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**LITERATURE**





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# LITERATURE

and a changing civilisation

by

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MULK RAJ ANAND



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## CHAPTER I

### THE ANCIENT WORLD

THE object of this book is to trace the development of literature (mainly English) in relation to the social order of which it is always and everywhere the outcome. For it should be obvious that the kind of life a man leads, and therefore the kind of thoughts and feelings he has, is determined primarily by how he keeps himself alive. In the same way the form taken by the aggregate thoughts and feelings of any society, as expressed in its literature, philosophy and religion, will depend largely on how that society arranges for the production, distribution and exchange of those things which it considers most necessary for its continued existence. This is most obvious of course, except where it is veiled by religious myth, in primitive communities and early agricultural civilisations. But with the growing complexity of productive relationships under industrial capitalism, modern literature and art, in becoming more and more difficult and obscure, more and more the intellectual preserve of a leisured minority, and in thus losing touch with the life of society as a whole, has tended to arrogate to itself a more or less disembodied existence in a distinctly high-class sphere called Culture—or to use F. R. Leavis's phrase, "minority culture," as distinct from "mass civilisation." At the other end of the scale is the "mass civilisation" with its appalling and slimy sea of mass-produced reading matter that helps to keep the public so conveniently stupid. For should people begin to think for themselves and begin to feel a bit different from the print-blinded, radio-deafened, sport-doped mass, they might become inconveniently critical of a state of society that calls itself civilised yet deliberately

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condemns the greater number of its members to intellectual and economic degradation.

The devotees of "minority culture," however, are not concerned with such crude and obvious issues. Their sole aim is to refine upon their already over-refined æsthetic sensibilities, to complicate still further their already complicated introspective minds, and by doing this they believe themselves to be defending the cause of Culture and Tradition.

Indeed, our introspective apologists of *poésie-pur* who maintain that beliefs and external interests in a poet are an obstacle to the free practice of his art, and who say that poetry and painting should express nothing but itself—that is, Messrs. T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, Herbert Read and Wyndham Lewis, the acknowledged arbiters of contemporary taste—are not unlike the Spider of Swift's fable in *The Battle of the Books*. The Bee, like the ancient authors seeing himself as part of Nature and society, frankly admits going to the flowers for his honey. But the Spider, that is the modern author, who nevertheless entangles other creatures in his web and lives by sucking their blood, boasts that he is obliged to no one, but spins and draws everything out of himself. Politics and economics, the Spider will loftily inform you, are no concern of his. He is only concerned with literature. The object of this book is to demonstrate that it is only by understanding the economic, and therefore the class structure of society, that any genuine understanding of the literature and thought of an age can be arrived at.<sup>1</sup> To consider

<sup>1</sup> It would, of course, be foolish to pretend that ideologies are determined simply by the economic structure of society, for they are all the time reacting back on social consciousness and through social consciousness affecting the social-political structure, till at last they change the basic economic structure itself. It is this complicated interplay which is usually forgotten by vulgarisers of historical materialism. No amount of such interplay, however, invalidates the essential truth of the conception of culture as a superstructure dependent upon the organisation of society—which is basically an economic organisation—for its existence. Man does not live by bread alone, but he has never yet lived for long without it.

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literature on its own, as artificially divorced from the society of which it is the outcome, is to find yourself before long hopelessly side-tracked from any rational or coherent view of things into culture, "pure art" and Mr. I. A. Richards's self-destructive system of "pseudo-beliefs."

Ever since those far-off days when man lived in a world of mystery and fear, when the sun, the river, the fire, the forest and each natural thing that moved him to awe was venerated as a god, writing has been surrounded with a certain mystery. At first, of course, there was no writing and men made songs about the elements and deified them in their own image and myths arose about the creation of the world. These songs and legends were kept in the memory of generations of peoples, and traditions grew up in all parts of the world about an invisible race of gods inhabiting the elements, and living lives similar to the peoples who worshipped them. Then through constant practice and the hard compulsion of necessity, the growing of corn and the domestication of animals was learned, and certain men arose who pretended to have learned this knowledge from the gods. They were the first priests and religion came into being. And the priests, holding the secrets of life and death—that is, knowing and controlling the labour processes—by playing upon the childish credulity of primitive man gradually became the most powerful people in the community. Then heroes arose, men who distinguished themselves by endurance in war with other tribes, skill in the hunt and in the everlasting war with stubborn and relentless Nature, and songs were made celebrating the deeds of these men, who, on account of their prowess, were not unnaturally believed to be in closer contact with the gods than more ordinary men. And the epic came into being and the deeds of the heroes were sung on feast-days and festivals in the house of the chief. With the discovery of agriculture man gave up his

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early wandering life and settled in the fertile valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile and the Indus, and the ancient civilisations of Sumeria, Egypt and Northern India came into being round about the years 6000 to 4000 B.C.

The priests composed, or commanded to be composed, hymns and sacrificial formulæ glorifying and propitiating the gods of the elements to be sung and chanted at the planting and harvesting of the corn, and supplicating the gods as guardians of agriculture and of the communal life, and lyric poetry was born. Thus we have the Vedas of India, and much later when the Greek-speaking peoples came down into the Aegean peninsula, the Homeric hymns. The priests divided society into different castes according to the kind of work done by the various members; each caste was carefully graded and had its exclusive set of privileges. The object of this was a system of government that should keep the labouring population in complete subjection, stripping them of all the results of their labour and yet stimulating them to work indefatigably for the State. For this purpose in Egypt a god speaking through the mouth of the ruling class, the priests, who gave out that the social order was divinely ordained, was found to be most effective. In India the priestly caste of the Brahmins (god men) collected the laws and wisdom of their race into "sacred" books, called the *Brahmanas*. No low-caste man (i.e., those who did the necessary and unpleasant work of the community) was allowed to touch or attempt to read these books. If he was caught doing so boiling oil was poured into his ears. In Egypt the books of the law and technical knowledge were written in priestly characters (hieroglyphics) so that only the priests could read them. Common men were given another script, so there was no risk of their acquiring knowledge and becoming rebellious. If even the shadow of a low-caste man fell over any of the people who subsisted on his

labours, they were forthwith defiled and had to go to the temple to be expensively cleansed. The subjugation was complete and the military and merchant castes, who upheld the priests, did very well out of it.

Presently the myths of the gods and the epics of the heroes were collected together and written down, and national literatures sprang up in different parts of the ancient world. About 1300 B.C. a European race of pirates established themselves in the Aegean and along the coasts of Asia Minor, stamping out the remains of an ancient and far more highly-developed Cretan civilisation. They set up trading-centres and soon their sea-ports in the Aegean and Asia Minor became extremely prosperous. In one of these, according to tradition, Homer collected the myths and legends of his race and wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (some time between the eighth and seventh centuries), which tell of several tribes of Aegean Greeks who made war upon another tribe settled in Asia Minor and of the travels and strange adventures of one Odysseus, the captain of a band of Aegean Greeks, on his way home from the war to rocky Ithaca. In India Vyassa, a member of the European people who had settled among the remains of the highly developed civilisation of the dark Dravidians, edited between the sixth and fifth centuries the vast mass of folk-tales and legends of his race celebrating the conquest of India, and wrote the *Mahabharata*, while about the same time Valmiki composed the companion epic, *The Ramayana*—poems, which constitute India's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the sixth century B.C. also, the prince, Gautama was born, and began teaching his noble and aristocratic doctrine of world-renunciation. Both Buddhism, which is a doctrine born of satiety and extreme sensibility, and the epics of India, are evidence of a very high state of civilisation, for such a teaching as the Buddha's could only have arisen in a world-weary civilisation and would have been impossible among a young and militantly progressive

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people like the Greeks. We have to wait another five hundred years before parallels to Buddhism arise in the disillusioned Stoic and Christian philosophies under the world-dominion of the Romans. About the same time as Buddha and the epics of India, the Jews, a barbaric shepherd people undergoing captivity in Babylon, the centre of the great Assyrian Empire, were gradually becoming sufficiently civilised through contact with the Babylonians to collect their laws, poetry, chronicles, myths and legends, together into a book called the Bible. The Jehovah they worshipped was an invisible personification of the patriarchs this desert-dwelling branch of the Semitic race had known for generations. Like the gods of other nations Jehovah was a national god and very jealous of all the other gods. Much later the literature of this shepherd people was taken up and expounded in the churches of Western Europe by another people of an entirely different way of life, who nevertheless for centuries persecuted and tortured the descendants of the authors of that book they venerated above all others. But the fervently national creed of the Jewish Lord of Hosts served as an inspiring call to arms in the prosecution of their nationalistic ambitions. It is still more curious to notice that the legend of the creation of the world and the Flood, commented upon with the utmost veneration by generations of European theologians, was adopted by the Jews from the Babylonians, a people whom the later Christian Church relegated to eternal flames.

Meanwhile maritime Greece was growing in power and influence, having established colonies and trading-posts throughout the Aegean, along the coast of Asia Minor, in Sicily and as far west as Marseilles. The old clan system pictured by Homer, in which princesses did the washing in the company of household slaves, had long ago broken up. Each trading-centre had become a city-state, ruled over by a tyrant, with colonies of its own. In these sea-



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cities and islands of Ionia the modern mind was coming to birth. Men had broken away from the superstitious domination of the priests and were beginning to think rationally, conducting scientific experiments into the physical nature of the universe and using their senses in frank enjoyment of Nature. A lyrical poetry expressing the thoughts and emotions of individual men and women came into being, a poetry whose keen and sensitive beauty has never been surpassed. Sappho in Lesbos and Anacreon in Samos, were writing their love-songs. But the Persians, whose huge and sumptuous empire had succeeded that of Babylon, overran Ionia and pushed on to Athens and the Aegean, where they were turned back and defeated by a much smaller Greek force, first on land at Marathon and then on sea at Salamis. It was the victory of the modern mind over the decadent and unwieldy forces of the ancient world, the first victory of Europe over Asia.

The Greeks were a frank and fearless people, who for the first time faced the world in its objective reality and with the clear light of intelligence prevailed upon the superstitious and fear-haunted darkness of the ancients. The Ionic pillar, the symbol of the living present, and the Ionic order, the symbol of the delicate balance of the intellect, rose against the massive Egyptian and Assyrian tombs, where the venerated dead cast their shade over the living. With the liberation of the powers of the mind, a magnificent literature came into being in this great morning of our world. The tyranny of priests and kings was abolished at Athens, and man's first attempt at a democracy was established, albeit a democracy severely nationalistic in spirit and founded upon the rule of wealth and the ancient vice of slavery. But the great writers and thinkers of Greece all lived public lives and took an active part in the politics of their day. As a consequence their work was essentially sane and healthy. In Greece the lonely, neurotic individual who lived to himself, was almost

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unknown. "The man who holds aloof from public life," said Pericles, "we regard as useless." The Greek word for a private person was idiot, the assumption being that a man who did not take an intelligent interest in the affairs of his day, was essentially ignorant and therefore only half-witted. It is true that we to-day are in some ways more self-conscious than the Greeks, but because of artificial segregation into families and classes, our self-consciousness has become a tortuous and self-destructive disease, expressing itself in a shrinking refinement that recoils from the world. Such is what usually passes for an "artistic temperament." It is a condition that can only lead to a general impoverishment of our entire culture. The Greek, on the other hand, with his balance of intellectual and physical activity, of private reflection and public intercourse, knew the secret of mental health. It is significant that in Greece there was very little home life, and in Plato's *Republic* the home is abolished altogether.

Athens grew richer and extended her dominion over the greater part of the Aegean and built up an empire founded upon slavery and commerce. Slaves worked and died in the silver-mines and the marble-quarries under the lash of overseers, and laboured and gasped out their last breath at the oar so that Phidias could mould the visions of Homer into the Parthenon freize and Socrates and his young men could wander about the free city of Athens and speculate on the nature of the Good and the Beautiful and the immortality of the soul. But when they descended from ideal realms and began to ask awkward questions about political and economic justice and to question the national gods of Athens, the wealthy democratic, slave-owning class called a halt. Socrates, the most disinterested man of his time, was put to death for "corrupting" the youth of his day (that is to say, for making them politically and ethically conscious) and Anaxagoras, the tutor of Pericles (who, by the way, was wasting far

too much money in the eyes of the merchants on beautifying the city) was exiled for calling the moon a stone.

A selfish and often brutal imperial policy was the ruin of the Athenian State. It incurred the destructive jealousy of the "fascist" Sparta (which had crushed out literature by rigid militarisation), and the miserable Peloponnesian War, and it led to the disastrous attempt to conquer Sicily from which Athens never recovered. As a result of the disillusionment of the Peloponnesian War, in which rival Greek city-states were busy smashing up the splendid civilisation they had created for themselves, Greek philosophy in the person of Plato turns for the first time from scientific empiricism to "other worldliness," from time and change to the world of archetypes and ideas, from politics to Utopias. Idealistic imperialists usually cite Athens as a justification of their piracies without pausing to consider that it was the greed of imperialism that destroyed the most advanced city-state the world had ever known.

After the conquests of Alexander with his Macedonian gold-mines, the intellectual centre of the Mediterranean world shifted from Athens to Alexandria, where the Hellenic scientific and literary tradition was carried on under the enlightened patronage of Alexander's general, Ptolemy. Alexandria inherited the trade of the Phoenician city Tyre, and became not only the most learned, but the most wealthy city of the Mediterranean, rivalling even Carthage. But when the Romans at last defeated the power of Carthage, sacked the city and razed it to the ground and began to spread their iron dominion over the entire Mediterranean world, as far north as Scotland and as far east as the Caspian Sea, they also bought over Hellenic culture, ransacking Athens and the old Ionian cities for statues for the houses of their profiteers. At this time wealthy Romans had much the same respect for "tradition" as American globe-trotters for the picturesque

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corners of old Europe. They "bought up" Athens and Alexandria and their towering and arrogant buildings rose against the modest structures of the Greeks. The Romans, in fact, did everything in a big way. But Rome had already grown decadent and its vast and overweening power contained the seed of its own decay even before the last days of the Republic. Except for the profiteers, the Second Punic War against Carthage had ruined most of the population of Italy. Top-heavy with the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few men and dragged down by the moral and economic depravity of the slave system, Rome was unable to continue in even the relative freedom of the old Greek democracy and the Roman world degenerated into a vast arena where a few rich adventurers scuffled for the control of absolute power. A great slave revolt flared up under Spartacus in 73 B.C., and although the Spartacists managed to hold out heroically for two years in the crater of Vesuvius—being mostly trained gladiators—the insurrection was finally suppressed by Crassus and six thousand revolting slaves were crucified along the Appian Way.

In spite of the grandeur that was Rome, the lot of the average Roman was one of extreme misery. On the one hand you had successful speculators like the appalling vulgarian Trimalcio in Petronius's *Satyricon* and military adventurers like Lucullus eating themselves sick in houses like the British Museum, and on the other hand the majority of the people living in dark suburban tenements ten stories high, in streets no more than ten feet wide, let out by the room at preposterous rents by private contractors and so badly built that they not infrequently collapsed with all their inhabitants. After the Punic Wars, as Spengler points out, Rome did not conquer the world with much credit to herself; like every other imperialist power in history, she merely took possession of a booty that lay open to everyone. The old East, now enfeebled

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by long years of war, readily fell before the Roman military machine, which it was the ambition of every rich adventurer to control, whether Crassus, Lucullus, Pompey or Julius Cæsar.

Diodorus, the Sicilian historian of the first century B.C., has left an account of the condition of the Roman silver-mines in Spain. "The slaves who have to work in these mines make incredible sums for their masters; but many of them, working far below the ground, exerting their bodies day and night in the shafts, die from overwork. For they have no recreation or recess in their work, but are driven on by the whips of their supervisors to bear the worst discomforts and work themselves to death." The indictment of Apuleius in his *Golden Ass* is still more forcible: "Good gods! what a herd of dwarfed men I saw. Their skin was criss-crossed with livid weals. Their scarred backs were shaded rather than covered by their patched rags. Some had nothing but a narrow apron for their loins, and all were so shirted that the skin showed through the rents. Their brows were branded. Their heads were half-shaven and their ankles in irons. They were wan with ugliness, and their heavy eyes blinked and smarted in the smoky gloom of the hot ovens." Slaves were also put to work in factories in the towns for the production of commodities for the market as wage-workers are to-day. Slaves worked large agricultural estates, on the Carthaginian model, whose produce was sold in the cities. Slaves worked for private contractors on large construction schemes, upon amphitheatres and aqueducts. The result of this system was that a large class of "free" but starving Roman citizens, consisting of expropriated farmers, skilled artisans, and small tradesmen, unable to compete with cheap slave labour, eked out a wretched existence on the State dole of "bread and circuses." With the spread of imperial dominion, and the consequent increase in the number of slaves, the "free" citizen's condition grew

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worse and worse. The parallel with the crisis in modern capitalism, where the monopoly capital of big trusts has taken the place of the slave-owning contractor of classical times, need not be laboured. In the midst of plenty Rome starved. But although we hear much of the great wealth and prodigality of the noble Romans, modern capitalist accumulation has made the wealth of the richest Roman ridiculous by comparison. Whereas the modern capitalist can reinvest much of his capital in improving the technical basis of his production, the Roman entrepreneur of the Imperial period, could only squander his profits in luxury and ostentation, and in stimulating a jaded appetite with every conceivable vice of voluptuousness and cruelty to which it was the business of his household slaves to minister.

"Who that is a man, who that has the heart of a man, can bear to watch them with their overflowing wealth?" said the demagogue Catilina in one of his public speeches. "They squander it in building houses over the water and in levelling hills, and we are lacking even the necessities of life. They knock together two houses or more, and we have not a single hearth of our own. They buy pictures, statuary, plate; they pull down houses as soon as they are built, and build new ones; they waste and abuse their wealth in every conceivable way, and yet they can't exhaust it with the worst of their caprices. But we have poverty at home and debts in the streets. Our present is bad, our future is yet darker. In short, what can we call our own but the wretchedness of our lives?"

The result was absolute satiety and world-weariness for the rich and for the poor the blind alley of apathy and despair. Thus the vaulting ambition of the Roman mind defeated itself and left the way open for a new belief. It came from the land of the Jews and was propagated by Paul of Tarsos, a Roman citizen and an epileptic, who,

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following a Jewish prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, taught the hollowness of worldly wealth and the necessity of turning one's thoughts inward and seeking God. But it happened that Paul was a fanatical ascetic, a man with a violent sex-recoil, and he spread the mystical communism of Jesus's teaching with considerable additions of his own. He taught that what the healthy pagan mind had hitherto regarded as the visitations of the goddess Aphrodite, born in the Greek imagination from the vast purity of the sea, was in reality nothing but "original sin," and that if man followed his natural impulses he would be damned. So the most vital impulse of life was by Paul turned back on itself and Christian ideology was poisoned at its roots.

In the almost continuous warfare that raged for three centuries in the Mediterranean world from the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C., Greek civilisation was to all intents and purposes extinguished, and it is not surprising that the Christians should have thought that the world was soon to come to an end. The cry of the Son of Man was in all men's mouths: "The foxes have their holes and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head." The phrase was used by Tiberius Gracchus in his public speeches in Rome and two centuries later it reappears in the discourses of Jesus of Nazareth.

But according to this new teaching, the politically impotent saw themselves as inheritors of eternal life and the poor and oppressed were told that in the sight of God they were greater than the greatest men of Rome, who, according to Paul, would soon be roasting in flames that burned but consumed them not for all eternity. This message of brotherly love, peace on earth and goodwill to men, was joyously embraced first by the slave population and then by increasing numbers of disillusioned Romans themselves. But to orthodox Romans this new

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sect who refused to do homage to their national gods appeared no better than atheists, and to refuse to offer incense to Cæsar's image in the temple of Capitoline Jove, was both sacrilege and treason. Accordingly the authorities began their persecution of the Christians and their irritation increased when they saw that these strange fanatics eagerly gave themselves up to the most horrible deaths in joyful expectation of a martyr's crown. But it was soon discovered that the Christians, like the Communists to-day, could be made scapegoats for every calamity. When Nero set fire to Rome he blamed it on the Christians, just as the German Nazi leaders set fire to the Berlin Reichstag and blamed it on the Communists. But at last, after a final outburst of persecution under Diocletian, in order to unite the empire, Constantine was forced to proclaim Christianity as the State religion. This edict only gave rise to fiercer and more bloody persecutions among the Christians themselves than ever they had endured at the hands of the Romans. Arian and Nestorian schisms arose, and in the fourth century Christians were already burning each other for differences of opinion, the bishops of the one side deposing and excommunicating the bishops of the other side according to their ability to enlist the sympathy of the various emperors.

Once recognised as the official religion, the Christian Church summarily dropped the communism of its Teacher and established itself with all the pomp and tyranny of a second empire. Neither the popes nor their episcopal dignitaries saw the sense of selling all they had and giving to the poor. Still less did they like the idea of holding all things in common. But by this time the empire had become so enfeebled by internal dissent and the moral rot of the slave system, that it could no longer keep back the more vigorous and free Vandals, Goths and Huns. As time went on these tribes also adopted Christianity, and in the eighth century the Frankish king Charlemagne finally



imposed the faith upon Europe by killing everyone who refused to embrace it.

During the three to four hundred years that it lasted, the Roman Empire, which evolved a more highly developed productive system than had ever existed before, produced a literature that reached a stage of complexity, and sophistication that was not equalled in the Christian West till well after the Renaissance. But even then the breadth and richness of the Roman utterance was lacking, although in a sense the Romans were too sophisticated and cynical ever to write great lyrical poetry and Greek still remained the chief literary language. Consequently, except for Virgil, the best Roman verse is generally satirical and philosophic, whether we take Catullus, Horace, Martial or Lucretius. Virgil reflected Homer's impetuous fire in the equable and constant power of *The Aeneid*, and imitated the later Greek pastoral poets in his eclogues. The calm and majestic beauty of the *Georgics*, however, shows the Roman mind at its best. Writing under Augustus when Italy was at last at peace, had begun consolidating her conquests, and Anthony, the last of the military adventurers, had come to his violent end, Virgil, a landowner himself, is consumed with the imperial pride of his city and his race. His poetry is full of confident assertions of Roman power, which, according to him, existed "to raise the fallen and make the arrogant to cower." Rome's destiny, he says, is to rule the world and teach the arts of peace, and he offers Augustus deification. But disillusioned Romans, to whom the noisy evangelism of Pauline Christianity seemed both impious and vulgar, embraced the nihilistic philosophy of Stoicism. Thus we have Seneca writing: "The mind is never greater than when it frees itself from the world and creates its own peace by fearing nothing, and its own wealth by desiring nothing." At the time of writing the philosopher was leading what he regarded, and indeed, what was for a man

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of his position, a simple life. That is to say, he was travelling through the country in a farmer's wagon with only a few slaves (one carriage-load), while his meals took less than an hour to prepare. "Yet whenever we meet a more elegant turnout," he says, "I blush against my will."

And the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius, encamped at Carnuntum, fighting the sadness in his own heart as well as the barbarians, notes in his *Meditations*: "Human life! Its duration is momentary, its substance is perpetual flux, its senses dim, its physical organism perishable, its consciousness a vortex, its destiny dark, its repute uncertain—in fact, the material element is a rolling stream, the spiritual element dreams and vapour, life a war and a sojourning in a far country, fame oblivion."

The money power of Rome—as Professor Arnold Toynbee suggests, itself the decline and fall of Greek civilisation—enslaved and corrupted literature just as it enslaved and corrupted everything else. Greek writers, painters and philosophers, the decadent and dispirited descendants of Pindar and Socrates, were kept as part of the household staff of the wealthy nobility, and the great theatre of Athens, where poetry was venerated by the whole State and grew to an unexampled splendour and perfection, was replaced in Rome by the amphitheatre where, a dispossessed and brutalised populace was invited to sate itself with scenes of carnage and butchery such as the Greeks would have abhorred. After the first century A.D. creative literature in Rome was to all intents and purposes dead. The Roman genius expressed itself in the building of aqueducts and public works and the elaboration of a quibbling legal code. The growth of Christianity produced a more introspective and tortured literature, such as Augustine's *Confessions* of the fourth century and the neurotic vilification of women and natural impulse by Jerome and other Fathers of the Church. Meanwhile Christian

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monasteries had been established in different parts of Europe, Christian ascetics were lashing themselves in the Egyptian desert, and after the fall of the Western Empire, monks were busily destroying all those traces of classical culture upon which they could lay their hands.

## CHAPTER II

### FEUDALISM AND THE CHURCH

BY the end of the seventh century the Anglo-Saxon pirates had been settled in Britain for about two hundred years. The legends that they had brought with them were of the same order as the legends brought by the Greeks into the Aegean, telling of the exploits of supermen and heroes against giants and monsters. Like the Greek legends they were sung to the harp in the hall of the chief, or baron, by wandering bards called scop. They differed from the Greek legends, however, by the heavy grey skies, the bogs and fens of their northern landscape, and by the prevalent mist through which shapes of horror loom and seem to cloud and confuse their very language. But after the Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons at the end of the sixth century, Latin became the language of learning among them, and such men as Bede of Northumbria wrote with a clear and noble simplicity that is free from the heavy weather of their poetry, though the terror of the harsh northern landscape is still there. Thus in Bede's account of the conversion of Northumbria to Christianity, one of the nobles at Aedwin's court speaks as follows:

"So, O king, does the present life of man on earth seem to me, in comparison with the time which is unknown to us, as though a sparrow flew swiftly through the hall, coming in by one door and going out by the other, and you, the while, sat at meat with your captains and liegemen, in wintry weather, with a fire burning in your midst and heating the room, the storm raging out of doors and driving snow and rain before it. For the time for which he is within, the bird is sheltered from the storm, but after this short while of calm he flies out again into

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the cold and is seen no more. Thus the life of man is visible for a moment, but we know not what comes before it or follows after it. If, then, this new doctrine brings something more of certainty, it deserves to be followed."

It should be mentioned, perhaps, that though Bede wrote in Latin, he was the disciple of the Irish monks settled in Jarrow, and his early training was partly Celtic. But while cloistered scholars were leading lives of extreme simplicity in grey stone monasteries by the sea and in the greenest and most delightful parts of the country, writing ecclesiastical histories, lives of the saints and epics of past wars and marvels, the working population of Britain continued man's eternal struggle with the earth and the sea. Familiar as we are with the idealisation of the sea in English poetry, there are few poems which give us the stark reality as well as the strange lure of sea-life so well as the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer*. This is probably because it was written by a seaman himself, though it shows signs of having been tampered with, probably by a monk in one of the grey stone monasteries, for a pious Christian ending has been added that goes ill with the bare realities of the opening lines:

With a bitter breast-care I have been abiding:  
Many seats of sorrow in my ship have known!  
Frightful was the whirl of waves when it was my part  
Narrow watch at night to keep on my vessel's prow  
When it rushed the rocks along. By the rigid cold  
Fast my feet were pinched, fettered by the frost,  
By the chains of cold. Care was sighing then  
Hot my heart around; hunger rent to shreds within  
Courage in me, me sea-wearied! This the man knows not,  
He to whom it happens happiest on earth,  
How I, carked with care, in the ice-cold sea,  
Overwent the winter on my wander-ways,  
All forlorn of happiness, all bereft of loving kinsmen,  
Hung about with icicles; flew the hail in showers.  
Nothing heard I there save the howling of the sea,

And the ice-chilled billow, 'whiles the crying of the swan!  
 All the glee I got me was the gannet's scream,  
 And the swoughing of the seal, 'stead of mirth of men;  
 'Stead of the mead-drinking, moaning of the sea-mew.

(Stopford Brooke's translation.)

But while another monk in another Northumbrian monastery was celebrating the deeds of the Danish heroes of Gothland in *The Lay of Beowulf*, which tells of the victory of the Franks over the Goths between 512 and 520, the Danes themselves came down on the north-east coast of Britain in one of their terrible raids, burning, killing and destroying and rudely breaking in upon the quiet cloistral life that had sheltered Bede, Alcuin and the author of *Beowulf*. But these wars in their turn produced a crop of epics of which the fragment of *The Battle of Maldon* that has survived, celebrating the defeat of the East Saxons by the Danes in 993, can be described as part of a rough *Iliad*. The poem, record of defeat though it is, is full of gaiety and a wild joy in battle, for when the Saxon chief is mortally wounded he breaks into a laugh and thanks God that he has been allowed to strike great blows before his end.

On the whole the Anglo-Saxon peasant, even under the Danish invaders, remained a relatively free man, farming his own lands for which he paid by military service under the chief who lived in the near-by castle, but with the Norman Conquest the old Saxon chiefs were expropriated and the land was divided up between foreign barons, whose castles became symbols of oppression and fear to the peasants. Many of them lost their freedom and became serfs with iron collars round their necks. Under the feudal system, so much admired by our neo-Catholic apologists, these serfs, who farmed the land of the baron, were branded like cattle and had scarcely more rights. In fact the baron's sheep and cows were usually better housed and better cared for. But generally speaking that

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land which was not owned by the temporal landlords under the king, was owned by the spiritual landlords under the pope. The Church was, in fact, the more powerful landlord of the two, for it held a third of the soil of the Catholic world and the vast manors of the religious orders employed many serfs and retainers, so that their inhabitants should not be interrupted by menial tasks in their pursuance of the holy life. In the thirteenth century, the great cathedral-building age, the condition of the serfs was even worse than at the time of Domesday Book, and everywhere the labouring population was fighting for its very existence against the lords, temporal and spiritual.

But that their spirit was not entirely crushed, is shown by the large crop of popular songs that has survived and dates from that time.<sup>1</sup> In the *Song of the Husbandman*, which has come down to us in manuscript form from the time of Edward I, we learn how the poor peasant—that is to say those independent peasant proprietors who owned land both on the great seigneurial domains, and *between* them, for there were after the Norman Conquest small peasant holdings not included in the huge baronies—was taxed to the point of starvation both by the barons and by the king, who at this time took every fourth penny. “Thus they rob the poor and pick them full clean—the rich lord it without any right,” though “many of religion hold them full abject.” Bailiffs hunt the peasants “as a hound doth a hare on the hill,” or the beadle comes “as roughly as a boar and says he will make my lodging full bare.” The peasant is forced to sell his corn while it is still green and then to sell his cow or his ass, so that he is left practically without means of subsistence. From the time of Edward II another song declaims against the consistory courts. The priests, “proud as peacocks,” interfere with everything and everybody. If one chances

<sup>1</sup> *Political Songs of England from the Reign of John to Edward II*, T. Wright, Camden Society.

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"to go on the earth with a maid," says the writer, one is hailed off to court, where an old churl sits in a black gown and more than forty before him "pink with their pens on the parchment." If you are accused in their writing, then you are "backbitten, for many they make to know (woe for women!)." So you are forced to give them money and thank them courteously, though you would rather see them all hanging in hell on hooks. "At church and market like a dog I am driven," complains the writer. But

. . . If the rich man die that was of any might,  
Then will the friars for the corpsē fight.

So that it is not surprising to read in the chronicles of monks being killed from time to time and abbeys being burned down by the exasperated peasantry. Such was the Age of Faith as far as the poor were concerned.

