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TWELVE TYPES

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G. K. Chesterton

Twelve Types

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Objection is often raised against realistic biography because it reveals so much that is important and even sacred about a man's life. The real objection to it will rather be found in the fact that it reveals about a man the precise points which are unimportant. It reveals and asserts and insists on exactly those things in a man's life of which the man himself is wholly unconscious; his exact class in society, the circumstances of his ancestry, the place of his present location. These are things which do not, properly speaking, ever arise before the human vision. They do not occur to a man's mind; it may be said, with almost equal truth, that they do not occur in a man's life. A man no more thinks about himself as the inhabitant of the third house in a row of Brixton villas than he thinks about himself as a strange animal with two legs. What a man's name was, what his income was, whom he married, where he lived, these are not sanctities; they are irrelevancies.

A very strong case of this is the case of the Brontës. The Brontë is in the position of the mad lady in a country village; her eccentricities form an endless source of innocent conversation to that exceedingly mild and bucolic circle, the literary world.

The truly glorious gossips of literature, like Mr Augustine Birrell and Mr Andrew Lang, never tire of collecting all the glimpses and anecdotes and sermons and side-lights and sticks and straws which will go to make a Brontë museum. They are the most personally discussed of all Victorian authors, and the limelight of biography has left few darkened corners in the dark old Yorkshire house. And yet the whole of this biographical investigation, though natural and picturesque, is not wholly suitable to the Brontës. For the Brontë genius was above all things deputed to assert the supreme unimportance of externals. Up to that point truth had always been conceived as existing more or less in the novel of manners. Charlotte Brontë electrified the world by showing that an infinitely older and more elemental truth could be conveyed by a novel in which no person, good or bad, had any manners at all. Her work represents the first great assertion that the humdrum life of modern civilisation is a disguise as tawdry and deceptive as the costume of a 'bal masqué.' She showed that abysses may exist inside a governess and eternities inside a manufacturer; her heroine is the commonplace spinster, with the dress of merino and the soul of flame. It is significant to notice that Charlotte Brontë, following consciously or unconsciously the great trend of her genius, was the first to take away from the heroine not only the artificial gold and diamonds of wealth and fashion, but even the natural gold and diamonds of physical beauty and grace. Instinctively she felt that the whole of the exterior must be made ugly that the whole of the interior might

be made sublime. She chose the ugliest of women in the ugliest of centuries, and revealed within them all the hells and heavens of Dante.

It may, therefore, I think, be legitimately said that the externals of the Brontës' life, though singularly picturesque in themselves, matter less than the externals of almost any other writers. It is interesting to know whether Jane Austen had any knowledge of the lives of the officers and women of fashion whom she introduced into her masterpieces. It is interesting to know whether Dickens had ever seen a shipwreck or been inside a workhouse. For in these authors much of the conviction is conveyed, not always by adherence to facts, but always by grasp of them. But the whole aim and purport and meaning of the work of the Brontës is that the most futile thing in the whole universe is fact. Such a story as 'Jane Eyre' is in itself so monstrous a fable that it ought to be excluded from a book of fairy tales. The characters do not do what they ought to do, nor what they would do, nor, it might be said, such is the insanity of the atmosphere, not even what they intend to do. The conduct of Rochester is so primevally and superhumanly caddish that Bret Harte in his admirable travesty scarcely exaggerated it. 'Then, resuming his usual manner, he threw his boots at my head and withdrew,' does perhaps reach to something resembling caricature. The scene in which Rochester dresses up as an old gipsy has something in it which is really not to be found in any other branch of art, except in the end of the pantomime, where the Emperor turns

into a pantaloon. Yet, despite this vast nightmare of illusion and morbidity and ignorance of the world, 'Jane Eyre' is perhaps the truest book that was ever written. Its essential truth to life sometimes makes one catch one's breath. For it is not true to manners, which are constantly false, or to facts, which are almost always false; it is true to the only existing thing which is true, emotion, the irreducible minimum, the indestructible germ. It would not matter a single straw if a Brontë story were a hundred times more moonstruck and improbable than 'Jane Eyre,' or a hundred times more moonstruck and improbable than 'Wuthering Heights.' It would not matter if George Read stood on his head, and Mrs Read rode on a dragon, if Fairfax Rochester had four eyes and St John Rivers three legs, the story would still remain the truest story in the world. The typical Brontë character is, indeed, a kind of monster. Everything in him except the essential is dislocated. His hands are on his legs and his feet on his arms, his nose is above his eyes, but his heart is in the right place.

