

# **Studies in Early Victorian Literature eBook**

## **Studies in Early Victorian Literature by Frederic Harrison**

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## CHARACTERISTICS OF VICTORIAN LITERATURE

That which in England is conveniently described as the Victorian Age of literature has a character of its own, at once brilliant, diverse, and complex. It is an age peculiarly difficult to label in a phrase; but its copious and versatile gifts will make it memorable in the history of modern civilisation. The Victorian Age, it is true, has no Shakespeare or Milton, no Bacon or Hume, no Fielding or Scott—no supreme master in poetry, philosophy, or romance, whose work is incorporated with the thought of the world, who is destined to form epochs and to endure for centuries. Its genius is more scientific than literary, more historical than dramatic, greater in discovery than in abstract thought.

In lyric poetry and in romance our age has names second only to the greatest; its researches into nature and history are at least equal to those of any previous epoch; and, if it has not many great philosophers, it has developed the latest, most arduous, most important of all the sciences. This is the age of Sociology: its central achievement has been the revelation of social laws. This social aspect of thought colours the poetry, the romance, the literature, the art, and the philosophy of the Victorian Age. Literature has been the gainer thereby in originality and in force. It has been the loser in symmetry, in dignity, in grace.

The Victorian Age is a convenient term in English literature to describe the period from 1837 to 1895: not that we assign any sacramental efficacy to a reign, or assume that the Queen has given any special impulse to the writers of her time. Neither reigns, nor years, nor centuries, nor any arbitrary measure of time in the gradual evolution of thought can be exactly applied, or have any formative influence. A period of so many years, having some well-known name by which it can be labelled, is a mere artifice of classification. And of course an Englishman will not venture to include in his survey the American writers, or to bring them within his national era. The date, 1837, is an arbitrary point, and a purely English point. Yet it is curious how different a colour may be seen in the main current of the English literature produced before and after that year. In the year of the Queen's accession to the throne, the great writers of the early part of this century were either dead or silent. Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Lamb, Sheridan, Hazlitt, Mackintosh, Crabbe, and Cobbett, were gone. There were still living in 1837, Wordsworth, Southey, Campbell, Moore, Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, De Quincey, Miss Edgeworth, Miss Mitford, Leigh Hunt, Brougham, Samuel Rogers:—living, it is true, but they had all produced their important work at some earlier date. Carlyle, Dickens, Thackeray, Macaulay, Tennyson, Browning, had begun to write, but were not generally known. The principal English authors



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who belong equally to the Georgian and to the Victorian Age are Landor, Bulwer, Disraeli, Hallam, and Milman, and they are not quite in the very first rank in either age. It is a significant fact that the reign of the Queen has produced, with trifling exceptions, the whole work of Tennyson, the Brownings, Thackeray, Dickens, the Brontes, George Eliot, Kingsley, Trollope, Spencer, Mill, Darwin, Ruskin, Grote, Macaulay, Freeman, Froude, Lecky, Milman, Green, Maine, Matthew Arnold, Symonds, Rossetti, Swinburne, Morris, John Morley, to say nothing of younger men who are still in their prime and promise.

Widely as these differ among themselves, they have characters which differentiate them from all men of the eighteenth century, and also from the men of the era of Goethe and Scott. Can we imagine *Sartor Resartus* being published in the age of Johnson, or *In Memoriam* in that of Byron? How different a land is the Italy which Ruskin sees from the Italy that Rogers knew! What a new world is that of the Brontes and George Eliot beside that which was painted by Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austen! In what things would Southey and John Morley agree, except about books and pure English? Place Burke *On the Sublime and Beautiful* beside Ruskin's *Modern Painters*; compare the *Stones of Venice* with Eustace's *Classical Tour*; compare Carlyle's *French Revolution* with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*; compare the *Book of Snobs* with Addison's *Spectator*; contrast *The Ring and the Book* with Gray's *Elegy* or Cowper's *Task*. What wholly different types, ideas, aims! The age of Pope and Addison, of Johnson and Gibbon, clung to symmetry, "the grand air," the "best models"; it cared much more for books than for social reforms, and in the world of letters a classical manner was valued far more than originality of ideas. And when we come to a later age, what an irrepressible and stormy imagination do we find! Byron, Shelley, Scott, Coleridge, Campbell, Southey, Landor, revelled in romance and colour, in battle and phantasmagoria, in tragedy, mystery, and legend. They boiled over with excitement, and their visions were full of fight. The roar and fire of the great revolutionary struggle filled men's brains with fierce and strange dreams.

Our Victorian Age is as different from the Virgilian and Ciceronian style of the age of Gray and Johnson, as it is from the resounding torrent which was poured forth by Byron and Scott. The social earnestness of our time colours our literature, and almost distorts our literature; while, on the other hand, our practical and scientific genius scorns the melodramatic imagery with which our grandfathers were delighted. Gibbon would have smiled a cruel epigram, if he had been expected to thrust a Latter-Day Pamphlet on the social question into one of his chapters on the Fall of Rome. But Carlyle's *French Revolution* is as much political rhapsody and invective as it is

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history. Dickens made a series of novels serve as onslaughts on various social abuses; and George Eliot's heart is ever with Darwin, Spencer, and Comte, as much as it is with Miss Austen. Ruskin would sacrifice all the pictures in the world, if society would transform itself into a Brotherhood of St. George. Tennyson has tried to put the dilemmas of theological controversy into lyric poetry, and Psychology is now to be studied, not in metaphysical ethics, but in popular novels. The aim of the modern historian is to compile a *Times* newspaper of events which happened three or four, eight or ten centuries ago. The aim of the modern philosopher is to tabulate mountains of research, and to prune away with agnostic *non possumus* the ancient oracles of hypothesis and imagination.

Our literature to-day has many characteristics: but its central note is the dominant influence of Sociology—enthusiasm for social truths as an instrument of social reform. It is scientific, subjective, introspective, historical, archaeological:—full of vitality, versatility, and diligence:—intensely personal, defiant of all law, of standards, of convention:—laborious, exact, but often indifferent to grace, symmetry, or colour:—it is learned, critical, cultured:—with all its ambition and its fine feeling, it is unsympathetic to the highest forms of the imagination, and quite alien to the drama of action.

It would be a difficult problem in social dynamics to fix anything like a true date for this change in the tone of literature, and to trace it back to its real social causes. The historian of English literature will perhaps take the death of Walter Scott, in 1832, as a typical date. By a curious coincidence, Goethe died in the same year. Two years later Coleridge and Lamb died. Within a few years more most of those who belonged to the era of Byron, Shelley, Scott, and Sheridan were departed or had sung their last effective note. The exceptions were Wordsworth and his immediate Lakist followers, Landor and Bulwer, of whom the latter two continued to produce. The death of Scott happened in the year of the Reform Act of 1832; and here we reach a political and social cause of the great change. The reformed democratic Parliament of 1832 was itself the reaction after the furious upheaval caused by the Revolution of 1789, and it heralded the social and legislative revolution of the last sixty years. It was the era when the steam-power and railway system was founded, and the vast industrial development which went with it. The last sixty years have witnessed a profound material revolution in English life; and the reaction on our literature has been deep and wide.

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The most obvious and superficial change in literature is the extreme diversity of its form. There is no standard now, no conventional type, no good “model.” It is an age of “Go-as-you-please,” and of *tous les genres sont bons, surtout le genre ennuyeux*. In almost any age of English literature, or indeed of any other literature, an experienced critic can detect the tone of the epoch at once in prose or verse. There is in them an unmistakeable *Zeit-Geist* in phraseology and form. The Elizabethan drama, essay, or philosophy could not be mistaken for the drama, essay, or philosophy of the Restoration; the heroic couplet reigned from Dryden to Byron; Ciceronian diction reigned from Addison to Burke; and then the Quarterlies, with Southey, Lamb, Scott, De Quincey, Coleridge, Sydney Smith, and Leigh Hunt, introduced a simpler, easier tone of the well-bred *causeur*, as free from classical mannerism as it was free from subtle mechanism or epigrammatic brilliance. Down to about the death of Scott and Coleridge, almost any page of English prose or verse could be certainly attributed to its proper generation by the mark of its style alone.

The Victorian literature presents a dozen styles, every man speaking out what is in him, in the phrases he likes best. Our *Zeit-Geist* flashes all across the heavens at once. Let us place a page from *Sartor Resartus* beside a page from Macaulay’s *History of England*, or either beside a page from Arnold’s *Literature and Dogma* or one from the *Stones of Venice*. Here are four typical styles in prose, each of which has been much admired and imitated; yet they differ as widely as Shelley from Ovid, or Tennyson from Pope. Again, for verse, contrast *Paracelsus* with *The Princess*—poems written about the same time by friends and colleagues. Compare a poem of William Morris with one by Lewis Morris. Compare Swinburne’s *Songs and Sonnets* with Matthew Arnold’s *Obermann*; Rudyard Kipling’s *Ballads* with *The Light of Asia*. Have they any common standard of form, any type of metre? The purists doubt as to the style of Carlyle as a “model,” but no one denies that the *French Revolution* and *Hero-Worship*, at least in certain passages, display a mastery over language as splendid as anything in our prose literature. Exactly the same might be said also of *Esmond*, and again of *Silas Marner*, and again of the *Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Yet all of these differ as widely as one style can differ from another. *Fifine at the Fair*, and *The Angel in the House*, have each fervent admirers. No! there is no recognised “model” either in verse or in prose.

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In truth, we have now both in prose and in verse strongly-contrasted types, each of which commands admiration and following. Both in prose and verse we have one type which has carried subtle finish and a purism studied almost to the point of “preciousness,” alongside of another type which crowds its effects without regard to tone and harmony, and by its side a third type which trots along breathless in its shirt-sleeves. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* has that exquisite polish of workmanship which we find in such poets as Virgil, Racine, and Milton—that perfection of phrase which we cannot conceive the poet capable of improving by any labour. Put aside for the moment any question about the ideas, inspiration, or power of the poem as a whole, and consider that, in all those hundreds of stanzas, there is hardly one line that is either careless, prosaic, or harsh, not a single false note, nothing commonplace, nothing over-coloured, but uniform harmony of phrase. This perfection of phrasing is not always to be found even in the greatest poets, for Aeschylus and Dante at times strike a fierce discord, and Shakespeare, Calderon, and Goethe sometimes pass into rank extravaganza. But this scholarly and measured speech has impressed itself on the poetry of our time—insomuch, that the Tennysonian cycle of minor poets has a higher standard of grace, precision, and subtlety of phrase than the second rank of any modern literature:—a standard which puts to shame the rugosities of strong men like Dryden, Burns, and Byron. There is plenty of mannerism in this school of our minor poetry, but no one can call it either slovenly or harsh.

The friend, contemporary, almost the rival of Tennyson, one whom some think endowed by nature with even stronger genius, on the other hand, struck notes of discord harsher, louder, and more frequent than any poet since Elizabethan times. Whatever we hold about the insight and imagination of Browning, no one can doubt that he often chose to be uncouth, crabbed, grotesque, and even clownish, when the humour was on him. There are high precedents for genius choosing its own instrument and making its own music. But, whatever were Browning’s latent powers of melody, his method when he chose to play upon the gong, or the ancient instrument of marrow-bone and cleavers, was the exact antithesis of Tennyson’s; and he set on edge the teeth of those who love the exquisite cadences of *In Memoriam* and *Maud*. Browning has left deep influence, if not a school. The younger Lytton, George Meredith, Buchanan, here and there Swinburne and William Morris, seem to break loose from the graceful harmony which the Tennysonians affect, and to plunge headlong into the obscure, the uncouth, the ghastly, and the lurid. No one denies originality and power in many of these pieces: but they are flat blasphemy against the pellucid melody of the Tennysonian idyll. Our poetry seems to be under two contrary spells: it is enthralled at one time by the ravishing symmetry of Mozart; at another time it yearns for the crashing discords that thunder along the march of the Valkyrie through the air.

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As in poetry, so in prose. We find in our best prose of to-day an extraordinary mastery over pure, nervous, imaginative language; and all this, alongside here of a riotous extravagance, and there, of a crude and garrulous commonplace. Thackeray's best chapters, say in *Vanity Fair*, *Esmond*, the *Humourists*, contain an almost perfect prose style—a style as nervous as that of Swift, as easy as that of Goldsmith, as graceful as that of Addison, as rich as that of Gibbon or Burke. No English romances have been clothed in a language so chaste and scholarly—not even Fielding's. Certainly not the *Waverley* series; for Scott, as we know, rehearsed his glowing chronicles of the past with the somewhat conventional verbosity of the *improvisatore* who recites but will not pause to write. George Eliot relates her story with an art even more cultivated than that of Thackeray—though, doubtless, with an over-elaborated self-consciousness, and perceptible suggestions of the laboratory of the student. Trollope tells his artless tales in perfectly pure, natural, and most articulate prose, the language of a man of the world telling a good story well. And a dozen living novelists are masters of a style of extreme ease and grace.

Side by side with this chastened English prose, we have men of genius who have fallen into evil habits. Bulwer, who knew better, would quite revel in a stagey bombast; Dickens, with his pathos and his humour, was capable of sinking into a theatrical mannerism and cockney vulgarities of wretched taste; Disraeli, with all his wit and *savoir faire*, has printed some rank fustian, and much slip-slop gossip; and George Meredith at times can be as jerky and mysterious as a prose Browning. Charlotte Bronte and Kingsley could both descend to blue fire and demoniac incoherences. Macaulay is brilliant and emphatic, but we weary at last of his everlasting *staccato* on the trumpet; and even the magnificent symphonies of Ruskin at his best will end sometimes in a sort of *coda* of fantasias which suggest limelights and coloured lenses. Carlyle, if not the greatest prose master of our age, must be held to be, by virtue of his original genius and mass of stroke, the literary dictator of Victorian prose. And, though we all know how wantonly he often misused his mighty gift, though no one now would venture to imitate him even at a distance, and though Matthew Arnold was ever taking up his parable—"Flee Carlylese as the very Devil!"—we are sliding into Carlylese unconsciously from time to time, and even *Culture* itself fell into the trap in the very act of warning others.

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Side by side with such chastened literary art as that of Thackeray and George Eliot, Matthew Arnold and John Morley, Lecky and Froude, Maine and Symonds, side by side with a Carlylese tendency to extravagance, slang, and caricature, we find another vein in English prose—the flat, ungainly, nerveless style of mere scientific research. What lumps of raw fact are flung at our heads! What interminable gritty collops of learning have we to munch! Through what tangles of uninteresting phenomena are we not dragged in the name of Research, Truth, and the higher Philosophy! Mr. Mill and Mr. Spencer, Mr. Bain and Mr. Sidgwick, have taught our age very much; but no one of them was ever seen to smile; and it is not easy to recall in their voluminous works a single irradiating image or one monumental phrase.

There are eminent historians to-day who disdain the luminous style of Hume and Robertson, and yet deride the colour and fire of Gibbon. Grote poured forth the precious contents of his portentous notebooks with as little care for rhythm and as little sense of proportion as a German professor. Freeman and Gardiner have evidently trained themselves in the same school of elaborate learning, till they would appear to count the graceful English of Froude, Lecky, and Green as hardly becoming the dignity of history. It would seem as if the charge which some of our historians are most anxious to avoid is the charge of being “readable,” and of keeping to themselves any fact that they know.

The men who are rather pleased than pained to hear themselves called by the barbarous term of “scientists” seem to think that it matters nothing how ill-digested be their book, or how commonplace be their language. They are accustomed to lecture to students in the laboratory in their shirt-sleeves with their hands in their pockets; and they believe that immortality may be achieved if they can pile up enough facts and manufacture an adequate number of monographs. And they do this, in the teeth of excellent examples to the contrary. Huxley and Tyndall have given their brethren in science fine examples of a pure, vigorous, and well-knit style. Yet, how many of them are still quite content to go rumbling along with an interminable rigmarole of dry “memoirs.” Our ponderous biographies of third-rate people tend to become mere bags of letters and waste-paper baskets. And all this with such consummate models before us, and so very high a standard of general cultivation. We have had in this age men who write an English as pure and powerful as any in the whole range of our literature; we have tens of thousands of men and women who write a perfectly correct and intelligent prose. And yet out of a million books, we find so very few which even aim at being works of art in the sense that *Tom Jones* is a work of art, and the *Decline and Fall* is a work of art.



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It is, no doubt, this preponderance of the practical, scientific, and social energies which has checked in our Victorian Age the highest imaginative and dramatic genius. With all its achievements in lyric and psychologic poetry, it has hardly attempted to scale the empyrean of song. In the seventy-six years that have passed since Shelley conceived his *Prometheus*, as he sat gazing over the sombre ruins of the Campagna, no one has ever ventured into that seventh heaven of invention. Since the *School for Scandal* (1777) no English drama has been produced which has anything like the same hold on the stage. For more than sixty years the English stage has not known one consummate actor. Though men of real genius have in these sixty years laboured at the higher drama, they have hardly achieved even such measures of success as fell to Byron and Shelley with *Manfred* and the *Cenci*. With all its lyric and psychologic power, with all its energy and its learning, the Victorian Age has not quite equalled the age of Goethe. It is as if its scientific spirit checked the supreme imagination: as if its social earnestness produced a distaste for merely dramatic passion.

One of the most striking facts about our modern literature is the preponderance of the "subjective" over the "objective." The interest in external events, as the subject of imaginative work, quite pales before the interest in analysis of mental and moral impulse. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Jane Austen, have completely dominated our age, and have displaced the epic and legendary themes of Scott, Byron, Campbell, and Southey. *The Two Voices*, *In Memoriam*, *The Ring and the Book*, *Silas Marner*, *Vanity Fair*, *Bleak House*, dissect brain and heart, but do not make their prime motive in any thrilling history. The crisis of modern romance goes on in the conscience, not in the outside world. Hence the enormous multiplication of the psychologic novel, a form of art which the eighteenth century would have viewed with wonder and perplexity. The curious part of this is the striking abatement of taste for the historical romance, in spite of the immense extension of historical study and archaeological revival. We know far more about the past, both within and without, than did our fathers; and we are always seeking to realise to ourselves the habits, ideas, aspect, the very clothes and furniture of ages of old, which we study with sympathetic zeal and in the minutest detail. Yet the historical romance appears only at intervals. *Harold* and *Esmond* are both more than forty years old, *Romola* more than thirty years old. They are none of them quite unqualified successes; and no later historical romance has approached these three in power and interest. Why is it, that, in an age pre-eminently historical, in an age so redundant of novels, the historical novel is out of fashion? Partly, no doubt, our romancers

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shun comparison with the mighty Wizard of the North; partly, the analytic genius of our time so greatly exceeds its synthetic genius; and mainly, the range of our historical learning inclines us to restore the past by exact scholarship and not by fiction without authority. George Eliot was so anxious to have her local colour accurate that she ended by becoming somewhat fatiguing. Some day, no doubt, the genius of romance will return to this inexhaustible field with enthusiasm equal to Scott's, with a knowledge far more accurate than his, and a spirit quite purged from political and social bias.

From the death of Scott in 1832 until 1894 are sixty-two years; and if we divide this period into equal parts at the year 1863 (it was the year of Thackeray's death), we shall be struck with the fact that the purely literary product of the first period of thirty-one years (1832-1863) is superior to the purely literary product of the second period of thirty-one years (1863-1894). The former period gives us all that was best of Tennyson, the Brownings, Carlyle, Thackeray, Dickens, Bulwer, the Brontes, Mrs. Gaskell, Trollope, George Eliot, Kingsley, Disraeli, Dr. Arnold, Thirlwall, Grote, Hallam, Milman, Macaulay, Mill, Froude, Layard, Kinglake, Ruskin. The second period gave us in the main, Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, G. H. Lewes, Maine, Leslie Stephen, John Morley, Matthew Arnold, Lecky, Freeman, Stubbs, Bryce, Green, Gardiner, Symonds, Rossetti, Morris, Swinburne. Poetry, romance, the critical, imaginative, and pictorial power, dominate the former period: philosophy, science, politics, history are the real inspiration of the latter period.

The era since the death of Scott is essentially a scientific age, a sociologic age; and this is peculiarly visible in the second half of this era of sixty-two years. About the middle of the period we see how the scientific and sociologic interest begins to over-shadow, if not to oust, the literary, poetic, and romantic interest. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859; and its effect on thought became marked within the next few years. In 1862, Herbert Spencer commenced to issue his great encyclopaedic work, *Synthetic Philosophy*, still, we trust, to be completed after more than thirty years of devoted toil. Darwin's later books appeared about the same period, as did a large body of scientific works in popular form by Huxley, Tyndall, Wallace, Lewes, Lubbock, Tylor, and Clifford. It is only needful here to refer to such scientific works as directly reacted on general literature. About the same time the later speculations of Comte began to attract public attention in England, and the *Positive Polity* was translated in 1875. Between the years 1860-1875, there grew up in England an absorbing interest in Social Philosophy, and a conviction that the idea of invariable law offered a solution of the progress of society. Evolution as an idea was in the air, and it was applied to Man as much as to Nature. It is no part of our present purpose to trace its growth from the scientific aspect. It is enough to note how it acted and reacted on general literature.



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Poetry began to hover round the problem of Evolution. It wrapped it in mystery, denounced it with fine indignation, and took it for the text of some rather prosaic homilies. Criticism fell into the prevailing theory: so did history, and even romance. Philosophy and Science are not the best foster-mothers of Poetry and Romance. Philosophy and Science grew more solemn than ever; and Poetry and Romance lost something of their wilder fancy and their light heart. Literature grew less spontaneous, more correct, more learned, and, it may be, more absorbed in its practical purpose of modifying social life.

The old notion of literature being a business apart from affairs, of men of letters being an order, of an absorption in books being ample work for a life—all this is far from the rule. At least twenty members of the present and late Governments have been copious writers; Mr. Gladstone and at least three or four of his late colleagues are quite in the front rank of living authors—nay, several of them began their career as literary men. It would be difficult to name an important writer of the Victorian Age who has not at times flung himself with ardour into the great social, political, or religious battles of his time. Thackeray, Trollope, Green, Symonds, are possible exceptions—examples of bookmen who passed their lives with books, and who never wrote to promote “a cause.” But all the rest have entered on the “burning questions” of their age, and most of them with the main part of their force. As a consequence “learning,” as it was understood by Casaubon, Scaliger, Bentley, Johnson, and Gibbon, as it was understood by Littré, Doellinger, and Mommsen, may be said to have disappeared in England. Cardinal Newman, Mark Pattison, Dr. Pusey, were said to be very learned, but it was a kind of learning which kept very much to itself. For good or for evil, our literature is now absorbed in the urgent social problem, and is become but an instrument in the vast field of Sociology—the science of Society.

This predominance of Sociology, the restless rapidity of modern life, the omnipresence of material activity, fully account for the special character of modern literature. Literature is no longer “bookish”—but practical, social, propagandist. It is full of life—but it is a dispersive, analytic, erratic form of vitality. It has a most fastidious taste in form—but it often flings the critical spirit aside in its passion for doing, in its ardour to convince and to inspire. It is industrious, full of learning and research—but it regards its learning as an instrument of influence, not as an end of thought. It can work up a poem or an essay, as carefully as Mieris or Breughel polished a cabinet picture—and it can “tear a passion to tatters,” or tumble its note-books into a volume all in a heap. It has no “standard,” no “model,” no “best writer”—and yet it has a curious faculty for reviving every known

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form and imitating any style. It is intensely historical, but so accurately historical that it is afraid to throw the least colour of imagination around its history. It has consummate poetic feeling, and copious poetic gifts—but it has now no single poet of the first rank. It has infinite romantic resources, and an army of skilful novelists—and yet it has no single living writer worthy to be named beside the great romancers of the nineteenth century.

This rich, many-sided, strenuous literature, which will place the name of Victoria higher than that of Elizabeth in the history of our language, would form a splendid subject hereafter for some one of our descendants who was equal to the task of treating our Victorian literature as a whole. In the meantime, it may be worth while for the men and women of to-day, who are full of all the excellent work around us, to be reminded of the good things produced now nearly sixty years ago. As one who can remember much that was given to the world in a former generation, I shall endeavour in these little sketches to mark some of the characteristics of the best writers in the early Victorian Age, confining myself for the present to prose literature of the imaginative kind.

It is now some time since the country of Shakespeare and of Milton has been without its poet laureate, and to the non-poetical world the absence of that court functionary is hardly perceptible. Nay, the question has begun to arise, If there is to be a laureate in poetry, why not a laureate also in prose romance? And if there were a laureate in prose romance, whom should we choose?

The same phenomenon meets us in the realm of prose fiction as in poetry: that we have vast quantities of thoughtful work produced, an army of cultivated workers, a great demand, an equally great supply, a very high average of merit—and yet so little of the very first rank. For the first time in the present century, English literature is without a single living novelist of world-wide reputation. The nineteenth century opened with *Castle Rackrent* and the admirably original tales of Maria Edgeworth. Jane Austen followed in the same field. And since *Waverley* appeared, in 1814, we have had a succession of fine romances in unbroken line. Fenimore Cooper's work is nearly contemporary with the best of Scott's. At Sir Walter's death Bulwer-Lytton was in full career. And Lytton, Disraeli, Hawthorne, the Brontes, Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope were all at their best nearly together. During the last twenty years or so of this splendid period they had been joined by George Eliot; and of the whole band Anthony Trollope was the survivor. With him our language lost the last of those companions of the fireside in mansion and cottage whose names are household words, whose books are in every hand, where the English tongue is heard.

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We need not engage in any critical estimate of these writers: we are but too well aware of their failures and defects. Lytton indited not a little bombast, Dickens had his incurable mannerisms, and Thackeray his conventional cynicisms. There are passages in George Eliot's romances which read like sticky bits from a lecture on comparative palaeontology; and Disraeli, who for fifty years threw off most readable tales in the intervals of politics, seems always to be laughing at the public behind his mask. Yet the good sense of mankind remembers the best and forgets the worst, even if the worst be four-fifths of the whole.

The place of genius is decided by its inimitable hits, and its misses evermore drop out of memory as time goes on. The world loves its bright spirits for what they give it, and it does not score their blots like an examiner marking a student's paper. Thus the men and women of the first rank still hold the field in the million homes where English tales are a source of happiness; and it would be perverse to maintain that any living men have reached that level. We can see no trace that *Pickwick* or *Emma*, *Natty Bumppo* or *Uncas*, are losing their hold on the imagination of men and women, any more than *Jeanie Deans* and the *Antiquary*. *Oliver Twist*, the *Last Days of Pompeii*, *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, have more readers than ever. And I find the *Last Chronicle of Barse*t, *Lothair*, and *Silas Marner* as fresh as they were a quarter of a century ago.

We all admit that there are delightful writers still. I am not about to decry our living romancers, and certainly not to criticise them. If any man choose to maintain that there is more poetry in *Tess* than in the entire *Barse*tshire series, that Dickens could not have bettered the *Two Drummer Boys* of Rudyard Kipling, that *Treasure Island* has a realism as vivid as *Robinson Crusoe*, that Mrs. Wood's *Village Tragedy* may rank with *Silas Marner*, that Howells and Besant, Ouida and Rhoda Broughton, Henry James and Mrs. Burnett, are as good reading as we need, that Bret Harte has struck a line as original as that of Dickens, and that George Meredith has an eye for character which reminds us not seldom of Thackeray and Fielding—I do not dispute it. I am no one-book man or one-style man, but enjoy what is good in all. But I am thinking of the settled judgment and the visible practice of the vast English-speaking and English-reading world. And judging by that test, we cannot shut our eyes to this, that we have no living romancer who has yet achieved that world-wide place of being read and welcomed in every home where the language is heard or known. George Meredith has been a prolific writer for thirty years and Stevenson for twenty years; but their most ardent admirers, among whom I would be counted, can hardly claim for them a triumph so great.

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We come, then, to this, that for the first time during this whole century now ending, English literature can count no living novelist whom the world, and not merely the esoteric circle of cultured Englishmen, consents to stamp with the mark of accepted fame. One is too eccentric, obscure, and subtle, another too local and equal, a third too sketchy, this one too unreal, that one far too real, too obvious, too prosaic, to win and to hold the great public by their spell. Critics praise them, friends utter rhapsodies, good judges enjoy them—but their fame is partial, local, sectional, compared to the fame of Scott, Dickens, or Thackeray.

What is the cause? I do not hesitate to say it is that we have over-trained our taste, we are overdone with criticism, we are too systematically drilled, there is far too much moderate literature and far too fastidious a standard in literature. Everyone is afraid to let himself go, to offend the conventions, or to raise a sneer. It is the inevitable result of uniformity in education and discipline in mental training. Millions can write good grammar, easy and accurate sentences, and imitate the best examples of the age. Education has been driven at high pressure into literary lines, and a monotonous correctness in literary taste has been erected into a moral code. Tens of thousands of us can put the finger on a bit of exaggeration, or a false light in the local colour, or a slip in perfect realism. The result is a photographic accuracy of detail, a barren monotony of commonplace, and the cramping of real inventive genius. It is the penalty of giving ourselves up to mechanical culture.

If another Dickens were to break out to-morrow with the riotous tomfoolery of *Pickwick* at the trial, or of Weller and Stiggins, a thousand lucid criticisms would denounce it as vulgar balderdash. Glaucus and Nydia at Pompeii would be called melodramatic rant. The *House of the Seven Gables* would be rejected by a sixpenny magazine, and *Jane Eyre* would not rise above a common “shocker.” Hence the enormous growth of the Kodak school of romance—the snap-shots at everyday realism with a hand camera. We know how it is done. A woman of forty, stout, plain, and dull, sits in an ordinary parlour at a tea-table, near an angular girl with a bad squint. “Some tea?” said Mary, touching the pot. “I don’t mind,” replied Jane in a careless tone; “I am rather tired and it is a dull day.” “It is,” said Mary, as her lack-lustre eyes glanced at the murky sky without. “Another cup?” And so the modern *romance* dribbles on hour by hour, chapter by chapter, volume by volume, recording, as in a phonograph, the minute commonplace of the average man and woman in perfectly real but entirely common situations. To this dead level of correctness literary purism has brought romance. The reaction against the photographic style, on the other hand, leads to spasmodic efforts to arouse the jaded interest by forced sensationalism, physiological bestialities, and a crude form of the hobgoblin and bogey business.

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In all the ages of great productive work there were intense individuality, great freedom, and plenty of failures. *Tom Jones* delighted the town which was satiated with gross absurdities, some of them, alas! from the pen of Fielding himself. Shakespeare wrote happily before criticism had invented the canons of the drama, and Sir Walter's stories had no reviews to expose his historical blunders. In the great romance age which began to decline some forty years ago, there was not a tithe of such good average work as we get now; criticism had not become a fine art; every one was free to like what he pleased, and preposterous stuff was written and enjoyed. Of course it cannot be good to like preposterous stuff, and an educated taste ought to improve literature. But it is almost a worse thing when general culture produces an artificial monotony, when people are taught what they ought to like, when to violate the canons of taste is far worse than to laugh at the Ten Commandments.

With a very high average of fairly good work, an immense mass of such work, and an elaborate code of criticism, the production of brilliant and inimitable successes is usually arrested in every field. Having thousands of graceful verse-writers, we have no great poet; in a torrent of skilful fiction, we have no great novelist; with many charming painters, who hardly seem to have a fault, we have no great artist; with *mises-en-scene*, make-up costumes, and accessories for our plays such as the world never saw before, we have no great actor; and with ten thousand thoughtful writers, we have not a single genius of the first rank. Elaborate culture casts chill looks on original ideas. Genius itself is made to feel the crudeness and extravagance of its first efforts and retires with shame to take a lower place. We are all so fastidious about form and have got such fixed regulation views about form, we are so correct, so much like one another, such good boys and girls, that the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of the inventive spirit are taught from childhood to control themselves and to conform to the decorum of good society. A highly organised code of culture may give us good manners, but it is the death of genius.

There are other things which check the flow of a really original literature, though perhaps a high average culture and a mechanical system of education may be the most potent. Violent political struggles check it: an absorption in material interests checks it: uniformity of habits, a general love of comfort, conscious self-criticism, make it dull and turbid. Now our age is marked by all of these. From the age of Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau, the French genius produced almost no imaginative work of really European importance until it somewhat revived again with Chateaubriand in the present century. Nor in England can we count anything of a like kind from the death of Goldsmith until we reach Scott, Byron, and Wordsworth after an interval of forty years. In the United States the great eras of imaginative production have been those which were free from political and military struggles.

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The case of France is indeed conclusive proof how suddenly political turmoil kills imaginative work. French literature, which during the greater part of the eighteenth century had shown amazing activity, suddenly seems arrested with Rousseau; and in the latter years of the eighteenth century there is absolutely nothing of even moderate quality in the field of art. The same is true of England for the last thirty years of the same century. Shakespeare's dramas were not produced till his country had victoriously passed through the death-struggle of the religious wars in the sixteenth century. The civil war of the Puritans arrested poetry, so that for nearly thirty years the muse of Milton himself withdrew into her solitary cell. Dryden carried on the torch for a time. But prose literature did not revive in England until the Hanoverian settlement. Political ferment kills literature: prolonged war kills it: social agitation unnerves it; and still more the uneasy sense of being on the verge of great and unknown change.

Take our Queen's reign of now some fifty-eight years (1837-1895) and divide it in half at the year 1866. It is plain that by far the greater part of the "Victorian" literature was produced in the former half and quite the inferior part of it was produced in the latter half. By the year 1866 we had already got all, or all that was best, of Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, Ruskin, Lytton, Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Disraeli, Kingsley, and others who lived after that date. In 1865 Lord Palmerston died, and with him died the old Parliamentary era. In the same year died Abraham Lincoln in the great crisis of the reconstruction of the American Constitution. We attach no peculiar importance to that date. But it is certain that both English and American people have been in this last twenty-nine years absorbed in constitutional agitations which go deep down into our social system. We in England have passed from one constitutional struggle to another, and we are now in the most acute stage of all this period. Parliamentary reform, continental changes, colonial wars, military preparations, Home Rule, have absorbed the public mind and stunned it with cataracts of stormy debate. We are all politicians, all party-men now.

There is upon us also, both in England and in America, a social ferment that goes deeper than any mere constitutional struggle. It is the vague, profound, multiform, and mysterious upheaval that is loosely called Socialism—not Socialism in any definite formula, but the universal yearning of the millions for power, consideration, material improvement, and social equality. The very vagueness, universality, and unbounded scope of the claim they make constitute its power. All orders and classes are concerned in it: all minds of whatever type are affected by it: every political, social, or industrial axiom has to be reconsidered in the light of it: it appeals to all men and



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it enters into life at every corner and pore. We are like men under the glamour of some great change impending. The spell of a new order holds us undecided and expectant. There is something in the air, and that something is a vague and indescribable sense that a new time is coming. Men felt it in France, and indeed all over Europe, from 1780 till 1790. It was an uncertain and rather pleasing state of expectancy. It did not check activity, nor enjoyment, nor science. But it diverted the profounder minds from the higher forms of imaginative work.