Meanwhile at Court French poetry held the day with the chivalric *Gesta Romanorum* and, later, the genteel and precious allegory of the *Roman de la Rose*, in which tradition Chaucer grew up. This was essentially a literature of the leisured classes, who had nothing to do but hunt, feast, make love, make war and smash each other up at tournaments. But poetry and prose continued to be written in the monasteries in Latin and in that modification of Anglo-Saxon and Norman-English called Middle English—poems of an extremely mystical and allegorical character such as *The Pearl*, which show a high degree of subjective refinement, not to mention translations from the Bible, sermons and everlasting lives of the saints. Epics in the French Arthurian tradition like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were also composed in Middle English. But though the author of *Gawain* makes use of the courtesies of the chivalric tradition, his poem has none of the brilliance and light of French literature, deriving rather from the dreary landscape, the heavy weather and



jolting alliteration of *Beowulf*. The knight fights with men and beasts, but these are nothing to the weather he has to contend with as he rides through the countryside dressed in iron.

Besides the heavy taxation imposed to carry on Edward III's French wars, waged to secure a monopoly of the vineyards of Aquitaine and Guienne, the peasants suffered acutely from the bubonic plague which largely depopulated the countryside between the years 1348-49 and again in 1361-62, whereas the wealthy classes, to a much larger extent, escaped infection. "He who was ill-nourished with unsubstantial food," complains the scholar Symon de Covino, "fell before the slightest breath of the destroyer; to the poor death was welcome, for life is to them more cruel than death. But death respected princes, nobles, knights, judges and gentlemen; of these few die, because their life is one of enjoyment." The Black Death did at least one good thing: it helped to break up the feudal system. The Church, of course, preached that it was a sign of God's anger against wicked people who rebelled against His ministers, the priests, from whom they refused to learn meekness and obedience.

It is William Langland, born about 1330, who gives us the most intimate picture of country life at this time. Langland was bred for the Church and was at one time an inmate of the monastery at Great Malvern, but he married and had a daughter and this prevented him from going into the priesthood. So he moved to London and followed the craft of a public scribe, pleading his tonsure to excuse himself from working with his hands. He was a tall, gaunt man with a shaven crown and walked about the streets haughtily, neither greeting the sergeants nor doing obeisance to the lord and ladies. Many people thought him mad. In his lifework, *The Vision of Piers Ploughman*, it was his concern to give a true picture of the broad base of economic misery upon which the impressive

edifice of the Catholic Middle Ages was reared. Towering above the hovels of the villagers he saw those twin symbols of authority that supported each other in keeping the labouring class well down in their destitution: the Manor and the Church. *Piers Ploughman* is a crude, lengthy and meandering work, but it at least gives the reality of that sweet rural life that was to be so exquisitely sentimentalised by the poets of a future age.

As prisoners in pits are poor folk in cotes (cottages),  
 Charged with children and chief lord's rent,  
 That they with spinning may spare spin it in house-hire,  
 Both in milk and in meal to make with papelotes (porridge),  
 To a-glotype with their gurls (children) that greden after food.  
 Also themselves suffren much hunger,  
 And woe in wintertime with waking a-nights  
 To rise to the ruel to rock the cradle,  
 Both to card and to comb, to clothe and to wash,  
 To rub and to rely, rushes to pilie (peel),  
 That ruth is to rede or in rhyme to show  
 The woe of these women that wonyeth in cotes.  
 And of many other men that much woe suffren,  
 Both a-fyngrede and a-furst (both hungry and thirsty) to turn  
     the fair outward  
 And both abashed for to beg and will not be a-knowe  
 What they needeth at their neighbours at noon and at even,  
 This I wot witley as the world teacheth,  
 What other behoveth that hath many children,  
 And hath no chattels but his craft to clothe them and to feed,  
 And many grasp thereat, and few pence taketh . . .  
 Fridays and fasting-days a farthing-worth of muscles  
 Were a feast for such folk . . .  
 These were alms to help that have such charges,  
 And to comfort such cotyers and crooked men and blind.

But Langland, though he recognised all this, was before everything a moralist and concluded, according to the theology of his time, that social evils were not so much the result of the economic system itself, as the obscuring

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of Holy Truth by such vices as covetousness, gluttony, pride and so on, and real as his indignation was against what he took to be merely corruption in Church and State, he aimed only at reform, preaching "a change of heart" and obedience to rulers. But the picture he gives is very different from the blithe, idealised pages of Chaucer.

Another piece by an unknown author in the Langland tradition called *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, gives a still better idea of the medieval ploughman:

As I went by the way, weeping for sorrow, I saw a poor man hanging on to a plough. His coat was of a course stuff which was called cary; his hood was full of holes and his hair stuck out of it. As he trod the soil his toes peered out of his worn shoes with their thick soles; his hose hung about his hocks on all sides, and he was all bedaubed with mud as he followed the plough. He had two mittens, made scantily of rough stuff; with worn-out fingers and thick with muck. Thus he bemired himself in the mud almost to the ankle, and drove four heifers before him that had become feeble, so that men might count their every rib.

His wife walked beside him with a long goad in a shortened cotehardy looped up full high, and wrapped in a winnowing sheet to protect her from the weather. She went barefoot on the ice so that the blood flowed. And at the end of the row lay a little crumb-bowl, and therein a little child covered with rags, and two two-year-olds were on the other side, and they all sung one song that was pitiful to hear: they all cried the same cry. The poor man sighed sorely, and said: "Children be still!"

Then, possibly, if it was a fine day, the opulent court of a bishop or an abbot, the princes of Holy Church, on its way to Westminster or Rome, or the lord of the manor and ladies with falcons on their wrists and their crowd of insolent, toadying retainers, would come riding through the countryside, and the ploughman would have good reason to stop work and stare—if, indeed, he were not peremptorily commanded to his knees. Certainly the countryside in those days was "unspoiled." But what was

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the use of unspoiled country to people starving, ignorant and depressed. It may be objected that this is not the Middle Ages of noble knights and ladies of Shallot languishing in tall towers of which most people are accustomed to think. But these knights and ladies were only a very small minority of the nation. The Middle Ages represented here is the Middle Ages of the majority of the people of England, and for them it was not a particularly romantic time. If driven by hunger to poach in the lord's wood or fish in the abbey's streams, the poor man would be hanged or maimed for life by one of the frightful punishments of that day. If he rebelled against Holy Church, the priests burned him.

By 1381, however, the peasants had emancipated themselves sufficiently to unite and rebel. They killed tax-collectors, lawyers and courtiers, and marched upon London 100,000 strong under the leadership of Wat Tyler and Jack Straw, and here they burned down the palaces of John of Gaunt, the regent, and of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The demonstration was surprisingly orderly and well-organised, for though they destroyed the property of their hated oppressors, they did not steal and even hanged one of their own ranks for theft. They still had a pathetic belief, however, in the goodwill of the King and this was their ruin. When young Richard II met them in person and cynically promised to redress their wrongs (they demanded the abolition of serfdom and a general reduction of rents), they dispersed peaceably. As soon as danger had passed, Richard of course broke his promises and the rebellion was put down with the utmost brutality.

John Gower, a rich landowner and the author of the long and tedious *Confessio Amantis* running to 30,000 lines, reflects in his *Vox Clamantis* the terror of his class at the popular uprising. Although he had no sympathy with the popular cause, like other moralists of his day, he recognised the existence of corruption in both Church and

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State, concluding as usual that this was due to the Seven Deadly Sins of Catholic teaching conceived as such, and existing, as it were, in their own right without contributory causes. He writes of the populace suddenly changed into wild beasts—asses fierce as lions, who will bear no more burdens, oxen who refuse to draw the plough, and dogs who bark at the huntsman. A jay, who represents Jack Straw, leads them, shouting: "Down with honour! Perish the law!" and bringing up the rear of this militant zoo, is John Ball, an excommunicate priest, who preaches on the text:

When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?

Meanwhile the merchant classes in the towns, the new "middle" men, half-way between lord and serf, had formed themselves into self-governing communities with charters from the king, and were becoming a serious menace to the power of the feudal barons and the ecclesiastical landowners. When the Latin Church had preached the first crusade in order to have an opportunity of suppressing the Greek Church at Byzantium, many of the barons sold their estates to the burghers, and since it was considered beneath the dignity of a gentleman to trade or work, the profits of commerce were monopolised by the merchant class, who had no such scruples. Moreover, as time went on an increasing number of serfs escaped to the towns, where the file was applied to their iron collars and their blue blouses removed so that they might become "free" citizens by entering into the workshops of the merchants. Technical and scientific knowledge was required for manufacture and successful navigation, and this could not be had from the Church. So schools were opened in the towns, universities became secular, and gradually the incense-laden gloom of priestcraft began to disperse, though Roger Bacon, the Oxford scholar, was

imprisoned twice in the thirteenth century by Holy Church, who designated his invention of spectacles as "witchcraft," and it was only by the skin of his teeth that he escaped being burnt alive. But English merchants visited Italy, the first capitalist nation of Europe, and in particular Florence, the Athens of the Middle Ages, which by this time had attained to great commercial prosperity and democratic self-government. Greek scholars, painters, sculptors and architects had been invited from Byzantium and the first school of Italian painting grew up round Cimabue and Giotto; the surviving classics were zealously studied and Dante, who was at one and the same time the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of a new era, derived directly from Virgil, modifying the pagan tradition with the scholastic philosophy of his day; and with Boccaccio and Petrarch, who lodged a Greek in his house to translate Homer, the really serious salvaging of antiquity from the wreck of the Dark Ages began. Book hunting was organised with the enthusiasm of a gold rush, and Greek and Roman manuscripts were unearthed from beneath piles of rubbish in the monasteries of Europe, and some of the loveliest poetry of the world was gradually deciphered on torn and ragged manuscripts over which idle monks had scribbled dull reiterations of the Lord's Prayer.

It was to this Florence of the later fourteenth century, in the morning glory of the Renaissance, that Geoffrey Chaucer came at the age of thirty to borrow money for Edward III. Although Chaucer was the son of a London wine merchant, he had been brought up as a page at Court, and so was from the first under the influence of the "gentillesse" of French poetry and the manners and outlook of the ruling class. Yet his middle-class origin and his active life as a man of affairs, saved his greatest poetry from both the genteel preciousness of the Court, and the mystical moralising of the monastery. Not only was he

ambassador in France, Flanders and Italy, and comptroller of the London customs at Aldgate, but for many years acted as clerk of works for the royal residences and surveyor of the walls, gutters, sewers, bridges and roads between Greenwich and Woolwich. He thus led no confined literary life among books, but studied the politics and sciences of his age, and was an expert technician in many of the basic things of daily life. His work thus reflects not a fragment of his age, but the whole of it—reflects it, doubtless, in peculiarly cheerful colours and from a distinctly upper-class angle. Chaucer read the Italians in the original and was fully conscious of the greatness of Dante, but, he remarks ironically, he has no wish to follow the Florentine into the regions of the air, preferring to keep his feet on the solid earth. As for Petrarch, whom he probably knew personally, the excessive subtlety and refined idealism of his poetry was not for the creator of the wife of Bath and the inspector of the London sewers. Certainly Chaucer was capable of the most exquisite lyricism, as when in *Troilus and Criseyde* he was translating and adapting Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. In this work of adaption he did exactly what Shakespeare was to do again and again when the Elizabethan takes over the dramatic and sentimental framework from a foreign source and develops its characters. Chaucer took over the ideal atmosphere ("Ye loveres, that bathen in gladnesse") from Boccaccio and himself peopled it with a Troilus, a Cressida and a Pandar that have the humour, the pathos, the solidity of living creatures. In *The Canterbury Tales*, whose setting was suggested to him as he saw the companies of pilgrims passing through Greenwich on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury, he collected many of the tales, and what we to-day should call dirty stories, that he had heard as a young man at Court, as ambassador and customs officer and embodied them in a work that surpassed in the extraordinary vividness of its

characterisation anything that had yet been written in Europe. Hitherto Chaucer had been known as a great translator and adaptor, but with *The Canterbury Tales* he became, at the age of nearly fifty, a great and original and distinctively English poet. Chaucer's pilgrims are not merely delineations of types, such as allegorical poetry had been concerned with hitherto, and such as it would continue to be concerned with after Chaucer's death right up till the time of Shakespeare, but living men and women in whom, as we read, the later Middle Ages comes to life again before the mind's eye. There is no other poet in English so gay and so witty as Chaucer, and from that it has been deduced, quite erroneously, that the Middle Ages were generally a jolly sort of time to live in, when everybody was as blithe as Chaucer. But when we think of him we should remember that he mixed, most of his life, with people who had no need to bother about sordid and unpleasant things, and that he was so far above them himself that he finds them merely amusing. For Chaucer, as for the dreamer in the *Roman de la Rose*, it was always a May morning.

The fifteenth-century successors of Chaucer were mostly dull-witted monks who went on chewing the cud of the *Roman de la Rose* and the old Tale of Troy, which came to them not through the vital fire of Homer—for that might have put some zest into their veins—but from second-rate French and Italian paraphrases. John Lydgate, a monk of Bury St. Edmunds, was apparently unable to see very much difference between Chaucer and Gower, and those that came after him were unable to see much difference between Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate. During the fifteenth century official poetry in England was to all intents and purposes dead. Much more exciting were the travels of one Sir John Mandeville by a French physician, Jean de Bourgogne, a contemporary of Chaucer, whose fabulous adventures in the mystical Land of Prester John



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were believed in preference to the authentic Asiatic travels of the Venetian Marco Polo. But as every book had to be copied by hand, there were relatively few, and reading was confined to the well-to-do classes. The nation at large was regaled from time to time by miracle and morality plays, naïve dramatisations of Old and New Testament stories, performed on carts in the market-places of the towns. As the century advanced the noble lords were far too busy cutting one another's throats in the Wars of the Roses, and the merchant classes were far too occupied making money to bother about literature. For this century saw the beginning of England's commercial expansion, the end of the feudal system and therefore a steady decline in the power of the Church. A little poem called *The Libel (book) of English Policy*, dating from 1434, outlines the economic determination of politics with engaging frankness. The poem begins by affirming that:

There is no realm in no manner degree,  
But they have need of our English commoditie . . .

For though they have meat, drink, in every kinges land,  
Yet they lack cloth, as I understand.  
And for to detirmine that the truth is so,  
Listen well to me, and ye must accord thereto.

For the merchants come our wool for to buy,  
Or else the cloth that is made thereof surely,  
Out of divers lands beyond the sea  
To have the merchandize into their countrie.

Therefore let not our wool be sold for nought,  
Neither our cloth, for they must be sought;  
And in especial restrain straitly the wool  
That the commons of this land may work at the full.

And if any wool be sold in this lond,  
Let it be of the worst both to free and to bond . . .  
By merchants and cloth-makers, for Godës sake take keep  
The which make the poor to mourn and to weep.

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So with the growth of the Flemish wool manufacture in the fifteenth century, export of wool became England's principal trade. Spain also exported wool, but, says the little poem: "Hit is of lytelle valeue, trust unto me." Nevertheless, the author goes on, England must build a bigger navy.

Keep then the sea about in special,  
Which of England is the round wall.

Already Edward III had made war on France to protect English merchants, whom he "loved heartily." Then the author, who was evidently a man very much in the know, turns his attention to Ireland, England's first colony. From Ireland England can get hides, all kinds of fish, linen and cloth, also:

Of sylvere and golde there is the oore  
Among the wylde Yrish, though they be poore.

In fact, says the author, in all Christendom there is no land so fertile, rich and plenteous as Ireland. It is a great pity, of course, that these wild people are not more willing to let England rule them peaceably and should always be scheming to ally with other countries, such as Spain. But remember, advises the author, "With all your myghte take hede to kepe Yreland, that it be not loste."

Particularly did the new generation of commercial nobles that arose after the civil war during the last third of the fifteenth and the first decades of the sixteenth centuries take heed. Suddenly waking up from chivalrous dreams and seeing an opportunity enormously to enrich themselves, these gentlemen forcibly turned the poor peasant off his holding, burnt down his cottage, confiscated the common land where he was wont to graze his own cow and gather fuel, and converted everything into sheep-walks. This banditry was politely called Enclosures.

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Moreover, with the limitation of their power by Henry VII, the robber barons had been forced to disband their private armies and England was filled with an increasing number of men and women with no means of subsistence whatever. Their number was added to in the next century by the demolition of the monasteries by Henry VIII. Many of them simply died of starvation. Some migrated to the town and became an easy prey to the owners of workshops and factories. But those who could get no employment at all, took to the highroads and became robbers and vagabonds, and as such were tied to cart-tails and flogged. Then they were made to swear to go back to the place of their birth and "put themselves to labour." One can imagine their reception by the landlord who had already turned them off their own farms. The result of applying to him would be a second arrest on a charge of begging without a licence, so they would be flogged again and have their ears cut off. Arrested a third time for obstinately refusing to do non-existent work, they were simply hanged.

Only one man, as far as we know, made any sincere protest against this state of things, and that was Sir Thomas More. His impartial eye noticed at once the growing wealth of the agricultural nobles, the merchant classes in the towns and the general destitution of the peasantry. "Your sheep," he remarks, "that were wont to be so tame, and so small eaters, now, as I hear say, be become so great devourers and so wild that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves." In his great *Utopia*, begun in 1515 and founded on *The Republic* of Plato, he sets forth principles of government that are no more than common justice. Yet the name he gave to his work has come to signify everything impossible of achievement. The existing order of society, in which we see the beginning of modern capitalism, he said quite plainly, was "a conspiracy of the rich against the poor." He had nothing but contempt for

the chivalrous romances that were then pouring out of the printing press of William Caxton for popular consumption, for they merely kept up the illusion of chivalry and glorified "men slayers." As for war, it is, he said, a crime against society, and he recognised the accumulation of private property as the source of all evils.

But in a vain attempt to persuade himself that the age of chivalry had not already reduced itself to absurdity in the Wars of the Roses, Sir Thomas Malory, a Lancastrian knight, translated and put together in his *Morte d'Arthur*, a number of the old French Arthurian legends, and temporarily lost himself in a nobleman's paradise of knights and ladies and enchanters and "*Cours d'amour, parlemens d'amour ou de courtesie et de gentillesse*." Caxton tells us that he was "instantly required" to imprint this book on his new press by "many noble and divers gentlemen." Malory, however, shared the misfortunes of the defeated Lancastrian party and his book, though it has since become the chief classic of chivalrous romance, was rather too accurately described by Roger Ascham, the Puritan middle-class critic of the next century, as consisting of nothing but "open manslaughter and bold bawdrie."

It has been said that official poetry, that is to say the work of accredited clerks, was to all intents and purposes extinct in fifteenth-century England. But the ballad, the poetry of the people as distinct from that of the Court or monastery, was very much alive. The oral tradition of these ballads has come down to us charged with generations of collective human emotion. The most grimly magnificent of these are Border Ballads such as *The Twa Corbies*, arising in general out of the more or less incessant warfare between the English and the Scots and in particular out of the personal quarrel of the Percy of Northumberland and the Douglas of Scotland. Reprinted in Bishop Percy's *Reliques* in 1765, *Chevy Chase* was one of the poems that induced the eighteenth-century reversion to romanticism.

Indeed, there are few love-poems anywhere as moving as *Clerk Saunders* and *Helen of Kirconnell*. The ballad of *The Old Cloak*, too, is obviously straight from the life of the peasantry, with its dialogue of man and wife in bed, the wife urging her husband to get up on a winter night and put on his old cloak ("so bare and over-worn, that a cricket thereon cannot run") and save their cow from freezing to death. The husband naturally enough temporises and the poem develops into an argument as to whether he should buy a new cloak or not, having worn the old one for forty years. His wife, being a severely economical woman, replies that: "It is pride that puts this country down"—and in any case what about the cow. About this time, too, the satirist, John Skelton, rises to prominence. Skelton, himself a priest, adapting to English the metre of medieval dog-Latin, like the balladists, also took his material straight from life—so straight, in fact, that it nearly cost him his head. As poetry Skelton's work comes nowhere near the anonymous ballad literature of his age, yet he is probably the most considerable poet between Chaucer and Spenser, though that is not saying very much. As he himself humorously admits in *Colin Clout*:

For though my rhyme be ragged,  
Tattered and jagged,  
Rudely rain-beaten,  
Rusty and moth-eaten,  
If ye take well therewith,  
It hath in it some pith.

So vital and fiery is his verse, so near is it to the common life of the day, that it has provoked the virtuous censure of generations of academic critics, just as in his own time it aroused the antagonism of the humanists and every dull and worthy clerk in the land. He pretended to report popular opinion and if it gives offence, he says, he is only telling what men say.

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Thus I, Colin Clout,  
As I go about,  
And wandering as I walk  
I hear the people talk.  
Men say, for silver and gold  
Mitres are bought and sold . . .  
For a simoniac  
Is but a hermoniac;  
And no more ye make  
Of simony, men say,  
But a child's play! . . .

As for the kind of life lead by the princes of Holy Church,  
their only aim, men said, was

To fat their bodies full,  
Their souls lean and dull. . . .  
In rochets of fine Rennes,  
White as morrow's milk,  
Their tabards of fine silk,  
Their stirrups with gold begared—  
There may no cost be spared.  
Their mules gold doth eat:  
Their neighbours die for meat.

What care they though Jill sweat,  
Or Jack of the Noke?  
The poor people they yoke  
With summons and citations  
And excommunications,  
About churches and market.  
The bishop on his carpet  
At home full soft doth sit.

The lesser orders, men say, there is no learning among them, and far from feeding their sheep they fleece them. It is disgraceful, Skelton remarks sarcastically, to hear how the people talk. Good churchmen should put an end to such scandalous libels. For his part it makes his very blood boil! In the jazz-metre of *The Tunning of Elinor*

*Rumming*, celebrating a glorious drunk of all the poor housewives of Leatherhead, who pawn everything they possess for the sake of the good ale, Skelton has written one of the most vividly original poems in the language.

The spirit of the new age, usually referred to as the beginning of "modern times," is even better reflected in the *Paston Letters*. The Pastons were a middle-class family with estates in Norfolk, William Paston having bought Gresham Manor from Chaucer's son, who had got it through a "good" marriage. These letters, which cover the best part of the fifteenth century, are written by people recognisable as thoroughly middle-class, people who have the supreme bourgeois virtue of "push." Entirely utilitarian, they are concerned with money matters, the letting of land, leases, lawsuits and the various ways of bettering the family position. Devoid of grace or charm, these letters are written with the same economy in words as their writers practised in regard to their purses. The prevailing spirit is the spirit of shopkeepers, a hard and calculating view of life. There is immediate hatred of any one who "lets the family down." Such a let-down occurs in the Paston correspondence half-way through the century, when Margery Paston falls in love with Richard Charles, the bailiff at Gresham Manor. The letters of Margaret and John to Sir John Paston on this subject, are a rude awakening to the actual state of affairs prevailing in the medieval marriage market for the reader of chivalrous romance. Indeed, it would seem that chivalrous feeling, true love and courtesy exist in inverse proportion to the amount of lip-service paid to them.<sup>1</sup> Because Margery wanted to betroth herself to a man she

<sup>1</sup> It is instructive in this respect to read in Boccaccio that Dante, the exploiter of the most idealistic of all love-affairs in literature, "always both in youth and maturity, found room among his virtues for lechery." And even Sir Tristram and Sir Lancelot, as Byron remarks, were no better than they should be, although very poetical personages and true knights *sans peur*, though not altogether *sans reproche*.

loved who was not a good match for the family socially, the others treat her with a brutal contempt. For by this time, of course, the Pastons were a "county family" and could angle with their marriageable daughters for those aristocratic connections so dear to the bourgeois heart. First of all Margaret takes her erring sister to the Bishop of Norwich, who points out to her how much of this world's goods she will lose by such a marriage and how many nice people will no longer want to receive her. When that fails, he asks her to tell him just what had passed between her and the bailiff, so that he might determine whether she had legally compromised herself or not. Margery Paston, who is the only member of the family towards whom one can feel any affection, promptly replies that if the bishop did not consider that what she had done had already made her betrothal sure, then she would make it sure ere she went hence. The holy man is scandalised, of course, and, writes Margaret Paston to Sir John, "the bishop and the chancellor both said that there was neither I nor no friend of her's that would receive her." Margaret's snobbish glee fairly rings down the centuries. Then the bailiff is examined and as his account tallies with the girl's, the bishop suggests, in his Christian way, that perhaps other things could be found against the man that would make the marriage impossible. So Margaret turns her sister out of the house with the vulgarest invective and much pious cant about God, gives the servants instructions that she is not to be received again, and poor Margery is lodged out of harm's way with a near-by farmer's family who have a reputation for "discretion." But the civil war soon gave the Pastons something else to write to each other about. Their manor at Caister, which they had recently built at great expense, is in a state of siege and in imminent danger of destruction. Mother Paston writes to son Sir John in London, in September, 1469, to say that they "fayll gunnepowder and arrowes, and the place sore



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brokyn with gonnes of the toder parte, so that, but thei have hasty helpe, thei be like to lese bothe their lyfes and the place, to the greatest rebuke to you that ever came to any jentilman," for what with "the gret multitude of gannes, and other shoot and ordynaunce, ther shall no man dar appere in the place." The violence and uncertainty of village life in those days is shown by many references in the letters to noblemen who send armed men to seize the crops and houses of other noblemen, and to men of one political party waylaid and set upon in the lanes by men of the opposing party. Some idea of the size of the households and the number of retainers kept by these various bandit barons can be gauged when we read that at the Earl of Warwick's table six oxen were regularly eaten at a single meal. It is true that he kept an extremely "open house" so as to be sure of support when the time came for a *putsch* to get control of the Crown, arguing, most likely, that the nearest way to poor men's hearts is down their throats.

But the mainstream of the energy of the age continued to flow into commerce and a rapidly expanding overseas trade, and those who found themselves the owners of this new wealth, were determined to tolerate no interference with their liberty to buy and sell. So Holy Church, which forbade trade with "infidels," and tried to limit usury (though by the sale of indulgences it was itself the greatest usurer in Christendom), had to be reformed, and with the confiscation under Henry VIII of Church-lands and the destruction of many of its most splendid palaces, it lost a great part of its hold on men's minds and became merely a convenient appurtenance to the State. What the King began was carried still further by geography and astronomy. For in pursuance of new trade routes to India, incredibly rich fields for piracy had been discovered in the west beyond the Great Sea and as far east as China. Men began to doubt the existence of that impassable torrid zone each

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side of the Equator, which, according to Holy Church, God had decreed to be the abode of the lower animals. They even began to doubt whether the terrestrial paradise on high ground in Eastern India, surrounded by that wall of fire reaching to the sky, had ever been there at all. But the astronomical discoveries of Copernicus, and the telescopes of Galileo which ratified them, dealt the old scholastic philosophy a still more staggering blow. Even as late as 1616 the theologians of the Holy Office tried to save the situation by proclaiming once more that the earth was the immovable centre of the universe, and that it was heresy to say that it moved round the sun. Further, the earth could not be anything but flat, they argued, for how, when the time appointed came, if it were round, would the people of the antipodes be able to see the Son of Man descending in glory from Heaven? Great discoveries are not so easily hushed up, however, and exact science, urgently needed for navigation and the development of industry, began to progress in Europe for the first time since the Alexandrian age of Ptolemy and the Arab "infidels" of the ninth century, who had created a magnificent civilisation in Spain when Christendom was still in a condition of comparative savagery.

With the abolition of the Church's monopoly in God, it also became possible to study the literatures of Greece and Rome. And as the European nations approached them in technical development and wealth, they began to look forward to the Romans as the exemplars of everything that a civilisation should be. So at the Renaissance European literature became the adopted child of the classics.

## CHAPTER III

### THE RENAISSANCE AND THE RISE OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES

"GOLD is a wonderful thing!" wrote Christopher Columbus from Jamaica in 1503, "whoever owns it is lord of all he wants. With gold it is even possible to open for souls a way to paradise!" And to the imagination of Renaissance Europe, India appeared the source of all fabulous wealth, fit prey for Christian pirates. In their efforts to get there the Portuguese accidentally ran up against the West Indies; later, the English under the Cabots, going further north, found their way blocked by Newfoundland; while other Englishmen tried to get to India through Russia. The history of the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries is the story of one long European gold rush.

Sailing southwards this time, on the advice of the Venetians, the Portuguese doubled the Cape in their little boat, amazed at the great Moorish cities they found along the African coast. Pushing on across the Indian Ocean, or the Lake of Wonder with ambergris floating on its waters and its bed strewn with pearls, bewildered by the white sails of Arabian, Indian and Chinese shipping, the natives of Europe paused at the Malabar coast in astonishment before the splendour and richness of Indian civilisation. In a special Bull, the Pope had obligingly granted to the Crown of Portugal all lands that its subjects might discover as far as India inclusive. Small bands of European natives armed with guns, put to rout whole Asiatic armies; the people of these far countries were captured, tortured for their wealth, and sold into slavery by the Christians, and fabulous riches began to pour into

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Portugal and Spain, whose vast possessions were united under the crown of his Most Catholic Majesty Philip II. Then the Dutch, the French and the English pirates followed the Spanish and the Portuguese. "There are no two countries where gold is esteemed less than in India and more than in England," remarks the sonneteer Barfield, "the reason is because the Indians are barbarous, and our nation civil." In time England was to furnish the people of India with abundant proof of this particular kind of civility. Exultantly Chapman cries out with the voice of youthful imperialism, for whom the whole world is still a prey :

O Child, Honour's Muse, sing in my voice! . . .  
Riches and conquest and renown I sing.

To the West Indies and down the coast of South America went the English, burning, killing and plundering: hanged as pirates when the Spaniards caught them, knighted by Elizabeth if they returned home sufficiently rich. The negro slave trade of Sir John Hawkins was subsidised by the Queen and her aristocracy, and the Queen presented him with a coat of arms blazoned with "a demi Moor proper in chains." Hawkins had a rough-and-ready way of selling his negroes. If the Spanish in America refused to buy them, he burned down their towns. The greatest Elizabethan pirate, Francis Drake, sailed round the world luxuriously in his *Golden Hind*, with silver plate, perfumes, musicians and geographers. He returned considerably more luxuriously loaded, his plunder being valued at a million and a half. The Queen knights him on board his ship, presents him with a coat of arms (*Auxilio divino*—with God's help), and conveys the swag in triumph to the Tower. Sometimes a part of this glittering booty was sold in the London market, and impecunious Elizabethan poets would feast their eyes on bars of silver and gold, heaps of pearls, sapphires, opals and grass-green emeralds,

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shining silks and fragrant spices—booty which not only encrusted the clothes of the nobles, but found its way with barbaric profusion into their poetry. Awestruck, they listened to travellers' tales such as those with which Othello won the heart of Desdemona, thrilled by most disastrous chances, moving accidents by flood and field and hair-breadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach, tales:

Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch  
heaven . . .

And of the cannibals that each other eat,  
The Anthropophagi; and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders.

And as they listened, as they gazed at the incredible plunder of the New World, their imaginations became inflamed and everywhere a strange breath of wonder and poetry touched men's minds from distant countries and far horizons.

A ferocious nationalism, motivated by this hunger for wealth, this delirious spirit of adventure and this pride in Englishmen who had endured and adventured so much, inspired the literature of the period. Even sweet Master Spenser, forgetting for a moment the romantic tapestry world in which he had set the allegorical figures of his imagination wandering, pauses in his laudation of Christian Virtue to urge his countrymen on to the conquest of the Amazonian gold-fields:

Joy on those warlike women, which so long,  
Can from all men so rich a kingdom hold!  
And shame on you, O men! which boast your strong  
And valiant hearts, in thoughts less hard and bold,  
Yet quail in conquest of that land of gold.  
But this to you, O Britons! most pertains,  
To whom the right hereof it selfe hath sold,  
The which, for sparing little cost or paines,  
Loose so immortal glory, and so endlesse gaines.