The great and abiding truth for which the Brontë cycle of fiction stands is a certain most important truth about the enduring spirit of youth, the truth of the near kinship between terror and joy. The Brontë heroine, dingily dressed, badly educated, hampered by a humiliating inexperience, a kind of ugly innocence, is yet, by the very fact of her solitude and her gaucherie, full of the greatest delight that is possible to a human being, the delight of expectation, the delight of an ardent and

flamboyant ignorance. She serves to show how futile it is of humanity to suppose that pleasure can be attained chiefly by putting on evening dress every evening, and having a box at the theatre every first night. It is not the man of pleasure who has pleasure; it is not the man of the world who appreciates the world. The man who has learnt to do all conventional things perfectly has at the same time learnt to do them prosaically. It is the awkward man, whose evening dress does not fit him, whose gloves will not go on, whose compliments will not come off, who is really full of the ancient ecstasies of youth. He is frightened enough of society actually to enjoy his triumphs. He has that element of fear which is one of the eternal ingredients of joy. This spirit is the central spirit of the Brontë novel. It is the epic of the exhilaration of the shy man. As such it is of incalculable value in our time, of which the curse is that it does not take joy reverently because it does not take it fearfully. The shabby and inconspicuous governess of Charlotte Brontë, with the small outlook and the small creed, had more commerce with the awful and elemental forces which drive the world than a legion of lawless minor poets. She approached the universe with real simplicity, and, consequently, with real fear and delight. She was, so to speak, shy before the multitude of the stars, and in this she had possessed herself of the only force which can prevent enjoyment being as black and barren as routine. The faculty of being shy is the first and the most delicate of the powers of enjoyment. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of pleasure.

Upon the whole, therefore, I think it may justifiably be said that the dark wild youth of the Brontës in their dark wild Yorkshire home has been somewhat exaggerated as a necessary factor in their work and their conception. The emotions with which they dealt were universal emotions, emotions of the morning of existence, the springtide joy and the springtide terror. Every one of us as a boy or girl has had some midnight dream of nameless obstacle and unutterable menace, in which there was, under whatever imbecile forms, all the deadly stress and panic of 'Wuthering Heights.' Every one of us has had a day-dream of our own potential destiny not one atom more reasonable than 'Jane Eyre.' And the truth which the Brontës came to tell us is the truth that many waters cannot quench love, and that suburban respectability cannot touch or damp a secret enthusiasm. Clapham, like every other earthly city, is built upon a volcano. Thousands of people go to and fro in the wilderness of bricks and mortar, earning mean wages, professing a mean religion, wearing a mean attire, thousands of women who have never found any expression for their exaltation or their tragedy but to go on working harder and yet harder at dull and automatic employments, at scolding children or stitching shirts. But out of all these silent ones one suddenly became articulate, and spoke a resonant testimony, and her name was Charlotte Brontë. Spreading around us upon every side to-day like a huge and radiating geometrical figure are the endless branches of the great city. There are times when we are almost stricken crazy, as well

we may be, by the multiplicity of those appalling perspectives, the frantic arithmetic of that unthinkable population. But this thought of ours is in truth nothing but a fancy. There are no chains of houses; there are no crowds of men. The colossal diagram of streets and houses is an illusion, the opium dream of a speculative builder. Each of these men is supremely solitary and supremely important to himself. Each of these houses stands in the centre of the world. There is no single house of all those millions which has not seemed to some one at some time the heart of all things and the end of travel.

