he was seventy years old; even it is but a quarry from which a reader may dig the ore of a sound critical judgment summing up a life’s reflection, out of the grit and dust of perfunctory biographical compilations. There was hardly one of the literary coterie over which he presided that was not doing better and more lasting work. Nothing that Johnson wrote is to be compared, for excellence in its own manner, with _Tom Jones_ or the _Vicar of Wakefield_ or the _Citizen of the World_. He produced nothing in writing approaching the magnitude of Gibbon’s _Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire_, or the profundity of Burke’s philosophy of politics. Even Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose main business was painting and not the pen, was almost as good an author as he; his _Discourses_ have little to fear when they are set beside Johnson’s essays. Yet all these men recognised him as their guide and leader; the spontaneous selection of such a democratic assembly as men of genius in a tavern fixed upon him as chairman, and we in these later days, who are safe from the overpowering force of personality and presence—or at least can only know of it reflected in books—instinctively recognize him as the greatest man of his age. What is the reason?

Johnson’s pre-eminence is the pre-eminence of character. He was a great moralist; he summed up in himself the tendencies of thought and
literature of his time and excelled all others in his grasp of them; and
he was perhaps more completely than any one else in the whole history of
English literature, the typical Englishman. He was one of those to whom
is applicable the commonplace that he was greater than his books. It is
the fashion nowadays among some critics to speak of his biographer
Boswell as if he were a novelist or a playwright and to classify the
Johnson we know with Hamlet and Don Quixote as the product of creative
or imaginative art, working on a "lost original." No exercise of
critical ingenuity could be more futile or impertinent. The impression
of the solidity and magnitude of Johnson's character which is to be
gathered from Boswell is enforced from other sources; from his essays
and his prayers and meditations, from the half-dozen or so lives and
reminiscences which were published in the years following his death
(their very number establishing the reverence with which he was
regarded), from the homage of other men whose genius their books leave
indisputable. Indeed the Johnson we know from Boswell, though it is the
broadest and most masterly portrait in the whole range of biography,
gives less than the whole magnitude of the man. When Boswell first met
him at the age of twenty-two, Johnson was fifty-four. His long period of
poverty and struggle was past. His _Dictionary_ and all his works except
the _Lives of the Poets_ were behind him; a pension from the Crown had
established him in security for his remaining years; his position was
universally acknowledged. So that though the portrait in the _Life_ is a
full-length study of Johnson the conversationalist and literary
dictator, the proportion it preserves is faulty and its study of the
early years--the years of poverty, of the _Vanity of Human Wishes_ and
_London_, of _Rasselas_, which he wrote to pay the expenses of his
mother's funeral, is slight.
It was, however, out of the bitterness and struggle of these early years that the strength and sincerity of character which carried Johnson surely and tranquilly through the time of his triumph were derived. From the beginning he made no compromise with the world and no concession to fashion. The world had to take him at his own valuation or not at all. He never deviated one hair's breadth from the way he had chosen. Judged by the standards of journalistic success, the _Rambler_ could not well be worse than he made it. Compared with the lightness and gaiety and the mere lip-service to morality of Addison its edification is ponderous. Both authors state the commonplaces of conduct, but Addison achieves lightness in the doing of it, and his manner by means of which platitudes are stated lightly and pointedly and with an air of novelty, is the classic manner of journalism. Johnson goes heavily and directly to the point, handling well worn moral themes in general and dogmatic language without any attempt to enliven them with an air of discovery or surprise. Yet they were, in a sense, discoveries to him; not one of them but was deeply and sincerely felt; not one but is not a direct and to us a pathetically dispassionate statement of the reflection of thirty years of grinding poverty and a soul's anguish. Viewed in the light of his life, the _Rambler_ is one of the most moving of books. If its literary value is slight it is a document in character.

So that when he came to his own, when gradually the public whom he despised and neglected raised him into a pontifical position matched by none before him in England and none since save Carlyle, he was sure of himself; success did not spoil him. His judgment was unwarped by
flattery. The almost passionate tenderness and humanity which lay beneath his gruffness was undimmed. His personality triumphed in all the fullness and richness which had carried it in integrity through his years of struggle. For over twenty years from his chair in taverns in the Strand and Fleet Street he ruled literary London, imposed his critical principles on the great body of English letters, and by his talk and his friendships became the embodiment of the literary temperament of his age.

His talk as it is set down by Boswell is his best monument. It was the happiest possible fate that threw those two men together, for Boswell besides being an admirer and reporter sedulously chronicling all his master said and did, fortunately influenced both the saying and the doing. Most of us have some one in whose company we best shine, who puts our wits on their mettle and spurs us to our greatest readiness and vivacity. There is no doubt that Boswell, for all his assumed humility and for all Johnson's affected disdain, was just such a companion for Johnson. Johnson was at his best when Boswell was present, and Boswell not only drew Johnson out on subjects in which his robust common sense and readiness of judgment were fitted to shine but actually suggested and conducted that tour in Scotland which gave Johnson an opportunity for displaying himself at his best. The recorded talk is extraordinarily varied and entertaining. It is a mistake to conceive Johnson as a monster of bear-like rudeness, shouting down opposition, hectoring his companions, and habitually a blustering verbal bully. We are too easily hypnotized by Macaulay's flashy caricature. He could be merciless in argument and often wrongheaded and he was always acute,
uncomfortably acute, in his perception of a fallacy, and a little
disconcerting in his unmasking of pretence. But he could be gay and
tender too and in his heart he was a shrinking and sensitive man.

As a critic (his criticism is the only side of his literary work that
need be considered), Johnson must be allowed a high place. His natural
indolence in production had prevented him from exhausting his faculties
in the more exacting labours of creative work, and it had left him time
for omnivorous if desultory reading, the fruits of which he stored in a
wonderfully retentive memory against an occasion for their use. To a
very fully equipped mind he brought the service of a robust and acute
judgment. Moreover when he applied his mind to a subject he had a
faculty of intense, if fitful concentration; he could seize with great
force on the heart of a matter; he had the power in a wonderfully short
time of extracting the kernel and leaving the husk. His judgments in
writing are like those recorded by Boswell from his conversation; that
is to say he does not, as a critic whose medium was normally the pen
rather than the tongue would tend to do, search for fine shades of
distinction, subdivide subtleties, or be careful to admit _caveats_ or
exceptions; he passes, on the contrary, rapid and forcible verdicts,
not seldom in their assertions untenably sweeping, and always decided
and dogmatic. He never affects diffidence or defers to the judgments of
others. His power of concentration, of seizing on essentials, has given
us his best critical work--nothing could be better, for instance, than
his characterisation of the poets whom he calls the metaphysical school
(Donne, Crashaw, and the rest) which is the most valuable part of his
life of Cowley. Even where he is most prejudiced--for instance in his
attack on Milton's _Lycidas_—there is usually something to be said for his point of view. And after this concentration, his excellence depends on his basic common sense. His classicism is always tempered, like Dryden's, by a humane and sensible dislike of pedantry; he sets no store by the unities; in his preface to Shakespeare he allows more than a "classic" could have been expected to admit, writing in it, in truth, some of the manliest and wisest things in Shakespearean literature. Of course, he had his failings—-the greatest of them what Lamb called imperfect sympathy. He could see no good in republicans or agnostics, and none in Scotland or France. Not that the phrase "imperfect sympathy," which expresses by implication the romantic critic's point of view, would have appealed to him. When Dr. Johnson did not like people the fault was in them, not in him; a ruthless objectivity is part of the classic equipment. He failed, too, because he could neither understand nor appreciate poetry which concerned itself with the sensations that come from external nature. Nature was to him a closed book, very likely for a purely physical reason. He was short-sighted to the point of myopia, and a landscape meant nothing to him; when he tried to describe one as he did in the chapter on the "happy valley" in _Rasselas_ he failed. What he did not see he could not appreciate; perhaps it is too much to ask of his self-contained and unbending intellect that he should appreciate the report of it by other men.

(2)

As we have seen, Johnson was not only great in himself, he was great in his friends. Round him, meeting him as an equal, gathered the greatest
and most prolific writers of the time. There is no better way to study
the central and accepted men of letters of the period than to take some
full evening at the club from Boswell, read a page or two, watch what
the talkers said, and then trace each back to his own works for a
complete picture of his personality. The lie of the literary landscape
in this wonderful time will become apparent to you as you read. You will
find Johnson enthroned, Boswell at his ear, round him men like Reynolds
and Burke, Richardson and Fielding and Goldsmith, Robertson and Gibbon,
and occasionally drawn to the circle minnows like Beattie and a genius
like Adam Smith. Gray, studious in his college at Cambridge, is
exercising his fastidious talent; Collins' sequestered, carefully
nurtured muse is silent; a host of minor poets are riding Pope's poetic
diction, and heroic couplet to death. Outside scattered about is the
van of Romance--Percy collecting his ballads; Burns making songs and
verses in Scotland; the "mad" people, Smart and Chatterton, and above
all Blake, obscurely beginning the work that was to finish in Wordsworth
and Coleridge and Keats.

Of Johnson's set the most remarkable figure was Edmund Burke--"the
supreme writer," as De Quincey called him, "of his century." His
writings belong more to the history of politics than to that of
literature, and a close examination of them would be out of place here.
His political theory strikes a middle course which offends--and in his
own day offended--both parties in the common strife of political
thinking. He believed the best government to consist in a patriotic
aristocracy, ruling for the good of the people. By birth an Irishman, he
had the innate practicality which commonly lies beneath the flash and
colour of Irish forcefulness and rhetoric. That, and his historical
training, which influenced him in the direction of conceiving every
institution as the culmination of an evolutionary development, sent him
directly counter to the newest and most enthusiastically urged political
philosophy of his day--the philosophy stated by Rousseau, and put in
action by the French Revolution. He disliked and distrusted "metaphysical theories," when they left the field of speculation for
that of practice, had no patience with "natural rights" (which as an
Irishman he conceived as the product of sentimentalism) and applied what
would nowadays be called a "pragmatic" test to political affairs.
Practice was the touchstone; a theory was useless unless you could prove
that it had worked. It followed that he was not a democrat, opposed
parliamentary reform, and held that the true remedy for corruption and
venality was not to increase the size of the electorate, but to reduce
it so as to obtain electors of greater weight and independence. For him
a member of Parliament was a representative and not a delegate, and must
act not on his elector's wishes but on his own judgment. These opinions
are little in fashion in our own day, but it is well to remember that in
Burke's case they were the outcome not of prejudice but of thought, and
that even democracy may admit they present a case that must be met and answered.

Burke's reputation as a thinker has suffered somewhat unjustly as a
result of his refusal to square his tenets either with democracy or with
its opposite. It has been said that ideas were only of use to him so far
as they were of polemical service, that the amazing fertility and
acuteness of his mind worked only in a not too scrupulous determination
to overwhelm his antagonists in the several arguments--on India, or America, on Ireland or on France--which made up his political career. He was, said Carlyle, "vehement rather than earnest; a resplendent far-sighted rhetorician, rather than a deep and earnest thinker." The words as they stand would be a good description of a certain type of politician; they would fit, for instance, very well on Mr. Gladstone; but they do Burke less than justice. He was an innovator in modern political thought, and his application of the historical method to the study of institutions is in its way a not less epoch-making achievement than Bacon's application of the inductive method to science. At a time when current political thought, led by Rousseau, was drawing its theories from the abstract conception of "natural rights" Burke was laying down that sounder and deeper notion of politics which has governed thinking in that department of knowledge since. Besides this, he had face to face with the affairs of his own day, a far-sightedness and sagacity which kept him right where other men went wrong. In a nation of the blind he saw the truth about the American colonies; he predicted with exactitude the culmination of the revolution in Napoleon. Mere rhetorical vehemence cannot explain the earnestness with which in a day of diplomatic cynicism he preached the doctrine of an international morality as strict and as binding as the morality which exists between man and man. Surest of all, we have the testimony, uninfluenced by the magic of language, of the men he met. You could not, said Dr. Johnson, shelter with him in a shed for a few moments from the rain without saying, "This is an extraordinary man."

His literary position depends chiefly on his amazing gift of expression,
on a command of language unapproached by any writer of his time. His eloquence (in writing not in speaking; he is said to have had a monotonous delivery) was no doubt at bottom a matter of race, but to his Irish readiness and flash and colour he added the strength of a full mind, fortified by a wonderful store of reading which a retentive and exact memory enabled him to bring instantly to bear on the subject in hand. No writer before him, except Defoe, had such a wide knowledge of the technicalities of different men's occupations, and of all sorts of the processes of daily business, nor could enlighten an abstract matter with such a wealth of luminous analogy. It is this characteristic of his style which has led to the common comparison of his writing with Shakespeare's; both seem to be preternaturally endowed with more information, to have a wider sweep of interest than ordinary men. Both were not only, as Matthew Arnold said of Burke, "saturated with ideas," but saturated too in the details of the business and desire of ordinary men's lives; nothing human was alien from them. Burke's language is, therefore, always interesting and always appropriate to his thought; it is also on occasion very beautiful. He had a wonderful command of clear and ringing utterance and could appeal when he liked very powerfully to the sensibilities of his readers. Rhetoricians are seldom free from occasional extravagance, and Burke fell under the common danger of his kind. He had his moments of falsity, could heap coarse and outrageous abuse on Warren Hastings, illustrate the horrors of the Revolution by casting a dagger on the floor of the House of Commons, and nourish hatred beyond the bounds of justice or measure. But these things do not affect his position, nor take from the solid greatness of his work.
Boswell we have seen; after Burke and Boswell, Goldsmith was the most brilliant member of the Johnson circle. If part of Burke's genius is referable to his nationality, Goldsmith's is wholly so. The beginning and the end of him was Irish; every quality he possessed as a man and as a writer belongs to his race. He had the Irish carelessness, the Irish generosity, the Irish quick temper, the Irish humour. This latter gift, displayed constantly in a company which had little knowledge of the peculiar quality of Irish wit and no faculty of sympathy or imagination, is at the bottom of the constant depreciation of him on the part of Boswell and others of his set. His mock self-importance they thought ill-breeding; his humorous self-depreciation and keen sense of his own ridiculousness, mere lack of dignity and folly. It is curious to read Boswell and watch how often Goldsmith, without Boswell's knowing it, got the best of the joke. In writing he had what we can now recognise as peculiarly Irish gifts. All our modern writers of light half-farcical comedy are Irish. Goldsmith's _She Stoops to Conquer_, is only the first of a series which includes _The School for Scandal, The Importance of being Earnest_, and _You Never can Tell_. And his essays--particularly those of the _Citizen of the World_ with its Chinese vision of England and English life--are the first fruit of that Irish detachment, that ability to see "normally" English habits and institutions and foibles which in our own day has given us the prefaces of Mr. Shaw. As a writer Goldsmith has a lightness and delicate ease which belongs rather to the school of the earlier eighteenth century than to his own day; the enthusiasm of Addison for French literature which he retained gave him a more graceful model than the "Johnsonian" school, to which he professed himself to belong, could afford.
The eighteenth century novel demands separate treatment, and of the other prose authors the most eminent, Edward Gibbon, belongs to historical rather than to literary studies. It is time to turn to poetry.

There orthodox classicism still held sway; the manner and metre of Pope or Thomson ruled the roost of singing fowl. In the main it had done its work, and the bulk of fresh things conceived in it were dull and imitative, even though occasionally, as in the poems of Johnson himself and of Goldsmith, an author arose who was able to infuse sincerity and emotion into a now moribund convention. The classic manner--now more that of Thomson than of Pope--persisted till it overlapped romanticism; Cowper and Crabbe each owe a doubtful allegiance, leaning by their formal metre and level monotony of thought to the one and by their realism to the other. In the meantime its popularity and its assured position were beginning to be assailed in the coteries by the work of two new poets.