*The Fairie Queene*, Bk. IV, xi.

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On the London stage Christopher Marlowe, the son of a Canterbury shoemaker, roared in magnificent verse of the "pampered jades of Asia." In lines of incomparable lyricism and sonority, his imagination is dazed and overleaps itself with visions of barbaric power, slaughter and lust. He writes of Tamburlain, the Scythian conqueror, who had recently established the empire of the Great Moguls in India:

Threatening the world with high astounding terms,  
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.

He dreamed of armies:

Whose ransom made them march in coats of gold,  
With costly jewels hanging in their ears,  
And shining stones upon their lofty crests.

Even the fair Zenocrate, the bride of Tamburlain, is lauded as "fairer than rocks of pearl and precious stone." And the audience roared in applause to the thunder of the mighty line:

Our conquering swords shall marshal us the way  
We use to march upon the slaughter'd foe,  
Trampling their bowels with our horses' hoofs,  
Brave horses bred on the white Tartarian hills.

And William Shakespeare, the son of a Stratford butcher, beginning his career as actor-playwright, was busy, in company with a syndicate of poets, turning the chronicles of English kings into plays that voiced the pride of a people newly-awakened to their national heritage.

A great travel literature grew up with accounts of foraging expeditions to India, China and the North Pole, written in the clear, matter-of-fact style of men of action. And this travel literature, of which Hakluyt's *The Principall navigations, voyages, and discoveries of the English Nation* (1589) is the most famous, is buoyed up with the

same incomparable optimism. The way in which these voyages and discoveries were conducted is illustrated by the remarks of Cavendish on his journey round the world in the tracks of Drake. "It hath pleased the Almighty," he writes, "to suffer me to circumpass the whole globe of the world. . . . I burnt and sank nineteen ships, great and small. All the villages and towns that ever I landed at, I burned and spoiled." It was, indeed, an auspicious beginning of the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> At the defeat of the Spanish Armada the national spirit rose to delirious heights of self-confidence comparable to the exaltation of Greece after Salamis.

But there is another side to this brave picture. While the riches of the landowning nobility and the merchant middle classes in particular were vastly increasing, there was still terrible poverty and destitution throughout the land. The stately homes of England continued to be erected. Peasants and small farmers were still being turned off their land by country gentlemen, and three or four hundred destitute people were hanged every year as vagabonds, and many others deported for slavery in the galleys. Unfortunately the brilliance of the Elizabethan period was only a surface gloss. "There are paupers everywhere," exclaimed the Queen after a journey through her realm. With the limitation of the power of the Church, the Elizabethan intellectual had indeed more freedom than in the Middle Ages and he could write more or less what he liked, as long as he said nothing against the government, for then he would be liable to the charge of treason. It was in this way that Marlowe came to an untimely end. Having written such "revolutionary" plays as *Edward II*

<sup>1</sup> "The barbarities and desperate outrages of the so-called Christian race, throughout every region of the world, and upon every people they have been able to subdue, are not to be paralleled by those of any other race, however fierce, however untaught, and however reckless of mercy and of shame in any age in the earth."—W. Howitt, *Colonisation and Christianity* (1838).

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and *Richard II*, in which kings are represented as being deposed and murdered, and belonging, together with the notoriously discontented Sir Walter Raleigh, to what was considered a politically dangerous society, he was assassinated one day in a country pub. Elizabeth had not forgotten the Wars of the Roses, and she had no intention of allowing such anarchy to break out again.

The Elizabethan intellectual got his relative freedom at the price of poverty. The desire to have their sons gentlemen impelled the merchant classes to send them to the university and from the university those that could scrape together sufficient money went to Italy, then in the last and decadent phase of the Renaissance. From Italy, to their minds the land of every conceivable delight and self-indulgence, they returned rather contemptuous of everything English and not at all disposed to settle down and earn their living. Once having tasted literary fame and the stimulation of the intellectual world, they never dreamed of going back to the trade of their fathers, but eked out a precarious existence, giving a hand at play-writing and tossing off satirical pamphlets and love-stories. A typical case is that of Robert Greene, the best-seller of his day.

At Court John Lyly had scored an enormous success with his huge and artificial novel *Euphues*, which was partly a criticism of manners on the Italian model and partly a guide in deportment for gentlemen, again on the Italian model. Greene saw his chance and began writing dozens of short novels in imitation of Lyly, based on Italian stories, which were so popular among the leisured reading public of the day, that, according to his friend Thomas Nashe, "glad was that printer that might be so blest to pay him dear for the very dregs of his wit." *The Card of Fancy* gives one a good idea of the kind of thing that the politer Elizabethan reading public liked:



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Now there remained in the Court, a young knight, called Signor Valericus, who by chance casting his glancing eyes on the glittering beauty of Castania, was so fettered in the snare of fancy, and so entangled in the trap of affection, so perplexed in the laborinth of pinching love, and so enchanted with the charm of Venus' sorcery, that as the elephant rejoiceth greatly at the sight of a rose, as the bird Halciones delighteth to view the feathers of the Phoenix, and as nothing better contenteth a roebuck, than to gaze at a red cloth, so there was no object that could allure the wavering eyes of Valericus, as the surpassing beauty of Castania, yea, his only bliss, pleasure, joy and delight, was in feeding his fancy with staring on the heavenly face of his goddess. But alas her beauty bred his bane, her looks his loss, her sight his sorrow, her exquisite perfections his extreme passions, that as the ape by seeing the snail is infected, as the leopard falleth in a trance at the sight of the locust, as the cockatrice dieth with beholding the chrisolite, so poor Valericus was pinched to the heart with viewing her comely countenance, was gripped with galling grief, and tortured with insupportable torments, by gazing upon the gallant beauty of so gorgeous a dame. . . .

It is not surprising to learn that Greene's books were extremely popular among women. But, unfortunately, he spent all the money he got on carouses in his rooms, which, lasting for whole days and nights together, became the scandal of the town. At last, pawning his cloak and his sword to feast his bohemian friends withal, he died of dropsy, induced by drinking too much and a surfeit of pickled herring. More businesslike men obtained State employment, like Spenser, or linked up with a company of players, like Shakespeare, and finally got themselves a share in a theatre. The only other alternative was the uncertainty of aristocratic patronage, and thus we have the hyperbolical servility of the dedications of the period with Nashe writing to the Earl of Southampton: "Unreprievably perish that book whatsoever to waste-paper, which on the diamond rock of your judgement disasterly chaunceth to be shipwrackt."

Shakespeare, being a sensible, level-headed sort of man, combined both aristocratic patronage with writing for the stage. But even at the beginning of his career he incurred the jealousy of Greene, because he had made quite a reputation for himself with managers by knocking the plays of less successful writers into shape. Greene, whose life-long ambition it was to be a great dramatic poet like Marlowe, on his death-bed attacks Shakespeare as "an upstart crow beautified in our feathers, who wraps a tiger's heart in a player's hide, being in his own conceit the only shake-scene in the country." Stung by these reproaches Shakespeare brought out *Venus and Adonis* to prove that he could write "pure" poetry on classical themes better than even Marlowe with his Ovidian *Hero and Leander*. Shakespeare's powerful dramatic instinct made *Venus and Adonis* considerably more real than Marlowe's precious poem, and indeed it shows every sign of being a dramatisation of his own experience, as James Joyce remarks when he identifies Venus with Anne Hathaway—"a bold-faced Stratford wench who tumbles in a cornfield a lover younger than herself." Moreover, Shakespeare gave his poem a further basis in reality by its genuine Warwickshire setting. But both *Venus and Adonis* and *Hero and Leander*, with their rather decadent eroticism, are evidence of the kind of thing poets wrote to suit the taste of the nobility, as distinct from the more healthy and vigorous plays they wrote for the popular stage. In both poems there are reflections upon sexual abnormality, further evidence of which is supplied by Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, also addressed to a young nobleman. Homosexuality was prevalent in Italy at that time, the Italians thinking, no doubt, that they were adopting the manners of the classical world, and all really modish Elizabethans imitated them.

In sharp contrast with Greene's "love-pamphlets" an entirely different and very real kind of novel was being

written at this time by Thomas Deloney, the balladist, to whom the university wits referred contemptuously as that "balleting silk-weaver of Northwich." Deloney took his themes from the wool and cloth-making industry. His novels, *Jack of Newbery* and *Thomas of Reading*, relate the lives of famous weavers, and these books, set in the heart of the English countryside, achieve a reality and a direct and simple beauty such as the fantastic Euphuists, catering for politer tastes, would have scorned. But both *Jack of Newbery* and *Thomas of Reading*, as well as *The Gentle Craft*, in the picture they give us of the working life of Tudor England, are worth all the love-pamphlets of Greene and the wearisome hyberboles of Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller* put together. Their characters move in a living air where we can breathe at last.

The enthusiasm of the Elizabethan gold rush was not of very long duration. When it was discovered that it did not result in the general affluence that was vaguely expected, but rather in periodic outbreaks of the plague, from which the nobility again escaped by going to live in their country houses till the infection of the town had passed, there supervened a period of cynicism and gloom. Shakespeare's attitude to wealth in his later and most personal plays, is totally different from the Marlowe of either *Tamburlain* or *The Jew of Malta*. "What more may heaven do for earthly man," asks Marlowe:

Than thus to pour out plenty in their laps,  
Ripping the bowels of the earth for them,  
Making the seas their servants, and the winds  
To drive their substance with successful blasts? . . .  
Haply some hapless man hath conscience,  
And for his conscience lives in beggary.

Gold has no particularly virtuous properties for Shakespeare. Neither, except in such a piece of deliberate jingoistic journalism as *Henry V*, has war. In these respects he

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showed an altogether finer and more analytical mind than his predecessor. *Timon of Athens* is by no means all Shakespeare's work, but the speeches of Timon in Act iv bear the stamp of his mind and may be taken as fairly representative of his attitude to money:

Gold! yellow, glittering, precious gold! . . .  
Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair,  
Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valient . . .  
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,  
Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads;  
This yellow slave  
Will knit and break religions; bless the accurs'd;  
Make the hoar leprosy ador'd; place thieves,  
And give them title, knee, and approbation,  
With senators on the bench; this it is  
That makes the wappen'd widow wed again;  
She whom the spital house and ulcerous sores  
Would cast the gorge at, this embalms and spices  
To the April day again.

This disgust with the social system of his day is still more obvious in *Lear*: "A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears: see how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark, in thine ear . . . which is the justice, which is the thief? Hast thou seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? . . . and the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office."

The usurer hangs the cozener.  
Through batter'd clothes small vices do appear.  
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw doth pierce it.

So much for wealth and position, the goal of most men's lives and the justice of the law which exists to protect

private property. These, the most passionate passages in Shakespeare, can well be taken as evidence of his attitude more truly than the oft-quoted but coldly intellectual speech by Ulysses on degree in *Troilus and Cressida*. Julius Cæsar is no hero to him, but merely an old fool, not unlike Lear when on the throne, whose head has been turned by absolute power. Of love with its mask of respectability, of all goals the most universally idealised, Shakespeare is no more reassuring in his later plays. Says Lear:

Behold yon simpering dame,  
Whose face between her forks presageth snow;  
That minces virtue, and does shake the head,  
To hear of pleasure's name;  
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't  
With a more riotous appetite.

which, had it been written by Joyce or any other modern, would have earned for its author a reputation of being distinctly nasty-minded. Hamlet's remarks on women are no more complimentary. In *Othello* Shakespeare shows the misery of a noble and innocent mind dominated by passionate love and in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, with no less pity than glory, the havoc wrought by the same obsession. Yet, I doubt if there is anything more sublime in English, or any other literature, than the overwhelming death-scenes in the last two acts of *Anthony and Cleopatra*:

O Sun!

Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in; darkling stand  
The varying star of the world.

In Shakespeare we see the anarchy of the individual mind of man broken loose from the moorings of religious or social order. The Renaissance raised men's hopes to the most magnificent potentialities within him, only to dash them again in the blackest pessimism as soon as he realised his individual limitations, and life becomes "a tale told

by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Money is everything now. "The learned pate ducks to the golden fool." The despotism of the Church is exchanged for the despotism of money—soon to grow to nightmare proportions in Big Business and High Finance. Shakespeare has himself been accused of snobbishness by one school of critics and commended for his just appreciation of social rank by the official, academic school. The truth is that when Shakespeare bought his coat of arms on returning to Stratford, he did so for a very good reason. After a hard life as "a player," a despised section of the community, he wanted a certain amount of comfort and security in his declining years. And he knew quite well, society being what it was, that he would be respected far more for a coat of arms than for his poetry, which he did not even trouble to collect and publish. At the time of his death no less than twenty-one of his plays remained in manuscript. It was not till seven years after his death, that his actor friends, Heming and Condell, collected together all these old stage favourites, both his printed and unprinted work and every play in which they knew he had had a hand, and published them in folio form in 1623 in order to keep (as they wrote) "the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive," adding somewhat querulously: "It had been a thing, we confess, worthy to have been wished, that the author himself had liv'd to have set forth, and overseen his own writings; but since it hath bin ordain'd otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envy his friends the office of their care, and pain, to have collected and published them." It is as though Shakespeare regarded his plays as so much journalism, and sick to death of the stage and burying his book like Prospero, could not be bothered with anything that reminded him of his old life.

But considering the towering greatness of his work, this has been thought so improbable that some people have

jumped to the conclusion that there was no such person as Shakespeare at all and that the name was either that of a writing syndicate or the nom-de-plume of a noble (Bacon or the Earl of Oxford, for instance), who was too aristocratic ever to acknowledge it. But, even leaving aside the plain evidence of Heming and Condell, this seems to me quite fantastic. We have only to compare Shakespeare's work with the trivial compositions of Henry de Vere, Earl of Oxford, and the totally different temper of Bacon's writings to realise the absurdity of these theories. Besides, unless we agree that he was in the game as well, we have the testimony of Ben Jonson (in *Discoveries*, 1641) that he knew Shakespeare personally and "lov'd the man, and doe honour his memory (on this side idolatry) as much as any. . . . There was ever more in him to be praised, than to be pardoned." Further, he said that the Droeshout Portrait was extremely like "gentle" Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> There is not much to be gained by flying in the face of all this evidence, small as it seems to us, who are accustomed to the most hysterical praise of far inferior work. And in any case we should remember that Spenser was regarded as the Prince of Poets in his time and not Shakespeare, however much posterity may have reversed this judgment. Shakespeare, in his least personal work, reflected many of the national ideals and aspirations of his time, but there is a melancholy, a disillusionment in his greatest work that strikes deeper than any attitude he may have found it politic to adopt. He saw through most things, wealth, position, patriotism, love, friendship, understanding only too well the motives that prompted men in their actions. Yet everything he touched he transfigured with the grandeur and nobility of his mind.

<sup>1</sup> "Gentle" in this context does not mean of gentle birth as some have maintained, but is used to describe the essential qualities of the man whose poetry surpasses all other in tenderness and the sublimity of its pity for human nature.

While Edmund Spenser was exalting the ideal of chivalrous virtue in his *Fairie Queene*, he paused to write a long pamphlet in dialogue form called *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, whither he had gone as secretary to Lord Grey of Wilton, who had been sent over to teach the wild Irish a lesson. The pamphlet is an instructive reflection of British colonial policy at this time. Lord Grey, having massacred the entire Spanish garrison of Smerwick, which had surrendered "on discretion," proceeded to depopulate Munster with fire and sword. He is quite right, says Spenser, for nothing is so dangerous as mercy at such times. Unfortunately, however, the Irish were not sufficiently grateful for the rule of the "gentle, affable, loving and temperate" Lord Grey, whom some people, says Spenser, go so far as to call a bloody man, so the best thing to do, he writes, is to bring over 10,000 foot soldiers and 1,000 horse, give the rebels twenty days in which to surrender, and if they refuse proceed to exterminate them. He couldn't see why the government hesitated. But, on second thoughts, it might be just as well to let the famine have its course. It was already having the most gratifying results: "Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth on their hands and knees, for their legs could not bear them: they looked anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; and did eat of the carrions, happy where they could find them . . . the very carcases they spared not to scrape out of their graves." But the Irish would not have very long to wait before another Puritan, Oliver Cromwell, furthered the glory of British arms in their country by the massacre of Drogheda, when his soldiers danced babies on their pike-points. It is a pity that Spenser could not have been there to applaud. It is indeed this complete divorce between the idealism of his poetry, which he cultivated ostensibly as a "pure" art, and the extreme brutality that he advocated in practice, that, for all the fineness of its æsthetic sensibility,



prevents his work from ever achieving that reality and depth which makes Shakespeare the greatest literary mind in the language. In so far as Spenser is "the touchstone of English poetic sensibility," as Professor de Selincourt maintains, a source to which generations of poets have returned, his influence has been a vitiating one, and is responsible for some of the worst artificialities in our poetry.

In *The Fairie Queene*, in which he thought he was writing a national epic round King Arthur, Spenser sought to do for English poetry what Homer had done for Greek and Virgil for Latin. It was a grand attempt. But Spenser was too much of an idealist ever to achieve the bold and clear outlines of a great epic and his vast design was hopelessly confused with memories of the absurd allegories and romances of the Middle Ages. Besides, for all his idealism, Spenser always had his eye on the "main chance" and hoped by his poetry, with its flattery of the Queen and those round her, to get for himself some lucrative State appointment. There is a clear political intent in his epic, for all its medieval pageantry, its dragons, brazen castles, enchanters' dens and its ladies riding on white donkeys, for it relates how King Arthur saw in a dream the Fairy Queen "with whose excellent beauty ravished, he awaking resolved to seek her out." "In that Faery Queen," he writes to Sir Walter Raleigh, "I mean glory in my general intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our sovaine the queen, and her kingdom in fairy land." In the same way his King Arthur represents in general magnificence (the supreme virtue, which included all others, being the symbol of "divine grace") and in particular the Earl of Leicester, the Queen's favourite at that time, and from whom preferment might be expected. His *Artegal* again, stands for Justice incarnate—that is, Lord Grey of Wilton—whereas the Redcross Knight, "armed with the armour of a

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Christian man," represents the Christian soul in search of truth. In many ways Spenser's mind was a hang-over from the Middle Ages, and his poem, in spite of its political design, remains a medieval allegory of the old type, though dressed in all the splendour of the Renaissance.

His other poems evidence the servile flattery of the medieval retainer. He writes that only those could form any idea of the Queen's power, mercy and wisdom, who also knew God's; and that the sun, looking out from heaven and seeing Elizabeth below, instantly went in again for fear of being outshone. Knowing the Queen to be particularly susceptible to romantic sentiment, he feigns the passion of a hopeless lover, vowing, in his pastoral poems, to carve her name on all the trees of the forest and even to teach his sheep to bleat its syllables. But it was all in vain. When Spenser's name was brought up for a pension, Burghley is reported to have exclaimed: "What, all that for a song!" and the poet had to be content with a dubious fifty pounds a year and a distinctly unacceptable castle in County Cork, which soon after was very nearly burnt down over his head. The Fairy Queen, whatever her other virtues, was always pretty close-fisted where money was concerned.

But with the turn of the century and the accession to the throne of the wisest fool in Christendom, James I, we find not only a pursuit of recondite subtleties of thought and feeling for their own sake, as in the poems and sermons of John Donne, the reverberating tortuosities of Sir Thomas Browne, and the exploration of the depths of horror in the plays of Webster and Tourneur, but a new scientific spirit abroad and a consolidation of England's position in the fields of commerce and intellect. The East India Company had already been granted its charter by the Queen in 1600, and seven years later saw the first English colony planted in Virginia. The learned and rather ponderous Jonson is poet-laureate; Bacon is engaged in a

general intellectual stock-taking in the *Novum Organum* and laying the foundations of inductive thinking; and the authorised version of the Bible, which will in future be the staple of English prose style, is being worked upon at Westminster by a committee of learned heads. But as the century progresses and James I's successor asserts pretensions to a divine right to collect as many taxes as he thinks fit, a new antagonism between the King and the by now extremely powerful merchant middle class becomes more and more apparent.

The Crown, like the Church before it, is now asserting its right to a monopoly which seriously interferes with the progress and expansion of trade—with the prosperity, that is, of the middle classes and a section of the commercial nobility. Certain gentlemen refuse, as a matter of principle, to pay the King's ship money and their ears are cut off. The middle classes, rigidly Puritan in their religion, desperately fearing anything that seems to portend a return to the despotism of Rome, take strong objection to the King's High Church tendencies and in 1640 make religion the excuse for a pious rebellion under the gentleman farmer, Oliver Cromwell. The real point at issue, however, is: who shall create and control the State apparatus, a feudal king with the support of Holy Church, or a commercial middle class? The middle classes, the revolutionary party in the State, win the war, execute the King, and the Commonwealth is their brief period of power. But the nobles, fearing their own extinction, and the country at large being extremely discontented under this drably utilitarian, Calvinistic dictatorship, invite Charles I's son and heir back to the throne.

The Restoration was the sign for a veritable orgy of hangings, drawings and quarterings of the "rebels" by the newly-restored King and aristocracy, and a complementary outbreak of the most remarkable lasciviousness in aristocratic circles. The King, Evelyn tells us, "mindeth

nothing but his lust. . . . Lady Byron is the King's seventeenth whore abroad." And to judge from the plays of Wycherley & Co. the only thing that was really funny, the only thing that the town could laugh at without "rusticity," was the faithlessness of other people's wives and the fact of somebody else being either a cuckold, being sexually impotent or catching the pox. On these subjects Wycherley's characters tickle themselves into perfect ecstasies of sniggering amusement, and the "dirty story" becomes the only subject fit for Restoration Comedy. The only bright spot is William Congreve, the graciousness of whose style (comparable to Purcell in music), and the sheer delight of whose wit would aerate even the most sexually musty atmosphere. Restoration Tragedy was wholly artificial and absurd. Like those long and ridiculous "heroic" romances originating from the Hôtel Rambouillet in France, where the aristocracy amused themselves by dressing up as Alexander, Scipio, Julius Cæsar or Syrus, King of Persia with Louis XIV whigs, the dramatists of the day sought to express "glory" in the most grandiloquent sentiments, and these plays together with such novels as *Le Grand Cyrus* (survivals and baroque revivifications of the medieval chivalrous tales), provided "highbrow" entertainment for the leisured class. It is the literature of a people leading perfectly useless lives and consequently the victims of moral degeneration: the result of the restoration of a monarch to feudal power at a time when, in England, at any rate, feudal power was hopelessly out of date. Fortunately it did not outlast the life of Charles II.

During all this period the greatest and most representative figure of the creative forces of the age is John Milton. Coming of a well-to-do middle-class family, he sums up in himself the by now powerful and independent spirit of his class. His soul may have been like a star, as Wordsworth says, but it certainly did not dwell apart. Milton, in fact, entered into the revolutionary struggle of his day

more than any other great writer. As the struggle reached its decisive stage before actually breaking out into civil war, he deserted poetry for politics. On the eve of war, the Long Parliament was hotly debating the subject of the abolition of episcopal rule, which had been reintroduced by Archbishop Laud, and a rain of pamphlets began to descend on the land like the plague of frogs in Egypt. "At this," says Milton, "I was thoroughly awakened, when I discerned that from these beginnings would proceed the delivery of all human life from slavery. . . . When God commands to take up the trumpet and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in man's will what he shall say." If, on the other hand, he remained silent and aloof from the great struggle of his time, which he considered more important than writing poetry, God, he says, would for ever reproach him for accepting leisure for study out of the sweat of other man. If at that time he should remain "dumb as a beast, from henceforward be that which thine own brutish silence hath made thee." Milton already knew himself to be a great poet, but thought the time unpropitious for the composition of any great work and decided to wait until the land should have "enfranchised herself from this impertinent joke of prelacy, under whose inquisitorious and tyrannical duncery no free and splendid wit can flourish." Milton's personal grievances now become the theme of his splendid rhetoric. He is unhappily married and wants a divorce. "Did God open so to us this hazardous and accidental door of marriage," he cries, "to shut upon us like the gate of death without retracting or returning?" But the Presbyterian Westminster Assembly proved no less tyrannous and duncish than the bishops. They did not agree that God had commanded him to blow his own trumpet this time. They said that the grave and virtuous Milton was nothing better than a libertine whose very garters were shackles to him. So his belief in individual liberty was all at once dashed to pieces. Yet after the

execution of the King he finally ruined his failing eyesight by writing a defence of the English revolution for the benefit of Europe—the *Defensio Pro Populo Anglico*—writing far into the night by tallow light after a hard day's work at Whitehall as Latin Secretary to Cromwell. "The choice lay before me," he says, "between dereliction of a supreme duty and loss of sight. . . . I decided to employ my little remaining sight in doing this, the greatest service to the commonweal it was in my power to render." But whether that furious and abusive work did very much service to the English revolution, and whether it was worth Milton's eyesight, is extremely doubtful.

How he escaped execution along with all the other revolutionaries at the Restoration, is not known. He used to lie awake at night dazed with horror at the thought of the frightful punishments meted out to many of his friends. Nevertheless, in retirement, and with many thoughts of the Civil War, he began to dictate his epic, *Paradise Lost*. Græco-Roman in form, it shows strong Hebraic influence, evidence of Milton's life as both Renaissance scholar and Puritan, having Christian miracles and legends instead of pagan myths. But in the celestial rebellion of Satan against the Divine right of God, seated like a king upon his throne, attended by a prince and a court of aristocratic angels, it is the Fiend who emerges as the hero of the poem and God the Father a worse tyrant than either of the kings Charles. Milton set out to justify the ways of God to man and failed magnificently. The English rebellion, too, had apparently failed. The corpse of its leader was hanging in chains at Tyburn, while its other leaders were writhing in the King's torture chambers, just as Milton's God had bound the rebel angels in "adaman-tine chains and penal fire."

Unequalled in English literature as is the intellectual power with which the thought and imagery of *Paradise Lost*

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is compressed and carried forward at an unvarying heroic pitch, the laboured, self-retarding movement of the poem, so different from either the blithe exhilaration of Homer or the calm, equable pace of Virgil, is evidence of the embittered, baffled sensuality of the poet's nature. It is the very cramped, furnace-like power of the poem that makes it so exhausting to read, rather than its actual length, and there are few people who would disagree with Dr. Johnson that no man ever wished it a word longer. Yet the poet's blindness was responsible for the dark and hugely-reverberating imagery. Again and again, as we read, we are reminded of this blindness, and that his shadowy vision is not that of the physical eye, but rather of the inner eye of the imagination. The spaces of darkness and void through which Satan steers his course between Heaven and Hell, the sense of the far-blazing intolerable light of the throne of God, as well as the Claudesque perspectives of the Garden of Eden, and the rich Virgilian light that rests upon this early earth of his imagination, are all in a large measure due to Milton's infirmity. One might even go so far as to say that he would not have written so great a poem had he not been blind. But at last, like Satan, he:

Glad that now his Sea should find a shore,  
With fresh alacritie and force renew'd  
Springs upward like a Pyramid of fire  
Into the wilde Expanse, and through the shock  
Of fighting Elements, on all sides round  
Environ'd wins his way; harder beset  
And more endanger'd, than when Argo pass'd  
Through Bosphorus, betwixt the justling Rocks:  
Or when Ulysses on the Larbord shunn'd  
Charybdis, and by th' other whirlpool steard.  
So he with difficulty and labour hard  
Mov'd on, with difficulty and labour hee. . . .  
But now at last the sacred influence

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Of light appears, and from the walls of Heav'n  
Shoots farr into the bosom of dim Night  
A glimmering dawn; here Nature first begins  
Her fardest verge, and Chaos to retire  
As from her outmost works a brok'n foe  
With tumult less and with less hostile din,  
That Satan with less toil, and now with ease  
Wafts on the calmer wave by dubious light  
And like a weather-beaten Vessel holds  
Gladly the Port, though Shrouds and Tackle torn. . . .

A king by divine right was established once more in England, just as Milton leaves God in possession of the courts of Heaven. But not for long. By the time James II comes to the throne the royal pretensions to absolutism have become more and more inconvenient. Moreover, from behind his throne there looms once more the bogey of Catholicism. So, in the "Glorious" revolution of 1688, religion is again made the excuse for getting rid of a king who insists on taking his position seriously, and in a compromise between the aristocratic landowners and the merchant middle classes, William of Orange is invited to occupy the throne, as a convenient figure-head, by Act of Parliament. By Act of Parliament, too, the noble lords continued their confiscation of the land, abolishing the remains of feudal tenure and establishing modern proprietary rights over common ground and the small holdings of those who had no means of resisting them. The stately homes of England continued to be built up at the price of the homelessness and destitution of large numbers of the population. In the towns a new bankocracy had grown up out of the recently-hatched high finance and a class of industrialists had come into being who clamoured for protective tariffs. And that aggressive economic nationalism that had occasioned the recent war with Holland (Holland being at that time in almost exclusive possession of the East India trade), whose cause Marlborough was at that



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moment supporting in the war on the Continent, and whose blessings were reaped in the Great War, 1914-18, was at last consolidated.

The growth of trade and capitalism under Queen Anne produced a literature whose distinguishing quality was materialism and the "good sense" of bourgeois decency. English writers, their country now already surpassing the technical and productive level of the Romans, felt themselves to have entered upon a new Augustan age, and Dryden and Pope re-translated Virgil and Homer according to the polite manners of the day as extolled by Steele and Addison in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. No thought, Monsieur Boileau taught them, could be valuable of which good sense was not the ground-work.

Good sense, which only is the gift of Heaven,  
And though no science, fairly worth the seven.

echoed Pope. The elegant and reformed manners of the town dominated literature. Nature was methodised and both the universe and the State were set working with the precision of a well-regulated watch. Alexander Pope, whose agile mentality dazzles in its swift and balanced workings, is the spokesman of the age:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is man . . .  
Go, wondrous creature, mount where Science guides,  
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;  
Instruct the plannets in what orbs to run,  
Correct old time, and regulate the sun. . . .

(*Essay on Man*.)

Pope's view of politics and the ordering of states is marked with the same simple, clockwork precision. With his eye on the constitutional monarchy of his day, he writes as if true democracy had been achieved at last:

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Taught power's due use to people and to kings,  
Taught nor to slack, nor strain, its tender strings,  
The less, or greater, set so justly true  
That touching one must strike the other too ;  
Till jarring interests of themselves create  
The according music of a well-mixed state.  
Such is the world's great harmony, that springs  
From order, union, full consent of things . . .  
For forms of government let fools contest,  
Whate'er is best administered is best.

Sitting in his grotto at Twickenham, sheltered by aristocratic patronage, Mr. Pope could afford to take such a pleasantly aloof view of things. When he satirised the expense of the newly-rich country gentleman, it is not the accumulation of riches in private hands that he objects to, but merely the tasteless abuse of them. For, he remarks, but for the landowner, who employs him, how would the poor peasant live? How, indeed, except by restoring to him the land which the country gentlemen had stolen. But from Pope's satire we can get a pretty good idea of the ostentation with which these gentry lived, some of them "nabobs" of the East India Company who had made vast fortunes by robbing and swindling the Hindu:

My lord advances with majestic mien,  
Smit with the mighty pleasure to be seen :  
But soft—by regular approach—not yet—  
First through the length of yon hot terrace sweat ;  
And when up ten steep slopes you've dragged your thighs,  
Just at his study door he'll bless your eyes.