WILLIAM MORRIS AND HIS SCHOOL

It is proper enough that the unveiling of the bust of William Morris should approximate to a public festival, for while there have been many men of genius in the Victorian era more despotic than he, there have been none so representative. He represents not only that rapacious hunger for beauty which has now for the first time become a serious problem in the healthy life of humanity, but he represents also that honourable instinct for finding beauty in common necessities of workmanship which gives it a stronger and more bony structure. The time has passed when William Morris was conceived to be irrelevant to be described as a designer of wall-papers. If Morris had been a hatter instead of a decorator, we should have become gradually and painfully conscious of an improvement in our hats. If he had been a tailor, we should have suddenly found our frock-coats trailing on the ground with the grandeur of mediæval raiment. If he had been a shoemaker, we should have found, with no little consternation, our shoes gradually approximating to the antique sandal. As a hairdresser, he would have invented some massing of the hair worthy to be the crown of Venus; as an ironmonger, his nails would have had some noble pattern, fit to be the nails of the Cross. The limitations of William

Morris, whatever they were, were not the limitations of common decoration. It is true that all his work, even his literary work, was in some sense decorative, had in some degree the qualities of a splendid wall-paper. His characters, his stories, his religious and political views, had, in the most emphatic sense, length and breadth without thickness. He seemed really to believe that men could enjoy a perfectly flat felicity. He made no account of the unexplored and explosive possibilities of human nature, of the unnameable terrors, and the yet more unnameable hopes. So long as a man was graceful in every circumstance, so long as he had the inspiring consciousness that the chestnut colour of his hair was relieved against the blue forest a mile behind, he would be serenely happy. So he would be, no doubt, if he were really fitted for a decorative existence; if he were a piece of exquisitely coloured cardboard.

But although Morris took little account of the terrible solidity of human nature – took little account, so to speak, of human figures in the round, it is altogether unfair to represent him as a mere aesthete. He perceived a great public necessity and fulfilled it heroically. The difficulty with which he grappled was one so immense that we shall have to be separated from it by many centuries before we can really judge of it. It was the problem of the elaborate and deliberate ugliness of the most self-conscious of centuries. Morris at least saw the absurdity of the thing. He felt that it was monstrous that the modern man, who was pre-eminently capable of realising the strangest and

most contradictory beauties, who could feel at once the fiery aureole of the ascetic, and the colossal calm of the Hellenic god, should himself, by a farcical bathos, be buried in a black coat, and hidden under a chimney-pot hat. He could not see why the harmless man who desired to be an artist in raiment should be condemned to be, at best, a black and white artist. It is indeed difficult to account for the clinging curse of ugliness which blights everything brought forth by the most prosperous of centuries. In all created nature there is not, perhaps, anything so completely ugly as a pillar-box. Its shape is the most unmeaning of shapes, its height and thickness just neutralising each other; its colour is the most repulsive of colours – a fat and soulless red, a red without a touch of blood or fire, like the scarlet of dead men's sins. Yet there is no reason whatever why such hideousness should possess an object full of civic dignity, the treasure-house of a thousand secrets, the fortress of a thousand souls. If the old Greeks had had such an institution, we may be sure that it would have been surmounted by the severe, but graceful, figure of the god of letter-writing. If the mediæval Christians had possessed it, it would have had a niche filled with the golden aureole of St Rowland of the Postage Stamps. As it is, there it stands at all our street-corners, disguising one of the most beautiful of ideas under one of the most preposterous of forms. It is useless to deny that the miracles of science have not been such an incentive to art and imagination as were the miracles of religion. If men in the twelfth century had been told that the lightning had been driven

for leagues underground, and had dragged at its destroying tail loads of laughing human beings, and if they had then been told that the people alluded to this pulverising portent chirpily as 'The Twopenny Tube,' they would have called down the fire of Heaven on us as a race of half-witted atheists. Probably they would have been quite right.

This clear and fine perception of what may be called the anæsthetic element in the Victorian era was, undoubtedly, the work of a great reformer: it requires a fine effort of the imagination to see an evil that surrounds us on every side. The manner in which Morris carried out his crusade may, considering the circumstances, be called triumphant. Our carpets began to bloom under our feet like the meadows in spring, and our hitherto prosaic stools and sofas seemed growing legs and arms at their own wild will. An element of freedom and rugged dignity came in with plain and strong ornaments of copper and iron. So delicate and universal has been the revolution in domestic art that almost every family in England has had its taste cunningly and treacherously improved, and if we look back at the early Victorian drawing-rooms it is only to realise the strange but essential truth that art, or human decoration, has, nine times out of ten in history, made things uglier than they were before, from the 'coiffure' of a Papuan savage to the wall-paper of a British merchant in 1830.

