STRACHEY LYTTON

BOOKS AND CHARACTERS, FRENCH & ENGLISH

Lytton Strachey

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Содержание

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TO JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

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The 'Dialogue' is now printed for the first time, from a manuscript, apparently in the handwriting of Voltaire and belonging to his English period.

RACINE

When Ingres painted his vast 'Apotheosis of Homer,' he represented, grouped round the central throne, all the great poets of the ancient and modern worlds, with a single exception—Shakespeare. After some persuasion, he relented so far as to introduce into his picture a *part* of that offensive personage; and English visitors at the Louvre can now see, to their disgust or their amusement, the truncated image of rather less than half of the author of *King Lear* just appearing at the extreme edge of the enormous canvas. French taste, let us hope, has changed since the days of Ingres; Shakespeare would doubtless now be advanced—though perhaps chiefly from a sense of duty—to the very steps of the central throne. But if an English painter were to choose a similar subject, how would he treat the master who stands acknowledged as the most characteristic representative of the literature of France? Would Racine find a place in the picture at all? Or, if he did, would more of him be visible than the last curl of his full-bottomed wig, whisking away into the outer darkness?

There is something inexplicable about the intensity of national tastes and the violence of national differences. If, as in the good old days, I could boldly believe a Frenchman to be an inferior creature, while he, as simply, wrote me down a savage, there would be an easy end of the matter. But alas! *nous avons changé*

tout cela. Now we are each of us obliged to recognise that the other has a full share of intelligence, ability, and taste; that the accident of our having been born on different sides of the Channel is no ground for supposing either that I am a brute or that he is a ninny. But, in that case, how does it happen that while on one side of that 'span of waters' Racine is despised and Shakespeare is worshipped, on the other, Shakespeare is tolerated and Racine is adored? The perplexing question was recently emphasised and illustrated in a singular way. Mr. John Bailey, in a volume of essays entitled 'The Claims of French Poetry,' discussed the qualities of Racine at some length, placed him, not without contumely, among the second rank of writers, and drew the conclusion that, though indeed the merits of French poetry are many and great, it is not among the pages of Racine that they are to be found. Within a few months of the appearance of Mr. Bailey's book, the distinguished French writer and brilliant critic, M. Lemaître, published a series of lectures on Racine, in which the highest note of unqualified panegyric sounded uninterruptedly from beginning to end. The contrast is remarkable, and the conflicting criticisms seem to represent, on the whole, the views of the cultivated classes in the two countries. And it is worthy of note that neither of these critics pays any heed, either explicitly or by implication, to the opinions of the other. They are totally at variance, but they argue along lines so different and so remote that they never come into collision. Mr. Bailey, with the utmost sang-froid, sweeps on one side the whole

of the literary tradition of France. It is as if a French critic were to assert that Shakespeare, the Elizabethans, and the romantic poets of the nineteenth century were all negligible, and that England's really valuable contribution to the poetry of the world was to be found among the writings of Dryden and Pope. M. Lemaître, on the other hand, seems sublimely unconscious that any such views as Mr. Bailey's could possibly exist. Nothing shows more clearly Racine's supreme dominion over his countrymen than the fact that M. Lemaître never questions it for a moment, and tacitly assumes on every page of his book that his only duty is to illustrate and amplify a greatness already recognised by all. Indeed, after reading M. Lemaître's book, one begins to understand more clearly why it is that English critics find it difficult to appreciate to the full the literature of France. It is no paradox to say that that country is as insular as our own. When we find so eminent a critic as M. Lemaître observing that Racine 'a vraiment "achevé" et porté à son point suprême de perfection *la tragédie*, cette étonnante forme d'art, et qui est bien de chez nous: car on la trouve peu chez les Anglais,' is it surprising that we should hastily jump to the conclusion that the canons and the principles of a criticism of this kind will not repay, and perhaps do not deserve, any careful consideration? Certainly they are not calculated to spare the susceptibilities of Englishmen. And, after all, this is only natural; a French critic addresses a French audience; like a Rabbi in a synagogue, he has no need to argue and no wish to convert. Perhaps, too, whether he willed or no, he