His study! with what authors is it stored?  
In books, not authors, curious is my lord ;  
To all their dated backs he turns you round . . .  
And now the chapel's silver bell you hear,  
That summons you to all the pride of prayer :  
Light quirks of music, broken and uneven,  
Make the soul dance upon a jig to heaven . . .  
To rest, the cushion and soft dean invite,

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Who never mentions hell to ears polite.  
But hark! the chiming clocks to dinner call;  
A hundred footsteps scape the marble hall:  
The rich buffet well-coloured serpents grace,  
And gaping tritons spew to wash your face.  
Is this a dinner? this a genial room?  
No, 'tis a temple, and a hecatomb.  
A solemn sacrifice, performed in state,  
Your drink by measure, and to minutes eat . . .  
Between each act the trembling salvers ring,  
From soup to sweet-wine, and God bless the king.

It is instructive to consider the political ideas of the philosopher Locke, who writes that individuals are born free, subject only to a moral law, but as this law is not always respected, the citizens of the State delegate the judicial powers to certain representatives whose moral government is nothing but a public service! He also blandly asserts that property is based upon labour. A strange perversion of empirical thought! Materialism and reason evidently were to be kept within bounds and not allowed to conflict with class interests. Free-thinking and scepticism was all very well for the upper classes, but religion and "Christianity" must be kept up for the benefit of the lower classes, including the bourgeoisie. Thus we have Hobbes, as the defender of the royal prerogative, calling upon absolute monarchy to keep down that *puer robustus sed malitiosus*, the working class, and Locke writing upon *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Nevertheless, the principle of constitutional rights was established for those who had sufficient property to be worthy of the law's consideration, and it was upon the principles laid down at this time by the English rationalists that the French encyclopædists of the eighteenth century took their stand, using English empiricism as a spring-board for their attacks on the feudalism of the rest of Europe. Meanwhile the aristocracy, on the proceeds of "enclosed" farm-lands

and investments in the negro slave trade, led leisured and cultivated lives, travelling extensively and acquiring the manners of Paris and the arts of Rome. How such gentlemen should deport themselves was set forth in the most polished terms by Lord Chesterfield in his *Letters* to his son—letters, the glossy duplicity of which Johnson adequately described as teaching “the morals of a whore, and the manners of a dancing-master.” But the general condition of writers as the eighteenth century advanced, was on the whole extremely wretched. Their choice lay, said Samuel Johnson, between the patron and the jail, for noblemen were still willing to pay a certain amount for the reputation for “culture” that a dedication to a good book would confer upon them, provided its author did the necessary toadying. Johnson somehow managed to keep clear of the debtor’s prison, but the rewards of aristocratic patronage, as far as a man of his courage and integrity was concerned, are illustrated by his letter to Lord Chesterfield: “Seven years, my lord, have now passed, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door . . .”

From behind the apparent equilibrium of the Age of Good Sense, emerges the great and terrible mind of Swift. The proper study of mankind is man, is it? One can imagine the Dean smiling grimly. He might have smiled still more grimly had he lived to see his terrifying revelation of the bestial absurdity of human nature, *Gulliver’s Travels*, expurgated by subsequent generations into a book of clean fun for the nursery. But it is typical of the English mind, with its congenital unwillingness to recognise anything that is not quite flattering to its self-esteem, that a work which reduces its most respected conventions to absurdity, which exposes all its political practices, and even that last refuge of humanity, romantic love, as contemptible; which shows philosophy as ambitious jargon, metaphysics as nothing but mystification, should

be classed with *Robinson Crusoe* as "a tale which holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner." Such exposures in other countries have led to philosophies of nihilism. But it is to the credit of the essentially practical spirit of the English nation that they have been able to dismiss the indictment of a Swift as the expression of pathological misanthropy. Indeed, should one accept the implications of *Gulliver's Travels*, and of much of Swift's poetry in which he can never forget the action of his mistress's bowels, it would be impossible to live in human society at all. In a savagely ironical little pamphlet, written with the cool detachment of a statistician, on the problem of the poverty of the Irish peasants, consistently reduced to starvation by British economic pressure, Swift makes the suggestion that far from the children of the poor being a burden to them, if only they served them up as butcher's meat for the tables of the rich, they might be made into quite a profitable investment. Such things, as well as the essay on *The Mechanical Operations of the Spirit*, tracing the pathology of religious mysticism, are scarcely what one would expect from an apparently orthodox dean.<sup>1</sup>

With the advance of the eighteenth century, as far as literature is concerned, the more aristocratic doctrine of Sovereign Reason began to be obscured by floods of sentiment and the "pathetic," novels catering for a definitely middle-class taste. Sentimentality and bourgeois respectability, a relish for "affecting" scenes in fiction and a hard-faced, calculating commercialism, went hand in hand. The bourgeoisie had ever been scandalised by the sceptical materialism and the free behaviour of the aristocracy. They, at any rate, believed in God—see how He

<sup>1</sup> In particular, the reader might turn up Swift's analysis of the causes of war and the general economic condition of England under Queen Anne in *Gulliver*, Part IV, Chaps. v-vii. His description of the military profession can scarcely be bettered. "A soldier," he says, "is a *yaboo* hired to kill in cold blood as many of his own species, who have never offended him, as possibly he can."

assisted them in business; they, at any rate, thought it worth while to behave respectably, at least in public—how otherwise could they expect the lower orders to respect them? Thus Samuel Richardson's servant girl, Pamela, beset with the wicked attentions of her gentlemanly employer, keeps her virtue intact till she can sell it at a sufficiently high price to the tune of wedding-bells and pious phrases. Such a book, reflecting as it did, and as it still does, the morality of an increasingly powerful class, soon to dominate the thought and literature of an entire century, could not fail to be enormously popular. A great part of its success, of course, was due to its infinite suggestiveness, drawn out in several volumes through all the subtle refinements of a foiled and lustful eroticism. The desire to attack such a morality turned the finer intelligence of Henry Fielding from the stage to the novel, and in his *Joseph Andrews* an equally falsely innocent manservant is shown playing the same game with his lady employer. In his greatest work, *Tom Jones*, he carries his attack still further, using the mock-heroic manner of a majestic prose to expose and ridicule the whole moral structure of society. In the character of Tom, the bastard, he sets the natural impulses of a genuine humanity against hypocritical and calculating "virtue." Academic critics of Fielding find themselves in a difficult position, for while they necessarily uphold the morality he attacks and are able to censure him for "faults of taste" and a want of delicacy, they are forced to acknowledge his greatness. So to obscure his essential attitude, they concentrate on the "picaresque" qualities of his work and dilate upon the "exquisite purity" of his rather sickly last novel *Amelia*, where in his old age, and through the constant pressure of illness and misfortune, Fielding's mind had stiffened at last into a conventional mould.

Beset with the sickly vapours of eighteenth-century sentimentality, on the one hand, and the frozen and unreal

conventions of "classicism," on the other, through which a romantic feeling for Nature in her wilder moods was already beginning to break, what with Macpherson's *Ossian*, Blake's prophetic books, Percy's medieval *Reliques* and the construction in parklands of "gothic" ruins, it is once more to the working class that we must turn for any genuine feeling. In the work of Robert Burns can be seen that simple, unadorned language of real feeling which Wordsworth was to cultivate as the only language fit for poetry. In Burns we see the spontaneously beautiful emotions of what still remained of the independent peasantry in distinction to the sterile intellectualism of the "cultured" classes. Only a man such as Burns, whose emotions had not been warped by social snobbery and the scramble for money, could have written love-songs in the eighteenth century that were vitiated with neither sentimentality nor sly cynicism. Only Burns, who spent his life in touch with the primal things of man's existence, who sowed and reaped with his own hands the very bread he ate, could have written such a poem as that *To A Mouse, on turning her up in her nest with the plough, November 1785*, with a tenderness that was real and not affected. One shudders to think of the same subject treated by Goldsmith, for instance. It is instructive to compare Wordsworth's mystical flights upon the subject of field-flowers, fine as they sometimes are, with a few lines of Burns on the mountain daisy, "on turning one down with the plough, April, 1786" which, with their clear and delicate perception of objective reality, reach an inevitable perfection unattainable by any of the Return to Nature movements of this sophisticated age:

Wee, modest, crimson-tippèd flow'r,  
 Thou's met me in an evil hour;  
 For I maun crush amang the stoure  
     Thy slender stem:  
 To spare thee now is past my pow'r,  
     Thou bonnie gem.

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Alas! it's no thy neebor sweet,  
The bonnie lark, companion meet,  
Bending thee 'mang the dewy weet,  
    Wi' spreckl'd breast,  
When upward-springing, blythe to greet,  
    The purpling east.

Cauld blew the bitter-biting north  
Upon thy early, humble birth;  
Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth  
    Amid the storm,  
Scarce rear'd above the parent earth  
    Thy tender form.

which is, of course, in the true classic tradition. It was the uprising of genuine feeling from the labouring classes, acting not from predilection but necessity, that in the great French Revolution was to smash the polite decadence of all aristocratic "men of feeling." But an equally fundamental revolution in England, effected by the application of steam and tool-making machinery to manufacture, was already beginning to change not only the face of the land, but also the very substance and temper of English literature.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND CAPITALISM

THE poets of the Romantic Revival saw themselves as a second generation of Elizabethans. And so, in a sense, they were. England had once more entered upon a period of intensified commercial and colonial expansion, comparable to, but far exceeding, that of the age of Elizabeth. Wealth was once more feverishly pursued, but this time by a generation of industrial pirates. The introduction of the new machinery into workshops and factories was speeding up production to an unprecedented extent; and as the private owners of these factories could employ men, women and children of the destitute classes at extremely low wages (children being extensively kidnapped for the purpose, just as boys were kidnapped for the Royal Navy) and set to work for fifteen hours a day, a veritable capitalist's paradise had opened before their eyes. As long as the working classes could be doped with sufficient doses of Methodism and sufficiently evangelised, there was little danger of the French Revolution spreading to England. Moreover, the naval power of Napoleonic France had been defeated, stripped of her colonies, and, by smashing up the handlooms of the Indian peasants, a vast market had been opened up in the East for Manchester cotton goods.<sup>1</sup> So with the commencement of the Victorian era, the era of industrial capitalism, piety and profits became the order of the day.

But the further science and industry spread their dominion over the world, subduing external Nature to

<sup>1</sup> In 1834 the English Governor-General is said to have reported: "The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India."

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their ends, and torturing increasing numbers of human beings, the further the poets of the Romantic Revival retired within themselves. Turning away from the industrial horror of their age, seeking in compensation an expansion of their lonely souls into the secret moods of Nature and into idyllic visions of the past, they nevertheless brought about an expansion of feeling and sensibility, more complex, more self-conscious, more feverish, just as the industrialists were effecting a national expansion in their efforts to find markets for their goods. It is an age of introspective epics, each tracing "the growth of a poet's mind," whether Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Shelley's *Alastor*, or Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, each:

. . . crazed

By love and feeling, and internal thought  
Protracted among endless solitudes.

Thus, after his first revolutionary fervour and a passionate love-affair in France, where it had become dangerous for him to remain through his association with the Girondists, Wordsworth, the son of a Cumberland farmer, discovered in himself a need for a more tranquil life. He accordingly settled in Dorsetshire, and then in the Lake District, where he proceeded to immerse himself in the healing influences of Nature and a solitude mitigated by the presence of an adoring sister and the intellectual stimulation of Coleridge. In these circumstances, while the armies of England, financed by the Indian gold of the Duke of Wellington, intervened to restore republican France to a fitting respect for royal and aristocratic privilege, separated by war from his mistress and his daughter, Wordsworth finds mystical compensation for "the heavy and the weary weight of this unintelligible world." In those *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* in 1798, he writes of:

that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on,—

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Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul . . .

For I have learned  
To look on Nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth ; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts ; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And blue sky, and in the mind of man.

This was a new voice in English poetry ; the result of calm after conflict, of retirement from the world of politics and men and of sublimated desire. It is Wordsworth in early life at the height of his powers, before the attempt to live all his life in that "presence" which filled him with such elevated thoughts, that protracted mystical communion with Nature and the strangulation of all natural human feeling, led to the long decline of his middle and later years ; when this once passionate lover and revolutionary, this living soul, grew with the slow passage of time into a pillar of salt, a pillar of bourgeois-capitalist society, and the author of an increasing bulk of mediocre and unnecessary work. In his youth, before all those deplorable ecclesiastical sonnets, he wrote a sonnet, one of the most splendid in the language, in disgust of the commercial spirit of his age :

The world is too much with us ; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers :  
Little we see in Nature that is ours ;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon !  
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon ;

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The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Undoubtedly the most important event in Wordsworth's development was the French Revolution. It was his revolutionary sympathies that prompted in him that feeling of impatience with the "gaudiness and inane phraseology" of the cultured, "classical," poets of the eighteenth century, who were still larding their verse with faded imagery drawn from the poets of Rome, imagery that had grown meaningless by being used out of its social context merely as polite ornamentation. It was his revolutionary sympathies that led him to maintain that the language of the middle and lower classes, and particularly of what remained of the peasantry, as being the unadorned expression of spontaneous feeling, was the only language fit for poetry. "Such people," he wrote in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, "being less under the action of social vanity, convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions." Moreover, the language of such people, "arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression." The fact that Wordsworth, in his greatest work, did not write in the language of "cottagers and clowns," as Coleridge observed, is scarcely to the point. The important thing is that he effected a revolution in poetic

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diction, and reflected the dominant political trend of his day, by setting up the speech of the middle and lower classes against the artificial manners of a parasitic aristocracy. As for the "moral being" of Nature and that "presence" which filled him with elevated thoughts, he rather gives the game away when, in *The Prelude*, he casually remarks:

To every natural form, rock, fruit, or flower,  
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,  
Or linked them to some feeling:

III, 127-130.

It should always be remembered, of course, that to Wordsworth Nature was the homeliness of Westmorland. As Aldous Huxley remarks, what would Wordsworth have felt in a tropical forest? Wordsworth's idealisation was essentially that of an industrial age when man had already got the wilder and more terrifying forces of Nature under control. To judge by the sculpture of the Negroes and the Mayas, for instance, these peoples would probably not have agreed with Wordsworth about the solace of living close to Nature, nor would even the Anglo-Saxon poets. All these peoples were too much up against it.

The next generation carried forward the revolt where Wordsworth turned back. Both Byron and Shelley, though the heirs of aristocratic estates, remained in open rebellion against established society, and the Church which supported it, all their lives. Far away in Italy, Shelley, also seeking a mystical communion with Nature, could yet be moved to wild indignation by the massacre of Peterloo, in such a poem as *The Mask of Anarchy*. In contrast to the wrapt contemplation of Wordsworth and the oratorical, declamatory verse of Lord Byron, Shelley, with the enthusiasm of a noble and generous nature, antagonised the

ruling class of his day by continually voicing sentiments that struck at the very roots of organised society. Even Keats, a liberal of the school of Leigh Hunt, his dreamy mind invaded and disturbed by the impetuous rhythms and the exultations of this extraordinary poetry, advised its author to "curb his magnanimity" and to "load every rift (of his verse) with ore." As if Shelley, child of the Revolution, for whom Freedom was the very breath of life, his head full of eighteenth-century principles of political justice and Platonic ideals of intellectual beauty, could be expected to follow a course similar to that taken by a man who cried out for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts, and whose poetry, even at the last, is clouded with the brooding and unsatisfied desires of adolescence.

A story which Leigh Hunt tells of Shelley is typical of his largely misplaced impetuosity. Returning from the opera one night to his house in the Vale of Health, Hampstead, he came upon Shelley standing in the snow, supporting a woman who had collapsed through hunger and exhaustion, and vehemently lecturing an elderly gentleman who had refused to give the poor creature a night's shelter. The gentleman had just given it as his opinion that there were impostors everywhere and that Shelley's conduct was extraordinary. "Sir," cried Shelley, "I am sorry to say that your conduct is *not* extraordinary. It is such men as you who madden the spirits and the patience of the poor and wretched, and if ever a convulsion comes in this country (which is probable) remember what I tell you. You will have your house, that you refuse to put this miserable woman into, burnt over your head!" Instead of waxing romantic about Cumberland beggars and idiot boys and admiring the picturesque poverty of cottagers, like Wordsworth and other writers of the day, Shelley made a weekly allowance to the most destitute inhabitants of Marlowe while he lived there; and though, in one sense, these spasmodic acts of charity have a bad

effect on their recipients by keeping them more or less contented with a system that cannot abolish their wretchedness, such things are evidence that for Shelley the misery of the poor was not merely an abstract political theory, but a living reality. "No man," he wrote in 1812, "has a right to be respected for any other possessions but virtue and talents. Titles are tinsel, power a corruption, glory a bauble, and excessive wealth a libel on its possessor. No man has a right to monopolise more than he can enjoy; what the rich gives to the poor whilst millions are starving, is not a perfect favour, but an imperfect right. Every man has a right to a certain degree of leisure, and to liberty; because it is his duty to attain a certain degree of knowledge."

*The Revolt of Islam*, written in the tender green of the spring woods at Marlowe as he floated down the river in his skiff, was intended to be his revolutionary epic, and, indeed, the printer, fearing prosecution, refused to issue it in its original form. But even this work (written significantly in the metre of *The Fairie Queene*) is a mystic dream, where the powers of evil remain shadowy and unreal, and the chief impression left in the mind is one of radiant and impalpable loveliness. Even so his work was considered dangerous by orthodox critics, who expatiated censoriously upon the wildness of its imagination and the licentiousness of its morals. To Hazlitt, Shelley appeared as "a shrill-voiced youth, a fire in his eye, a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain, a hectic flutter in his speech."

This same fever of the blood had deeply infected Lord Byron, an embittered exile from Regency society, whose darling he had once been. Wandering sombrely over the Continent, seeing in the majestic ruins of the ancient world the wreck of his own life, frustrated and dogged with melancholy memories and a sufficiently picturesque evil reputation, wrapping himself with a fine gesture in his own Satanic gloom as in a mysterious cloak, but in

reality bored to death with having nothing to do and too much money to spend, Byron became the showman of the Romantic movement and the idol of every gentlemanly young wastrel in Europe.

With the Romantic Revival the period-fancying so characteristic of nineteenth-century poetry begins. The arrival of the Elgin Marble in 1803 and Wedgwood's copies of the Portland Vase made Hellenism all the rage. Ladies copied their dresses from Greek vases, architects designed fashionable London streets and London buildings in a very elegant Anglo-Greek manner, and poets wrote romantic epics about the Greek gods (or the Middle Ages—it didn't much matter which, for they could switch from one to the other with the greatest ease, and in any case the "Gothic Revival" was just a few years ahead). A tasteless welter of conflicting styles was in the very nature of industrialism. Keats begins his career by re-writing the myth of *Endymion* after a prolonged study of Spenser, and ends it by writing *Hyperion* after a prolonged study of Milton. Landor enquires how it is that he could write such a poem as *Hyperion* without knowing Greek and Shelley replies: "Because Keats was a Greek." Byron calls himself "Childe Harold" and writes an epic about his travels in Spenserian stanzas, and Sir Walter Scott, in his *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion*, takes you back, in the manner of Percy's *Reliques*, to the Middle Ages as he sees them.

*Blackwood's* Edinburgh tory magazine, however, did not agree that Keats was a Greek. He had once been an apothecary's assistant, was associated with Leigh Hunt's "cocknies," and that was enough for them. On the appearance of *Endymion* they politely advised him: "back to the shop, Mr. John, back to plasters, pills and ointment boxes." The kind of poetry the editor, J. G. Lockhart, really liked, though, was Sir Walter Scott's. *Blackwood's* had good reason to like it. For while Scott wrote romantically



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about Scotland in the Middle Ages he diverted attention from the real condition of the Highland Gaels at that time. In Scotland in the first decades of the nineteenth century an usurpation of the land by the aristocracy was in progress more criminal than anything of its kind since William the Conqueror burned down thirty-six Hampshire villages and evicted the tenants to make the New Forest a hunting-ground for himself and his Norman chivalry. In the Highlands so-called deer-forests and shooting-boxes were being constructed for "sporting" purposes at the cost of millions of acres of fertile pasture land, and the consequent famine of the original inhabitants, who were told off to go and live as best they might on barren soil along the sea coast. British soldiers were placed at the disposal of the aristocratic robbers to deal with those of the natives who caused trouble during this process of "clearing." The famine resulting from these extemporised wildernesses, was ascribed by the English economists of the day to "overpopulation." Conservative journals had good reason to encourage the reading of Sir Walter Scott.

About the same time as Scott was enchanting the popular imagination with his romantic pictures of the Highland life in past ages, Jane Austen was writing extremely accurate novels of upper middle-class provincial life in England. Her characters are the Pastons all over again, but Pastons who have in the meantime grown much more sure of themselves and have begun to put on airs. Indeed, the world they move in is a veritable upper middle-class paradise in which everybody leads leisured, comfortable lives, and in which such a vulgar element as the proletariat, the factory fodder who are busy making money for them, does not so much as exist. Although her characters' minds are occupied mostly with scandalous chatter and with how much such and such a gentleman or lady "is worth," or how much they will "get" by such and such a profitable marriage—the everlasting topics of conversation among

the middle classes—her ladies are nevertheless so refined, that they throw vapours on the least occasion, and so genteel that their sensibilities are offended by the ordinary processes of living incident to the human animal. Jane Austen's clear, satirical temper, bred no doubt by her life as the daughter of a country clergyman, is merciless in its analysis.

Very different is De Quincey, intoxicating himself with opium and the circumlocutions of his own prose, and Charles Lamb writing whimsically about books, curios and old play-bills. But to turn to William Cobbett is to be refreshed as with a clean wind blowing through all this overcharged and rather sickly atmosphere. If the *Rural Rides* have none of De Quincey's cloudy splendour, nor Lamb's whimsical charm, it is because Cobbett was concerned with English life as he saw it, and what he saw was not conducive to either cloudy splendour or whimsical charm. On the other hand his strong, simple pages bring the reality of the English countryside before our eyes more than all the sentimental rhapsodies of the poets, or the outbursts of the poetic prose writers. Cobbett was a countryman, like Burns bred on the soil, and he had no illusions about the conditions under which countrymen lived. As he rides through the valley of the Avon in August, 1826, he notes its splendid fertility and agricultural wealth, but notices a strange dearth of inhabitants. "A very fine sight this was," he notes in his journal, "and it could not meet the eye without making one look round (and in vain) *to see the people who were to eat all this food*, and without making one reflect on the horrible, the unnatural, base and infamous state in which we must be when projects are on foot and are openly avowed for *transporting* those who raise this food, *because they want to eat enough of it to keep alive*; and when no project is on foot for *transporting* the idlers who live in luxury upon this same food: when no project is on foot for transporting

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pensioners, parsons, or dead-weight people!" It seems impossible to find a more beautiful and pleasant country than England, says Cobbett, or to imagine a more happy life than men might lead here, "if it were untormented by an accursed system that takes the food from those who raise it, and gives it to those that do nothing that is useful to man." In even the poorest villages, he notes, you will find a fine church, for the upkeep of which those peasants who still remain are forced to pay tithes and rent for glebe land, for the privilege of being told in the name of Christianity that a happier state awaits them, if they behave themselves, beyond the grave. In other parts of the country, though there is no less abundance of cattle and agricultural produce as far as manor lands are concerned, Cobbett is unable to get a good meal, because, the villagers being so poor, the butchers have closed down—a state of affairs, he remarks, exactly similar to that existing in France before the Revolution. For after the Napoleonic wars there was much "unemployment" in England, just as there was after the last war. The people at large benefited nothing by defeating Napoleon, though he was the ogre of every nurse-maid. Nevertheless, says Cobbett, men were commanded to submit to objectionable military discipline, to risk their lives in defence of what was represented to them as "their" country, and then, if they returned whole, or in part, or in their right minds, told that they had "no right to be upon, or have maintenance out of, the lands of that country." At Winchester he found men condemned to be hanged for poaching on the preserves of the sporting nobility and gentry; at Carlisle the old castle had been turned into a barracks with guns mounted on the walls "in a situation to shoot up the streets if necessary."

By 1830 most of the leading poets of the Romantic Revival were dead, except Wordsworth, who lingered on a complacent ghost of his former self, and the Victorian

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age, with its prophets Carlyle and Darwin, the one preaching Christian capitalism and a doctrine of work and prayer, and the other natural selection, the survival of the fittest and the Devil take the hindermost, was well on the way to its golden apogee. Its poets felt themselves standing on the very peak of civilisation and posed as the heirs of all the ages. Tennyson, the official laureate, ruled as a prince of literature from his splendid house in the Isle of Wight, reflecting in his work the sentimental idealism of the wealthy merchant middle classes. In one breath he urged his countrymen on to imperial conquest to secure fruitful fields of exploitation from backward peoples who had not had the benefit of Christianity, writing *Form*, *Riflemen*, *Form!*, and in the other dreamed of chivalrous virtue in the *Idylls of the King*, vitiating the plain vigour of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* with the hot-house perfumes of his over-sweet verse. In *Enoch Arden*, an enormously-popular work in its time, he gives a picture of the pious, well-behaved and respectful peasantry of which the Victorian gentleman loved to think. Through the work of Robert Browning, the other "great" poet of the period, can be clearly seen the effect of industrial complexity, the bustling optimism and that passion for accumulation of the capitalist classes. But Browning was a very different kettle of fish from Tennyson. He was in fact the very opposite of all Tennyson's polished half-truths and conventional ethics. While the one poet elaborated the obvious in sweet and melodious verse that caresses the sense like a perfume, or pleases like the glitter of a jewel, the other in rough, hurried and crowded lines rummaged in old forgotten corners of knowledge, laying bare the motives rather than polishing the surface of things. For one thing he understood love and the real nature of woman—a very different affair with him from Tennyson's waxen effigies of female virtue and the semi-homosexual hysteria of *In Memoriam*. In his muttered dramatic monologues he

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introduced the colloquial speech of ordinary men and women into poetry as Wordsworth thought he had done at the close of the eighteenth century. If there is something rather "obvious" and irritating in Browning's poetry for us to-day, it is due perhaps to this very loquacity of a collector who is all the time volubly showing off his curios and period pieces, and the rather smug optimism of his general attitude. But his work as an innovator and explorer in rhythm and diction, however, is still having a powerful effect upon the poets of our own day.

The novels of Charles Dickens, good bourgeois though he was, partially revealed the appalling squalor in which the lower stratas of the population were sunk. Having himself known what poverty could mean, the terror of once more relapsing into that state became the mainspring of his enormous creative industry, though the root causes of that poverty, buried in the viciousness of the whole economic system, are largely obscured in his novels by the sticky mess of sentimental "cosiness" and raucous humour which recommended him to the vast middle-class reading public of his day. Though one can recognise Dickens as an extremely powerful writer, he is, for a generation nurtured on Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley, of all the Victorians the most difficult to read.

By abolishing the property of nine-tenths of the population and investing it in the hands of one-tenth, the nation had been given the blessings of commercial prosperity, and those who pointed out the manifest injustice of this state of affairs were loudly denounced as attacking "the sacredness of private property." Socialist! That word plumbed the very depths of opprobrium to the comfortable Victorian ear, and signified a man with whom no "decent" or "right-thinking" people would associate. The socialist did an unheard of thing: he made the working class discontented with being robbed of nine-tenths of the fruits of their labour, when as a matter of fact, the working man

had never been better off than he was in his consumptive Victorian slum, argued capitalist apologists, working all his life for a wage that barely kept him and his family alive. In point of fact, the working class, said the Victorian gentleman, were a drunken, foul-mouthed lot, who had to be kept in "their place," and if it wasn't for socialist agitators everything was going along very nicely. There was even talk now of building public baths and public libraries for the working class, talk of actually educating them. If things went on like that much longer one wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Jack and his master!

And as the nineteenth century proceeds this middle-class mentality spreads like a spawn over culture. They paid the piper, so they could call the tune. Money and the position it could buy became more than ever before the sole criterion of value. Unlike the rich men of Rome, the Victorian capitalist, as he accumulated his surplus riches, found it prudent to adopt that façade of strict puritan morality that gradually became the laughing-stock of the Continent. But as labour troubles increased abroad, and as foreign workmen were not nearly so docile and respectful to their employers as English workmen, the Continental bourgeoisie began to recognise with admiration the astuteness of the people they had contemptuously called a nation of shopkeepers. They realised, from the example of their English rivals, that there was nothing like keeping up appearances for keeping the working class down. Under these conditions it is hardly surprising that in the Victorian era pretentiousness and vulgarity spread itself through all spheres of art. As in industry, so in culture : quantity and size were pursued for their own sake, and that elegance and simplicity that comes from functional utility, which is the quality of genuine classicism, was entirely lost in a meaningless welter of styles. Swinburne, master of all manners but great in none, discovered

that poetry could be manufactured in extraordinary profusion like everything else. It is true that he felt stifled by the moral hypocrisy of his time and attempted to return, for literary purposes at least, to pagan sensualism. But he only succeeded in turning himself into a verbal hypnotist. The pseudo-Greek drama *Atalanta in Calydon* of 1865, took the more cultured reading public of his day by storm, but of course nothing could be less classic than its relaxed verbosity. Men like Rossetti and, to a lesser extent, William Morris, also turned their eyes back to a golden dream-world of the past. The Oxford Movement was another aspect of the same tendency and "holiness" and Catholic ritual were prescribed as a panacea for all ills.

But in 1857-58 there was trouble in Britain's chief goldmine, India. The Indians suddenly rebelled against being ruled for their own good and about fifty British traders were killed. The revolt spread and indignation flared up in the hearts of freedom-loving Britishers at the thought of white people being killed by "blacks." But as a matter of fact the mutiny gave British imperialism just the chance it wanted. Highly-trained and heavily-armed troops were sent out to India and with the help of astute diplomacy, which played off one feudal prince, and one religious sect against another, and large promises which were promptly broken as soon as the British gained the ascendancy, the best part of the huge continent was brought under direct British rule. It also gave English gentlemen, out for a day's sport, the chance to raid Indian villages, shooting, hanging and torturing wherever they went. The best sport of all, they discovered, was to string niggers up in figures of eight and watch their amusing antics as they slowly strangled. Nineteen years later Victoria was proclaimed Queen-Empress and India became the brightest jewel in the British Crown.<sup>1</sup> There was also

<sup>1</sup> See Edward Thompson, *The Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*.

trouble at home. During the 'eighties the working class of England were becoming more and more impatient of the continued fleecing of capitalism and widespread rioting broke out once more, and the spectre of revolution raised its head for the first time since the days of Chartism. Even under the sacred club windows of Pall Mall the police were breaking up the demonstrations of angry crowds, and silk hats were none too popular in the streets.

It was about this time that Ruskin and William Morris, stirred by the suffering around them and revolted by the degeneracy of all creative activity, began their analysis of the foundations of capitalist society. "A civilised nation of modern Europe," wrote Ruskin, "consists in broad terms, of (1) a mass of half-taught, discontented and mostly penniless populace, calling itself the people; of (2) a thing which calls itself a government—meaning an apparatus for collecting and spending money; and (3) a small number of capitalists, many of them rogues, and most of them stupid persons who have no idea of any object of human existence other than money-making and gambling. . . . A certain quantity of literary men, saying anything they can be paid to say; of clergymen, saying anything they have been taught to say, and of nobility, saying nothing at all, combine in disguising the action, and perfecting the disorganisation, of the mass; but with respect to practical business, the civilised nation consists broadly of mob, money-collecting machine and capitalist." Marx himself could scarcely have said more. But, unfortunately, Ruskin, though he saw plainly enough the evil of society and though he was by no means insensible to "the cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, fiercer than their furnace blast," with his unfortunate parental-fixation, believed in authority firmly and benevolently exercised from above and taught that what society wanted to put it right was more religion. Thus his rich, many-shaded and mystical mind largely confused and defeated



his social criticism. He aimed, quite futilely, to awaken the conscience of the capitalist, rather than to root out the evil by abolishing him altogether.