The output of Thomas Gray and William Collins is small; you might almost read the complete poetical works of either in an evening. But for all that they mark a period; they are the first definite break with the classic convention which had been triumphant for upwards of seventy years when their prime came. It is a break, however, in style rather
than in essentials, and a reader who seeks in them the inspiriting freshness which came later with Wordsworth and Coleridge will be disappointed. Their carefully drawn still wine tastes insipidly after the "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" of romance. They are fastidious and academic; they lack the authentic fire; their poetry is "made" poetry like Tennyson's and Matthew Arnold's. On their comparative merits a deal of critical ink has been spilt, Arnold's characterisation of Gray is well known--"he never spoke out." Sterility fell upon him because he lived in an age of prose just as it fell upon Arnold himself because he lived too much immersed in business and routine. But in what he wrote he had the genuine poetic gift--the gift of insight and feeling. Against this, Swinburne with characteristic vehemence raised the standard of Collins, the latchet of whose shoe Gray, as a lyric poet, was not worthy to unloose. "The muse gave birth to Collins, she did but give suck to Gray." It is more to our point to observe that neither, though their work abounds in felicities and in touches of a genuine poetic sense, was fitted to raise the standard of revolt. Revolution is for another and braver kind of genius than theirs. Romanticism had to wait for Burns and Blake.

In every country at any one time there are in all probability not one but several literatures flourishing. The main stream flowing through the publishers and booksellers, conned by critics and coteries, recognized as the national literature, is commonly only the largest of several channels of thought. There are besides the national literature local literatures--books, that is, are published which enjoy popularity and critical esteem in their own county or parish and are utterly
unknown outside; there may even be (indeed, there are in several parts of the country) distinct local schools of writing and dynasties of local authors. These localized literatures rarely become known to the outside world; the national literature takes little account of them, though their existence and probably some special knowledge of one or other of them is within the experience of most of us. But every now and again some one of their authors transcends his local importance, gives evidence of a genius which is not to be denied even by those who normally have not the knowledge to appreciate the particular flavour of locality which his writings impart, and becomes a national figure. While he lives and works the national and his local stream turn and flow together.

This was the case of Robert Burns. All his life long he was the singer of a parish--the last of a long line of "forbears" who had used the Scottish lowland vernacular to rhyme in about their neighbours and their scandals, their loves and their church. Himself at the confluence of the two streams, the national and the local, he pays his tribute to two sets of originals, talks with equal reverence of names known to us like Pope and Gray and Shenstone and names unknown which belonged to local "bards," as he would have called them, who wrote their poems for an Ayrshire public. If he came upon England as an innovator it was simply because he brought with him the highly individualized style of Scottish local vernacular verse; to his own people he was no innovator but a fulfilment; as his best critic[5] says he brought nothing to the literature he became a part of but himself. His daring and splendid genius made the local universal, raised out of rough and cynical
satirizing a style as rich and humorous and astringent as that of Rabelais, lent inevitableness and pathos and romance to lyric and song. But he was content to better the work of other men. He made hardly anything new.

[Footnote 5: W.E. Henley, "Essay on Burns." Works, David Nutt.]

Stevenson in his essay on Burns remarks his readiness to use up the work of others or take a large hint from it "as if he had some difficulty in commencing." He omits to observe that the very same trait applies to other great artists. There seem to be two orders of creative writers. On the one hand are the innovators, the new men like Blake, Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley, and later Browning. These men owe little to their predecessors; they work on their own devices and construct their medium afresh for themselves. Commonly their fame and acceptance is slow, for they speak in an unfamiliar tongue and they have to educate a generation to understand their work. The other order of artists have to be shown the way. They have little fertility in construction or invention. You have to say to them "Here is something that you could do too; go and do it better," or "Here is a story to work on, or a refrain of a song; take it and give it your subtlety, your music." The villainy you teach them they will use and it will go hard with them if they do not better the invention; but they do not invent for themselves. To this order of artists Burns like Shakespeare, and among the lesser men Tennyson, belongs. In all his plays Shakespeare is known to have invented only one plot; in many he is using not only the structure but in many places the words devised by an older author; his mode of treatment depends on the
conventions common in his day, on the tragedy of blood, and madness and
revenge, on the comedy of intrigue and disguises, on the romance with
its strange happenings and its reuniting of long parted friends. Burns
goes the same way to work; scarcely a page of his but shows traces of
some original in the Scottish vernacular school. The elegy, the verse
epistle, the satirical form of _Holy Willie's Prayer_, the song and
recitative of _The Jolly Beggars_, are all to be found in his
predecessors, in Fergusson, Ramsay, and the local poets of the
south-west of Scotland. In the songs often whole verses, nearly always
the refrains, are from older folk poetry. What he did was to pour into
these forms the incomparable richness of a personality whose fire and
brilliance and humour transcended all locality and all tradition, a
personality which strode like a colossus over the formalism and
correctness of his time. His use of familiar forms explains, more than
anything else, his immediate fame. His countrymen were ready for him;
they could hail him on the instant (just as an Elizabethan audience
could hail Shakespeare) as something familiar and at the same time more
splendid than anything they knew. He spoke in a tongue they could
understand.

It is impossible to judge Burns from his purely English verse; though he
did it as well as any of the minor followers of the school of Pope he
did it no better. Only the weakest side of his character--his
sentimentalism--finds expression in it; he had not the sense of
tradition nor the intimate knowledge necessary to use English to the
highest poetic effect; it was indeed a foreign tongue to him. In the
vernacular he wrote the language he spoke, a language whose natural
force and colour had become enriched by three centuries of literary use, which was capable, too, of effects of humour and realism impossible in any tongue spoken out of reach of the soil. It held within it an unmatched faculty for pathos, a capacity for expressing a lambent and kindly humour, a power of pungency in satire and a descriptive vividness that English could not give. How express in the language of Pope or even of Wordsworth an effect like this:--

"They reeled, they set, they cross'd, they cleekit,

Till ilka carlin swat and reekit,

And coost her duddies to the wark,

And linket at it in her sark."

or this--

"Yestreen when to the trembling string,

The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha'

To thee my fancy took its wing--

I sat but neither heard nor saw:

Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,

And yon the toast of a' the toun,

I sigh'd and said amang them a',

You are na Mary Morison."

It may be objected that in all this there is only one word, and but two or three forms of words that are not English. But the accent, the
rhythm, the air of it are all Scots, and it was a Burns thinking in his native tongue who wrote it, not the Burns of

"Anticipation forward points the view ";

or

"Pleasures are like poppies spread,
You grasp the flower, the bloom is shed."

or any other of the exercises in the school of Thomson and Pope.

It is easy to see that though Burns admired unaffectedly the "classic" writers, his native realism and his melody made him a potent agent in the cause of naturalism and romance. In his ideas, even more than in his style, he belongs to the oncoming school. The French Revolution, which broke upon Europe when he was at the height of his career, found him already converted to its principles. As a peasant, particularly a Scotch peasant, he believed passionately in the native worth of man as man and gave ringing expression to it in his verse. In his youth his liberal-mindedness made him a Jacobite out of mere antagonism to the existing regime; the Revolution only discovered for him the more logical Republican creed. As the leader of a loose-living, hard drinking set, such as was to be found in every parish, he was a determined and free-spoken enemy of the kirk, whose tyranny he several times
encountered. In his writing he is as vehement an anti-clerical as
Shelley and much more practical. The political side of romanticism, in
fact, which in England had to wait for Byron and Shelley, is already
full-grown in his work. He anticipates and gives complete expression to
one half of the Romantic movement.

What Burns did for the idea of liberty, Blake did for that and every
other idea current among Wordsworth and his successors. There is nothing
stranger in the history of English literature than the miracle by which
this poet and artist, working in obscurity, utterly unknown to the
literary world that existed outside him, summed up in himself all the
thoughts and tendencies which were the fruit of anxious discussion and
propaganda on the part of the authors--Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb--who
believed themselves to be the discoverers of fresh truth unknown to
their generation. The contemporary and independent discovery by Wallace
and Darwin of the principle of natural selection furnishes, perhaps, a
rough parallel, but the fact serves to show how impalpable and universal
is the spread of ideas, how impossible it is to settle literary
indebtedness or construct literary genealogy with any hope of accuracy.
Blake, by himself, held and expressed quite calmly that condemnation of
the "classic" school that Wordsworth and Coleridge proclaimed against
the opposition of a deriding world. As was his habit he compressed it
into a rude epigram,

"Great things are done when men and mountains meet;
This is not done by jostling in the street."
The case for nature against urbanity could not be more tersely nor better put. The German metaphysical doctrine which was the deepest part of the teaching of Wordsworth and Coleridge and their main discovery, he expresses as curtly and off-handedly,

"The sun's light when he unfolds it,
Depends on the organ that beholds it."

In the realm of childhood and innocence, which Wordsworth entered fearfully and pathetically as an alien traveller, he moves with the simple and assured ease of one native. He knows the mystical wonder and horror that Coleridge set forth in _The Ancient Mariner_. As for the beliefs of Shelley, they are already fully developed in his poems. "The king and the priest are types of the oppressor; humanity is crippled by "mind-forg'd manacles"; love is enslaved to the moral law, which is broken by the Saviour of mankind; and, even more subtly than by Shelley, life is pictured by Blake as a deceit and a disguise veiling from us the beams of the Eternal."[6]

[Footnote 6: Prof. Raleigh.]

In truth, Blake, despite the imputation of insanity which was his contemporaries' and has later been his commentators' refuge from assenting to his conclusions, is as bold a thinker in his own way as Neitzsche and as consistent. An absolute unity of belief inspires all
his utterances, cryptic and plain. That he never succeeded in founding a
school nor gathering followers must be put down in the first place to
the form in which his work was issued (it never reached the public of
his own day) and the dark and mysterious mythology in which the
prophetic books which are the full and extended statement of his
philosophy, are couched, and in the second place to the inherent
difficulty of the philosophy itself. As he himself says, where we read
black, he reads white. For the common distinction between good and evil,
Blake substitutes the distinction between imagination and reason; and
reason, the rationalizing, measuring, comparing faculty by which we come
to impute praise or blame is the only evil in his eyes. “There is
nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so;” to rid the world
of thinking, to substitute for reason, imagination, and for thought,
vision, was the object of all that he wrote or drew. The implications of
this philosophy carry far, and Blake was not afraid to follow where they
led him. Fortunately for those who hesitate to embark on that dark and
adventurous journey, his work contains delightful and simpler things. He
wrote lyrics of extraordinary freshness and delicacy and spontaneity; he
could speak in a child's voice of innocent joys and sorrows and the
simple elemental things. His odes to "Spring" and "Autumn" are the
harbingers of Keats. Not since Shakespeare and Campion died could
English show songs like his

"My silks and fine array."

and the others which carry the Elizabethan accent. He could write these
things as well as the Elizabethans. In others he was unique.
"Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry."

In all the English lyric there is no voice so clear, so separate or distinctive as his.

CHAPTER VII

THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL

(1)

There are two ways of approaching the periods of change and new birth in literature. The commonest and, for all the study which it entails, the easiest, is that summed up in the phrase, literature begets literature. Following it, you discover and weigh literary influences, the influence of poet on poet, and book on book. You find one man harking back to earlier models in his own tongue, which an intervening age misunderstood or despised; another, turning to the contemporary literatures of neighbouring countries; another, perhaps, to the splendour and exoticism of the east. In the matter of form and style, such a study carries you far. You can trace types of poetry and metres back to curious and
unsuspected originals, find the well-known verse of Burns' epistles
turning up in Provencal; Tennyson's _In Memoriam_ stanza in use by Ben
Jonson; the metre of _Christabel_ in minor Elizabethan poetry; the
peculiar form of Fitzgerald's translation of _Omar Khayyam_ followed by
so many imitators since, itself to be the actual reflection of the rough
metrical scheme of his Persian original. But such a study, though it is
profitable and interesting, can never lead to the whole truth. As we saw
in the beginning of this book, in the matter of the Renaissance, every
age of discovery and re-birth has its double aspect. It is a revolution
in style and language, an age of literary experiment and achievement,
but its experiments are dictated by the excitement of a new
subject-matter, and that subject-matter is so much in the air, so
impalpable and universal that it eludes analysis. Only you can be sure
that it is this weltering contagion of new ideas, and new thought--the
"Zeitgeist," the spirit of the age, or whatever you may call it--that is
the essential and controlling force. Literary loans and imports give the
forms into which it can be moulded, but without them it would still
exist, and they are only the means by which a spirit which is in life
itself, and which expresses itself in action, and in concrete human
achievement, gets itself into the written word. The romantic revival
numbers Napoleon amongst its leaders as well as Byron, Wellington, Pitt
and Wilberforce, as well as Keats and Wordsworth. Only the literary
manifestations of the time concern us here, but it is important to
remember that the passion for simplification and for a return to nature
as a refuge from the artificial complexities of society, which inspired
the _Lyrical Ballads_, inspired no less the course of the Revolution in
France, and later, the destruction by Napoleon of the smaller feudal
states of Germany, which made possible German nationality and a national
In this romantic revival, however, the revolution in form and style matters more than in most. The classicism of the previous age had been so fixed and immutable; it had been enthroned in high places, enjoyed the esteem of society, arrogated to itself the acceptance which good breeding and good manners demanded. Dryden had been a Court poet, careful to change his allegiance with the changing monarchy. Pope had been the equal and intimate of the great people of his day, and his followers, if they did not enjoy the equality, enjoyed at any rate the patronage of many noble lords. The effect of this was to give the prestige of social usage to the verse in which they wrote and the language they used. "There was," said Dr. Johnson, "before the time of Dryden no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. Words too familiar or too remote to defeat the purpose of a poet." This poetic diction, refined from the grossness of domestic use, was the standard poetic speech of the eighteenth century. The heroic couplet in which it was cast was the standard metre. So that the first object of the revolt of the romantics was the purely literary object of getting rid of the vice of an unreal and artificial manner of writing. They desired simplicity of style.

When the _Lyrical Ballads_ of Wordsworth and Coleridge were published in 1798, the preface which Wordsworth wrote as their manifesto hardly touched at all on the poetic imagination or the attitude of the poet to life and nature. The only question is that of diction. "The majority of
the following poems," he writes, "are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." And in the longer preface to the second edition, in which the theories of the new school on the nature and methods of the poetic imagination are set forth at length, he returns to the same point. "The language too, of these men (that is those in humble and rustic life) has been adopted ... because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived, and because from their rank in society, and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple unelaborated expressions." Social vanity--the armour which we wear to conceal our deepest thoughts and feelings--that was what Wordsworth wished to be rid of, and he chose the language of the common people, not because it fitted, as an earlier school of poets who used the common speech had asserted, the utterance of habitual feeling and common sense, but because it is the most sincere expression of the deepest and rarest passion. His object was the object attained by Shakespeare in some of his supremest moments; the bare intolerable force of the speeches after the murder of Macbeth, or of King Lear's

"Do not laugh at me,
For as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia."

Here, then, was one avenue of revolt from the tyranny of artificiality,
the getting back of common speech into poetry. But there was another, earlier and more potent in its effect. The eighteenth century, weary of its own good sense and sanity, turned to the Middle Ages for picturesqueness and relief. Romance of course, had not been dead in all these years, when Pope and Addison made wit and good sense the fashionable temper for writing. There was a strong romantic tradition in the eighteenth century, though it does not give its character to the writing of the time. Dr. Johnson was fond of old romances. When he was in Skye he amused himself by thinking of his Scottish tour as the journey of a knight-errant. "These fictions of the Gothic romances," he said, "are not so remote from credibility as is commonly supposed." It is a mistake to suppose that the passion for mediaevalism began with either Coleridge or Scott. Horace Walpole was as enthusiastic as either of them; good eighteenth century prelates like Hurd and Percy, found in what they called the Gothic an inexhaustible source of delight. As was natural, what attracted them in the Middle Ages was not their resemblances to the time they lived in, but the points in which the two differed. None of them had knowledge enough, or insight enough, to conceive or sympathize with the humanity of the thirteenth century, to shudder at its cruelties and hardnesses and persecutions, or to comprehend the spiritual elevation and insight of its rarest minds. "It was art," said William Morris, "art in which all men shared, that made life romantic as people called it in those days. That and not robber barons, and inaccessible kings, with their hierarchy of serving nobles, and other rubbish." Morris belonged to a time which knew its middle ages better. To the eighteenth century the robber barons and the "other rubbish" were the essence of romance. For Percy and his followers, medievalism was a collection of what actors call "properties" gargoyles,
and odds and ends of armour and castle keeps with secret passages, 
banners and gay colours, and gay shimmering obsolete words. Mistaking 
what was on its surface at any rate a subtle and complex civilization, 
for rudeness and quaintness, they seemed to themselves to pass back into 
a freer air, where any extravagance was possible, and good breeding and 
mere circumspection and restraint vanished like the wind.