could do very little to the purpose; for the difficulties which beset an Englishman in his endeavours to appreciate a writer such as Racine are precisely of the kind which a Frenchman is least able either to dispel or even to understand. The object of this essay is, first, to face these difficulties, with the aid of Mr. Bailey's paper, which sums up in an able and interesting way the average English view of the matter; and, in the second place, to communicate to the English reader a sense of the true significance and the immense value of Racine's work. Whether the attempt succeed or fail, some important general questions of literary doctrine will have been discussed; and, in addition, at least an effort will have been made to vindicate a great reputation. For, to a lover of Racine, the fact that English critics of Mr. Bailey's calibre can write of him as they do, brings a feeling not only of entire disagreement, but of almost personal distress. Strange as it may seem to those who have been accustomed to think of that great artist merely as a type of the frigid pomposity of an antiquated age, his music, to ears that are attuned to hear it, comes fraught with a poignancy of loveliness whose peculiar quality is shared by no other poetry in the world. To have grown familiar with the voice of Racine, to have realised once and for all its intensity, its beauty, and its depth, is to have learnt a new happiness, to have discovered something exquisite and splendid, to have enlarged the glorious boundaries of art. For such benefits as these who would not be grateful? Who would not seek to make them known to others, that they too may enjoy, and render thanks?

M. Lemaître, starting out, like a native of the mountains, from a point which can only be reached by English explorers after a long journey and a severe climb, devotes by far the greater part of his book to a series of brilliant psychological studies of Racine's characters. He leaves on one side almost altogether the questions connected both with Racine's dramatic construction, and with his style; and these are the very questions by which English readers are most perplexed, and which they are most anxious to discuss. His style in particular—using the word in its widest sense—forms the subject of the principal part of Mr. Bailey's essay; it is upon this count that the real force of Mr. Bailey's impeachment depends; and, indeed, it is obvious that no poet can be admired or understood by those who quarrel with the whole fabric of his writing and condemn the very principles of his art. Before, however, discussing this, the true crux of the question, it may be well to consider briefly another matter which deserves attention, because the English reader is apt to find in it a stumbling-block at the very outset of his inquiry. Coming to Racine with Shakespeare and the rest of the Elizabethans warm in his memory, it is only to be expected that he should be struck with a chilling sense of emptiness and unreality. After the colour, the moving multiplicity, the imaginative luxury of our early tragedies, which seem to have been moulded out of the very stuff of life and to have been built up with the varied and generous structure of Nature herself, the Frenchman's dramas, with their rigid uniformity of setting, their endless duologues,

their immense harangues, their spectral confidants, their strict exclusion of all visible action, give one at first the same sort of impression as a pretentious pseudo-classical summer-house appearing suddenly at the end of a vista, after one has been rambling through an open forest. 'La scène est à Buthrote, ville d'Epire, dans une salle du palais de Pyrrhus'—could anything be more discouraging than such an announcement? Here is nothing for the imagination to feed on, nothing to raise expectation, no wondrous vision of 'blasted heaths,' or the 'seaboard of Bohemia'; here is only a hypothetical drawing-room conjured out of the void for five acts, simply in order that the persons of the drama may have a place to meet in and make their speeches. The 'three unities' and the rest of the 'rules' are a burden which the English reader finds himself quite unaccustomed to carry; he grows impatient of them; and, if he is a critic, he points out the futility and the unreasonableness of those antiquated conventions. Even Mr. Bailey, who, curiously enough, believes that Racine 'stumbled, as it were, half by accident into great advantages' by using them, speaks of the 'discredit' into which 'the once famous unities' have now fallen, and declares that 'the unities of time and place are of no importance in themselves.' So far as critics are concerned this may be true; but critics are apt to forget that plays can exist somewhere else than in books, and a very small acquaintance with contemporary drama is enough to show that, upon the stage at any rate, the unities, so far from having fallen into discredit, are now in effect triumphant. For

what is the principle which underlies and justifies the unities of time and place? Surely it is not, as Mr. Bailey would have us believe, that of the 'unity of action or interest,' for it is clear that every good drama, whatever its plan of construction, must possess a single dominating interest, and that it may happen—as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance—that the very essence of this interest lies in the accumulation of an immense variety of local activities and the representation of long epochs of time. The true justification for the unities of time and place is to be found in the conception of drama as the history of a spiritual crisis—the vision, thrown up, as it were, by a bull's-eye lantern, of the final catastrophic phases of a long series of events. Very different were the views of the Elizabethan tragedians, who aimed at representing not only the catastrophe, but the whole development of circumstances of which it was the effect; they traced, with elaborate and abounding detail, the rise, the growth, the decline, and the ruin of great causes and great persons; and the result was a series of masterpieces unparalleled in the literature of the world. But, for good or evil, these methods have become obsolete, and to-day our drama seems to be developing along totally different lines. It is playing the part, more and more consistently, of the bull's-eye lantern; it is concerned with the crisis, and nothing but the crisis; and, in proportion as its field is narrowed and its vision intensified, the unities of time and place come more and more completely into play. Thus, from the point of view of form, it is true to say that it has been the drama of Racine rather than that of