There is no reason to assume that Socialism or the ideals of Socialism are at all hostile to literature or even imaginative poetry, provided they are not too close, not actually causing direct agitation. But when men are debating bills in heated meetings, they do not often see these questions in the halo of romance. Rousseau's *Heloise* and Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* were quite a generation before the Revolution, at a time when franchise and agrarian politics had hardly begun. The poetry and the romance of a great social reformation are never visible to men in the midst of it, who are ready to tear each other's eyes out in the name of Eight-Hours Bills and Land Nationalisation. When men have got to this stage they want lighter matter to amuse them at home; but they can hardly appreciate, even if they could find, the loftier flights of social romance. Sam Weller to-day has joined a union, and reads his Henry George. Rawdon Crawley of our own generation is a mere drunken ruffian, only fit to point the moral in a lecture on the drink traffic. And Becky Sharp is voted to be a stupid libel on the social destiny of the modern school "marm."

The great advance in the material comfort and uniformity of life and manners dries up the very sources of prose romance, even more than it ruins poetry. The poet is by nature an isolated spirit dwelling in an ideal world of his own. But the prose novelist draws life as he sees it in the concrete from intimate knowledge of real men and women. How intensely did Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Miss Austen, Miss Edgeworth know by experience the characters they drew! A romance cannot be constructed out of the novelist's inner consciousness as *Paradise Lost*, Shelley's *Prometheus*, and Wordsworth's *Excursion* were constructed. Even Scott becomes grave and melodramatic when he peoples his stage with those whose like he never saw. But how vastly more romantic was the Scotland of Scott than is the Scotland of Stevenson! The *Vicar of Wakefield* and *Squire Western* are not to be found in an age that is busy with railways and telegraphs and the *Review of Reviews*. *Pickwick* and *Oliver Twist* have been improved off the face of the earth by cheap newspapers and sanitary reform. The fun has gone out of *Vanity Fair*, and the *House of the Seven Gables* is an hotel with seven hundred beds.

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Comfort, electric light, railway sleeping-cars, and equality are excellent things, but they are the death of romance. The essence of romance is variety, contrast, individuality, the eccentric, the unconventional. Level up society, put nineteen out of every twenty on fairly equal terms, popularise literature, and turn the Ten Commandments into a code of decorum, and you cut up by the roots all romantic types of life. The England of Fielding and the Scotland of Scott were breezy, boisterous, disorderly, picturesque, and jolly worlds, where gay and hot spirits got into mischief and played mad pranks as, in the words of the old song, "They powlered up and down a bit and had a rattling day." Laws, police, total abstinence, general education, and weak digestions have put an end to pranks, as we are all proud to say. The result is that Romance, finding little of romance in the real world, has taken two different lines in the desperate effort to amuse us somehow. The virtuous line is the phonographic reproduction of everyday life in ordinary situations. The disreputable line is Zolaesque bestiality, and forced, unreal, unlovely, and hysterical sensationalism.

It cannot be more than a paradox to pretend that *fin de siecle* has anything to do with it. But it is a curious coincidence how the last decade of modern centuries seems to die down in creative fertility. The hundred millions who speak our English tongue have now no accepted living master of the first rank, either in verse or in prose. In 1793 there was not one in all Europe. In 1693, though Dryden lingered in his decline, it was one of the most barren moments in English literature. And so in 1593, though the *Faery Queen* was just printed, and Shakespeare had begun to write, there were nothing but the first streaks which herald the dawn. But this is obviously a mere coincidence; nor can an artificial division of time affect the rise or fall of genius. It may be that, in these latter days, when our age is the victim of self-conscious introspection, the close of a century which has shown such energy may affect us in some unconscious way. Perhaps there is a vague impression that the world is about to turn over a new page in the mighty ledger of mankind, that it is now too late to do much with the nineteenth century, and that we will make a new start with the twentieth.

The world is growing less interesting, less mysterious, less manifold, at any rate to the outer eye. The *mise-en-scene* of external life is less rich in colour and in contrast. Magnificence, squalor, oddity, historic survivals, and picturesque personalities grow rarer year by year. Everybody writes a grammatical letter in conventional style, wears the clothes in fashion, and conforms to the courtesies of life. It is right, good, and wise: but a little dull. It is the lady-like age, the epoch of the dress-coat, of the prize lad and the girl of the period. Mr. Charles Pearson, in his remarkable



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forecast of *National Life and Character*, warned us how the universal levelling of modern democracy must end in a certain monotony and a lowered vitality. We live longer, but in quiet, comfortable, orderly ways. This is not at all injurious to morality, politics, industry, science, philosophy, or religion. It is not necessarily injurious to poetry, at least of the lower flight. But it is adverse to high art. And it is asphyxiating to romance.

The novelist must draw from the living model and he must address the people of his own age. He cannot write for posterity, nor can he live in a day-dream world of his own. The poet is often lost to his own contemporaries. It may need two or three, five or six, generations to reveal him, as Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, and Wordsworth may remind us. But the novelist must live in his generation, be of it most intensely, and if he is to delight at all, like the actor, he must delight his own age. What sons of their own time were Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope: how intensely did they drink with both hands from the cup of life. George Eliot, George Meredith, Louis Stevenson, Howells, James, look on life from a private box. We see their kid gloves and their opera-glass and we know that nothing could ever take them on to the stage and ruffle it with the world of the day, like men of the world who mean to taste life. There is no known instance of a great novelist who lived obscure in a solitary retreat or who became famous only after the lapse of many generations.

It is the lady-like age: and so it is the age of ladies' novels. Women have it all their own way now in romance. They carry off all the prizes, just as girl students do in the studios of Paris. Up to a certain point, within their own limits, they are supreme. Half the modern romance, and many people think the better half, is written by women. That is perfectly natural, an obvious result of modern society. The romance to which our age best lends itself is the romance of ordinary society, with delicate shades of character and feeling in place of furious passion or picturesque incident. Women are by nature and training more subtle observers of these social *nuances* and refined waverings of the heart than any others but men of rare genius. The field is a small and home-like area, the requirements are mainly those of graceful intuition, the tone must be pure, lady-like, subdued. In this sphere it is plain that women have a marked superiority; it is the sphere in which Jane Austen is the yet unapproached queen. But we may look for more Jane Austens, and on wider fields with a yet deeper insight into far grander characters. The social romance of the future is the true poetic function of women. It is their own realm, in which they will doubtless achieve yet unimagined triumphs. Men, revolting from this polite and monotonous world, are trying desperate expedients. But they are all wrong; the age is

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against it. Try to get out of modern democratic uniformity and decorum and you may as well try to get out of your skin. Mr. Stevenson was driven to playing at Robinson Crusoe in the Pacific, and Mr. Rudyard Kipling once seemed bent on dying in a tussle with Fuzzy-Wuzzy in the Soudan. But it is no good. A dirty savage is no longer a romantic being. And as to the romance of the wigwam, it reminds me of the Jews who keep the Feast of Tabernacles by putting up some boughs in a back yard.

Let us have no nonsense, no topsy-turvy straining after new effects, which is so wearisome to those who love the racy naturalism of Parson Adams and Edie Ochiltree. But let us have no pessimism also. The age is against the romance of colour, movement, passion, and jollity. But it is full of the romance of subtle and decorous psychology. It is not the highest art: it is indeed a very limited art. But it is true art: wholesome, sound, and cheerful. The world does not exist in order to supply brilliant literature; and the march of democratic equality and of decorous social uniformity is too certain a thing, in one sense too blessed a thing, to be denied or to be denounced. An age of colour, movement, variety, and romantic beauty will come again one day, we know not how. There will be then a romance of passion and incident, of strenuous ambition and mad merriment. But not to-day nor to-morrow. Let us accept what the dregs of the nineteenth century can give us, without murmuring and repining for what it cannot give and should not seek to give.

In this little series of studies, I shall make no attempt to estimate the later literature of the Victorian Age, nor will I at all refer to any living writer. Nor shall I deal with social and moral philosophy, poetry, art, or religion. I propose to look back, from our present point of view, on the literature, in the narrower sense of the term, produced in the earlier part of the Queen's reign.

## II

### THOMAS CARLYLE

It is now for about half a century that the world has had all that is most masterly in the work of Thomas Carlyle. And a time has arrived when we may very fairly seek to weigh the sum total of influence which he left on his own and on subsequent generations. We are now far enough off, neither to be dazzled by his eloquence nor irritated by his eccentricities. The men whom he derided and who shook their heads at him are gone: fresh problems, new hopes, other heroes and prophets whom he knew not, have arisen. Our world is in no sense his world. And it has become a very fair question to ask—What is the residuum of permanent effect from these great books of his, which have been permeating English thought for half a century and more?

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It is a rare honour for any writer—at least for one who is neither poet nor novelist—to have his productions live beyond two generations, and to continue to be a great literary force, when fifty years have altered all the conditions in which he wrote and the purposes and ideas which he treated. It cannot be said that Carlyle's effective influence is less now than it was a generation ago. It has lived through the Utilitarian and Evolution movements and has not been extinguished by them. And Thomas Carlyle bids fair to enter into that sacred band whose names outlive their own century and give some special tone to their national literature.

The survival of certain books and names from generation to generation does not depend on merit alone. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is immortal: though we do not rank "Bozzy" as a hero or a genius. Hume's *History of England* is a classic: though it can hardly be said to be an adequate account of our country. Few books have ever exercised so amazing an influence as Rousseau's *Social Contract*; yet the loosest mind of to-day can perceive its sophistry. Burke's diatribes on the French Revolution affected the history of Europe; though no one denies that they were inspired by passion and deformed by panic. Hobbes has very few readers to-day; but the *Leviathan* may last as long as More's *Utopia*, which has hardly more readers in our age. Books which exert a paramount influence over their contemporaries may die down and be known only in the history of literature. And books, again, of very moderate value, written by men of one-sided intellect or founded on somewhat shallow theories, may, by virtue of some special quality, or as embodying some potent idea, attain to a permanent place in the world of letters. Many a great book ceases very early to command readers: and many books continue to be read although they are far from great.

The first question that arises is this:—Do the chief works of Carlyle belong to that class of books which attain an enduring and increasing power, or to that class which effect great things for one or two generations and then become practically obsolete? It would not be safe to put his masterpieces in any exclusive sense into either of these categories; but we may infer that they will ultimately tend to the second class rather than the first. Books which attain to an enduring and increasing power are such books as the *Ethics*, the *Politics*, and the *Republic*, the *Thoughts* of Marcus Aurelius and of Vauvenargues, the *Essays* of Bacon and of Hume, Plutarch's *Lives* and Gibbon's *Rome*. In these we have a mass of pregnant and ever-fertile thought in a form that is perennially luminous and inspiring. It can hardly be said that even the masterpieces of Carlyle—no! not the *Revolution*, *Cromwell*, or the *Heroes*—reach this point of immortal wisdom clothed with consummate art. The "personal equation" of Teufelsdröckhian humour, its whimsies, and conundrums, its wild outbursts of hate and scorn, not a few false judgments, and perverse likes and dislikes—all this is too common and too glaring in the Carlylean cycle, to permit its master to pass into the portals where dwell the wise, serene, just, and immortal spirits. Not of such is the Kingdom of the literary Immortals.

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On the other hand, if these masterpieces of sixty years ago are not quite amongst the great books of the world, it would be preposterous to regard them as obsolete, or such as now interest only the historian of literature. They are read to-day practically as much as ever, and are certain to be read for a generation or two to come. But they are not read to-day with the passionate delight in the wonderful originality, nor have they the commanding authority they seemed to possess for the faithful disciples of the forties and the fifties. Nor can any one suppose that the next century will continue to read them, except with an open and unbiassed mind, and a willingness to admit that even here there is much dead wood, gross error, and pitiable exaggeration. When we begin to read in that spirit, however splendid be the imagination, and however keen the logic, we are no longer under the spell of a master: we are reading a memorable book, with a primary desire to learn how former generations looked upon things.

Thomas Carlyle, like all other voluminous writers, wrote very much that cannot be called equal to his best: and it cannot be denied that the inferior pieces hold a rather large proportion of the whole. Nothing is less fatal to true criticism than the popular habit of blindly overvaluing the inferior work of men of genius, unless it be the habit of undervaluing them by looking at their worst instead of at their best. Great men are to be judged by their highest; and it is not of very great consequence if this highest forms a moderate part of the total product. Now, what are the masterpieces of Thomas Carlyle? In the order of their production they are *Sartor Resartus*, 1831; *French Revolution*, 1837; *Hero-Worship*, 1840; *Past and Present*, 1843; *Cromwell*, 1845. We need not be alarmed if this list forms but a third of the thirty volumes (not including translations); and if it omits such potent outbursts as *Chartism*, 1839; and *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, 1850; or such a wonderful piece of history as *Friedrich the Second*, 1858-1865. *Chartism* and the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* are full of eloquence, insight, indignation, and pity, and they exerted a great and wholesome effect on the generation whom they smote as with the rebuke and warning of a prophet. But, as we look back on them after forty or fifty years of experience, we find in them too much of passionate exaggeration, at times a ferocious wrong-headedness, and everywhere so little practical guidance or fruitful suggestion, that we cannot reckon these magnificent Jeremiads as permanent masterpieces.

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As to *Friedrich*, it is not a book at all, but an encyclopaedia of German biographies in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Who reads every word of these ten volumes? Who cares to know how big was the belly of some court chamberlain, or who were the lovers of some unendurable Frau? What a welter of dull garbage! In what dust-heaps dost thou not smother us, Teufelsdröckh! O, Thomas, Thomas, what Titania has bewitched thee with the head of Dryasdust on thy noble shoulders? Compare *Friedrich* with *Cromwell*. In the Life of the Puritan hero we have a great purpose, a prolonged homily, a magnificent appeal against an unjust sentence passed two hundred years before by ignorance, bigotry, and passion. The literary interest never overpowers the social and political, the moral and the religious purpose. Twenty years later, when he takes up the German *Friedrich*, the literary interest overpowers the historical. Half of the ten volumes of *Friedrich* are taken up with tiresome anecdotes about the ordinary appendages of a German court. Even the true greatness of Frederick—his organisation of a model civil administration—is completely obscured in the deluge of court gossip and *Potsdamiana*. *Friedrich* is a wonderful work, highly valuable to the student, a memorable result of Teufelsdröckhian industry and humour—but it is not a masterpiece: judged by the standard of Carlyle's own masterpieces, it is really a failure. *Cromwell* is the life of a hero and a statesman; *Friedrich* consists of miscellaneous memoirs of the court and camp of the greatest of modern rulers.

On the whole, we may count the *Cromwell* as the greatest of Carlyle's effective products. With his own right hand, alone and by a single stroke, he completely reversed the judgment of the English nation about their greatest man. The whole weight of Church, monarchy, aristocracy, fashion, literature, and wit had for two centuries combined to falsify history and distort the character of the noblest of English statesmen. And a simple man of letters, by one book, at once and for ever reversed this sentence, silenced the allied forces of calumny and rancour, and placed Oliver for all future time as the greatest hero of the Protestant movement. There are few examples in the history of literature of so great and so sudden a triumph of truth and justice. At the same time, it is well to remember that the *Cromwell* is not a literary masterpiece, in the sense of being an organic work of high art. It is not the "Life" of Cromwell: it was not so designed, and was never so worked out. It is his "Letters and Speeches," illustrated by notes. A work so planned cannot possibly be a work of art, or a perfect piece of biography. The constant passage from text to commentary, from small print to large, from Oliver's Puritan sermonising to Carlyle's Sartorian eccentricities, destroys the artistic harmony of the book as an organic work of art. The "Life" of Cromwell was in fact never written by Carlyle; and has yet to be written. Never yet was such splendid material for a "Life" prepared by a great historian.

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*Sartor Resartus* (1831), the earliest of his greater works, is unquestionably the most original, the most characteristic, the deepest and most lyrical of his productions. Here is the Sage of Craigenputtock at his best, at his grimmest, and, we must add, in his most incoherent mood. To make men think, to rouse men out of the slough of the conventional, the sensual, the mechanical, to make men feel, by sheer force of poetry, pathos, and humour, the religious mystery of life and the “wretchlessness of unclean living”—(as our Church article hath it)—nothing could be more trumpet-tongued than *Sartor*. The Gospel according to Teufelsdröckh is, however, a somewhat Apocalyptic dispensation, and few there be who can “rehearse the articles of his belief” with anything like precision. Another and a more serious difficulty is this. How many a “general reader” steadily reads through *Sartor* from cover to cover? And of such, how many entirely understand the inner Philosophy of Clothes, and follow all the allusions, quips, and nicknames of Sartorian subjectivity. It would be a fine subject for some Self-Improvement Circle of readers to write examination papers upon questions as to the exact meaning of all the inward musings of Teufelsdröckh. The first class of successful candidates, one fears, would be small. A book—not of science or of pure philosophy, or any technical art whatever—but a book addressed to the general reader, and designed for the education of the public, and which can be intelligently digested and assimilated by so very few of the public, can hardly be counted as an unqualified success. And the adepts who have mastered the inwardness of *Sartor* are rare and few.

The *French Revolution*, however, is far more distinctly a work of art than *Cromwell*, and far more accessible to the great public than *Sartor*. Indeed the *French Revolution* is usually, and very properly, spoken of and thought of, as a prose poem, if prose poem there can be. It has the essential character of an epic, short of rhythm and versification. Its “argument” and its “books”; its contrasts and “episodes”; its grouping of characters and *denouement*—are as carefully elaborated as the *Gerusalemme* of Tasso, or the *Aeneid* of Virgil. And it produces on the mind the effect of a poem with an epic or dramatic plot. It is only a reader thoroughly at home in the history of the time, who can resist the poet’s spell when, at the end of Part III., Book VII., he is told that the Revolution is “ended,” and the curtain falls. As a matter of real history, this is an arbitrary invention. For the street fight on the day named in the Revolutionary Calendar—13 *Vendémiaire*, An 4 (5th October 1795), is merely a casual point in a long movement, at which the poet finds it artistic to stop. But the French Revolution does not stop there, nor did the “Whiff of Grapeshot” end it in any but an arbitrary sense. When the



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poet tells us that, upon Napoleon's defeating the sections around the Convention, "the hour had come and the Man," and that the thing called the French Revolution was thereby "blown into space," nothing more silly, mendacious, and "phantasmic" was ever stated by sober historian. The Convention was itself the living embodiment and product of the Revolution, and Bonaparte's smart feat in protecting it, increased its authority and confidence. If Carlyle's *French Revolution* be trusted as real history, it lands us in as futile a *non sequitur* as ever historian committed.

Viewed as an historical poem, the *French Revolution* is a splendid creation. Its passion, energy, colour, and vast prodigality of ineffaceable pictures place it undoubtedly at the head of all the pictorial histories of modern times. And the dramatic rapidity of its action, and the inexhaustible contrasts of its scenes and tableaux—things which so fatally pervert its truthfulness as authentic history—immensely heighten the effect of the poem on the reader's mind. Not that Carlyle was capable of deliberately manufacturing an historical romance in the mendacious way of Thiers and Lamartine. But, having resolved to cast the cataclysm of 1789 and the few years before and after it into a dramatic poem, he inevitably, and no doubt unconsciously, treated certain incidents and certain men with a poet's license or with a distorted vision. This too is more apparent toward the close of his work, when he begins to show signs of fatigue and exhaustion. Nay, it is to be feared that we are still suffering from the outrage committed on Victorian literature by Mr. Mill's incendiary housemaid. We may yet note marks of arson in the restored volume. At the same time, there are large parts of his work which are as true historically as they are poetically brilliant. Part I.—"The Bastille"—is almost perfect. The whole description of Versailles, its court, and government, of the effervescence of Paris—from the death of Louis XV. to the capture of Versailles—is both powerful and true. Part II.—"The Constitution"—is the weakest part of the whole from the point of view of accurate history. And Part III.—"The Terror"—is only trustworthy in separate pictures and episodes, however splendid its dramatic power.

It would need an essay, or rather a volume, on the French Revolution to enumerate all the wrong judgments and fallacies of Carlyle's book, if we bring it to the bar of sober and authentic history. First and foremost comes his fundamental misconception that the Revolution was an anarchical outburst against corruption and oppression, instead of being, as it was, the systematic foundation of a new order of society. Again, he takes it to be a purely French, local, and political movement, instead of seeing that it was an European, social, spiritual movement toward a more humane civilisation. And next, he regards the Revolution as taking place in the six years between

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the taking of the Bastille and the defeat of the Sections by Bonaparte; whereas the Revolution was preparing from the time of Louis XIV., and is not yet ended in the time of President Faure. Next to the capital mistake of misconceiving the entire character and result of the Revolution, comes the insolence which treats the public men of France during a whole generation as mere subjects for ribaldry and caricature. From this uniform mockery, Mirabeau and Bonaparte, two of the least worthy of them, are almost alone exempted. This is a blunder in art, as well as a moral and historical offence. Men like Gondorcet, Danton, Hoche, Carnot, not to name a score of other old Conventionels, soldiers, and leaders were pure, enlightened, and valorous patriots—with a breadth of soul and social sympathies and hopes that tower far above the insular prejudices and Hebrew traditions of a Scotch Cameronian *litterateur*—poet, genius, and moralist though he also was himself.

But though the *French Revolution* is not to be accepted as historical authority, it is profoundly stimulating and instructive, when we look on it as a lyrical apologue. It is an historical phantasmagoria—which, though hardly more literally true than Aristophanes' *Knights* or *Clouds*, may almost be placed beside these immortal satires for its imagination, wisdom, and insight. The personages and the events of the French Revolution in fact succeeded each other with such startling rapidity and such bewildering variety, that it is difficult for any but the most patient student to keep the men and the phases steadily before the eye without confusion and in distinct form. This Carlyle has done far better than any other historian of the period, perhaps even better than any historian whatever. That so many Englishmen are more familiar with the scenes and the men and women of the French Revolution than they are with the scenes and the men and women of their own history, is very largely the work of Carlyle. And as to the vices and weakness of the Old Regime, the electric contagion of the people of Paris, the indomitable elasticity of the French spirit, the magnetic power of the French genius, the famous *furia francese*, and the terrible rage into which it can be lashed—all this Carlyle has told with a truth and insight that has not been surpassed by any modern historian.

It being then clearly understood that Carlyle did not leave us the trustworthy history of the French Revolution, in the way in which Thucydides gave us the authentic annals of the Peloponnesian war, or Caesar the official despatches of the Conquest of Gaul, we must willingly admit that Carlyle's history is one of the most fruitful products of the nineteenth century. No one else certainly has written the authentic story of the French Revolution at large, or of more than certain aspects and incidents of it. In spite of misconceptions, and such mistaken estimates as those of Mirabeau and Bonaparte, such insolent



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mockery of good and able men, such ridiculous caricatures as that of the “Feast of Pikes” and the trial of the King, such ribald horse-play as “Grilled Herrings” and “Lion Sprawling,” in spite of blots and blunders in every chapter—the *French Revolution* is destined to live long and to stand forth to posterity as the typical work of the master. It cannot be said to have done such work as the *Cromwell*; for it is far less true and sound as history, and it is only one out of scores of interpreters of the Revolution, whereas in the *Cromwell* Carlyle worked single-handed. But being far more organic, far more imaginative, indeed more powerful than the *Cromwell* in literary art, the *French Revolution*—produced, we may remember, exactly in the middle of the author’s life—will remain the enduring monument of Carlyle’s great spirit and splendid brain.

The book entitled *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840), to give it its full and original title, comes next in order of time, and perhaps of abiding value. It is a book rather difficult for us now to estimate after more than half a century, for so very much has been done in the interval to build upon these foundations, to enlarge our knowledge of these very heroes, and the estimates of Carlyle in the first half of this century are for the most part so completely the commonplaces of the English-speaking world at the close of the century, that when we open the *Heroes* again it is apt to seem obvious, *connu*, the emphatic assertion of a truism that no one disputes. How infinitely better do we now, in 1895, know Dante and Shakespeare, Cromwell and Napoleon, than did our grandfathers in 1840! Who, nowadays, imagines Mahomet to have been an impostor, or Burns to have been a mere tipsy song-writer? What a copious literature has the last half-century given us on Dante, on Islam and its spirit, on Rousseau, on Burns, on the English and the French revolutions! But in 1840 the true nature of these men was very faintly understood. Few people but soldiers had the least chance of being called “heroes,” and the “heroic in history” was certainly not thought to include either poets, preachers, or men of letters. *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, like the *Cromwell*, has, in fact, done its work so completely that we find it a little too familiar to need any constant reading or careful study.

To judge fairly all that Carlyle effected by his book on Heroes we must put ourselves at the point of view of the time when it was written, the days of Wellington and Melbourne, Brougham and Macaulay, Southey and Coleridge. None of these men understood the heroic in Norse mythology, or the grandeur of Oliver Cromwell, or the supreme importance of the *Divina Commedia* as the embodiment of Catholic Feudalism. All this Carlyle felt as no Englishman before him had felt, and told us in a voice which has since been accepted as conclusive. How far deeper is the

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view of Carlyle about some familiar personality like Johnson than is that of Macaulay, how much farther does Carlyle see into the Shakesperean firmament than even Coleridge! How far better does he understand Rousseau and Burns than did Southey, laureate and critic as he was hailed in his time. The book is a collection of Lectures, and we now know how entirely Carlyle loathed that kind of utterance, how much he felt the restraints and limits it involved. And for that reason, the book is the simplest and most easily legible of his works, with the least of his mannerism and the largest concessions to the written language of sublunary mortals. Nearly all the judgments he passes are not only sound, but now almost universally accepted. To deal with the heroic in history, he needed, as he said, six months rather than six days. It was intended, he told his hearers, "to break ground," to clear up misunderstandings. It has done this: and a rich crop has resulted from his ploughshare.

Nothing but a few sketches could be compressed into six hours. But it is curious how many things seem omitted in this survey of the heroic. At the age of forty-five Carlyle had not recognised Friedrich at all, for he does not figure in the "Hero as King." Napoleon takes his place, though Bonaparte was a "hero" only in the bad sense of hero which Carlyle was seeking to explode. It is well that, since he finished the *French Revolution*, Carlyle seems to have found out that Bonaparte "parted with Reality," and had become a charlatan, a sham. Still for all that, he remains "our last great man." Mazzini was present at the delivery of these lectures: and when he had listened to this last, he went up to Carlyle and told him that he had undone his Hero-Worship and had fallen from the truth; and from that hour Mazzini would hold no terms with the gospel of One-Man. To make Hero-Worship close with the installation of Napoleon as "our last great man," was to expose the inherent weakness of the Sartorian creed—that humanity exists for the sake of its great men. The other strange delusion is the entire omission from the "Hero as Priest" of any Catholic hero. Not only are St. Bernard, and St. Francis, Becket and Lanfranc—all the martyrs and missionaries of Catholicism—consigned to oblivion:—but not a word is said of Alfred, Godfrey, St. Louis, St. Ferdinand, and St. Stephen. In a single volume there must be selection of types. But the whole idea of Hero-Worship was perverted in a plan which had no room for a single Catholic chief or priest.

This perverse exaggeration of Puritan religion, and the still more unjust hatred of Catholic religion, unfortunately runs through all Carlyle's work, and perhaps nowhere breaks out in so repulsive a form as in the piece called "Jesuitism" (1850), in the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (No. VIII.). Discarding the creed, the practice, and the language of Puritanism, Carlyle still retained its narrowness,

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its self-righteousness, its intolerance, and its savagery. The moralist, to whom John Knox was a hero, but St. Bernard was not, but only a follower of the “three-hatted Papa,” and an apostle of “Pig’s-wash,” was hardly the man to exhaust the heroic in history. In the “Hero as Man-of-Letters,” Carlyle was at home. If ever pure letters produced a hero, the sage of Chelsea was one. With Johnson, with Rousseau, he is perfectly rational, and the mass of literature which has accumulated round the names of these two, only tends to confirm the essential justice of Carlyle’s estimate. Nor need we dispute his estimate of the vigour and manliness of Burns. It is only when Carlyle describes him as “the most gifted British soul” in the eighteenth century—the century of Hume, Adam Smith, Fielding, and Burke—that we begin to smile. Burns was a noble-hearted fellow, as well as a born poet. But perhaps the whole cycle of Sartorian extravaganzas contains no saying so futile as the complaint, that the British nation in the great war with France entrusted their destinies to a phantasmic Pitt, instead of to “the Thunder-god, Robert Burns.” Napoleon would no doubt have welcomed such a change of ministry. It is incoherences of this sort which undo so much of the splendid service that Carlyle gave to his age.

But we are not willing to let the defects of Carlyle’s philosophy drive out of mind the permanent and beautiful things in his literary work. *Past and Present* (1843) is certainly a success—a happy and true thought, full of originality, worked out with art and power. The idea of embedding a living and pathetic picture of monastic life in the twelfth century, and a minute study of the labours of enlightened churchmen in the early struggles of civilisation—the idea of embedding this tale, as if it were the remains of some disinterred saint, in the midst of a series of essays on the vices and weaknesses of modern society—was a highly original and instructive device, only to be worked to success by a master. And the master brought it to a delightful success. In all his writings of thirty volumes there are few pages more attractive than the story of Jocelin of Brakelond, Abbot Hugo, Abbot Samson, and the festival of St. Edmund, which all pass away as in a vision leaving “a mutilated black ruin amidst green expanses”—as we so often see in our England to-day after the trampling of seven centuries over the graves of the early monks.

And then, when the preacher passes suddenly from the twelfth century to the nineteenth, from toiling and ascetic monks to cotton spinners and platform orators—the effect is electric—as though some old Benedictine rose from the dead and began to preach in the crowded streets of a city of factories. Have we yet, after fifty years of this time of tepid hankering after Socialism and Theophilanthropic experiments, got much farther than Thomas Carlyle in his preaching in Book IV. on “Aristocracies,” “Captains

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of Industry,” “The Landed,” “The Gifted”? What truth, what force in the aphorism:—“To predict the Future, to manage the Present, would not be so impossible, had not the Past been so sacrilegiously mishandled; effaced, and what is worse, defaced!”—“Of all Bibles, the frightfulest to disbelieve in is this ‘Bible of Universal History’”—“The Leaders of Industry, if Industry is ever to be led, are virtually the Captains of the World.” What new meaning that phrase has acquired in these fifty years! “Men of letters may become a ‘chivalry,’ an actual instead of a virtual Priesthood.” Well! not men of letters exactly: but perhaps philosophers, with an adequate moral and scientific training. Here, as so often, Carlyle just missed a grand truth to which his insight and nobility of soul had led him, through his perverse inability to accept any systematic philosophy, and through his habit to listen to the whispering of his own heart as if it were equivalent to scientific certainty. But the whole book, *Past and Present*, is a splendid piece and has done much to mould the thought of our time. It would impress us much more than it does, were it not already become the very basis of all sincere thought about social problems and the future conditions of industry.

Of the *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (1845) we have already spoken, as the greatest of our author's effective products, inasmuch as it produced the most definite practical result in moulding opinion, and a result of the highest importance. But it is not, as we have seen, a work of art, or even an organic work at all, and it cannot compare in literary charm with some other of the author's works. We do not turn to the *Cromwell* again and again, as we do to the *French Revolution*, or to *Sartor*, which we can take up from time to time as we do a poem or a romance. Many of the great books of the world are not read and re-read by the public, just as none but special students continually resort to the *Novum Organum*, or the *Wealth of Nations*. For similar reasons, the *Cromwell* will never be a favourite book with the next century, as it cannot be said to have been with ours. It has done its work with masterly power; and its work will endure. And some day perhaps, from out these materials, and those collected by Mr. Gardiner, and by [Transcriber's note: next two words transliterated from Greek] *oi peri* Gardiner, a *Life of Cromwell* may be finally composed.

It is true that Carlyle's determination to force Oliver upon us as perfect saint and infallible hero is irritating and sometimes laughable; it is true that his zeal to be-dwarf every one but Cromwell himself is unjust and untrue; and the depreciation of every man who declines to play into Oliver's hands is too often manifest. But, on the whole, the judgments are so sound, the supporting authorities are so overwhelming, the work of verification is so thorough, so scrupulous, so perfectly borne out by all subsequent research—that the future will no doubt look on the *Cromwell*, not only as the most extraordinary, but the most satisfactory and effective of all Carlyle's work; although for the reasons stated, it can never have the largest measure of his literary charm or possess the full afflatus of his poetic and mystical genius.

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By the time that *Cromwell* was published, Thomas Carlyle was turned of fifty, and had produced nearly two-thirds of his total work. It may be doubted if any later book will be permanently counted amongst his masterpieces. *Friedrich*, for reasons set forth, was an attempt in late life to repeat the feat of the *Cromwell*: it was a much less urgent task: and it was not so well performed. The *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) do not add much that is new to *Past and Present* (1843) or to *Sartor* (1831); and little of what they add is either needful or true. The world had been fully enlightened about Wind-bags, Shams, the approach to Tophet, Stump-orators, Palaver-Parliaments, Phantasm-Captains, and the rest of the Sartorian puppet-pantomime. There was a profound truth in all of these invectives, warnings, and prophecies. But the prophet's voice at last got so shrieky and monotonous, that instead of warning and inspiring a second generation, these terrific maledictions began to pall upon a practical world. An ardent admirer of the prophet has said that, when he first heard Carlyle speak face to face, he could hardly resist the impression that he was listening to an actor personating the Sage of Chelsea, and mimicking the stock phrases of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Certainly no man of sense can find any serious guidance on any definite social problem from these "Pamphlets" of his morbid decline. Carlyle at last sat eating his heart out, like Napoleon on St. Helena. His true friends will hasten to throw such a decent covering as Japhet and Shem threw around Noah, over the latest melancholy outbursts about Negroes, Reformers, Jamaica massacres, and the anticipated conflagration of Paris by the Germans. It is pitiful indeed to find in "the collected and revised works," thirty-six volumes, the drivel of his Pro-Slavery advocacy, and of ill-conditioned snarling at honest men labouring to reform ancient abuses.