A similar longing to be rid of the precision and order of everyday life 
drove them to the mountains, and to the literature of Wales and the 
Highlands, to Celtic, or pseudo-Celtic romance. To the fashion of the 
time mountains were still frowning and horrid steeps; in Gray's Journal 
of his tour in the Lakes, a new understanding and appreciation of nature 
is only struggling through; and when mountains became fashionable, it 
was at first and remained in part at least, till the time of Byron, for 
those very theatrical qualities which had hitherto put them in 
abhorrence. Wordsworth, in his _Lines written above Tintern Abbey_, in 
which he sets forth the succeeding stages of his mental development, 
refers to this love of the mountains for their spectacular qualities, as 
the first step in the progress of his mind to poetic maturity:

"The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
The mountain and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms were then to me
An appetite."
This same passion for the "sounding cataract" and the "tall rock," this
appetite for the deep and gloomy wood, gave its vogue in Wordsworth's
boyhood to Macpherson's _Ossian_, a book which whether it be completely
fraudulent or not, was of capital importance in the beginnings of the
romantic movement.

The love of mediaeval quaintness and obsolete words, however, led to a
more important literary event--the publication of Bishop Percy's edition
of the ballads in the Percy folio--the _Reliques of Ancient Poetry_.
Percy to his own mind knew the Middle Ages better than they knew
themselves, and he took care to dress to advantage the rudeness and
plainness of his originals. Perhaps we should not blame him. Sir Walter
Scott did the same with better tact and skill in his Border minstrelsy,
and how many distinguished editors are there, who have tamed and
smoothed down the natural wildness and irregularity of Blake? But it is
more important to observe that when Percy's reliques came to have their
influence on writing his additions were imitated as much as the poems on
which he grafted them. Chatterton's _Rowley Poems_, which in many places
seem almost inconceivably banal and artificial to us to-day, caught
their accent from the episcopal editor as much as from the ballads
themselves. None the less, whatever its fault, Percy's collection gave
its impetus to one half of the romantic movement; it was eagerly read in
Germany, and when it came to influence Scott and Coleridge it did so not
only directly, but through Burger's imitation of it; it began the modern
study and love of the ballad which has given us _Sister Helen_, the
_white Ship_ and the _Lady of Shalott_.


But the romantic revival goes deeper than any change, however momentous
of fashion or style. It meant certain fundamental changes in human
outlook. In the first place, one notices in the authors of the time an
extraordinary development of imaginative sensibility; the mind at its
countless points of contact with the sensuous world and the world of
thought, seems to become more alive and alert. It is more sensitive to
fine impressions, to finely graded shades of difference. Outward
objects and philosophical ideas seem to increase in their content and
their meaning, and acquire a new power to enrich the intensest life of
the human spirit. Mountains and lakes, the dignity of the peasant, the
terror of the supernatural, scenes of history, mediaeval architecture
and armour, and mediaeval thought and poetry, the arts and mythology of
Greece—all became springs of poetic inspiration and poetic joy. The
impressions of all these things were unfamiliar and ministered to a
sense of wonder, and by that very fact they were classed as romantic, as
modes of escape from a settled way of life. But they were also in a
sense familiar too. The mountains made their appeal to a deep implanted
feeling in man, to his native sense of his own worth and dignity and
splendour as a part of nature, and his recognition of natural scenery as
necessary, and in its fullest meaning as sufficient for his spiritual
needs. They called him back from the artificiality and complexity of the
cities he had built for himself, and the society he had weaved round
him, to the natural world in which Providence had planted him of old,
and which was full of significance for his soul. The greatest poets of
the romantic revival strove to capture and convey the influence of
nature on the mind, and of the mind on nature interpenetrating one
another. They were none the less artists because they approached nature
in a state of passive receptivity. They believed in the autocracy of the individual imagination none the less because their mission was to divine nature and to understand her, rather than to correct her profusions in the name of art.

In the second place the romantic revival meant a development of the historical sense. Thinkers like Burke and Montesquieu helped students of politics to acquire perspective; to conceive modern institutions not as things separate, and separately created, but as conditioned by, and evolved from, the institutions of an earlier day. Even the revolutionary spirit of the time looked both before and after, and took history as well as the human perfectibility imagined by philosophers into its purview. In France the reformers appealed in the first instance for a States General--a mediaeval institution--as the corrective of their wrongs, and later when they could not, like their neighbours in Belgium, demand reform by way of the restoration of their historical rights, they were driven to go a step further back still, beyond history to what they conceived to be primitive society, and demand the rights of man. This development of the historical sense, which had such a widespread influence on politics, got itself into literature in the creation of the historical novel. Scott and Chateaubriand revived the old romance in which by a peculiar ingenuity of form, the adventures of a typical hero of fiction are cast in a historical setting and set about with portraits of real personages. The historical sense affected, too, novels dealing with contemporary life. Scott's best work, his novels of Scottish character, catch more than half their excellence from the richness of colour and proportion which the portraiture of the living people
acquires when it is aided by historical knowledge and imagination.

Lastly, besides this awakened historical sense, and this quickening of imaginative sensibility to the message of nature, the Romantic revival brought to literature a revival of the sense of the connection between the visible world and another world which is unseen. The supernatural which in all but the crudest of mechanisms had been out of English literature since _Macbeth_, took hold on the imaginations of authors, and brought with it a new subtlety and a new and nameless horror and fascination. There is nothing in earlier English literature to set beside the strange and terrible indefiniteness of the _Ancient Mariner_, and though much in this kind has been written since, we have not got far beyond the skill and imagination with which Coleridge and Scott worked on the instinctive fears that lie buried in the human mind.

Of all these aspects of the revival, however, the new sensitiveness and accessibility to the influences of external nature was the most pervasive and the most important. Wordsworth speaks for the love that is in homes where poor men lie, the daily teaching that is in

"Woods and rills;
The silence that is in the starry sky,
The peace that is among the lonely hills."

Shelley for the wildness of the west wind, and the ubiquitous spiritual emotion which speaks equally in the song of a skylark or a political
revolution. Byron for the swing and roar of the sea. Keats for verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. Scott and Coleridge, though like Byron they are less with nature than with romance, share the same communion.

This imaginative sensibility of the romantics not only deepened their communion with nature, it brought them into a truer relation with what had before been created in literature and art. The romantic revival is the Golden Age of English criticism; all the poets were critics of one sort or another--either formally in essays and prefaces, or in passing and desultory flashes of illumination in their correspondence.

Wordsworth, in his prefaces, in his letter to a friend of Burns which contains such a breadth and clarity of wisdom on things that seem alien to his sympathies, even in some of his poems; Coleridge, in his _Biographia Literaria_, in his notes on Shakespeare, in those rhapsodies at Highgate which were the basis for his recorded table talk; Keats in his letters; Shelley in his _Defence of Poetry_; Byron in his satires and journals; Scott in those lives of the novelists which contain so much truth and insight into the works of fellow craftsmen--they are all to be found turning the new acuteness of impression which was in the air they breathed, to the study of literature, as well as to the study of nature. Alongside of them were two authors, Lamb and Hazlitt, whose bent was rather critical than creative, and the best part of whose intelligence and sympathy was spent on the sensitive and loving divination of our earlier literature. With these two men began the criticism of acting and of pictorial art that have developed since into two of the main kinds of modern critical writing.
Romantic criticism, both in its end and its method, differs widely from that of Dr. Johnson and his school. Wordsworth and Coleridge were concerned with deep-seated qualities and temperamental differences. Their critical work revolved round their conception of the fancy and the imagination, the one dealing with nature on the surface and decorating it with imagery, the other penetrating to its deeper significances. Hazlitt and Lamb applied their analogous conception of wit as a lower quality than humour, in the same fashion. Dr. Johnson looked on the other hand for correctness of form, for the subordination of the parts to the whole, for the self-restraint and good sense which common manners would demand in society, and wisdom in practical life. His school cared more for large general outlines than for truth in detail. They would not permit the idiosyncrasy of a personal or individual point of view: hence they were incapable of understanding lyricism, and they preferred those forms of writing which set themselves to express the ideas and feelings that most men may be supposed to have in common. Dr. Johnson thought a bombastic and rhetorical passage in Congreve's _Mourning Bride_ better than the famous description of Dover cliff in _King Lear_. “The crows, sir,” he said of the latter, "impede your fall." Their town breeding, and possibly, as we saw in the case of Dr. Johnson, an actual physical disability, made them distrust any clear and sympathetic rendering of the sense impressions which nature creates. One cannot imagine Dr. Johnson caring much for the minute observations of Tennyson's nature poems, or delighting in the verdurous and mossy alleys of Keats. His test in such a case would be simple; he would not have liked to have been in such places, nor reluctantly compelled to go there would he in all likelihood have had much to say about them beyond that they were
damp. For the poetry--such as Shelley's--which worked by means of impalpable and indefinite suggestion, he would, one may conceive, have cared even less. New modes of poetry asked of critics new sympathies and a new way of approach. But it is time to turn to the authors themselves.

(2)

The case of Wordsworth is peculiar. In his own day he was vilified and misunderstood; poets like Byron, whom most of us would now regard simply as depending from the school he created, sneered at him. Shelley and Keats failed to understand him or his motives; he was suspected of apostasy, and when he became poet laureate he was written off as a turn-coat who had played false to the ideals of his youth. Now common opinion regards him as a poet above all the others of his age, and amongst all the English poets standing beside Milton, but a step below Shakespeare himself--and we know more about him, more about the processes by which his soul moved from doubts to certainties, from troubles to triumph, than we do about any other author we have. This knowledge we have from the poem called, _The Prelude_, which was published after his death. It was designed to be only the opening and explanatory section of a philosophical poem, which was never completed. Had it been published earlier it would have saved Wordsworth from the coldness and neglect he suffered at the hands of younger men like Shelley; it might even have made their work different from what it is. It has made Wordsworth very clear to us now.
Wordsworth is that rarest thing amongst poets, a complete innovator. He looked at things in a new way. He found his subjects in new places; and he put them into a new poetic form. At the turning point of his life, in his early manhood, he made one great discovery, had one great vision. By the light of that vision and to communicate that discovery he wrote his greatest work. By and by the vision faded, the world fell back into the light of common day, his philosophy passed from discovery to acceptance, and all unknown to him his pen fell into a common way of writing. The faculty of reading which has added fuel to the fire of so many waning inspirations was denied him. He was much too self-centred to lose himself in the works of others. Only the shock of a change of environment--a tour in Scotland, or abroad--shook him into his old thrill of imagination, so that a few fine things fitfully illumine the enormous and dreary bulk of his later work. If we lost all but the _Lyrical Ballads_, the poems of 1804, and the _Prelude_, and the _Excursion_, Wordsworth's position as a poet would be no lower than it is now, and he would be more readily accepted by those who still find themselves uncertain about him.

The determining factor in his career was the French Revolution--that great movement which besides re-making France and Europe, made our very modes of thinking anew. While an undergraduate in Cambridge Wordsworth made several vacation visits to France. The first peaceful phase of the Revolution was at its height; France and the assembly were dominated by the little group of revolutionary orators who took their name from the south-western province from which most of them came, and with this group--the Girondists--Wordsworth threw in his lot. Had he remained he
would probably have gone with them to the guillotine. As it was, the
commands of his guardian brought him back to England, and he was forced
to contemplate from a distance the struggle in which he burned to take
an active part. One is accustomed to think of Wordsworth as a mild old
man, but such a picture if it is thrown back as a presentment of the
Wordsworth of the nineties is a far way from the truth. This darkly
passionate man tortured himself with his longings and his horror. War
came and the prayers for victory in churches found him in his heart
praying for defeat; then came the execution of the king; then the plot
which slew the Gironde. Before all this Wordsworth trembled as Hamlet
did when he learned the ghost's story. His faith in the world was
shaken. First his own country had taken up arms against what he believed
to be the cause of liberty. Then faction had destroyed his friends whom
he believed to be its standard bearers. What was in the world, in
religion, in morality that such things could be? In the face of this
tremendous problem, Wordsworth, unlike Hamlet, was resolute and
determined. It was, perhaps, characteristic of him that in his desire to
get his feet on firm rock again he fled for a time to the exactest of
sciences--to mathematics. But though he got certainties there, they must
have been, one judges, certainties too arid for his thirsting mind. Then
he made his great discovery--helped to it, perhaps, by his sister
Dorothy and his friend Coleridge--he found nature, and in nature, peace.

Not a very wonderful discovery, you will say, but though the cleansing
and healing force of natural surroundings on the mind is a familiar
enough idea in our own day, that is only because Wordsworth found it.
When he gave his message to the world it was a new message. It is worth
while remembering that it is still an unaccepted one. Most of his critics still consider it only Wordsworth's fun when he wrote:

"One impulse from the vernal wood
Can teach us more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can."

Yet Wordsworth really believed that moral lessons and ideas were to be gathered from trees and stones. It was the main part of his teaching. He claimed that his own morality had been so furnished him, and he wrote his poetry to convince other people that what had been true for him could be true for them too.

For him life was a series of impressions, and the poet's duty was to recapture those impressions, to isolate them and brood over them, till gradually as a result of his contemplation emotion stirred again—an emotion akin to the authentic thrill that had excited him when the impression was first born in experience. Then poetry is made; this emotion "recollected" as Wordsworth said (we may add, recreated) "in tranquillity" passes into enduring verse. He treasured numberless experiences of this kind in his own life. Some of them are set forth in the _Prelude_, that for instance on which the poem _The Thorn_ in the _Lyrical Ballads_ is based; they were one or other of them the occasion of most of his poems; the best of them produced his finest work—such a poem for instance as _Resolution and Independence_ or _Gipsies_, where
some chance sight met with in one of the poet's walks is brooded over
till it becomes charged with a tremendous significance for him and for
all the world. If we ask how he differentiated his experiences, which
had most value for him, we shall find something deficient. That is to
say, things which were unique and precious to him do not always appear
so to his readers. He counted as gold much that we regard as dross. But
though we may differ from his judgments, the test which he applied to
his recollected impressions is clear. He attached most value to those
which brought with them the sense of an indwelling spirit, transfusing
and interpenetrating all nature, transfiguring with its radiance, rocks
and fields and trees and the men and women who lived close enough to
them to partake of their strength--the sense, as he calls it in his
_Lines above Tintern Abbey_ of something "more deeply interfused" by
which all nature is made one. Sometimes, as in the hymn to Duty, it is
conceived as law. Duty before whom the flowers laugh, is the daughter of
the voice of God, through whom the most ancient heavens are fresh and
strong. But in most of his poems its ends do not trouble; it is
omnipresent; it penetrates everything and transfigures everything; it is
God. It was Wordsworth's belief that the perception of this indwelling
spirit weakened as age grew. For a few precious and glorious years he
had the vision

"When meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream."
Then as childhood, when "these intimations of immortality," this perception of the infinite are most strong, passed further and further away, the vision faded and he was left gazing in the light of common day. He had his memories and that was all.

There is, of course, more in the matter than this, and Wordsworth's beliefs were inextricably entangled with the conception which Coleridge borrowed from German philosophy.

"We receive but what we give"

wrote Coleridge to his friend,

"And in our life alone doth Nature live."

And Wordsworth came to know that the light he had imagined to be bestowed, was a light reflected from his own mind. It is easy to pass from criticism to metaphysics where Coleridge leads, and wise not to follow.

If Wordsworth represents that side of the Romantic Revival which is best described as the return to Nature, Coleridge has justification for the phrase "Renascence of Wonder." He revived the supernatural as a literary
force, emancipated it from the crude mechanism which had been applied to
it by dilettantes like Horace Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe, and invested
it instead with that air of suggestion and indefiniteness which gives
the highest potency to it in its effect on the imagination. But
Coleridge is more noteworthy for what he suggested to others than for
what he did in himself. His poetry is, even more than Wordsworth's,
equal; he is capable of large tracts of dreariness and flatness; he
seldom finished what he began. The _Ancient Mariner_, indeed, which was
the fruit of his close companionship with Wordsworth, is the only
completed thing of the highest quality in the whole of his work.
_Christabel_ is a splendid fragment; for years the first part lay
uncompleted and when the odd accident of an evening's intoxication led
him to commence the second, the inspiration had fled. For the second
part, by giving to the fairy atmosphere of the first a local habitation
and a name, robbed it of its most precious quality; what it gave in
exchange was something the public could get better from Scott. _Kubla
Khan_ went unfinished because the call of a friend broke the thread of
the reverie in which it was composed. In the end came opium and oceans
of talk at Highgate and fouled the springs of poetry. Coleridge never
fulfilled the promise of his early days with Wordsworth. "He never spoke
out." But it is on the lines laid down by his share in the pioneer work
rather than on the lines of Wordsworth's that the second generation of
Romantic poets—that of Shelley and Keats—developed.