But where Ruskin timidly drew back, William Morris, basing his activity on a study of Karl Marx, went boldly forward. Much has been written about Morris in the centenary celebrations this year. Bernard Shaw went so far as to call him a saint. But very little was said about Morris the Marxian socialist.

It was not so much as hinted in all the laudatory newspaper articles and speeches about Morris the craftsman, Morris the poet and medievalist that Morris, the part-author of *Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome*, stated his position quite clearly and in no uncertain terms, when he said: "I do declare that any other state of society but communism is grievous and disgraceful to all belonging to it." Nor did Mr. Baldwin, when he opened the Morris Exhibition at South Kensington in the cause of culture, remember what Morris thought about Parliament: "On the one side a kind of watch committee, sitting to see that the interests of the upper classes took no hurt; and on the other a sort of blind to delude people into supposing that they had some share in the management of their own affairs." As for art, literature and science under capitalism, their practitioners were, he said, confronted at the outset with the capitalist sneer: "Will it pay?" whereas for foolish whims, "The satisfaction of which will build a profit, money will come by the ton." This state of things has now become so firmly embedded in most people's minds, that they commonly regard it as a law of Nature. Not so Morris. "I tell you," he said in the course of his passionate lecture, *Art and Socialism*, delivered in 1884, "I tell you I feel dazed at the immensity of the work which is undergone for the making of useless things. Art, the joy of life, ruined by this sticky mass of useless luxury goods which is the product of competitive commerce and enslaves

millions in its manufacture. The manufacturers sell them only by a stirring up of a feverish desire for petty excitement, the outward token of which is known by the conventional name of fashion—a strange monster, born of the vacancy of the lives of rich people. . . . Do not think it a little matter to resist this monster of folly: to think for yourselves what you really desire will not only make men and women of you so far, but may also set you thinking of the due desires of other people. . . .”

The fundamental contradiction of capitalist society Morris summed up as: “The terrible aspect exhibited of two peoples living street by street, and door by door—people of the same blood, and at least nominally living under the same laws—yet one civilised and the other uncivilised.” Morris never attempted to gloss over the stark fact of the class war in capitalist society as sentimental Utopian socialists have always done. He was from the first impatient of Fabianism, regarding it as a thoroughly superficial movement—socialism on paper. The essential nobility and integrity of the man is shown by the strong simplicity of his thought and writing: clear and unambiguous because it is without hypocrisy, conscious or otherwise: simple and direct because it is the result of powerful feeling. He never attempted, like Carlyle, to obscure the reality of the social relations of his day by rhetorical thunders and highly coloured, sonorous ramifications of prose.<sup>1</sup> It is significant that Morris was

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle was in some respects a forerunner of a certain type of demagogue that is becoming increasingly familiar at the present time. With his passionate declamations against the evils of economic individualism and the cash-nexus as the sole link between man and man, together with his later jingoistic imperialism and his mystical exaltation of the hero, or superman, at the expense of anything in the shape of democracy, he is clearly in line with modern fascist orators. “Hero worship,” he wrote, “heart-felt, prostrate admiration, submission burning, boundless for the noblest, god-like form of man. . . .” His great and especial hero was Cromwell, the leader of the middle classes and the archetype of all subsequent Dukes and Führers. Even the cloudy rhetoric of his style reminds one of the fascist orators of recent years.

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the only Victorian who rose naturally to the breadth and simplicity of the epic. After translating Homer, Virgil and the Icelandic Sagas, in his own *Sigurd the Volsung*, he accomplished the only really successful epic of the nineteenth century. It is not merely a *genre* piece of period-fancying, like the artificial poetry of his contemporaries, but from the harsh and bitter struggle of man with Nature that forms the background of Icelandic literature, and the towering courage represented there, Morris was drawing inspiration and courage for the no less harsh and bitter struggle of the economic classes in contemporary Britain.

Holding such views, and being at the same time a great figure in English literature, a myth has been carefully woven about Morris's work. It is not by mistake that his *News from Nowhere* and *The Dream of John Ball* have been consistently represented as the fantasies of a sentimental medievalist, instead of what in fact they are—the pre-figurations of a communist society. While it is true that Morris laid his scene in a transfigured Middle Ages—chiefly because he admired the living and functional simplicity of medieval handicraft, when men could still put themselves into their work and take joy in it as in a creation of their own—it is astonishing, as R. Page Arnot has pointed out in his essay: *William Morris, A Vindication*, how Morris's picture corresponds to the indications given by Marx on the *Gotha Programme*, and even anticipates some of the features already beginning to show themselves in embryo in the present transition to socialism in Soviet Russia. . . *News from Nowhere* was written, moreover, shortly after the events of "Bloody Sunday" in Trafalgar Square had given a foretaste of the ferocity of the bourgeoisie. Nor is it by chance that *The Dream of John Ball* is set in the year of the Peasants' Revolt and that in the five hundred years of future history, unrolled in the talk of the dreamer and John Ball, that the parallel is so close in its account of the growth and development of capitalist

society, and its final overthrow by the workers, with the historical sections of Marx's *Capital*. So clear was Morris's vision of the developing class struggle that lies in the path to socialism that in *News from Nowhere* he even prefigures fascism: "A great part of the upper and middle classes," he writes, "were determined to set on foot a counter-revolution; for the communism which now loomed ahead seemed quite unendurable to them. Bands of young men, like the marauders in the great strike of whom I told you just now, armed themselves and drilled, and began on any opportunity or pretence to skirmish with the people in the streets. The government neither helped them nor put them down, but stood by, hoping that something might come out of it. These 'Friends of Order,' as they were called, had some success at first, and grew bolder.

"A sort of irregular war was carried on with varied success all over the country; and at last the government, which at first pretended to ignore the struggle, or treat it as mere rioting, definitely declared itself for the 'Friends of Order.'"

It is not my business here to deal with Morris's activity in founding the Socialist League in 1884, or his editorship of *The Commonweal*, but such activities, as well as his writings, are sufficient evidence that he was no literary or artistic or mere Fabian socialist, but a revolutionary socialist, taking his stand on the principles of the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels. Beside this example of courage and integrity, Bernard Shaw cuts a rather sorry figure, for all the brilliance and acuteness of his mind.

Deriving from Samuel Butler, Ibsen, Marx and Nietzsche, Shaw began his career as a biting critic of bourgeois capitalist morality, dissecting the falsity of marriage, the home, the Church and "respectability" generally in a series of brilliant plays and still more brilliantly analytical prefaces. He proved himself a great dramatist in *Man and Superman*, *St. Joan*, and the first part of *Back to Methuselah*,

but the part of Joan, as he handled it, savoured rather too unpleasantly of fascist demagoguery. It was the kind of play, one felt, that could be used for recruiting in time of war. It was a tremendous success in Germany, of course, and shortly afterwards Hitler began to hear "voices" telling him to assume the leadership of his country. After *St. Joan* came *The Apple Cart*, in which a king is shown as a dictator easily outwitting a vulgar and half-educated Labour Cabinet, who represent the interests of big capitalist monopolies. Morris had already warned his audiences against the possible utilisation of the machinery and forms of socialism in the interests of capitalism, and he told them quite plainly that they would not achieve "the new country of Equality" without "Intelligence enough to conceive, courage enough to will, and power enough to compel, for if our ideas of a new society are anything more than a dream, these three qualities must animate the due effective majority of the working people, and then, I say, the thing will be done." He also emphasised the fact that the ruling class would not relinquish their privileges without a bitter struggle, and that in the last recourse when they see their position seriously threatened, "that body of people who have, for instance, ruined India, starved and gagged Ireland, and tortured Egypt, have capacities in them for *openly* playing the tyrant's game nearer home." Fighting the tremendous organisation of civilised commercial society, a society that Morris defined, nevertheless, as essentially false and demoralising, one must be prepared to lose money, friends, position and reputation. As a Fabian Socialist, however, Bernard Shaw, seeking first the Kingdom of Heaven, has had all these things added unto him. But for all that, Shaw has probably done more than any other English writer to lay the foundations of socialism in the popular mind. At the present time he is almost alone among our intellectual leaders in coming out in support of the Soviet Union. In his work we see the

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beauty of pure intelligence, illuminating human problems as with the play of summer lightning. He excels in the comedy of ideas rather than the drama of human passion, freeing us, with the clarity and precision of his mind, from the stifling entanglements of human nature like the music of a more icy Mozart. The kernel of his later philosophy, however, as expressed in *Back to Methuselah* and *Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*, is a more and more mystical belief in creative evolution in the course of which humanity gets better and better till it at last becomes divine.

Those writers of the last quarter of the nineteenth century who were content to turn a deaf ear to the crying evils of their day (Morris wrote to many of them without success, for he believed that any honest and intelligent man as soon as he realised the iniquities of capitalism and the reasonableness of socialism, would, by his very nature, become a socialist) and pretend, like their modern descendants, that politics is a vulgar game and no concern of the man of letters, continued, like Walter Pater, to lose themselves in idealised visions of the past and to evolve philosophies of selfish epicureanism. While the exquisite languor of Pater's *The Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean* reflected the temper of the cultured reading public of the day, British, French and German armies were demonstrating the superiority of Western civilisation in the Boxer Rising by looting the Summer Palace of Peking and teaching the yellow heathen a lesson by setting fire to the ancient *Chinese Encyclopædia* in which was accumulated the wisdom of centuries. "While all melts under our feet," wrote Walter Pater in the conclusion of *The Renaissance* (1868) "we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's

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friend. . . . With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. . . . The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us. . . . For art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake. . . . Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping, as a solitary prisoner, its own dream of a world." Thus the ruling class justified its indifference to, its acquiescence in the dwarfed, stultified and poisoned lives of the working class. And it should not be thought that Pater's attitude and the Art-for-Art's-Sake movement that evolved from it, was peculiar to his day. It is just as prevalent among our intellectuals at the present time.

But at that time it found its logical conclusion in a mind devoid of Pater's retired asceticism, in the decadence of Oscar Wilde with his *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde, a strange combination of morbid sentimentality and jewel-like brilliance, unconsciously condemned his own book by a preface dealing with the aims of "pure" art. Those who go beneath the surface, he said, do so at their peril. The elect are those "to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty. . . . We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless." This attitude was responsible for

both the squalor of nineteenth-century England at one end of the scale, and its pursuit of "culture" among the well-to-do. Art has no function, Wilde would have us believe, other than to express beauty with a capital B. "Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." Unfortunately *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is written in the style of *The Woman's World*, which Wilde edited from 1887 to 1889. It is, in its morbid way, also highly, and by its author's own standards, inartistically moral. He nevertheless hit the nail on the head when, in the same preface, he remarks: "The nineteenth century's dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass."

"To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame . . . is success in life," Wilde's master Walter Pater taught him, and as long as he maintained that brilliance, as in his comedies, he was successful indeed. But when the Marquis of Queensberry sent him a post card to the St. James's Theatre, where *The Importance of Being Earnest* was drawing crowded houses, saying: "You are a bugger," he lost his nerve. Instead of replying in character with something like: "What you say is completely true," and quietly slipping out of the country till the scandal had exhausted itself, he was foolish enough to proceed with a libel action which landed him in Reading gaol. But even this was not the end of his attitudinising. In *De Profundis* he disgraced himself by an orgy of self-pity and self-abasement, assuming, as he said: "The purple pall of grief." Victorian capitalist society, suddenly became virtuous, had its revenge upon poor Oscar for a trivial offence that was not punishable by law until 1885. He was insulted by the pure-minded newspapers while still on trial, and his name was removed from the play-bills of St. James's Theatre, though the management continued to make money out of his play.

Wilde cheapened and limited the dynamic implications



of Pater's philosophy that we should surrender ourselves to the perpetual changing newness of life and live each of its moments with as much intensity as possible, by turning away to a narrow orthodoxy of his own, to a sterile and absolute philosophy of the self-sufficiency of Art. "Life! Life!" he cries in *Intentions*, "don't let us go to life for the fulfilment of our experience. It is a thing too narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament. . . . It is through Art and through Art only, that we can realise our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence." Wilde is not alone in this denial of life and the cultivation of a static reality. It is in varying degrees the standpoint not only of all the idealist philosophers from Plato to Hegel; it is the common ground of all the great ascetic religions of the world, and is an aspect of the age-old pursuit of a non-existent Absolute. Wilde had at least enough penetration to see that it resulted in a cultivation of "exquisite sterile emotions," though it is precisely those emotions which his decadence led him to cultivate above all others.

As the nineteenth century draws to its close with the pale converging streams of decadent and semi-decadent poetry and prose in the higher spheres of creative activity, and the cultivation of "style" for its own sake, with Wilde, Ernest Dowson, George Moore and Arthur Symons (whose intuitive criticism, by the way, is often extremely penetrating and still stands as some of the finest in the language) and in the lower sphere the doctrine of action and mystical imperialism rattled forth in the schoolboy jingoism of Rudyard Kipling, W. B. Yeats towers above all others as the greatest poet of his age. The Irish Literary Revival coincided with the growth of the Irish nationalist movement, and although Yeats himself

turned away in scorn from the conflicts and passions of his time to the dim twilight lands of Celtic folk-tale, to theosophy, astrology and crystal-gazing, J. M. Synge was writing magnificent plays in Irish dialect and *The Aran Isles* in a beautifully easy colloquial style that is distinctively un-English. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that the best writers of this time, whether we take Shaw, Yeats, Synge, Wilde, George Moore or Arthur Symonds, are, with scarcely an exception, all Irish. "I have always sought," says Yeats in *Per Amica Silentia Lunæ*, "to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets, old women in Connaught, mediums in Soho, lay brothers whom I imagine dreaming in some medieval monastery the dreams of their village, learned authors who refer all to antiquity; to immerse it in the general mind where that mind is scarce separable from what we have begun to call 'the subconscious'; to liberate it from all that comes of councils and committees, from the world as it is seen from universities or from populous towns, and that I might so believe I have murmured evocations and frequented mediums, delighted in all that displayed great problems through sensuous images, or exciting phrases, accepting from abstract schools but a few technical words that are so old they seem but broken architraves fallen amid bramble and grass. . . ." He has sought always to write as one newly-awakened from sleep with the dream still clear before his inner eye, and to "think that in the return of birds and leaves, or moon and sun, and in the evening flight of rooks he may discover rhythm and pattern like those in sleep and so never awake out of vision." But, fortunately, Yeats is not merely a dreamer; he has known too often the fierce clarity and the bitterness of those rudely awakened from this Teiresian state of prophecy. "Then he will remember Wordsworth, withering into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted, and climb to some waste room and find, forgotten there by youth,

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some bitter crust." Ireland being the least commercial of any nation to-day, over which the past still broods like a dream, and coming himself from a family of landowners, Yeats has had the opportunity to live in his visions more than most. Yet some of his later poems have the magnificent finality of Greek epigrams, and lines which burn into the mind with all the compelling fire of Shakespeare. He has never fallen into the mystical vagueness of an "A.E." or a Fionna Macleod, and because of the depth of his feeling, his work is not of the kind that dies with a fashion or a transitory mood. His own prevailing mood is one of contemplative abstraction; his poetry is, in Pater's sense, a continual weaving and unweaving of himself. In a poem of superb aloofness from *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), called "The Dawn," he proudly declares the function of the poet as the ultimately unmoved observer of all ages:

I would be ignorant as the dawn  
That has looked down  
On that old queen measuring a town  
With the pin of a brooch,  
Or on the withered men that saw  
From their pedantic Babylon  
The careless planets in their courses,  
The stars fade out where the moon comes,  
And took their tablets and did sums;  
I would be ignorant as the dawn  
That merely stood, rocking the glittering coach  
Above the cloudy shoulders of the horses;  
I would be—for no knowledge is worth a straw—  
Ignorant and wanton as the dawn.

From a lesser man such a declaration might be absurd. From Yeats, who is the greatest poet of a closing era, one can accept it as justified and inevitable, for:

These are the clouds about the fallen sun,  
The majesty that shuts his burning eye:

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A society with a predominantly shopkeeping mentality such as ours, is no place for a poet, and he can only exist in spite of it, though its accumulative force will gradually drive him to silence or completely vitiate his talent. Thus Yeats was compelled, like other writers of his day, to protect his genius as best he might against the vulgarity of our civilisation, and like those poets and painters of nineteenth-century France, the symbolists and impressionists, whose work has profoundly influenced all modern English poetry and painting, to assume an aloof and mysterious attitude in mere self-defence from a society in which the poet and artist can never be anything but a parasite and buffoon.

Poetry "doesn't pay"; it doesn't fetch high prices in the market; our money-grubbers and social climbers have even lost the understanding of it—the bourgeois world therefore has no use for it. But if the public can be startled out of its obtuse complacency by stories and legends of the "Bohemian" lives of its writers and artists, when it learns that these strange people are willing to go without comfort and *money* for the sake of their work, the public will begin to think that, though it means nothing to them, there may be something in all this high falutin' stuff after all. Moreover, snobbery is no less active here than in other spheres. The public has been taught that it is cultured, that it is a sign of belonging to the educated classes, to like poetry and painting. So it will even part with quite large sums of money (as long as the thing is done respectably through dealers) for the privilege of possessing those emblems of culture, those boosted pictures and rare editions, that seem to reflect so creditably upon their owners. Thus we are informed that capitalism supports art, though it is not often that the painter or the poet benefits very much from this support. Usually it is not till his death has given him "news-value" that the public wakes up to the fact that he has lived at all.

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However vulgar and below their notice artists and men of letters may consider the political and economic world to be, most of them were involved in the ferocious struggle of British and German imperialism from 1914 to 1918 and much fine talent was blown to bits between those years and left hanging on the barbed wire of Flanders.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PRESENT AND THE BREAKDOWN OF CAPITALISM

THE War, 1914-18, in which many millions were killed and maimed only for the purpose, as Lenin said, of deciding whether the British or the German pirates should plunder the largest number of countries, lowered the whole standard of European civilisation. After centuries of "culture" and "progress" it was discovered that civilisation was after all nothing but a gloss on fundamental human savagery. So far as progress was anything more than a myth, it had been made in the scientific efficiency with which the forces of barbarism could be organised in the interests of the ruling class. The nations were set at each other's throats by rival capitalist groups, lashed to fury with the hysterical propaganda of a lying Press, and men, whose only interest lay in unity, were set fighting each other (instead of fighting their real enemies at home), for the perpetuation of a system from which they had nothing to gain and everything to lose—as they soon discovered when the War was over. Under the ferocious peace three million unemployed men and women in England alone lost whatever illusions they may have had about their country needing them. They were expected, nevertheless, to share in the rejoicings at a perfectly hollow victory and the extension of an empire that meant nothing to them.

After the first trade "boom" in the years immediately following the War, after the colossal vulgarity of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley that attempted to revive the lost glories of the exhibition of 1858, increasingly acute economic depressions set in, and each trade revival, though loudly proclaimed by the Press, was seen to be smaller than the last, till in the World Slump of 1929 it

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became apparent that capitalism was on its last legs. At present (1934) the crisis of capitalism is acknowledged even by the capitalists themselves, and many countries have been driven to fascism in order that they may "rationalise" industry by wholesale wage-cuts, sacking and the smashing up of workers' organisations. If the War and its subsequent economic crises is evidence of the bankruptcy of capitalist civilisation, fascism with its mad-dog demagogy, its reversion to medieval pogroms and the use of torture on an unprecedented scale, is conclusive evidence of the spiritual decay and corruption that has infected the bourgeoisie of whole nations.

The reaction of the British intelligentsia to the War, which they supported almost to a man, went through three successive stages and found its expression in poetry through: the rhapsodical self-immolation of a Rupert Brooke, which played so nicely into the hands of the war-mongers and gave the lead to the rest of Britain's patriotic youth: the introspective fantasies of Robert Graves and Herbert Read in which the agony of the trenches liberated strange ejaculations from their "Unconscious," and the austere beautiful poems of compassion and renunciation of Wilfred Owen: and finally through the revolt against war and all its sum of human misery in the bitterly corrosive irony of Siegfried Sassoon's poems, which, coming from an already "decorated" officer, caused quite a flutter of apprehension among the bourgeoisie behind the lines. Ten years later appeared Graves's *Good-bye to All That* (no doubt Rupert Brooke would have written a similar valediction to his earlier sentiments had he lived), and Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, in which the horror of the first impact of the War is largely sublimated to a public-schoolboy boisterousness in the one and to a grey melancholy gentleness in the other. A more vehement indignation found its expression in Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, although, as always with Aldington, the

indignation is essentially personal and peevish and altogether deficient in a sense of political reality. But the indignation is genuine enough of its kind, and that is something.

Since the War, the economic and political situation has affected literature far more obviously than it did in the years of Victorian growth and the apparently serene days of Edward VII. To-day signs of disintegration and the decline of the old order can be seen in every contemporary work of significance. The nations, as has been said recently, are like men in a small room threatening each other with sticks of dynamite. Any year may see the outbreak of war, or a series of wars, that will certainly be the end of European civilisation as we know it. Under these circumstances, writers, as might be expected, are stirred with a profound cynicism and disquiet.

In England the expressions of this disillusion have been far less spectacular than on the Continent, for England seems still relatively secure in comparison with other nations and in many places the old decorous Victorian tradition still lingers on.<sup>1</sup> It would be difficult to imagine such frightful indictments of our civilisation as M. Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, Johann Rabener's *Condemned to Live*, Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited*, or such a complete *reductio ad absurdum* of human nature as is to be found in the novels and stories of Italo Svevo coming from an Englishman. Our middle-class writers, though many of them have lost heavily on their incomes in the slump, are still too comfortable to write anything so ungentlemanly. It is significant that all Svevo's effete and useless characters belong to the rentier class of a country

<sup>1</sup> Recent years, however, have seen a change. The fashion of elegant and mischievous debunking of the "eminent" Victorians set by Lytton Strachey has developed into something more fundamental in John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle For Power* and *The Menace of Fascism*, which are profoundly serious exposures of the whole economic foundation, and the ideological superstructure, of capitalist society.



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that under Mussolini's leadership is popularly supposed to be so vigorous and progressive. The Old Man in the story of *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl* turns to the vitality of a working-class girl as to a spring of life, but he is too enfeebled to take her life and it kills him. Again, Zeno in the *Confessions of Zeno* is utterly incapable of taking responsibility for his own actions, and uses psycho-analysis as a means of evading every vital issue.

Certainly we have Aldous Huxley, who writes with polished cynicism about people who are never very far from hysteria, and Richard Aldington's novels are said to be fundamental criticisms of bourgeois values. Such a book as *The Colonel's Daughter* might possibly be considered in that light, but in *All Men Are Enemies*, written from the point of view of the selfishly-suffering individual, he returns to the usual haven of romantic love supported by a substantial private income. What effective protest there has been has come from the working class, from D. H. Lawrence, from Lionel Britton and now from Walter Greenwood with the grim beauty of his *Love on the Dole*, which makes an interesting commentary on both Aldington's love in *Aeaea* on £600 a year, and Huxley's weak-kneed young men who find the greatest difficulty in bringing themselves to the crucial act of love at all. In his poetry, T. S. Eliot, a follower from a distance of the royalist-fascist, neo-Catholic party of France, has repeatedly sounded the note of weary despair, and for doing so has been informed by I. A. Richards that he has "defined the spiritual condition of an entire generation."

As for the condition of the stage to-day, if by some mischance a good play happens to get a public performance in London, it seldom survives a month at the most, is usually off after the first week or fortnight, and is played to practically empty houses. Even vulgarised productions of Shakespeare in the West End are few and far between,

and then only tolerated because they give the public an opportunity of seeing some male or female "star" showing off their personality in a famous role. It is not the play the public is interested in. As for the other classics, one can scarcely hope to see them staged in London at all, unless some wealthy man of taste, such as the late Nigel Playfair, happens to own a theatre on which he is prepared to lose money. Even our greatest contemporary dramatist, Shaw, is not good "box office," and it is a forlorn hope to expect to see the work of the best modern dramatists of other nations in London. This is a very different state of things from that existing in Berlin before the advent of the Nazi barbarians, when it was always possible to see a Shakespeare, a Shaw or an Oscar Wilde play any night of the year. At the best, Londoners who care for drama must snatch the opportunity of seeing the Irish Players, the wonderful Ohel Theatre of Palestine, the Compagnie des Cinze or the Moscow Art Theatre on one of their occasional and brief visits. For the rest, vulgar and slyly suggestive inanities can count upon an almost uninterrupted London run of years. With the majority of the upper classes, "going to the theatre" is primarily a social function, an occasion for showing off a new dress or getting another subject for conversation at tea-table or dinner party, while among the working class it is seldom anything but music-hall dope, an opportunity for wallowing in beery and sexy fantasies, or witnessing over and over again the monotonous subject of adultery among their "betters." In both the book market and the theatre to-day there is the largest provision for the lowest common multiple of bad taste.

Before embarking upon any more detailed analysis of contemporary writers, it is necessary to deal with the position of writers under the present phase of capitalism in general. The taste of the vast reading public of to-day is largely determined by Hollywood and the popular

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Press.<sup>1</sup> The function of the newspaper is to provide its readers with as many "sensations" a day as possible, and the sensations of which the Great British Public apparently never tires are provided by crime, weddings (royal, if possible), divorce and sport news. Political information reaches them in a garbled form according to the "policy" of the paper (that is to say, the seldom very exalted views of its millionaire owner and the requirements of its largest advertising clients) in which it appears. Such are the "sensations" upon which the public is daily invited to nourish its mind—journalism consisting for the most part in the art of presenting events in such a way that they are at once exciting and vapid, for it would never do for the public to become too conscious of what their rulers are up to.

It is hardly to be wondered at, therefore, if after the newspaper the most popular reading matter consists of crime and detective novels. This type of book dates back rather remotely, to the picaresque novel of the sixteenth century and the rogue-books which provided pabulum for the lower middle classes. The difference is that the rogue is always quite frankly the hero of the old picaresque tale and the reader was not invited to share the vicarious excitement of a prolonged man-hunt by the guardians of private property, but could enter into a series of usually gay and reckless adventures and so achieve a certain emotional release. The modern crime and detective book has precisely the opposite effect. Nowadays one is invited to hate the criminal (whose motives for committing the crime are, of course, not too deeply analysed) and the heroes are the police. In so far as the police existed at all in sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century picaresque

<sup>1</sup> The newspaper, in fact, is almost the only form of literature that many people read. The reason should be sought chiefly, perhaps, in the congested, hurried, overworked condition of their lives, although many leisured and "educated" people prefer to read rubbish to anything else.

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novels, they were shown as figures of fun or simply brutalised executioners. This, of course, would never do in an advanced society such as ours and the passions aroused in the minds of the readers of these modern novels are rather hatred, fear, suspicion, a taste for espionage and cruelty, and, above all, a fearful admiration of the police. In Kipling's *Mark of the Beast*, for instance, torture is used for the first time in modern fiction as a commendable instrument of justice. Since then the use of torture in one form or another has become an accepted means of adding to the excitement of a crime story. It would be as well, therefore, for the public to be aware of the sentiments they imbibe when recreating themselves with a little "light" reading. The detective novel serves the useful purpose, by deadening natural human sympathy with misfortune, of preparing the way for all the undisguised brutalities of fascist rule.

After crime books, the next most popular type of novel is the "clean, gripping love story." These books, turned out by mass-production methods like the crime stories, make their appeal largely among women, for whom the tracking down of a wealthy husband, who shall keep them for the rest of their lives in a condition of married prostitution, is supposedly the chief concern. The calculating commercialism of their "100 per cent. pure" heroines, is thinly veiled by the cheap emotionalism of the "love-interest," and a lavish setting in hotels, restaurants and "smart" watering-places. Much attention is paid to the refinement of the characters' manners (as though they were newly-acquired for the occasion) and to their expensive clothes. The great thing is to be "good class" and English—foreigners, and particularly coloured races, are represented as inferior people, and we read much of "the relentless cruelty of the Oriental mind." The hero is always "immaculately dressed," unless the novel he laid in artistic circles, and then he will be picturesquely poor. These books serve the useful purpose of stimulating

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commercialised sex, snobbery, nationalism and race-prejudice. Such are the innumerable sixpenny paper novels of the order of Edgar Wallace's crime stories, E. M. Hull's "desert romances," the wish-fulfilments of Edgar Rice Burrough's Tarzan Series, and, most popular of all, the potted film-stories of the Sixpenny Reader's Library.

In the case of those novels which aspire to a certain literary level, the best-sellers of the Walpole and Priestly type, it is not the intrinsic value of the book that counts nowadays so much as the spurious value created for it by various literary cliques, the outcome of cocktail parties, nice little dinners at West End hotels and week-ends at country houses at which authors and reviewers learn to understand one another, or the reputation built up for it by reviews that have been quite simply bought by the amount of advertising space booked by the publisher. Thus we have a pernicious capitalisation of spiritual values comparable to the artificial stimulation of prices by the Trusts and Combines of Big Business. Just as in every other commercial field, the public is persuaded to buy dope it doesn't really want by being persistently told that it can't do without it. While as in the case of more expensive goods, advertisers sell them by suggesting that all the "best" people have them, so advertising reviewers sell the "high-brow" books of their friends by making out that all really intelligent people read them.

One of the most flagrant cases of literary capitalism of recent years, apart from the notorious Edgar Wallace, is that of Arnold Bennett who dried up the springs of his own creative vitality by deliberately turning himself into a commercialised writing-machine. In 1908 Bennett published his one great book, *The Old Wives' Tale*, which he created out of a relentless sincerity to his own experience as a member of the lower middle class of the industrial Black Country. Between that time and *Riceyman Steps*

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(1923), a belated attempt to return to the springs of his old creative vitality, Bennett produced an enormous mass of spurious popular novels. Had he died in 1910, after completing the *Clayhanger* trilogy, instead of in 1931, his reputation would stand precisely where it does to-day. But the greater part of his life was devoted to achieving the goal of capitalist success. At the end of each year he noted in his journal the exact number of words written and the increase in market value of each paragraph of his work over the preceding year. By 1903 he had attained the record of half a million words and if he fell below that at any time he concluded that something was seriously wrong with his instrument of production. In this extraordinary and self-destructive industry he outdid even Trollope who, with his watch on the table in front of him, timed himself to turn out two hundred and fifty words of creative writing every fifteen minutes. But there is a considerable difference between the value of Trollope's work (good second-rate though it is) produced under pressure, and Bennett's "sensational series" of light fiction, "pocket philosophies" and fantasies, which brought him in £6,000 a year and enabled him to cruise about the world in a private yacht.

To-day the book market is flooded with the meretricious work of skilful hacks, who make a good living by trading upon the worst instincts of the public and obscuring the work of serious writers who are usually informed by prospective publishers that there is "no market" for their books. But this is only the literary counterpart of the wasteful mass-production characteristic of capitalism, each literary hack endeavouring to get as near as he can to a monopoly of the market which he supplies.

