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THE VICTORIAN AGE IN LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

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A section of a long and splendid literature can be most conveniently treated in one of two ways. It can be divided as one cuts a currant cake or a Gruyère cheese, taking the currants (or the holes) as they come. Or it can be divided as one cuts wood—along the grain: if one thinks that there is a grain. But the two are never the same: the names never come in the same order in actual time as they come in any serious study of a spirit or a tendency. The critic who wishes to move onward with the life of an epoch, must be always running backwards and forwards among its mere dates; just as a branch bends back and forth continually; yet the grain in the branch runs true like an unbroken river.

Mere chronological order, indeed, is almost as arbitrary as alphabetical order. To deal with Darwin, Dickens, Browning, in the sequence of the birthday book would be to forge about as real a chain as the "Tacitus, Tolstoy, Tupper" of a biographical dictionary. It might lend itself more, perhaps, to accuracy: and it might satisfy that school of critics who hold that every artist should be treated as a solitary craftsman, indifferent to the commonwealth and unconcerned about moral things. To write on that principle in the present case, however, would involve all those delicate difficulties, known to politicians, which beset the public defence of a doctrine which one heartily disbelieves. It is quite needless here to go into the old "art for art's sake"—business, or explain at length why individual artists cannot be reviewed without reference to their traditions and

creeds. It is enough to say that with other creeds they would have been, for literary purposes, other individuals. Their views do not, of course, make the brains in their heads any more than the ink in their pens. But it is equally evident that mere brain-power, without attributes or aims, a wheel revolving in the void, would be a subject about as entertaining as ink. The moment we differentiate the minds, we must differentiate by doctrines and moral sentiments. A mere sympathy for democratic merry-making and mourning will not make a man a writer like Dickens. But without that sympathy Dickens would not be a writer like Dickens; and probably not a writer at all. A mere conviction that Catholic thought is the clearest as well as the best disciplined, will not make a man a writer like Newman. But without that conviction Newman would not be a writer like Newman; and probably not a writer at all. It is useless for the æsthete (or any other anarchist) to urge the isolated individuality of the artist, apart from his attitude to his age. His attitude to his age is his individuality: men are never individual when alone.

It only remains for me, therefore, to take the more delicate and entangled task; and deal with the great Victorians, not only by dates and names, but rather by schools and streams of thought. It is a task for which I feel myself wholly incompetent; but as that applies to every other literary enterprise I ever went in for, the sensation is not wholly novel: indeed, it is rather reassuring than otherwise to realise that I am now doing something that nobody could do properly. The chief peril of the process, however, will be an inevitable tendency to make the

spiritual landscape too large for the figures. I must ask for indulgence if such criticism traces too far back into politics or ethics the roots of which great books were the blossoms; makes Utilitarianism more important than *Liberty* or talks more of the Oxford Movement than of *The Christian Year*. I can only answer in the very temper of the age of which I write: for I also was born a Victorian; and sympathise not a little with the serious Victorian spirit. I can only answer, I shall not make religion more important than it was to Keble, or politics more sacred than they were to Mill.

CHAPTER I

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THE VICTORIAN COMPROMISE AND ITS ENEMIES

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The previous literary life of this country had left vigorous many old forces in the Victorian time, as in our time. Roman Britain and Mediæval England are still not only alive but lively; for real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them, as from a root. Even when we improve we never progress. For progress, the metaphor from the road, implies a man leaving his home behind him: but improvement means a man exalting the towers or extending the gardens of his home. The ancient English literature was like all the several literatures of Christendom, alike in its likeness, alike in its very unlikeness. Like all European cultures, it was European; like all European cultures, it was something more than European. A most marked and unmanageable national temperament is plain in Chaucer and the ballads of Robin Hood; in spite of deep and sometimes disastrous changes of national policy, that note is still unmistakable in Shakespeare, in Johnson and his friends, in Cobbett, in Dickens. It is vain to dream of defining such vivid things; a national soul is as indefinable as a smell, and as unmistakable. I remember a friend who tried impatiently to explain the word "mistletoe" to a German, and cried at last, despairing, "Well, you know holly—mistletoe's the opposite!"

I do not commend this logical method in the comparison of plants or nations. But if he had said to the Teuton, "Well, you know Germany—England's the opposite"—the definition, though fallacious, would not have been wholly false. England, like all Christian countries, absorbed valuable elements from the forests and the rude romanticism of the North; but, like all Christian countries, it drank its longest literary draughts from the classic fountains of the ancients: nor was this (as is so often loosely thought) a matter of the mere "Renaissance." The English tongue and talent of speech did not merely flower suddenly into the gargantuan polysyllables of the great Elizabethans; it had always been full of the popular Latin of the Middle Ages. But whatever balance of blood and racial idiom one allows, it is really true that the only suggestion that gets near the Englishman is to hint how far he is from the German. The Germans, like the Welsh, can sing perfectly serious songs perfectly seriously in chorus: can with clear eyes and clear voices join together in words of innocent and beautiful personal passion, for a false maiden or a dead child. The nearest one can get to defining the poetic temper of Englishmen is to say that they couldn't do this even for beer. They can sing in chorus, and louder than other Christians: but they must have in their songs something, I know not what, that is at once shamefaced and rowdy. If the matter be emotional, it must somehow be also broad, common and comic, as "Wapping Old Stairs" and "Sally in Our Alley." If it be patriotic, it must somehow be openly bombastic and, as it were, indefensible, like "Rule Britannia" or like that superb song (I never knew its name, if it has one) that records the number of leagues from Ushant