But great and beneficent as was the æsthetic revolution of Morris, there was a very definite limit to it. It did not lie

only in the fact that his revolution was in truth a reaction, though this was a partial explanation of his partial failure. When he was denouncing the dresses of modern ladies, 'upholstered like arm-chairs instead of being draped like women,' as he forcibly expressed it, he would hold up for practical imitation the costumes and handicrafts of the Middle Ages. Further than this retrogressive and imitative movement he never seemed to go. Now, the men of the time of Chaucer had many evil qualities, but there was at least one exhibition of moral weakness they did not give. They would have laughed at the idea of dressing themselves in the manner of the bowmen at the battle of Senlac, or painting themselves an æsthetic blue, after the custom of the ancient Britons. They would not have called that a movement at all. Whatever was beautiful in their dress or manners sprang honestly and naturally out of the life they led and preferred to lead. And it may surely be maintained that any real advance in the beauty of modern dress must spring honestly and naturally out of the life we lead and prefer to lead. We are not altogether without hints and hopes of such a change, in the growing orthodoxy of rough and athletic costumes. But if this cannot be, it will be no substitute or satisfaction to turn life into an interminable historical fancy-dress ball. But the limitation of Morris's work lay deeper than this. We may best suggest it by a method after his own heart. Of all the various works he performed, none, perhaps, was so splendidly and solidly valuable as his great protest for the fables and superstitions of mankind. He has the supreme credit of

showing that the fairy-tales contain the deepest truth of the earth, the real record of men's feeling for things. Trifling details may be inaccurate, Jack may not have climbed up so tall a beanstalk, or killed so tall a giant; but it is not such things that make a story false; it is a far different class of things that makes every modern book of history as false as the father of lies; ingenuity, self-consciousness, hypocritical impartiality. It appears to us that of all the fairy-tales none contains so vital a moral truth as the old story, existing in many forms, of Beauty and the Beast. There is written, with all the authority of a human scripture, the eternal and essential truth that until we love a thing in all its ugliness we cannot make it beautiful. This was the weak point in William Morris as a reformer: that he sought to reform modern life, and that he hated modern life instead of loving it. Modern London is indeed a beast, big enough and black enough to be the beast in Apocalypse, blazing with a million eyes, and roaring with a million voices. But unless the poet can love this fabulous monster as he is, can feel with some generous excitement his massive and mysterious 'joie-de-vivre,' the vast scale of his iron anatomy and the beating of his thunderous heart, he cannot and will not change the beast into the fairy prince. Morris's disadvantage was that he was not honestly a child of the nineteenth century: he could not understand its fascination, and consequently he could not really develop it. An abiding testimony to his tremendous personal influence in the æsthetic world is the vitality and recurrence of the Arts and Crafts Exhibitions, which are steeped in his

personality like a chapel in that of a saint. If we look round at the exhibits in one of these æsthetic shows, we shall be struck by the large mass of modern objects that the decorative school leaves untouched. There is a noble instinct for giving the right touch of beauty to common and necessary things, but the things that are so touched are the ancient things, the things that always to some extent commended themselves to the lover of beauty. There are beautiful gates, beautiful fountains, beautiful cups, beautiful chairs, beautiful reading-desks. But there are no modern things made beautiful. There are no beautiful lamp-posts, beautiful letter-boxes, beautiful engines, beautiful bicycles. The spirit of William Morris has not seized hold of the century and made its humblest necessities beautiful. And this was because, with all his healthiness and energy, he had not the supreme courage to face the ugliness of things; Beauty shrank from the Beast and the fairy-tale had a different ending.