But to return to those literary movements by which one may suppose our age will be remembered. Since the Romantic Revival, no revolutionary movement in literature had arisen in England, but the emergence of the

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symbolist movement in France has had a profound affect upon our literature, not only during the age of Walter Pater, but upon many contemporaries as well. During the War that group of international writers and artists gathered at Zurich, evolved, in 1916, a destructive, anti-bourgeois protest movement called Dadaism, which had its roots in a feeling of hysterical, anarchical revolt. The aim of the movement was nevertheless, to release the forces of the unconscious. The guidance of the intellect was renounced and the mind was used simply as a passageway through which these forces could find expression. From this movement, which defeated itself by its very anarchy, arose in 1924 in Paris, under the influence of Freudian psychology, *surréalisme*, or super-realism, an extension of Dadaism and symbolism, seeking to systematise states of dementia into "immense geographies of dream and desire." By consciously harnessing the forces of the unconscious, by externalising dream-states and by following out those irrational, associative thought-processes usually obscured by what the *surréalistes* held was a purely conventional intellectual control, it was sought vastly to extend the boundaries of literary expression. They allied themselves (theoretically) with Bolshevism in politics, organised a raid on the Diaghilef ballet of White-Russian emigrés, and justified their work by quotations from Marx and Lenin, claiming to be as good dialectical materialists as those engaged in political activity. For they were, they said (and still say), breaking down the old ideology in the bourgeois mind. Unfortunately, *surréalisme* largely defeats itself, like the earlier Dadaism, by its obscurity and general incoherence.

*Surréalisme* had important repercussions. Although James Joyce had finished *Ulysses* (1921) before the *surréalistes* issued their first manifesto in 1924, living in Zurich and later in Paris, Joyce was closely in touch with the movement and the whole technique of his enormous and

elaborate novel, and still more of his later work, is based on *surréaliste* subjectivism. Much the same technique is found in the novels of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, who developed a kind of contrapuntal form of their own founded upon *Ulysses*; in the poetry of T. S. Eliot and the whole modern school of private psycho-analytical poets that largely derive from him.

But since I. A. Richards says that Eliot has defined the spiritual condition of an entire generation, it will be worth while to examine his work in some detail. Of course the author of *The Waste Land* and *The Sacred Wood* cannot be considered a follower of the *surréalistes*. Such a movement is far too revolutionary for the essentially academic mind of this "Royalist, Classicist, and Anglo-Catholic." His style dates further back to the defeated romanticism of the later symbolists, to the conversational, ironic manner of Corbière and Laforgue, and so near is he to these poets in his earlier poems that his very turns of phrase read like translations from the French. If Eliot's poetry seemed new and original when *Prufrock* appeared in 1917, it was because no one else had troubled to imitate this particular aspect of symbolism in England before, or at least not so well and so deliberately as he. But the weary defeat and cynicism and the sordid details of city life that seem eternally to haunt his mind, found an immediate echo in the minds of that generation that grew to maturity under the shadow of the War. From the first, Eliot's muse was like "a patient etherised upon a table" during which all the natural faculties are frozen and the mind weaves nightmare fantasies of its own. In the hopeless *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, his verse meanders like the mind of a somnambulist ceaselessly and wearily rearranging the patterns of memory and action deferred:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,



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When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume? . . .

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along  
the floor—

And this, and so much more?—

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:  
Would it have been worth while

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:

“That is not it at all,

That is not what I meant, at all.”

It is, as he says, impossible for Eliot to say just what he means, for, as he tells us now, he is convinced of the futility of arguing about anything really fundamental. Yet he is always explaining, hesitating, retracting, fearing enthusiasm or any sign of genuine and spontaneous feeling, terrified of committing himself and of being “pinned and wriggling on the wall.” And so, together with I. A. Richards, he has evolved a somewhat confused critical philosophy of elaborate evasion in support of his non-committal attitude. In a much-quoted passage from *The Sacred Wood*, he explains himself in one of his favourite elliptical sentences as follows: “My meaning is, that a poet has not a personality to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality. . . . Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry, may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality”—which, in the last resort, can only be taken as a plea for nineteenth-century *poésie*—

*pur* and art-for-art's-sake, although, as always with Eliot, he may not *exactly* intend this. But as far as it is possible to pin him down, a poet, according to Eliot, should give expression to neither his personality, the sum total of his emotions, nor to his general attitude to the world. What, then, is he to give expression to? To a "medium," says Eliot, that is, to pure poetry that expresses nothing but itself. As Paul Valéry adopts more or less the same point of view, it is fairly safe to assume that this is what Eliot does mean. Similarly we have I. A. Richards in *Science and Poetry* telling us that: "It is not the poet's business to make true statements"; he should make "pseudo-statements." One would have thought that pseudo-statements would have resulted in pseudo-poetry. But apparently not, for Richards says that Eliot has effected "a severance between his poetry and all beliefs." Again, "All poetry shows conclusively, that even the most important among our attitudes can be aroused and maintained without belief entering in at all." So that when writing poetry Richards advises us to "cut our pseudo-statements free from belief, and yet retain them, in this released state, as the main instruments by which we order our attitudes to one another and to the world." According to him the only way in which we can achieve "sincerity" is by being conscious of our insincerity—to such quibbling shifts are the chief writers of our day driven in justification of their aloof and dignified posture on the critical fence!

Thus, in his essay on Dante, Eliot suggests that Dante did not "believe" in the hell, purgatory and heaven of his own *Divine Comedy*, though it is obvious that he believed in them sufficiently to be powerfully moved by their symbolism, and that he was not just expressing "a medium" or adopting a particular attitude for the occasion. But Eliot would have us think that Dante was only writing "as if" he believed, and as though he were engaged in the same elaborate game of intellectual blind man's buff as Eliot himself. But the

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greatness of the *Divine Comedy*, apart from its exquisite workmanship and the unparalleled rarity of its atmosphere—resides in precisely the fact that its symbolism, by which Dante objectified certain spiritual states, is fundamental to human nature in all ages, because it is made up of enduring human emotion and not pseudo-belief. Moreover, Dante was a man who took an active part in politics, allying himself with the revolutionary merchant class of his day in its effort to throw off the yoke of the feudal nobility and was finally expelled from Florence for his pains. In revenge he put his political enemies into his *Inferno*, which does not look very much as though we can make any hard and fast distinction between what Dante believed in as a poet and what he believed in as a man.

Like his contemporaries in the kindred field of music, Stravinsky and Schönberg, Eliot aims at a synthetic art, a kind of substitute for poetry, by mechanically applying the formulas of past poetry, or, as he would say, of Tradition. As Constant Lambert remarks of Stravinsky in a similar context, "One cannot create a creature of flesh and blood out of fossil fragments." Yet this is precisely what Eliot attempts to do in *The Waste Land*. The lyrical impulse, without which there can be no poetry, is the result of powerful feeling, but to Eliot: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion. But of course only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately in escaping from emotion, he frequently escapes from poetry as well. "I have lost my passion," he writes in *Gerontion*:

why should I need to keep it  
Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
How should I use it for your closer contact?

<sup>1</sup> *The Sacred Wood*.

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These with a thousand small deliberations  
Protract the profit, of their chilled delirium,  
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,  
With pungent sauces, multiply variety  
In a wilderness of mirrors.

Like Stravinsky again, he wishes to be thought a classicist, and classicist rather than classical is what he is, for it is just the realistic, sane temper of classicism that is most foreign to his work. It is not the world outside him that Eliot is interested in so much as the condition of his own nerves. His poetry is all shrinking refinement and a selfish sensitivity, born of privileged retirement. In contact with the world he is constantly being outraged by such things as "the damp souls of housemaids," "smells of steak in passageways," and "broken finger-nails of dirty hands." Human emotion seems to him so much meaningless chatter, breaking in upon his serene contemplation of Tradition.

In *The Waste Land* he draws a resentful and essentially romantic comparison between the sordidness of the present age and the imagined idyllic condition of Elizabethan London. (What would Eliot have done, I wonder, had he lived in Shakespeare's London, and, during a stroll along Cheapside, been met with a gang of shackled, half-naked and bloody-backed men driven along to slavery in the galleys, or encountered the open sewers, the piles of ordure and filth that contributed to the pleasure of taking the air in those days?) He contents himself with contrasting the aristocratic love of Essex and Elizabeth, floating down the Thames in their gilded barge to the refrain of Spenser's *Prothalamion*, with the sordid little rape of a tired typist, with her furnished room and tinned food, by a small house-agent's clerk to the refrain of a vulgar jazz tune. Again, in two scenes of contemporary life, he contrasts the bored, upper-class woman, neurotic from having nothing to do all day, who is trying to engage

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the attention of an equally bored lover, with the tale of a working-class woman in a pub. In the one instance (*The Waste Land*, section II) the upper-class woman, glittering with jewels and satin and odiferous with perfume, after an introductory passage of synthetic poetry which has been often compared to the richness of Shakespeare and Keats, to prove that "Mr. Eliot can do it if he tries," breaks out hysterically:

"My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think."

I think we are in rats' alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.

"What is that noise?"

The wind under the door.

"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"

Nothing again nothing. . . .

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"

I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?

What shall we ever do?"

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

Thus the leisured women for whom leisure and luxury have become an intolerable prison. The scene shifts to the pub and the working-class woman speaks:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—

I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,

HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.

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He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you  
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.  
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,  
He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.  
And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,  
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,  
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.  
Oh, is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.  
Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight  
look.

HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME . . .

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.

(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)

The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the  
same.

You *are* a proper fool, I said.

Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,

What you get married for if you don't want children?

HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

In both scenes the subjection of discussion, or inference, is "love." The upper-class woman confronted with a bored, devitalised lover, becomes more and more jumpy, and with a despairing gesture lets her hair down and suggests parading the street as a prostitute. The working-class woman, without mincing her words, shows what "love" has been to her friend, with all its background of premature age, overwork, poverty and clumsy abortions. To Eliot both scenes are merely examples of the chattering futility of the human animal, and in both the characters are waiting for death to end the tedium of their lives, announced in the one case by "the knock upon the door" and in the other by the reiterations of the barman. As exposures of contemporary society, these are two of the most valuable passages in Eliot's work.

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The monotonous recurrence of the imagery of putrefaction and decay and the hollow weariness of the poetry, is not only an indication of the withering up of the very sources of creative energy, but gives the lie to Eliot's whole position as a traditionalist. For Tradition in his work is exemplified not as a vitalising principal, but as a dried husk, a death shape:

Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left  
Hard and curled and ready to snap.

It is seen "feeding a little life with dried tubers." Of course, one is not suggesting for a moment that Eliot has not written some extremely powerful poetry: one would not be dealing with him at all if he hadn't. What I am concerned to attack is his general attitude which has led to that very condition of spiritual aridity and nihilism so powerfully exemplified in *The Hollow Men*, with such subtle Dantesque beauty in the fifth section of *The Waste Land*, and in the last weary bid for religious faith of *Ash Wednesday*—poetry that has all the sterility of the lonely, self-enclosed individual:

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly  
But merely vans to beat the air  
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry  
Smaller and dryer than the will  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still.

Only those who have known that state can realise with what skill and subtlety it is expressed here. But to realise that state is to want to attack that which produces it. There can be no doubt whatever that T. S. Eliot is one of the most important poets of our time. It is for that reason one deplores his retrogression into Anglo-Catholicism and royalism, and is sorry to see him sitting, like his own

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Sweeney, a lonely guardian of Tradition, "intransigent, intolerant and intolerable"

Under the bam  
Under the bo  
Under the bamboo tree.

a sterile tree that will never again put forth leaves, but will grow as dusty and as neglected with time as a Victorian hat-stand.<sup>1</sup>

In regarding the contemporary capitalist world as a waste land, Eliot is, in one sense, perfectly justified. For, as he shows still more explicitly in *Sweeney Agonistes*, the pleasures that a competitive commercial society offers the majority of its members are sickly and nauseating, while the conventional artificiality with which many of us are forced to live is pretty near death.

The same element of *pastiche*, of poetry manufacture, is seen in the work of Ezra Pound, a close associate of Eliot and another expatriated American. In Pound we have the spectacle of an extremely skilful and academic mind, an extremely responsive lyrical sensibility, "time travelling" (like Eliot again) through the poetic traditions of the past. Having no roots in any particular society, Pound can switch his mind with the greatest agility and responsiveness from New York to medieval Japan, from the Florence of Dante and Cavalcanti to Anglo-Saxon Britain, and from ancient Greece to Provence, a capability that fulfils Eliot's injunction that in order to have an historical sense, in order to be able to write good poetry at all, a poet should feel every age of the past as having "a simultaneous existence in his mind." Pound's *Selected Poems* (selected by Eliot) contains much work of a delicate loveliness, particularly *Cathay*, that section devoted to

<sup>1</sup> "If ever communism comes to this country," said T. S. Eliot in a broadcast talk in 1932, "I hope it will find me intransigent, intolerant and intolerable."



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Japanese and Chinese renderings, for which we can only be profoundly grateful to both Pound and Fenelosa. The only trouble is that none of this is Pound's poetry, his own *chic* modernistic productions keeping strange company with the genuine poetry of other men which his genius as an impressario has "produced" for us. But such a collection as Pound's *Selected Poems* admirably conforms to Eliot's definition of poetry as a "superior amusement." That is to say, it affects us in much the same way as a Bloomsbury sitting-room where Negro, Greek and Chinese bric-à-brac jostle one another in "amusing" confusion, setting off the Catholic Madonna, the Victorian *immortelles* and the steel and glass furniture of a precious eclecticism. And this, of course, leads us directly to the Sitwells. For the same principle of *pastiche* is to be seen in the work of this aristocratic family, who are everlastingly writing poems "in the manner" of somebody else, embroidering a theme taken from Pope or the Elizabethans, or writing synthetic poetry to illustrate their theories of "texture" and their extremely modern and "amusing" imagery derived from the kitchen garden. In fact Edith Sitwell has written that the modern poet should "stylise" his work in the manner of Stravinsky, Francis Poulenc, Picasso, and the *pasticheurs* of the Diaghilev Russian Ballet. So once more we are brought back to the sterile doctrine of pure æstheticism and the art for art's sake of a dying class.

In Edith and Sacheverell Sitwell's verse, we have an anatomy of all the elements of decadent Elizabethan poetry, which proceeded to gild refined gold, paint the lily and throw a perfume on the violet in wasteful and ridiculous excess, mixed, as if to make confusion worse confounded, with Keats at his most luscious, and the hallucinatory association of Rimbaud. Such poetry provides the reader with an escape from reality into the phantasmagoria of an "artificial paradise" where black nymphs in feathered headdresses wander through gardens of exotic

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flowers and fruit, through coral tears of dripping light and waves of honey. Like many of the romantically escapist writers and artists of our time, Edith Sitwell adopts the airs of classicism, writing in couplets that are anything but heroic. For her verse is totally devoid of the intellectual precision, the brevity of wit and the clear architectural qualities of classicism which might have given form and coherence to the shadowy emanations of her fancy.

And waves are freckled with gold ripples, these  
Seem golden spangles on the strawberries;  
And black Bacchantes with their panached feathers  
Wear mittens with gold fringe bright as the weathers . . .  
But now Melpomene, Zenobia,  
The Amazons black as Ethiopia  
In Pan's huge forests seem like statues tall,  
Where the thick jewels from the rich figs fall  
In this vast empire of eternal shade  
Where leaves seem Memphis, Thebes, from music made.  
In wooded gardens by each gardener's frame  
Dark wrinkled satyrs with long straw beards came,  
Dark honey from rough cups of straw to sip,  
And every straw cup has an amber lip.  
The gardener, wrinkled, dark, beside a cave  
Sways branches gold-mosaic'd as the wave  
And finds these are with satyrs' straw beards twined  
By that gold-fingered arborist, the wind.

*Metamorphosis.*

And so on. There is no reason why such verse, which repeats and parodies itself to an astonishing extent, should ever stop, for it has no progression, has no recognisable beginning or end, and when we put the book down we have no idea what it is all about. A similar sickly lyrical effusion and fantastic dreaming swamps all intelligibility in the verses of Sacheverell Sitwell.

The poetry of Roy Campbell, with its bellowing bulls, its zebras and rhinoceroses, its "enormous flowers, explod-

ing in the sand," and its surly, snarling seas, is certainly vigorous enough. But in the overstrained rhetoric of his pugilistic, bull-fighting muse, there is clearly perceptible a note of hysteria. From his autobiography, *Broken Record* (1934), we learn that he is in favour of the Jew- and socialist-baiting of the Nazis, that he has a profound contempt for the working class and believes in the "good old relationship of slave and master." But then Campbell is an "equestrian" and takes pride in riding rough-shod over all the common decencies of civilised intercourse.

In the work of D. H. Lawrence, the son of a Nottinghamshire miner, there is that "turning loose of emotion" so abhorrent to T. S. Eliot. And certainly of much of Lawrence's work one is forced to say that he never blotted a line and would he had blotted a thousand. Much of it suffers from reiteration and over-emphasis, and sometimes the loose emotional impressionism of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, is scarcely crystallised into poetry at all. But at least Lawrence had something important to say; he was not just writing for the sake of amusing himself with verbal textures. It is for this reason that some of his best poetry occurs in the lyrically descriptive passages of his novels. In his prose, indeed, the emotion is so powerful that, with the natural surge of a wave it gathers up his expression in its own momentum, creating an organic form of its own, and bursts over the mind with a lyrical splendour that leaves criticism aghast. It is for this reason that we can recognise Lawrence as one of the very few genuine poets of recent times. But living as he did in an age of disruption and nervous disorder, and in a society that he abhorred, he was, as a poet, essentially short-winded, angrily impatient, and incapable of sustained lyrical flight. It is possible, of course, that his intensely personal and feminine sensibility would never have been capable of such objective exteriorisation of itself in poetry as even that achieved by Rilke in his magnificent, mournful and tor-

mentedly obscure *Duinese Elegies*. But Rilke, though voluntarily poor and intentionally suffering, was a man of independent means and had the stable tradition behind him of a family of landowners, while Lawrence had all his life to grub about in the dirt of bourgeois commercialism to keep himself alive at all. "Get money," he wrote, "or eat dirt."

The case of D. H. Lawrence is that of a man thwarted and tormented by our commercial-capitalist civilisation. His was no theoretical objection, but the fanatical hatred of a fine spirit that feels itself hunted to death by all it knows to be decadent, hypocritical and foul. At last he choked with his own hatred and critics were able to point to the curious inconsistencies of his attitude. Of such stuff social-revolutionaries are made. But one is forced to admit that Lawrence was no social-revolutionary, although he recognised that the vitality was with the working class. His outlook remained personal to the last. He was quite incapable of ever taking anything approaching a scientific or objective view of things, and being too deeply involved in his own message of erotic mysticism, he imagined that everything depended upon a "creative-convulsive seizure upon the soul." He had no political sense worth mentioning and sometimes delivered himself of sheer inanities. Lumping President Wilson, Bernard Shaw and Marx together, he accuses them of never having "felt one hot blood-pulse of love for the working man," and serving all their lives "the blood-drinking, ever ash-thirsty ideal" rather than saving man in what he vaguely called "his living, spontaneous, original being."

In *Studies in Classic American Literature* Lawrence enunciated his creed:

"That I am I.

That my soul is a dark forest.

That my known self will never be more than a little clearing  
in the forest.

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That gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest into the clearing of my known self, and then go back.

That I must have the courage to let them come and go.

That I will never let mankind put anything over me, but that I will try always to recognise and submit to the gods in me and the gods in other men and women."

The "gods" were, of course, passions and in his reverence for them Lawrence had much in common with the religious outlook of the pagan world, yet he never got outside the engulfing vortex of his own emotions. It was this intense egotism, this emotional anarchism, this determination never to let mankind "put anything over me," that led him, though he hated the bourgeois world like poison, to reject communism. Communism to him was not a living, dialectical order, but a mechanisation of the human spirit in the service of the State, and he failed to see that only under communism has each individual a chance to develop his innate creative potentialities to the full. In so far as he had a coherent message it was this: that "the amazingly difficult and vital business of human relationship has been almost laughably underestimated in our epoch." Such a realisation, with its unconscious implications of the social and human order of communism, makes him important. We find this message set forth most clearly in his *Psycho-analysis and the Unconscious*:

So we are face to face with the basic problem of human conduct. No human being can develop save through polarised connection with other human beings. This circuit of polarised union precedes all mind and all knowing. It is anterior to and ascendent over the human will. And yet the mind and the will can both interfere with the dynamic circuit, an idea, like a stone wedged in a delicate machine, can arrest one whole process of psychic interaction and spontaneous growth.

How then? Man doth not live by bread alone. It is time we made haste to settle the bread question, which after all is only the ABC of social economics (*sic*) and proceeded to devote our

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attention to this much more profound and vital question: how to establish and maintain the circuit of vital polarity from which the psyche actually develops, as the body develops from the circuit of alimentation and respiration. We have reached the stage where we can settle the alimentation and respiration problems almost off-hand. But woe betide us, the unspeakable agony we suffer from the failure to establish and maintain the vital circuits between ourselves and the other human beings, and all the extraneous universe. The tortures of psychic starvation which civilised people proceed to suffer, once they have solved for themselves the bread-and-butter problem of alimentation, will not bear thought. Delicate, creative desire, sending forth its fine vibrations in search of the true pole of magnetic rest in another human being or beings, how it is thwarted, insulated by a whole set of indiarubber ideas, and ideals and conventions, till every form of perversion and death-desire sets in! Psycho-analysis won't tell us. But a mere shadow of the true unconscious will give you a hint.

To Lawrence the "unconscious" was "only another word for life," and that it was for him not just all a question of sex should be obvious to anyone who has understood the implications of the above. The tragedy, and it is the tragedy Lawrence saw, is that most people have become so insulated with indiarubber ideas and ideals that they don't even know what he is talking about. So we have our "crop-headed, flat-chested, chemicalised women" and our "wimbly wambly young men." Lawrence knew well enough in his "dark instinctive self" that there is urgent need for revolution if we are to survive, but he didn't know what revolution or how. He despaired of our youth because he saw that they were just monkeys sitting on their tails and being whizzed round in machines, listening to radio or gramophone; he saw money as our "vast collective madness," but from the fact that he talked so glibly about settling the bread-and-butter problem, it is clear that he did not realise the situation in its objective reality as the working of economic laws in society. Settling

the bread-and-butter problem involves nothing short of social revolution, the displacement of private combines and trusts that exist to keep up the price of wheat, as of everything else, by collective ownership. And that is not merely the ABC of economics. An ill-nourished man or woman cannot adjust their vital circuit when their bellies are crying out for food, or when they are condemned either to degrading drudgery for a bare existence or have to waste their days in self-destructive idleness. Unfortunately the strange gods that came out of the dark forest of Lawrence's soul went back again too quickly and without following to their active conclusion any of the apocalyptic utterances they threw over their shoulders in their divine impatience.

In the popular bourgeois mind Lawrence is still a "low" and "unspiritual" writer, because he deals with what is fundamental to human nature. Although they were forced to recognise his greatness, bourgeois critics were from the first hostile to Lawrence and merely tolerated him as one of the lower orders who had raised himself by an unaccountable talent for writing, but that of course he could never be a "gentleman."<sup>1</sup> From the first he made them uncomfortable by the burning reality of his work. For

<sup>1</sup> A curious instance of this attitude is to be seen in the case of David Garnett, a personal friend of Lawrence's and the "Bunny" of his *Letters*. Apparently Lawrence's hair seemed to Garnett "incredibly plebeian, mongrel and underbred. "No gentleman," he says in the reminiscences prefaced to *Love Among the Haystacks*, "ever has hair so scrubby and growing in that queer way." Then with his well-known whimsical charm, Garnett proceeds to give his first impressions of Lawrence. "He was the type of plumber's mate who goes back to fetch the tools, he was the weedy runt you find in every gang of workmen, the one who keeps the other men laughing all the time, who makes trouble with the boss and is saucy to the foreman, who gets the sack, who is 'victimised,' the cause of a strike, the man for whom trade unions exist, who lives on the dole, who hangs round pubs, whose wife supports him, who bets on football and is always cheeky, cocky and in trouble." After this remarkable outburst it is rather poor compensation to add that Lawrence had beautiful eyes.

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it is not always pleasant to be confronted with the superior vitality of the working class, especially when it is clothed in forms of such splendour. As long as it remains unobtrusively dressed in its dirty corduroys, or in the dull anonymity of some uniform, and confines itself to repairing the roads, to driving trains and 'buses and mining coal at the risk of its life, it is "in its place." Lawrence, however, was an example of the working class out of his place in capitalist society, competing in the high-class sphere of culture with the sons and daughters of gentlemen, and he was made to feel it. But for all that there can be little doubt that in creative vitality and natural genius, D. H. Lawrence is the most remarkable, indeed, the greatest English writer of contemporary times. Every other post-War novel pales in comparison to the force of sheer genius that went into his work.

Galsworthy is still a much more popular writer than Lawrence, but beside such a book as *Kangaroo*, or beside any short story of D. H. Lawrence, *The Forsyte Saga*, where the bourgeoisie is worthily embalmed, is as ponderous and as lifeless as a tombstone on the grave of a dead class. Take any two representative passages of Galsworthy and Lawrence, put them side by side, and see the difference between a clumsy and lifeless prose and the very breath and exaltation of life itself. Nothing is so indicative of the degeneracy of taste in the reading public to-day as the comparative neglect of Lawrence in favour of such second- and third-rate novelists as Galsworthy, Wells and Bennett in his popular mood. Undoubtedly the fact that Galsworthy belonged to one of the most respected professions has had much to do with the popularity of his work, the effect of whose gentle irony has been to idealise rather than to indict middle-class values. Even when witnessing such a play as *Loyalties*, about people who value class and race loyalty above ordinary common decency, the bourgeoisie, who have now become so



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impervious to any values other than their own, actually enjoy identifying themselves with his most despicable characters. In the same way, when Galsworthy shows how the accumulation of private property is valued far in excess of human happiness and well-being, most readers do not even realise the criminality of this attitude, so ingrained is it in their very natures. How many middle-class readers of *The Forsyte Saga* realise that the book is intended to be an exposure of their most cherished ambitions?

If Lawrence's work shows the influence of the post-War psycho-analytical movement, the introversion of consciousness away from an intolerable world, Virginia Woolf's lovely and unpopular novels carry subjective lyrical impressionism still further. Beginning with such stories as *Kew Gardens* and *The Mark on the Wall*, she developed the same technique in her novels from *Jacob's Room* (a too-mannered and not very successful work) to *The Waves*, in which it finds its culmination. The absence of "plot" in these novels has made them unpopular, but their exploration of the subtleties of civilised sensibility which, by its psychological realism and its sense of the ironical relativity of all experience, never becomes sentimental, is always enchanting. *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, which mirrors a day in the life of a London "society" woman, rather hard and superficial as she is, flows from the first page to the last like a stream of lucid water, its characters and experience smoothed like pebbles by the clear even flow of the style. Apart from Joyce, from whom of course she derives, there is no other contemporary novelist who has such a subtle registration of the psychological overtones of different people in a room, or gives one such a sense of the strangeness of life as Virginia Woolf. It is true that neither sordidness nor powerful emotions intrude upon the lovely mosaic of her world, but as very few post-War writers, Virginia Woolf has contributed a new form to the novel that is perfectly in

tune with the subjective and ironically aloof consciousness of the more cultivated section of the leisured classes of our day.

Polished, cynical and urbanely detached, Aldous Huxley is the very opposite of the whirlpool of Lawrence, who draws the mind down through ever-deepening tunnels of emotion, yet he is more concerned with the problems and unpleasantness of modern life, more willing to participate in the human tangle, than Virginia Woolf. But such travel books as *Jesting Pilate* and *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, where he makes a show of a philosophical attitude to the world and a disinterested pursuit of truth, are not altogether reassuring as to the depth and range of Huxley's perceptions, when those perceptions are not engaged in unmasking the transparently affected *poseurs* of his novels. One must admit, however, that *Jesting Pilate* (1926) is a considerably more perspicacious work than *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934). Huxley has spent so much time exposing artificiality and hypocrisy among our modern intelligentsia, that a slightly condescending and sneering approach to the world has become habitual to him, reinforcing his dominant mood of disillusionment, scepticism and negation. One has only to turn to the jocular remarks inspired by the lyrical sensualism of Indian sculpture in this travelling philosopher. "From Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, and for the last two thousand years, almost every Hindu artist seems to have been engaged in illustrating the works of Aretino. Even the most sacred persons tend to melt—and at the most solemn moments of their religious life—into suggestive postures. . . . The boneless limbs—dozens of them, very often to a single personage—ooze about the picture-space or the sculpture-volume like voluptuous ectoplasm. The haunches jutt to right or left; the waists are tapered as though by a delicious process of suction; even the men seem as though inflated about the chest; and as for the women. . . . But language fails" (*Beyond the Mexique Bay*, p. 47). After reading such a

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passage, amusing and elegant as it is, one would be led to suppose that Indian art is purely pornographic. And so the imperialistic illusion of the racial inferiority of the Hindu to the white man is nicely bolstered up, especially when we think of the glories of British sculpture. But though Huxley's extremely English mind is morally outraged by Indian work and can only defend itself against its "suffocating animal heat" with a gibe, he has no difficulty in responding to the considerably more remote sculpture of the Mayas, the product of an aberrant civilisation based on mental darkness and ferocious sacrificial rites. He can respond to it, characteristically enough, because it is an art that often has "all the abstraction of pure geometry" and whose decorations are "as austere abstract in their formal arrangement as the most mathematical of cubist designs." Then he adds significantly: "There is no sex in the art of the Mayas; but, by way of compensation, what a lot of death!" Why is it, then, asks Huxley, that the Mayas should find death a congenial and stimulating theme, while Hindu civilisation was "best inspired by, indeed can hardly escape from, thoughts of sexual pleasure?" The fact is, the Hindus were far more luxuriously civilised than the Mayas. They elaborated a complete and very sophisticated civilisation based on the life-principle in man, while the people of Central America in their jungle-cities externalised their own instincts into gods that had to be continually gorged with blood and death. Besides the Mayas were a priest-ruled people kept in subjection by a parade of horrors, in much the same way as the symbol of a suffering man nailed to an instrument of torture has been used for centuries by the ruling class to keep down the mass of Europeans. Such a preference for Mayan over Hindu art is indicative of Huxley's whole attitude of mind. Rather than the lyrical sensuality of the creative processes of life, he would turn to the sterilities and death-shapes of abstract form.

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The same tendency is to be observed in his novels, where he preserves himself in a certain remoteness of disdain from human affairs, assuming the toga of the cynic. Although his characters frequently have all the airs of humanity, Huxley is not interested in them as human beings so much as embodiments of ideas. Each of his novels is an "antic hay" with men like satyrs dancing on the lawns of their middle-class preserves, and the fact that it is ideas he is interested in rather than human beings, accounts for the increasingly large encroachments made by the essay form upon each of his novels in succession. As for his attitude to society as a whole, the most completely revealing of his books is *Brave New World*, a satirical vision of a possible future for the human race.