It is perilous for any man, however consummate be his genius, to place himself on a solitary rock apart from all living men and defiant of all before him, as the sole source of truth out of his own inner consciousness. It is fatal to any man, however noble his own spirit, to look upon this earth as "one fuliginous dust-heap," and the whole human race as a mere herd of swine rushing violently down a steep place into the sea. Nor can the guidance of mankind be with safety entrusted to one who for eighty-six years insisted on remaining by his own hearth-stone a mere omnivorous reader and omnigenous writer of books. Carlyle was a true and pure "man of letters," looking at things and speaking to men, alone in his study, through the medium of printed paper. All that a "man of letters," of great genius and lofty spirit, could do by consuming and producing mere printed paper, he did. And as the "supreme man of letters" of his time he will ever be honoured and long continue to be read. He deliberately cultivated a form

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of speech which made him unreadable to all except English-speaking readers, and intelligible only to a select and cultivated body even amongst them. He wrote in what, for practical purposes, is a local, or rather personal, dialect. And thus he deprived himself of that world-wide and European influence which belongs to such men as Hume, Gibbon, Scott, Byron—even to Macaulay, Tennyson, Dickens, Ruskin, and Spencer. But his name will stand beside theirs in the history of British thought in the nineteenth century; and a devoted band of chosen readers, wherever the Anglo-Saxon tongue is heard, will for generations to come continue to drink inspiration from the two or three masterpieces of the Annandale peasant-poet.

### III

#### LORD MACAULAY

Macaulay, who counted his years of life by those of this century, may fairly claim to have had the greatest body of readers, and to be the most admired prose-writer of the Victorian Age. It is now some seventy years since his first brilliant essay on “Milton” took the world by storm. It is half a century since that fascinating series of *Essays* was closed, and little short of that time since his famous *History* appeared. The editions of it in England and in America are counted by thousands; it has six translations into German, and translations into ten other European languages. It made him rich, famous, and a peer. Has it given him a foremost place in English literature?

Here is a case where the judgment of the public and the judgment of experts is in striking contrast. The readers both of the Old and of the New World continue to give the most practical evidence that they love his books. Macaulay is a rare example of a writer all of whose works are almost equally popular, and believed by many to be equally good. *Essays, Lays, History, Lives*—all are read by millions: as critic, poet, historian, biographer, Macaulay has achieved world-wide renown. And yet some of our best critics deny him either fine taste, or subtlety, or delicate discrimination, catholic sympathies, or serene judgment. They say he is always more declaimer than thinker—more advocate than judge. The poets deny that the *Lays* are poetry at all. The modern school of scientific historians declare that the *History* is a splendid failure, and it proves how rotten was the theory on which it is constructed. The purists in style shake their heads over his everlasting antitheses, the mannerism of violent phrases and the perpetual abuse of paradox. His most indulgent friends admit the force of these defects, which they usually speak of as his “limitations” or his “methods.” Here, indeed, is an opportunity for one of those long-drawn antitheses of which Macaulay was so great a master. How he would himself have revelled in the paradox—“that books which were household words with every cow-boy in Nevada, and every



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Baboo in Bengal, were condemned by men of culture as the work of a Philistine and a mannerist"; "how ballads which were the delight of every child were ridiculed by critics as rhetorical jingles that would hardly win a prize in a public school"; "how the most famous of all modern reviewers scarcely gave us one example of delicate appreciation or subtle analysis"; how it comes about "that the most elaborate of modern histories does not contain an idea above the commonplaces of a crammer's textbook"—and so forth, in the true Black-and-White style which is so clear and so familiar. But let us beware of applying to Macaulay himself that tone of exaggeration and laborious antithesis which he so often applied to others. Boswell, he says, was immortal, "*because he was a dunce, a parasite, and a coxcomb.*" It would be a feeble parody to retort that Macaulay became a great literary power "because he had no philosophy, little subtlety, and a heavy hand." For my part, I am slow to believe that the judgment of the whole English-speaking race, a judgment maintained over more than half a century, can be altogether wrong; and the writer who has given such delight, has influenced so many writers, and has taught so much to so many persons, can hardly have been a shallow mannerist, or an ungovernable partisan. No one denies that Macaulay had a prodigious knowledge of books; that in literary fecundity and in varied improvisation he has rarely been surpassed; that his good sense is unfailing, his spirit manly, just, and generous; and lastly, that his command over language had unequalled qualities of precision, energy, and brilliance. These are all very great and sterling qualities. And it is right to acknowledge them with no unstinted honour—even whilst we are fully conscious of the profound shortcomings and limitations that accompanied but did not destroy them.

In a previous paper we discussed the permanent contribution to English literature of Thomas Carlyle; and it is curious to note how complete a contrast these two famous writers present. Carlyle was a simple, self-taught, recluse man of letters: Macaulay was legislator, cabinet minister, orator, politician, peer—a pet of society, a famous talker, and member of numerous academies. Carlyle was poor, despondent, morbid, and cynical: Macaulay was rich, optimist, overflowing with health, high spirits, and good nature. The one hardly ever knew what the world called success: the other hardly ever knew failure. Carlyle had in him the elements that make the poet, the prophet, the apostle, the social philosopher. In Macaulay these were singularly wanting; he was the man of affairs, the busy politician, the rhetorician, the eulogist of society as it is, the believer in material progress, in the ultimate triumph of all that is practical and commonplace, and in the final discomfiture of all that is visionary and Utopian. The Teufelsdröckhian dialect is obscure even to its select students:



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the Macaulay sentence is plain as that of Swift himself. Carlyle's gospel is full of passion, novelty, suggestion, theory, and social problems. Macaulay turned his back on social problems and disdained any kind of gospel. He had no mission to tell the world how bad it is; on the contrary, he was never wearied with his proofs that it ought to be well satisfied with its lot and its vast superiority in all things to its ancestors.

The great public, wherever English books penetrate, from the White Sea to Australia, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, loves the brilliant, manly, downright optimist; the critics and the philosophers care more for the moody and prophetic pessimist. But this does not decide the matter; and it does not follow that either public or critic has the whole truth. If books were written only in the dialect, and with the apocalyptic spirit of *Sartor*, it is certain that millions would cease to read books, and could gain little from books if they did. And if the only books were such "purple patches" of history as Macaulay left us, with their hard and fast divisions of men into sheep and goats, and minute biographies of fops, pedants, and grandees, narrated in the same resonant, rhetorical, unsympathetic, and falsely emphatic style—this generation would have a very patchwork idea of past ages and a narrow sense of the resources of our English language. There is room for both literary schools, and we need teachers of many kinds. We must not ask of any kind more than they can give. Macaulay has led millions who read no one else, or who never read before, to know something of the past, and to enjoy reading. He will have done them serious harm if he has persuaded them that this is the best that can be done in historical literature, or that this is the way in which the English language can be most fitly used. Let us be thankful for his energy, learning, brilliance. He is no priest, philosopher, or master. Let us delight in him as a fireside companion.

In one thing all agree—critics, public, friends, and opponents. Macaulay's was a life of purity, honour, courage, generosity, affection, and manly perseverance, almost without a stain or a defect. His life, it was true, was singularly fortunate, and he had but few trials, and no formidable obstacles. He was bred up in the comfortable egoism of the opulent middle classes; the religion of comfort, *laissez-faire*, and social order was infused into his bones. But, so far as his traditions and temper would permit, his life was as honourable, as unsullied, and as generous, as ever was that of any man who lived in the fierce light that beats upon the famous. We know his nature and his career as well as we know any man's; and we find it on every side wholesome, just, and right. He has been fortunate in his biographers, and amply criticised by the best judges. His nephew, Sir George Trevelyan, has written his life at length in a fine book. Dean Milman and Mark

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Pattison have given us vignettes; Cotter Morison has adorned the *Men of Letters* series with a delightful and sympathetic sketch; and John Morley and Leslie Stephen have weighed his work in the balance with judicial acumen and temperate firmness. There is but one voice in all this company. It was a fine, generous, honourable, and sterling nature. His books deserve their vast popularity and may long continue to maintain it. But Macaulay must not be judged amongst philosophers—nor even amongst the real masters of the English language. And, unless duly corrected, he may lead historical students astray and his imitators into an obtrusive mannerism.

Let us take a famous passage from one of his most famous essays, written in the zenith of his powers after his return from India, at the age of forty—an essay on a grand subject which never ceased to fascinate his imagination, composed with all his amazing resources of memory and his dazzling mastery of colour. It is the third paragraph of his well-known review of Von Ranke's *History of the Popes*. The passage is familiar to all readers, and some of its phrases are household words. It is rather long as well as trite; but it contains in a single page such a profusion of historical suggestion; it is so vigorous, so characteristic of Macaulay in all his undoubted resources as in all his mannerism and limitations; it is so essentially true, and yet so thoroughly obvious; it is so grand in form, and yet so meagre in philosophic logic, that it may be worth while to analyse it in detail; and for that purpose it must be set forth, even though it convey to most readers little more than a sonorous truism.

There is not, and there never was on this earth, a work of human policy so well deserving of examination as the Roman Catholic Church. The history of that Church joins together the two great ages of human civilisation. No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to the times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon, and when camelopards and tigers bounded in the Flavian amphitheatre. The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday when compared with the line of the Supreme Pontiffs. That line we trace back in unbroken series, from the Pope who crowned Napoleon in the nineteenth century to the Pope who crowned Pepin in the eighth; and far beyond Pepin the august dynasty extends, till it is lost in the twilight of fable. The republic of Venice came next in antiquity. But the republic of Venice was modern when compared with the Papacy; and the republic of Venice is gone, and the Papacy remains. The Papacy remains, not in decay, not a mere antique, but full of life and youthful vigour. The Catholic Church is still sending forth, to the farthest ends of the world, missionaries as zealous as those who landed in Kent with Augustin, and still confronting hostile kings with the same spirit with which she confronted Attila. The number of her

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children is greater than in any former age. Her acquisitions in the New World have more than compensated her for what she has lost in the Old. Her spiritual ascendancy extends over the vast countries which lie between the plains of the Missouri and Cape Horn, countries which, a century hence, may not improbably contain a population as large as that which now inhabits Europe. The members of her communion are certainly not fewer than a hundred and fifty millions; and it will be difficult to show that all the other Christian sects united amount to a hundred and twenty millions. Nor do we see any sign which indicates that the term of her long dominion is approaching. She saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot on Britain, before the Frank had crossed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished in Antioch, when idols were still worshipped in the temple of Mecca. And she may still exist in undiminished vigour when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's.

Here we have Macaulay in all his strength and all his limitations. The passage contains in the main a solid truth—a truth which was very little accepted in England in the year 1840—a truth of vast import and very needful to assert. And this truth is clothed in such pomp of illustration, and is hammered into the mind with such accumulated blows; it is so clear, so hard, so coruscating with images, that it is impossible to escape its effect. The paragraph is one never to be forgotten, and not easy to be refuted or qualified. No intelligent tiro in history can read that page without being set a-thinking, without feeling that he has a formidable problem to solve. Tens of thousands of young minds must have had that deeply-coloured picture of Rome visibly before them in many a Protestant home in England and in America. Now, all this is a very great merit. To have posed a great historical problem, at a time when it was very faintly grasped, and to have sent it ringing across the English-speaking world in such a form that he who runs may read—nay, he who rides, he who sails, he who watches sheep or stock *must* read—this is a real and signal service conferred on literature and on thought. Compare this solid sense with Carlyle's ribaldry about "the three-hatted Papa," "pig's wash," "servants of the Devil," "this accursed nightmare," and the rest of his execrations—and we see the difference between the sane judgment of the man of the world and the prejudices of intolerant fanaticism.

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But, unfortunately, Macaulay, having stated in majestic antitheses his problem of “the unchangeable Church,” makes no attempt to provide us with a solution. This splendid eulogium is not meant to convert us to Catholicism—very far from it. Macaulay was no Catholic, and had only a sort of literary admiration for the Papacy. As Mr. Cotter Morison has shown, he leaves the problem just where he found it, and such theories as he offers are not quite trustworthy. He does not suggest that the Catholic Church is permanent because it possesses truth: but, rather, because men’s ideas of truth are a matter of idiosyncrasy or digestion. The whole essay is not a very safe guide to the history of Protestantism or of Catholicism, though it is full of brilliant points and sensible assertions. And in the end our essayist, the rebel from his Puritan traditions, and the close ally of sceptical Gallios, after forty pages of learned *pros* and *cons*, declares that he will not say more for fear of “exciting angry feelings.” He rather sneers at Protestant fervour: he declaims grand sentences about Catholic fervour. He will not declare for either of them; and it does not seem to matter much in the long run for which men declare, provided they can be kept well in hand by saving common-sense. In the meantime the topic is a mine of paradox to the picturesque historian. This is not philosophy, it is not history, but it is full of a certain rich literary seed.

The passage, though a truism to all thoughtful men, was a striking novelty to English Protestants fifty years ago. But it will hardly bear a close scrutiny of these sweeping, sharp-edged, “cock-sure” dogmas of which it is composed. The exact propositions it contains may be singly accurate; but as to the most enduring “work of human policy,” it is fair to remember that the Civil Law of Rome has a continuous history of at least twenty-four centuries; that the Roman Empire from Augustus to the last Constantine in New Rome endured for fifteen centuries; and from Augustus to the last Hapsburg it endured for eighteen centuries. There is a certain ambiguity between the way in which Macaulay alternates between the Papacy and the Christian Church, which are not at all the same thing. The Papacy, as a European or cosmical institution, can hardly be said to have more than twelve centuries of continuous history on the stage of the world. The religion and institutions of Confucius and of Buddha have twice that epoch; and the religion and institutions of Moses have thirty centuries; and the Califate in some form or other is nearly coeval with the Papacy. The judicious eulogist has guarded himself against denying in words any of these facts; but a cool survey of universal history will somewhat blunt the edge of Macaulay’s trenchant phrases. After all, we must admit that the passage as a whole, apart from the superlatives, is substantially true, and contains a most valuable and very striking thought.

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Passing from the thought to the form of this famous passage, with what a wealth of illustration is it enforced, with what telling contrasts, with what gorgeous associations! How vivid the images, how stately the personages, who are called up to heighten the lights of the tableau of the Vatican! Ancient and modern civilisation are joined by it; it recalls the Pantheon and the Colosseum; it gave sanction to the Empire of Charlemagne and to that of Napoleon, it inspired Augustin, and confronted Attila; Venice is a mere modern foundation; the Church is older than Hengist and Horsa, Clovis, or Mahomet; yet it stretches over the Atlantic continent from Missouri to Cape Horn, and still goes on conquering and to conquer. And the climax of this kaleidoscopic “symphony in purple and gold”—the New Zealander sketching the ruins of St. Paul’s from a broken arch of London Bridge—has become a proverb, and is repeated daily by men who never heard of Macaulay, much less of Von Ranke, and is an inimitable bit of picturesque colouring. It is very telling, nobly hyperbolic, no man can misunderstand it, or forget it. The most practised hand will not find it easy to “go one better than” Macaulay in a swingeing trope. It is a fascinating literary artifice, and it has fascinated many to their ruin. In feeble hands, it degenerates into what in London journalistic slang is known as “telegraphese.” A pocket encyclopaedia and a copious store of adjectives have enabled many a youth to roar out brilliant articles “as gently as a sucking dove.” But all men of power have their imitators, and are open to parody and spurious coining. Now, Macaulay, however brilliant and kaleidoscopic, is always using his own vast reading, his own warm imagination, his unfailing fecundity, and his sterling good sense.

Turn to the style of the passage—it is perfectly pellucid in meaning, rings on the ear like the crack of a rifle, is sonorous, rich, and swift. One can fancy the whole passage spoken by an orator; indeed it is difficult to resist the illusion that it was “declaimed” before it was written. We catch the oratorical tags and devices, the repeated phrase, the incessant antithesis, the alternate rise and fall of eloquent speech. It is declamation—fine declamation—but we miss the musical undertones, the subtle involutions, the unexpected bursts, and mysterious cadences of really great written prose. The term “the Republic of Venice” is repeated three times in three lines: the term “the Papacy” is repeated three times in two lines. Any other writer would substitute a simple “it” for most of these; and it is difficult to see how the paragraph would lose. The orator aids his hearers by constant repetition of the same term; the writer avoids this lest he prove monotonous. The short sentences of four or five words interposed to break the torrent—the repetition of the same words—the see-saw of black and white, old and young, base and pure—all

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these are the stock-in-trade of the rhetorician, not of the master of written prose. Now, Macaulay was a rhetorician, a consummate rhetorician, who wrote powerful invectives or panegyrics in massive rhetoric which differed from speeches mainly in their very close fibre, in their chiselled phrasing, and above all in their dazzling profusion of literary illustration. If it was oratory, it was the oratory of a speaker of enormous reading, inexhaustible memory, and consummate skill with words.

There is nothing at all exceptional about this passage which has been chosen for analysis. It is a fair and typical piece of Macaulay's best style. Indeed his method is so uniform and so mechanical that any page of his writing exhibits the same force and the same defects as any other. Take one of the most famous of his scenes, the trial of Warren Hastings, toward the end of that elaborate essay, written in 1841. Every one knows the gorgeous and sonorous description of Westminster Hall, beginning—"The place was worthy of such a trial." In the next sentence the word "hall" recurs five times, and the relative "which" occurs three times, and is not related to the same noun. Ten sentences in succession open with the pronoun "there." It is a perfect galaxy of varied colour, pomp, and illustration; but the effect is somewhat artificial, and the whole scene smells of the court upholsterer. The "just sentence of Bacon" pairs off with "the just absolution of Somers"; the "greatest painter" sits beside the "greatest scholar of the age"; ladies have "lips more persuasive than those of Fox"; there, too, is "the beautiful mother of a beautiful race." And in the midst of these long-drawn superlatives and glittering contrasts come in short martial phrases, as brief and sharp as a drill-sergeant's word of command. "Neither military nor civil pomp was wanting"—"The avenues were lined with grenadiers"—"The streets were kept clear by cavalry." No man can forget these short, hard decisive sentences.

The artificial structure of his paragraphs grew upon Macaulay with age. His *History of England* opens with a paragraph of four sentences. Each of these begins with "I purpose," "I shall"; and the last sentence of the four has ten clauses each beginning with "how." The next paragraph has four successive sentences beginning "It will be seen"—and the last sentence has again three clauses each beginning with "how." The fourth paragraph contains the word "I" four times in as many lines. This method of composition has its own merits. The repetition of words and phrases helps the perception and prevents the possibility of misunderstanding. Where effects are simply enumerated, the monotony of form is logically correct. Every successive sentence heralded by a repeated "how," or "there," or "I," adjusts itself into its proper line without an effort of thought on the reader's part. It is not graceful; it is pompous, and distinctly rhetorical. But it is eminently clear, emphatic, orderly, and easy to follow or to remember. Hence it is unpleasing to the finely-attuned ear, and is counted somewhat vulgar by the trained lover of style, whilst it is immensely popular with those who read but little, and is able to give them as much pleasure as it gives instruction.



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The famous passage about Westminster Hall, written in 1841, may be compared with the equally known passage on the Chapel in the Tower which occurs in the fifth chapter of the *History*, written in 1848. It begins as all lovers of English remember—"In truth there is no sadder spot on the earth than this little cemetery." The passage continues with "there" and "thither" repeated eight times; it bristles with contrasts, graces and horrors, antithesis, climax, and sonorous heraldries. "Such was the dust with which the dust of Monmouth mingled." It is a fine paragraph, which has impressed and delighted millions. But it is, after all, rather facile moralising; its rhetorical artifice has been imitated with success in many a prize essay and not a few tall-talking journals. How much more pathos is there in a stanza from Gray's *Elegy*, or a sentence from Carlyle's *Bastille*, or Burke's *French Revolution*!

The habit of false emphasis and the love of superlatives is a far worse defect, and no one has attempted to clear Macaulay of the charge. It runs through every page he wrote, from his essay on Milton, with which he astonished the town at the age of twenty-five, down to the close of his *History* wherein we read that James II. valued Lord Perth as "author of the last improvements on the thumb-screw." Indeed no more glaring example of Macaulay's *megalomania* or taste for exaggeration can be found than the famous piece in the *Milton* on the Restoration of Charles II.

Then came those days, never to be recalled without a blush, the days of servitude without loyalty and sensuality without love, of dwarfish talents and gigantic vices, the paradise of cold hearts and narrow minds, the golden age of the coward, the bigot, and the slave. The king cringed to his rival that he might trample on his people, sank into a viceroy of France, and pocketed, with complacent infamy, her degrading insults, and her more degrading gold. The caresses of harlots and the jests of buffoons regulated the policy of the State. The government had just ability enough to deceive and just religion enough to persecute. The principles of liberty were the scoff of every grinning courtier, and the Anathema Maranatha of every fawning dean. In every high place, worship was paid to Charles and James, Belial and Moloch; and England propitiated these obscene and cruel idols with the blood of her best and bravest children. Crime succeeded to crime, and disgrace to disgrace, till the race, accursed of God and man, was a second time driven forth, to wander on the face of the earth, and to be a by-word and a shaking of the head to the nations.



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This is vigorous invective, in the style of Cicero against Catiline, or Junius attacking a duke; it is brilliant rhetoric and scathing satire. At bottom it has substantial truth, if the attention is fixed on Whitehall and the scandalous chronicle of its frequenters. It differs also from much in Macaulay's invectives in being the genuine hot-headed passion of an ardent reformer only twenty-five years old. It is substantially true as a picture of the Court at the Restoration: but in form how extravagant, even of that! Charles II. is Belial; James is Moloch; and Charles is *propitiated* by the blood of Englishmen!—Charles, easy, courteous, good-natured, profligate Charles. And all this of the age of the *Paradise Lost* and the *Morning Hymn*, of Jeremy Taylor, Izaak Walton, Locke, Newton, and Wren! Watch Macaulay banging on his antithetic drum—"servitude without loyalty and sensuality without love"—"dwarfish talents and gigantic vices"—"ability enough to deceive"—"religion enough to persecute." Every phrase is a superlative; every word has its contrast; every sentence has its climax. And withal let us admit that it is tremendously powerful, that no one who ever read it can forget it, and few even who have read it fail to be tinged with its fury and contempt. And, though a tissue of superlatives, it bears a solid truth, and has turned to just thoughts many a young spirit prone to be fascinated by Charles's good-nature, and impressed with the halo of the divine consecration of kings.

But the savage sarcasms which are tolerable in a passionate young reformer smarting under the follies of George IV., are a serious defect in a grave historian, when used indiscriminately of men and women in every age and under every condition. In his *Machiavelli*, Macaulay hints that the best histories are perhaps "those in which a little of fictitious narrative is judiciously employed." "Much," he says, "is gained in effect." It is to be feared that this youthful indiscretion was never wholly purged out of him. Boswell, we know, was "a dunce, a parasite, and a coxcomb"—and therefore immortal. He was one of "the smallest men that ever lived," of "the meanest and feeblest intellect," "servile," "shallow," "a bigot and a sot," and so forth—and yet, "a great writer, *because* he was a great fool." We all know what is meant; and there is a substratum of truth in this; but it is tearing a paradox to tatters. How differently has Carlyle dealt with poor dear Boszy! Croker's *Boswell's Johnson* "is as bad as bad can be," full of "monstrous blunders"—(he had put 1761 for 1766) "gross mistakes"—"for which a schoolboy would be flogged." Southey is "utterly destitute of the power of discerning truth from falsehood." He prints a joke which "is enough to make us ashamed of our species." Robert Montgomery pours out "a roaring cataract of nonsense." One of his tropes is "the worst similitude in the world." And yet Macaulay can rebuke Johnson for "big words wasted on little things"!

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Neither Cicero, Milton, Swift, nor Junius ever dealt in more furious words than Macaulay, who had not the excuse of controversy or passion. Frederick William of Prussia was “the most execrable of fiends, a cross between Moloch and Puck”; “his palace was hell”; compared with the Prince, afterwards Frederick the Great, “Oliver Twist in the workhouse, and SMIKE at Dotheboys Hall were petted children.” It would be difficult for Mark Twain to beat that. “The follies and vices of King John *were the salvation* of England.” Cranmer was peculiarly fitted to organise the Church of England by being “unscrupulous, indifferent, a coward, and a time-server.” James I. was given to “stammering, slobbering, shedding unmanly tears,” alternating between the buffoon and the pedagogue. James II. “amused himself with hearing Covenanters shriek”; he was “a libertine, singularly slow and narrow in understanding, obstinate, harsh, and unforgiving.” The country gentleman of that age talked like “the most ignorant clown”; his wife and daughter were in taste “below a stillroom maid of the present day.” The chaplain was a mere servant, and was expected to marry a servant girl whose character had been blown upon.

But it ought to be remembered that all of these descriptions are substantially true. Macaulay’s pictures of the Stuarts, of Cromwell, of the Restoration and its courtiers, of Milton, of William III., are all faithful and just; Boswell *was* often absurd; Southey *was* shallow; Montgomery *was* an impostor; Frederick William *did* treat his son brutally; the country squire and the parson two centuries ago were much rougher people than they are to-day. And if Macaulay had simply told us this in measured language of this kind, he would have failed in beating his lesson into the mind. Not only was “a little of fictitious narrative judiciously employed,” but not a little of picturesque exaggeration and redundant superlatives. Carlyle is an even worse offender in this line. Did he not call Macaulay himself “squat, low-browed, commonplace”—“a poor creature, with his dictionary literature and his saloon arrogance”—“no vision in him”—“will neither see nor do any great thing”?[1] Ruskin, Freeman, Froude, and others have been tempted to deal in gross superlatives. But with all these it has been under the stimulus of violent indignation. With Macaulay the superlatives pour out as his native vernacular without heat or wrath, as a mere rhetorician’s trick, as the favourite tones of a great colourist. And though the trick, like all literary tricks, grows upon the artist, and becomes singularly offensive to the man of taste, it must always be remembered that, with Macaulay, the praise or blame is usually just and true; he is very rarely grossly unfair and wrong, as Carlyle so often is; and if Macaulay resorts too often to the superlative degree, he is usually entitled to use the comparative degree of the same adjective.

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The style, with all its defects, has had a solid success and has done great things. By clothing his historical judgments and his critical reflections in these cutting and sonorous periods, he has forced them on the attention of a vast body of readers wherever English is read at all, and on millions who have neither time nor attainments for any regular studies of their own. How many men has Macaulay succeeded in reaching, to whom all other history and criticism is a closed book, or a book in an unknown tongue! If he were a sciolist or a wrong-headed fanatic, this would be a serious evil. But, as he is substantially right in his judgments, brimful of saving common-sense and generous feeling, and profoundly well read in his own periods and his favourite literature, Macaulay has conferred most memorable services on the readers of English throughout the world. He stands between philosophic historians and the public very much as journals and periodicals stand between the masses and great libraries. Macaulay is a glorified journalist and reviewer, who brings the matured results of scholars to the man in the street in a form that he can remember and enjoy, when he could not make use of a merely learned book. He performs the office of the ballad-maker or story-teller in an age before books were known or were common. And it is largely due to his influence that the best journals and periodicals of our day are written in a style so clear, so direct, so resonant. We need not imitate his mannerism; we may all learn to be outspoken, lucid, and brisk.

It is the very perfection of his qualities in rousing the interest of the great public which has drawn down on Macaulay the grave rebukes of so many fine judges of the higher historical literature. Cotter Morison, Mark Pattison, Leslie Stephen, and John Morley all agree that his style has none of the subtler charms of the noblest prose, that his conception of history is radically unsound, that, in fact, it broke down by its own unwieldy proportions. Mr. Morison has very justly remarked that if the *History of England* had ever been completed on the same scale for the whole of the period as originally designed, it would have run to fifty volumes, and would have occupied in composition one hundred and fifty years. As it is, the eight duodecimo volumes give us the events of sixteen years, from 1685 to 1701; so that the history of England from Alfred would require five hundred similar volumes. Now, Gibbon's eight octavo volumes give us the history of the world for thirteen centuries; that is to say, Gibbon has recounted the history of a century in nearly the same space that Macaulay records the history of a year. There cannot be a doubt that Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* is immeasurably superior to Macaulay's fragment, in thought, in imagination, in form, in all the qualities of permanent history; it stands on a far higher plane; it will long outlast and overshadow it. Compared with this, Macaulay's delightful and brilliant pictures are mere glorified journalism.

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Macaulay, who was no braggart, has put it on record that his conception of history was more just than that of Hume, Robertson, Voltaire, and Gibbon. It is perfectly true that his conception was different from theirs, his execution was different, and he does not address the same class of readers. But his conception of history was not just; it was a mistake. His leading idea was to make history a true romance. He has accomplished this; and he has given us *a historical novel drawn from authentic documents*. This is, no doubt, a very useful thing to do, a most interesting book to read; it is very pleasant literature, and has a certain teaching of its own to a certain order of readers. But it is not history. It sacrifices the breadth of view, the organic life, the philosophy, the grand continuity of human society. It must be a sectional picture of a very limited period in a selected area; it can give us only the external; it inevitably tends to trivial detail and to amusing personalities; it necessarily blinds us to the slow sequence of the ages. Besides this, it explains none of the deeper causes of movement; for, to make a picture, the artist must give us the visible and the obvious. History, in its highest sense, is the record of the evolution of humanity, in whole or in part. To compose an historical novel from documents is to put this object aside. History, said Macaulay in his *Hallam*, "is a compound of poetry and philosophy." But in practice, he substituted word-painting for poetry, and anecdote for philosophy. His own delightful and popular *History of England* is a compound of historical romance and biographical memoir.

Macaulay's strong point was in narrative, and in narrative he has been surpassed by hardly any historian and even by few novelists. Scott and Victor Hugo have hardly a scene more stirring than Macaulay's death of Charles II., Monmouth's rebellion, the flight of James II., the trial of Titus Gates, the inner life of William III. This is a very great quality which has deservedly made him popular. And if Macaulay had less philosophy than almost any historian of the smallest pretension, he has a skill in narration which places him in a fair line with the greatest. Unfortunately, this superb genius for narration has rarely been devoted to the grander events and the noblest chiefs in history. Even his hero William III. hardly lives in his canvas with such a glowing light as Charles II., Monmouth, and Jeffreys. The expulsion of James II. was a very poor affair if compared with the story of Charles I. and the Parliament. If Macaulay had painted for us the Council Chamber of Cromwell as he has painted the Whitehall of Charles II.; if he had described the battle of Naseby as well as he has pictured the fight of Sedgemoor; if he had narrated the campaigns of Marlborough as brilliantly as he has told that which ended at the Boyne—how much should we have had!

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But it could not be. His own conception of history made this impossible. It is well said that he planned his history “on the scale of an ordnance map.” He did what a German professor does when he tries to fathom English society by studying the *Times* newspaper day by day. The enormous mass of detail, the infinitesimal minuteness of view, beat him. As he complained about Samuel Johnson, he runs into “big words about little things.” Charles’s mistress, her pug-dog, the page-boy who tended the dog, nay, the boy’s putative father, occupy the foreground: and the poet, the statesman, and the hero retire into the middle distance or the background. What would we not have given to have had Macaulay’s *History of England* continued down to his own time, the wars of Marlborough, the reign of Anne, the poets, wits, romancers, inventors, reformers, and heroes of the eighteenth century, the careers of Walpole, Chatham, Pitt, Burke, Fox, Nelson, Wellington, Brougham, Bentham, and Canning—the formation of the British Empire—the great revolutionary struggle in Europe! The one thought which dims our enjoyment of this fascinating collection of memoirs, and these veracious historical romances, is the sense of what we might have had, if their author had been a great historian as well as a magnificent literary artist.

[1] Froude’s *Carlyle*, i. 192.

## IV

### BENJAMIN DISRAELI

In the blaze of the political reputation of the Earl of Beaconsfield we are too apt to overlook the literary claims of Benjamin Disraeli. But many of those who have small sympathy with his career as a statesman find a keen relish in certain of his writings; and it is hardly a paradox to augur that in a few generations more the former chief of the new Tory Democracy may have become a tradition, whilst certain of his social satires may continue to be widely read. Bolingbroke, Swift, Sheridan, and Macaulay live in English literature, but are little remembered as politicians; and Burke, the philosopher, grows larger in power over our thoughts, as Burke, the party orator, becomes less and less by time. We do not talk of Viscount St. Albans, the learned Chancellor: we speak only of Bacon, the brilliant writer, the potent thinker. And so perhaps in the next century, we shall hear less of Lord Beaconsfield, the Imperial Prime Minister: but Benjamin Disraeli’s pictures of English society and the British Parliament may still amuse and instruct our descendants.

It is true that the permanent parts of his twenty works may prove to be small. Pictures, vignettes, sketches, epigrams will survive rather than elaborate works of art; these gems of wit and fancy will have to be picked out of a mass of rubbish; and they will be enjoyed for their vivacious originality and Voltairean pungency, not as masterpieces or complete creations. That Disraeli wrote much stuff is true enough.

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But so did Fielding, so did Swift, and Defoe, and Goldsmith. Writers are to be judged by their best; and it does not matter so very much if that best is little in bulk. Disraeli's social and political satires have a peculiar and rare flavour of their own, charged with an insight and a vein of wit such as no other man perhaps in this century has touched—so that, even though they be thrown off in sketches and sometimes in mere *jeux d'esprit*, they bring him into the company of Swift, Voltaire, and Montesquieu. He is certainly inferior to all these mighty satirists both in wit and passion, and also in definite purpose. But he has touches of their lightning-flash irradiating contemporary society. And it seems a pity that the famous *Men of Letters* series which admits (and rightly admits) Hawthorne and De Quincey, could find no room for the author of *Ixion in Heaven*, *The Infernal Marriage*, *Coningsby*, and *Lothair*.

Disraeli's literary reputation has suffered much in England by the unfortunate circumstance of his having been the leader of a political party. As the chief of a powerful party which he transformed with amazing audacity, as the victorious destroyer of the old Whig oligarchy and the founder of the new Tory democracy, as a man of Jewish birth and alien race, as a man to whom satire was the normal weapon and bombastic affectation a deliberate expedient for dazzling the weak—Disraeli, even in his writings, has been exposed in England to a bitter system of disparagement which blinds partisans to their real literary merit. His political opponents, and they are many and savage, can see little to admire in his strange romances: his political worshippers and followers, who took him seriously as a great statesman, are not fond of imagining their hero as an airy satirist. His romances as well as his satires are wholly unlike anything English; and though he had brilliant literary powers, he never acquired any serious literary education. Much as he had read, he had no learning, and no systematic knowledge of any kind. He was never, strictly speaking, even an accurate master of literary English. He would slip, as it were, unconsciously, into foreign idioms and obsolete words. In America, where his name arouses no political prejudice, he is better judged. To the Englishman, at least to the pedant, he is still a somewhat elaborate jest.