But herein, indeed, lay Morris's deepest claim to the name of a great reformer: that he left his work incomplete. There is, perhaps, no better proof that a man is a mere meteor, merely barren and brilliant, than that his work is done perfectly. A man like Morris draws attention to needs he cannot supply. In after-years we may have perhaps a newer and more daring Arts and Crafts Exhibition. In it we shall not decorate the armour of the twelfth century but the machinery of the twentieth. A lamp-post shall be wrought nobly in twisted iron, fit to hold the sanctity of fire. A pillar-box shall be carved with figures emblematical

of the secrets of comradeship and the silence and honour of the State. Railway signals, of all earthly things the most poetical, the coloured stars of life and death, shall be lamps of green and crimson worthy of their terrible and faithful service. But if ever this gradual and genuine movement of our time towards beauty – not backwards, but forwards – does truly come about, Morris will be the first prophet of it. Poet of the childhood of nations, craftsman in the new honesties of art, prophet of a merrier and wiser life, his full-blooded enthusiasm will be remembered when human life has once more assumed flamboyant colours and proved that this painful greenish grey of the æsthetic twilight in which we now live is, in spite of all the pessimists, not of the greyness of death, but the greyness of dawn.

THE OPTIMISM OF BYRON

Everything is against our appreciating the spirit and the age of Byron. The age that has just passed from us is always like a dream when we wake in the morning, a thing incredible and centuries away. And the world of Byron seems a sad and faded world, a weird and inhuman world, where men were romantic in whiskers, ladies lived, apparently, in bowers, and the very word has the sound of a piece of stage scenery. Roses and nightingales recur in their poetry with the monotonous elegance of a wallpaper pattern. The whole is like a revel of dead men, a revel with splendid vesture and half-witted faces.

But the more shrewdly and earnestly we study the histories of men, the less ready shall we be to make use of the word "artificial." Nothing in the world has ever been artificial. Many customs, many dresses, many works of art are branded with artificiality because they exhibit vanity and self-consciousness: as if vanity were not a deep and elemental thing, like love and hate and the fear of death. Vanity may be found in darkling deserts, in the hermit and in the wild beasts that crawl around him. It may be good or evil, but assuredly it is not artificial: vanity is a voice out of the abyss.

The remarkable fact is, however, and it bears strongly on the present position of Byron, that when a thing is unfamiliar to us, when it is remote and the product of some other age or spirit,

we think it not savage or terrible, but merely artificial. There are many instances of this: a fair one is the case of tropical plants and birds. When we see some of the monstrous and flamboyant blossoms that enrich the equatorial woods, we do not feel that they are conflagrations of nature; silent explosions of her frightful energy. We simply find it hard to believe that they are not wax flowers grown under a glass case. When we see some of the tropic birds, with their tiny bodies attached to gigantic beaks, we do not feel that they are freaks of the fierce humour of Creation. We almost believe that they are toys out of a child's play-box, artificially carved and artificially coloured. So it is with the great convulsion of Nature which was known as Byronism. The volcano is not an extinct volcano now; it is the dead stick of a rocket. It is the remains not of a natural but of an artificial fire.

But Byron and Byronism were something immeasurably greater than anything that is represented by such a view as this: their real value and meaning are indeed little understood. The first of the mistakes about Byron lies in the fact that he is treated as a pessimist. True, he treated himself as such, but a critic can hardly have even a slight knowledge of Byron without knowing that he had the smallest amount of knowledge of himself that ever fell to the lot of an intelligent man. The real character of what is known as Byron's pessimism is better worth study than any real pessimism could ever be.

It is the standing peculiarity of this curious world of ours that almost everything in it has been extolled enthusiastically and

invariably extolled to the disadvantage of everything else.

One after another almost every one of the phenomena of the universe has been declared to be alone capable of making life worth living. Books, love, business, religion, alcohol, abstract truth, private emotion, money, simplicity, mysticism, hard work, a life close to nature, a life close to Belgrave Square are every one of them passionately maintained by somebody to be so good that they redeem the evil of an otherwise indefensible world. Thus while the world is almost always condemned in summary, it is always justified, and indeed extolled, in detail after detail.