Shakespeare that has survived. Plays of the type of *Macbeth* have been superseded by plays of the type of *Britannicus*. *Britannicus*, no less than *Macbeth*, is the tragedy of a criminal; but it shows us, instead of the gradual history of the temptation and the fall, followed by the fatal march of consequences, nothing but the precise psychological moment in which the first irrevocable step is taken, and the criminal is made. The method of *Macbeth* has been, as it were, absorbed by that of the modern novel; the method of *Britannicus* still rules the stage. But Racine carried out his ideals more rigorously and more boldly than any of his successors. He fixed the whole of his attention upon the spiritual crisis; to him that alone was of importance; and the conventional classicism so disheartening to the English reader—the 'unities,' the harangues, the confidences, the absence of local colour, and the concealment of the action—was no more than the machinery for enhancing the effect of the inner tragedy, and for doing away with every side issue and every chance of distraction. His dramas must be read as one looks at an airy, delicate statue, supported by artificial props, whose only importance lies in the fact that without them the statue itself would break in pieces and fall to the ground. Approached in this light, even the 'salle du palais de Pyrrhus' begins to have a meaning. We come to realise that, if it is nothing else, it is at least the meeting-ground of great passions, the invisible framework for one of those noble conflicts which 'make one little room an everywhere.' It will show us no views, no spectacles, it will give us no sense of atmosphere or

of imaginative romance; but it will allow us to be present at the climax of a tragedy, to follow the closing struggle of high destinies, and to witness the final agony of human hearts.

It is remarkable that Mr. Bailey, while seeming to approve of the classicism of Racine's dramatic form, nevertheless finds fault with him for his lack of a quality with which, by its very nature, the classical form is incompatible. Racine's vision, he complains, does not 'take in the whole of life'; we do not find in his plays 'the whole pell-mell of human existence'; and this is true, because the particular effects which Racine wished to produce necessarily involved this limitation of the range of his interests. His object was to depict the tragic interaction of a small group of persons at the culminating height of its intensity; and it is as irrational to complain of his failure to introduce into his compositions 'the whole pell-mell of human existence' as it would be to find fault with a Mozart quartet for not containing the orchestration of Wagner. But it is a little difficult to make certain of the precise nature of Mr. Bailey's criticism. When he speaks of Racine's vision not including 'the whole of life,' when he declares that Racine cannot be reckoned as one of the 'world-poets,' he seems to be taking somewhat different ground and discussing a more general question. All truly great poets, he asserts, have 'a wide view of humanity,' 'a large view of life'—a profound sense, in short, of the relations between man and the universe; and, since Racine is without this quality, his claim to true poetic greatness must be denied. But, even upon

the supposition that this view of Racine's philosophical outlook is the true one—and, in its most important sense, I believe that it is not—does Mr. Bailey's conclusion really follow? Is it possible to test a poet's greatness by the largeness of his 'view of life'? How wide, one would like to know, was Milton's 'view of humanity'? And, though Wordsworth's sense of the position of man in the universe was far more profound than Dante's, who will venture to assert that he was the greater poet? The truth is that we have struck here upon a principle which lies at the root, not only of Mr. Bailey's criticism of Racine, but of an entire critical method—the method which attempts to define the essential elements of poetry in general, and then proceeds to ask of any particular poem whether it possesses these elements, and to judge it accordingly. How often this method has been employed, and how often it has proved disastrously fallacious! For, after all, art is not a superior kind of chemistry, amenable to the rules of scientific induction. Its component parts cannot be classified and tested, and there is a spark within it which defies foreknowledge. When Matthew Arnold declared that the value of a new poem might be gauged by comparing it with the greatest passages in the acknowledged masterpieces of literature, he was falling into this very error; for who could tell that the poem in question was not itself a masterpiece, living by the light of an unknown beauty, and a law unto itself? It is the business of the poet to break rules and to baffle expectation; and all the masterpieces in the world cannot make a precedent. Thus Mr.