Let us put aside every bias of political sympathy and anything that we know or suspect of the nature of the man, and we may find in the writer, Benjamin Disraeli, certain very rare qualities which justify his immense popularity in America, and which ought to maintain it in England. In his preface to *Lothair* (October 1870), he proudly said that it had been “more extensively read both by the people of the United Kingdom and the United States than any work that has appeared for the last half century.” This singular popularity must



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have a ground. Disraeli, in truth, belongs to that very small group of real political satirists of whom Swift is the type. He is not the equal of the terrible Dean; but it may be doubted if any Englishman since Swift has had the same power of presenting vivid pictures and decisive criticisms of the political and social organism of his times. It is this Aristophanic gift which Swift had. Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rabelais, Diderot, Heine, Beaumarchais had it. Carlyle had it for other ages, and in a historic spirit. There have been far greater satirists, men like Fielding and Thackeray, who have drawn far more powerful pictures of particular characters, foibles, or social maladies. But since Swift we have had no Englishman who could give us a vivid and amusing picture of our political life, as laid bare to the eye of a consummate political genius.

It must be admitted that, with all the rare qualities of Disraeli's literary work, he hardly ever took it quite seriously, or except as an interlude and with some ulterior aim. In his early pieces he simply sought to startle the town and to show what a wonderfully clever young fellow had descended upon it. In his later books, such as *Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and *Tancred*, he wished to propound a new party programme. *Lothair* was a picture of British society, partly indulgent and sympathetic, partly caustic or contemptuous, but presented all through with a vein of *persiflage*, mockery, and extravaganza. All this was amusing and original; but every one of these things is fatal to sustained and serious art. If an active politician seeks to galvanise a new party by a series of novels, the romances cannot be works of literary art. If a young man wants only to advertise his own smartness, he will not produce a beautiful thing. And if a statesman out of office wishes to amuse himself by alternate banter and laudation of the very society which he has led and which looks to him as its inspiration, the result will be infinitely entertaining, but not a great work of art. Disraeli therefore with literary gifts of a very high order never used them in the way in which a true artist works, and only resorted to them as a means of gaining some practical and even material end.

But, if Disraeli's ambition led him to political and social triumphs, for which he sacrificed artistic success and literary honours, we ought not to be blind to the rare qualities which are squandered in his books. He did not produce immortal romances—he knew nothing of an ingenious plot, or a striking situation, or a creative character—but he did give us inimitable political satires and some delicious social pantomimes; and he presented these with an original wit in which the French excel, which is very rare indeed in England. Ask not of Disraeli more than he professes to give you, judge him by his own standard, and he will still furnish you with delightful reading, with suggestive and original thoughts.



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He is usually inclined to make game of his reader, his subject, and even of himself; but he lets you see that he never forgets this, and never attempts to conceal it. He is seldom dull, never sardonic or cruel, and always clean, healthy, and decent. His heroines are ideal fairy queens, his heroes are all visionary and chivalrous nincompoops; and even, though we know that much of it is whimsical banter and nonsensical fancy, there is an air of refined extravaganza in these books which may continue to give them a lasting charm.

The short juvenile drolleries of his restless youth are the least defective as works of art; and, being brief and simple *jeux d'esprit* of a rare order, they are entirely successful and infinitely amusing. *Ixion in Heaven*, *The Infernal Marriage*, and *Popanilla*, are astonishing products of a lad of twenty-three, who knew nothing of English society, and who had had neither regular education nor social opportunities. They have been compared with the social satires of Lucian, Swift, and Voltaire. It is true they have not the fine touch and exquisite polish of the witty Greek of Samosata, nor the subtle irony of Voltaire and Montesquieu, nor the profound grasp of the Dean. But they are full of wit, observation, sparkle, and fun. The style is careless and even incorrect, but it is full of point and life. The effects are rather stagey, and the smartness somewhat strained—that is, if these boyish trifles are compared with *Candide* and the *Lettres Persanes*. As pictures of English society, court, and manners in 1827 painted in fantastic apologues, they are most ingenious, and may be read again and again. *The Infernal Marriage*, in the vein of the *Dialogues of the Dead*, is the most successful. *Ixion* is rather broader, simpler, and much more slight, but is full of boisterous fun. *Popanilla*, a more elaborate satire in direct imitation of *Gulliver's Travels*, is neither so vivacious nor so easy as the smaller pieces, but it is full of wit and insight. Nothing could give a raw Hebrew lad the sustained imagination and passion of Jonathan Swift; but there are few other masters of social satire with whom the young genius of twenty-three can be compared. These three satires, which together do not fill 200 pages, are read and re-read by busy and learned men after nearly seventy years have passed. And that is in itself a striking proof of their originality and force.

It is not fair to one who wrote under the conditions of Benjamin Disraeli to take any account of his inferior work: we must judge him at his best. He avowedly wrote many pot-boilers merely for money; he began to write simply to make the world talk about him, and he hardly cared what the world might say; and he not seldom wrote rank bombast in open contempt for his reader, apparently as if he had made a bet to ascertain how much stuff the British public would

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swallow. *Vivian Grey* is a lump of impudence; *The Young Duke* is a lump of affectation; *Alroy* is ambitious balderdash. They all have passages and epigrams of curious brilliancy and trenchant observation; they have wit, fancy, and life scattered up and down their pages. But they are no longer read, nor do they deserve to be read. *Contarini Fleming*, *Henrietta Temple*, *Venetia*, are full of sentiment, and occasionally touch a poetic vein. They had ardent admirers once, even amongst competent judges. They may still be read, and they have scenes, descriptions, and detached thoughts of real charm, and almost of true beauty. They are not, in any sense, works of art; they are ill constructed, full of the mawkish gush of the Byronic fever, and never were really sincere and genuine products of heart and brain. They were show exercises in the Byronic mode. And, though we may still take them up for an hour for the occasional flashes of genius and wit they retain, no one believes that they can add much permanent glory to the name of Benjamin Disraeli.

Apart from the three early burlesques of which we have spoken—trifles indeed and crude enough, but trifles that sparkle with penetration and wit—the books on which Disraeli's reputation alone can be founded are *Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and *Lothair*. These all contain many striking epigrams, ingenious theories, original suggestions, vivacious caricatures, and even creative reflections, mixed, it must be admitted, with not a little transparent nonsense. But they are all so charged with bright invention, keen criticism, quaint paradox, they are so entirely unlike anything else in our recent literature, and they pierce, in a Voltairean way, so deeply to the roots of our social and political fabric, that they may long continue to be read. In the various prefaces, and especially in the general preface to *Lothair* (of October 1870), Disraeli has fully explained the origin and aim of these and his other works. It is written, as usual, with his tongue in his cheek, in that vein of semi-bombastic paradox which was designed to mystify the simple and to amuse the acuter reader. But there is an inner seriousness in it all; and, as it has a certain correspondence with his public career and achievements, it must be taken as substantially true. *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845) were written in the vigour of manhood and the early days of his political ambition, with an avowed purpose of founding a new party in Parliament. It must be admitted that they did to some extent effect their purpose—not immediately or directly, and only as part of their author's schemes. But the Primrose League and the New Tory Democracy of our day bear witness to the vitality of the movement which, fifty years ago, Disraeli propounded to a puzzled world. *Lothair* (1870) came twenty-five years later—when he had outlived his illusions; and in more artistic and more mellow tones he painted the weaknesses of a society that he had failed to inspire, but which it gratified his pride to command.

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"*Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and *Tancred*," says he, in his grandiose way, "form a real Trilogy." "The derivation and character of political parties,"—he goes on to explain—"was the subject of *Coningsby*." "The condition of the people which had been the consequence of them"—was the subject of *Sybil*. "The duties of the Church as a main remedial agency" and "the race who had been the founders of Christianity" [although, surely, friend Benjamin, if we are to believe the Gospels, the murderers and persecutors of Christ and His Apostles]—were the subjects of *Tancred* (1847). *Tancred*, though it has some highly amusing scenes, may be dismissed at once. Disraeli fought for the Chosen Race, their endowments and achievements, with wonderful courage and ingenuity. It was perhaps the cause which he had most deeply at heart, from its intimate relation to his own superb ambition and pride. But it has made no real way, nor has it made any converts, unless we count *Daniel Deronda* as amongst them. Thackeray's "Codlingsby" has almost extinguished "Sidonia." And the strange phantasmagoria of the Anglican Church, revived by the traditions of Judaism, and ascending to the throne of St. Peter, is perhaps the most stupendous joke which even Disraeli had ever dared to perpetrate. In the preface to *Lothair* we read:—

The tradition of the Anglican Church was powerful. Resting on the Church of Jerusalem, modified by the divine school of Galilee, it would have found that rock of truth which Providence, by the instrumentality of the Semitic race, had promised to St. Peter.

Whatever this jargon may mean, the public has allowed it to fall flat. It seems to suggest that the Archbishop of Canterbury, by resuming the tradition of Caiaphas, as "modified" by the Sermon on the Mount, might oust the Pope of Rome as was foretold by the Divine young Jewish reformer when he called the fishermen of Galilee. It is difficult to believe that Disraeli himself was serious in all this. In the last scene, as *Tancred* is proposing to the lovely Jewess, their privacy is disturbed by a crowd of retainers around the papa and mamma of the young heir. The last lines of *Tancred* are these:—"The Duke and Duchess of Bellamont had arrived at Jerusalem." This is hardly the way in which to preach a New Gospel to a sceptical and pampered generation.

But, if the regeneration of the Church of England by a re-Judaising process and by return to the Targum of the Pharisees has proved abortive, it must be admitted that, from the political point of view, the conception announced in the "trilogy," and rhapsodically illustrated in *Tancred*—the conception of the Anglican Church reviving its political ascendancy and developing "the most efficient means of the renovation of the national spirit"—has not proved quite abortive. It shows astonishing prescience to have seen fifty years ago that the Church

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of England might yet become a considerable political power, and could be converted, by a revival of Mediaeval traditions, into a potent instrument of the New Tory Democracy. Whatever we may think about the strengthening of the Established Church from the point of view of intellectual solidity or influence with the nation, it can hardly be doubted that in the fifty years that have passed since the date of the “trilogy,” the Church as a body has rallied to one party in the State, and has proved a potent ally of militant Imperialism and Tory Democracy. Lord Beaconsfield lived to witness that great transformation in the Church of the High and Dry Pluralists and the Simeonite parsons, which he had himself so powerfully organised in Parliament, in society, and on the platform. His successor to-day can count on no ally so sure and loyal as the Church. But it was a wonderful inspiration for a young man fifty years ago to perceive that this could be done—and to see the way in which it might be done.

*Coningsby* and *Sybil* at any rate were active forces in the formation of a definite political programme. And this was a programme which in Parliament and in the country their author himself had created, organised, and led to victory. It cannot be denied that they largely contributed to this result. And thus these books have this very remarkable and almost unique character. It would be very difficult to mention anything like a romance in any age or country which had ever effected a direct political result or created a new party. *Don Quixote* is said to have annihilated chivalry; *Tartuffe* dealt a blow at the pretensions of the Church; and the *Marriage of Figaro* at those of the old *noblesse*. It is possible that *Bleak House* gave some impulse to law reform, and *Vanity Fair* has relieved us of a good deal of snobbery. But no novel before or since ever created a political party and provided them with a new programme. *Coningsby* and *Sybil* really did this; and it may be doubted if it could have been done in any other way. “Imagination, in the government of nations” (we are told in the preface to *Lothair*) “is a quality not less important than reason.” Its author trusts much “to a popular sentiment which rested on a heroic tradition and which was sustained by the high spirit of a free aristocracy.”

Now this is a kind of party programme which it was almost impossible to propound on the platform or in Parliament. These imaginative and somewhat Utopian schemes of “changing back the oligarchy into a generous aristocracy round a real throne,” of “infusing life and vigour into the Church as the trainer of the nation,” of recalling the popular sympathies “to the principles of loyalty and religious reverence”—these were exactly the kind of new ideas which it would be difficult to expound in the House of Commons or in a towns-meeting. In the preface to *Coningsby* the author tells us that, after reflection, the form of fiction seemed to be the best method of influencing opinion. These books then present us with the unique example of an ambitious statesman resorting to romance as his means of reorganising a political party.

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There is another side to this feature which is also unique and curiously full of interest. These romances are the only instances in which any statesman of the first rank, who for years was the ruling spirit of a great empire, has thrown his political conceptions and schemes into an imaginative form. And these books, from *Vivian Grey* (1825) to *Endymion* (1880), extend over fifty-five years; some being published before his political career seemed able to begin, some in the midst of it, and the later books after it was ended. In the grandiloquent style of the autobiographical prefaces, we may say that they recall to us the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, the *Political Testament* of Richelieu, and the *Conversations* of Napoleon at St. Helena.

In judging these remarkable works, we ought to remember that they are not primarily romances at all, that they do not compete with genuine romances, and they ought to be read for the qualities they have, not for those in which they fail. They are in part autobiographical sketches, meditations on society, historical disquisitions, and political manifestoes. They are the productions of a statesman aiming at a practical effect, not of a man of letters creating a work of imaginative art. The creative form is quite subsidiary and subordinate. It would be unreasonable to expect in them elaborate drawing of character, complex plot, or subtle types of contemporary life. Their aim is to paint the actual political world, to trace its origin, and to idealise its possible development. And this is done, not by an outside man of letters, but by the very man who had conquered a front place in this political world, and who had more or less realised his ideal development. They are almost the only pictures of the inner parliamentary life we have; and they are painted by an artist who was first and foremost a great parliamentary power, of consummate experience and insight. If the artistic skill were altogether absent, we should not read them at all, as nobody reads Lord Russell's dramas or the poems of Frederick the Great. But the art, though unequal and faulty, is full of vigour, originality, and suggestion. Taken as a whole, they are quite unique.

*Coningsby; or, the New Generation*, was the earliest and in some ways the best of the trilogy. It is still highly diverting as a novel, and, as we see to-day, was charged with potent ideas and searching criticism. It was far more real and effective as a romance than anything Disraeli had previously written. There are scenes and characters in the story which will live in English literature. Thackeray could hardly have created more living portraits than "Rigby," "Tadpole," and "Taper," or "Lord Monmouth." These are characters which are household words with us like "Lord Steyne" and "Rawdon Crawley." The social pictures are as realistic as those of Trollope, and now and then as bright as those of Thackeray. The love-making is tender,

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pretty, and not nearly so mawkish as that of “Henrietta Temple” and “Venetia.” There is plenty of wit, epigram, squib, and *bon mot*. There is almost none of that rhodomontade which pervades the other romances, except as to “Sidonia” and the supremacy of the Hebrew race—a topic on which Benjamin himself was hardly sane. *Coningsby*, as a novel, is sacrificed to its being a party manifesto and a political programme first and foremost. But as a novel it is good. It is the only book of Disraeli’s in which we hardly ever suspect that he is merely trying to fool us. It is not so gay and fantastic as *Lothair*. But, being far more real and serious, it is perhaps the best of Disraeli’s novels.

As a political manifesto, *Coningsby* has been an astonishing success. The grand idea of Disraeli’s life was to struggle against what he called the “Venetian Constitution,” imposed and maintained by the “Whig Oligarchy.” As Radical, as Tory, as novelist, as statesman, his ruling idea was “to dish the Whigs,” in Lord Derby’s historic phrase. And he did “dish the Whigs.” The old Whigs have disappeared from English politics. They have either amalgamated with the Tories, become Unionist Conservatives, henchmen of Lord Salisbury, or else have become Gladstonians and Radicals. The so-called Whigs of 1895, if any politicians so call themselves, are far more Tory than the Whigs of 1844, and the Tories of 1895 are far more democratic than the Whigs of 1844. This complete transformation is very largely due to Disraeli himself.

Strictly speaking, Disraeli has eliminated from our political arena both “Whig” and “Tory,” as understood in the old language of our party history. And the first sketch of the new policy was flung upon an astonished public in *Coningsby*, just fifty years ago. No doubt, the arduous task of educating the Conservative Party into the new faith of Tory Democracy was not effected by *Coningsby* alone. But it may be doubted if Mr. Disraeli would have accomplished it by his speeches without his writings. As a sketch of the inner life of the parliamentary system of fifty years ago, *Coningsby* is perfect and has never been approached. Both Thackeray and Trollope have painted Parliament and public life so far as it could be seen from a London club. But Disraeli has painted it as it was known to a man who threw his whole life into it, and who was himself a consummate parliamentary leader.

*Sybil; or, the Two Nations*, the second of the trilogy (1845), was devoted, he tells us, “to the condition of the people,” that dismal result of the “Venetian Constitution” and of the “Whig Oligarchy” which he had denounced in *Coningsby*. *Sybil* was perhaps the most genuinely serious of all Disraeli’s romances; and in many ways it was the most powerful. Disraeli himself was a man of sympathetic and imaginative nature who really felt for the suffering and oppressed.



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He was tender-hearted as a man, however sardonic as a politician. He had seen and felt the condition of the people in 1844. It was a time of cruel suffering which also stirred the spirits of Carlyle, Mill, Cobden, and Bright. It led to the new Radicalism of which Mr. Gladstone and Mr. John Morley are eminent types. But the genius of Disraeli saw that it might also become the foundation of a new Toryism; and *Sybil* was the first public manifesto of the new departure. The political history of the last fifty years is evidence of his insight that, to recover their political ascendancy, a Conservative Party must take in hand "the condition of the people," under the leadership of "a generous aristocracy," and in alliance with a renovated Church. These are the ideas of *Sybil*, though in the novel they are adumbrated in a dim and fantastic way. As a romance, *Sybil* is certainly inferior to *Coningsby*. As a political manifesto, it has had an almost greater success, and the movement that it launched is far from exhausted even yet. One of Disraeli's comrades in the new programme of 1844-5 was a member of the last Conservative cabinet. And when we consider all the phases of Tory Democracy, Socialistic Toryism, and the current type of Christian Socialism, we may come to regard the ideas propounded in *Sybil* as not quite so visionary as they appeared to the Whigs, Radicals, Free Traders, and Benthamites of fifty years ago.

In *Lothair*, which did not appear until twenty-five years after *Sybil*, we find an altered and more mellow tone, as of a man who was playing with his own puppets, and had no longer any startling theories to propound or political objects to win. For this reason it is in some ways the most complete and artistic of Disraeli's romances. The plot is not suspended by historical disquisitions on the origin of the Whig oligarchy, by pictures of the House of Commons that must weary those who know nothing about it, and by enthusiastic appeals to the younger aristocracy to rouse itself and take in hand the condition of the people. In 1870, Mr. Disraeli had little hope of realising his earlier visions, and he did not write *Lothair* to preach a political creed. The tale is that he avowed three motives, the first to occupy his mind on his fall from power, the second to make a large sum which he much needed, and the third to paint the manners of the highest order of rank and wealth, of which he alone amongst novelists had intimate knowledge. That is exactly what we see in *Lothair*. It is airy, fantastic, pure, graceful, and extravagant. The whole thing goes to bright music, like a comic opera of Gilbert and Sullivan. There is life and movement; but it is a scenic and burlesque life. There is wit, criticism, and caricature; but it does not cut deep, and it is neither hot nor fierce. There is some pleasant tom-foolery; but at a comic opera we enjoy this graceful nonsense. We see in every page



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the trace of a powerful mind; but it is a mind laughing at its own creatures, at itself, at us. *Lothair* would be a work of art, if it were explicitly presented as a burlesque, such as was *The Infernal Marriage*, or if we did not know that it was written to pass the time by one who had ruled this great empire for years, and who within a few years more was destined to rule it again. It was a fanciful and almost sympathetic satire on the selfish fatuity of the noble, wealthy, and governing orders of British society. But then the author of this burlesque was himself about to ask these orders to admit him to their select ranks, and to enthrone him as their acknowledged chief.

As the rancour of party feeling that has gathered round the personality of Beaconsfield subsides, and as time brings new proofs of the sagacity of the judgments with which Benjamin Disraeli analysed the political traditions of British society, we may look for a fresh growth of the popularity of the trilogy and *Lothair*. England will one day be as just, as America has always been, to one of our wittiest writers. He will one day be formally admitted into the ranks of the Men of Letters. He has hitherto been kept outside, in a sense, partly by his being a prominent statesman and party chief, partly by his incurable tone of mind with its Semitic and non-English ways, partly by his strange incapacity to acquire the *nuances* of pure literary English. No English writer of such literary genius slips so often into vulgarisms, solecisms, archaisms, and mere slipshod gossip. But these are after all quite minor defects. His books, even his worst books, abound in epigrams, pictures, characters, and scenes of rare wit. His painting of parliamentary life in England has neither equal nor rival. And his reflections on English society and politics reveal the insight of vast experience and profound genius.

## V

### W. M. THACKERAY

The literary career of William Makepeace Thackeray has not a few special features of its own that it is interesting to note at once. Of all the more eminent writers of the Victorian Age, his life was the shortest: he died in 1863 at the age of fifty-two, the age of Shakespeare. His literary career of twenty-six years was shorter than that of Carlyle, of Macaulay, Disraeli, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Froude, or Ruskin. It opened with the reign of the Queen, almost in the very year of *Pickwick*, whose author stood beside his grave and lived and wrote for some years more. But these twenty-six years of Thackeray's era of production were full of wonderful activity, and have left us as many volumes of rich and varied genius. And the most striking feature of all is this—that in these twenty-six full volumes in so many modes, prose, verse, romance, parody, burlesque, essay, biography, criticism, there are hardly more than one or two which can be put aside as worthless and as utter failures; very few fail in his consummate mastery

of style; few can be said to be irksome to read, to re-read, and to linger over in the reading.

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This mastery over style—a style at once simple, pure, nervous, flexible, pathetic, and graceful—places Thackeray amongst the very greatest masters of English prose, and undoubtedly as the most certain and faultless of all the prose writers of the Victorian Age. Without saying that he has ever reached quite to the level of some lyrical and apocalyptic descants that we may find in Carlyle and in Ruskin, Thackeray has never fallen into the faults of violence and turgidity which their warmest admirers are bound to confess in many a passage from these our two prose-poets. Carlyle is often grotesque; Macaulay can be pompous; Disraeli, Bulwer, Dickens, are often slovenly and sometimes bombastic; George Eliot is sometimes pedantic, and Ruskin has been stirred into hysterics. But Thackeray's English, from the first page of his first volume to the last page of his twenty-sixth volume, is natural, scholarly, pure, incisive, and yet gracefully and easily modulated—the language of an English gentleman of culture, wit, knowledge of the world, and consummate ease and self-possession. It is the direct and trenchant language of Swift: but more graceful, more flexible, more courteous.

And what is a truly striking fact about Thackeray's mastery of style is this—that it was perfectly formed from the beginning; that it hardly ever varied, or developed, or waned in the whole course of his literary career; that his first venture as a very young man is as finished and as ripe as his very latest piece, when he died almost in the act of writing the words—“*and his heart throbbed, with an exquisite bliss.*” This prodigious precocity in style, such uniform perfection of exact composition, are perhaps without parallel in English literature. At the age of twenty-six Thackeray wrote *The History of Samuel Titmarsh* and the *Great Hoggarty Diamond*. It was produced under very melancholy conditions, in the most unfavourable form of publication, and it was mangled by editorial necessities. And yet it can still be read and re-read as one of Thackeray's masterpieces, trifling and curtailed as it is (for it may be printed in one hundred pages); it is as full of wit, humour, scathing insight, and fine pathos in the midst of burlesque, as is *Vanity Fair* itself. It is already Thackeray in all his strength, with his “Snobs,” his “Nobs,” his fierce satire, and his exquisite style.

Modern romance has no purer, more pathetic, or simpler page than the tale of the death of poor Samuel Titmarsh's first child. Though it is, as it deserves to be, a household word, the passage must be quoted here as a specimen of faultless and beautiful style.

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It was not, however, destined that she and her child should inhabit that little garret. We were to leave our lodgings on Monday morning; but on Saturday evening the child was seized with convulsions, and all Sunday the mother watched and prayed for it: but it pleased God to take the innocent infant from us, and on Sunday, at midnight, it lay a corpse in its mother's bosom. Amen. We have other children, happy and well, now round about us, and from the father's heart the memory of this little thing has almost faded; but I do believe that every day of her life the mother thinks of her first-born that was with her for so short a while: many and many a time she has taken her daughters to the grave, in Saint Bride's, where he lies buried; and she wears still at her neck a little, little lock of gold hair, which she took from the head of the infant as he lay smiling in his coffin. It has happened to me to forget the child's birthday, but to her never; and often in the midst of common talk, comes something that shows she is thinking of the child still,—some simple allusion that is to me inexpressibly affecting.

Could words simpler, purer, more touching be found to paint a terrible, albeit very common sorrow! Not a needless epithet, not a false note, not a touch over-wrought! And this is the writing of an unknown, untried youth!

This exquisitely simple, easy, idiomatic, and nervous style marks all Thackeray's work for his twenty-six years of activity, and is equally perfect for whatever purpose it is used, and in whatever key he may choose to compose. It naturally culminates in *Vanity Fair*, written just in the middle of his literary career. Here not a word is wasted: the profoundest impressions are made by a quiet sentence or a dozen plain words that neither Swift nor Defoe could have surpassed. I know nothing in English literature more powerful than those last lines of the thirty-second chapter of *Vanity Fair*. For thirty-two chapters we have been following the loves, sorrows, and anxieties of Amelia Sedley and George Osborne. For four chapters the story has pictured the scene in Brussels on the eve of Waterloo. The women and non-combatants are trembling with excitement, anxiety, fear; the men are in the field, whilst the cannon roar all day in the distance—Amelia half distracted with love, jealousy, and foreboding. And the wild alternations of hope, terror, grief, and agony are suddenly closed in the last paragraph of Chapter XXXII.

No more firing was heard at Brussels—the pursuit rolled miles away. Darkness came down on the field and city: and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart.

Take all the great critical scenes in the book, and note how simple, and yet how full of pathos and of power, is the language in which they are described. There is the last parting of George and Amelia as the bugle rings to arms.

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George came in and looked at her again, entering still more softly. By the pale night-lamp he could see her sweet, pale face—the purple eyelids were fringed and closed, and one round arm, smooth and white, lay outside of the coverlet. Good God! how pure she was; how gentle, how tender, and how friendless! and he, how selfish, brutal, and black with crime! Heart-stained and shame-stricken, he stood at the bed's foot, and looked at the sleeping girl. How dared he—who was he, to pray for one so spotless! God bless her! God bless her! He came to the bed-side, and looked at the hand, the little soft hand, lying asleep; and he bent over the pillow noiselessly towards the gentle pale face.

The whole tragedy of their lives is given in miniature in this touching scene; and yet how natural and commonplace are all the effects of which it is composed, how few and simple the words which describe such love and such remorse. It is hard to judge in *Vanity Fair* which are the more perfect in style, the pathetic and tragic scenes or those which are charged with humour and epigram.

And the scene after George's marriage, when old Osborne burns his will and erases his son's name from the family Bible—and the scene when Osborne receives his son's last letter—"Osborne trembled long before the letter from his dead son"—"His father could not see the kiss George had placed on the superscription of his letter. Mr. Osborne dropped it with the bitterest, deadliest pang of balked affection and revenge. His son was still beloved and unforgiven." And the scene of "the widow and mother," when young Georgy is born, and the wonderful scene when Sir Pitt proposes marriage to the little green-eyed governess and she is scared into confessing her great secret, and the most famous scene of all, when Rawdon Crawley is released from the sponging-house and finds Lord Steyne with Rebecca alone. It is but a single page. The words spoken are short, brief, plain—not five sentences pass—"I am innocent," said she—"Make way, let me pass," cried My Lord—"You lie, you coward and villain!" said Rawdon. There is in all fiction no single scene more vivid, more true, more burnt into the memory, more tragic. And with what noble simplicity, with what incisive reticence, with what subtle anatomy of the human heart, is it recorded.

*Vanity Fair* was written, it is true, under the strain of serial publication, haste, and anxiety, but it is perhaps, even in style, the most truly complete. The wonderful variety, elasticity, and freshness of the dialogue, the wit of the common scenes, the terrible power of the tragic scenes, the perfection of the *mise-en-scene*—the rattle, the fun, the glitter of the Fair, are sustained from end to end, from the first words of the ineffable Miss Pinkerton to the *Vanitas Vanitatum* when the showman shuts up his puppets in their box. There is not in all *Vanity Fair* a single dull

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page that we skip, not a bit of padding, no rigmarole of explanation whilst the action stands still. Of what other fiction can this be said? Richardson and even Fielding have their *longueurs*. Miss Austen is too prone to linger over the tea-table beyond all human patience. And even Scott's descriptions of his loved hills grow sometimes unreadable, especially when they are told in a flaccid and slovenly style. But *Vanity Fair* is kept up with inexhaustible life and invention, with a style which, for purity and polish, was beyond the reach of Fielding, Richardson, or Scott.

*Esmond* was composed with even greater care than *Vanity Fair*, and in the matter of style is usually taken to be Thackeray's greatest masterpiece. Its language is a miracle of art. But it is avowedly a *tour de force*—an effort to reproduce an entire book in the form and speech of a century and a half preceding. As a *tour de force* it is wonderful; but in so long a book the effort becomes at last too visible, and undoubtedly it somewhat cramps the freedom of the author's genius. Thackeray was not a born historical romancist, as were Scott and Dumas; nor was he a born historian at all. And when he undertook to produce an elaborate romance in the form and with the colouring of a past age, like George Eliot, he becomes rather too learned, too conscientious, too rigidly full of his authorities; and if as an historian he enters into rivalry with Macaulay, he somewhat loses his cunning as a novelist. Thackeray's force lay in the comedy of manners. In the comedy of manners we have nothing but *Tom Jones* to compare with *Vanity Fair*. And though Thackeray is not equal to the "prose Homer of human nature," he wrote an English even finer and more racy.

In *Esmond* we are constantly pausing to admire the wonderful ingenuity and exquisite grace of the style, studying the language quite apart from the story; and we feel, as we do when we read Milton's Latin poems or Swinburne's French sonnets, that it is a surprising imitation of the original. But at the same time *Esmond* contains some of the noblest passages that Thackeray ever wrote, scenes and chapters which in form have no superior in English literature. That sixth chapter of the second book, in the cathedral, when Henry Esmond returns to his mistress on the 29th of December, on his birthday. "Here she was weeping and happy. She took his hand in both hers; he felt her tears. It was a rapture of reconciliation"—"so for a few moments Esmond's beloved mistress came to him and blessed him." To my mind, there is nothing in English fiction which has been set forth in language of such exquisite purity and pathos.

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*Esmond*, too, which may be said to be one prolonged parody of the great Queen-Anne essayists, contains that most perfect of all parodies in the English language—"The paper out of the *Spectator*"—in chapter third of the third book. It is of course not a "parody" in the proper sense, for it has no element of satire or burlesque, and imitates not the foibles but the merits of the original, with an absolute illusion. The 341st number of the *Spectator*, dated Tuesday, April 1, 1712, is so absolutely like Dick Steele at his best, that Addison himself would have been deceived by it. Steele hardly ever wrote anything so bright and amusing. It is not a "parody": it is a forgery; but a forgery which required for its execution the most consummate mastery over all the subtleties and mysteries of style.

In parody of every kind, from the most admiring imitation down to the most boisterous burlesque, Thackeray stands at the head of all other imitators. The *Rejected Addresses* of James and Horace Smith (1812) is usually regarded as the masterpiece in this art; and Scott good-humouredly said that he could have mistaken the death of Higginbottom for his own verses. But Thackeray's *Novels by Eminent Hands* are superior even to the *Rejected Addresses*. *Codlingsby*, the parody of Disraeli's *Coningsby*, may be taken as the most effective parody in our language: intensely droll in itself, it reproduces the absurdities, the affectations, the oriental imagination of Disraeli with inimitable wit. Those ten pages of irrepressible fooling are enough to destroy Disraeli's reputation as a serious romancer. No doubt they have unfairly reacted so as to dim our sense of Disraeli's real genius as a writer. When we know *Codlingsby* by heart, as every one with a sense of humour must do, it is impossible for us to keep our countenance when we take up the palaver about Sidonia and the Chosen Race. The *Novels by Eminent Hands* are all good: they are much more than parodies; they are real criticism, sound, wise, genial, and instructive. Nor are they in the least unfair. If the balderdash and cheap erudition of Bulwer and Disraeli are covered with inextinguishable mirth, no one is offended by the pleasant imitations of Lever, James, and Fenimore Cooper.

All the burlesques are good, and will bear continual re-reading; but the masterpiece of all is *Rebecca and Rowena*, the continuation in burlesque of *Ivanhoe*. It is one of the mysteries of literature that we can enjoy both, that the warmest admirers of Scott's glorious genius, and even those who delight in *Ivanhoe*, can find the keenest relish in *Rebecca and Rowena*, which is simply the great romance of chivalry turned inside out. But Thackeray's immortal burlesque has something of the quality of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*—that we love the knight whilst we laugh, and feel the deep pathos of human nature



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and the beauty of goodness and love even in the midst of the wildest fun. And this fine quality runs through all the comic pieces, ballads, burlesques, pantomimes, and sketches. What genial fun in the *Rose and the Ring*, in *Little Billee*, in *Mrs. Perkins' Ball*, in the *Sketch Book*, in *Yellowplush*. It is only the very greatest masters who can produce extravaganzas, puerile tomfooleries, drolleries to delight children, and catchpenny songs, of such a kind that mature and cultivated students can laugh over them for the fiftieth time and read them till they are household words. This is the supreme merit of *Don Quixote*, of *Scapin*, of *Gulliver*, of *Robinson Crusoe*. And this quality of immortal truth and wit we find in *Rebecca and Rowena*, in the *Rose and the Ring*, in *Little Billee*, in *Codlingsby*, and *Yellowplush*. The burlesques have that Aristophanic touch of beauty, pathos, and wisdom mingled with the wildest pantomime.

A striking example of Thackeray's unrivalled powers of imitation may be seen in the letters which are freely scattered about his works. No one before or since ever wrote such wonderfully happy illustrations of the epistolary style of boy or girl, old maid or illiterate man. There never were such letters as those of George Osborne in *Vanity Fair*—that letter from school describing the fight between Cuff and Figs is a masterpiece—the letters of Becky, of Rawdon, of Amelia—all are perfect reproductions of the writer, as are scores of letters scattered up and down the twenty-six volumes. Nor must we omit, as part of the style, the author's own illustrations. They are really part of the book; they assist us to understand the characters; they are a very important portion of the writer's method. None of our great writers ever had this double instrument: and Thackeray has used it with consummate effect. The sketches in *Vanity Fair* and in *Punch*, especially the minor thumb-nail drolleries, are delightful—true caricatures—real portraits of character. It is true they are ill drawn, often impossible, crude, and almost childish in their incorrectness and artlessness. But they have in them the soul of a great caricaturist. They have the Hogarthian touch of a great comic artist.