The world envisaged in this book at once recalls H. G. Wells's Utopian world-state. But Wells has, or once had, the reputation of a socialist to keep up, whereas Huxley presents us with a complete capitalist's paradise, in which society is rigidly graded into classes, each member being carefully pre-conditioned for his class before birth. Those destined for a life of monotonous manual labour are conveniently hatched as half-wits so as to save trouble later on. Big Business has reached its logical end as monopoly of all the means of life and the human race exists purely in order to make profits for it. A hatred of all natural pleasures is carefully implanted in the children of the salaried classes at Conditioning Centres, together with a desire for expensive mechanised amusements taken far from home. In this way the amusements and transport industries are kept in a flourishing condition, while every expression of man's creative spirit in literature and art, is extinguished. Those who refuse to conform are dealt with summarily. Thousands of "culture-fans" are gassed in the British Museum reading-room and a demonstration of Simple Lifers is shot down at Golders Green. Such books as the Bible and Shakespeare, which might

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inform the human race of what it once was, are kept carefully under lock and key by the authorities. While representing the class society of capitalism, Huxley's novel is also a *reductio ad absurdum* of the attempts to condition human life and behaviour, by creating a collective mind, such as we see in Russia at the present time. Actually the brave new world with which he presents us has far more in common with the fascist than the communist State of which it is intended to be a parody.

The general conclusion of the book, essentially defeatist and reactionary in character, is that the progress of science will enslave humanity. Science, however, is not an autonomous entity existing on its own, but is entirely dependent upon the uses to which it is put by man himself. To contend that science is using man for its own ends and may destroy civilisation, is merely to make excuses for the capitalist system which uses each advance in technical organisation to enslave the working class still more effectually. The assertion often made in justification of increasing control of industry by "science" by the capitalists themselves, is that it is essentially "labour saving." As Sir Herbert Austin recently informed us: "Mechanisation is now relieving the brain of the old tediums and giving a new stimulus . . . slaves of to-day being made of metal, while the mind directs." In this respect we are fortunate in having the evidence of William Ferrie, a motor-mechanic, who works in one of Sir Herbert's motor factories:<sup>1</sup> "When I heard it said that man is master of the machine, and that slaves of to-day are made of metal, I can't help smiling rather cynically," said Ferrie. "I'll tell you this: the machine enslaves us. It compels us to do its bidding, we have to accept its pace and follow its commands. The conveyor-belt is our master. If the management of the factory decide to increase the speed by ten

<sup>1</sup> A talk banned by the B.B.C. but published in the *News Chronicle*, March 6th, 1934.

per cent., a thousand hands work ten per cent. faster. I am not exaggerating when I say that those of us who work on the conveyor-belt are bound to it as galley-slaves were bound to the galley. In our factory we manufacture cars. In the shop you will find a long line of travelling bodies swooping and dipping in accordance with the layout of the shop. On the belts is the machine which is being made. Now it is on ground level, now it arises on the conveyor-belt over our heads; to come down again to earth when next required. In this way ground space is saved, but it means that we have to chase our ever-moving job and as the speed increases, so does the hardness of our work. . . . When the belt is on the move nothing in the world exists for us except the line of chassis relentlessly bearing down upon us. We often work with the sweat pouring out of us. It is necessary for men to move like lightning. Each worker has to finish his particular job before the next chassis bears down on him—and the next, and the next and the next. Some men are underneath on their backs; others in little carts propelling themselves along by their heels all day long; others scramble about in order to keep the line up in the production standard." Yet in his presidential address to the Royal Association this year (1934), we have Sir James Jeans comfortably asserting: that science "has lead to the emancipation from soul-destroying toil and routine work to greater leisure and better opportunities for its enjoyment."

The realisation of something of what all this means has lately resulted in the formation of a group of young Oxford "revolutionary" poets, shepherded by Michael Roberts—the *New Signature* and *New Country* group. Things being as they are, says Roberts in his preface to *New Country*, "There is only one thing to do: there is only one way of life for us: to renounce the capitalist system now and live by fighting against it . . . because

there is no other decent way of life for us, no other way of living at our best." In justification of this attitude Roberts then proceeds to draw up analogies from village-green cricket as symbolising all that is best in the English tradition. "You're a fool," he says, addressing the supposedly conservative reader, "if you think your system will give you cricket much longer. Haven't you realised? *Cricket doesn't pay!* If you want cricket you'd better join us," the young revolutionary poets whose mission it is "to arouse and clarify the vision of the class from which they sprang"—the bond-holding middle class. As one would expect, Roberts does not accept "the cruder" Marxian ethic. "That is only the attitude," he says, "of the man who wants to see his home team win." And the class-struggle is not cricket. Marxism must be "modified" and "developed." But a change of outlook has got to come, "and you can't change your batting style without taking thought and spoiling, for the time being, your play." The whole trouble, thinks Roberts, is not that the world is in the grip of financiers, but that it is not in any one's grip at all: it is not intelligence that is lacking, he says, but control. "There are many people in the country—and I think there are as many of them in the Conservative Party as there are in the Labour Party—who are being forced to realise that no party which they know will even be able to grapple with the situation." It was on this assumption that Sir Oswald Mosley formed the New Party which soon developed into the British Union of Fascists.

The chief batsmen of this new team, one gathers, are W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis. While still at Oxford they decided to begin applauding each other's batting style, and having influential connections in the literary world, both Spender and Auden scored centuries with their first books. The cry was taken up joyously on all hands: a new lyrical poet and a new

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satirist of the first order had appeared in English literature and what made it all the more exciting was that they were Bolshies! It was not long before a book called *A Hope for Poetry* by Day Lewis appeared—the “hope,” it is hardly necessary to add, is the poetry of Spender, Auden and Day Lewis himself. The despair, the “voices quiet and meaningless, like rats’ feet over broken glass” of the hollow men, was superseded in Bloomsbury circles by joyous young shouts and three athletic young figures in flannel shirts could be seen advancing confidently, with cricket bats under their arms, against the Great Boyg of Mr. Eliot.

But apart from all this haloo and the perpetual chairing of each other “on shoulders of shouting wind,” if only their poetry had been left to speak for itself one might have enjoyed it in peace. Stopping one’s ears with cotton-wool, then, one realises that their work is certainly of some importance. Stephen Spender, for instance, has written poems that evidence not only a verbal power and a command of large rhythms that one looks for in vain from the politely derivative, spiritually impotent, “private” versifiers of recent years, but most remarkable of all is the social consciousness, the strength, directness and grave intellectual beauty of his work. The lines from such a poem as the following will illustrate his general standpoint :

Not palaces, an era’s crown  
Where the mind dwells, intrigues, rests :  
The architectural gold-leaved flower  
From people ordered like a single mind,  
I build. This only what I tell :  
It is too late for rare accumulation  
For family pride, for beauty’s filtered dusts ;  
I say, stamping the words with emphasis,  
Drink from here energy and only energy,  
As from the electric charge of a battery,  
To will this Time’s change.  
Eye, gazelle, delicate wanderer,



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Drinker of the horizon's fluid line;  
Ear that suspends on a chord  
The spirit drinking timelessness;  
Touch, love, all senses:  
•Leave your gardens, your singing feasts,  
Your dreams of suns circling before our sun,  
Of heaven after our world.  
Instead, watch images of flashing brass  
That strike the outward sense, the polished will  
Flag of our purpose which the wind engraves.  
No spirit seek here rest. But this: No man  
Shall hunger: Man shall spend equally.  
Our goal which we compel: Man shall be man.

Day Lewis's *Magnetic Mountain* is equally remarkable. There is a lyrical spirit moving through his work as pure as Blake's and his verse exhibits a rhythmic vitality as furious, yet as perfectly poised, as his own "kestrel joy." At other times he falls into the bouncing rhythms used by W. H. Auden:

Or stay at the terminous till you grow verminous,  
Eating chocolate creams from the slot-machines.

But all through the work of these three writers there is a preparation, a bracing of sinew, a steadying of nerve, a continual valediction to the old life of bourgeois values, as though the revolution were coming next week, and as though the bulk of the English workers did not still support the bourgeois Labour Party, and the unemployed were not chiefly interested in football and dog-racing. In Auden's *Orators*, where a wild *surréaliste* humour is built up out of the juxtaposition of incongruous objects and ideas, this preparedness breaks out into burlesque plans of campaign, and farcical accounts of how a revolution might be effected. Auden's aim is to make poetry once more a popular art, and for this purpose he utilises the technique of Rudyard Kipling and the colloquial rhythms of Lawrence's *Pansies*. The cumulative

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effect of all this, however, is to demonstrate that there can be no progress along the line of capitalist civilisation, but only complete degeneration and rot. Auden writes:

If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try;  
If we don't, it doesn't matter, but we'd better start to die.

The only danger is, that their criticism, which tends to oscillate between jocular plainness and extreme obscurity, will be passed over as "just the fun" of a group of clever young men of good families. Their aim, of course, is to derive creativeness from those stirrings of new birth that many people feel within themselves without understanding, but which are the forces already shaping the future.

A reactionary, who seems to command a good deal of respect in literary circles to-day, is P. Wyndham Lewis. Lewis began his career just before the War as editor of the "Vorticist" magazine, *Blast*, which, despite protestations to the contrary, had obvious affinities with Marinetti's futurism. Marinetti, the mouthpiece of the new imperialistic bourgeoisie of Italy, came out about this time with a doctrine of mechanical force and efficiency. In 1913 he issued hysterical and inflammatory manifestos about the absolute sovereignty of Italy, the necessity of bringing the working man to heel, and "the cult of progress, and speed, sport, physical strength and brave manhood" directed against "the mania of culture, classical education, libraries and ruins." "War," he proclaimed, is "the only hygiene of the world." Lewis did not go so far as that, but, obviously intrigued, followed from a distance and proclaimed the right of the artist to be nothing but a vortex of emotion. Vorticism, in fact, was largely a *fauviste* movement, the outcome of the increasingly savage commercial competition of the bourgeois world. Futurism was the beginning, ideologically, of Italian fascism.

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In 1931 Lewis visited Germany, exchanged his admiration of Italian for German fascism, and wrote an "impartial" book on Hitler. It is significant that Lewis took the Nazi movement on its face value as a "fiery fusion" of principles "snatched from the armory of the Extreme Left and the Extreme Right"<sup>1</sup> and failed completely to pierce through this fiery fusion to the hard and quite unidealistic kernel of fascism in general—which is a fiercely nationalistic defence of monopoly capital and the privileges of the bourgeoisie, enforced by a civil army with command of prison, concentration camp and torture chamber. "Not by means of Dagger, Poison and Pistol must the Hitlerist seek to impose his political views upon the people," wrote Lewis in 1931. "Force, in the Communist or the Machiavellian sense, is not necessary." The Anglo-Saxon would feel reassured at once, he tells us, in the presence of "these straight-forward young pillars of the law," for "these hefty young street-fighting warriors have not the blood-shot eyes and furtive manners of the political gutter gunmen, but the personal neatness, the clear blue eyes of the police." Yet it was left to these straightforward young pillars of the law to devise such a reassuring method of keeping themselves in power as sending the bodies of murdered political opponents back to their relatives in sealed coffins—not to be opened on pain of death. It was left to these men with "their personal neatness" to arrest and torture a man's wife in default of catching him, to beat their enemies to death and compel them to eat excrement. One is not likely to read such details in *The Daily Mail*, of course, for Lord Rothermere, who supports Sir Oswald Mosley, has a great admiration for Hitler's methods. One relies on the reports of refugees from the

<sup>1</sup> An identical claim appears in the programme of the New Britain Movement, which stands for "National renaissance" and the mystical supremacy of British imperialism. It denies that it is a fascist movement, however!

Fatherland, whose several accounts of fascist rule all bear one another out in the most unmistakable manner. It is true that Lewis's book was written before Hitler came to power, but his motive for supporting fascism is clear enough when he writes: "It does not require phenomenal foresight to discern that at any moment this universal unrest could be made to swell up suddenly into a world-storm of unparalleled proportions—a 'War-to-end-Class-War,' as it were"—the classless society of communism being the very last thing that Lewis wants. "The communist," he writes, "views everything in the darkest colours. His is the romantic, the stormy palette . . . the Hitlerist dream is full of an imminent classical serenity, leisure and abundance." The difference between communism and fascism, to Lewis, "is *Misery-Spot* against *Golden Age!* Here again I, as an artist, plump for the *Golden Age!*" What could be more "impartial"?

But if Lewis had taken the trouble to acquaint himself with the simple economics of the situation, he might not have plumped quite so readily for this golden age of crowded prisons and millions of unemployed. He might have had some doubts about its imminent classical serenity, when he discovered that Hitler was financed by Thyssen and the German Steel Trust, who want another war to keep themselves and their shareholders happy. But in the opinion of Lewis: "Perhaps the German people are to-day nearer to true democracy, who knows, than any nation has ever been at all." So he lightly throws his bait of fascism to the English reader, remarking casually that an extreme party is needed in England to enrol the enthusiasm of youth. In passing it should be noticed that this writer has the usual plain man's naïve idea of the communist as a ruffian with a bomb in his pocket, and a pathetic faith in the respectable legality of fascism. In Vienna recently it was Lewis's "straightforward young pillars of the law" who massacred the families of the social-democrats and

workers, smashing up some of the finest-planned civil areas in Europe with field-guns, and quite openly violated the popular mandate which put the social-democrats of Vienna into power. But still Lewis thinks it "quite obvious that communism could not exist without great misery and patent injustice."

In his last book, *Men Without Art*, Lewis writes, he tells us, "from the standpoint of genius." From this exalted position it appears to him that "Life is at a standstill, and the routine of customary things held up. It is time mankind once more at least pretended to move on a bit; a *jump* is due, there has been a good spell of reculation—a long sag has taken place. The architects are handicapped, the painters are depressed, the writers don't know what to write about, the stage is barred against talent, and science is forbidden to go full steam ahead—least no work should be found for *anyone* any more. Genius is in danger!" Quite true. But is genius to assist in this stagnation by refusing to take any part in the re-organisation of society? Is it to dissociate itself "from any political system whatever?" as Lewis says it should. Is it to stand aside and see the debasement of every value that makes life worth living by a wretched shopkeeping mentality, and do nothing? Apparently this is Lewis's view, for he proceeds: "There must exist among us some non-partisan principle. And the most obvious way of securing that is to accept and keep intact what, to make myself readily understood, I have called the party of genius: *that* partisan will—yes, even the more militant partisan he is—provide the nearest approach to an impartial, non-partisan principle that it is possible to have in our human society." In other words "genius" must think only of art and have no opinions at all about anything that affects the destiny of society and the human race. But although "genius" must shut its eyes to all that, it should be willing to become a passive instrument of whatever society it happens to find itself in.

It must not discriminate, because that would imply having opinions and meddling in politics. It must be purely "impartial." "Act, I say to the artist, as the perfect opportunist."

As an example of this new impartiality, Lewis leads off in *Men Without Art* with an attack on Marxism. His method is to give a ridiculous caricature of Marxism, to indicate the mechanical absurdity of his own conception, then to claim that he has attacked dialectical materialism and disposed of it as a philosophical doctrine. He applies the same method to the work of Virginia Woolf and to D. H. Lawrence (in *The Enemy* No. 2). But such methods neither expose Marxism, Virginia Woolf nor Lawrence: they merely rebound on Lewis himself. Suddenly forgetting his non-partisan principles, he concludes with a dark hint: "There comes a time, that is all, when those whose interests are mortally affected have to take action." Action in what direction, or of what kind, Lewis does not tell us. But he allows it to be understood that it will be action against the "increasing proletarianism of literature," throwing out another hint to the effect that there is no longer "a politically powerful literate class to confer prestige on good writing." Are these shades of royalism, Anglo-Catholicism and classicism? Or does he think that perhaps Mosley and his Blackshirts will do it for him and his kind with their rubber truncheons and knuckle-dusters?

"All I have done here," he concludes, "has been, starting from the assumption that a non-material system of values attaches to the exercises of the artist, to denounce the various interferences, by the agencies of which, at present, his activities are impaired." These agencies are, says Lewis, economic materialism, mathematical mysticism, "the economic blizzard," moralist utilitarianism, and both nationalism and internationalism. These are the things that are preventing the artist from reaching his goal of pure

art. And as genius should have no political views, he can only sit patiently on the volcano of the modern world and wait for it to erupt and blow him to his non-partisan, impartial end. I have discussed Lewis's book at some length because the attitude contained in it is fairly prevalent to-day in the ranks of the party of genius; who continue comfortably impartial as small rentiers till the time comes, as Lewis says, to take action to protect their less spiritual interests.

Another critic, John Middleton Murry, though seemingly antithetical, is actually complementary to Wyndham Lewis. Both writers are exhibitionists in their different ways: Lewis likes to see himself as the mysteriously cloaked enemy, the giant among pygmies, whereas Murry adopts the role of the spiritual saviour, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, publicly shouldering the cross of his generation. While Lewis favours an apparently objective, intellectual and "classical" view of things, Murry, listening in to his inner voice, stands at the moment for a kind of private communism of the heart. Middleton Murry began his career during the War as an expounder of the mysteries of Dostoevsky and the introspective Russian novelists, and continued, as a "void wrestler" and biographer of Jesus Christ, their private struggle with God. More recently he has expounded the true sexual nature of D. H. Lawrence and discovered a new gospel of salvation in Karl Marx, whose doctrine of economic materialism, he says, is in direct apostolic succession to the teaching of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets. Murry's pursuit of socialism is still through the labyrinths of his own soul, so that his conception of Marx is strangely distorted, and makes him incapable of appreciating the logic and consistency of Lenin and Stalin's application of Marxism to practical issues. To him, as a mystical theorist, these great leaders of the working class have only "degraded" and "noisily coarsened" a delightfully humane and Christian

doctrine whose effects should be felt only in the heart of each individual.

In his extraordinary book, *The Necessity of Communism* (1932), whose upshot is a support of the bourgeois Labour Party, he gibs at the idea of anything in the shape of Russian communism coming to this country, because he believes that the Englishman is "too decent to allow such inhuman horrors to be perpetrated." The "inhuman horrors" referred to, are the conscripting of White-guard counter-revolutionaries, whose aim is to bring back the bloody tyranny of the Czar, into labour gangs, and the treating of such people, quite rightly, as worse than ordinary criminals. He does not add, however, that the reformed Soviet prison system for ordinary criminals is incomparably more humane than our own. Nor does he mention the inhuman horrors being perpetrated at present in India by the fascist rule of the same decent Englishmen. Indeed, when you hear of English decency and love of fair play it is advisable to glance occasionally in the direction of the colonies, at the history of Ireland, Egypt and India under British rule. So Murry proceeds to exhort his readers: "If you don't want inhuman communism then you must have human communism. If you don't want a revolution in the world about you, you must undergo a revolution within. . . . This book is, incidentally, the record of that inward revolution in a single man. If it sets it in motion in you also, then have no fear. The cause of human communism will be won." Was there ever a nicer way of effecting social revolution, changing oneself and leaving the economic system inviolate? A little later, with unconscious irony, Murry quotes a famous passage from Marx's essay on Feuerbach: "Social life is essentially practical. All the mysteries, which divert pure theory into mysticism, find their resolution in human activity, and in the understanding of this activity." It is scarcely believable that a man who can quote with approval such a passage



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as that can, in the very same book, evolve a mystical and purely subjective theory of social life and call it Marxism. Nevertheless, that is what Murry does in *The Necessity of Communism*, where he is concerned to show "the essential congruity of the vision of Marx and the vision of the great mystics." "This then, is the task of this little book—to create a Marxism that shall include Marx himself. It was like Marx to leave himself out of his own world. We shall repay his heroism by putting him back into it again." Thus proceeds apace the creation of a Marx myth alongside the Morris myth and the investing with a sentimental halo a man who spent his life in showing up the confusions and inconsistencies of idealist philosophy.

Signs of a more revolutionary protest against the existing economic order have come recently, as one would expect, from those who have suffered most directly from it. The novels of Lionel Britton, James Hanley and Walter Greenwood may be taken as fairly typical of the voice of the emergent working class to date. All three writers, in contrast to the popular novelists of to-day, have in common an unclouded vision of the forces at work in contemporary society. Their books necessarily make pretty terrible reading. In *Hunger and Love* (1931) Britton has written a work of undisciplined, elemental power. Its protest against the moral degradation that makes human life dependent upon possession of money, stands out like a huge volcanic rock in the polite literary world of our time. It was due to the efforts of Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell and Upton Sinclair that the book was published at all. It outraged every bourgeois decency, whose existence depends upon pretending that the state of things Britton reveals as a running sore in the social body are non-existent, and was therefore upon its publication, with a few exceptions, overwhelmed with the abuse of the capitalist Press. It is to the credit of Arnold Bennett that he also had the courage to hail the book as a work of

genius, though he showed a considerable want of discrimination in stating that it was a better book than Joyce's *Ulysses*, for it is patent that Britton has neither the consummate artistry, nor the intellectual power of Joyce. Yet his picture of the struggle for life of the orphan errand-boy Arthur Phelps, gives his work the quality of an epic. Arthur Phelps, though ignorant and uneducated, wants to lead a full life like everyone else, but having no money he is condemned to sordidness and humiliation. "The bourgeoisie have a theory," he says. "It is quite simple. They think that if they can keep a man's thoughts fully occupied at the very lowest plane of life, belly-starved and sex-starved, there will be no time to worry about the bourgeoisie." As for Phelps's relation to his employer, Sarnier, a small greengrocer, we learn:

Profit is his life. There's cradle, and there's grave; he lives in between: for profit. It's his life. He has nothing else. What else has he got? He looks at you queerly. He talks to you like a father. Bad bawl over. . . . But—there's a threat in it. Don't forget he owns you! Don't forget his God. He speaks fatherly to you, language of game. But there is something of tiger and wolf, something of threat of dark—there is a snarl. He owns you. Don't forget that. Body and blood! Blood! Body and soul.

The old Saxon serf wore an iron ring round his neck, the bull wears it through his nose. Your collar is "linen" from the cotton-pods of Carolina . . . pressing down on your jugular—reminding you always that your life is not your own, no right to comfort, no right to life. The old Sarniers of the earth are padding about in the dark. Watching you. Meat for them, whenever they like.

Language of game; with snarl. Losing him profit. Be careful, the social darkness will get you; you will be one with the dark; you will be unemployed. . . . The copper with the bludgeon, the soldier with the gun. The shop-keeper must have his profit, the landlord must have his rent, your life belongs to the employer. The farmer takes the fleece off the sheep. If you are

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quiet and make no resistance the policeman will not bash you and the soldier will not stick his bayonet into your guts. Go down Whitehall and round St. James's Palace; see the soldiers with the bayonets fixed. Remember that when the landlord comes for his rent.

Of course the defeatism and despair of *Hunger and Love* is only another example of the helplessness of the lonely individual in revolt against the forces of the whole of organised society. Britton is an anarchist rather than a socialist. And Arthur Phelps always keeps before him the vision of the suburban villa: the goal of petit-bourgeois success. As he "gets on" he thinks to himself: "Have a look round Golders Green Garden Suburb or some of the newer houses they're putting up round places like Wimbledon Park. . . . Wouldn't be so bad, you know, all on your own in one of those little places, nicely furnished. Perhaps you will have a gramophone . . . bookcases anyhow, and a writing-desk. . . . And Doreen."

James Hanley has written novels and stories dealing with slum life, *Drift*, *Ebb and Flood* and *Boy*, round the Liverpool docks. He makes no direct attack upon the society that is responsible for the squalor and degradation to which his characters are condemned, but this indictment is implicit in all his books. His style is feverish and he habitually writes as though in a rage with the world, for his mind is obviously one of extreme sensitivity that has been scalded by the horrors of his early environment. There is undoubtedly an element of sadism in his work. He reveals life to us as if in the brief and lurid glare of a series of matches struck in the midst of squalid darkness. But he is sufficiently an artist to extract a certain macabre beauty from his horrible material. Walter Greenwood is not only more politically conscious than Hanley, and though his *Love on the Dole*, set in the Salford docks, is a no less terrible indictment of our civilisation, his intense though more balanced humanity and the lyrical serenity of his

style invests his material with beauty and dignity. His characters live in hovels that are "still valuable in the estate market, even though the cost of their building has been paid over and over again by successive tenants . . . jungles of tiny houses cramped and huddled together, the cradle of generations of the future. Places where men and women are born, love and die and pay preposterous rents for the privilege of calling these grimy houses 'home'" Here is a specimen of Salford home-life taken at random from Greenwood's pages:

"Aaach! Ah've worked all me bloody life, lad, an' what ah've Ah got? All me bloody clo'es i' pawn t'get food t'eat," warningly: "Don't set me off, now. Don't you set me off!"

Nettled, Harry, in a burst of uncontrollable temper, blurted out: "Well, Ah'm sick of it all, Ah can tell y'. Nowt t'spend and nowt t'wear an' me workin' full time."

Hardcastle jumped to his feet, blazing and flung his newspaper aside. "God A'mighty," he cried, "this is a bloody life, this is. Ah come home t'rest an' what do Ah get? If it ain't you it's her (Sally). Blimey, man, d'ye think blasted money grows on trees. . . . Aaach, let me get out o'here." He snatched up his seedy cap and coat and stamped out. Nobody understood a fellow's feelings. Here he was, a man, married to a woman, father to a couple of children, working hard and had always worked hard, yet couldn't afford to dress his children respectably. Blimey, didn't either of them ever think how he must feel about it? This kind of thing, not being able to provide adequately for one's family made a man feel an irresponsible fool, humbled him, haunted him to the point of driving him to frantic, fool-hardy expedients. . . . Walking abroad he would find himself brooding, muttering to himself: "Worked every hour God sent, every day o' me life. An' what have Ah got t'see for it? Every bloody day, every bloody hour an worse off'n when Ah was fust wed!"

No doubt, the local curate, with a salary paid by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners out of the rents of such slum property, on his next visit, should he overhear Mr. Hard-

castle's musing, would advise him to be thrifty and patient, for God does not like to hear him using such bad language.

Bad language leads one to James Joyce. An Irishman like Yeats, Joyce has been left to the end of this chapter because he quite definitely marks the end of a period. In the *summa* of *Ulysses* he has done for English literature of the last eight hundred years what Thomas Aquinas did for theology in the late Middle Age. Nor is this comparison of Joyce to the prince of schoolmen accidental. Joyce was educated at a Jesuit college in Ireland, and not only has his mind never quite lost the hieratical cast imposed upon it by his early training, but in his voluminous and esoterical symbolism, his elaborate parallelism to Homer, in his use of cryptograms in his later work, and in his deliberate blasphemousness and obscenity, his priest-baiting and his robust sensuality, as well as in the *walpurgnatch* of his Dublin brothel scene, his attitude of mind is in many ways reminiscent of the Middle Ages. He has in him something of both Aquinas and Rabelais.

His first book *Dubliners* (1914), a collection of short stories, was written more or less under the influence of the French naturalists, except that it is illuminated all through with the lyricism and the cold, Irish wit that is never far absent from any of Joyce's writings. There are passages in it that point forward to the impressionism of that lovely and haunting study of adolescence, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, pervaded with the soft damp air, the cool dreamy light of Dublin. But from the first Joyce came to grips with the major problems of life without shirking even the sordidness incident to city life. Each story in the book is a perfectly executed piece of work, though on its appearance it passed practically unnoticed, its publication being even delayed for some time because it was thought to contain one or two not particularly flattering references to Queen Victoria. In one of the conversations of Stephen Daedalus with the undergraduates in *A Portrait of the*

*Artist*, Joyce defines his attitude to his work: "Beauty expressed by the artist," says Stephen, "cannot awaken in us an emotion which is kinetic or a sensation which is purely physical. It awakens, or ought to awaken, or induces, or ought to induce, an esthetic stasis, an ideal pity, or an ideal terror, a stasis called forth, prolonged and at last dissolved by what I call the rhythm of beauty." Though this may be taken as primarily the quality of Greek art and literature, it is ultimately the essential quality of art itself and there can scarcely be any art without it. For it is obvious that literature is not just an accurate record of events, any more than good painting is just an accurate representation of the world. Although we admire Greek art and poetry for its essential truth to common human experience, it gives us at the same time a world slightly idealised, though by no means falsified, for it is the expression of collective, rather than individual, emotions and beliefs. If the Greeks have given an example for all time in the perfect poise of beauty and truth in their work, the first step in the direction of truth for us, says Joyce, is to understand "the frame and scope of the intellect itself, to comprehend the act itself of intellection, just as the first step in the direction of beauty is to understand the frame and scope of the imagination, to comprehend itself the act of esthetic appreciation." Having achieved his ideal of wholeness, harmony and radiance (the quality necessary to a work of art according to Aquinas) in *A Portrait of the Artist*, Joyce set out on his metaphysical voyage of discovery into the ocean of the Subconscious. The result was *Ulysses*. And just as Freud, that Ulysses of science, brought back with him many startling stories of what he had seen and heard in the land of the Unconscious, so Joyce frightened most people out of their wits by a more thorough revelation of human nature than had ever been attempted before in any novel. For this reason *Ulysses* was considered unfit for the childish mind of the public,

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spoon-fed for years on crime and spook stories and the sugar-icing of romance. The foulest abuse was heaped upon its author by the pure-minded critics, who had apparently forgotten Emerson's truism to the effect that you will never meet anything more revolting than yourself.

The fact is that, like Ibsen who handled family life somewhat roughly at the end of the last century, Joyce has let the cat out of the bag. Our whole society is infected with such falsity and moral cowardice that it cannot face up to what everybody knows in their hearts is a true representation of itself by one of the very few great writers of its time. The assumption, of course, is not so much that nobody ever relieves themselves in the lavatory—for that would be rather too absurd even for the critics—but that nobody should ever do so in literature. In *Ulysses* Mr. Bloom goes to the lavatory after breakfast and sits there reading awhile. Not a very outrageous thing to do, one would have thought. But for making him do it, Joyce set up a most unholy hulabaloo about his ears. The incident is not given undue prominence in proportion to the scale (more than life-size) of the book, but it seems to have obsessed the minds of its critics. Then again Mrs. Bloom lies in bed thinking, rather precisely, about her various lovers. Also not a very extraordinary thing to do. Nevertheless the illusion has to be kept up that no "nice" woman would ever think about men in such a frankly physical way. Unfortunately psycho-analysis has revealed that it is precisely those women who are loudest in their protestations of "niceness" that *do* think in that way. Indeed, it would be a pretty poor lookout for the human race if they didn't. The charge against Joyce is merely that he wrote too frankly, whereas if he had slyly, but unmistakably, hinted he would have been widely applauded. It is a curious situation.

But *Ulysses* will outlive its critics. For this magnificent

panorama of a Dublin day is by implication not only one of the most moral, but also one of the greatest achievements in our literature. Joyce is often referred to as having let loose a Rabelaisian deluge of words. But something of the scientific deliberation with which *Ulysses* was composed can be gauged when we read that so careful was he about the exact dimensions of time and space in his book, that several portions of it were composed with the map of Dublin and a watch on the table in front of him. He presents his characters complete, for they move simultaneously through the subjective world of their own thoughts and the objective reality of the town. Thus Dublin too emerges from the labyrinths of this vast book a complete city: its streets, its traffic, the laughter and clatter of its public-houses and restaurants, the business of its shops, its churches, its cemetery and its brothel, on June 16th, 1904—all ending with the magnificent monologue of Marion Bloom, symbol of the fruitful earth, in whose mind the processes of life and birth are perpetually renewing themselves with the slow, even, monotonous motion of the great earth-ball itself.