The work of Wordsworth was conditioned by the French Revolution but it
hardly embodied the revolutionary spirit. What he conceived to be its
excesses revolted him, and though he sought and sang freedom, he found
it rather in the later revolt of the nationalities against the
Revolution as manifested in Napoleon himself. The spirit of the
revolution, as it was understood in France and in Europe, had to wait
for Shelley for its complete expression. Freedom is the breath of his
work--freedom not only from the tyranny of earthly powers, but from the
tyrranny of religion, expressing itself in republicanism, in atheism, and
in complete emancipation from the current moral code both in conduct and
in writing. The reaction which had followed the overthrow of Napoleon at
Waterloo, sent a wave of absolutism and repression all over Europe,
Italy returned under the heel of Austria; the Bourbons were restored in
France; in England came the days of Castlereagh and Peterloo. The poetry
of Shelley is the expression of what the children of the revolution--men
and women who were brought up in and believed the revolutionary
gospel--thought about these things.

But it is more than that. Of no poet in English, nor perhaps in any
other tongue, could it be said with more surety, that the pursuit of the
spirit of beauty dominates all his work. For Shelley it interfused all
nature and to possess it was the goal of all endeavour. The visible
world and the world of thought mingle themselves inextricably in his
contemplation of it. For him there is no boundary-line between the two,
the one is as real and actual as the other. In his hands that old trick
of the poets, the simile, takes on a new and surprising form. He does
not enforce the creations of his imagination by the analogy of natural
appearances; his instinct is just the opposite--to describe and illumine
nature by a reference to the creatures of thought. Other poets, Keats
for instance, or Tennyson, or the older poets like Dante and Homer,
might compare ghosts flying from an enchanter like leaves flying before
the wind. They might describe a poet wrapped up in his dreams as being
like a bird singing invisible in the brightness of the sky. But Shelley
can write of the west wind as

"Before whose unseen presence the leaves, dead,
Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing."

and he can describe a skylark in the heavens as

"Like a poet hidden
In the light of thought."

Of all English poets he is the most completely lyrical. Nothing that he
wrote but is wrought out of the anguish or joy of his own heart.

"Most wretched souls,"

he writes

"Are cradled into poetry by wrong
They learn in suffering what they teach in song."

Perhaps his work is too impalpable and moves in an air too rarefied. It
sometimes lacks strength. It fails to take grip enough of life. Had he lived he might have given it these things; there are signs in his last poems that he would have given it. But he could hardly have bettered the sheer and triumphant lyricism of _The Skylark_, of some of his choruses, and of the _Ode to Dejection_, and of the _Lines written on the Eugenoen hills_.

If the Romantic sense of the one-ness of nature found its highest exponent in Shelley, the Romantic sensibility to outward impressions reached its climax in Keats. For him life is a series of sensations, felt with almost febrile acuteness. Records of sight and touch and smell crowd every line of his work; the scenery of a garden in Hampstead becomes like a landscape in the tropics, so extraordinary vivid and detailed is his apprehension and enjoyment of what it has to give him. The luxuriance of his sensations is matched by the luxuriance of his powers of expression. Adjectives heavily charged with messages for the senses, crowd every line of his work, and in his earlier poems overlay so heavily the thought they are meant to convey that all sense of sequence and structure is apt to be smothered under their weight. Not that consecutive thought claims a place in his conception of his poetry. His ideal was passive contemplation rather than active mental exertion. "O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts," he exclaims in one of his letters; and in another, "It is more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like Mercury." His work has one message and one only, the lastingness of beauty and its supreme truth. It is stated in _Endymion_ in lines that are worn bare with quotation. It is stated again, at the height of his work in his greatest ode,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty: that is all
We know on earth and all we need to know."

His work has its defects; he died at twenty-six so it would be a miracle
if it were not so. He lacks taste and measure; he offends by an
over-luxuriousness and sensuousness; he fails when he is concerned with
flesh and blood; he is apt, as Mr. Robert Bridges has said, "to class
women with roses and sweetmeats." But in his short life he attained with
surprising rapidity and completeness to poetic maturity, and
perhaps from no other poet could we find things to match his
greatest--_Hyperion, Isabella_, the _Eve of St. Agnes_ and
the _Odes_.

There remains a poet over whom opinion is more sharply divided than it
is about any other writer in English. In his day Lord Byron was the
idol, not only of his countrymen, but of Europe. Of all the poets of
the time he was, if we except Scott, whose vogue he eclipsed, the only
one whose work was universally known and popular. Everybody read him; he
was admired not only by the multitude and by his equals, but by at least
one who was his superior, the German poet Goethe, who did not hesitate
to say of him that he was the greatest talent of the century Though this
exalted opinion still persists on the Continent, hardly anyone could be
found in England to subscribe to it now. Without insularity, we may
claim to be better judges of authors in our own tongue than foreign
critics, however distinguished and comprehending. How then shall be
explained Lord Byron's instant popularity and the position he won? What were the qualities which gave him the power he enjoyed?

In the first place he appealed by virtue of his subject-matter—the desultory wanderings of _Childe Harold_ traversed ground every mile of which was memorable to men who had watched the struggle which had been going on in Europe with scarcely a pause for twenty years. Descriptive journalism was then and for nearly half a century afterwards unknown, and the poem by its descriptiveness, by its appeal to the curiosity of its readers, made the same kind of success that vividly written special correspondence would to-day, the charm of metre super-added. Lord Byron gave his readers something more, too, than mere description. He added to it the charm of a personality, and when that personality was enforced by a title, when it proclaimed its sorrows as the age's sorrows, endowed itself with an air of symbolism and set itself up as a kind of scapegoat for the nation's sins, its triumph was complete. Most men have from time to time to resist the temptation to pose to themselves; many do not even resist it. For all those who chose to believe themselves blighted by pessimism, and for all the others who would have loved to believe it, Byron and his poetry came as an echo of themselves. Shallow called to shallow. Men found in him, as their sons found more reputably in Tennyson, a picture of what they conceived to be the state of their own minds.

But he was not altogether a man of pretence. He really and passionately loved freedom; no one can question his sincerity in that. He could be a fine and scathing satirist; and though he was careless, he had great
The age of the Romantic Revival was one of poetry rather than of prose; it was in poetry that the best minds of the time found their means of expression. But it produced prose of rare quality too, and there is delightful reading in the works of its essayists and occasional writers.

In its form the periodical essay had changed little since it was first made popular by Addison and Steele. It remained, primarily, a vehicle for the expression of a personality, and it continued to seek the interests of its readers by creating or suggesting an individuality strong enough to carry off any desultory adventure by the mere force of its own attractiveness. Yet there is all the difference in the world between Hazlitt and Addison, or Lamb and Steele. The _Tatler_ and the _Spectator_ leave you with a sense of artifice; Hazlitt and Lamb leave you with a grip of a real personality—in the one case very vigorous and combative, in the other set about with a rare plaintiveness and gentleness, but in both absolutely sincere. Addison is gay and witty and delightful but he only plays at being human; Lamb's essays—the translation into print of a heap of idiosyncrasies and oddities, and likes and dislikes, and strange humours—come straight and lovably from a human soul.

The prose writers of the romantic movement brought back two things into writing which had been out of it since the seventeenth century. They
brought back egotism and they brought back enthusiasm. They had the confidence that their own tastes and experiences were enough to interest their readers; they mastered the gift of putting themselves on paper.

But there is one wide difference between them and their predecessors. Robert Burton was an egotist but he was an unconscious one; the same is, perhaps, true though much less certainly of Sir Thomas Browne. In Lamb and Hazlitt and De Quincey egotism was deliberate, consciously assumed, the result of a compelling and shaping art. If one reads Lamb's earlier essays and prose pieces one can see the process at work--watch him consciously imitating Fuller, or Burton, or Browne, mirroring their idiosyncrasies, making their quaintnesses and graces his own. By the time he came to write the _Essays of Elia_, he had mastered the personal style so completely that his essays seem simply the overflow of talk. They are so desultory; they move from one subject to another so waywardly--such an essay as a _Chapter on Ears_, for instance, passing with the easy inconsequence of conversation from anatomy through organ music to beer--when they quote, as they do constantly, it is incorrectly, as in the random reminiscences of talk. Here one would say is the cream risen to the surface of a full mind and skimmed at one taking. How far all this is from the truth we know--know, too, how for months he polished and rewrote these magazine articles, rubbing away roughnesses and corners, taking off the traces of logical sequences and argument, till in the finished work of art he mimicked inconsequence so perfectly that his friends might have been deceived. And the personality he put on paper was partly an artistic creation, too. In life Lamb was a nervous, easily excitable and emotional man; his years were worn with the memory of a great tragedy and the constantly impending fear of a repetition of it. One must assume him in his way to have been a good man
of business—he was a clerk in the India House, then a throbbing centre
of trade, and the largest commercial concern in England, and when he
retired his employers gave him a very handsome pension. In the early
portrait by Hazlitt there is a dark and gleaming look of fire and
decision. But you would never guess it from his books. There he is the
gentle recluse, dreaming over old books, old furniture, old prints, old
plays and play-bills; living always in the past, loving in the town
secluded byways like the Temple, or the libraries of Oxford Colleges,
and in the country quiet and shaded lanes, none of the age’s enthusiasm
for mountains in his soul. When he turned critic it was not to discern
and praise the power and beauty in the works of his contemporaries but
to rediscover and interpret the Elizabethan and Jacobean romantic plays.

This quality of egotism Lamb shares with other writers of the time, with
De Quincey, for instance, who left buried in work which is extensive and
unequal, much that lives by virtue of the singular elaborateness and
loftiness of the style which he could on occasion command. For the
revival of enthusiasm one must turn to Hazlitt, who brought his
passionate and combative disposition to the service of criticism, and
produced a series of studies remarkable for their earnestness and their
vigour, and for the essential justness which they display despite the
prejudice on which each of them was confessedly based.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VICTORIAN AGE
Had it not been that with two exceptions all the poets of the Romantic
Revival died early, it might be more difficult to draw a line between
their school and that of their successors than it is. As it happened,
the only poet who survived and wrote was Wordsworth, the oldest of them
all. For long before his death he did nothing that had one touch of the
fire and beauty of his earlier work. The respect he began, after a
lifetime of neglect, to receive in the years immediately before his
death, was paid not to the conservative laureate of 1848, but to the
revolutionary in art and politics of fifty years before. He had lived on
long after his work was done

"To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
That blamed the living man."

All the others, Keats, Shelley, Byron were dead before 1830, and the
problem which might have confronted us had they lived, of adult work
running counter to the tendencies and ideals of youth, does not exist
for us. Keats or Shelley might have lived as long as Carlyle, with whom
they were almost exactly contemporary; had they done so, the age of the
Romantic Revival and the Victorian age would have been united in the
lives of authors who were working in both. We should conceive that is,
the whole period as one, just as we conceive of the Renaissance in
England, from Surrey to Shirley, as one. As it is, we have accustomed
ourselves to a strongly marked line of division. A man must be on either one side or the other; Wordsworth, though he wrote on till 1850, is on the further side, Carlyle, though he was born in the same year as Keats, on the hither side. Still the accident of length of days must not blind us to the fact that the Victorian period, though in many respects its ideals and modes of thinking differed from those of the period which preceded it, is essentially an extension of the Romantic Revival and not a fresh start. The coherent inspiration of romanticism disintegrated into separate lines of development, just as in the seventeenth century the single inspiration of the Renaissance broke into different schools. Along these separate lines represented by such men as Browning, the Pre-Raphaelites, Arnold, and Meredith, literature enriched and elaborated itself into fresh forms. None the less, every author in each of these lines of literary activity invites his readers to understand his direct relations to the romantic movement. Rossetti touches it through his original, Keats; Arnold through Goethe and Byron; Browning first through Shelley and then in item after item of his varied subject-matter.

In one direction the Victorian age achieved a salient and momentous advance. The Romantic Revival had been interested in nature, in the past, and in a lesser degree in art, but it had not been interested in men and women. To Wordsworth the dalesmen of the lakes were part of the scenery they moved in; he saw men as trees walking, and when he writes about them as in such great poems as _Resolution and Independence_, the _Brothers_, or _Michael_, it is as natural objects he treats them, invested with the lonely remoteness that separates them from the
complexities and passions of life as it is lived. They are there, you feel, to teach the same lesson as the landscape teaches in which they are set. The passing of the old Cumberland beggar through villages and past farmsteads, brings to those who see him the same kind of consolation as the impulses from a vernal wood that Wordsworth celebrated in his purely nature poetry. Compare with Wordsworth, Browning, and note the fundamental change in the attitude of the poet that his work reveals. _Pippa Passes_ is a poem on exactly the same scheme as the _Old Cumberland Beggar_, but in treatment no two things could be further apart. The intervention of Pippa is dramatic, and though her song is in the same key as the wordless message of Wordsworth's beggar she is a world apart from him, because she is something not out of natural history, but out of life. The Victorian age extended the imaginative sensibility which its predecessor had brought to bear on nature and history, to the complexities of human life. It searched for individuality in character, studied it with a loving minuteness, and built up out of its discoveries amongst men and women a body of literature which in its very mode of conception was more closely related to life, and thus the object of greater interest and excitement to its readers, than anything which had been written in the previous ages. It is the direct result of this extension of romanticism that the novel became the characteristic means of literary expression of the time, and that Browning, the poet who more than all others represents the essential spirit of his age, should have been as it were, a novelist in verse. Only one other literary form, indeed, could have ministered adequately to this awakened interest, but by some luck not easy to understand, the drama, which might have done with greater economy and directness the work the novel had to do, remained outside the main
stream of literary activity. To the drama at last it would seem that we are returning, and it may be that in the future the direct representation of the clash of human life which is still mainly in the hands of our novelists, may come back to its own domain.

The Victorian age then added humanity to nature and art as the subject-matter of literature. But it went further than that. For the first time since the Renaissance, came an era which was conscious of itself as an epoch in the history of mankind, and confident of its mission. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries revolutionized cosmography, and altered the face of the physical world. The nineteenth century, by the discoveries of its men of science, and by the remarkable and rapid succession of inventions which revolutionized the outward face of life, made hardly less alteration in accepted ways of thinking. The evolutionary theory, which had been in the air since Goethe, and to which Darwin was able to give an incontrovertible basis of scientific fact, profoundly influenced man's attitude to nature and to religion. Physical as apart from natural science made scarcely less advance, and instead of a world created in some fixed moment of time, on which had been placed by some outward agency all the forms and shapes of nature that we know, came the conception of a planet congealing out of a nebula, and of some lower, simpler and primeval form of life multiplying and diversifying itself through succeeding stages of development to form both the animal and the vegetable world. This conception not only enormously excited and stimulated thought, but it gave thinkers a strange sense of confidence and certainty not possessed by the age before. Everything seemed plain to them; they were heirs of all the
ages. Their doubts were as certain as their faith.

"There lives more faith in honest doubt
Believe me than in half the creeds."

said Tennyson; "honest doubt," hugged with all the certainty of a
revelation, is the creed of most of his philosophical poetry, and what
is more to the point was the creed of the masses that were beginning to
think for themselves, to whose awakening interest his work so strongly
appealed. There were no doubt, literary side-currents. Disraeli survived
to show that there were still young men who thought Byronically.
Rossetti and his school held themselves proudly aloof from the
rationalistic and scientific tendencies of the time, and found in the
Middle ages, better understood than they had been either by Coleridge or
Scott, a refuge from a time of factories and fact. The Oxford movement
ministered to the same tendencies in religion and philosophy; but it is
the scientific spirit, and all that the scientific spirit implied, its
certain doubt, its care for minuteness, and truth of observation, its
growing interest in social processes, and the conditions under which
life is lived, that is the central fact in Victorian literature.