Bailey's attempts to discover, by quotations from Shakespeare, Sophocles, and Goethe, the qualities without which no poet can be great, and his condemnation of Racine because he is without them, is a fallacy in criticism. There is only one way to judge a poet, as Wordsworth, with that paradoxical sobriety so characteristic of him, has pointed out—and that is, by loving him. But Mr. Bailey, with regard to Racine at any rate, has not followed the advice of Wordsworth. Let us look a little more closely into the nature of his attack.

'L'épithète rare,' said the De Goncourts,'voilà la marque de l'écrivain.' Mr. Bailey quotes the sentence with approval, observing that if, with Sainte-Beuve, we extend the phrase to 'le mot rare,' we have at once one of those invaluable touch-stones with which we may test the merit of poetry. And doubtless most English readers would be inclined to agree with Mr. Bailey, for it so happens that our own literature is one in which rarity of style, pushed often to the verge of extravagance, reigns supreme. Owing mainly, no doubt, to the double origin of our language, with its strange and violent contrasts between the highly-coloured crudity of the Saxon words and the ambiguous splendour of the Latin vocabulary; owing partly, perhaps, to a national taste for the intensely imaginative, and partly, too, to the vast and penetrating influence of those grand masters of bizarrerie—the Hebrew Prophets—our poetry, our prose, and our whole conception of the art of writing have fallen under the dominion of the emphatic, the extraordinary, and the bold. No one in

his senses would regret this, for it has given our literature all its most characteristic glories, and, of course, in Shakespeare, with whom expression is stretched to the bursting point, the national style finds at once its consummate example and its final justification. But the result is that we have grown so unused to other kinds of poetical beauty, that we have now come to believe, with Mr. Bailey, that poetry apart from 'le mot rare' is an impossibility. The beauties of restraint, of clarity, of refinement, and of precision we pass by unheeding; we can see nothing there but coldness and uniformity; and we go back with eagerness to the fling and the bravado that we love so well. It is as if we had become so accustomed to looking at boxers, wrestlers, and gladiators that the sight of an exquisite minuet produced no effect on us; the ordered dance strikes us as a monotony, for we are blind to the subtle delicacies of the dancers, which are fraught with such significance to the practised eye. But let us be patient, and let us look again.

> Ariane ma soeur, de quel amour blessée,
> Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée.

Here, certainly, are no 'mots rares'; here is nothing to catch the mind or dazzle the understanding; here is only the most ordinary vocabulary, plainly set forth. But is there not an enchantment? Is there not a vision? Is there not a flow of lovely sound whose beauty grows upon the ear, and dwells exquisitely within the

memory? Racine's triumph is precisely this—that he brings about, by what are apparently the simplest means, effects which other poets must strain every nerve to produce. The narrowness of his vocabulary is in fact nothing but a proof of his amazing art. In the following passage, for instance, what a sense of dignity and melancholy and power is conveyed by the commonest words!

> Enfin j'ouvre les yeux, et je me fais justice:
> C'est faire à vos beautés un triste sacrifice
> Que de vous présenter, madame, avec ma foi,
> Tout l'âge et le malheur que je traîne avec moi.
> Jusqu'ici la fortune et la victoire mêmes
> Cachaient mes cheveux blancs sous trente diadèmes.
> Mais ce temps-là n'est plus: je régnais; et je fuis:
> Mes ans se sont accrus; mes honneurs sont detruits.

Is that wonderful 'trente' an 'épithète rare'? Never, surely, before or since, was a simple numeral put to such a use—to conjure up so triumphantly such mysterious grandeurs! But these are subtleties which pass unnoticed by those who have been accustomed to the violent appeals of the great romantic poets. As Sainte-Beuve says, in a fine comparison between Racine and Shakespeare, to come to the one after the other is like passing to a portrait by Ingres from a decoration by Rubens. At first, 'comme on a l'oeil rempli de l'éclatante vérité pittoresque du grand maître flamand, on ne voit dans l'artiste français qu'un ton assez uniforme, une teinte diffuse de pâle et douce lumière.