to the Scilly Isles. Also there is a tender love-lyric called "O Tarry Trousers" which is even more English than the heart of *The Midsummer Night's Dream*. But our greatest bards and sages have often shown a tendency to rant it and roar it like true British sailors; to employ an extravagance that is half conscious and therefore half humorous. Compare, for example, the rants of Shakespeare with the rants of Victor Hugo. A piece of Hugo's eloquence is either a serious triumph or a serious collapse: one feels the poet is offended at a smile. But Shakespeare seems rather proud of talking nonsense: I never can read that rousing and mounting description of the storm, where it comes to—

> "Who take the ruffian billows by the top,
> Curling their monstrous heads, and *hanging*
> them
> With deafening clamour in the slippery clouds."

without seeing an immense balloon rising from the ground, with Shakespeare grinning over the edge of the car, and saying, "You can't stop me: I am above reason now." That is the nearest we can get to the general national spirit, which we have now to follow through one brief and curious but very national episode.

Three years before the young queen was crowned, William Cobbett was buried at Farnham. It may seem strange to begin with this great neglected name, rather than the old age of Wordsworth or the young death of Shelley. But to any one who feels literature as human, the empty chair of Cobbett is more solemn and significant than the throne. With him died the sort of democracy that was a

return to Nature, and which only poets and mobs can understand. After him Radicalism is urban—and Toryism suburban. Going through green Warwickshire, Cobbett might have thought of the crops and Shelley of the clouds. But Shelley would have called Birmingham what Cobbett called it—a hell-hole. Cobbett was one with after Liberals in the ideal of Man under an equal law, a citizen of no mean city. He differed from after Liberals in strongly affirming that Liverpool and Leeds are mean cities.

It is no idle Hibernianism to say that towards the end of the eighteenth century the most important event in English history happened in France. It would seem still more perverse, yet it would be still more precise, to say that the most important event in English history was the event that never happened at all—the English Revolution on the lines of the French Revolution. Its failure was not due to any lack of fervour or even ferocity in those who would have brought it about: from the time when the first shout went up for Wilkes to the time when the last Luddite fires were quenched in a cold rain of rationalism, the spirit of Cobbett, of rural republicanism, of English and patriotic democracy, burned like a beacon. The revolution failed because it was foiled by another revolution; an aristocratic revolution, a victory of the rich over the poor. It was about this time that the common lands were finally enclosed; that the more cruel game laws were first established; that England became finally a land of landlords instead of common land-owners. I will not call it a Tory reaction; for much of the worst of it (especially of the land-grabbing) was done by Whigs; but we may certainly call it Anti-Jacobin. Now this

fact, though political, is not only relevant but essential to everything that concerned literature. The upshot was that though England was full of the revolutionary ideas, nevertheless there was no revolution. And the effect of this in turn was that from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth the spirit of revolt in England took a wholly literary form. In France it was what people did that was wild and elemental; in England it was what people wrote. It is a quaint comment on the notion that the English are practical and the French merely visionary, that we were rebels in arts while they were rebels in arms.

It has been well and wittily said (as illustrating the mildness of English and the violence of French developments) that the same Gospel of Rousseau which in France produced the Terror, in England produced *Sandford and Merton*. But people forget that in literature the English were by no means restrained by Mr. Barlow; and that if we turn from politics to art, we shall find the two parts peculiarly reversed. It would be equally true to say that the same eighteenth-century emancipation which in France produced the pictures of David, in England produced the pictures of Blake. There never were, I think, men who gave to the imagination so much of the sense of having broken out into the very borderlands of being, as did the great English poets of the romantic or revolutionary period; than Coleridge in the secret sunlight of the Antarctic, where the waters were like witches' oils; than Keats looking out of those extreme mysterious casements upon that ultimate sea. The heroes and criminals of the great French crisis

would have been quite as incapable of such imaginative independence as Keats and Coleridge would have been incapable of winning the battle of Wattignies. In Paris the tree of liberty was a garden tree, clipped very correctly; and Robespierre used the razor more regularly than the guillotine. Danton, who knew and admired English literature, would have cursed freely over *Kubla Khan*; and if the Committee of Public Safety had not already executed Shelley as an aristocrat, they would certainly have locked him up for a madman. Even Hébert (the one really vile Revolutionist), had he been reproached by English poets with worshipping the Goddess of Reason, might legitimately have retorted that it was rather the Goddess of Unreason that they set up to be worshipped. Verbally considered, Carlyle's *French Revolution* was more revolutionary than the real French Revolution: and if Carrier, in an exaggerative phrase, empurpled the Loire with carnage, Turner almost literally set the Thames on fire.