Tennyson represents more fully than any other poet this essential spirit
of the age. If it be true, as has been often asserted, that the spirit
of an age is to be found best in the work of lesser men, his complete
identity with the thought of his time is in itself evidence of his
inferiority to his contemporary, Browning. Comparison between the two
men seem inevitable; they were made by readers when _In Memoriam_ and _Men and Women_ came hot from the press, and they have been made ever since. There could, of course, scarcely be two men more dissimilar, Tennyson elaborating and decorating the obvious; Browning delving into the esoteric and the obscure, and bringing up strange and unfamiliar finds; Tennyson in faultless verse registering current newly accepted ways of thought; Browning in advance thinking afresh for himself, occupied ceaselessly in the arduous labour of creating an audience fit to judge him. The age justified the accuracy with which Tennyson mirrored it, by accepting him and rejecting Browning. It is this very accuracy that almost forces us at this time to minimise and dispraise Tennyson's work. We have passed from Victorian certainties, and so he is apt when he writes in the mood of _Locksley Hall_ and the rest, to appear to us a little shallow, a little empty, and a little pretentious.

His earlier poetry, before he took upon himself the burden of the age, is his best work, and it bears strongly marked upon it the influence of Keats. Such a poem for instance as _Oenone_ shows an extraordinarily fine sense of language and melody, and the capacity caught from Keats of conveying a rich and highly coloured pictorial effect. No other poet, save Keats, has had a sense of colour so highly developed as Tennyson's. From his boyhood he was an exceedingly close and sympathetic observer of the outward forms of nature, and he makes a splendid use of what his eyes had taught him in these earlier poems. Later his interest in insects and birds and flowers outran the legitimate opportunity he possessed of using it in poetry. It was his habit, his son tells us, to keep notebooks of things he had observed in his garden or in his walks,
and to work them up afterwards into similes for the _Princess_ and the _Idylls of the King_. Read in the books written by admirers, in which they have been studied and collected (there are several of them) these similes are pleasing enough; in the text where they stand they are apt to have the air of impertinences, beautiful and extravagant impertinences no doubt, but alien to their setting. In one of the _Idylls of the King_ the fall of a drunken knight from his horse is compared to the fall of a jutting edge of cliff and with it a lance-like fir-tree, which Tennyson had observed near his home, and one cannot resist the feeling that the comparison is a thought too great for the thing it was meant to illustrate. So, too, in the _Princess_ when he describes a handwriting,

"In such a hand as when a field of corn
Bows all its ears before the roaring East."

he is using up a sight noted in his walks and transmuted into poetry on a trivial and frivolous occasion. You do not feel, in fact, that the handwriting visualized spontaneously called up the comparison; you are as good as certain that the simile existed waiting for use before the handwriting was thought of.

The accuracy of his observation of nature, his love of birds and larvae is matched by the carefulness with which he embodies, as soon as ever they were made, the discoveries of natural and physical science. Nowadays, possibly because these things have become commonplace to us,
we may find him a little school-boy-like in his pride of knowledge. He
knows that

"This world was once a fluid haze of light,
Till toward the centre set the starry tides
And eddied wild suns that wheeling cast
The planets."

just as he knows what the catkins on the willows are like, or the names
of the butterflies: but he is capable, on occasion of "dragging it in,"
as in

"The nebulous star we call the sun,
If that hypothesis of theirs be sound."

from the mere pride in his familiarity with the last new thing. His
dealings with science, that is, no more than his dealings with nature,
have that inevitableness, that spontaneous appropriateness that we feel
we have a right to ask from great poetry.

Had Edgar Allan Poe wanted an example for his theory of the
impossibility of writing, in modern times, a long poem, he might have
found it in Tennyson. His strength is in his shorter pieces; even where
as in _In Memoriam_ he has conceived and written something at once
extended and beautiful, the beauty lies rather in the separate parts;
the thing is more in the nature of a sonnet sequence than a continuous poem. Of his other larger works, the _Princess_, a scarcely happy blend between burlesque in the manner of the _Rape of the Lock_, and a serious apostleship of the liberation of women, is solely redeemed by these lyrics. Tennyson's innate conservatism hardly squared with the liberalising tendencies he caught from the more advanced thought of his age, in writing it. Something of the same kind is true of _Maud_, which is a novel told in dramatically varied verse. The hero is morbid, his social satire peevish, and a story which could have been completely redeemed by the ending (the death of the hero), which artistic fitness demands, is of value for us now through its three amazing songs, in which the lyric genius of Tennyson reached its finest flower. It cannot be denied, either, that he failed--though magnificently--in the _Idylls of the King_. The odds were heavily against him in the choice of a subject. Arthur is at once too legendary and too shadowy for an epic hero, and nothing but the treatment that Milton gave to Satan (i.e. flat substitution of the legendary person by a newly created character) could fit him for the place. Even if Arthur had been more promising than he is, Tennyson's sympathies were fundamentally alien from the moral and religious atmosphere of Arthurian romance. His robust Protestantism left no room for mysticism; he could neither appreciate nor render the mystical fervour and exultation which is in the old history of the Holy Grail. Nor could he comprehend the morality of a society where courage, sympathy for the oppressed, loyalty and courtesy were the only essential virtues, and love took the way of freedom and the heart rather than the way of law. In his heart Tennyson's attitude to the ideals of chivalry and the old stories in which they are embodied differed probably very little from that of Roger Ascham, or of any other Protestant Englishman;
when he endeavoured to make an epic of them and to fasten to it an allegory in which Arthur should typify the war of soul against sense, what happened was only what might have been expected. The heroic enterprise failed, and left us with a series of mid-Victorian novels in verse in which the knights figure as heroes of the generic mid-Victorian type.

But if he failed in his larger poems, he had a genius little short of perfect in his handling of shorter forms. The Arthurian story which produced only middling moralizing in the _Idylls_, gave us as well the supremely written Homeric episode of the _Morte d'Arthur_, and the sharp and defined beauty of _Sir Galahad_ and the _Lady of Shallott_. Tennyson had a touch of the pre-Raphaelite faculty of minute painting in words, and the writing of these poems is as clear and naive as in the best things of Rossetti. He had also what neither Rossetti nor any of his contemporaries in verse, except Browning, had, a fine gift of understanding humanity. The peasants of his English idylls are conceived with as much breadth of sympathy and richness of humour, as purely and as surely, as the peasants of Chaucer or Burns. A note of passionate humanity is indeed in all his work. It makes vivid and intense his scholarly handling of Greek myth; always the unchanging human aspect of it attracts him most, in Oenone's grief, in the indomitableness of Ulysses, the weariness and disillusionment in Tithonus. It has been the cause of the comfort he has brought to sorrow; none of his generation takes such a human attitude to death. Shelley could yearn for the infinite, Browning treat it as the last and greatest adventure, Arnold meet it clear eyed and resigned. To Wordsworth it is the mere return of
man the transient to Nature the eternal.

"No motion has she now; no force,
She neither hears nor sees,
Roiled round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees."

To Tennyson it brings the fundamental human home-sickness for familiar things.

"Ah, sad and strange as on dark summer dawns,
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds
To dying ears when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square."

It is an accent which wakes an echo in a thousand hearts.

(2)

While Tennyson, in his own special way and, so to speak, in collaboration with the spirit of the age, was carrying on the work of Romanticism on its normal lines, Browning was finding a new style and a new subject matter. In his youth he had begun as an imitator of Shelley, and _Pauline_ and _Paracelsus_ remain to show what the influence of the "sun-treader" was on his poetry. But as early as his second publication,
_Bells and Pomegranates_, he had begun to speak for himself, and with
_Men and Women_, a series of poems of amazing variety and brilliance, he
placed himself unassailably in the first rank. Like Tennyson's, his
genius continued high and undimmed while life was left him. _Men and
Women_ was followed by an extraordinary narrative poem, _The Ring and
the Book_, and it by several volumes of scarcely less brilliance, the
last of which appeared on the very day of his death.

Of the two classes into which, as we saw when we were studying Burns,
creative artists can be divided, Browning belongs to that one which
makes everything new for itself, and has in consequence to educate the
readers by whom its work can alone be judged. He was an innovator in
nearly everything he did; he thought for himself; he wrote for himself,
and in his own way. And because he refused to follow ordinary modes of
writing, he was and is still widely credited with being tortured and
obscure.[7] The charge of obscurity is unfortunate because it tends to
shut off from him a large class of readers for whom he has a sane and
special and splendid message.

[Footnote 7: The deeper causes of Browning's obscurity have been
detailed in Chapter iv. of this book. It may be added for the benefit of
the reader who fights shy on the report of it, that in nine cases out of
ten, it arises simply from his colloquial method; we go to him expecting
the smoothness and completeness of Tennyson; we find in him the
irregularities, the suppressions, the quick changes of talk—the
clipped, clever talk of much idea'd people who hurry breathlessly from
one aspect to another of a subject.]
His most important innovation in form was his device of the dramatic lyric. What interested him in life was men and women, and in them, not their actions, but the motives which governed their actions. To lay bare fully the working of motive in a narrative form with himself as narrator was obviously impossible; the strict dramatic form, though he attained some success in it, does not seem to have attracted him, probably because in it the ultimate stress must be on the thing done rather than the thing thought; there remained, therefore, of the ancient forms of poetry, the lyric. The lyric had of course been used before to express emotions imagined and not real to the poet himself; Browning was the first to project it to express imagined emotions of men and women, whether typical or individual, whom he himself had created. Alongside this perversion of the lyric, he created a looser and freer form, the dramatic monologue, in which most of his most famous poems, _Cleon, Sludge the Medium, Bishop Blougram's Apology_, etc., are cast. In the convention which Browning established in it, all kinds of people are endowed with a miraculous articulation, a new gift of tongues; they explain themselves, their motives, the springs of those motives (for in Browning's view every thought and act of a man's life is part of an interdependent whole), and their author's peculiar and robust philosophy of life. Out of the dramatic monologues he devised the scheme of _The Ring and the Book_, a narrative poem in which the episodes, and not the plot, are the basis of the structure, and the story of a trifling and sordid crime is set forth as it appeared to the minds of the chief actors in succession. To these new forms he added the originality of an extraordinary realism in style. Few poets have the power by a word,
phrase, a flash of observation in detail to make you see the event as Browning makes you see it.

Many books have been written on the philosophy of Browning's poetry. Stated briefly its message is that of an optimism which depends on a recognition of the strenuousness of life. The base of his creed, as of Carlyle's, is the gospel of labour; he believes in the supreme moral worth of effort. Life is a "training school" for a future existence, and our place in it depends on the courage and strenuousness with which we have laboured here. Evil is in the world only as an instrument in the process of development; by conquering it we exercise our spiritual faculties the more. Only torpor is the supreme sin, even as in _The Statue and the Bust_ where effort would have been to a criminal end.

"The counter our lovers staked was lost
As surely as if it were lawful coin:
And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
Was, the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a crime, I say."

All the other main ideas of his poetry fit with perfect consistency on to his scheme. Love, the manifestation of a man's or a woman's nature, is the highest and most intimate relationship possible, for it is an opportunity--the highest opportunity--for spiritual growth. It can reach this end though an actual and earthly union is impossible.
"She has lost me, I have gained her;
Her soul's mine and thus grown perfect,
I shall pass my life's remainder.
Life will just hold out the proving
Both our powers, alone and blended:
And then come the next life quickly!
This world's use will have been ended."

It follows that the reward of effort is the promise of immortality, and
that for each man, just because his thoughts and motives taken together
count, and not one alone, there is infinite hope.

The contemporaries of Tennyson and Browning in poetry divide themselves
into three separate schools. Nearest to them in temper is the school of
Matthew Arnold and Clough; they have the same quick sensitiveness to the
intellectual tendencies of the age, but their foothold in a time of
shifting and dissolving creeds is a stoical resignation very different
from the buoyant optimism of Browning, or Tennyson's mixture of science
and doubt and faith. Very remote from them on the other hand is the
backward-gazing mediaevalism of Rossetti and his circle, who revived
(Rossetti from Italian sources, Morris from Norman) a Middle age which
neither Scott nor Coleridge had more than partially and brokenly
understood. The last school, that to which Swinburne and Meredith with
all their differences unite in belonging, gave up Christianity with
scarcely so much as a regret,
"We have said to the dream that caress'd and the dread that smote us, 
Good-night and good-bye."

and turned with a new hope and exultation to the worship of our 
immemorial mother the earth. In both of them, the note of enthusiasm for 
political liberty which had been lost in Wordsworth after 1815, and was 
too early extinguished with Shelley, was revived by the Italian 
Revolution in splendour and fire.

(3)

As one gets nearer one's own time, a certain change comes insensibly 
over one's literary studies. Literature comes more and more to mean 
imaginative literature or writing about imaginative literature. The mass 
of writing comes to be taken not as literature, but as argument or 
information; we consider it purely from the point of view of its subject 
matter. A comparison will make this at once clear. When a man reads 
Bacon, he commonly regards himself as engaged in the study of English 
literature; when he reads Darwin he is occupied in the study of natural 
science. A reader of Bacon's time would have looked on him as we look on 
Darwin now.

The distinction is obviously illogical, but a writer on English 
literature within brief limits is forced to bow to it if he wishes his 
book to avoid the dreariness of a summary, and he can plead in
extenuation the increased literary output of the later age, and the
incompleteness with which time so far has done its work in sifting the
memorable from the forgettable, the ephemeral from what is going to
last. The main body of imaginative prose literature--the novel--is
treated of in the next chapter and here no attempt will be made to deal
with any but the admittedly greatest names. Nothing can be said, for
instance, of that fluent journalist and biased historian Macaulay, nor
of the mellifluousness of Newman, nor of the vigour of Kingsley or
Maurice; nor of the writings, admirable in their literary qualities of
purity and terseness, of Darwin or Huxley; nor of the culture and
apostleship of Matthew Arnold. These authors, one and all, interpose no
barrier, so to speak, between their subject-matter and their readers;
you are not when you read them conscious of a literary intention, but of
some utilitarian one, and as an essay on English literature is by no
means a handbook to serious reading they will be no more mentioned here.

In the case of one nineteenth century writer in prose, this method of
exclusion cannot apply. Both Carlyle and Ruskin were professional men of
letters; both in the voluminous compass of their works touched on a
large variety of subjects; both wrote highly individual and peculiar
styles; and both without being either professional philosophers or
professional preachers, were as every good man of letters, whether he
denies it or not, is and must be, lay moralists and prophets. Of the two
Ruskin is plain and easily read, and he derives his message; Carlyle,
his original, is apt to be tortured and obscure. Inside the body of his
work the student of nineteenth century literature is probably in need of
some guidance; outside so far as prose is concerned he can fend for
himself.

As we saw, Carlyle was the oldest of the Victorians; he was over forty when the Queen came to the throne. Already his years of preparation in Scotland, town and country, were over, and he had settled in that famous little house in Chelsea which for nearly half a century to come was to be one of the central hearths of literary London. More than that, he had already fully formed his mode of thought and his peculiar style. _Sartor Resartus_ was written and published serially before the Queen came to the throne; the _French Revolution_ came in the year of her accession at the very time that Carlyle's lectures were making him a fashionable sensation; most of his miscellaneous essays had already appeared in the reviews. But with the strict Victorian era, as if to justify the usually arbitrary division of literary history by dynastic periods, there came a new spirit into his work. For the first time he applied his peculiar system of ideas to contemporary politics. _Chartism_ appeared in 1839; _Past and Present_, which does the same thing as _Chartism_ in an artistic form, three years later. They were followed by one other book--_Latter Day Pamphlets_--addressed particularly to contemporary conditions, and by two remarkable and voluminous historical works. Then came the death of his wife, and for the last fifteen years of his life silence, broken only briefly and at rare intervals.

The reader who comes to Carlyle with preconceived notions based on what he has heard of the subject-matter of his books is certain to be surprised by what he finds. There are histories in the canon of his works and pamphlets on contemporary problems, but they are composed on a
plan that no other historian and no other social reformer would own. A reader will find in them no argument, next to no reasoning, and little practical judgment. Carlyle was not a great "thinker" in the strictest sense of that term. He was under the control, not of his reason, but of his emotions; deep feeling, a volcanic intensity of temperament flaming into the light and heat of prophecy, invective, derision, or a simple splendour of eloquence, is the characteristic of his work. Against cold-blooded argument his passionate nature rose in fierce rebellion; he had no patience with the formalist or the doctrinaire. Nor had he the faculty of analysis; his historical works are a series of pictures or tableaux, splendidly and vividly conceived, and with enormous colour and a fine illusion of reality, but one-sided as regards the truth. In his essays on hero-worship he contents himself with a noisy reiteration of the general predicate of heroism; there is very little except their names and the titles to differentiate one sort of hero from another. His picture of contemporary conditions is not so much a reasoned indictment as a wild and fantastic orgy of epithets: "dark simmering pit of Tophet," "bottomless universal hypocrisies," and all the rest. In it all he left no practical scheme. His works are fundamentally not about politics or history or literature, but about himself. They are the exposition of a splendid egotism, fiercely enthusiastic about one or two deeply held convictions; their strength does not lie in their matter of fact.