Existence has been praised and absolved by a chorus of pessimists. The work of giving thanks to Heaven is, as it were, divided ingeniously among them. Schopenhauer is told off as a kind of librarian in the House of God, to sing the praises of the austere pleasures of the mind. Carlyle, as steward, undertakes the working department and eulogises a life of labour in the fields. Omar Khayyam is established in the cellar and swears that it is the only room in the house. Even the blackest of pessimistic artists enjoys his art. At the precise moment that he has written some shameless and terrible indictment of Creation, his one pang of joy in the achievement joins the universal chorus of gratitude, with the scent of the wild flower and the song of the bird.

Now Byron had a sensational popularity, and that popularity was, as far as words and explanations go, founded upon his pessimism. He was adored by an overwhelming majority, almost every individual of which despised the majority of mankind.

But when we come to regard the matter a little more deeply we tend in some degree to cease to believe in this popularity of the pessimist. The popularity of pure and unadulterated pessimism is an oddity; it is almost a contradiction in terms. Men would no more receive the news of the failure of existence or of the harmonious hostility of the stars with ardour or popular rejoicing than they would light bonfires for the arrival of cholera or dance a breakdown when they were condemned to be hanged. When the pessimist is popular it must always be not because he shows all things to be bad, but because he shows some things to be good. Men can only join in a chorus of praise even if it is the praise of denunciation. The man who is popular must be optimistic about something even if he is only optimistic about pessimism. And this was emphatically the case with Byron and the Byronists. Their real popularity was founded not upon the fact that they blamed everything, but upon the fact that they praised something. They heaped curses upon man, but they used man merely as a foil. The things they wished to praise by comparison were the energies of Nature. Man was to them what talk and fashion were to Carlyle, what philosophical and religious quarrels were to Omar, what the whole race after practical happiness was to Schopenhauer, the thing which must be censured in order that somebody else may be exalted. It was merely a recognition of the fact that one cannot write in white chalk except on a blackboard.

Surely it is ridiculous to maintain seriously that Byron's love of the desolate and inhuman in nature was the mark of

vital scepticism and depression. When a young man can elect deliberately to walk alone in winter by the side of the shattering sea, when he takes pleasure in storms and stricken peaks, and the lawless melancholy of the older earth, we may deduce with the certainty of logic that he is very young and very happy. There is a certain darkness which we see in wine when seen in shadow; we see it again in the night that has just buried a gorgeous sunset. The wine seems black, and yet at the same time powerfully and almost impossibly red; the sky seems black, and yet at the same time to be only too dense a blend of purple and green. Such was the darkness which lay around the Byronic school. Darkness with them was only too dense a purple. They would prefer the sullen hostility of the earth because amid all the cold and darkness their own hearts were flaming like their own firesides.

Matters are very different with the more modern school of doubt and lamentation. The last movement of pessimism is perhaps expressed in Mr Aubrey Beardsley's allegorical designs. Here we have to deal with a pessimism which tends naturally not towards the oldest elements of the cosmos, but towards the last and most fantastic fripperies of artificial life. Byronism tended towards the desert; the new pessimism towards the restaurant. Byronism was a revolt against artificiality; the new pessimism is a revolt in its favour. The Byronic young man had an affectation of sincerity; the decadent, going a step deeper into the avenues of the unreal, has positively an affectation of affectation. And it is by their fopperies and their frivolities that we know that

their sinister philosophy is sincere; in their lights and garlands and ribbons we read their indwelling despair. It was so, indeed, with Byron himself; his really bitter moments were his frivolous moments. He went on year after year calling down fire upon mankind, summoning the deluge and the destructive sea and all the ultimate energies of nature to sweep away the cities of the spawn of man. But through all this his sub-conscious mind was not that of a despairer; on the contrary, there is something of a kind of lawless faith in thus parleying with such immense and immemorial brutalities. It was not until the time in which he wrote 'Don Juan' that he really lost this inward warmth and geniality, and a sudden shout of hilarious laughter announced to the world that Lord Byron had really become a pessimist.