This trend of the English Romantics to carry out the revolutionary idea not savagely in works, but very wildly indeed in words, had several results; the most important of which was this. It started English literature after the Revolution with a sort of bent towards independence and eccentricity, which in the brighter wits became individuality, and in the duller ones, Individualism. English Romantics, English Liberals, were not public men making a republic, but poets, each seeing a vision. The lonelier version of liberty was a sort of aristocratic anarchism in Byron and Shelley; but though in Victorian times it faded into much milder prejudices and much more *bourgeois* crotchets, England

retained from that twist a certain odd separation and privacy. England became much more of an island than she had ever been before. There fell from her about this time, not only the understanding of France or Germany, but to her own long and yet lingering disaster, the understanding of Ireland. She had not joined in the attempt to create European democracy; nor did she, save in the first glow of Waterloo, join in the counter-attempt to destroy it. The life in her literature was still, to a large extent, the romantic liberalism of Rousseau, the free and humane truisms that had refreshed the other nations, the return to Nature and to natural rights. But that which in Rousseau was a creed, became in Hazlitt a taste and in Lamb little more than a whim. These latter and their like form a group at the beginning of the nineteenth century of those we may call the Eccentrics: they gather round Coleridge and his decaying dreams or linger in the tracks of Keats and Shelley and Godwin; Lamb with his bibliomania and creed of pure caprice, the most unique of all geniuses; Leigh Hunt with his Bohemian impecuniosity; Landor with his tempestuous temper, throwing plates on the floor; Hazlitt with his bitterness and his low love affair; even that healthier and happier Bohemian, Peacock. With these, in one sense at least, goes De Quincey. He was, unlike most of these embers of the revolutionary age in letters, a Tory; and was attached to the political army which is best represented in letters by the virile laughter and leisure of Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianæ*. But he had nothing in common with that environment. It remained for some time as a Tory tradition, which balanced the cold and brilliant aristocracy of the

Whigs. It lived on the legend of Trafalgar; the sense that insularity was independence; the sense that anomalies are as jolly as family jokes; the general sense that old salts are the salt of the earth. It still lives in some old songs about Nelson or Waterloo, which are vastly more pompous and vastly more sincere than the cockney cocksureness of later Jingo lyrics. But it is hard to connect De Quincey with it; or, indeed, with anything else. De Quincey would certainly have been a happier man, and almost certainly a better man, if he had got drunk on toddy with Wilson, instead of getting calm and clear (as he himself describes) on opium, and with no company but a book of German metaphysics. But he would hardly have revealed those wonderful vistas and perspectives of prose, which permit one to call him the first and most powerful of the decadents: those sentences that lengthen out like nightmare corridors, or rise higher and higher like impossible eastern pagodas. He was a morbid fellow, and far less moral than Burns; for when Burns confessed excess he did not defend it. But he has cast a gigantic shadow on our literature, and was as certainly a genius as Poe. Also he had humour, which Poe had not. And if any one still smarting from the pinpricks of Wilde or Whistler, wants to convict them of plagiarism in their "art for art" epigrams—he will find most of what they said said better in *Murder as One of the Fine Arts*.

One great man remains of this elder group, who did their last work only under Victoria; he knew most of the members of it, yet he did not belong to it in any corporate sense. He was a poor man and an invalid, with Scotch blood and a strong, though perhaps only inherited, quarrel with the old

Calvinism; by name Thomas Hood. Poverty and illness forced him to the toils of an incessant jester; and the revolt against gloomy religion made him turn his wit, whenever he could, in the direction of a defence of happier and humaner views. In the long great roll that includes Homer and Shakespeare, he was the last great man who really employed the pun. His puns were not all good (nor were Shakespeare's), but the best of them were a strong and fresh form of art. The pun is said to be a thing of two meanings; but with Hood there were three meanings, for there was also the abstract truth that would have been there with no pun at all. The pun of Hood is underrated, like the "wit" of Voltaire, by those who forget that the words of Voltaire were not pins, but swords. In Hood at his best the verbal neatness only gives to the satire or the scorn a ring of finality such as is given by rhyme. For rhyme does go with reason, since the aim of both is to bring things to an end. The tragic necessity of puns tautened and hardened Hood's genius; so that there is always a sort of shadow of that sharpness across all his serious poems, falling like the shadow of a sword. "Sewing at once with a double thread a shroud as well as a shirt"—"We thought her dying when she slept, and sleeping when she died"—"Oh God, that bread should be so dear and flesh and blood so cheap"—none can fail to note in these a certain fighting discipline of phrase, a compactness and point which was well trained in lines like "A cannon-ball took off his legs, so he laid down his arms." In France he would have been a great epigrammatist, like Hugo. In England he is a punster.