One is tempted to enlarge at length on the merits of Thackeray's style, because it is in his mastery over all the resources of the English language that he surpasses contemporary prose writers. And it is a mastery which is equally shown in every form of composition. There is a famous bit of Byron's about Sheridan to the effect that he had written the best comedy, made the finest speech, and invented the drollest farce in the English language. And it is hardly extravagant to say of Thackeray that, of all the Englishmen of this century, he has written the best comedy of manners, the best extravaganza, the best burlesque, the best parody, and the best

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comic song. And to this some of his admirers would add—the best lectures, and the best critical essays. It is of course true that he has never reached or attempted to reach the gorgeous rhapsodies of De Quincey or the dithyrambic melodies of Ruskin. But these heaven-born Pegasi cannot be harnessed to the working vehicles of our streets. The marvel of Thackeray's command over language is this—that it is unfailing in prose or in verse, in pathos or in terror, in tragedy or in burlesque, in narrative, in repartee, or in drollery: and that it never waxes or flags in force and precision throughout twenty-six full volumes.

Of Thackeray's style—a style that has every quality in perfection: simplicity, clearness, ease, force, elasticity, and grace—it is difficult to speak but in terms of unstinted admiration. When we deal with the substance and effective value of his great books we see that, although Thackeray holds his own with the best writers of this century, he cannot be said to hold the same manifest crown of supremacy. One of his strongest claims is the vast quantity and variety of his best work, and the singularly small proportion of inferior work. Fielding himself wrote pitiful trash when he became, as he said, a mere “hackney writer”; Richardson's *Grandison* overcomes most readers; Scott at last broke down; Carlyle, Disraeli, Dickens, and Ruskin have written many things which “we do not turn over by day and turn over by night,” to put it as gently as one can. But Thackeray is hardly ever below himself in form, and rarely is he below himself in substance. *Pendennis* is certainly much inferior to *Vanity Fair*, and *Philip* is much inferior to *Pendennis*. *The Virginians* is far behind *Esmond*. But of the more important books not one can be called in any sense a failure unless it be *Lovel the Widower*, and *The Adventures of Philip*.

Thackeray's masterpiece beyond question is *Vanity Fair*—which as a comedy of the manners of contemporary life is quite the greatest achievement in English literature since *Tom Jones*. It has not the consummate plot of *Tom Jones*; it has not the breadth, the Shakespearean jollity, the genial humanity of the great “prose Homer”; it has no such beautiful character as Sophia Western. It is not the overflowing of a warm, genial, sociable soul, such as that of Henry Fielding. But *Vanity Fair* may be put beside *Tom Jones* for variety of character, intense reality, ingenuity of incident, and profusion of wit, humour, and invention. It is even better written than *Tom Jones*; has more pathos and more tragedy; and is happily free from the nauseous blots into which Henry Fielding was betrayed by the taste of his age. It is hard to say what scene in *Vanity Fair*, what part, what character, rests longest in the memory. Is it the home of the Sedleys and the Osbornes, is it Queen's Crawley, or the incidents at Brussels, or at Gaunt House:—is it George Osborne, or Jos, or Miss Crawley, the Major or the Colonel,—is it Lord Steyne or Rebecca? All are excellent, all seem perfect in truth, in consistency, in contrast.

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The great triumph of *Vanity Fair*—the great triumph of modern fiction—is Becky Sharp: a character which will ever stand in the very foremost rank of English literature, if not with Falstaff and Shylock, then with Squire Western, Uncle Toby, Mr. Primrose, Jonathan Oldbuck, and Sam Weller. There is no character in the whole range of literature which has been worked out with more elaborate completeness. She is drawn from girlhood to old age, under every conceivable condition, and is brought face to face with all kinds of persons and trials. In all circumstances Becky is true to herself; her ingenuity, her wit, her selfishness, her audacity, her cunning, her clear, cool, alert brain, even her common sense, her spirit of justice, when she herself is not concerned, and her good-nature, when it could cost her nothing—all this is unfailing, inimitable, never to be forgotten. Some good people cry out that she is so wicked. Of course she is wicked: so were Iago and Blifil. The only question is, if she be real? Most certainly she is, as real as anything in the whole range of fiction, as real as Tartuffe, or Gil Blas, Wilhelm Meister, or Rob Roy. No one doubts that Becky Sharps exist: unhappily they are not even very uncommon. And Thackeray has drawn one typical example of such bad women with an anatomical precision that makes us shudder.

And if Becky Sharp be the masterpiece of Thackeray's art amongst the characters, the scene of her husband's encounter with her paramour is the masterpiece of all the scenes in *Vanity Fair*, and has no superior, hardly any equal, in modern fiction. Becky, Rawdon Crawley, and Lord Steyne—all are inimitably true, all are powerful, all are fearful in their agony and rage. The uprising of the poor rake almost into dignity and heroism, and his wife's outburst of admiration at his vengeance, are strokes of really Shakespearean insight. It was with justice that Thackeray himself felt pride in that touch. "*She stood there trembling before him. She admired her husband, strong, brave, victorious.*" It is these touches of clear sight in Becky, her respect for Dobbin, her kindness to Amelia apart from her own schemes, which make us feel an interest in Becky, loathsome as she is. She is always a woman, and not an inhuman monster, however bad a woman, cruel, heartless, and false.

There remains always the perpetual problem if *Vanity Fair* be a cynic's view of life, the sardonic grin of a misanthrope gloating over the trickery and meanness of mankind. It is well to remember how many are the scenes of tenderness and pathos in *Vanity Fair*, how powerfully told, how deeply they haunt the memory and sink into the heart. The school life of Dobbin, the ruin of old Sedley and the despair of Amelia, the last parting of Amelia and George, Osborne revoking his will, Sedley broken down, Rawdon in the sponging-house, the birth and boyhood of Georgy Osborne,

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the end of old Sedley, the end of old Osborne, are as pathetic and humane as anything in our literature. Mature men, who study fiction with a critical spirit and a cool head, admit that the only passages in English romance that they can never read again without faltering, without a dim eye and a quavering voice, are these scenes of pain and sorrow in *Vanity Fair*. The death of old Sedley, nursed by his daughter, is a typical piece—perfect in simplicity, in truth, in pathos.

One night when she stole into his room, she found him awake, when the broken old man made his confession. “O, Emmy, I’ve been thinking we were very unkind and unjust to you,” he said, and put out his cold and feeble hand to her. She knelt down and prayed by his bed-side, as he did too, having still hold of her hand. When our turn comes, friend, may we have such company in our prayers.

And this is the arch-cynic and misanthrope, grinning at all that is loveable and tender!

It is too often forgotten that *Vanity Fair* is not intended to be simply the world: it is society, it is fashion, the market where mammon-worship, folly, and dissipation display and barter their wares. Thackeray wrote many other books, and has given us many worthy characters. Dobbin, Warrington, Colonel Newcome, Ethel Newcome, Henry Esmond are generous, brave, just, and true. Neither *Esmond*, nor *The Newcomes*, nor *The Virginians* are in any sense the work of a misanthrope. And where Thackeray speaks in his own person, in the lectures on the *English Humourists*, he is brimful of all that is genial, frank, lenient, and good-hearted. What we know of the man, who loved his friends and was loved by them, and who in all his critical and personal sketches showed himself a kindly, courteous, and considerate gentleman, inclines us to repel this charge of cynicism. We will not brand him as a mere satirist, and a cruel mocker at human virtue and goodness.

This is, however, not the whole of the truth. The consent of mankind, and especially the consent of women, is too manifest. There is something ungenial, there is a bitter taste left when we have enjoyed these books, especially as we lay down *Vanity Fair*. It is a long comedy of roguery, meanness, selfishness, intrigue, and affectation. Rakes, ruffians, bullies, parasites, fortune-hunters, adventurers, women who sell themselves, and men who cheat and cringe, pass before us in one incessant procession, crushing the weak, and making fools of the good. Such, says our author, is the way of *Vanity Fair*—which we are warned to loathe and to shun. Be it so:—but it cannot be denied that the rakes, ruffians, and adventurers fill too large a canvas, are too conspicuous, too triumphant, too interesting. They are more interesting than the weak and the good whom they crush under foot: they are drawn with a more glowing brush, they are far more splendidly endowed.

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They have better heads, stronger wills, richer natures than the good and kind ones who are their butts. Dobbin, as the author himself tells us, “is a spooney.” Amelia, as he says also, “is a little fool.” Peggy O’Dowd, dear old goody, is the laughing-stock of the regiment, though she is also its grandmother. *Vanity Fair* has here and there some virtuous and generous characters. But we are made to laugh at every one of them to their very faces. And the evil and the selfish characters bully them, mock them, thrust them aside at every page—and they do so because they are more the stuff of which men and women of any mark are made.

There are evil characters in Shakespeare, in Fielding, in Goldsmith, in Scott: we find ruffians, rakes, traitors, and parasites. But they are not paramount, not universal, not unqualified. Iago is utterly overshadowed by Othello, Blifil by Alworthy, Tom Jones by Sophia Western, Squire Thornhill by Dr. Primrose, the reprobate Staunton by the good angel Jeanie Deans. Shakespeare, Fielding, Goethe, Scott draw noble and generous natures quite as well as they paint the evil natures: indeed they paint them better; they enjoy the painting of them more; they make us enjoy them more. Take this test: if we run over the characters of Shakespeare or of Scott we have to reflect before we find the villains. If we run over the characters in Thackeray, it is an effort of memory to recall the generous and the fine natures. Thackeray has given us some loveable and affectionate men and women; but they all have qualities which lower them and tend to make them either tiresome or ridiculous. Henry Esmond is a high-minded and almost heroic gentleman, but he is glum, a regular kill-joy, and, as his author admitted, something of a prig. Colonel Newcome is a noble true-hearted soldier; but he is made too good for this world and somewhat too innocent, too transparently a child of nature. Warrington, with all his sense and honesty, is rough; Pendennis is a bit of a puppy; Clive Newcome is not much of a hero; and as for Dobbin he is almost intended to be a butt.

A more serious defect is a dearth in Thackeray of women to love and to honour. Shakespeare has given us a gallery of noble women; Fielding has drawn the adorable Sophia Western; Scott has his Jeanie Deans. But though Thackeray has given us over and over again living pictures of women of power, intellect, wit, charm, they are all marred by atrocious selfishness, cruelty, ambition, like Becky Sharp, Beatrix Esmond, and Lady Kew; or else they have some weakness, silliness, or narrowness which prevents us from at once loving and respecting them. Amelia is rather a poor thing and decidedly silly; we do not really admire Laura Pendennis; the Little Sister is somewhat colourless; Ethel Newcome runs great risk of being a spoilt beauty; and about Lady Castlewood, with all her love and devotion, there hangs a certain sinister and unnatural taint,

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which the world cannot forgive, and perhaps ought not to forgive. The sum of all this is, that in all these twenty-six volumes and hundreds of men and women portrayed, there is not one man or one woman having at once a noble character, perfect generosity, powerful mind, and loveable nature; not one man or one woman of tender heart and perfect honour, but has some trait that tends to make him or her either laughable or tedious. It is not so with the supreme masters of the human heart. And the world does not condone this, and it is right in not condoning it.

But to say this, is not to condemn Thackeray as a cynic. With these many scenes of exquisite tenderness and pathos, with men and women of such loving hearts and devoted spirits, with the profusion of gay, kindly, childlike love of innocent fun, that we find all through Thackeray's work, he does not belong to the order of the Jonathan Swifts, the Balzacs, the Zolas, the gruesome anatomists of human vice and meanness. On the other hand he does not belong to the order of the Shakespeares, Goethes, and Scotts, to whom human virtue and dignity always remain in the end the supreme forces of human life. Thackeray, with a fine and sympathetic soul, had a creative imagination that was far stronger on the darker and fouler sides of life than it was on the brighter and pure side of life. He saw the bright and pure side: he loved it, he felt with it, he made us love it. But his artistic genius worked with more free and consummate zest when he painted the dark and the foul. His creative imagination fell short of the true equipoise, of that just vision of *chiaroscuro*, which we find in the greatest masters of the human heart. This limitation of his genius has been visited upon Thackeray with a heavy hand. And such as it is, he must bear it.

The place of Thackeray in English literature will always be determined by his *Vanity Fair*: which will be read, we may confidently predict, as long as *Tom Jones*, *Clarissa*, *Tristram Shandy*, *The Antiquary*, and *Pickwick*. But all the best of his pieces, even the smaller *jeux d'esprit*, may be read with delight again and again by young and old. And of the best are—*Esmond*, *The Newcomes*, *Barry Lyndon*, the *Book of Snobs*, the *Hoggarty Diamond*, some of the *Burlesques* and *Christmas Books*, and the *English Humourists*. Of these, *Esmond* has every quality of a great book, except its artificial form, its excessive elaboration of historical colouring, and its unsavoury plot. Beatrix Esmond is almost as wonderful a creation as Becky Sharp; though, if formed on a grander mould, she has less fascination than that incorrigible minx. The *Newcomes*, if in some ways the most genial of the longer pieces, is plainly without the power of *Vanity Fair*. And if *Barry Lyndon* has this power, it is an awful picture of cruelty



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and meanness. The *Book of Snobs* and the *Hoggarty Diamond* were each a kind of prelude to *Vanity Fair*, and both contain some of its essential marks of pathos and of power. It is indeed strange to us now to remember that both of these books, written with such finished mastery of hand and full of such passages of wit and insight, could have been published for years before the world had recognised that it had a new and consummate writer before it. The *Book of Snobs* indeed may truly be said to have seriously improved the public opinion of the age, and to have given a death-blow to many odious forms of sycophancy and affectation which passed unrebuked in England fifty years ago. And the *Burlesque Romances* and the *English Humourists* have certainly assisted in forming the public taste and in promoting a sound criticism of our standard fiction.

Charlotte Bronte dedicated her *Jane Eyre*, in 1847, to William Makepeace Thackeray, as “the first social regenerator of the day.” Such language, though interesting as coming from a girl of singular genius and sincerity, however ignorant of real life, was excessive. But we may truly assert that he has enriched our literature with some classical masterpieces in the comedy of contemporary manners.

## VI

### CHARLES DICKENS

It is a fearsome thing to venture to say anything now about Charles Dickens, whom we have all loved, enjoyed, and laughed over: whose tales are household words in every home where the English tongue is heard, whose characters are our own school-friends, the sentiment of our youthful memories, our boon-companions and our early attachments. To view him in any critical light is a task as risky as it would be to discuss the permanent value of some fashionable amusement, a favourite actor, a popular beverage, or a famous horse. Millions and millions of old and young love Charles Dickens, know his personages by heart, play at games with his incidents and names, and from the bottom of their souls believe that there never was such fun, and that there never will be conceived again such inimitable beings, as they find in his ever-fresh and ever-varied pages. This is by itself a very high title to honour: perhaps it is the chief jewel in the crown that rests on the head of Charles Dickens. I am myself one of these devotees, of these lovers, of these slaves of his: or at least I can remember that I have been. To have stirred this pure and natural humanity, this force of sympathy, in such countless millions is a great triumph. Men and women to-day do not want any criticism of Charles Dickens, any talk about him at all. They enjoy him as he is: they examine one another in his books: they gossip on by the hour about his innumerable characters, his never-to-be-forgotten waggeries and fancies.



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No account of early Victorian literature can omit the name of Charles Dickens from the famous writers of the time. How could we avoid notice of one whose first immortal tale coincides with the accession of our Queen, and who for thirty-three successive years continued to pour out a long stream of books that still delight the English-speaking world? When we begin to talk about the permanent place in English literature of eminent writers, one of the first definite problems is presented by Charles Dickens. And it is one of the most obscure of such problems; because, more than almost any writer of our age, Charles Dickens has his own accustomed nook at every fireside: he is a familiar friend, a welcome guest; we remember the glance of his eye; we have held his hand, as it were, in our own. The children brighten up as his step is heard; the chairs are drawn round the hearth, and a fresh glow is given to the room. We do not criticise one whom we love, nor do we suffer others to do so. And there is perhaps a wider sympathy with Charles Dickens as a person than with any other writer of our time. For this reason there has been hardly any serious criticism or estimate of Dickens as a great artist, apart from some peevish and sectional disparagement of his genius, which has been too much tinged with academic pedantry and the bias of aristocratic temper or political antagonism.

I am free to confess that I am in no mood to pretend making up my mind for any impartial estimate of Charles Dickens as an abiding power in English literature. The "personal equation" is in my own case somewhat too strong to leave me with a perfectly "dry light" in the matter. I will make a clean breast of it at once by saying, that I can remember reading some of the most famous of these books in their green covers, month by month, as they came out in parts, when I was myself a child or "in my 'teens." That period included the first ten of the main works from *Pickwick* down to *David Copperfield*. With *Bleak House*, which I read as a student of philosophy at Oxford beginning to be familiar with Aristotelian canons, I felt my enjoyment mellowed by a somewhat more measured judgment. From that time onward Charles Dickens threw himself into a great variety of undertakings and many diverse kinds of publication. His *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Great Expectations*, *Tale of Two Cities*, were never to me anything like the wonder and delight that I found in *Oliver Twist*, *Nickleby*, and *Copperfield*. And as to the short tales and the later pieces down to *Edwin Drood*, I never find myself turning back to them; the very memory of the story is fading away; and I fail to recall the characters and names. A mature judgment will decide that the series after *David Copperfield*, written when the author was thirty-eight, was not equal to the series of the thirteen years preceding. Charles Dickens will always be remembered

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by *Pickwick*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nickleby*, and *Copperfield*. And though these tales will long continue to delight both old and young, learned and unlearned alike, they are most to be envied who read him when young, and they are most to be pitied who read him with a critical spirit. May that be far from us, as we take up our *Pickwick* and talk over the autobiographic pathos of *David Copperfield*.

This vivid sympathy with the man is made stronger in my own case in that, from my own boyhood till his death, I was continually seeing him, was frequently his neighbour both in London and the seaside, knew some of his friends, and heard much about him and about his work. Though I never spoke to him, there were times when I saw him almost daily; I heard him speak and read in public; and his favourite haunts in London and the country have been familiar to me from my boyhood. And thus, as I read again my *Pickwick*, and *Nickleby*, and *Copperfield*, there come back to me many personal and local memories of my own. The personality of Charles Dickens was, even to his distant readers, vivid and intense; and hence it is much more so to those who have known his person. I am thus an ardent Pickwickian myself; and anything I say about our immortal Founder must be understood in a Pickwickian sense.

Charles Dickens was before all things a great humourist—doubtless the greatest of this century; for, though we may find in Scott a more truly Shakespearean humour of the highest order, the humour of Dickens is so varied, so paramount, so inexhaustible, that he stands forth in our memory as the humourist of the age. Swift, Fielding, Hogarth, Sterne, and Goldsmith, in the last century, reached at times a more enduring level of humour without caricature; but the gift has been more rarely imparted to their successors in the age of steam. Now, we shall never get an adequate definition of that imponderable term—humour—a term which, perhaps, was invented to be the eternal theme of budding essayists. We need not be quite as liberal in our interpretation of humour as was Thackeray in opening his *English Humourists*; for he declared that its business was to awaken and direct our love, our pity, our kindness, our scorn for imposture, our tenderness for the weak, to comment on the actions and passions of life, to be the week-day preacher—and much more to that effect. But it may serve our immediate purpose to say with Samuel Johnson that humour is “grotesque imagery”; and “grotesque” is “distorted of figure; unnatural.” That is to say, humour is an effort of the imagination presenting human nature with some element of distortion or disproportion which instantly kindles mirth. It must be imaginative; it must touch the bed-rock of human nature; it must arouse merriment and not anger or scorn. In this fine and most rare gift Charles Dickens abounded to overflowing; and this humour poured in perfect cataracts of “grotesque imagery” over every phase of life of the poor and the lower middle classes of his time, in London and a few of its suburbs and neighbouring parts.

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This in itself is a great title to honour; it is his main work, his noblest title. His sphere was wide, but not at all general; it was strictly limited to the range of his own indefatigable observations. He hardly ever drew a character or painted a scene, even of the most subordinate kind, which he had not studied from the life with minute care, and whenever he did for a moment wander out of his limits, he made an egregious failure. But this task of his, to cast the sunshine of pathos and of genial mirth over the humblest, dullest, and most uninviting of our fellow-creatures, was a great social mission to which his whole genius was devoted. No waif and stray was so repulsive, no drudge was so mean, no criminal was so atrocious, but what Charles Dickens could feel for him some ray of sympathy, or extract some pathetic mirth out of his abject state. And Dickens does not look on the mean and the vile as do Balzac and Zola, that is, from without, like the detective or the surgeon. He sees things more or less from their point of view: he feels with the Marchioness: he himself as a child was once a Smike: he cannot help liking the fun of the Artful Dodger: he has been a good friend to Barkis: he likes Traddles: he loves Joe: poor Nancy ends her vile life in heroism: and even his brute of a dog worships Bill Sikes.

Here lies the secret of his power over such countless millions of readers. He not only paints a vast range of ordinary humanity and suffering or wearied humanity, but he speaks for it and lives in it himself, and throws a halo of imagination over it, and brings home to the great mass of average readers a new sense of sympathy and gaiety. This humane kinship with the vulgar and the common, this magic which strikes poetry out of the dust of the streets, and discovers traces of beauty and joy in the most monotonous of lives, is, in the true and best sense of the term, Christ-like, with a message and gospel of hope. Thackeray must have had Charles Dickens in his mind when he wrote: "The humourous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness—your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture—your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy." Charles Dickens, of all writers of our age, assuredly did this in every work of his pen, for thirty-three years of incessant production. It is his great title to honour; and a novelist can desire no higher title than this.

There is another quality in which Charles Dickens is supreme—in purity. Here is a writer who is realistic, if ever any writer was, in the sense of having closely observed the lowest strata of city life, who has drawn the most miserable outcasts, the most abandoned men and women in the dregs of society, who has invented many dreadful scenes of passion, lust, seduction, and debauchery; and yet in forty works and more you will not find a page which a mother need withhold from her grown daughter. As Thackeray

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wrote of his friend:—"I am grateful for the innocent laughter and the sweet and unsullied page which the author of *David Copperfield* gives to my children." We need not formulate any dogma or rule on such a topic, nor is it essential that all books should be written *virginibus puerisque*; but it is certain that every word of Charles Dickens was so written, even when he set himself (as he sometimes did) to describe animal natures and the vilest of their sex. Dickens is a realist in that he probes the gloomiest recesses and faces the most disheartening problems of life: he is an idealist in that he never presents us the common or the vile with mere commonplace or repulsiveness, and without some ray of humane and genial charm to which ordinary eyes are blind. Dickens, then, was above all things a humourist, an inexhaustible humourist, to whom the humblest forms of daily life wore a certain sunny air of genial mirth; but the question remains if he was a humourist of the highest order: was he a poet, a creator of abiding imaginative types? Old Johnson's definition of humour as "grotesque imagery," and "grotesque" as meaning some distortion in figure, may not be adequate as a description of humour, but it well describes the essential feature of Charles Dickens. His infallible instrument is caricature—which strictly means an "overload," as Johnson says, "an exaggerated resemblance." Caricature is a likeness having some comical exaggeration or distortion. Now, caricature is a legitimate and potent instrument of humour, which great masters have used with consummate effect. Leonardo da Vinci, Michael Angelo, Rembrandt, Hogarth, use it; but only at times, and in a subsidiary way. Rabelais, Swift, Fielding, use this weapon not unfrequently; Shakespeare very sparingly; Goldsmith and Scott, I think, almost never. Caricature, the essence of which is exaggeration of some selected feature, distortion of figure, disproportion of some part, is a potent resource, but one to which the greater masters resort rarely and with much moderation.

Now with Charles Dickens caricature—that comical exaggeration of a particular feature, distortion of some part beyond nature—is not only the essence of his humour, but it is the universal and ever-present source of his mirth. It would not be true to say that, exaggeration is the sole form of humour that he uses, but there is hardly a character of his to which it is not applied, nor a scene of which it is not the pervading "motive." Some feature, some oddity, some temperament is seized, dwelt upon, played with, and turned inside out, with incessant repetition and unwearied energy. Every character, except the walking gentleman and the walking lady, the insipid lover, or the colourless friend, have some feature thrust out of proportion, magnified beyond nature. Sam Weller never speaks without his anecdote, Uriah is always "umble," Barkis is always "willin'," Mark Tapley is always "jolly," Dombey is always

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solemn, and Toots is invariably idiotic. It is no doubt natural that Barnaby's Raven should always want tea, whatever happens, for the poor bird has but a limited vocabulary. But one does not see why articulate and sane persons like Captain Cuttle, Pecksniff, and Micawber should repeat the same phrases under every condition and to all persons. This, no doubt, is the essence of farce: it may be irresistibly droll as farce, but it does not rise beyond farce. And at last even the most enthusiastic Pickwickian wearies of such monotony of iteration.

Now, the keynote of caricature being the distortion of nature, it inevitably follows that humorous exaggeration is unnatural, however droll; and, where it is the main source of the drollery, the picture as a whole ceases to be within the bounds of nature. But the great masters of the human heart invariably remain true to nature: not merely true to a selected feature, but to the natural form as a whole. Falstaff, in his wildest humour, speaks and acts as such a man really might speak and act. He has no catch-phrase on which he harps, as if he were a talking-machine wound up to emit a dozen sounds. Parson Adams speaks and acts as such a being might do in nature. The comic characters of Goldsmith, Scott, or Thackeray do not outrun and defy nature, nor does their drollery depend on any special and abnormal feature, much less on any stock phrase which they use as a label. The illustrations of Cruikshank and Phiz are delightfully droll, and often caricatures of a high order. But being caricatures, they overload and exaggerate nature, and indeed are always, in one sense, impossible in nature. The grins, the grimaces, the contortions, the dwarfs, the idiots, the monstrosities of these wonderful sketches could not be found in human beings constructed on any known anatomy. And Dickens's own characters have the same element of unnatural distortion. It is possible that these familiar caricatures have even done harm to his reputation. His creations are of a higher order of art and are more distinctly spontaneous and original. But the grotesque sketches with which he almost uniformly presented his books accentuate the element of caricature on which he relied; and often add an unnatural extravagance beyond that extravagance which was the essence of his own method.

The consequence is that everything in Dickens is "in the excess," as Aristotle would say, and not "in the mean." Whether it is Tony Weller, or "the Shepherd," or the Fat Boy, Hugh or the Raven, Toots or Traddles, Micawber or Skimpole, Gamp or Mantalini—all are overloaded in the sense that they exceed nature, and are more or less extravagant. They are wonderful and delightful caricatures, but they are impossible in fact. The similes are hyperbolic; the names are grotesque; the incidents partake of harlequinade, and the speeches of roaring farce. It is often wildly droll, but it is rather the drollery of the stage than of the

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book. The characters are never possible in fact; they are not, and are not meant to be, nature; they are always and everywhere comic distortions of nature. Goldsmith's Dr. Primrose tells us that he chose his wife for the same qualities for which she chose her wedding gown. That is humour, but it is also pure, literal, exact truth to nature. David Copperfield's little wife is called a lap-dog, acts like a lap-dog, and dies like a lap-dog; the lap-dog simile is so much overdone that we are glad to get rid of her, and instead of weeping with Copperfield, we feel disposed to call him a ninny.

Nothing is more wonderful in Dickens than his exuberance of animal spirits, that inexhaustible fountain of life and gaiety, in which he equals Scott and far surpasses any other modern. The intensity of the man, his electric activity, his spasmodic nervous power, quite dazzle and stun us. But this restless gaiety too often grows fatiguing, as the rollicking fun begins to pall upon us, as the jokes ring hollow, and the wit gets stale by incessant reiteration. We know how much in real life we get to hate the joker who does not know when to stop, who repeats his jests, and forces the laugh when it does not flow freely. Something of the kind the most devoted of Dickens's readers feel when they take in too much at one time. None but the very greatest can maintain for long one incessant outpour of drollery, much less of extravagance. Aristophanes could do it; Shakespeare could do it; so could Cervantes; and so, too, Rabelais. But then, the wildest extravagance of these men is so rich, so varied, so charged with insight and thought, and, in the case of Rabelais, so resplendent with learning and suggestion, that we never feel satiety and the cruel sense that the painted mask on the stage is grinning at us, whilst the actor behind it is weary and sad. When one who is not amongst the very greatest pours forth the same inextinguishable laughter in the same key, repeating the same tricks, and multiplying kindred oddities, people of cultivation enjoy it heartily once, twice, it may be a dozen times, but at last they make way for the young bloods who can go thirty-seven times to see "Charley's Aunt."

A good deal has been said about Dickens's want of reading; and his enthusiastic biographer very fairly answers that Charles Dickens's book was the great book of life, of which he was an indefatigable student. When other men were at school and at college, he was gathering up a vast experience of the hard world, and when his brother writers were poring over big volumes in their libraries, he was pacing up and down London and its suburbs with inexhaustible energy, drinking in oddities, idiosyncrasies, and wayside incidents at every pore. It is quite true: London is a microcosm, an endless and bottomless Babylon; which, perhaps, no man has ever known so well as did Charles Dickens. This was his library: here he gathered that vast encyclopaedia of human



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nature, which some are inclined to call “cockney,” but if it be, “Cockayne” must be a very large country indeed. Still, the fact remains, that of book-learning of any kind Dickens remained, to the end of his days, perhaps more utterly innocent than any other famous English writer since Shakespeare. His biographer labours to prove that he had read Fielding and Smollett, *Don Quixote* and *Gil Blas*, *The Spectator*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. Perhaps he had, like most men who have learned to read. But, no doubt, this utter severance from books, which we feel in his tales, will ultimately tell against their immortality.

This rigid abstinence from books, which Dickens practised on system, had another reaction that we notice in his style. Not only do we feel in reading his novels that we have no reason to assume that he had ever read anything except a few popular romances, but we note that he can hardly be said to have a formed literary style of his own. Dickens had mannerisms, but hardly a style. In some ways, this is a good thing: much less can he be said to have a bad style. It is simply no style. He knows nothing of the crisp, modulated, balanced, and reserved mastery of phrase and sentence which marks Thackeray. Nor is it the easy simplicity of *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Vicar of Wakefield*. The tale spins along, and the incidents rattle on with the volubility of a good story-teller who warms up as he goes, but who never stops to think of his sentences and phrases. He often gets verbose, rings the changes on a point which he sees to have caught his hearers; he plays with a fancy out of measure, and turns his jest inside out and over and over, like a fine comic actor when the house is in a roar. His language is free, perfectly clear, often redundant, sometimes grandiloquent, and usually addressed more to the pit than to the boxes. And he is a little prone to slide, even in his own proper person, into those formal courtesies and obsolete compliments which forty years ago survived amongst the superior orders of bagmen and managing clerks.

There is an old topic of discussion whether Dickens could invent an organic and powerful plot, and carry out an elaborate scheme with perfect skill. It is certain that he has never done so, and it can hardly be said that he has ever essayed it. The serial form in parts, wherein almost all his stories were cast, requiring each number of three chapters to be “assorted,” like sugar-plums, with grave and gay, so as to tell just enough but not too much, made a highly-wrought scheme almost impossible. It is plain that Charles Dickens had nothing of that epical gift which gave us *Tom Jones* and *Ivanhoe*. Perhaps the persistent use of the serial form shows that he felt no interest in that supreme art of an immense drama duly unfolded to a prepared end. In *Pickwick* there neither was, nor could there be, any organic plot. In *Oliver Twist*,



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in *Barnaby Rudge*, in *Dombey*, in *Bleak House*, in the *Tale of Two Cities*, there are indications of his possessing this power, and in certain parts of these tales we seem to be in the presence of a great master of epical narration. But the power is not sustained; and it must be confessed that in none of these tales is there a complete and equal scheme. In most of the other books, especially in those after *Bleak House*, the plot is so artless, so *decousu*, so confused, that even practised readers of Dickens fail to keep it clear in their mind. The serial form, where a leading character wanders about to various places, and meets a succession of quaint parties, seems to be that which suited his genius and which he himself most entirely enjoyed.

In contrast with the Pickwickian method of comic rambles in search of human “curios,” Dickens introduced some darker effects and persons of a more or less sensational kind. Some of these are as powerful as anything in modern fiction; and Fagin and Bill Sikes, Smike and Poor Jo, the Gordon riots and the storms at sea, may stand beside some tableaux of Victor Hugo for lurid power and intense realism. But it was only at times and during the first half of his career that Dickens could keep clear of melodrama and somewhat stagey blue fire. And at times his blue fire was of a very cheap kind. Rosa Dartle and Carker, Steerforth and Blandois, Quilp and Uriah Heep, have a melancholy glitter of the footlights over them. We cannot see what the villains want, except to look villainous, and we fail to make out where is the danger to the innocent victims. We find the villain of the piece frantically struggling to get some paper, or to get hold of some boy or girl. But as the scene is in London in the nineteenth century, and not in Naples in the fifteenth century, we cannot see who is in real danger, or why, or of what. And with all this, Dickens was not incapable of bathos, or tragedy suddenly exploding in farce. The end of Krook by spontaneous combustion is such a case; but a worse case is the death of Dora, Copperfield’s baby wife, along with that of the lap-dog, Jip. This is one of those unforgotten, unpardonable, egregious blunders in art, in feeling, even in decency, which must finally exclude Charles Dickens from the rank of the true immortals.

But his books will long be read for his wonderful successes, and his weaker pieces will entirely be laid aside as are the failures of so many great men, the rubbish of Fielding, of Goldsmith, of Defoe; which do nothing now to dim the glory of *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. The glory of Charles Dickens will always be in his *Pickwick*, his first, his best, his inimitable triumph. It is true that it is a novel without a plot, without beginning, middle, or end, with much more of caricature than of character, with some extravagant tom-foolery, and plenty of vulgarity. But its

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originality, its irrepressible drolleries, its substantial human nature, and its intense vitality, place it quite in a class by itself. We can no more group it, or test it by any canon of criticism, than we could group or define *Pantagruel* or *Faust*. There are some works of genius which seem to transcend all criticism, of which the very extravagances and incoherences increase the charm. And *Pickwick* ought to live with *Gil Blas* and *Tristram Shandy*. In a deeper vein, the tragic scenes in *Oliver Twist* and in *Barnaby Rudge* must long hold their ground, for they can be read and re-read in youth, in manhood, in old age. The story of Dotheboys Hall, the Yarmouth memories of Copperfield, Little Nell, Mrs. Gamp, Micawber, Toots, Captain Cuttle, Pecksniff, and many more will long continue to delight the youth of the English-speaking races. But few writers are remembered so keenly by certain characters, certain scenes, incidental whimsies, and so little for entire novels treated strictly as works of art. There is no reason whatever for pretending that all these scores of tales are at all to be compared with the best of them, or that the invention of some inimitable scenes and characters is enough to make a supreme and faultless artist. The young and the uncritical make too much of Charles Dickens, when they fail to distinguish between his best and his worst. Their fastidious seniors make too little of him, when they note his many shortcomings and fail to see that in certain elements of humour he has no equal and no rival. If we mean Charles Dickens to live we must fix our eye on these supreme gifts alone.