Mais qu'on approche de plus près et qu'on observe avec soin: mille nuances fines vont éclore sous le regard; mille intentions savantes vont sortir de ce tissu profond et serré; on ne peut plus en détacher ses yeux.'

Similarly when Mr. Bailey, turning from the vocabulary to more general questions of style, declares that there is no 'element of fine surprise' in Racine, no trace of the 'daring metaphors and similes of Pindar and the Greek choruses—the reply is that he would find what he wants if he only knew where to look for it. 'Who will forget,' he says, 'the comparison of the Atreidae to the eagles wheeling over their empty nest, of war to the money-changer whose gold dust is that of human bodies, of Helen to the lion's whelps?… Everyone knows these. Who will match them among the formal elegances of Racine?' And it is true that when Racine wished to create a great effect he did not adopt the romantic method; he did not chase his ideas through the four quarters of the universe to catch them at last upon the verge of the inane; and anyone who hopes to come upon 'fine surprises' of this kind in his pages will be disappointed. His daring is of a different kind; it is not the daring of adventure but of intensity; his fine surprises are seized out of the very heart of his subject, and seized in a single stroke. Thus many of his most astonishing phrases burn with an inward concentration of energy, which, difficult at first to realise to the full, comes in the end to impress itself ineffaceably upon the mind.

C'était pendant l'horreur d'une profonde nuit.

The sentence is like a cavern whose mouth a careless traveller might pass by, but which opens out, to the true explorer, into vista after vista of strange recesses rich with inexhaustible gold. But, sometimes, the phrase, compact as dynamite, explodes upon one with an immediate and terrific force—

C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée!

A few 'formal elegances' of this kind are surely worth having.

But what is it that makes the English reader fail to recognise the beauty and the power of such passages as these? Besides Racine's lack of extravagance and bravura, besides his dislike of exaggerated emphasis and far-fetched or fantastic imagery, there is another characteristic of his style to which we are perhaps even more antipathetic—its suppression of detail. The great majority of poets—and especially of English poets—produce their most potent effects by the accumulation of details—details which in themselves fascinate us either by their beauty or their curiosity or their supreme appropriateness. But with details Racine will have nothing to do; he builds up his poetry out of words which are not only absolutely simple but extremely general, so that our minds, failing to find in it the peculiar delights to which we have been accustomed, fall into the error of rejecting it altogether as devoid of significance. And the error is a grave one, for in truth nothing is more marvellous than the magic with which Racine

can conjure up out of a few expressions of the vaguest import a sense of complete and intimate reality. When Shakespeare wishes to describe a silent night he does so with a single stroke of detail—'not a mouse stirring'! And Virgil adds touch upon touch of exquisite minutiae:

> Cum tacet omnis ager, pecudes, pictaeque volucres,
> Quaeque lacus late liquidos, quaeque aspera dumis
> Rura tenent, etc.

Racine's way is different, but is it less masterly?

> Mais tout dort, et l'armée, et les vents, et Neptune.

What a flat and feeble set of expressions! is the Englishman's first thought—with the conventional 'Neptune,' and the vague 'armée,' and the commonplace 'vents.' And he forgets to notice the total impression which these words produce—the atmosphere of darkness and emptiness and vastness and ominous hush.

It is particularly in regard to Racine's treatment of nature that this generalised style creates misunderstandings. 'Is he so much as aware,' exclaims Mr. Bailey, 'that the sun rises and sets in a glory of colour, that the wind plays deliciously on human cheeks, that the human ear will never have enough of the music of the sea? He might have written every page of his work without so much as looking out of the window of his study.'

The accusation gains support from the fact that Racine rarely describes the processes of nature by means of pictorial detail; that, we know, was not his plan. But he is constantly, with his subtle art, suggesting them. In this line, for instance, he calls up, without a word of definite description, the vision of a sudden and brilliant sunrise:

> Déjà le jour plus grand nous frappe et nous éclaire.

And how varied and beautiful are his impressions of the sea! He can give us the desolation of a calm:

> La rame inutile
> Fatigua vainement une mer immobile;

or the agitated movements of a great fleet of galleys:

> Voyez tout l'Hellespont blanchissant sous nos rames;

or he can fill his verses with the disorder and the fury of a storm:

> Quoi! pour noyer les Grecs et leurs mille vaisseaux,
> Mer, tu n'ouvriras pas des abymes nouveaux!
> Quoi! lorsque les chassant du port qui les recèle,
> L'Aulide aura vomi leur flotte criminelle,
> Les vents, les mêmes vents, si longtemps accusés,
> Ne te couvriront pas de ses vaisseaux brisés!