This is, perhaps, a condemnation of him in the minds of those people who ask of a social reformer an actuarially accurate scheme for the abolition of poverty, or from a prophet a correct forecast of the result.
of the next general election. Carlyle has little help for these and no message save the disconcerting one of their own futility. His message is at once larger and simpler, for though his form was prose, his soul was a poet's soul, and what he has to say is a poet's word. In a way, it is partly Wordsworth's own. The chief end of life, his message is, is the performance of duty, chiefly the duty of work. "Do thy little stroke of work; this is Nature's voice, and the sum of all the commandments, to each man." All true work is religion, all true work is worship; to labour is to pray. And after work, obedience the best discipline, so he says in _Past and Present_, for governing, and "our universal duty and destiny; wherein whoso will not bend must break." Carlyle asked of every man, action and obedience and to bow to duty; he also required of him sincerity and veracity, the duty of being a real and not a sham, a strenuous warfare against cant. The historical facts with which he had to deal he grouped under these embracing categories, and in the _French Revolution_, which is as much a treasure-house of his philosophy as a history, there is hardly a page on which they do not appear.

"Quack-ridden," he says, "in that one word lies all misery whatsoever."

These bare elemental precepts he clothes in a garment of amazing and bizarre richness. There is nothing else in English faintly resembling the astonishing eccentricity and individuality of his style. Gifted with an extraordinarily excitable and vivid imagination; seeing things with sudden and tremendous vividness, as in a searchlight or a lightning flash, he contrived to convey to his readers his impressions full charged with the original emotion that produced them, and thus with the highest poetic effect. There is nothing in all descriptive writing to
match the vividness of some of the scenes in the *French Revolution* or in the narrative part of *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, or more than perhaps in any of his books, because in it he was setting down deep-seated impressions of his boyhood rather than those got from brooding over documents, in *Sartor Resartus*. Alongside this unmatched pictorial vividness and a quite amazing richness and rhythm of language, more surprising and original than anything out of Shakespeare, there are of course, striking defects--a wearisome reiteration of emphasis, a clumsiness of construction, a saddening fondness for solecisms and hybrid inventions of his own. The reader who is interested in these (and every one who reads him is forced to become so) will find them faithfully dealt with in John Sterling's remarkable letter (quoted in Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*) on *Sartor Resartus*. But gross as they are, and frequently as they provide matter for serious offence, these eccentricities of language link themselves up in a strange indissoluble way with Carlyle's individuality and his power as an artist. They are not to be imitated, but he would be much less than he is without them, and they act by their very strength and pungency as a preservative of his work. That of all the political pamphlets which the new era of reform occasioned, his, which were the least in sympathy with it and are the furthest off the main stream of our political thinking now, alone continue to be read, must be laid down not only to the prophetic fervour and fire of their inspiration but to the dark and violent magic of their style.

CHAPTER IX
The faculty for telling stories is the oldest artistic faculty in the world, and the deepest implanted in the heart of man. Before the rudest cave-pictures were scratched on the stone, the story-teller, it is not unreasonable to suppose, was plying his trade. All early poetry is simply story-telling in verse. Stories are the first literary interest of the awakening mind of a child. As that is so, it is strange that the novel, which of all literary ways of story-telling seems closest to the unstudied tale-spinning of talk, should be the late discovery that it is. Of all the main forms into which the literary impulse moulds the stuff of imagination, the novel is the last to be devised. The drama dates from prehistoric times, so does the epic, the ballad and the lyric. The novel, as we know it, dates practically speaking from 1740. What is the reason it is so late in appearing?

The answer is simply that there seems no room for good drama and good fiction at the same time in literature; drama and novels cannot exist side by side, and the novel had to wait for the decadence of the drama before it could appear and triumph. If one were to make a table of succession for the various kinds of literature as they have been used naturally and spontaneously (not academically), the order would be the epic, the drama, the novel; and it would be obvious at once that the order stood for something more than chronological succession, and that
literature in its function as a representation and criticism of life
passed from form to form in the search of greater freedom, greater
subtlety, and greater power. At present we seem to be at the climax of
the third stage in this development; there are signs that the fourth is
on the way, and that it will be a return to drama, not to the old,
formal, ordered kind, but, something new and freer, ready to gather up
and interpret what there is of newness and freedom in the spirit of man
and the society in which he lives.

The novel, then, had to wait for the drama's decline, but there was
literary story-telling long before that. There were mediaeval romances
in prose and verse; Renaissance pastoral tales, and stories of
adventure; collections, plenty of them, of short stories like
Boccaccio's, and those in Painter's _Palace of Pleasure_. But none of
these, not even romances which deal in moral and sententious advice like
_Euphues_, approach the essence of the novel as we know it. They are all
(except _Euphues_, which is simply a framework of travel for a book of
aphorisms) simple and objective; they set forth incidents or series of
incidents; long or short they are anecdotes only--they take no account
of character. It was impossible we should have the novel as distinct
from the tale, till stories acquired a subjective interest for us; till
we began to think about character and to look at actions not only
outwardly, but within at their springs.

As has been stated early in this book, it was in the seventeenth century
that this interest in character was first wakened. Shakespeare had
brought to the drama, which before him was concerned with actions viewed
outwardly, a psychological interest; he had taught that “character is
destiny,” and that men's actions and fates spring not from outward
agencies, but from within in their own souls. The age began to take a
deep and curious interest in men's lives; biography was written for the
first time and autobiography; it is the great period of memoir-writing
both in England and France; authors like Robert Burton came, whose
delight it was to dig down into human nature in search for oddities and
individualities of disposition; humanity as the great subject of enquiry
for all men, came to its own. All this has a direct bearing on the birth
of the novel. One transient form of literature in the seventeenth
century--the Character--is an ancestor in the direct line. The
collections of them--Earle's _Microcosmography_ is the best--are not
very exciting reading, and they never perhaps quite succeeded in
naturalizing a form borrowed from the later age of Greece, but their
importance in the history of the novel to come is clear. Take them and
add them to the story of adventure--_i.e._, introduce each fresh person
in your plot with a description in the character form, and the step you
have made towards the novel is enormous; you have given to plot which
was already there, the added interest of character.

That, however, was not quite how the thing worked in actual fact. At the
heels of the “Character” came the periodical essay of Addison and
Steele. Their interest in contemporary types was of the same quality as
Earle's or Hall's, but they went a different way to work. Where these
compressed and cultivated a style which was staccato and epigrammatic,
huddling all the traits of their subject in short sharp sentences that
follow each other with all the brevity and curtness of items in a
prescription, Addison and Steele observed a more artistic plan. They
made, as it were, the prescription up, adding one ingredient after
another slowly as the mixture dissolved. You are introduced to Sir Roger
de Coverley, and to a number of other typical people, and then in a
series of essays which if they were disengaged from their setting would
be to all intents a novel and a fine one, you are made aware one by one
of different traits in his character and those of his friends, each
trait generally enshrined in an incident which illustrates it; you get
to know them, that is, gradually, as you would in real life, and not all
in a breath, in a series of compressed statements, as is the way of the
character writers. With the Coverley essays in the _Spectator_, the
novel in one of its forms--that in which an invisible and all knowing
narrator tells a story in which some one else whose character he lays
bare for us is the hero--is as good as achieved.

Another manner of fiction--the autobiographical--had already been
invented. It grew directly out of the public interest in autobiography,
and particularly in the tales of their voyages which the discoverers
wrote and published on their return from their adventures. Its
establishment in literature was the work of two authors, Bunyan and
Defoe. The books of Bunyan, whether they are told in the first person or
no, are and were meant to be autobiographical; their interest is a
subjective interest. Here is a man who endeavours to interest you, not
in the character of some other person he has imagined or observed, but
in himself. His treatment of it is characteristic of the awakening
talent for fiction of his time. _The Pilgrim's Progress_ is begun as an
allegory, and so continues for a little space till the story takes hold
of the author. When it does, whether he knew it or not, allegory goes to
the winds. But the autobiographical form of fiction in its highest art
is the creation of Defoe. He told stories of adventure, incidents
modelled on real life as many tellers of tales had done before him, but
to the form as he found it he super-added a psychological interest—the
interest of the character of the narrator. He contrived to observe in
his writing a scrupulous and realistic fidelity and appropriateness to
the conditions in which the story was to be told. We learn about
Crusoe's island, for instance, gradually just as Crusoe learns of it
himself, though the author is careful by taking his narrator up to a
high point of vantage the day after his arrival, that we shall learn
the essentials of it, as long as verisimilitude is not sacrificed, as
soon as possible. It is the paradox of the English novel that these our
earliest efforts in fiction were meant, unlike the romances which
preceded them, to pass for truth. Defoe's _Journal of the Plague Year_
was widely taken as literal fact, and it is still quoted as such
occasionally by rash though reputable historians. So that in England the
novel began with realism as it has culminated, and across two centuries
Defoe and the "naturalists" join hands. Defoe, it is proper also in this
place to notice, fixed the peculiar form of the historical novel. In his
_Memoirs of a Cavalier_, the narrative of an imaginary person's
adventures in a historical setting is interspersed with the entrance of
actual historical personages, exactly the method of historical romancing
which was brought to perfection by Sir Walter Scott.

(2)
In the eighteenth century came the decline of the drama for which the novel had been waiting. By 1660 the romantic drama of Elizabeth’s time was dead; the comedy of the Restoration which followed, witty and brilliant though it was, reflected a society too licentious and artificial to secure it permanence; by the time of Addison play-writing had fallen to journey-work, and the theatre to openly expressed contempt. When Richardson and Fielding published their novels there was nothing to compete with fiction in the popular taste. It would seem as though the novel had been waiting for this favourable circumstance. In a sudden burst of prolific inventiveness, which can be paralleled in all letters only by the period of Marlowe and Shakespeare, masterpiece after masterpiece poured from the press. Within two generations, besides Richardson and Fielding came Sterne and Goldsmith and Smollett and Fanny Burney in naturalism, and Horace Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe in the new way of romance. Novels by minor authors were published in thousands as well. The novel, in fact, besides being the occasion of literature of the highest class, attracted by its lucrativeness that under-current of journey-work authorship which had hitherto busied itself in poetry or plays. Fiction has been its chief occupation ever since.

Anything like a detailed criticism or even a bare narrative of this voluminous literature is plainly impossible without the limits of a single chapter. Readers must go for it to books on the subject. It is possible here merely to draw attention to those authors to whom the English novel as a more or less fixed form is indebted for its peculiar characteristics. Foremost amongst these are Richardson and Fielding; after them there is Walter Scott. After him, in the nineteenth century,
Dickens and Meredith and Mr. Hardy; last of all the French realists and
the new school of romance. To one or other of these originals all the
great authors in the long list of English novelists owe their method
and their choice of subject-matter.

With Defoe fiction gained verisimilitude, it ceased to deal with the
incredible; it aimed at exhibiting, though in strange and memorable
circumstances, the workings of the ordinary mind. It is Richardson's
main claim to fame that he contrived a form of novel which exhibited an
ordinary mind working in normal circumstances, and that he did this with
a minuteness which till then had never been thought of and has not since
been surpassed. His talent is very exactly a microscopical talent; under
it the common stuff of life separated from its surroundings and
magnified beyond previous knowledge, yields strange and new and deeply
interesting sights. He carried into the study of character which had
begun in Addison with an eye to externals and eccentricities, a minute
faculty of inspection which watched and recorded unconscious mental and
emotional processes.

To do this he employed a method which was, in effect, a compromise
between that of the autobiography, and that of the tale told by an
invisible narrator. The weakness of the autobiography is that it can
write only of events within the knowledge of the supposed speaker, and
that consequently the presentation of all but one of the characters of
the book is an external presentation. We know, that is, of Man Friday
only what Crusoe could, according to realistic appropriateness, tell us
about him. We do not know what he thought or felt within himself. On
the other hand the method of invisible narration had not at his time acquired the faculty which it possesses now of doing Friday's thinking aloud or exposing fully the workings of his mind. So that Richardson, whose interests were psychological, whose strength and talent lay in the presentation of the states of mind appropriate to situations of passion or intrigue, had to look about him for a new form, and that form he found in the novel of letters. In a way, if the end of a novel be the presentation not of action, but of the springs of action; if the external event is in it always of less importance than the emotions which conditioned it, and the emotions which it set working, the novel of letters is the supreme manner for fiction. Consider the possibilities of it; there is a series of events in which A, B, and C are concerned. Not only can the outward events be narrated as they appeared to all three separately by means of letters from each to another, or to a fourth party, but the motives of each and the emotions which each experiences as a result of the actions of the others or them all, can be laid bare. No other method can wind itself so completely into the psychological intricacies and recesses which lie behind every event. Yet the form, as everybody knows, has not been popular; even an expert novel-reader could hardly name off-hand more than two or three examples of it since Richardson's day. Why is this? Well, chiefly it is because the mass of novelists have not had Richardson's knowledge of, or interest in, the psychological under side of life, and those who have, as, amongst the moderns, Henry James, have devised out of the convention of the invisible narrator a method by which they can with greater economy attain in practice fairly good results. For the mere narration of action in which the study of character plays a subsidiary part, it was, of course, from the beginning impossible. Scott turned aside at the
height of his power to try it in "Redgauntlet"; he never made a second attempt.

For Richardson's purpose, it answered admirably, and he used it with supreme effect. Particularly he excelled in that side of the novelist's craft which has ever since (whether because he started it or not) proved the subtlest and most attractive, the presentation of women. Richardson was one of those men who are not at their ease in other men's society, and whom other men, to put it plainly, are apt to regard as coxcombs and fools. But he had a genius for the friendship and confidence of women. In his youth he wrote love-letters for them. His first novel grew out of a plan to exhibit in a series of letters the quality of feminine virtue, and in its essence (though with a ludicrous, and so to speak "kitchen-maidish" misunderstanding of his own sex) adheres to the plan. His second novel, which designs to set up a model man against the monster of iniquity in _Pamela_, is successful only so far as it exhibits the thoughts and feelings of the heroine whom he ultimately marries. His last, _Clarissa Harlowe_ is a masterpiece of sympathetic divination into the feminine mind. _Clarissa_ is, as has been well said, the "Eve of fiction, the prototype of the modern heroine"; feminine psychology as good as unknown before (Shakespeare's women being the "Fridays" of a highly intelligent Crusoe) has hardly been brought further since. But _Clarissa_ is more than mere psychology; whether she represents a contemporary tendency or whether Richardson made her so, she starts a new epoch. "This," says Henley, "is perhaps her finest virtue as it is certainly her greatest charm; that until she set the example, woman in literature as a self-suffering individuality, as an
existence endowed with equal rights to independence--of choice, volition, action--with man had not begun to be." She had not begun to be it in life either.