## VII

### CHARLOTTE BRONTE

They who are still youthful in the nineties can hardly understand the thrill which went through us all in the forties upon the appearance of *Jane Eyre*, on the discovery of a new genius and a new style. The reputation of most later writers grew by degrees and by repeated impressions of good work. Trollope, George Eliot, Stevenson, George Meredith, did not conquer the interest of the larger public until after many books and by gradual widening of the judgment of experts. But little Charlotte Bronte, who published but three tales in six years and who died at the age of thirty-eight, bounded into immediate fame—a fame that after nearly fifty years we do not even now find to have been excessive.

And then, there was such personal interest in the writer's self, in her intense individuality, in her strong character; there was so much sympathy with her hard and lonely life; there was such pathos in her family history and the tragedy which threw gloom over her whole life, and cut it off in youth after a few months of happiness. To have lived in poverty, in a remote and wild moorland, almost friendless and in continual struggle against sickness, to have been motherless since the age of five, to have lost

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four sisters and a brother before she was more than thirty-three, to have been sole survivor of a large household, to have passed a life of continual weakness, toil, and suffering—and then to be cut off after nine months of marriage,—all this touched the sympathies of the world as the private life of few writers touches them. And then the shock of her sudden death came upon us as a personal sorrow. Such genius, such courage, such perseverance, such promise—and yet but three books in all, published at intervals of two and of four years! There was meaning in the somewhat unusual form in which Mrs. Gaskell opens her *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, setting out verbatim in her first chapter the seven memorial inscriptions to the buried family in Haworth Church, and placing on the title-page a vignette of Haworth churchyard with its white tombstones. Charlotte Bronte was a kind of prosaic, most demure and orthodox Shelley in the Victorian literature—with visible genius, an intense personality, unquenchable fire, an early and tragic death. And all this passion in a little prim, shy, delicate, proud Puritan girl!

To this sympathy our great writer, whom she herself called “the first social regenerator of the day,” did full justice in that beautiful little piece which he wrote in the *Cornhill Magazine* upon her death and which is the last of the *Roundabout Papers* in the twenty-second volume of Thackeray’s collected works. It is called *The Last Sketch*: it is so eloquent, so true, so sympathetic that it deserves to be remembered, and yet after forty years it is too seldom read.

Of the multitude that have read her books, who has not known and deplored the tragedy of her family, her own most sad and untimely fate? Which of her readers has not become her friend? Who that has known her books has not admired the artist’s noble English, the burning love of truth, the bravery, the simplicity, the indignation at wrong, the eager sympathy, the pious love and reverence, the passionate honour, so to speak, of the woman? What a story is that of that family of poets in their solitude yonder on the gloomy northern moors!

He goes on to deplore that “the heart newly awakened to love and happiness, and throbbing with maternal hope, had ceased to beat.” He speaks of her “trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes.” He speaks of his recollections of her in society, of “the impetuous honesty” which seemed the character of the woman—

I fancied an austere little Joan of Arc marching in upon us, and rebuking our easy lives, our easy morals. She gave me the impression of being a very pure, and lofty, and high-minded person. A great and holy reverence of right and truth seemed to be with her always. Such, in our brief interview, she appeared to me. As one thinks of that life so noble, so lonely,—of that passion for truth—of those nights and nights of eager study, swarming fancies,

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invention, depression, elation, prayer; as one reads the necessarily incomplete, though most touching and admirable history of the heart that throbbed in this one little frame—of this one amongst the myriads of souls that have lived and died on this great earth—this great earth?—this little speck in the infinite universe of God—with what wonder do we think of to-day, with what awe await to-morrow, when that which is now but darkly seen shall be clear!

It is quite natural and right that Thackeray, Mrs. Gaskell, indeed all who have spoken of the author of *Jane Eyre*, should insist primarily on the personality of Charlotte Bronte. It is this intense personality which is the distinctive note of her books. They are not so much tales as imaginary autobiographies. They are not objective presentations of men and women in the world. They are subjective sketches of a Bronte under various conditions, and of the few men and women who occasionally cross the narrow circle of the Bronte world. Of the three stories she published, two are autobiographies, and the third is a fancy portrait of her sister Emily. Charlotte Bronte is herself *Jane Eyre* and Lucy Snowe, and Emily Bronte is Shirley Keeldar. So in *The Professor*, her earliest but posthumous tale, Frances Henri again is simply a little Swiss Bronte. That story also is told as an autobiography, but, though the narrator is supposed to be one William Crimsworth, it is a woman who speaks, sees, and dreams all through the book. The four tales, which together were the work of eight years, are all variations upon a Bronte and the two Bronte worlds in Yorkshire and Belgium. It is most significant (but quite natural) that Mrs. Gaskell in her *Life of Charlotte Bronte* devotes more than half her book to the story of the family before the publication of *Jane Eyre*. The four tales are not so much romances as artistic and imaginative autobiographies.

To say this is by no means to detract from their rare value. The romances of adventure, of incident, of intrigue, of character, of society, or of humour, depend on a great variety of observation and a multiplicity of contrasts. There is not much of Walter Scott, as a man, in *Ivanhoe* or of Alexander Dumas in the *Trois Mousquetaires*; and Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Bulwer, Miss Edgeworth, Stevenson, and Meredith—even Miss Austen and George Eliot—seek to paint men and women whom they conceive and whom we may see and know, and not themselves and their own home circle. But Charlotte Bronte told us her own life, her own feelings, sufferings, pride, joy, and ambition. She bared for us her own inner soul, and all that it had known and desired, and this she did with a noble, pure, simple, but intense truth. There was neither egoism, nor monotony, nor commonplace in it. It was all coloured with native imagination and a sense of true art. There is ample room in Art for these subjective idealisations of even the narrowest world. Shelley's lyrics are intensely self-centred, but no one can find in them either realism or egoism. The field in prose is far more limited, and the risk of becoming tedious and morbid is greater. But a true artist can now and then in prose produce most precious portraits of self and glowing autobiographic fantasies of a noble kind.

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And Charlotte Bronte was a true artist. She was also more than this; a brave, sincere, high-minded woman, with a soul, as the great moralist saw, “of impetuous honesty.” She was not seduced, or even moved, by her sudden fame. She put aside the prospect of success, money, and social distinction as things which revolted her. She was quite right. With all her genius it was strictly and narrowly limited; she was ignorant of the world to a degree immeasurably below that of any other known writer of fiction; her world was incredibly scanty and barren. She had to spin everything out of her own brain in that cold, still, gruesome Haworth parsonage. It was impossible for any genius to paint a world of which it was as ignorant as a child. Hence, in eight years she only completed four tales for publication. And she did right. With her strict limits both of brain and of experience she could not go further. Perhaps, as it was, she did more than was needed. *Shirley* and *Villette*, with all their fine scenes, are interesting now mainly because Charlotte Bronte wrote them, and because they throw light upon her brain and nature. *The Professor* is entirely so, and has hardly any other quality. We need not groan that we have no more than we have from her pen. *Jane Eyre* would suffice for many reputations and alone will live.

In considering the gifted Bronte family, it is really Charlotte alone who finally concerns us. Emily Bronte was a wild, original, and striking creature, but her one book is a kind of prose *Kubla Khan*—a nightmare of the superheated imagination. Anne Bronte always seems but a pale reflection of the family. In any other family she might be interesting—just as “Barrel Mirabeau” was the good boy and fool of the Mirabeau family, though in another family he would have been the genius and the profligate. And so, the poems of the whole three are interesting as psychologic studies, but have hardly a single stanza that can be called poetry at all. It is significant, but hardly paradoxical, that Charlotte’s verses are the worst of the three. How many born writers of musical prose have persisted in manufacturing verse of a curiously dull and unmelodious quality! The absolute masters of prose and of verse in equal perfection hardly exceed Shakespeare and Shelley, Goethe and Hugo. And Charlotte Bronte is an eminent example of a strong imagination working with freedom in prose, but which began by using the instrument of verse, and used it in a manner that never rose for an instant above mediocrity.

Of the Brontes it is Charlotte only who concerns us, and of Charlotte’s work it is *Jane Eyre* only that can be called a masterpiece. To call it a masterpiece, as Thackeray did, is not to deny its manifold and manifest shortcomings. It is a very small corner of the world that it gives, and that world is seen by a single acute observer from without. The plain little governess dominates

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the whole book and fills every page. Everything and every one appear, not as we see them and know them in the world, but as they look to a keen-eyed girl who had hardly ever left her native village. Had the whole book been cast into the form of impersonal narration, this limitation, this huge ignorance of life, this amateur's attempt to construct a romance by the light of nature instead of observation and study of persons, would have been a failure. As the autobiography of Jane Eyre—let us say at once of Charlotte Bronte—it is consummate art. It produces the illusion we feel in reading *Robinson Crusoe*. In the whole range of modern fiction there are few characters whom we feel that we know so intimately as we do Jane Eyre. She is as intensely familiar to us as Becky Sharp or Parson Adams. Much more than this. Not only do we feel an intimate knowledge of Jane Eyre, but we see every one by the eyes of Jane Eyre only. Edward Rochester has not a few touches of the melodramatic villain; and no man would ever draw a man with such conventional and Byronic extravagances. If Edward Rochester had been described in impersonal narrative with all his brutalities, his stage villain frowns, and his Grand Turk whims, it would have spoiled the book. But Edward Rochester, the “master” of the little governess, as seen by the eyes of a passionate, romantic, but utterly unsophisticated girl, is a powerful character; and all the inconsistencies, the affectation, the savageries we might detect in him, become the natural love-dream of a most imaginative and most ignorant young woman.

A consummate master of style has spoken, we have just seen, of the “noble English” that Charlotte Bronte wrote. It is true that she never reached the exquisite ease, culture, and raciness of Thackeray's English. She lapsed now and then into provincial solecisms; she “named” facts as well as persons; girls talk of a “beautiful man”; nor did she know anything of the scientific elaboration of George Eliot or the subtle grace of Stevenson. But the style is of high quality and conscientious finish—terse, pure, picturesque, and sound. Like everything she did, it was most scrupulously honest—the result of a sincere and vivid soul, resolved to utter what it had most at heart in the clearest tone. Very few writers of romance have ever been masters of a style so effective, so nervous, so capable of rising into floods of melody and pathos. There is a fine passage of the kind in one of her least-known books, the earliest indeed of all, which no publisher could be found in her lifetime to print. The “Professor” has just proposed, has been accepted, and goes home to bed half-crazy and fasting. A sudden reaction falls on his over-wrought nerves.



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A horror of great darkness fell upon me; I felt my chamber invaded by one I had known formerly, but had thought for ever departed. I was temporarily a prey to hypochondria. She had been my acquaintance, nay, my guest, once before in boyhood; I had entertained her at bed and board for a year; for that space of time I had her to myself in secret; she lay with me, she ate with me, she walked out with me, showing me nooks in woods, hollows in hills, where we could sit together, and where she could drop her drear veil over me, and so hide sky and sun, grass and green tree; taking me entirely to her death-cold bosom, and holding me with arms of bone. What tales she would tell me at such hours! What songs she would recite in my ears! How she would discourse to me of her own country—the grave—and again and again promise to conduct me there ere long; and drawing me to the very brink of a black, sullen river, show me, on the other side, shores unequal with mound, monument, and tablet, standing up in a glimmer more hoary than moonlight. “Necropolis!” she would whisper, pointing to the pale piles, and add, “It contains a mansion prepared for you.”

Finely imagined—finely said! It has the ring and weird mystery of De Quincey. There are phrases that Thackeray would not have used, such as jar on the ear and betray an immature taste. “Necropolis” is a strange affectation when “City of the Dead” was at hand; and “pointing to the pale piles” is a hideous alliteration. But in spite of such immaturities (and the writer never saw the text in type) the passage shows wonderful power of language and sense of music in prose. How fine is the sentence, “taking me to her death-cold bosom, and holding me with arms of bone,” and that of the tombstones, “in a glimmer more hoary than moonlight” Coleridge might have used such a phrase in the *Ancient Mariner* or in *Christabel*. Yet these were the thoughts and the words of a lonely girl of thirty as she watched the dreary churchyard at Haworth from the windows of its unlovely parsonage.

This vivid power of painting in words is specially called forth by the look of nature and the scenes she describes. Charlotte Bronte had, in the highest degree, that which Ruskin has called the “pathetic fallacy,” the eye which beholds nature coloured by the light of the inner soul. In this quality she really reaches the level of fine poetry. Her intense sympathy with her native moors and glens is akin to that of Wordsworth. She almost never attempts to describe any scenery with which she is not deeply familiar. But how wonderfully she catches the tone of her own moorland, skies, storm-winds, secluded hall or cottage!



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The charm of the hour lay in its approaching dimness, in the low-gliding and pale-beaming sun. I was a mile from Thornfield, in a lane noted for wild roses in summer, for nuts and blackberries in autumn, and even now possessing a few coral treasures in hips and haws, but whose best winter delight lay in its utter solitude and leafless repose. If a breath of air stirred, it made no sound here; for there was not a holly, not an evergreen to rustle, and the stripped hawthorn and hazel bushes were as still as the white worn stones which causewayed the middle of the path. Far and wide, on each side, there were only fields, where no cattle now browsed; and the little brown birds, which stirred occasionally in the hedge, looked like single russet leaves that had forgotten to drop. . . . From my seat I could look down on Thornfield: the gray and battlemented hall was the principal object in the vale below me; its woods and dark rookery rose against the west. I lingered till the sun went down amongst the trees, and sank crimson and clear behind them.

How admirable is this icy hush of nature in breathless expectation of the first coming of the master of Thornfield—of the master of Jane herself. And yet, how simple in phrase, how pure, how Wordsworthian in its sympathy with earth even in her most bare and sober hues! And then that storm which ushers in the story of the Vampyre woman tearing Jane's wedding veil at her bedside, when "the clouds drifted from pole to pole, fast following, mass on mass." And as Jane watches the shivered chestnut-tree, "black and riven, the trunk, split down the centre, gasped ghastly"—a strange but powerful alliteration. "The moon appeared momentarily in that part of the sky which filled the fissure; her disk was blood-red and half overcast; she seemed to throw on me one bewildered, dreary glance, and buried herself again instantly in the deep drift of cloud." An admirable overture to that terrific scene of the mad wife's visit to the rival's bed.

Charlotte Bronte is great in clouds, like a prose Shelley. We all recall that mysterious storm in which *Villette* darkly closes, and with it the expected bridegroom of Lucy Snowe

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The wind takes its autumn moan; but—he is coming. The skies hang full and dark—a rack sails from the west; the clouds cast themselves into strange forms—arches and broad radiations; there rise resplendent mornings—glorious, royal, purple as monarch in his state; the heavens are one flame; so wild are they, they rival battle at its thickest—so bloody, they shame Victory in her pride. . . . When the sun returned his light was night to some!

And into that night Lucy's master, lover, husband has for ever passed.

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This sympathy with nature, and this power to invest it with feeling for the human drama of which it is the scene, lifts little Charlotte Bronte into the company of the poets. No one, however, can enter into all the art of her landscapes unless he knows those Yorkshire moors, the straggling upland villages, bare, cold, gray, uncanny, with low, unlovely stone buildings, and stern church towers and graveyards, varied with brawling brooks and wooded glens, and here and there a grim manor-house that had seen war. It is so often that the dwellers in the least picturesque and smiling countries are found to love their native country best and to invest it with the most enduring art. And the pilgrims to Haworth Parsonage have in times past been as ardent as those who flock to Grasmere or to Abbotsford.

*Jane Eyre* is full of this “pathetic fallacy,” or aspect of nature dyed in the human emotions of which it is the mute witness. The storm in the garden at night when Rochester first offers marriage to his little governess, and they return to the house drenched in rain and melted with joy, is a fine example of this power. From first to last, the correspondence between the local scene and the human drama is a distinctive mark in *Jane Eyre*.

If I were asked to choose that scene in the whole tale which impresses itself most on my memory, I should turn to the thirty-sixth chapter when Jane comes back to have a look at Thornfield Hall, peeps on the battlemented mansion which she had loved so well, and is struck dumb to find it burnt out to a mere skeleton—“I looked with timorous joy toward a stately house: I saw a blackened ruin.” The suddenness of this shock, its unexpected and yet natural catastrophe, its mysterious imagery of the loves of Edward Rochester and Jane Eyre, and the intense sympathy which earth, wood, rookery, and ruin seem to feel for the girl’s eagerness, amazement, and horror, have always seemed to me to reach the highest note of art in romance. It is now forty-seven years since I first read that piece; and in all these years I have found no single scene in later fiction which is so vividly and indelibly burnt into the memory as is this. The whole of this chapter, and what follows it, is intensely real and true. And the very denouement of the tale itself—that inevitable bathos into which the romance so often dribbles out its last inglorious breath—has a manliness and sincerity of its own: “the sky is no longer a blank to him—the earth no longer a void.”

The famous scene in the twenty-sixth chapter with the interrupted marriage, when Rochester drags the whole bridal party into the den of his maniacal wife, the wild struggle with the mad woman, the despair of Jane—all this is as powerful as anything whatever in English fiction. It is even a masterpiece of ingenious construction and dramatic action. It is difficult to form a cool estimate of a piece so intense, so vivid, and so artful in its mechanism.

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The whole incident is conceived with the most perfect reality; the plot is original, startling, and yet not wholly extravagant. But it must be confessed that the plot is not worked out in details in a faultless way. It is undoubtedly in substance “sensational,” and has been called the parent of modern sensationalism. Edward Rochester acts as a Rochester might; but he too often talks like the “wicked baronet” of low melodrama. The execution is not always quite equal to the conception. The affiance of Jane and Edward Rochester, their attempted marriage, the wild temptation of Jane, her fierce rebuff of the tempter, his despair and remorse, her agony and flight—all are consummate in conception, marred here and there as they are in details by the blue fire and conventional imprecations of the stage.

The concluding chapters of the book, when Jane finally rejects St. John Rivers and goes back to Thornfield and to her “master,” are all indeed excellent. St. John is not successful as a character; but he serves to produce the crisis and to be foil to Rochester. St. John, it is true, is not a real being: like Rochester, he is a type of man as he affects the brain and heart of a highly sensitive and imaginative girl. Objectively speaking, as men living and acting in a practical world, St. John and Rochester are both in some degree caricatures of men; and, if the narrative were a cold story calmly composed by a certain Miss Bronte to amuse us, we could not avoid the sense of unreality in the men. But the intensity of the vision, the realism of every scene, the fierce yet self-governed passion of Jane herself, pouring out, as in a secret diary, her agonies of love, of scorn, of pride, of abandonment,—all this produces an illusion on us: we are no longer reading a novel of society, but we are admitted to the wild musings of a girl’s soul; and, though she makes out her first lover to be a generous brute and her second lover to be a devout machine, we feel it quite natural that Jane, with her pride and her heart of fire and her romantic brain, should so in her diary describe them.

St. John Rivers, if we take him coolly outside of Jane’s portrait gallery, is little more than a puppet. We never seem to get nearer to his own mind and heart, and his conduct and language are hardly compatible with the noble attributes with which he is said to be adorned. A man of such refined culture, of such high intelligence, of such social distinction and experience, of such angelic character, does not treat women with studied insolence and diabolical cynicism. That a girl, half maddened by disappointed love, should romantically come to erect his image into that of a sort of diabolic angel, is natural enough, and her conduct when she leaves Moor House is right and true, though we cannot say as much for Rivers’ words. But the impression of the whole scene is right.

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In the same way, Edward Rochester, if we take him simply as a cultured and travelled country gentleman, who was a magnate and great *parti* in his county, is barely within the range of possibility. As St. John Rivers is a walking contradictory of a diabolic saint, so Edward Rochester is a violent specimen of the heroic ruffian. In Emily Brontë's gruesome phantasmagoria of *Wuthering Heights* there is a ruffian named Heathcliff; and, whatever be his brutalities and imprecations, we always feel in reading it that *Wuthering Heights* is merely a grisly dream, not a novel at all. Edward Rochester has something of the Heathcliff too. But Rochester is a man of the best English society, courted by wealth and rank, a man of cultivated tastes, of wide experience and refined habits, and lastly of most generous and heroic impulses—and yet such a man swears at his people like a horse-dealer, teases and bullies his little governess, treats his adopted child like a dog, almost kicks his brother-in-law in his rages, plays shocking tricks with his governess at night, offers her marriage, and attempts to commit bigamy in his own parish with his living wife still under the same roof! That a man of Rochester's resource, experience, and forethought, should keep his maniac wife in his own ancestral home where he is entertaining the county families and courting a neighbouring peer's sister, and that, after the maniac had often attempted murder and arson—all this is beyond the range of probabilities. And yet the story could not go on without it. And so, Edward Rochester, man of the world as he is, risks his life, his home, and everything and every one dear to him in order that his little governess, Jane Eyre, should have the materials for inditing a thrilling autobiography. It cannot be denied that this is the very essence of "sensationalism," which means a succession of thrilling surprises constructed out of situations that are practically impossible.

Nor, alas! can we deny that there are ugly bits of real coarseness in *Jane Eyre*. It is true that most of them are the effects of that portentous ignorance of the world and of civilised society which the solitary dreamer of Haworth Parsonage had no means of removing. The fine ladies, the lords and soldiers in the drawing-room at Thornfield are described with inimitable life, but they are described as they appeared to the lady's-maids, not to each other or to the world. Charlotte Brontë perhaps did not know that an elegant girl of rank does not in a friend's house address her host's footman before his guests in these words—"Cease that chatter, blockhead! and do my bidding." Nor does a gentleman speak to his governess of the same lady whom he is thought to be about to marry in these terms—"She is a rare one, is she not, Jane? A strapper—a real strapper, Jane: big, brown, and buxom." But all these things are rather the result of pure ignorance. Charlotte Brontë, when she wrote her

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first book, had hardly ever seen any Englishmen but a few curates, the villagers, and her degraded brother, with rare glimpses of lower middle-class homes. But Jane Eyre's own doings and sayings are hardly the effect of mere ignorance. Her nocturnal adventures with her "master" are given with delightful *naïvete*; her consenting to hear out her "master's" story of his foreign amours is not pleasant. Her two avowals to Edward Rochester—one before he had declared his love for her, and the other on her return to him—are certainly somewhat frank. Jane Eyre in truth does all but propose marriage twice to Edward Rochester; and she is the first to avow her love, even when she believed he was about to marry another woman. It is indeed wrung from her; it is human nature; it is a splendid encounter of passion; and if it be bold in the little woman, it is redeemed by her noble defiance of his tainted suit, and her desperate flight from her married lover.

But Jane Eyre's ignorances and simplicities, the improbabilities of her men, the violence of the plot, the weird romance about her own life, are all made acceptable to us by being shown to us only through the secret visions of a passionate and romantic girl. As the autobiography of a brave and original woman, who bares to us her whole heart without reserve and without fear, *Jane Eyre* stands forth as a great book of the nineteenth century. It stands just in the middle of the century, when men were still under the spell of Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, and yet it is not wholly alien to the methods of our latest realists.

It is true that a purely subjective work in prose romance, an autobiographic revelation of a sensitive heart, is not the highest and certainly not the widest art. Scott and Thackeray—even Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth—paint the world, or part of the world, as it is, crowded with men and women of various characters. Charlotte Brontë painted not the world, hardly a corner of the world, but the very soul of one proud and loving girl. That is enough: we need ask no more. It was done with consummate power. We feel that we know her life, from ill-used childhood to her proud matronhood; we know her home, her school, her professional duties, her loves and hates, her agonies and her joys, with that intense familiarity and certainty of vision with which our own personal memories are graven on our brain. With all its faults, its narrowness of range, its occasional extravagances, *Jane Eyre* will long be remembered as one of the most creative influences of the Victorian literature, one of the most poetic pieces of English romance, and among the most vivid masterpieces in the rare order of literary "Confessions."

## VIII

CHARLES KINGSLEY

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In this series of papers I have been trying to note some of the more definite literary forces which tended to mould English opinion during the epoch of the present Queen. I can remember the issue of nearly all the greater products of the Victorian writers, or at least the heyday of their early fame. I do not speak of any living writer, and confine myself to the writers of our country. Much less do I permit myself to speak of those living lights of literature from whom we may yet receive work even surpassing that of those who are gone. My aim has been not so much to weigh each writer in the delicate balance of mere literary merit, but rather, from the point of view of the historian of ideas and of manners, to record the successive influences which, in the last fifty years or so, have moulded or reflected English opinion through printed books, be they of the dogmatic or of the imaginative order. In so doing, I have to speak of writers whose vogue is passing away with the present generation, or those of whom we must admit very grave defects and feebleness. Some of them may be little cared for to-day; though they have a place in the evolution of British society and thought.

Charles Kingsley has such a place—not by reason of any supreme work or any very rare quality of his own, but by virtue of his versatility, his verve, his fecundity, his irrepressible gift of breaking out in some new line, his strong and reckless sympathy, and above all by real literary brilliance. Where he failed to impress, to teach, to inspire—almost even though he stirred men to anger or laughter—Charles Kingsley for a generation continued to interest the public, to scatter amongst them ideas or problems; he made many people think, and gave many people delight. He woke them up in all sorts of ways, about all sorts of things. He wrote lyrics, songs, dramas, romances, sermons, Platonic dialogues, newspaper articles, children's fairy books, scientific manuals, philosophical essays, lectures, extravaganzas, and theological polemics. Hardly any of these were quite in the first rank, and some of them were thin, flashy, and almost silly. But most of them had the saving gift of getting home to the interests, ideas, and tastes of the great public, and he made them think even when he was very wrong himself. Such activity, such keenness, such command of literary resources, has to be reckoned with in a man of warm feeling and generous impulses; and thus, if Charles Kingsley is no longer with very many either prophet or master, he was a literary influence of at least the second rank in his own generation.

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This would not be enough to make a permanent reputation if it stood alone; but there were moments in which he bounded into the first rank. It would hardly be safe to call Kingsley a poet of great pretension, although there are passages in *The Saint's Tragedy* and in the *Ballads* of real power; but he has written songs which, as songs for the voice, have hardly been surpassed by Tennyson himself. *The Sands of Dee* and *The Three Fishers*, if not poetry of quite perfect kind, have that incommunicable and indescribable element of the *cantabile* which fits them to the wail of a sympathetic voice perhaps even better than any songs of the most finished poetry. A true song must be simple, familiar, musically suggestive of a single touching idea, and nothing more. And this is just the mysterious quality of these songs and the source of their immense popularity. Again, without pretending that Kingsley is a great novelist, there are scenes, especially descriptive scenes, in *Hypatia*, in *Westward Ho!* which belong to the very highest order of literary painting, and have hardly any superior in the romances of our era. No romances, except Thackeray's, have the same glow of style in such profusion and variety; and Thackeray himself was no such poet of natural beauty as Charles Kingsley—a poet, be it remembered, who by sheer force of imagination could realise for us landscapes and climates of which he himself had no sort of experience. Even Scott himself has hardly done this with so vivid a brush.

Kingsley was a striking example of that which is so characteristic of recent English literature—its strong, practical, social, ethical, or theological bent. It is in marked contrast with French literature. Our writers are always using their literary gifts to preach, to teach, to promulgate a new social or religious movement, to reform somebody or something to illustrate a new doctrine. From first to last, Carlyle regarded himself even more as preacher than as artist: so does his follower, Mr. Ruskin. Macaulay seemed to write history in order to prove the immeasurable superiority of the Whig to the Tory; and Froude and Freeman write history to enforce their own moral. Disraeli's novels were the programme of a party and the defence of a cause; and even Dickens and Thackeray plant their knives deep into the social abuses of their time. Charles Kingsley was not professed novelist, nor professed man of letters. He was novelist, poet, essayist, and historian, almost by accident, or with ulterior aims. Essentially, he was a moralist, a preacher, a socialist, a reformer, and a theologian.





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To begin with his poetry, and he himself began his literary career with verses at the age of sixteen, he began to write poetry almost as a child, and some of his earlier verses are his best. If Kingsley, with all his literary gifts, was never quite in the first rank in anything, he came nearest to being a poet of mark. Some of his ballads almost touch the high-water mark of true ballad poetry, with its abrupt fierce blows of tragedy and pathos, its simple touches of primitive rude speech, its reserve of force, its unspoken mysteries. At any rate, Kingsley's best ballads have no superior in the ballads of the Victorian era in lilt, in massiveness of stroke, in strange unexpected turns. *The Weird Lady* is an astonishing piece for a lad of twenty-one—it begins with, "The swevens came up round Harold the Earl, Like motes in the sunnes beam"—and it ends with the stanza:

A white dove out of the coffin flew;  
Earl Harold's mouth it kist;  
He fell on his face, wherever he stood;  
And the white dove carried his soul to God  
Or ever the bearers wist.

That little piece is surely a bit of pure and rare ballad poetry.

*A New Forest Ballad* is also good, it ends thus—

They dug three graves in Lyndhurst yard;  
They dug them side by side;  
Two yeomen lie there, and a maiden fair,  
A widow and never a bride.

So too is the *Outlaw*, whose last request is this:—

And when I'm taen and hangit, mither,  
a brittling o' my deer,  
Ye'll no leave your bairn to the corbie craws,  
to dangle in the air;  
But ye'll send up my twa douce brethren,  
and ye'll steal me fra the tree,  
And bury me up on the brown, brown muirs,  
where I aye loved to be.

The famous ballad in *Yeast* might have been a great success if Kingsley would have limited it to five stanzas instead of twenty. What a ring there is in the opening lines—

The merry brown hares came leaping  
Over the crest of the hill—

If he could only have been satisfied with the first five stanzas what a ballad it would have been!—If only he had closed it with the verse—

She thought of the dark plantation  
And the hares, and her husband's blood,  
And the voice of her indignation  
Rose up to the throne of God.

That was enough for a ballad, but not for a political novel. The other fifteen stanzas were required for his story; they may be vigorous rhetoric, impressive moralising, but they are too argumentative and too rhetorical to be ballad poetry. It is curious how much of Kingsley's work, both poetry and prose, is inspired by his love of sport and his indignation at game laws!

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His songs, spoiled as they are to our ears by poor music and too often maudlin voices, are as good songs and as fitted for singing as any in our time. *The Sands of Dee*, hacknied and vulgarised as it is by the banalities of the drawing-room, is really (to use a hacknied and vulgarised phrase) a “haunting” piece of song; and though Ruskin may pronounce “the cruel crawling foam” to be a false use of the pathetic fallacy, the song, for what it professes to be, is certainly a thing to live. I have always felt more kindly toward the East wind since Kingsley’s *Welcome, wild North-Easter!*; and his Church Hymns such as—*Who will say the world is dying?* and *The Day of the Lord is at hand, at hand!*—are far above the level even of the better modern hymns.

We have not yet touched upon Kingsley’s longest and most ambitious poem—*The Saint’s Tragedy*. With all its merits and beauties it is a mistake. It was avowedly a controversial diatribe against the celibacy and priestcraft of Romanism, and was originally designed to be in prose. That is not a safe basis for a dramatic poem, and the poem suffers from the fact that it is in great part a theological pamphlet. It would have made a most interesting historical novel as a mediaeval pendant to *Hypatia*; but it is not a great lyrical drama. As we have had no great lyrical drama at all since *Manfred* and *The Cenci*, that is not much in its dispraise. There are powerful passages, much poetic grace in the piece; but the four thousand lines of this elaborate polemical poem rather weary us, and a perfervid appeal to the Protestantism and uxoriousness of Britons should have been cast into other moulds.

The long poem of *Andromeda* almost succeeds in that impossible feat—the revival of the hexameter in English. It may be a hard saying to the countrymen of Longfellow, but the truth is that the hexameter is a metrical monster in our English speech. The paucity of easy dactyls and the absence of all true spondees in English words, the preponderance of consonants over vowels, the want of inflected forms, and other peculiarities in our language—make the hexameter incapable of transplantation; and this magnificent metre loses with us all its majesty, its ease, its beauty. The very line can hardly be printed on an ordinary page, for the immense number of letters in each English verse causes an unsightly doubling of the lines, chokes the voice, and wearies the ear. In the hexameter line of Homer there are usually about thirty letters, of which only twelve are consonants; in the English hexameter there are often sixty letters, of which nearly forty are consonants. And the Homeric hexameter will have six words where the English hexameter has twelve or fourteen.[1] Yet having set himself this utterly hopeless and thankless task, to write English hexameter, Kingsley produced some five hundred lines of *Andromeda*, which in rhythm, ease, rapidity, and metrical correctness are quite amongst the best in the language. It is very rare to meet with any English hexameter which in rhythm, stress, and prosody is perfectly accurate. *Andromeda* contains many such lines, as for example:

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Violet, asphodel, ivy, and vine-leaves, roses and lilies—  
Nereid, siren, and triton, and dolphin, and arrowy fishes.

These lines are true hexameters, chiefly because they consist of Latin and Greek words; and they have little more than forty letters, of which barely more than half are consonants. They would be almost pure hexameters, if in lieu of the long a[a-macron]nd, we could put e[e-breve]t, or te [tau epsilon]. And there are only three Saxon words in the two lines. But hexameters consisting of purely English words, especially of Anglo-Saxon words, halt and stammer like a schoolboy's exercise. The attempt of Kingsley in *Andromeda* is most ingenious and most instructive.

I have dwelt so much upon Kingsley's poetry because, though he was hardly a "minor poet,"—an order which now boasts sixty members—he wrote a few short pieces which came wonderfully near being a great success. And again, it is the imaginative element in all his work, the creative fire and the vivid life which he threw into his prose as much as his verse, into his controversies as much as into his fictions, that gave them their popularity and their savour. Nearly every one of Kingsley's imaginative works was polemical, full of controversy, theological, political, social, and racial; and this alone prevented them from being great works. Interesting works they are; full of vigour, beauty, and ardent conception; and it is wonderful that so much art and fancy could be thrown into what is in substance polemical pamphleteering.

Of them all *Hypatia* is the best known and the best conceived. *Hypatia* was written in 1853 in the prime of his manhood and was on the face of it a controversial work. Its sub-title was—*New Foes with an Old Face*,—its preface elaborates the moral and spiritual ideas that it teaches, the very titles of the chapters bear biblical phrases and classical moralising as their style. I should be sorry to guarantee the accuracy of the local colouring and the detail of its elaborate history; but the life, realism, and pictorial brilliancy of the scenes give it a power which is rare indeed in an historical novel. It has not the great and full knowledge of *Romola*, much less the consummate style and setting of *Esmond*; but it has a vividness, a rapidity, a definiteness which completely enthral the imagination and stamp its scenes on the memory. It is that rare thing, an historical romance which does not drag. It is not one of those romances of which we fail to understand the incidents, and often forget what it is that the personages are struggling so fiercely to obtain. No one who has read *Hypatia* in early life will fail to remember its chief scenes or its leading characters, if he lives to old age. After forty years this romance has been cast into a drama and placed upon the London stage, and it is frequently the subject of some vigorous pictures.