One of the best tests in the world of what a poet really means is his metre. He may be a hypocrite in his metaphysics, but he cannot be a hypocrite in his prosody. And all the time that Byron's language is of horror and emptiness, his metre is a bounding 'pas de quatre.' He may arraign existence on the most deadly charges, he may condemn it with the most desolating verdict, but he cannot alter the fact that on some walk in a spring morning when all the limbs are swinging and all the blood alive in the body, the lips may be caught repeating:

'Oh, there's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away,
When the glow of early youth declines in beauty's dull decay;
'Tis not upon the cheek of youth the blush that fades so fast,
But the tender bloom of heart is gone ere youth itself be past.'

That automatic recitation is the answer to the whole pessimism of Byron.

The truth is that Byron was one of a class who may be called the unconscious optimists, who are very often, indeed, the most uncompromising conscious pessimists, because the exuberance of their nature demands for an adversary a dragon as big as the world. But the whole of his essential and unconscious being was spirited and confident, and that unconscious being, long disguised and buried under emotional artifices, suddenly sprang into prominence in the face of a cold, hard, political necessity. In Greece he heard the cry of reality, and at the time that he was dying, he began to live. He heard suddenly the call of that buried and sub-conscious happiness which is in all of us, and which may emerge suddenly at the sight of the grass of a meadow or the spears of the enemy.

POPE AND THE ART OF SATIRE

The general critical theory common in this and the last century is that it was very easy for the imitators of Pope to write English poetry. The classical couplet was a thing that anyone could do. So far as that goes, one may justifiably answer by asking any one to try. It may be easier really to have wit, than really, in the boldest and most enduring sense, to have imagination. But it is immeasurably easier to pretend to have imagination than to pretend to have wit. A man may indulge in a sham rhapsody, because it may be the triumph of a rhapsody to be unintelligible. But a man cannot indulge in a sham joke, because it is the ruin of a joke to be unintelligible. A man may pretend to be a poet: he can no more pretend to be a wit than he can pretend to bring rabbits out of a hat without having learnt to be a conjuror. Therefore, it may be submitted, there was a certain discipline in the old antithetical couplet of Pope and his followers. If it did not permit of the great liberty of wisdom used by the minority of great geniuses, neither did it permit of the great liberty of folly which is used by the majority of small writers. A prophet could not be a poet in those days, perhaps, but at least a fool could not be a poet. If we take, for the sake of example, such a line as Pope's

'Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,'

the test is comparatively simple. A great poet would not have written such a line, perhaps. But a minor poet could not.

Supposing that a lyric poet of the new school really had to deal with such an idea as that expressed in Pope's line about Man:

'A being darkly wise and rudely great.'

Is it really so certain that he would go deeper into the matter than that old antithetical jingle goes? I venture to doubt whether he would really be any wiser or weirder or more imaginative or more profound. The one thing that he would really be, would be longer. Instead of writing

'A being darkly wise and rudely great,'

the contemporary poet, in his elaborately ornamented book of verses, would produce something like the following: —

'A creature
Of feature
More dark, more dark, more dark than skies,
Yea, darkly wise, yea, darkly wise:
Darkly wise as a formless fate
And if he be great
If he be great, then rudely great,
Rudely great as a plough that plies,
And darkly wise, and darkly wise.'

Have we really learnt to think more broadly? Or have we only learnt to spread our thoughts thinner? I have a dark suspicion

that a modern poet might manufacture an admirable lyric out of almost every line of Pope.

There is, of course, an idea in our time that the very antithesis of the typical line of Pope is a mark of artificiality. I shall have occasion more than once to point out that nothing in the world has ever been artificial. But certainly antithesis is not artificial. An element of paradox runs through the whole of existence itself. It begins in the realm of ultimate physics and metaphysics, in the two facts that we cannot imagine a space that is infinite, and that we cannot imagine a space that is finite. It runs through the inmost complications of divinity, in that we cannot conceive that Christ in the wilderness was truly pure, unless we also conceive that he desired to sin. It runs, in the same manner, through all the minor matters of morals, so that we cannot imagine courage existing except in conjunction with fear, or magnanimity existing except in conjunction with some temptation to meanness. If Pope and his followers caught this echo of natural irrationality, they were not any the more artificial. Their antitheses were fully in harmony with existence, which is itself a contradiction in terms.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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