What Richardson did for the subtest part of a novelist's business, his dealings with psychology, Fielding did for the most necessary part of it, the telling of the story. Before him hardly any story had been told well; even if it had been plain and clear as in Bunyan and Defoe it had lacked the emphasis, the light and shade of skilful grouping. On the "picaresque" (so the autobiographical form was called abroad) convention of a journey he grafted a structure based in its outline on the form of the ancient epic. It proved extraordinarily suitable for his purpose. Not only did it make it easy for him to lighten his narrative with excursions in a heightened style, burlesquing his origins, but it gave him at once the right attitude to his material. He told his story as one who knew everything; could tell conversations and incidents as he conceived them happening, with no violation of credibility, nor any strain on his reader's imagination, and without any impropriety could interpose in his own person, pointing things to the reader which might have escaped his attention, pointing at parallels he might have missed, laying bare the irony or humour beneath a situation. He allowed himself digressions and episodes, told separate tales in the middle of the action, introduced, as in Partridge's visit to the theatre, the added piquancy of topical allusion; in fact he did anything he chose. And he laid down that free form of the novel which is characteristically English, and from which, in its essence, no one till the modern realists has made a serious departure.
In the matter of his novels, he excels by reason of a Shakespearean sense of character and by the richness and rightness of his faculty of humour. He had a quick eye for contemporary types, and an amazing power of building out of them men and women whose individuality is full and rounded. You do not feel as you do with Richardson that his fabric is spun silk-worm-wise out of himself; on the contrary you know it to be the fruit of a gentle and observant nature, and a stock of fundamental human sympathy. His gallery of portraits, Joseph Andrews, Parson Adams, Parson Trulliber, Jones, Blifil, Partridge, Sophia and her father and all the rest are each of them minute studies of separate people; they live and move according to their proper natures; they are conceived not from without but from within. Both Richardson and Fielding were conscious of a moral intention; but where Richardson is sentimental, vulgar, and moral only so far as it is moral (as in _Pamela_), to inculcate selling at the highest price or (as in _Grandison_) to avoid temptations which never come in your way, Fielding's morality is fresh and healthy, and (though not quite free from the sentimentality of scoundrelism) at bottom sane and true. His knowledge of the world kept him right. His acquaintance with life is wide, and his insight is keen and deep. His taste is almost as catholic as Shakespeare's own, and the life he knew, and which other men knew, he handles for the first time with the freedom and imagination of an artist.

Each of the two--Fielding and Richardson--had his host of followers.

Abroad Richardson won immediate recognition; in France Diderot went so far as to compare him with Homer and Moses! He gave the first impulse to
modern French fiction. At home, less happily, he set going the
sentimental school, and it was only when that had passed away that—in
the delicate and subtle character-study of Miss Austen—his influence
comes to its own. Miss Austen carried a step further, and with an
observation which was first hand and seconded by intuitive knowledge,
Richardson's analysis of the feminine mind, adding to it a delicate and
finely humorous feeling for character in both sexes which was all her
own. Fielding's imitators (they number each in his own way, and with his
own graces or talent added his rival Smollett, Sterne, and Goldsmith)
kept the way which leads to Thackeray and Dickens—the main road of the
English Novel.

That road was widened two ways by Sir Walter Scott. The historical
novel, which had been before his day either an essay in anachronism with
nothing historical in it but the date, or a laborious and uninspired
compilation of antiquarian research, took form and life under his hands.
His wide reading, stored as it was in a marvellously retentive memory,
gave him all the background he needed to achieve a historical setting,
and allowed him to concentrate his attention on the actual telling of
his story; to which his genial and sympathetic humanity and his quick
eye for character gave a humorous depth and richness that was all his
own. It is not surprising that he made the historical novel a literary
vogue all over Europe. In the second place, he began in his novels of
Scottish character a sympathetic study of nationality. He is not,
perhaps, a fair guide to contemporary conditions; his interests were too
romantic and too much in the past to catch the rattle of the looms that
cought the ear of Galt, and if we want a picture of the great fact of
modern Scotland, its industrialisation, it is to Galt we must go. But in
his comprehension of the essential character of the people he has no
rival; in it his historical sense seconded his observation, and the two
mingling gave us the pictures whose depth of colour and truth make his
Scottish novels, _Old Mortality, The Antiquary, Redgauntlet_, the
greatest things of their kind in literature.

(3)

The peculiarly national style of fiction founded by Fielding and carried
on by his followers reached its culminating point in _Vanity Fair_. In
it the reader does not seem to be simply present at the unfolding of a
plot the end of which is constantly present to the mind of the author
and to which he is always consciously working, every incident having a
bearing on the course of the action; rather he feels himself to be the
spectator of a piece of life which is too large and complex to be under
the control of a creator, which moves to its close not under the
impulsion of a directing hand, but independently impelled by causes
evolved in the course of its happening. With this added complexity goes
a more frequent interposition of the author in his own person--one of
the conventions as we have seen of this national style. Thackeray is
present to his readers, indeed, not as the manager who pulls the strings
and sets the puppets in motion, but as an interpreter who directs the
reader's attention to the events on which he lays stress, and makes them
a starting-point for his own moralising. This persistent
moralizing--sham cynical, real sentimental--this thumping of death-bed
pillows as in the dreadful case of Miss Crawley, makes Thackeray's use
of the personal interposition almost less effective than that of any
other novelist. Already while he was doing it, Dickens had conquered the
public; and the English novel was making its second fresh start.

He is an innovator in more ways than one. In the first place he is the
earliest novelist to practise a conscious artistry of plot. _The Mystery
of Edwin Drood_ remains mysterious, but those who essay to conjecture
the end of that unfinished story have at last the surety that its end,
full worked out in all its details, had been in its author's mind before
he set pen to paper. His imagination was as diligent and as disciplined
as his pen, Dickens' practice in this matter could not be better put
than in his own words, when he describes himself as "in the first stage
of a new book, which consists in going round and round the idea, as you
see a bird in his cage go about and about his sugar before he touches
it." That his plots are always highly elaborated is the fruit of this
preliminary disciplined exercise of thought. The method is familiar to
many novelists now; Dickens was the first to put it into practice. In
the second place he made a new departure by his frankly admitted
didacticism and by the skill with which in all but two or three of his
books--_Bleak House_, perhaps, and _Little Dorrit_--he squared his
purpose with his art. Lastly he made the discovery which has made him
immortal. In him for the first time the English novel produced an
author who dug down into the masses of the people for his subjects;
apprehended them in all their inexhaustible character and humour and
pathos, and reproduced them with a lively and loving artistic skill.

Dickens has, of course, serious faults. In particular, readers
emancipated by lapse of time from the enslavement of the first enthusiasm, have quarrelled with the mawkishness and sentimentality of his pathos, and with the exaggeration of his studies of character. It has been said of him, as it has of Thackeray, that he could not draw a "good woman" and that Agnes Copperfield, like Amelia Sedley, is a very doll-like type of person. To critics of this kind it may be retorted that though "good" and "bad" are categories relevant to melodrama, they apply very ill to serious fiction, and that indeed to the characters of any of the novelists--the Brontes, Mrs. Gaskell or the like--who lay bare character with fullness and intimacy, they could not well be applied at all. The faultiness of them in Dickens is less than in Thackeray, for in Dickens they are only incident to the scheme, which lies in the hero (his heroes are excellent) and in the grotesque characters, whereas in his rival they are in the theme itself. For his pathos, not even his warmest admirer could perhaps offer a satisfactory case. The charge of exaggeration however is another matter. To the person who complains that he has never met Dick Swiveller or Micawber or Mrs. Gamp the answer is simply Turner's to the sceptical critic of his sunset, "Don't you wish you could?" To the other, who objects more plausibly to Dickens's habit of attaching to each of his characters some label which is either so much flaunted all through that you cannot see the character at all or else mysteriously and unaccountably disappears when the story begins to grip the author, Dickens has himself offered an amusing and convincing defence. In the preface to _Pickwick_ he answers those who criticised the novel on the ground that Pickwick began by being purely ludicrous and developed into a serious and sympathetic individuality, by pointing to the analogous process which commonly takes place in actual human relationships. You begin a new acquaintanceship
with perhaps not very charitable prepossessions; these later a deeper and better knowledge removes, and where you have before seen an idiosyncrasy you come to love a character. It is ingenious and it helps to explain Mrs. Nickleby, the Pecksniff daughters, and many another.

Whether it is true or not (and it does not explain the faultiness of such pictures as Carker and his kind) there can be no doubt that this trick in Dickens of beginning with a salient impression and working outward to a fuller conception of character is part at least of the reason of his enormous hold upon his readers. No man leads you into the mazes of his invention so easily and with such a persuasive hand.

The great novelists who were writing contemporarily with him--the Brontes, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot--it is impossible to deal with here, except to say that the last is indisputably, because of her inability to fuse completely art and ethics, inferior to Mrs. Gaskell or to either of the Bronte sisters. Nor of the later Victorians who added fresh variety to the national style can the greatest, Meredith, be more than mentioned for the exquisiteness of his comic spirit and the brave gallery of English men and women he has given us in what is, perhaps, fundamentally the most English thing in fiction since Fielding wrote.

For our purpose Mr. Hardy, though he is a less brilliant artist, is more to the point. His novels brought into England the contemporary pessimism of Schopenhaur and the Russians, and found a home for it among the English peasantry. Convinced that in the upper classes character could be studied and portrayed only subjectively because of the artificiality of a society which prevented its outlet in action, he turned to the peasantry because with them conduct is the direct expression of the
inner life. Character could be shown working, therefore, not
subjectively but in the act, if you chose a peasant subject. His
philosophy, expressed in this medium, is sombre. In his novels you can
trace a gradual realization of the defects of natural laws and the
quandary men are put to by their operation. Chance, an irritating and
trifling series of coincidences, plays the part of fate. Nature seems to
enter with the hopelessness of man's mood. Finally the novelist turns
against life itself. "Birth," he says, speaking of Tess, "seemed to her
an ordeal of degrading personal compulsion whose gratuitousness nothing
in the result seemed to justify and at best could only palliate." It is
strange to find pessimism in a romantic setting; strange, too, to find a
paganism which is so little capable of light or joy.

(4)

The characteristic form of English fiction, that in which the requisite
illusion of the complexity and variety of life is rendered by
discursiveness, by an author's licence to digress, to double back on
himself, to start may be in the middle of a story and work subsequently
to the beginning and the end; in short by his power to do whatever is
most expressive of his individuality, found a rival in the last twenty
years of the nineteenth century in the French Naturalistic or Realist
school, in which the illusion of life is got by a studied and sober
veracity of statement, and by the minute accumulation of detail. To the
French Naturalists a novel approached in importance the work of a man of
science, and they believed it ought to be based on documentary evidence,
as a scientific work would be. Above all it ought not to allow itself to
be coloured by the least gloss of imagination or idealism; it ought never to shrink from a confrontation of the naked fact. On the contrary it was its business to carry it to the dissecting table and there minutely examine everything that lay beneath its surface.

The school first became an English possession in the early translations of the work of Zola; its methods were transplanted into English fiction by Mr. George Moore. From his novels, both in passages of direct statement and in the light of his practice, it is possible to gather together the materials of a manifesto of the English Naturalistic school. The naturalists complained that English fiction lacked construction in the strictest sense; they found in the English novel a remarkable absence of organic wholeness; it did not fulfil their first and broadest canon of subject-matter--by which a novel has to deal in the first place with a single and rhythmical series of events; it was too discursive. They made this charge against English fiction; they also retorted the charge brought by native writers and their readers against the French of foulness, sordidness and pessimism in their view of life.

"We do not," says a novelist in one of Mr. Moore's books, "we do not always choose what you call unpleasant subjects, but we do try to get to the roots of things; and the basis of life being material and not spiritual, the analyst sooner or later finds himself invariably handling what this sentimental age calls coarse." "The novel," says the same character, "if it be anything is contemporary history, an exact and complete reproduction of the social surroundings of the age we live in."

That succinctly is the naturalistic theory of the novel as a work of science--that as the history of a nation lies hidden often in social
wrongs and in domestic grief as much as in the movements of parties or
dynasties, the novelist must do for the former what the historian does
for the latter. It is his business in the scheme of knowledge of his
time.

But the naturalists believed quite as profoundly in the novel as a work
of art. They claimed for their careful pictures of the grey and sad and
sordid an artistic worth, varying in proportion to the intensity of the
emotion in which the picture was composed and according to the picture's
truth, but in its essence just as real and permanent as the artistic
worth of romance. "Seen from afar," writes Mr. Moore, "all things in
nature are of equal worth; and the meanest things, when viewed with the
eyes of God, are raised to heights of tragic awe which conventionality
would limit to the deaths of kings and patriots." On such a lofty theory
they built their treatment and their style. It is a mistake to suppose
that the realist school deliberately cultivates the sordid or shocking.
Examine in this connection Mr. Moore's _Mummer's Wife_, our greatest
English realist novel, and for the matter of that one of the supreme
things in English fiction, and you will see that the scrupulous fidelity
of the author's method, though it denies him those concessions to a
sentimentalist or romantic view of life which are the common implements
of fiction, denies him no less the extremities of horror or
loathsomeness. The heroine sinks into the miserable squalor of a
dipsomaniac and dies from a drunkard's disease, but her end is shown as
the ineluctable consequence of her life, its early greyness and
monotony, the sudden shock of a new and strange environment and the
resultant weakness of will which a morbid excitability inevitably
brought about. The novel, that is to say, deals with a "rhythmical series of events and follows them to their conclusion"; it gets at the roots of things; it tells us of something which we know to be true in life whether we care to read it in fiction or not. There is nothing in it of sordidness for sordidness' sake nor have the realists any philosophy of an unhappy ending. In this case the ending is unhappy because the sequence of events admitted of no other solution; in others the ending is happy or merely neutral as the preceding story decides. If what one may call neutral endings predominate, it is because they also--notoriously--predominate in life. But the question of unhappiness or its opposite has nothing whatever to do with the larger matter of beauty; it is the triumph of the realists that at their best they discovered a new beauty in things, the loveliness that lies in obscure places, the splendour of sordidness, humility, and pain. They have taught us that beauty, like the Spirit, blows where it lists and we know from them that the antithesis between realism and idealism is only on their lower levels; at their summits they unite and are one. No true realist but is an idealist too.

Most of what is best in English fiction since has been directly occasioned by their work; Gissing and Mr. Arnold Bennett may be mentioned as two authors who are fundamentally realist in their conception of the art of the novel, and the realist ideal partakes in a greater or less degree in the work of nearly all our eminent novelists to-day. But realism is not and cannot be interesting to the great public; it portrays people as they are, not as they would like to be, and where they are, not where they would like to be. It gives no
background for day-dreaming. Now literature (to repeat what has been
than more once stated earlier in this book) is a way of escape from life
as well as an echo or mirror of it, and the novel as the form of
literature which more than any other men read for pleasure, is the main
avenue for this escape. So that alongside this invasion of realism it is
not strange that there grew a revival in romance.

The main agent of it, Robert Louis Stevenson, had the romantic strain in
him intensified by the conditions under which he worked; a
weak and anaemic man, he loved bloodshed as a cripple loves
athletics--passionately and with the intimate enthusiasm of make-believe
which an imaginative man can bring to bear on the contemplation of what
can never be his. His natural attraction for "redness and juice" in life
was seconded by a delightful and fantastic sense of the boundless
possibilities of romance in every-day things. To a realist a hansom-cab
driver is a man who makes twenty-five shillings a week, lives in a back
street in Pimlico, has a wife who drinks and children who grow up with
an alcoholic taint; the realist will compare his lot with other
cab-drivers, and find what part of his life is the product of the
cab-driving environment, and on that basis he will write his book. To
Stevenson and to the romanticist generally, a hansom cab-driver is a
mystery behind whose apparent commonplaceness lie magic possibilities
beyond all telling; not one but may be the agent of the Prince of
Bohemia, ready to drive you off to some mad and magic adventure in a
street which is just as commonplace to the outward eye as the cab-driver
himself, but which implicates by its very deceitful commonness whole
volumes of romance. The novel-reader to whom _Demos_ was the repetition
of what he had seen and known, and what had planted sickness in his soul, found the _New Arabian Nights_ a refreshing miracle. Stevenson had discovered that modern London had its possibilities of romance. To these two elements of his romantic equipment must be added a third--travel. Defoe never left England, and other early romanticists less gifted with invention than he wrote from the mind's eye and from books. To Stevenson, and to his successor Mr. Kipling, whose “discovery” of India is one of the salient facts of modern English letters, and to Mr. Conrad belongs the credit of teaching novelists to draw on experience for the scenes they seek to present. A fourth element in the equipment of modern romanticism--that which draws its effects from the “miracles” of modern science, has been added since by Mr. H. G. Wells, in whose latest work the realistic and romantic schools seem to have united.

CHAPTER X

THE PRESENT AGE

We have carried our study down to the death of Ruskin and included in it authors like Swinburne and Meredith who survived till recently; and in discussing the novel we have included men like Kipling and Hardy--living authors. It would be possible and perhaps safer to stop there and make no attempt to bring writers later than these into our survey. To do so is to court an easily and quickly stated objection. One is anticipating the verdict of posterity. How can we who are contemporaries tell whether an author's work is permanent or no?
Of course, in a sense the point of view expressed by these questions is true enough. It is always idle to anticipate the verdict of posterity.