His latest work, in which he is said to be constructing a novel still more huge and recondite than *Ulysses*, extracts of which have been published from time to time as *Work in Progress*, is set in the fourth dimension of space-time. Its aim is still more than ever "the orchestration of the subconscious" and it makes use not only of composite characters, but of a composite language. When it is finished the difficulties presented by *Ulysses* will seem plain sailing in comparison. Whether it is worth while spending years on the composition of an enormous book that at present seems as though it will be incomprehensible to most people, is doubtful. If Joyce appears as the chief representative of the psycho-analytic post-War movement in his other work, in *Work in Progress* he seems to have gone right over into the *surréaliste* camp and allowed the



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dreaming "stream of consciousness" to carry him into a subterranean world far from the common light of day. Already in *Ulysses* he has exploited every kind of style, for each section of the book, having for its setting a different time, place and mood is given its appropriate style, colour and symbolism, and with astonishing virtuosity the birth of a child is traced through all the styles of English prose from heavy and lumbering Anglo-Saxon to the latest wisecracks of the American salesman. No further progression, therefore, along that line, except into complete subjectivism and unintelligibility, seems possible. It is for that reason that I have taken James Joyce, not only as marking the end of a period, but as summing up in himself the whole tradition of the individualist movement in English literature.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE FUTURE

C EASELESS iconoclasm, feverish agitation, nervous unrest—these are the dominant characteristics of the European spirit under industrial capitalism since the eighteenth century. Everywhere the formal purity, the grace and equilibrium of an art expressive of the balanced town and country life of the eighteenth century has gone down before the strident turmoil of vast and continually growing cities, with their mammoth industries served by armies of workers and dominated by a feverish spirit of competition, the glaring contradictions of senseless abundance and stark poverty, vulgar magnificence and grimy wretchedness, and the utter dereliction of every ideal other than the pursuit of money, which among the passively suffering mass of humanity resolves itself into a sordid scramble for mere existence.

Under these conditions, there has been a steady and quite perceptible decline of culture. Goethe and Beethoven the last two great figures of the humanistic tradition, stand, lit as by the last rays of the setting sun of European culture, gazing into the misty abyss of the future with its surging revolutionary forces. Beethoven's symphonies are full of the unbounded disintegrating revolutionary ardour that is soon to change the whole world. With Beethoven, bred in the eighteenth-century tradition of Mozart, it is still a joyous force, exulting in the vigour of its youth. But it is not long before this ardour degenerates into the hysterical and strident masses of tone, the anarchic rhythms and dissonances of a Berlioz, a Wagner and finally a Strauss, which in our own day has developed into the cacophony of purely nervous cerebral music and the jiggling

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dementia of jazz. As the century advances the dignity and poise of a Goethe is swallowed up in the pessimism of a Schopenhauer, the violent neurosis of a Nietzsche and a Strindberg, the perverse Satanism of a Baudelaire, and the amorphous sensuousness of the symbolists and various "art-for-art's-sake" movements. By this time art, which William Morris defined as the result of man's joy in his work, has become the "fine art" of coteries and the leisured class, for the system of the division of labour introduced to increase the productivity of industrial capitalism has, as both Ruskin and Marx pointed out, destroyed every remnant of charm in man's work and turned it into a hated toil. The twentieth century, with its imperialism and the growth of Big Trusts, has witnessed a further decay of art, which is becoming more and more a convulsive affair of coteries and as such inspires the active dislike of the majority of the people. Art based on the life and work of the people is to-day practically extinct, unless we are to take sickly, crooning lullabies such as "Little Man, You've Had a Busy Day," broadcast nightly to millions by the B.B.C., as a genuine expression of the collective spirit of our time. And this, I am afraid, is what we have become: little men trying to persuade ourselves in sobbing accents that we are still happy.

Perhaps Nietzsche had something like this in mind when he wrote *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

I say unto you: a man must have chaos within to give birth to a dancing star. . . . Alas! the day cometh when man shall give birth to no more stars! . . . Behold I show you the Last Man. What is love? What is creation? What is desire? What is a star? asketh the Last Man, and he blinketh! Then will earth have grown small, and upon it shall hop the Last Man, which maketh all things small. His kind is inexterminable like the ground flea; the Last Man liveth longest. "We have discovered happiness"—say the Last Men, and they blink. . . . They grow no longer rich nor poor; it is too troublesome to do either.

Who desireth to rule? Who to obey? Both are too troublesome. No shepherd and but one flock! All men will alike, all are alike: he that feeleth otherwise goeth voluntarily into a madhouse. . . . They have little lusts for the day and little lusts for the night: but they have regard for health. We have discovered happiness, say the Last Men, and they blink.

It was in revolt against his vision of the future that Nietzsche evolved the exalted doctrine of the superman and the will to power, the logical outcome of which in our time is the semi-mystical cult of the fascist leader and Oswald Spengler's hysterical *Hour of Decision*, with all its racial superiority rubbish and fanatical hatred of the working class. But before he became the official Nazi philosopher, Spengler was capable of something better than that and his "megalopolitan" man of *The Decline of the West* has a certain affinity with the Last Man of *Zarathustra*. To-day, he says, we belong to the "intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. . . . The transition from Culture to Civilisation (according to Spengler's definition, the decline and inevitable end of a Culture) was accomplished for the classical world in the fourth, for the Western in the nineteenth century. . . . In place of a world, there is a city, a point, in which the whole life of broad regions is collecting while the rest dries up. In place of a type-true people, born of and grown on the soil, there is a new sort of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitical city-dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, religionless, clever, unfruitful, deeply contemptuous of the countryman. . . . We are civilised, not Gothic or Rococo, people: we have to reckon with the cold hard facts of a late life, to which the parallel is to be found not in Pericles's Athens but in Cæsar's Rome." Of great painting, music or literature, says Spengler, there can no longer be, for Western people, any question. There can be no further

creative development, only organisation and "extensive possibilities" and Cæsarism, "with which the history of West-European mankind will be definitely *closed*. . . . He who does not understand that this outcome is obligatory and insusceptible of modification, that our choice is between willing *this* and willing nothing at all, between cleaving to *this* destiny or despairing of the future and of life itself; he who cannot feel that there is grandeur also in the realisation of powerful intelligences, in the energy and discipline of metal-hard natures, in battles fought with the coldest and the most abstract means; he who is obsessed with the idealism of a provincial and would pursue the ways of life of past ages—must forego all desire to comprehend history, to live through history or to make history. . . . Again and again there appears this type of strong-minded, completely non-metaphysical man, and in the hands of this type lies the intellectual and material destiny of each and every 'late' period. (Such men, one supposes, as Lenin and Stalin.) And in such periods do Buddhism, stoicism and socialism ripen into definitive world-conceptions which enable a moribund humanity to be attacked and re-formed in its intimate structure." The last sentence is significant, although neither Buddhism nor stoicism fundamentally attacked and changed the social structure of either India in the sixth century B.C. or republican Rome. But Spengler, with his admiration, like Wells, for the independent gentleman type, cannot bring himself to contemplate the possibility of a new culture arising from the new life-forms of socialism. Indeed, he has now definitely set his face against any such possibility, preferring to limit his vision by a closed historical system, which identifies the obvious decline of capitalist culture with the inevitable decline of the culture of Western Europe as a whole.

Apart from such philosophies of history, which are too mystical and generalised to have much practical application,

there can be no doubt that the most important and formative events of our time have their roots in economic changes at the basis of society, and appear as the present world-crisis of capitalism and the establishment in Russia of the foundations of a powerful socialist State for the first time in history. It is out of the failure of the capitalist world to create a decent civilisation on the one hand, and the successes of the U.S.S.R. on the other, that are emerging those forces that are already shaping the future of the world.

In several European countries the desperate state of capitalism has given rise to fascist dictatorships, which usually begin by flaunting semi-socialistic programmes for the modification of some of the worst abuses of capitalism. But as the majority of fascist movements are financed by bankers and big industrialists, who quite rightly regard fascism as the last bulwark against communism, they are unable to put any of their socialistic promises into practice. Still less are they able, by defending capitalism, to solve the problems raised by its continued existence. The position of literature under fascism is unfortunate. In Germany the Führer Herr Hitler has fumed against "the aerated froth of sedentary inkslingers," and propaganda minister, Dr. Goebbels stated the fascist position in regard to culture in no uncertain terms when he said: "Intellectual activity has poisoned our people. The intellectual side of things fills me with disgust." So as long as these men are in power those writers who are not yet interned in concentration camps or who are not already exiled or dead, have no very bright prospects of an appreciative audience in the Fatherland. The fascist is only interested in "action" and they have given practical proof of this in Germany, not only by publicly burning the books of their most intelligent authors, but by their treatment of the poet, Erich Mühsam, whose sufferings are typical of what many intellectuals are undergoing in Germany at present. When

Mühsam asked permission to write to his wife (he was in prison, of course), he was seized by a Storm Trooper, his thumbs broken and then cynically informed: "Now you can write to your wife!" More recently a German professor has had his collection of D. H. Lawrence confiscated by the Nazis and was very nearly thrown into prison for possessing Dostoevsky! In Italy, where fascism might seem slightly more respectable, Mussolini said recently: "We must get rid of the half-wits and grumblers who are always criticising," and a fascist writer informs us that: "The fighting of the War was the first great masterpiece of fascist art." We can well believe it. As a result of this attitude a book crisis has developed in Italy alongside the general economic slump. Thus, in such countries as these, if anywhere, can be witnessed Spengler's decline of the West.

The work of Gabriele D'Annunzio may be taken as fairly representative of fascist mentality in Italy. His writing is remarkable for its tone of hysteria, its nostalgic, hot-house sensibility and its mystic cult of war and the "strong man." It is not surprising, therefore, that D'Annunzio is hailed by fascist critics as "The greatest poet of Italy since Dante" and Mussolini has already appeared as the editor of the "national edition" of his works. When D'Annunzio was offered the title of Prince of Montenevoso, he replied: "I have ascended all the mountains of glory! I have no need of the mountains of the earth!" He nevertheless accepted the title. The last years of this greatest Italian poet since Dante were spent waging miniature naval battles on the lake in the grounds of his fantastically-embattled castle, with the poet in admiral's uniform joyously firing off toy guns at his own model battleships.<sup>1</sup>

The only future that capitalism, in its last degenerate

<sup>1</sup> For an authentic picture of the condition of Italian peasants under fascism the reader is referred to Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara*.

phase of fascism, has to offer writers is that they shall descend to its own level. Fascist tendencies in English literature have already begun to show themselves. The novels and travel books are legion which represent the U.S.S.R. as a land of Asiatic brigands plotting to undermine civilisation. Thus we have such a book as W. C. White's *These Russians* (1931) informing us that "when this damned system breaks down there will be a pogrom. You will be able to row on Jewish blood from Arbat Gate to the Red Square." As one would expect, such prognostications are not uncommon in this type of literature. *Blue Shirts* by "J.J.J.", the scene of which is laid in 1942, is still more explicit as to how civilisation would be upheld by the fascist "Freeman's Union." Strike breaking is lauded as the supreme virtue of a true Briton and the striker's pickets are given every opportunity of appreciating British fair-play. We read: "I've pulled the two ears off him and left them hanging down his back," said Jerry cheerfully. 'There was four o' them,' said Vaus, 'that dirty dog Kisher. . . . 'He's below!' said Jerry, 'with the two eyes of him knocked through the back of his head and his leg broken! And the other doesn't know which side of his head his face is on.' Jerry remarked with relish: 'I got a tap or two at the devil meself!'" Jerry and Vaus, it should be remarked, are the "heroes" of *Blue Shirts* and are represented by the author as models of "common sense" and determined action in contrast to the "blood-thirsty, dirty Bolsheviks." When we add to this the rabid nationalism, the glorification of war and the anti-Semitism that pervade the book, it is not very difficult to allocate the quarter from which its authorship proceeds. In *Ragnarok* (1926) Shaw Desmond represents the destruction of "white civilisation" by Asia with, of course, the U.S.S.R. as the prime mover. The central figure of this extremely popular book, and the leader of the Fascist International "The White Companions," is a young girl



of eighteen, Joan Trefusis, the Joan of Arc of modern Europe, just as in *Blue Shirts* the saviour of England is another young fascist Joan of Arc, Pat Mallory. Thus we see the Maid of Orleans rapidly becoming, in the wake of Shaw's play, the bearer of the flag of British fascism! Apart from such books as these with their undisguised fascist intent, there are many thousands of novels let loose in pernicious floods on to the market every year, dealing with the British colonies and dominions, where the subject "black" races are as a matter of course represented as the natural inferiors of their pink exploiters.

It is indicative of the prevalent ideological confusion that a self-confessed "liberal fascist" such as H. G. Wells is commonly regarded as a socialist. Yet this "socialist" openly ridicules Marxism in his *World of William Clissold*, forecasts a fascist coup in *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham* and continues his anti-Marxist campaign in *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*. Wells has told us repeatedly that it is his conviction that "the world state" should be governed by a combination of international scientists, and Big Business men. The society he envisages in *After Democracy* and *The Shape of Things to Come*, is a super-fascist State of organised capitalism under the strong rule of an "enlightened" minority, backed up by "shock troops." He stands, as he said in his talk with Stalin this year, by "whatever party can preserve law and order!" In his *Outline of History*, which is probably by far his most valuable contribution to letters, you might imagine that Wells really was something of a socialist till you arrive at the chapter dealing with the beginning the imperialist phase of capitalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. From the Great War onwards his outlook is dominated more and more by a vague idealism and an almost mystical belief in the progress of science as the saving grace of the world. On a more careful reading it is noticeable that his *Outline* is rather a rationalisation

of his petit-bourgeois class prejudices rather than the record of a sequence of events within the framework of certain clearly-defined movements—namely the struggle in all ages of various classes for power. Wells writes from the point of view of the detached gentleman observer of “independent” means, and again and again an historic period is justified in his eyes as soon as it produces such independent and cultured gentlemen.

The Revolution, however, profoundly affected the privileged position of such gentry among the Russian intelligentsia. “The writers reduced to the position of simple citizens, found themselves superfluous,” remarks critic Marc Slonim.<sup>1</sup> “Profound disenchantment gripped many, and rage and hatred blinded many others, who sought salvation in emigrating. Others again repudiated the past, and began to remodel their lives. The problems which had agitated and tormented a whole generation of Russian intellectuals and writers had, of a sudden, lost all interest and had been turned to ashes in the fires of the Revolution.” In other words, the problems of such a man as Sologub, who had employed his time demonstrating “the cosmic absurdity of existence,” suddenly found a rational solution in action, and intellectuals accustomed to endless theoretical discussions and idealistic dreaming about “the purpose of life” were suddenly brought up sharply by a reality that was anything but vaguely hypothetical. Yet those symbolists, such writers as Blok and Biely, who were not too mortified by the loss of their social privileges, continued to invest the triumph of the Bolsheviks with mystical significance, and in his famous poem, *The Twelve*, Blok represents a section of the Red Army as twelve apostles led by Jesus Christ. Again in *Christ is Risen* he proclaimed the sufferings of his country as Golgotha and said that the now crucified Christ would

<sup>1</sup> *Soviet Literature*. An Anthology. Edited and translated by George Reavey and Marc Slonim (1933).

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be resurrected in Russia. No doubt he would have been disappointed had he lived to see the Saviour duly appear in the severely practical person of Comrade Stalin, with his gospel of the first Five-Year Plan for the regeneration of a Russia devastated by civil war and the interventionist armies of the European capitalist powers. Such men as Blok, however, do not represent the new spirit in Russian literature.

They were succeeded at first by the futurists, also a hang-over from the pre-War years, with the poet Mayakovsky, in violent reaction against the mystical lubrications of the symbolists, writing verses in the language of the newspaper and the street about such things as bread prices, the food supply, international events and the Chinese Revolution. This phase was followed by the Proletcult period of 1920-21, when an attempt was made to create a purely proletarian literature by "waging an unflagging struggle on the ideological front" and establishing a narrow and rigid censorship of books. It came to nothing, for the simple reason that a new culture is a thing of slow growth and the outcome of years of maturing life, and cannot suddenly spring into being at the command of governmental boards and committees. As the more moderate critic Lunacharsky pointed out: "To demand the immediate birth of a genuine proletarian culture is to demand a miracle," while Lenin himself went so far as to stigmatise the Proletcult movement as "bunk."<sup>1</sup> In 1925 it was necessary for a special Party resolution to be drawn up stating that: "The Party must fight against all thoughtless and contemptuous treatment of the old cultural heritage as well as of literary specialists. . . . It must also fight against a purely hot-house proletarian literature." So the rigorous criterion set up by Proletcult, which judged the

<sup>1</sup> "The creation of a new proletarian *class* culture is the fundamental goal of the Proletcult," wrote Pletnev. Lenin's comment upon this was: "Ha, ha!"

value of a work of art solely by whether it illustrated the class-struggle or not, was "liquidated." With the inauguration of Lenin's New Economic Policy, and the removal of this ban on the creative spirit, book-publishing regained its former pre-War level, which it was later so splendidly to exceed.

The books which began to pour out of the presses of the State Publishing House, were of a very different order from the violent neuroses of an Andriev or a Sologub, the void-wrestlings of a Dostoievsky, the cultured refinement of a Turgenev, or the sophisticated irony and disillusioned weariness of a Tchekhov. Needless to say, in most cases they were not as great or as accomplished as these. And although a new epic literature may be said to have arisen in Russia, whose spirit is reflected in the great films of Pudovkin and Eisenstein, as a result of the Revolution and the Civil War, the greater Russian novel of Tolstoy and Dostoievsky always has moved on a more epic scale in comparison with the smaller canvases of Western European writers. So that the magnificent *And Quiet Flows the Don* of the Cossack writer Michail Sholokhov, falls well within the old tradition of the Tolstoy of *War and Peace* and the Gogol of *Taras Bulba*. This is even more apparent from the fact that Sholokhov, at least in his work, unlike many of his minor contemporaries, is clearly an artist before he is a Party member. Introspective epics of the soul such as Dostoievsky gave us, are not, it is true, at present in vogue in the U.S.S.R., but it is somewhat naïve to suppose that the ideal of "pure objectivity" and "socialist realism" will last for ever, however much excessive introspection may have been the curse (and in some cases the glory) of pre-Revolutionary literature. It is still more naïve to suppose that a book is necessarily any the better because it is written by a manual worker, who has not had the opportunity to specialise in literature to the same extent as he has specialised in his mechanical pro-

fession. On the other hand, literature too easily becomes an affair of coteries and sterile stylistic refinements. That those who evince talent for it should be given an opportunity to write about their lives is admirable. And such an opportunity can only exist in a state of communism, where the wealth of the community is shared by all. Certainly the writer in Russia to-day is expected to deal with things that are of general interest to the community. But this is not difficult as the prospect of a new life being built up around him not only generates creative energy, but supplies him with the most diverse material.

Sholokhov's great novel, it should be noticed, however, was published during the period of the dictatorship of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, yet it is conspicuously free from propaganda. White Army men, officers and landowners are not represented as devils incarnate, any more than every Red Army man is a stainless hero. Instead of concluding with the triumphant victory of the Bolsheviks and a tableau of soaring caps, we are left with the figure of a Red Army captain, a rope round his neck, kicking his heels in the air and somewhat pathetically voicing his faith in the ultimate victory of communism. In the final pages we are shown an old peasant placing a shrine on the grave of a dead Bolshevik with the effigy of the Sorrowful Mother of God and the inscription: "Judge not and ye shall not be judged!" After all the shootings, hangings and butchery of the Civil War, the author turns with evident relief to the bustard tenderly sheltering her fragile eggs with dark glossy wings. "Go where you will," says one of Sholokhov's characters, "You will never find anything more terrible than man." Sholokhov's novel, that has all the grandeur and impartial irony of Greek tragedy, is an example of that universal and human art, free from class distinctions, nationalist hatred, self-destructive subjectivism, and commercial opportunism, at which communism aims.

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A proletarian writer in the person of Maxim Gorki, the doyen of Soviet literature, with his novels and plays about the lowest dispossessed class under capitalism, was in existence before the Revolution. Now, an important manufacturing centre and the largest aeroplane in the U.S.S.R. bears his name. Then there is Isaac Babel. Between 1924 and 1926 Babel published two small volumes of short stories, *Odessa* and *Red Cavalry*, which won him an international reputation. And although since then he has published nothing, and although it was alleged against him by some fanatics that his stories were a libellous distortion of the life of the Red Army, the value of his work is so far recognised by the Soviet Government that he is at this time actually in receipt of a subsidy from the State. And this in spite of the fact that Babel is an artist in his own right and the author of books which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as communist propaganda. It should be noticed also in regard to the position of Soviet writers in general, that they are among the richest and most privileged people in the Soviet Union, their books going into even greater editions than are enjoyed among us by the lowest common multiple of the "best-seller."

The inauguration of the first Five-Year Plan in 1928-29 witnessed an attempt to rationalise the production of literary works in the same way as the production of any other commodity. A Party dictatorship called R.A.P.P. (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) was set up which gave out that since the energies of the whole country were to be harnessed for the building of mighty industries as the basis of future socialist prosperity, "the depiction of the Five-Year Plan and the class-struggle within its framework is the only problem of Soviet literature." (It is a pity that Lenin was not still alive to give his opinion of this!) Writers were banded together in "shock brigades," despatched to the scene of action on the "industrial front" and set to work to keep pace with the feverish activity of

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their industrial and collectively-farming comrades. Books produced under these conditions were called "constructivist" (i.e., expressions of socialist construction") and include such remarkable works as Gladkov's *Cement and Power*, Kataev's *Forward, O Time!* and Pilnyak's *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*. At the international congress of revolutionary writers and artists held at Kharkov in 1930, the secretary, wearing the uniform of a Red Army man, exclaimed: "Pen in hand, we are soldiers of the great invincible army of the international proletariat!" A resolution was passed which laid down that: art is a class weapon; that artistic creation is to be systematised, organised, collectivised, and carried out according to the plans of a central staff like any other "soldierly" work; that this is to be done under the "careful and yet firm guidance of the Communist Party."

To pass resolutions under the infectious enthusiasm of a conference punctuated by demonstrations and the singing of the "Internationale" is one thing. To carry them out in creative work that shall be anything more than the journalism of party propaganda is something quite different. At any rate, the majority of those writers who were subjected to these stultifying regulations in Russia itself apparently thought so. The dictatorship of R.A.P.P., R.A.M.P. and its affiliated bodies, caused so much criticism and discontent that it at last became clear to even the government that every one who could not turn himself into a Party loud-speaker at a moment's notice was not necessarily a petit-bourgeois counter-revolutionary and an enemy of the working class. Accordingly—though largely at the instigation of Maxim Gorki—R.A.P.P. went the way of Prolecult and was formally "liquidated." Instead, the present All Union of Soviet Writers was established in 1932, on the assumption that although a writer may not write communist propaganda every time he sets pen to paper, he is nevertheless in sympathy with the aims of

socialist construction. At the Union Congress in Leningrad this year (1934) a member of the government made the statement that: "In the U.S.S.R. to-day the writer is free to write what he wishes, but he is not free to write badly." Long may this continue to be the acknowledged policy of the powers that be!

Max Eastman has recently published a book called *Artists in Uniform*, directed against what he terms the efforts of "the bureaucratic political machine set up in Soviet Russia after Lenin died, to whip all forms of human expression into line behind its organisational plans and its dictatorship." His book will doubtless meet with a wide acceptance not only among those who are already set in their class-prejudice to the Soviet Union, but more dangerously, among those who are still wavering in their sympathies. In the first place, Eastman is a Trotskyist and therefore bitterly opposed to the present Soviet Government. In the second place, it only needs a little open-minded investigation into the conditions that he "exposes" to discover that his account is extremely fallacious. Although many of the facts he brings forward cannot be denied, he examines them entirely without reference to their social context and without the least understanding not only of what the Soviet Government is up against, but without the slightest sympathy with what it is trying to do in its tremendous task of the building up of home industries and the re-organisation of human life. His method is best illustrated by his treatment of the suicides of the poets Yessenin and Mayakovsky. Yessenin in his last years was haunted by a mysterious "Black Being," which psychiatrists have since diagnosed as the fantasy of delirium tremens (he was also hopelessly in love with Isadora Duncan), whereas Eastman would have us believe that he killed himself because of the dictatorship of Stalin. In point of fact, Yessenin is one of the most popular poets in Russia at the present time and even during his life his



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works circulated throughout the country in enormous editions. So that he had far less reason to complain than many poets in England and America whose work is ignored by the public at large. Nor could Mayakovsky complain of neglect, though his poetry is of a difficult, "futurist" kind which, one would have thought would not have met with general acceptance. He too committed suicide because of a disastrous love-affair. Eastman, however, attributes these regrettable deaths to the tyranny of the Soviet Government! It is true that in the general enthusiasm for the Five-Year Plan Yessenin felt himself out of place. Many of us feel ourselves still more out of place in the vulgar world of Big Business and bourgeois self-aggrandisement. But we do not all commit suicide. And it is fantastic to expect a government to hold up its plans of industrial construction because one of its poets happens to dislike machinery.

Nevertheless, Eastman's book, though it is informed throughout with petty spite and is written in the style of a man who seems to find great difficulty in controlling his spittle, does expose the dangers that are inherent in any dictatorship, whether it be of the transitional stage to socialism known as the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, or the rabid demagoguery of fascism. For there is to-day undoubtedly a prospect of the human mind becoming a raucous gramophone-record that will only play one tune. There is, however, only good in the wide acceptance of a creed provided it gives play to that living diversity of the human spirit upon which any kind of creativeness depends. To implant nothing but dogma is to imprison the mind in an iron cage. On the other hand, it is right that the bestial acquisitiveness of human nature should be disciplined in the interests of society as a whole, and a social order that one can respect in which the artist once more has a function to fulfil is necessary to the creation of any great cultural tradition. All the great

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artistic traditions of the past, whether of Egypt, Greece, India, Africa, or our own Middle Ages, have had as their basis the expression of something greater than the artist's own "individuality."

But since the Renaissance, and more particularly during the nineteenth century and in our own day with its dominant commercial ideals, the artist, cut off from social life, living more or less as an outcast in "bohemia," has become a kind of hot-house plant, an anomaly with an artistic temperament who has admittedly little or nothing to do with the serious business of life. The result is the appearance in our time of a succession of the obscure and subjective art-forms of coteries, "movements," which produce an artificial and bastard culture by imitating fragments of the various great traditions of the past. This is more noticeable, of course, in the plastic arts than in literature, which can only discover innovations at the price of becoming largely unintelligible. Along with private enterprise in the economic sphere, the artist and writer is concerned above all things to sell his wares by building up "a name" for himself, by exploiting his individual peculiarities instead of disciplining such irrelevances in the expression of something greater than himself. All the great anonymous art of the past teaches but one lesson: that it is not the artist who matters, but his subject. We are sick to death of the artist's personal neurosis: let him now submerge himself in the expression of a great ideal and then his work, free from the present chaos of petty individualism, will have once more the noble impersonality of the great artistic traditions of the past. It is the attainment of this goal that the Soviet authorities have set themselves and upon a heroic design such as this that they are reshaping the life and thought of Russia to-day.

It is with an infinite sense of relief that one turns from the everlasting, self-pitying neurotics of the bourgeois novel to Soviet works with their comprehensive, social

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perspectives, where personal problems once more find their just relation within the great design of social life.

The greater part of the intelligentsia of England at the present time, is still in much the same position as Tchekov's more "enlightened" and "progressive" characters before the Revolution, clinging timidly to the individualistic "bohemian" traditions of the past and terrified at the prospect of having their privileged seclusion in any way menaced. But those of us who feel life sapped and vitiated with the fumes of an expiring individualist culture, will meet the demands of a new collective life joyously. Those who cling to the past will go under with the rest of capitalist Europe. To-day the world must renew itself with a new form of society or perish, and surely it is the duty of writers, as those who express the creative spirit of man, to help the world through its growing pains rather than continue to preserve the old order either with the barbarities of fascism or makeshift patent medicines and artificial restoratives, such as the various superficial schemes of social credit and monetary reform popular among the more well-to-do sections of the intelligentsia at the present time. The old world must die before the new socialist world of the future can begin to live. Let us help to kill and bury it before it buries us all in the ruins of its inevitable collapse.

Then the conception of literature as an elegant accomplishment of the leisured class and art as "fine art" will disappear, and literature will once again, as in classical times, become the expression of man's struggle with his environment and his pride in building up a society worthy of mankind. Already in Russia, a new energy, enthusiasm and creative power have been liberated in all departments of life and thought. Once more man is able to feel the sheer exhilaration of living, of being man, because the old class and family barriers and the petrifying money power have been smashed for ever. Once more a man is valued

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for what he is, rather than for what he has been able to accumulate at the expense of his fellows. Russia is usually accused of having abolished "God." But if we look round our own world and see how much "God" is revered in the principles that govern capitalist society, we must acknowledge that, for all practical purposes, we have abolished "God" ourselves long ago. The people of Russia have had the courage to look at the world as it is and to free themselves from the old mystical evasions that have only served to veil the exploitation of man by man. As for "the home," family men and the Church would, I know, much rather continue to see women kept in the position of privately-owned instruments of production rather than as individual human beings with rights equal to their own; they would much rather continue to see the growing lives of children strangled and warped by the complexes of their parents in the "sanctity of the home." So we are accustomed to hear the "immorality," and the "godlessness" of Soviet life abjured with bell, book and candle. (One reason for this, perhaps, is that priests now form an unemployed class in Russia.) The Church will readily enough sanctify a war that sends millions to destruction, it will remorselessly collect rents from the foulest slum property, but it will bitterly oppose any attempt at a new and full life. No disinterested person can contemplate the determination and energy and self-sacrifice with which the great experiment of communism is being carried forward in Russia to-day, without renewed hope and admiration for the heroic principle of man. For it is an attempt to lay the foundations of a co-operative, human society in place of a society of beasts of prey. If it is carried forward to the end, to complete socialism, man will ascend from the animal kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom, as master of his own environment, for the first time in history. Under socialism property will not be destroyed: it will become public property

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instead of the property of a small class. The lives of millions of underpaid, under-fed and ill-housed men and women will no longer be spent in producing a fantastic wealth that can never be theirs. They will share in the wealth they produce by their labour, as they are already doing in Russia, and live freely in their own right,—not just in so far as the interest of a ruling class requires them.

Speaking on Lenin and the future of civilisation in Moscow early this year, Bernard Shaw said:

“If the experiment that Lenin made, of which he is the head, which he represents to us—if that experiment in social organisation fails, then civilisation falls, as so many civilisations have fallen before. We know from our recent historical researches that there have been many civilisations, that their history has been very like the history of our civilisation, and that when they arrived at the point which Western capitalistic civilisation has reached, there began a rapid degeneracy, followed by complete collapse of the entire system and something very near to a return to savagery of the human race. Over and over again the human race has tried to get round that corner and has always failed. Now Lenin organised the method of getting round that corner. If his experiment is pushed through to the end, if other countries follow his example and follow his teaching, if this great communistic experiment spreads over the whole world, we shall have a new era in history. We shall not have the old collapse and failure, the beginning again, the going through the whole miserable story to the same miserable end; we shall have an era in human history of which we can now have no conception. . . . But if the experiment is overthrown and fails, if the world persists on its capitalistic lines, then I shall have to take a very melancholy farewell of you, my friends.”

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Engels	<i>Anti-Dühring</i> <i>The Origin of the Family</i>
Bukharin	<i>Historical Materialism</i>
William Morris	<i>Lectures</i> (Nonesuch Press)

And for an analysis of the situation in contemporary literature, to these:

R. D. Charques	<i>Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution</i>
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