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In any estimate of *Hypatia* as a romance, it is right to consider the curious tangle of difficulties which Kingsley crowded into his task. It was to be a realistic historical novel dated in an age of which the public knew nothing, set in a country of which the author had no experience, but which many of us know under wholly altered conditions. It was to carry on controversies as to the older and the later types of Christianity, as to Polytheism, Judaism, and Monotheism; it was to confute Romanism, Scepticism, and German metaphysics; it was to denounce celibacy and monasticism, to glorify muscular Christianity, to give glowing pictures of Greek sensuousness and Roman rascality, and finally to secure the apotheosis of Scandinavian heroism. And in spite of these incongruous and incompatible aims, the story still remains a vivid and fascinating tale. That makes it a real *tour de force*. It is true that it has many of the faults of Bulwer, a certain staginess, melodramatic soliloquies, careless incongruities, crude sensationalism—but withal, it has some of the merits of Bulwer at his best, in *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Riensi*, *The Last of the Barons*,—the play of human passion and adventure, intensity of reproduction however inaccurate in detail; it has “go,” intelligibility, memorability. The characters interest us, the scenes amuse us, the pictures are not forgotten. The stately beauty of Hypatia, the seductive fascination of Pelagia, the childlike nature of Philammon, the subtle cynicism of Raphael Aben-Ezra, the mighty audacity of the Goths, the fanaticism of Cyril, and the strange clash of three elements of civilisation,—Graeco-Roman, Christian, Teutonic—give us definite impressions, leave a permanent imprint on our thoughts. There are extravagances, theatricalities, impossibilities enough. The Gothic princes comport themselves like British seamen ashore in Suez or Bombay; Raphael talks like young Lancelot Smith in *Yeast*; Hypatia is a Greek Argemone; and Bishop Synesius is merely an African fifth-century Charles Kingsley, what Sydney Smith called a “squarson,” or compound of squire and parson. Still, after all—bating grandiloquences and incongruities and “errors excepted,” *Hypatia* lives, moves, and speaks to us; and, in the matter of vitality and interest, is amongst the very few successes in historical romance in the whole Victorian literature.

*West-ward Ho!* shares with *Hypatia* the merit of being a successful historical romance. It is free from many of the faults of *Hypatia*, it is more mature, more carefully written. It is not laden with the difficulties of *Hypatia*; it is only in part an historical romance at all; the English scenery is placed in a country which Kingsley knew perfectly and from boyhood; and the only controversy involved was the interminable debate about Jesuit mendacity and Romanist priestcraft. So that, if *Westward Ho!* does not present us with the

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weaknesses and the dilemmas of *Hypatia*, on the other hand it is not so brilliant or so rich with interest. But it has real and lasting qualities. The Devon coast scenery which Kingsley knew and loved, the West Indian and tropical scenery, which he loved but did not know, are both painted with wonderful force of imaginative colour. When one recalls all that Kingsley has done in the landscape of romance,—Alexandria and the desert of the Nile, West Indian jungles and rivers, Bideford Bay, his own heaths in *Yeast*, the fever-dens of London in *Alton Locke*,—one is almost inclined to rank him in this single gift of description as first of all the novelists since Scott. Compared with the brilliancy and variety of Kingsley's pictures of country, Bulwer's and Disraeli's are conventional; even those of Dickens are but local; Thackeray and Trollope have no interest in landscape at all; George Eliot's keen interest is not so spontaneous as Kingsley's, and Charlotte Brontë's wonderful gift is strictly limited to the narrow field of her own experience. But Kingsley, as a landscape painter, can image to us other continents and many zones, and he carries us to distant climates with astonishing force of reality.

*Two Years Ago* has some vigorous scenes, but it has neither the merits nor the defects of Kingsley in historical romance. Its scene is too near for his fine imagination to work poetically, and it is too much of a sermon and pamphlet to be worth a second, or a third reading; and as to *Hereward the Wake*, I must confess to not having been able to complete even a first reading, and that after sundry trials. Of Kingsley's remaining fanciful pieces it is enough to say that *The Heroes* still remains, after forty years, the child's introduction to Greek mythology, and is still the best book of its class. When we compare it with another attempt by a romancer of genius, and set it beside the sticky dulness of *The Tanglewood Tales*, it looks like a group of real Tanagra figurines placed beside a painted plaster cast. Kingsley's *Heroes*, in spite of the inevitable sermon addressed in the preface to all good boys and girls, has the real simplicity of Greek art, and the demi-gods tell their myths in noble and pure English. *The Water Babies* is an immortal bit of fun, which will be read in the next century with *Gulliver* and *The Ring and the Rose*, long after we have all forgotten the nonsensical whims about science and the conventional pulpit moralising which Kingsley scattered broadcast into everything he said or wrote.

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We have as yet said nothing about that which was Kingsley's most characteristic and effective work—his political fictions. These were the pieces by which his fame was first achieved, and no doubt they are the works which gave him his chief influence on his generation. But, for that very reason, they suffered most of all his writings as works of art. *Yeast* is a book very difficult to classify. It is not exactly a novel, it is more than a *Dialogue*, it is too romantic for a sermon, it is too imaginative for a pamphlet, it is too full of action for a political and social treatise. Incongruous as it is, it is interesting and effective, and contains some of Kingsley's best work. It has some of his most striking verses, some of his finest pictures of scenery, many of his most eloquent thoughts, all his solid ideas, the passion of his youth, and the first glow of his enthusiasm. It was written before he was thirty, before he thought himself to be a philosopher, before he professed to be entrusted with a direct message from God. Its title—*Yeast*—suggests that it is a ferment thrown into the compound mass of current political, social, and religious ideas, to make them work and issue in some new combination. Kingsley himself was a kind of ferment. His mind was itself destined to cause a violent chemical reaction in the torpid fluids into which it was projected. His early and most amorphous work of *Yeast* did this with singular vigour, in a fresh and reckless way, with rare literary and poetic skill.

If I spoke my whole mind, I should count *Yeast* as Kingsley's typical prose work. It is full of anomalies, full of fallacies, raising difficulties it fails to solve, crying out upon maladies and sores for which it quite omits to offer a remedy. But that is Kingsley all over. He was a mass of over-excited nerves and ill-ordered ideas, much more poet than philosopher, more sympathetic than lucid, full of passionate indignation, recklessly self-confident, cynically disdainful of consistency, patience, good sense. He had the Rousseau temperament, with its furious eloquence, its blind sympathies and antipathies, its splendid sophistries. *Yeast* was plainly the Christian reverse of the Carlyle image and superscription, as read in *Sartor* and *Past and Present*. Kingsley was always profoundly influenced by Frederick D. Maurice, who was a kind of spiritual Carlyle, without the genius or the learning of the mighty *Sartor*, with a fine gift of sympathy instead of sarcasm, with a genuine neo-Christian devoutness in lieu of an old-Hebrew Goetheism. Kingsley had some of Carlyle's passion, of his eloquence, of his power to strike fire out of stones. And so, just because *Yeast* was so disjointed as a composition, so desultory in thought, so splendidly defiant of all the conventions of literature and all the ten commandments of British society in 1849, I am inclined to rank it as Kingsley's typical



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performance in prose. It is more a work of art than *Alton Locke*, for it is much shorter, less akin to journalism, less spasmodic, and more full of poetry. *Yeast* deals with the country—which Kingsley knew better and loved more than he did the town. It deals with real, permanent, deep social evils, and it paints no fancy portrait of the labourer, the squire, the poacher, or the village parson. Kingsley there speaks of what he knew, and he describes that which he felt with the soul of a poet. The hunting scenes in *Yeast*, the river vignettes, the village revel, are exquisite pieces of painting. And the difficulties overcome in the book are extreme. To fuse together a Platonic Dialogue and a Carlyle latter-day pamphlet, and to mould this compound into a rural romance in the style of *Silas Marner*, heightened with extracts from University Pulpit sermons, with some ringing ballads, and political diatribes in the vein of Cobbett's appeals to the People—this was to show wonderful literary versatility and animation. And, after forty-five years, *Yeast* can be read and re-read still!

*Alton Locke* was no doubt more popular, more passionately in earnest, more definite and intelligible than *Yeast*; and if I fail to hold it quite as the equal of *Yeast* in literary merit, it is because these very qualities necessarily impair it as a work of art. It was written, we well know, under violent excitement and by a terrible strain on the neuropathic organism of the poet-preacher. It is undoubtedly spasmodic, crude, and disorderly. A generation which has grown fastidious on the consummate finish of *Esmond*, *Romola*, and *Treasure Island*, is a little critical of the hasty outpourings of spirit which satisfied our fathers in the forties, after the manner of *Sybil*, the *Last of the Barons*, or *Barnaby Rudge*. The Tennysonian modulation of phrase had not yet been popularised in prose, and spasmodic soliloquies and melodramatic eloquence did not offend men so cruelly as they offend us now.

As *Yeast* was inspired by Sartor Resartus, so *Alton Locke* was inspired by Carlyle's *French Revolution*. The effect of Carlyle upon Kingsley is plain enough throughout, down to the day when Carlyle led Kingsley to approve the judicial murder of negroes in Jamaica. Kingsley himself tells us, by the mouth of Alton Locke (chap. ix.), "I know no book, always excepting Milton, which at once so quickened and exalted my poetical view of man and his history, as that great prose poem, *the single epic of modern days*, Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*." Kingsley's three masters were—in poetry, Tennyson; in social philosophy, Carlyle; in things moral and spiritual, Frederick D. Maurice. He had far more of genius than had Maurice; he was a much more passionate reformer than Tennyson; he was far more genial and social than Carlyle. Not that he imitated any of the three. *Yeast* is not at all copied from Sartor, either in form or in thought; nor is *Alton Locke* in any sense imitated from the *French Revolution*. It is inspired by it; but *Yeast* and *Alton Locke* are entirely original, and were native outbursts from Kingsley's own fierce imagination and intense human sympathy.

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And in many ways they were amongst the most powerful influences over the thought of the young of the last generation. In the early fifties we were not so fastidious in the matter of style and composition as we have now become. Furious eloquence and somewhat melodramatic incongruities did not shock us so much, if we found them to come from a really glowing imagination and from genuine inspiration, albeit somewhat unpruned and ill-ordered. Now Kingsley “let himself go,” in the way of Byron, Disraeli, Bulwer, and Dickens, who not seldom poured out their conceptions in what we now hold to be spasmodic form. It is possible that the genteeler taste of our age may prevent the young of to-day from caring for *Alton Locke*. But I can assure them that five-and-forty years ago that book had a great effect and came home to the heart of many. And the effect was permanent and creative. We may see to-day in England widespread results of that potent social movement which was called Christian Socialism, a movement of which Kingsley was neither the founder nor the chief leader, but of which his early books were the main popular exponents, and to which they gave a definiteness and a key which the movement itself sadly lacked.

I was not of an age to take part in that movement, but in after years at the Working Men's College, which grew out of it, I gained a personal knowledge of what was one of the most striking movements of our time. Nowadays, when leading statesmen assure us “we are all Socialists now,” when the demands of the old “Chartists” are Liberal common form, when trades-unionism, co-operation, and state-aided benefits are largely supported by politicians, churchmen, journals, and writers, it is difficult for us now to conceive the bitter opposition which assailed the small band of reformers who, five-and-forty years ago, spoke up for these reforms. Of that small band, who stood alone amongst the literary, academic, and ecclesiastical class, Charles Kingsley was the most outspoken, the most eloquent, and assuredly the most effective. I do not say the wisest, the most consistent, or the most staunch; nor need we here discuss the strength or the weakness of the Christian Socialist reform. When we remember how widely this vague initiative has spread and developed, when we read again *Alton Locke* and *Yeast*, and note how much has been practically done in forty years to redress or mitigate the abuses against which these books uttered the first burning protest, we may form some estimate of all that the present generation of Englishmen owes to Charles Kingsley and his friends.

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I have dwelt last and most seriously upon Kingsley's earliest books, because they were in many respects his most powerful, his typical works. As he grew in years, he did not develop. He improved for a time in literary form, but his excitable nerve-system, his impulsive imagination, drove him into tasks for which he had no gift, and where he floated hither and thither without sure guide. From the time of his official success, that is, for the last fifteen years of his life, he produced nothing worthy of himself, and much that was manifest book-making—the mere outpouring of the professional preacher and story-teller. Of his historical and philosophical work I shall not speak at all. His shallow Cambridge Inaugural Lecture, given by him as Professor of History, was torn to pieces in the *Westminster Review* (vol. xix. p. 305, April 1861), it is said, by a brother Professor of History. Much less need we speak of his miserable duel with Cardinal Newman, wherein he was so shamefully worsted. For fifteen years he poured out lectures, sermons, tales, travels, poems, dialogues, children's books, and historical, philosophical, theological, social, scientific, and sanitary essays—but the Charles Kingsley of *Yeast*, of *Alton Locke*, of *Hypatia*, of *Westward Ho!* of the Ballads and Poems, we never knew again. He burnt out his fiery spirit at last, at the age of fifty-five, in a series of restless enterprises, and a vehement outpouring of miscellaneous eloquence.

Charles Kingsley was a man of genius, half poet, half controversialist. The two elements did not blend altogether well. His poetic passion carried away his reason and often confused his logic. His argumentative vehemence too often marred his fine imagination. Thus his *Saint's Tragedy* is partly a satire on Romanism, and his ballad in *Yeast* is mainly a radical pamphlet. Hardly one of his books is without a controversial preface, controversial titles, chapters, or passages on questions of theology, churches, races, politics, or society. Indeed, excepting some of his poems, and some of his popular or children's books (but not even all of these), all his works are of a controversial kind. Whatever he did he did with heart, and this was at once his merit and his weakness. Before all things, he was a preacher, a priest of the English Church, a Christian minister. He was, indeed, a liberal priest, sometimes even too free and easy. He brings in the sacred name perhaps more often than any other writer, and he does so not always in a devout way. He seemed at last to use the word "God" as if it were an expletive or mere intensive like a Greek *ge* [gamma epsilon], meaning "very much" or "very good," as where he so oddly calls the North-East wind "the wind of God." And he betrays a most unclerical interest in physical torture and physical voluptuousness (*Hypatia*, *The Saint's Tragedy*, *Saint Maura*, *Westward Ho!*), though it is true that his real nature is both eminently manly and pure.

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As we have done all through these estimates of great writers, we have to take the great writer at his best and forget his worst. It is a melancholy reflection that we so often find a man of genius working himself out to an unworthy close, it is too often feared, in the thirst of success and even the attraction of gain. But at his best Charles Kingsley left some fine and abiding influences behind him, and achieved some brilliant things. Would that we always had men of his dauntless spirit, of his restless energy, of his burning sympathy, of his keen imagination! He reminds us somewhat of his own Bishop Synesius, as described in *Hypatia* (chap. xxi.), who “was one of those many-sided, volatile, restless men, who taste joy and sorrow, if not deeply or permanently, yet abundantly and passionately”—“He lived . . . in a whirlwind of good deeds, meddling and toiling for the mere pleasure of action; and as soon as there was nothing to be done, which, till lately, had happened seldom enough with him, paid the penalty for past excitement in fits of melancholy. A man of magniloquent and flowery style, not without a vein of self-conceit; yet withal of overflowing kindliness, racy humour, and unflinching courage, both physical and moral; with a very clear practical faculty, and a very muddy speculative one”—and so on. Charles Kingsley must have been thinking of his own tastes when he drew the portrait of the “squire-bishop.” But he did more than the Bishop of Cyrene, and was himself a compound of squire-parson-poet. And in all three characters he showed some of the best sides of each.

[1] Amongst other difficulties it may be observed that such words as “and,” “is,” “are,” “the,” “who,” “his,” “its,” “have,” “been”—words without which few English sentences can be constructed—do not form the short syllables of a true dactyl.

## IX

### ANTHONY TROLLOPE

Some of our younger friends who read the name which heads this essay may incline to think that it ought to be very short indeed, nay, be limited to a single remark; and, like the famous chapter on the snakes in Iceland, it should simply run—that Anthony Trollope has no place at all in Victorian literature. We did not think so in England in the fifties, the sixties, and the seventies, in the heyday of Victorian romance; and I do not think we ought to pass that judgment now in this last quinquennium of our century. I shall have to put our friend Anthony in a very moderate and prosaic rank; I shall not conceal my sense of his modest claims and conspicuous faults, of his prolixity, his limited sphere, his commonplace. But in view of the enormous popularity he once enjoyed, of the space he filled for a whole generation, I cannot altogether omit him from these studies of the Victorian writers.

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I have, too, a personal reason for including him in the series. I knew him well, knew his subjects, and his stage. I have seen him at work at the “Megatherium Club,” chatted with him at the “Universe,” dined with him at George Eliot’s, and even met him in the hunting-field. I was familiar with the political personages and crises which he describes; and much of the local colouring in which his romances were framed was for years the local colouring that I daily saw around me. Most of the famous writers of whom I have been speaking in this series (with the exception of Charlotte Bronte) I have often seen and heard speak in public and in private, but I cannot be said to have known them as friends. But Anthony Trollope I knew well. I knew the world in which he lived, I saw the scenes, the characters, the life he paints, day by day in the same clubs, in the same rooms, and under the same conditions as he saw them. To re-read some of his best stories, as I have just done, is to me like looking through a photographic album of my acquaintances, companions, and familiar reminiscences of some thirty years ago. I can hear the loud voice, the honest laugh, see the keen eyes of our old friend as I turn to the admirable vignette portrait in his posthumous *Autobiography*, and I can almost hear him tell the anecdotes recounted in that pleasant book.

Does the present generation know that frank and amusing book—one of the most brisk and manly autobiographies in our language? Of course it is garrulous, egoistical, self-complacent in a way. When a famous writer, at the close of a long career of varied activity, takes up his pen to tell us how he has lived, and how his books were written, and what he has loved, seen, suffered, and striven for—it is his business to be garrulous; we want him to talk about himself, and to give us such peeps into his own heart and brain as he chooses to unlock. That is what an “autobiography” means. And never did man do this in a more hearty, manly, good-tempered spirit, with more good sense, with more modest *bonhomie*, with a more genial egoism. He has been an enormous worker; he is proud of his industry. He has fought his way under cruel hardships to wealth and fame: and he is well satisfied with his success. He has had millions of readers; he has been well paid; he has had good friends; he has enjoyed life. He is happy in telling us how he did it. He does not overrate himself. He believes some of his work is good: at least it is honest, pure, sound work which has pleased millions of readers. Much of his work he knows to be poor stuff, and he says so at once. He makes no pretence to genius; he does not claim to be a hero; he has no rare qualities—or none but industry and courage—and he has met with no peculiar sufferings and no cruel and undeserved rebuffs. He has his own ideas about literary work—you may think them commonplace, mechanical, mercenary ideas—but that is a true picture of Anthony Trollope; of his strong, manly, pure mind, of his clear head, of his average moral sense: a good fellow, a warm friend, a brave soul, a genial companion.

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With all his artless self-complacency in his own success, Trollope took a very modest estimate of his own powers. I remember a characteristic discussion about their modes of writing between Trollope and George Eliot at a little dinner party in her house.[1] “Why!” said Anthony, “I sit down every morning at 5.30 with my watch on my desk, and for three hours I regularly produce 250 words every quarter of an hour.” George Eliot positively quivered with horror at the thought—she who could write only when she felt in the vein, who wrote, re-wrote, and destroyed her manuscript two or three times, and as often as not sat at her table without writing at all. “There are days and days together,” she groaned out, “when I cannot write a line.” “Yes!” said Trollope, “with imaginative work like yours that is quite natural; but with my mechanical stuff it’s a sheer matter of industry. It’s not the head that does it—it’s the cobbler’s wax on the seat and the sticking to my chair!” In his *Autobiography* he has elaborately explained this process—how he wrote day by day, including Sundays, whatever his duties, his amusements, or the place; measuring out every page, counting the words, and exacting the given quantity hour by hour. He wrote continuously 2500 words in each day, and at times more than 25,000 words in a week. He wrote whilst engaged in severe professional drudgery, whilst hunting thrice a week, and in the whirl of London society. He wrote in railway trains, on a sea voyage, and in a town club room. Whether he was on a journey, or pressed with office reports, or visiting friends, he wrote just the same. *Dr. Thorne* was written whilst he was very sea-sick in a gale at sea, or was negotiating a treaty with Nubar Pasha; and the day after finishing *Dr. Thorne* he began *The Bertrams*. It is one of the most amazing, and one of the most comical, records of literary activity we have. No one can suppose that work of a very high class can be so produced at all. Nor does Trollope pretend that it is of a high class. He says it is honest work, the best he could do.

He takes a strange pleasure in recounting these feats of literary productiveness. He poses as the champion of the age in quantity and rapidity. This lightning novelist could produce a volume in two or three weeks; and thus he could easily turn out three novels of three volumes each in a year. He gives us an exact list of sixty works produced in about thirty-five years, and a total of about 70,000 pounds as the earnings of some twenty-four years. He insists that he never neglected his Post-Office work, but was an invaluable and energetic public servant; he insists that, much as he enjoyed his literary profits, he was never misled by the desire of money; and he insists that he could have done no better work if he had written much less, or if he had given more time to each book. In all this he does not convince us. He certainly showed transcendent force of



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will, of nerve, and of endurance. “It’s dogged as does it!” says Giles Hoggett to Mr. Crawley, in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*; and if “dogged” could make a great novelist, Anthony Trollope was pre-eminently “dogged.” But a great novelist needs other gifts. And to tell us that he would not have done better work if his whole life had been given to his work, if every book, every chapter of every book, were the fruit of ample meditation and repeated revision, if he had never written with any thought of profit, never written but what he could not contain hidden within him—this is to tell us palpable nonsense.

Trollope’s sixty works no doubt exceed the product of any Englishman of our age; but they fall short of the product of Dumas, George Sand, and Scribe. And, though but a small part of the sixty works can be called good, the inferior work is not discreditable: it is free from affectation, extravagance, nastiness, or balderdash. It never sinks into such tawdry stuff as Bulwer, Disraeli, and even Dickens, could indite in their worst moods. Trollope is never bombastic, or sensational, or prurient, or grotesque. Even at his worst, he writes pure, bright, graceful English; he tells us about wholesome men and women in a manly tone, and if he becomes dull, he is neither ridiculous nor odious. He is very often dull: or rather utterly commonplace. It is the fashion with the present generation to assert that he is never anything but commonplace; but this is the judgment of a perverted taste. His besetting danger is certainly the commonplace. It is true that he is almost never dramatic, or powerful, or original. His plots are of obvious and simple construction; his characters are neither new, nor subtle, nor powerful; and his field is strictly limited to special aspects of the higher English society in town and country. But in his very best work, he has risen above commonplace and has painted certain types of English men and women with much grace and consummate truth.

One of Trollope’s strong points and one source of his popularity was a command over plain English almost perfect for his own limited purpose. It is limpid, flexible, and melodious. It never rises into eloquence, poetry, or power; but it is always easy, clear, simple, and vigorous. Trollope was not capable of the sustained mastery over style that we find in *Esmond*, nor had he the wit, passion, and pathos at Thackeray’s command. But of all contemporaries he comes nearest to Thackeray in easy conversations and in quiet narration of incidents and motives. Sometimes, but very rarely, Trollope is vulgar—for good old Anthony had a coarse vein: it was in the family:—but as a rule his language is conspicuous for its ease, simplicity, and unity of tone. This was one good result of his enormous rapidity of execution. His books read from cover to cover, as if they were spoken in one sitting by an *improvisatore* in one and



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the same mood, who never hesitated an instant for a word, and who never failed to seize the word he wanted. This ease and mastery over speech was the fruit of prodigious practice and industry both in office work and in literary work. It is a mastery which conceals itself, and appears to the reader the easiest thing in the world. How few out of many millions have studied that subtle mechanism of ear and thought which created the melodious ripple of these fluent and pellucid words.

His work has one special quality that has not been sufficiently noticed. It has the most wonderful unity of texture and a perfect harmony of tone. From the first line to the last, there is never a sentence or a passage which strikes a discordant note; we are never worried by a spasmodic phrase, nor bored by fine writing that fails to "come off." Nor is there ever a paragraph which we need to read over again, or a phrase that looks obscure, artificial, or enigmatic. This can hardly be said of any other novelist of this century, except of Jane Austen, for even Thackeray himself is now and then artificial in *Esmond*, and the vulgarity of *Yellowplush* at last becomes fatiguing. Now Trollope reproduces for us that simplicity, unity, and ease of Jane Austen, whose facile grace flows on like the sprightly talk of a charming woman, mistress of herself and sure of her hearers. This uniform ease, of course, goes with the absence of all the greatest qualities of style; absence of any passion, poetry, mystery, or subtlety. He never rises, it is true, to the level of the great masters of language. But, for the ordinary incidents of life amongst well-bred and well-to-do men and women of the world, the form of Trollope's tales is almost as well adapted as the form of Jane Austen.

In absolute realism of spoken words Trollope has hardly any equal. His characters utter quite literally the same words, and no more, that such persons utter in actual life. The characters, it is true, are the average men and women we meet in the educated world, and the situations, motives, and feelings described are seldom above or below the ordinary incidents of modern life. But within this very limited range of incident, and for this very common average of person and character, the conversations are photographic or stenographic reproductions of actual speech. His letters, especially his young ladies' letters, are singularly real, life-like, and characteristic. We have long got rid of the artificial eloquence and the studied witticisms of the older school. Richardson, Fielding, Goldsmith, and Scott put into the mouths of their heroes and heroines elaborate speeches, poetry, eloquence, and epigrams which are no more like real speech than the allocutions of kings and queens in Shakespeare are like natural talk. That has long been discarded. Jane Austen and Thackeray make their men and women discourse as men and women do. But perhaps with Thackeray, the talk is too racy, too brilliant, too rich with wit, humour, and character, to be quite literally truthful. Now, Trollope, taking a far lower and simpler line, makes his characters talk with literal truth to nature.

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This photographic realism of conversation is common enough now: but it has too often the defects of photography; it is bleared, coarse, and ill-favoured. As we all know, in the new realism a young woman and her lover talk thus: "Old gal! why so glum?" said he—"It's my luck!" says she, and flings her straw hat on the floor. That is the new photographic style, but it does not please us of an older generation. Now Trollope makes his people utter such phrases as the characters he presents to us actually use in real life—or rather such phrases as they did use thirty years ago. And yet, although he hardly ever rises into eloquence, wit, brilliancy, or sinks into any form of talk either unnaturally tall, or unnaturally low,—still, the conversations are just sufficiently pointed, humorous, or characteristic, to amuse the reader and develop the speaker's character. Trollope in this exactly hits the happy mean. Like Mr. Woodhouse's gruel, his conversations are "thin—but not so very thin." He never attempts grandiloquence; but then he never sinks into the fashionable bathos of—"Sugar in your tea, dear?"—"Another lump, if you please,"—nor does he fall into the fashionable realism of—"Dry up, old man!" No! Trollope's characters speak with literal nature; and yet with enough of point, humour, vigour, to make it pleasant reading.

We may at once confess to his faults and limitations. They are plain enough, constant, and quite incapable of defence. Out of his sixty works, I should be sorry to pick more than ten as being worth a second reading, or twenty which are worth a first reading. Nor amongst the good books could I count any of the last ten years. The range of characters is limited to the clergy and professional men of a cathedral city, to the county families and the respectabilities of a quiet village, to the life of clubs, public offices, and Parliament in London, and to the ways of "society" as it existed in England in the third quarter of the present century. The plots are neither new nor ingenious; the incidents are rarely more than commonplace; the characters are seldom very powerful, or original, or complex. There are very few "psychologic problems," very few dramatic situations, very few revelations of a new world and unfamiliar natures. There are some natural scenes in Ireland; now and then a cook-maid, a farmer, a labourer, or a clerk, come on the stage and play their short parts with faultless demeanour. But otherwise, the entire company appear in the frock-coats and crinolines of the period, and every scene is played in silk hats, bonnets, and regulation evening toilette.

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But within this limited range of life, this uniformity of “genteel comedy,” Trollope has not seldom given us pieces of inimitable truthfulness and curious delicacy of observation. The dignitaries of the cathedral close, the sporting squires, the county magnates, the country doctors, and the rectory home, are drawn with a precision, a refinement, an absolute fidelity that only Jane Austen could compass. There is no caricature, no burlesque, nothing improbable or over-wrought. The bishop, the dean, the warden, the curate, the apothecary, the duke, the master of fox-hounds, the bishop’s wife, the archdeacon’s lady, the vicar’s daughter, the governess, the undergraduate—all are perfectly true to nature. So, too, are the men in the clubs in London, the chiefs, subordinates, and clerks in the public offices, the ministers and members of Parliament, the leaders, and rank and file of London “society.” They never utter a sentence which is not exactly what such men and women do utter; they do and they think nothing but what such men and women think and do in real life. Their habits, conversation, dress, and interests are photographically accurate, to the point of illusion. It is not high art—but it is art. The field is a narrow one; the actors are ordinary. But the skill, grace, and humour with which the scenes are caught, and the absolute illusion of truthfulness, redeem it from the commonplace.

The stage of Trollope’s drama is not a wide one, but it is far wider than that of Jane Austen. His plots and incidents are sufficiently trite and ordinary, but they are dramatic and original, if contrasted with those of *Emma* or *Mansfield Park*. No one will compare little Jane’s delicate palfrey with Anthony’s big-boned hunter; nor would any one commit the bad taste of treating these quadrupeds as if they were entered for a race; but a narrow stage and familiar incidents are not necessarily fatal to true art. If Trollope had done nothing more than paint ordinary English society with photographic accuracy of detail, it would not be a great performance. But he has done more than this. In the Bassetshire series, at any rate, he has risen to a point of drawing characters with a very subtle insight and delicate intuition. The warden, the bishop, Mrs. Proudie, Dr. Thorne, Mary Thorne, Lily Dale, Lady Arabella, and, above all, Mr. Crawley, are characters definitely conceived, profoundly mastered, and truly portrayed. Trollope evidently judged Crawley to be his greatest creation, and the *Last Chronicle of Basset* to be his principal achievement. In this he was doubtless right. There are real characters also in the two *Phineas Finn* tales. Chiltern, Finn, Glencora Palliser, Laura Kennedy, and Marie Goesler, are subtly conceived and truly worked out. This is enough to make a decent reputation, however flat be the interminable pot-boilers that precede and follow them.

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The list of Trollope's real successes is not very long. The six tales of the Barsetshire cycle, *The Warden*, *Barchester Towers*, *Doctor Thorne*, *Framley Parsonage*, *The Small House at Allington*, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, are unquestionably his main achievements; and of these either *Doctor Thorne* or *The Last Chronicle* is the best. The Crawley story is undoubtedly the finest thing Trollope ever did; but for myself, I enjoy the unity, completeness, and masterly scheme of *Doctor Thorne*, and I like Mary Thorne better than any of Trollope's women. If, to the six Barset tales, we add *Orley Farm*, *The Claverings*, the two *Phineas Finns*, and the *Eustace Diamonds*, we shall include, perhaps, more than posterity will ever trouble itself about, and almost exactly one-fifth of the novels he left behind. The ten or twelve of Trollope's best will continue to be read, and will, in a future generation, no doubt, regain not a little of their early vogue. This will be due, in part, to their own inherent merit as graceful, truthful, subtle observation of contemporary types, clothed in a style of transparent ease. Partly, it will be due to this: that these tales will reproduce for the future certain phases of life in the nineteenth century in England with minute fidelity and the most literal realism.

This is no doubt the cause of the revulsion of opinion by which in some English circles Trollope has suffered of late. If there are fashions, habits, and tastes which the rising generation is certain to despise, it is such as were current in the youth of their own parents about thirty or forty years before them. The collars, the bonnets, the furniture, the etiquette, the books of that age always seem to the young to be the last word of all that is awkward and "bad form," although in two or three generations these very modes regain a certain quaint charm. And for the moment poor Anthony represents to the emancipated youth of our time all that was "banal" and prosy some thirty years ago. The taste of our youth sets hard for a new heaven, or at least a new earth, and if not that, it may be a new hell. Novels or poems without conundrums, without psychologic problems, with no sexual theorems to solve, with no unique idiosyncrasies to fathom, without anything unnatural, or sickening, without hospital nastinesses,—are all, we are assured, unworthy the notice of the youth of either sex who are really up to date. In the style of the new pornographic and clinical school of art, the sayings and doings of wholesome men and women who live in drawing-rooms and regularly dress before dinner are "beastly rot," and fit for no one but children and old maids.

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But we conservatives of an older school are grateful to Anthony that he produced for the last generation an immense collection of pleasant tales without a single foul spot or unclean incident. It was his boast that he had never written a line which a pure woman could not read without a blush. This is no doubt one of the grounds on which he is so often denounced as *passe*. His tales, of course, are full of love, and the love is not always discreet or virtuous. There are cases of guilty love, of mad love, of ungoverned and unreasoning passion. But there is not an impure or prurient passage in the whole library of tales. Much more than this: in the centre of almost every tale, we are taken to the heart of a spotless, loving, refined, brave English girl. In nothing does Anthony Trollope delight more than when he unveils to us the secret thoughts of a noble-hearted maiden who loves strongly but who has a spirit as strong as her love, a clear brain and a pure will. In nothing is he more successful; nowhere is he more subtle, more true, more interesting. In this fine gift, he surpasses all his contemporaries, and almost all other English novelists. Mary Thorne, Lily Dale, Lucy Roberts—I would almost add, Martha Dunstable—may not be heroines of romance, and are certainly not great creations. But they are pure, right-minded, delicate, brave women; and it does one good to be admitted to the sacred confessional of their hearts.

It must be admitted that they are “young ladies,” nurtured in the conventional refinement of the last generation, high-bred, and trained in the jealous sensitiveness of what was thought to be “maiden modesty” thirty or forty years ago. That is their misfortune to-day; it is now rather silly to be a “young lady” at all, and the old-fashioned “maiden modesty” of their mothers and grandmothers is become positively ridiculous. Young women of the present date, we are assured in the language of our gilded youth, have to be either “jolly girls” or “crocks”; and Mary Thorne and Lily Dale are certainly not “jolly girls.” Their trials and agonies are not different from those which may happen in any ordinary family, and the problems they have to solve are those which may await any girl at any time. But the subtle touches with which we are admitted to their meditations, the delicate weighing of competing counsels and motives, the living pulses of heart and brain, and the essential soundness and reality of the mental and moral crisis—are all told with an art that may be beneath that of Jane Austen, but which certainly is akin to hers, and has the same quality of pure and simple human nature. Pure and simple human nature is, for the moment, out of fashion as the subject of modern romance. But it remains a curious problem how the boisterous, brawny, thick-skinned lump of manhood whom we knew as Anthony Trollope ever came to conceive so many delicate and sensitive country maidens, and to see so deeply and so truly into the heart of their maiden meditations.