Remember Matthew Arnold's prophecy that at the end of the nineteenth century Wordsworth and Byron would be the two great names in Romantic poetry. We are ten years and more past that date now, and so far as Byron is concerned, at any rate, there is no sign that Arnold's prediction has come true. But the obvious fact that we cannot do our grandchildren's thinking for them, is no reason why we should refuse to think for ourselves. No notion is so destructive to the formation of a sound literary taste as the notion that books become literature only when their authors are dead. Round us men and women are putting into plays and poetry and novels the best that they can or know. They are writing not for a dim and uncertain future but for us, and on our recognition and welcome they depend, sometimes for their livelihood, always for the courage which carries them on to fresh endeavour. Literature is an ever-living and continuous thing, and we do it less than its due service if we are so occupied reading Shakespeare and Milton and Scott that we have no time to read Mr. Yeats, Mr. Shaw or Mr. Wells. Students of literature must remember that classics are being manufactured daily under their eyes, and that on their sympathy and comprehension depends whether an author receives the success he merits when he is alive to enjoy it.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to draw a rough picture of some of the lines or schools of contemporary writing--of the writing mainly, though not altogether, of living authors. It is intended to indicate
some characteristics of the general trend or drift of literary effort as
a whole. The most remarkable feature of the age, as far as writing is
concerned, is without doubt its inattention to poetry. Tennyson was a
popular author; his books sold in thousands; his lines passed into that
common conversational currency of unconscious quotation which is the
surest testimony to the permeation of a poet's influence. Even Browning,
though his popularity came late, found himself carried into all the
nooks and corners of the reading public. His robust and masculine
morality, understood at last, or expounded by a semi-priestly class of
interpreters, made him popular with those readers--and they are the
majority--who love their reading to convey a moral lesson, just as
Tennyson's reflection of his time's distraction between science and
religion endeared them to those who found in him an answer or at least
an echo to their own perplexities. A work widely different from either
of these, Fitzgerald's _Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam_, shared and has
probably exceeded their popularity for similar reasons. Its easy
pessimism and cult of pleasure, its delightful freedom from any demand
for continuous thought from its readers, its appeal to the indolence and
moral flaccidity which is implicit in all men, all contributed to its
immense vogue; and among people who perhaps did not fully understand it
but were merely lulled by its sonorousness, a knowledge of it has passed
for the insignia of a love of literature and the possession of literary
taste. But after Fitzgerald--who? What poet has commanded the ear of the
reading public or even a fraction of it? Not Swinburne certainly, partly
because of his undoubted difficulty, partly because of a suspicion held
of his moral and religious tenets, largely from material reasons quite
unconnected with the quality of his work; not Morris, nor his
followers; none of the so-called minor poets whom we shall notice
presently—poets who have drawn the moods that have nourished their work from the decadents of France. Probably the only writer of verse who is at the same time a poet and has acquired a large popularity and public influence is Mr. Kipling. His work as a novelist we mentioned in the last chapter. It remains to say something of his achievements in verse.

Let us grant at once his faults. He can be violent, and over-rhetorical; he belabours you with sense impressions, and with the polysyllabic rhetoric he learned from Swinburne—and (though this is not the place for a discussion of political ideas) he can offend by the sentimental brutalism which too often passes for patriotism in his poetry. Not that this last represents the total impression of his attitude as an Englishman. His later work in poetry and prose, devoted to the reconstruction of English history, is remarkable for the justness and saneness of its temper. There are other faults—a lack of sureness in taste is one—that could be mentioned but they do not affect the main greatness of his work. He is great because he discovered a new subject-matter, and because of the white heat of imagination which in his best things he brought to bear on it and by which he transposed it into poetry. It is Mr. Kipling’s special distinction that the apparatus of modern civilization—steam engines, and steamships, and telegraph lines, and the art of flight—take on in his hands a poetic quality as authentic and inspiring as any that ever was cast over the implements of other and what the mass of men believe to have been more picturesque days. Romance is in the present, so he teaches us, not in the past, and we do it wrong to leave it only the territory we have ourselves discarded in the advance of the race. That and the great discovery of
India--an India misunderstood for his own purposes no doubt, but still
the first presentiment of an essential fact in our modern history as a
people--give him the hold that he has, and rightly, over the minds of
his readers.

It is in a territory poles apart from Mr. Kipling's that the main stream
of romantic poetry flows. Apart from the gravely delicate and scholarly
work of Mr. Bridges, and the poetry of some others who work separately
away from their fellows, English romantic poetry has concentrated itself
into one chief school--the school of the "Celtic Revival" of which the
leader is Mr. W.B. Yeats. Two sources went to its making. In its
inception, it arose out of a group of young poets who worked in a
conscious imitation of the methods of the French decadents; chiefly of
Baudelaire and Verlaine. As a whole their work was merely imitative and
not very profound, but each of them--Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson,
who are both now dead, and others who are still living--produced enough
to show that they had at their command a vein of poetry that might have
deepened and proved more rich had they gone on working it. One of them,
Mr. W.B. Yeats, by his birth and his reading in Irish legend and
folklore, became possessed of a subject-matter denied to his fellows,
and it is from the combination of the mood of the decadents with the
dreaminess and mystery of Celtic tradition and romance--a combination
which came to pass in his poetry--that the Celtic school has sprung. In
a sense it has added to the territory explored by Coleridge and Scott
and Morris a new province. Only nothing could be further from the
objectivity of these men, than the way in which the Celtic school
approaches its material. Its stories are clear to itself, it may be, but
not to its readers. Deirdre and Conchubar, and Angus and Maeve and Dectora and all the shadowy figures in them scarcely become embodied. Their lives and deaths and loves and hates are only a scheme on which they weave a delicate and dim embroidery of pure poetry--of love and death and old age and the passing of beauty and all the sorrows that have been since the world began and will be till the world ends. If Mr. Kipling is of the earth earthy, if the clangour and rush of the world is in everything he writes, Mr. Yeats and his school live consciously sequestered and withdrawn, and the world never breaks in on their ghostly troubles or their peace. Poetry never fails to relate itself to its age; if it is not with it, it is against it; it is never merely indifferent. The poetry of these men is the denial, passionately made, of everything the world prizes. While such a denial is sincere, as in the best of them, then the verses they make are true and fine. But when it is assumed, as in some of their imitators, then the work they did is not true poetry.

But the literary characteristic of the present age--the one which is most likely to differentiate it from its predecessor, is the revival of the drama. When we left it before the Commonwealth the great English literary school of playwriting--the romantic drama--was already dead. It has had since no second birth. There followed after it the heroic tragedy of Dryden and Shadwell--a turgid, declamatory form of art without importance--and two brilliant comic periods, the earlier and greater that of Congreve and Wycherley, the later more sentimental with less art and vivacity, that of Goldsmith and Sheridan. With Sheridan the drama as a literary force died a second time. It has been born again
only in our own day. It is, of course, unnecessary to point out that the
writing of plays did not cease in the interval; it never does cease. The
production of dramatic journey-work has been continuous since the
re-opening of the theatres in 1660, and it is carried on as plentifully
as ever at this present time. Only side by side with it there has grown
up a new literary drama, and gradually the main stream of artistic
endeavour which for nearly a century has preoccupied itself with the
novel almost to the exclusion of other forms of art, has turned back to
the stage as its channel to articulation and an audience. An influence
from abroad set it in motion. The plays of Ibsen—produced, the best of
them, in the eighties of last century—came to England in the nineties.
In a way, perhaps, they were misunderstood by their worshippers hardly
less than by their enemies, but all excrescences of enthusiasm apart
they taught men a new and freer approach to moral questions, and a new
and freer dramatic technique. Where plays had been constructed on a
journeyman plan evolved by Labiche and Sardou—mid-nineteenth century
writers in France—a plan delighting in symmetry, close-jointedness,
false correspondences, an impossible use of coincidence, and a quite
unreal complexity and elaboration, they become bolder and less
artificial, more close to the likelihoods of real life. The gravity of
the problems with which they set themselves to deal heightened their
influence. In England men began to ask themselves whether the theatre
here too could not be made an avenue towards the discussion of living
difficulties, and then arose the new school of dramatists—of whom the
first and most remarkable is Mr. George Bernard Shaw. In his earlier
plays he set himself boldly to attack established conventions, and to
ask his audiences to think for themselves. _Arms and the Man_ dealt a
blow at the cheap romanticism with which a peace-living public invests
the profession of arms; _The Devil's Disciple_ was a shrewd criticism of
the preposterous self-sacrifice on which melodrama, which is the most
popular non-literary form of play-writing, is commonly based; _Mrs.
Warren's Profession_ made a brave and plain-spoken attempt to drag the
public face to face with the nauseous realities of prostitution;
_Widowers' Houses_ laid bare the sordidness of a Society which bases
itself on the exploitation of the poor for the luxuries of the rich. It
took Mr. Shaw close on ten years to persuade even the moderate number of
men and women who make up a theatre audience that his plays were worth
listening to. But before his final success came he had attained a
substantial popularity with the public which reads. Possibly his early
failure on the stage--mainly due to the obstinacy of playgoers immersed
in a stock tradition--was partly due also to his failure in constructive
power. He is an adept at tying knots and impatient of unravelling them;
his third acts are apt either to evaporate in talk or to find some
unreal and unsatisfactory solution for the complexity he has created.
But constructive weakness apart, his amazing brilliance and fecundity of
dialogue ought to have given him an immediate and lasting grip of the
stage. There has probably never been a dramatist who could invest
conversation with the same vivacity and point, the same combination of
surprise and inevitableness that distinguishes his best work.

Alongside of Mr. Shaw more immediately successful, and not traceable to
any obvious influence, English or foreign, came the comedies of Oscar
Wilde. For a parallel to their pure delight and high spirits, and to the
exquisite wit and artifice with which they were constructed, one would
have to go back to the dramatists of the Restoration. To Congreve and
his school, indeed, Wilde belongs rather than to any later period. With
his own age he had little in common; he was without interest in its
social and moral problems; when he approved of socialism it was because
in a socialist state the artist might be absolved from the necessity of
carrying a living, and be free to follow his art undisturbed. He loved
to think of himself as symbolic, but all he symbolized was a fantasy of
his own creating; his attitude to his age was decorative and withdrawn
rather than representative. He was the licensed jester to society, and
in that capacity he gave us his plays. Mr. Shaw may be said to have
founded a school; at any rate he gave the start to Mr. Galsworthy and
some lesser dramatists. Wilde founded nothing, and his works remain as
complete and separate as those of the earlier artificial dramatists of
two centuries before.

Another school of drama, homogeneous and quite apart from the rest,
remains. We have seen how the "Celtic Revival," as the Irish literary
movement has been called by its admirers, gave us a new kind of romantic
poetry. As an offshoot from it there came into being some ten years ago
an Irish school of drama, drawing its inspiration from two sources--the
body of the old Irish legends and the highly individualized and
richly-coloured life of the Irish peasants in the mountains of Wicklow
and of the West, a life, so the dramatists believed, still unspoiled by
the deepening influences of a false system of education and the wear
and tear of a civilization whose values are commercial and not spiritual
or artistic. The school founded its own theatre, trained its own actors,
fashioned its own modes of speech (the chief of which was a frank
restoration of rhythm in the speaking of verse and of cadence in prose),
and having all these things it produced a series of plays all directed
to its special ends, and all composed and written with a special
fidelity to country life as it has been preserved, or to what it
conceived to be the spirit of Irish folk-legend. It reached its zenith
quickly, and as far as the production of plays is concerned, it would
seem to be already in its decline. That is to say, what in the beginning
was a fresh and vivid inspiration caught direct from life has become a
pattern whose colours and shape can be repeated or varied by lesser
writers who take their teaching from the original discoverers. But in
the course of its brief and striking course it produced one great
dramatist--a writer whom already not three years after his death, men
instinctively class with the masters of his art.

J.M. Synge, in the earlier years of his manhood, lived entirely abroad,
leading the life of a wandering scholar from city to city and country to
country till he was persuaded to give up the Continent and the criticism
and imitation of French literature, to return to England, and to go and
live on the Aran Islands. From that time till his death--some ten
years--he spent a large part of each year amongst the peasantry of the
desolate Atlantic coast and wrote the plays by which his name is known.
His literary output was not large, but he supplied the Irish dramatic
movement with exactly what it needed--a vivid contact with the realities
of life. Not that he was a mere student or transcriber of manners. His
wandering life among many peoples and his study of classical French and
German literature had equipped him as perhaps no other modern dramatist
has been equipped with an imaginative insight and a reach of perception
which enabled him to give universality and depth to his pourtrayal of
the peasant types around him. He got down to the great elemental forces
which throb and pulse beneath the common crises of everyday life and
laid them bare, not as ugly and horrible, but with a sense of their
terror, their beauty and their strength. His earliest play, _The Well of
the Saints_, treats of a sorrow that is as old as Helen of the vanishing
of beauty and the irony of fulfilled desire. The great realities of
death pass through the _Riders to the Sea_, till the language takes on a
kind of simplicity as of written words shrivelling up in a flame. _The
Playboy of the Western World_ is a study of character, terrible in its
clarity, but never losing the savour of imagination and of the
astringency and saltness that was characteristic of his temper. He had
at his command an instrument of incomparable fineness and range in the
language which he fashioned out the speech of the common people amongst
whom he lived. In his dramatic writings this language took on a kind of
rhythm which had the effect of producing a certain remoteness of the
highest possible artistic value. The people of his imagination appear a
little disembodied. They talk with that straightforward and simple kind
of innocence which makes strange and impressive the dialogue of
Maeterlinck's earlier plays. Through it, as Mr. Yeats has said, he saw
the subject-matter of his art "with wise, clear-seeing, unreflecting
eyes--and he preserved the innocence of good art in an age of reasons
and purposes." He had no theory except of his art; no "ideas" and no
"problems"; he did not wish to change anything or to reform anything;
but he saw all his people pass by as before a window, and he heard their
words. This resolute refusal to be interested in or to take account of
current modes of thought has been considered by some to detract from his
eminence. Certainly if by "ideas" we mean current views on society or
morality, he is deficient in them; only his very deficiency brings him
nearer to the great masters of drama--to Ben Johnson, to Cervantes, to
Moliere--even to Shakespeare himself. Probably in no single case amongst
our contemporaries could a high and permanent place in literature be
prophesied with more confidence than in his.

In the past it has seemed impossible for fiction and the drama, i.e.
serious drama of high literary quality, to flourish, side by side. It
seems as though the best creative minds in any age could find strength
for any one of these two great outlets for the activity of the creative
imagination. In the reign of Elizabeth the drama outshone fiction; in
the reign of Victoria the novel crowded out the drama. There are signs
that a literary era is commencing, in which the drama will again regain
to the full its position as a literature. More and more the bigger
creative artists will turn to a form which by its economy of means to
ends, and the chance it gives not merely of observing but of creating
and displaying character in action, has a more vigorous principle of
life in it than its rival.

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It is best to study English literature one period, or, even in the case
of the greatest, one author at a time. In every case the student should
see to it that he knows the _text_ of his authors; a knowledge of what
critics have said about our poets is a poor substitute for a knowledge
of what they have said themselves. Poetry ought to be read slowly and
carefully, and the reader ought to pay his author the compliment of
crediting him with ideas as important and, on occasion, as abstruse as any in a work of philosophy or abstract science. When the meaning is mastered, the poem ought to be read a second time aloud to catch the magic of the language and the verse. The reading of prose presents less difficulty, but there again the rule is, never allow yourself to be lulled by sound. Reading is an intellectual and not an hypnotic exercise.

The following short bibliography is divided to correspond with the chapters in this book. Prices and publishers are mentioned only when there is no more than one cheap edition of a book known to the author. For the subject as a whole, Chamber’s _Cyclopaedia of English Literature_ (3 vols., 10s. 6d. net each), which contains biographical and critical articles on all authors, arranged chronologically and furnished very copiously with specimen passages, may be consulted at any library.

* The books with an asterisk are suggested as those on which reading should be begun. The reader can then proceed to the others and after them to the many authors–great authors–who are not included in this short list.

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It is full of inaccuracy in detail.

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Chapter X.--W.B. Yeats' Poems; Wilde, _Importance of Being Earnest_;  
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And every new work of the best contemporary authors.

G.H.M.

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The dates attached to the authors are those of birth and death; those  
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