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Trollope is equally successful with some other social problems and characters of unstable equilibrium. They are none of them very profound or exalted studies in psychology; but they are truthful, natural, and ingenious; and it needed a sure and delicate hand to make them interesting and life-like. The feeble, solemn, timid, vacillating bishop, driven to distraction by some clerical scandal in his tea-cup of a diocese; the pompous ecclesiastic with wounded dignity and family quarrels; the over-sensitive priest whose conscience is more acute than his brain; the weak, generous, cowardly owner of an embarrassed estate; the honest and impulsive youth placed between love and duty; the loving girl who will not sacrifice dignity to love; the public official who is torn between conscience and self-interest; the man in a great position who does not know his own mind; the man with honest principles who is tempted above his strength by love, ambition, or ruin—all of these live in the pages of Trollope with perfect truth to nature and reality of movement. It would be too much to say that any of them are masterly creations, unless it be Crawley and the Proudies, but they are absolutely truthful, real, living portraits. The situations are not very striking, but then they are perfectly natural. And the characters never say or do a thing which oversteps by a hair's-breadth the probable and natural conduct of such persons.

All this is now said to be commonplace, goody-goody, and Philistine. There are no female acrobats, burglars, gutter-urchins, crapulous prostitutes, no pathological anatomy of diseased bodies and carious souls, hardly a single case of adultery in all Trollope. But they who can exist without these stimulants may find pleasant reading yet in his best work. *The Last Chronicle of Barset* is a really good tale which deserves to live, and the whole Crawley episode rises to the level of fine imaginative work. *Doctor Thorne* is a sound, pleasant, ingenious story from beginning to end. It has perhaps the best plot of all Trollope's books, and, singularly enough, it is the only plot which he admits not to be his own. I count Mary Thorne as his best woman and Doctor Thorne as one of his best men. The unity of *Doctor Thorne* is very striking and ingenious. The stage is crowded: there are nearly a score of well-marked characters and five distinct households; but the whole series works into the same plot; the scene is constantly varied, and yet there is no double plot or separate companies. Thus, though the whole story revolves round the fortunes of a single family, the interest and the movement never flag for a page. The machinery is very simple; the characters are of average strength and merit; the incidents and issues are ordinary enough. And the general effect is wholesome, manly, womanly, refined, and true to nature.



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The episcopal and capitular group of ecclesiastics round the Cathedral of Barchester is Trollope's main creation, and is destined to endure for some time. It is all in its way inimitably true and subtly graduated from bishop to dean, from dean to canon, and so on through the whole chapter down to the verger and the porter. The relations of these dignitaries to each other, the relation of their woman-kind to each other, the relation of the clerical world to the town world and to the county world, their conventional etiquette, their jealousies, their feuds, their scandals, and their entertainments, are all marked with admirable truth and a refined touch. The relation of the village respectabilities to the county families, the relation of the county families to the great ducal magnate, are all given with curious precision and subtle discrimination. When *The Warden* appeared just forty years ago, I happened to be a pupil in the chambers of the late Sir Henry Maine, then a famous critic of the *Saturday Review*; and I well remember his interest and delight in welcoming a new writer, from whom he thought so much might be expected. The relations of London "Society" to the parliamentary and ministerial world as described in Trollope's later books are all treated with entire mastery. It is this thorough knowledge of the organism of English society which specially distinguishes Trollope. It is a quality in which Thackeray alone is his equal; and Thackeray himself has drawn no complex social organism with such consummate completeness as Trollope's Barchester Close. It is of course purely English, locally true to England only. But it is, as Nathaniel Hawthorne said, "solid and substantial," "as real as if it were a great lump out of the earth,"—"just as English as a beefsteak."

What makes all that so strange is this, that when he began to write novels, Trollope had far less experience than have most cultivated men of cathedral closes, rectories, and county families. He had never been to a college, and till past middle life he never had access to the higher grades of English society. He never at any time, and certainly not when the Barchester cycle began, had any footing whatever in clerical circles, and but little intimate acquaintance with young ladies of birth and refinement in country homes. He never was much thrown with the young bloods of the army, of the universities, or of Parliament. He rarely consorted with dukes or county magnates, and he never lived in the centre of the political world. Yet this rough, self-taught busy Post-Office surveyor in Ireland, perpetually travelling about the country on the inspections of his duty, managed to see to the very marrow of the prelates of a cathedral, to the inner histories of the duke's castle and the squire's home, into the secret musings of the rector's daughter, and into the tangled web of parliamentary intrigue. He did all this with a perfectly sure and subtle touch, which was often, it is true, somewhat tame, and is never perhaps of any very great brilliance, but which was almost faultlessly true, never extravagant, never unreal. And, to add to the wonder, you might meet him for an hour; and, however much you might like his bluff, hearty, resonant personality, you would have said he was the last man to have any delicate sympathy with bishops, dukes, or young ladies.



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His insight into parliamentary life was surprisingly accurate and deep. He had not the genius of Disraeli, but his pictures are utterly free from caricature or distortion of any kind. In his photographic portraiture of the British Parliament he surpassed all his contemporaries; and inasmuch as such studies can only have a local and sectional interest, they have probably injured his popularity and his art. His conduct of legal intricacies and the ways of lawyers is singularly correct; and the long and elaborate trial scene in *Phineas Redux* is a masterpiece of natural and faithful descriptions of an Old Bailey criminal trial in which “society” happens to be involved. Yet of courts of law, as of bishops’ palaces, rectory firesides, the lobbies of Parliament, and ducal “house parties,” Trollope could have known almost nothing except as an occasional and outside observer. The life of London clubs, the habits and *personnel* of a public office, the hunting-field, and the social hierarchy and ten commandments observed in a country town—these things Trollope knew to the minutest shade, and he has described them with wonderful truth and zest.

There was a truly pathetic drollery in his violent passion for certain enjoyments—hunting, whist, and the smoking-room of his club. I cannot forget the comical rage which he felt at Professor Freeman’s attack on fox-hunting. I am not a sporting man myself; and, though I may look on fox-hunting as one of the less deadly sins involved in “sport,” I know nothing about it. But it chanced that as a young man I had been charged with the duty of escorting a certain young lady to a “meet” of fox-hounds in Essex. A fox was found; but what happened I hardly remember; save this, that, in the middle of a hot burst, I found myself alongside of Anthony Trollope, who was shouting and roaring out “What!—what are you doing here?” And he was never tired of holding me up to the scorn of the “Universe” club as a deserter from the principles of Professor Freeman and John Morley. I had taken no part in the controversy, but it gave him huge delight to have detected such backsliding in one of the school he detested. Like other sporting men who imagine that their love of “sport” is a love of nature, when it is merely a pleasure in physical exercise, Trollope cared little for the poetic aspect of nature. His books, like Thackeray’s, hardly contain a single fine picture of the country, of the sea, of mountains, or of rivers. Compared with Fielding, Scott, Charlotte Bronte, Dickens, George Eliot, he is a man blind to the loveliness of nature. To him, as to other fox-hunters, the country was good or bad as it promised or did not promise a good “run.” Though Trollope was a great traveller, he rarely uses his experiences in a novel, whereas Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Bulwer, George Eliot fill their pages with foreign adventures and scenes of travel. His hard riding as an overgrown heavy-weight, his systematic

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whist playing, his loud talk, his burly ubiquity and irrepressible energy in everything—formed one of the marvels of the last generation. And that such a colossus of blood and bone should spend his mornings, before we were out of bed, in analysing the hypersensitive conscience of an archdeacon, the secret confidences whispered between a prudent mamma and a love-lorn young lady, or the subtle meanderings of Marie Goesler's heart—this was a real psychologic problem.

There can be no doubt that this constitutional vehemence of his, this hypertrophy of blood and muscle, injured his work and dimmed his reputation. Much of his work he ought to have burnt. His classical studies are worthless, his *Life of Thackeray* and his *Travels* are mere book-making. His novels, even the best, are revised and printed with scandalous haste. He speaks of a "*toga virile*" and of "*the husband of his bosom*," for wife; and there are misprints in every paragraph. When, in his *Autobiography*, he let the public into the story of his method, of his mechanical writing so many words per hour, of his beginning a new tale the day after he finished the last, of his having no particular plot, and hardly thinking about a plot, and all the little trade secrets of his factory, the public felt some disgust and was almost inclined to think it had been cheated out of its 70,000 pounds.

Anthony Trollope was not a fraud, nor even a mere tradesman. His reputation may perhaps partially revive, and some of his best work may be read in the next century. His best work will of course be a mere residuum of his sixty books, as is the best of nearly all prolific writers. I am inclined to think the permanent survival may be limited to the *Barchester* cycle, with *Orley Farm* and the two *Phineas Finns*. In any case, his books will hereafter bear a certain historical interest, as the best record of actual manners in the higher English society between 1855 and 1875. That value nothing can take away, however dull, *connu*, and out of date the books may now seem to our new youth. It is a curious problem why our new youth persists in filling its stomach with the poorest trash that is "new"—*i.e.* published in 1895, whilst it will not look at a book that is "old"—*i.e.* published in 1865, though both are equally unknown to the young reader. If our new youth ever could bring itself to take up a book having 1865 on its title-page, it might find in the best of Anthony Trollope much subtle observation, many manly and womanly natures, unfailing purity of tone, and wholesome enjoyment.

[1] This anecdote has been doubted, on the ground that such rapid composition is impossible. But Trollope in his *Autobiography* asserts this fact, exactly as he told George Eliot, except that the first half hour was occupied by re-reading the work of the previous day. The average morning's work was thus 2500 words, written in two and a half hours.

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#### GEORGE ELIOT

It will be the duty of the more serious criticism of another generation in some degree to revive the reputation of George Eliot as an abiding literary force—a reputation which the taste of the hour is rather disposed to reduce. Five-and-twenty years ago the tendency was towards excessive praise: many judges, of trained literary insight, proclaimed her as the greatest genius of the age, one of the brightest stars of English literature, nay, said some of them, quite losing control of their speech—a modern Shakespeare, and so forth. Some cooler heads looked grave, but none save the inveterate cynics ventured to mock; and the great public, as usual, thought it best to follow the lead of so many men and so many women of the higher culture. The inevitable reaction ensued: when, not only were the grave shortcomings of George Eliot ruthlessly condemned, but her noble aim and superb qualities were blindly ignored.

The taste in popular romance sways hither and thither in sudden revulsion, like the taste in hats or in frocks, or the verdict of manhood suffrage. This or that type becomes suddenly the rage, this or that mannerism is voted an offence, as quickly as fashion runs after a new tint, or boycotts an obsolete sleeve. Journalism and all the other forces of the hour stimulate these caprices and carry away the masses by their volubility and noise. It is the business of serious criticism, keeping a cooler head, to correct these fervid impulses of the day—whilst excited audiences in the amphitheatre raise or depress the fatal thumb, awarding life or death to the combatants in the great arena.

The business of criticism is to *judge*—to judge upon the whole evidence, after hearing counsel on both sides with equal attention, after weighing every shred of argument and every word that any witness has to offer, and after patient study of every aspect of the case, to deliver a complete and reasoned estimate of the whole matter at issue. The true critic is not a mere jurymen, who has nothing to do but to pronounce a bare verdict of “guilty” or “not guilty.” He is a judge of the supreme court of equity, who may find, in some intricate story unravelled at his bar, a dozen errors in law and as many mistakes of fact, and yet may give substantial relief or may decree onerous penalties. It is easy enough to detect faulty, easy enough to insist on merits: the thing wanted to guide the public is the cool, compensated, equitable judgment that is not seduced by any conspicuous charm, and is not irritated by any incorrigible defect, but which, missing no point of merit and none of failure, finally and resolutely strikes the just balance.

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This just balance, with all its intricate adjustments of compensation and equivalence, is peculiarly needed in the case of George Eliot, and at the same time is unusually difficult. George Eliot was most conspicuous as an artist, as a worker in the sphere of imagination and creation. At the same time, she had very rare powers and a really unusual learning quite outside of imaginative art. And these reflective powers and such stores of knowledge are often antagonistic to creative art, and undoubtedly were so not seldom with her. If Aristotle himself had written a dull psychological tragedy, we might read it for his sake, but we should not forgive him, and we ought not to forgive him. And if Shakespeare himself had written the *Novum Organum* or the *Principia*, we should not have had *Hamlet* and *Lear* as we now know them. There is no compensation between philosophy and poetry. No profundity, no learning, can give beauty to verses which lack the divine fire. If George Eliot's fame has to be based solely on her great powers and endowments, her art would not be worth much. However, it is not so: she was an artist, with true artistic gifts. Her philosophic power and her scientific attainments often ennoble these gifts: yet it is too often evident that they seriously mar and embarrass them.

Turn it the other way. Until nearly the age of forty, George Eliot was known only as a critical and philosophical writer. And in reading, in logical acumen, and in breadth of view, she was the equal of the first minds of her time. But no one of her contemporaries, eminent in philosophy and science, approached her, however remotely, in artistic gifts; and no one of them even attempted to invest ethical and social ideas with high imagination and beautiful ideals. Thus, George Eliot was of a far higher mental plane than any contemporary who has used imaginative prose as an art, and she was also a far greater artist than any contemporary philosopher. It is quite certain that learning and wisdom may be lodged in the same brain with the highest poetry, as Lucretius, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Goethe may prove. And men of original power have not seldom used imaginative art with signal success to convey the ideas with which they were charged; for this has been done by Cervantes, Rabelais, Swift, Rousseau, Byron, Shelley, and Goethe.

It is therefore legitimate and natural that a powerful and teeming mind should resort to art as its medium, and also that an artist of high aims should be a systematic thinker and an omnivorous student. The combination is very rare and success is singularly difficult. To fail in art is to lose all and to end in utter failure. And to carry ethical purpose and erudition into art is indeed a perilous undertaking, wherein but one or two of the greatest have wholly succeeded. The problem with George Eliot is to judge how far she has succeeded in the all but impossible task. That her success is far from complete is but too obvious. That she has had many incidental successes is also obvious. Her work is not sufficiently spontaneous, not easy or simple, not buoyant enough. But it has great nobility, rare distinction. It may not live as perfect art; but it should not perish as ambitious failures perish.

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If George Eliot were not a writer of romance, she was nothing at all in the front ranks of Victorian literature. With all her powers of mind, her mastery of language, her immense stores of knowledge and supreme culture, she gave to the world nothing of great mark, acknowledged and known as hers, except her famous romances; for, as we shall presently see, we cannot count any of the poems as of great mark. But, as a writer of romance, George Eliot differs essentially and for the worse from all the other great writers of romance in her own or preceding generations. Most certainly she was not a born romancer; she had no spontaneous gift of telling stories, no irrepressible genius that way. Now all the great romancers have been born to it, as Robinson Crusoe was born to the sea, or as Turner was born to paint. Though Scott published novels late, he had begun *Waverley* at thirty-four; his earlier works are romantic ballads and metrical romances; and from boyhood, at home and abroad, he was ever filled with some tale of adventure and character. Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth “lisped” in novelettes, as Pope said he “lisped in numbers.” Though Charlotte Bronte published so little, she wrote stories incessantly from childhood. Lytton, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, invented tales as part of their daily lives, and from the earliest age. But George Eliot was thirty-nine when her first tales were published, and she was forty before she was known to the public as a novelist at all. And so little was novel-writing her natural gift, that her most intimate friends never suspected her power, nor did she herself altogether enjoy the exercise of her art. To the last her periods of mental gestation were long, painful, and unhopeful. Parturition was a dangerous crisis, and the long-expected infant was reared with misgivings and a superfluity of coddling. The romances of George Eliot came like some *enfant de miracle*, born late in the mother’s life, at the cost of infinite pain, much anxiety, and amidst the wondering trepidation of expectant circles of friends.

Even in her best books we never quite get over the sense of almost painful elaboration, of a powerful mind having rich gifts striving to produce some rare music with an unfamiliar and uncongenial instrument. It reminds us of Beethoven evolving his majestic sonatas on an untuned and dilapidated old piano, the defects of which he could not himself hear. The conventional critic in *The Vicar of Wakefield* is told to say that “the picture would have been better if the artist had taken more pains.” With George Eliot too often we are made to feel that the picture would have been, at any rate, more enjoyable if the artist had taken less pains. To study her more ambitious tales is like an attempt to master some new system of psychology. The metaphysical power, the originality of conception, the long brooding over anomalies and objections—these are all there: but the rapid improvisation and easy

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invention are not there. Such qualities would indeed be wholly out of place in philosophy, but they are the essence of romance. In romance we want to feel that the piece is only brought to an end by time and our human powers of listening; that there is “plenty more where these come from”; that the story-teller enjoys telling stories for their own sake, and would go on with the tales, though the audience were reduced to a child, an idiot, and a deaf man.

This explains the paradox that the most popular, and most certainly the most praised of George Eliot’s works, are the simpler and the shorter. Every one enjoys the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, short stories of a hundred pages each, with simple plots and a few characters in everyday life. I have no doubt myself that *Silas Marner* comes nearer to being a great success than any of the more elaborate books. Yet *Silas Marner* is about one-fifth part of the length of *Middlemarch*; and its plot, *mise-en-scene*, and incidents are simplicity itself. There is no science, no book-learning, and but few ethical problems in it from beginning to end; and it all goes in one small volume, for the tale concerns but the neighbours of one quiet village. Yet the quaint and idyllic charm of the piece, the perfection of tone and keeping, the harmony of the landscape, the pure, deep humanity of it, all make it a true and exquisite work of high art.

Modern English (and I am one of those who hold that the best modern English is as good as any in our literature) has few pieces of description more gem-like in its crystalline facets than the opening chapter that tells of the pale, uncanny weaver of Raveloe in his stone cottage by the deserted pit. Some of us can remember such house weavers in such lonesome cottages on the Northern moors, and have heard the unfamiliar rattle of the loom in a half-ruinous homestead. How perfect is that vignette of Raveloe—“a village where many of the old echoes lingered, undrowned by new voices”—with its “strange lingering echoes of the old demon-worship among the grey-haired peasantry”! The entire picture of the village and its village life a hundred years ago, is finished with the musical and reserved note of poetry, such as we are taught to love in Wordsworth and Tennyson. And for quiet humour modern literature has few happier scenes than the fireside at the “Rainbow,” with Macey and Winthrop, the butcher and the farrier, over their pipes and their hot potations, and the quarrel about “seeing ghos’es,” about smelling them!

Within this most graceful and refined picture of rural life there is a dominant ethical motive which she herself describes as its aim, “to set in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural, human relations.” This aim is perfectly worked out: it is a right and healthy conception, not too subtle, not too common:—to put it in simpler words than hers, it is how a lonely, crabbed,



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ill-used old man is humanised by the love of a faithful and affectionate child. The form is poetic: the moral is both just and noble: the characters are living, and the story is original, natural, and dramatic. The only thing, indeed, which *Silas Marner* wants to make it a really great romance is more ease, more rapidity, more “go.” The melody runs so uniformly in minor keys, the sense of care, meditation, and introspection is so apparent in every line, the amount of serious thought lavished by the writer and required of the reader is so continuous, that we are not carried away, we are not excited, inspired, and thrilled as we are by *Jane Eyre* or *Esmond*. We enjoy a beautiful book with a fine moral, set in exquisite prose, with consummate literary resources, full of fine thoughts, true, ennobling thoughts, and with no weak side at all, unless it be the sense of being over-wrought, like a picture which has been stippled over in every surface.

A clever French woman said of George Eliot’s conversation—*elle s’ecoute quand elle parle!* Just so, as we read on we seem to see how she held up each sentence into the light as it fell from her pen, scrutinised it to see if some rarer phrase might not be compacted, some subtler thought excogitated. Of all the more important tales, *Silas Marner* is that wherein we least feel this excessive thoughtfulness. And thus it is the best. Perhaps other born romancers would have thrown into it more life, energy, jollity, or passion. Thackeray would have made the weaver a serio-comic hermit: Dickens would have made Eppie a sentimental angel; Charlotte Bronte would have curdled our blood; Trollope might have made more of Nancy’s courting. But no one of them could have given us a more lofty lesson “of the remedial influences of pure, natural, human relations.” The only doubt is, whether a novel is the medium for such lessons. On this, opinions are, and will remain, divided. The lesson and the art ought both to be faultless.

When we ask for a romance fully developed and more than a graceful vignette, *Adam Bede* must be regarded as the principal, and with the wider public it is always the typical, work of George Eliot. She said herself that it seemed to her “impossible that she should ever write anything so good and true again”:—and herein she was no doubt right. It is the only one of her works in prose or verse which we feel to be inevitable, spontaneous, written out of the abundance of enjoyment and experience. It is of all her books the heartiest, the wittiest, the most cheerful, or rather the least desponding. In that book it may be that she exhausted herself and her own resources of observation as an eye-witness. She wrote fine things in other veins, in different scenes, and she conceived other characters and new situations. But for all practical purposes *Adam Bede* was the typical romance, which everything she had thought or known impelled her to write, in which she told the best of what she had seen and the most important of what she had to say. Had she never written anything but *Adam Bede*, she would have had a special place of her own in English romance:—and I am not sure that anything else which she produced very materially raised, enlarged, or qualified that place.



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*The Mill on the Floss* must always be very interesting to all who knew George Eliot and loved her work, if for no other reason, for its autobiographic and personal touches and its revelation of yearnings and misgivings hardly suspected in life. There are scenes and minor characters in it which hold their own against *Adam Bede*, but as a whole it is not so strong or so rich in colour, and it can hardly be said to occupy new ground. It has not the pathos of *Amos Barton*, nor the exquisite style of *Silas Marner*, nor the breadth and constructive merit of *Adam Bede*. And except to the chosen band of Eliotists, it is not likely to retain any permanent popularity. It is a book to study for those who have special interest in George Eliot as woman, as teacher, and as artist—but for my own part I find it rather a book to reflect upon than a book to read and to re-read.

With respect to *Romola*, though we must all agree with Mr. Oscar Browning that it is “replete with learning,” “weighed with knowledge in every page,” exquisite in art, and so forth, it is really impossible to call it with him “the best historical novel ever written.” Even in exact reproduction of another age, it cannot compare with *Esmond*, and how immeasurably as romance is it beneath the fire and movement of a dozen historical romances that one could name! The beauty of the Florentine pictures, the enormous care, thought, and reading, lavished on the story, the variety of literary resource—all make it a most memorable work, a work almost *sui generis*, a book which every student of Italy, every lover of Florence must mark, learn, and inwardly digest. But to call it a complete success is to go too far. The task was too great. To frame in a complex background of historical erudition an ethical problem of even greater complexity and subtlety—this was a task which might have sorely tried even greater powers than hers—a task in which Goethe and Scott might have succeeded, but which Goethe and Scott were too truly the born artists to attempt without ample care, and too busy with many things to devote to it the required labour.

*Romola* is certainly a wonderful monument of literary accomplishments; but it remains a *tour de force*, too elaborate, too laboured, too intricate, too erudite. As the French say, it has *trop de choses*, it is too long, too full, over-costumed, too studiously mounted on the stage. We sometimes see nowadays “a Shakespearean revival,” with scenery studied by eminent artists on the spot, costumes archaeologically accurate, real armour, “properties” from famous collections, a *mise-en-scene* of lavish splendour and indefatigable research—and then we ask, how can “Hamlet” or “Lear” live up to such learning, and why is “Romeo” such a melancholy devil? Few men enjoyed the earlier portions of *Romola* more than I did. *Italianissimo* and *Florentissimo* as

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I was, it was an intense treat. But, though I have read and re-read *Romola* from time to time, it has always been in sections. I have never read it straight through at one time; and to this hour, I am not quite clear about all the ramifications of the plot and the various cross-purposes of the persons. Could any one say this about *Quentin Durward* or *Ivanhoe*, or of the *Last Days of Pompeii*, or of *Esmond* or even of *Hypatia* or *Westward Ho!*

*Romola*, we know, tried its author most cruelly in composition, nor need we wonder at this. "I began it," she said, "a young woman—I finished it an old woman." "It ploughed into her," said her husband, "more than any of her other books." And, in my opinion, it marks the decline of her genius. I cannot count any of the later books as equal to her earlier works. Her great period of production reaches at most over the six years 1858-1863 (aetat. 39-45), in which she produced *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), and *Romola* (1863). If we measure by strict success in the highest art, this period should not be extended beyond the four years which closed with *Silas Marner*. *Romola* is an ambitious, beautiful, altogether noble essay to fly skyward like Icarus, whose ingenious mechanism was melted by the sunlight in mid-career. And I cannot count any of the later pieces, prose or verse, as anything but inferior to *Romola*. They have great beauties, fine passages, subtle characters, and high conceptions—but they are the artificial products of a brain that showed symptoms of exhaustion, of a great writer who was striving after impossible tasks without freedom and without enjoyment.

I cannot at all agree with those admirers of George Eliot's genius who believe that it grew continuously in power, who even assure us that it reached its zenith in *Daniel Deronda*. What can they mean? *Daniel Deronda*, as usual, shows brilliant literary skill in many passages, and its insight into modern Hebraism is a psychological problem. But with all its merits and even beauties, *Daniel Deronda* has the fatal defect of unpleasant characters who are neither beautiful nor interesting, terrible situations which bore rather than terrify us, a plot which is at once preposterous and wearisome. As to *Middlemarch*—George Eliot's longest, most crowded, and ethically most elaborated romance—with all its subtlety, its humour, its variety, and its sardonic insight into provincial Philistinism, it becomes at last tedious and disagreeable by reason of the interminable maunderings of tedious men and women, and the slow and reiterated dissection of disagreeable anatomies. At this moment I cannot, after twenty years, recall the indefinite, lingering plot, or the precise relations to each other of the curiously uninteresting families, who talk scandal and fuss about in Middlemarch town.

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In *Felix Holt* I was naturally much interested, having read it in manuscript, and advised upon the point of law, as appears from her published letters in the *Life* by J. Cross. There are two or three lines—the lawyers’ “opinion on the case”—which she asked me to sketch; and I remember telling her when she inserted these lines in the book, that I should always be able to say that I had written at least a sentence which was embodied in English literature. *Felix Holt* contains some fine characters and scenes, but it cannot be regarded as equal to *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*. We will not speak of *Theophrastus Such*, 1879, written just before her death. It was the work of a woman physically and intellectually exhausted. I feel a certain guilty sense of disappointment when I think of the book, for I possibly had some hand in causing it to be written. I had sent her a long letter pointing out that our literature, with all its wealth of achievement in every known sphere, was still deficient in one form of composition in which the French stood paramount and alone. That was what they called *Pensees*—moral and philosophical reflections in the form of epigrams or rather aphorisms. I thought, and I still think, that this form of composition was peculiarly suited to her genius, at least in her prime. It was not in her prime when she painfully evolved the sour affectations set forth in *Theophrastus*.

A word or two must be said about the *Poems*. They have poetic subjects, ideas, similes: they are full of poetic yearning, crowded with poetic imagery; they have everything poetry needs, except poetry. They have not the poet’s hall-mark. They are imitation poems, like the forged “ancient masters” they concoct at Florence, or the Tanagra statuettes they make in Germany. With all her consummate literary gifts and tastes, George Eliot never managed to write a poem, and never could be brought to see that the verses she wrote were not poems. It was an exaggeration of the defect that mars her prose; and her verses throw great light on her prose. They are over-laboured; the conception overpowers the form; they are too intensely anxious to be recognised as poems. We see not so much poetic passion, as a passionate yearning after poetic passion. We have—not the inevitable, incalculable, inimitable phrase of real poetry—but the slowly distilled, calculated, and imitated effort to reach the spontaneous.

It is melancholy indeed to have to admit this, after such labour, such noble conceptions, such mastery over language: but it is the truth. And it explains much of kindred failure in her prose work. Great imagination, noble conceptions, mastery over language can do much, but they cannot make a poet. Nothing can, but being a poet. Nor can these gifts make a great romancer or poet in prose. Nothing can, but being born to romance, being a prose poet. As the Gospel has it—“Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?” George Eliot had not sufficiently meditated on this scripture. She too often supposed that by taking thought—by enormous pains, profound thought, by putting this thought in exquisite and noble words—she might produce an immortal romance, an immortal poem.

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And yet let us never forget that the *Spanish Gypsy* is a very grand conception, that it has some noble scenes, and here and there some stately lines—even some beautiful passages, could we forget the artificial alliteration and the tuneless discords to which the poet's ear seems utterly insensible. The opening lines seem to promise well and have much of mellow thought, in spite of five hissing sibilants in the very first verse—

[Transcriber's note: In the original book, the letters in the poem fragments under discussion were bolded. Here, they are delineated with slashes (/).]

'Ti/s/ the warm South, where Europe spread/s/ her land/s/.  
Like fretted leaflets, breathing on the deep:

And then comes in the fourth line an awful cacophony of alliteration—and an alliteration in “c.”

A Calm earth-goddess crowned with corn and vines.

Then we have a really pretty but artificial line—an alliteration in “m.”

On the *Mid* Sea that *moans* with *me/m/ories*.

The seventh line again is an alliteration of alternate “p” and “d.”

*Pant* dumbly *passionate* with *dreams* of youth.

The tenth line is an excruciating alliteration in sibilants.

*Feed/s/* the *famed* stream that *water/s/* *Andalu/s/*.

But it must be admitted that the next line is graceful—

And loiters, amorous of the fragrant air.

The whole introduction of some 400 lines is full of beautiful images, fine thoughts, and striking phrases, but it is crowded, artificial, brocaded to excess with *trop de choses*; and it suddenly breaks into drama, with dialogue in person. This alternation of dramatic form and dialogue with epical narrative, interlarding the tragedy in parts with portentously long explanatory comment, is perhaps the most unlucky novelty which was ever attempted in verse. What would one say if even fine passages out of Wordsworth's *Excursion* had been accidentally bound up between the pages of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?

But it is needless to enlarge on all the metrical and poetic defects of this medley of nearly 10,000 lines, with its lip-twisting, ear-torturing lyrics—(was there ever such a cacophony as—

O the sweet sweet prime  
Of the past spring-time!)—

with its strange alternations of action and narration, its soliloquies of 150 unbroken lines, and all its other incongruities. The important point is, that it has a really grand scheme, that the characters of Zarca and of Fedalma are lofty, impressive, and nobly dramatic, that the whole poem is, in conception, a work of power and true imagination. Just as Kingsley, who had far greater poetic faculty than George Eliot, mistook in making the *Saint's Tragedy* a drama, when he might have made it a grand historical romance, so George Eliot made a cruel mistake in writing the *Spanish Gypsy* as a poem, when she might have written it as an historical romance—a romance, it may be, much superior to *Romola*, as the subject and the conception were on grander lines.

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It is to me a truly melancholy duty to have to admit that so much in the noble conceptions and rich thought of George Eliot was not a complete success in ultimate execution—and that, in great measure, because the conception and aim were so great and the execution so profoundly conscientious. I knew her well, I was amongst those who had the deepest regard for her mental power and her moral insight. I always recognised her as one of the best and most cultured minds of her time. I had great faith in her judgment, and could respect her courage even when I repudiated her opinions. But I never was one of those who exaggerated her gifts as an artist. I never could count anything later than *Silas Marner* as a complete and unqualified masterpiece. One may have the imaginative power shown by Michael Angelo in his Sistine Chapel, or his Medicean tombs, and yet, if one is not complete master of the brush and the chisel, no imagination, no thought, will produce a masterpiece in fresco or in marble. George Eliot was a most thoughtful artist, but she was more of a thinker than an artist; she was always more the artist when she was least the thinker; and when she conceived a work of art in her sublimest aspirations (as notably in *The Spanish Gypsy*), she almost makes us doubt if she were an artist at all.

She was an artist; and the younger generations will make an unpardonable error if they fail to do justice to the permanent survival of her best and earliest work. They will also be guilty of unpardonable blindness if they fail to note how completely she stands above all her contemporary rivals in romance, by thought, by knowledge, by nobility of aim. She raised the whole art of romance into a higher plane of thought, of culture, and of philosophic grasp. And when she failed, it was often by reason of the nobility of her aim itself, of the volume of her own learning, of the intensity of her own standard of perfection. Her passages in prose are studied with the care that men usually bestow on a sonnet; her accessories and landscapes are patient and conscientious transcripts of actual spots of country and town; her drama is a problem of ethical teaching, subtly elaborated, and minutely probed. In these high aims and difficult ambitions, she not seldom failed, or achieved a somewhat academic and qualified success. But the task was not seldom such that even to have fallen short of complete success was a far from ignoble triumph.

She raised the whole art of romance to a higher plane, I say; and, although in this ambitious aim she too often sacrificed freshness, ease, and simplicity, the weight of the limits she imposed on herself must fairly be counted in the balance. Romance had never before in England been written with such a sense of responsibility, with such eager subtlety of form, and with such high ethical purpose. The sense of responsibility wearies many readers, and at last crushed the writer; the form became “precious,”

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and at last pedantic; and the ethical purpose was sometimes more visible than the ethical life. In the French drama Corneille had great conceptions, noble types of character, stately verse, and tragic situations; but English readers too often find him mannered, artificial, dull. Corneille, I freely admit, is not Shakespeare: I greatly prefer Shakespeare; but I prefer Corneille to Ibsen. We have plenty of Ibsenites to-day, and rather a plethora than a dearth of ignoble creatures in squalid situations who expose to us their mean lives with considerable truth to nature. In such an age, it is just as well that the lessons of *Adam Bede*, *Romola*, *Fedalma* and *Zarca*, should not be quite forgotten.

The art of romance, in the widest and loftiest sense of the term, is even yet in its infancy. Ancient literature, mediaeval literature, knew nothing of it. Nor indeed did modern literature entirely conceive it in all its fulness until the days of Le Sage, Richardson, Fielding, and Goldsmith. Nay, we may say that its power was not quite revealed before Scott, Goethe, Manzoni, Jane Austen, Balzac, Thackeray, Dickens, and George Sand. Its subtlety, its flexibility, its capacity for analytic research, its variety of range, and facility for reaching all hearts and all minds—all this is simply incalculable. And we may be sure that the star of romance has not yet reached its zenith. It is the art of the future—and an art wherein women are quite as likely to reign as men. It would be treason to Art to pretend that George Eliot came near to such perfection. But she had certain qualities that none of her predecessors had quite possessed, and she strove for an ideal which may one day become something more than a dream—a dream that as yet eludes and escapes from the mind as it struggles to grasp it and to fix it.