And then, in a single line, he can evoke the radiant spectacle of a triumphant flotilla riding the dancing waves:

> Prêts à vous recevoir mes vaisseaux vous attendent;
> Et du pied de l'autel vous y pouvez monter,
> Souveraine des mers qui vous doivent porter.

The art of subtle suggestion could hardly go further than in this line, where the alliterating v's, the mute e's, and the placing of the long syllables combine so wonderfully to produce the required effect.

But it is not only suggestions of nature that readers like Mr. Bailey are unable to find in Racine—they miss in him no less suggestions of the mysterious and the infinite. No doubt this is partly due to our English habit of associating these qualities with expressions which are complex and unfamiliar. When we come across the mysterious accent of fatality and remote terror in a single perfectly simple phrase—

> La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé

we are apt not to hear that it is there. But there is another reason—the craving, which has seized upon our poetry and our criticism ever since the triumph of Wordsworth and Coleridge at the beginning of the last century, for metaphysical stimulants. It would be easy to prolong the discussion of this matter far beyond

the boundaries of 'sublunary debate,' but it is sufficient to point out that Mr. Bailey's criticism of Racine affords an excellent example of the fatal effects of this obsession. His pages are full of references to 'infinity' and 'the unseen' and 'eternity' and 'a mystery brooding over a mystery' and 'the key to the secret of life'; and it is only natural that he should find in these watchwords one of those tests of poetic greatness of which he is so fond. The fallaciousness of such views as these becomes obvious when we remember the plain fact that there is not a trace of this kind of mystery or of these 'feelings after the key to the secret of life,' in *Paradise Lost*, and that *Paradise Lost* is one of the greatest poems in the world. But Milton is sacrosanct in England; no theory, however mistaken, can shake that stupendous name, and the damage which may be wrought by a vicious system of criticism only becomes evident in its treatment of writers like Racine, whom it can attack with impunity and apparent success. There is no 'mystery' in Racine—that is to say, there are no metaphysical speculations in him, no suggestions of the transcendental, no hints as to the ultimate nature of reality and the constitution of the world; and so away with him, a creature of mere rhetoric and ingenuities, to the outer limbo! But if, instead of asking what a writer is without, we try to discover simply what he is, will not our results be more worthy of our trouble? And in fact, if we once put out of our heads our longings for the mystery of metaphysical suggestion, the more we examine Racine, the more clearly we shall discern in him another kind of mystery, whose

presence may eventually console us for the loss of the first—the mystery of the mind of man. This indeed is the framework of his poetry, and to speak of it adequately would demand a wider scope than that of an essay; for how much might be written of that strange and moving background, dark with the profundity of passion and glowing with the beauty of the sublime, wherefrom the great personages of his tragedies—Hermione and Mithridate, Roxane and Agrippine, Athalie and Phèdre—seem to emerge for a moment towards us, whereon they breathe and suffer, and among whose depths they vanish for ever from our sight! Look where we will, we shall find among his pages the traces of an inward mystery and the obscure infinities of the heart.

> Nous avons su toujours nous aimer et nous taire.

The line is a summary of the romance and the anguish of two lives. That is all affection; and this all desire—

> J'aimais jusqu'à ses pleurs que je faisais couler.

Or let us listen to the voice of Phèdre, when she learns that Hippolyte and Aricie love one another:

> Les a-t-on vus souvent se parler, se chercher?
> Dans le fond des forêts alloient-ils se cacher?
> Hélas! ils se voyaient avec pleine licence;
> Le ciel de leurs soupirs approuvait l'innocence;

Ils suivaient sans remords leur penchant amoureux;
Tous les jours se levaient clairs et sereins pour eux.

This last line—written, let us remember, by a frigidly ingenious rhetorician, who had never looked out of his study-window—does it not seem to mingle, in a trance of absolute simplicity, the peerless beauty of a Claude with the misery and ruin of a great soul?

It is, perhaps, as a psychologist that Racine has achieved his most remarkable triumphs; and the fact that so subtle and penetrating a critic as M. Lemaître has chosen to devote the greater part of a volume to the discussion of his characters shows clearly enough that Racine's portrayal of human nature has lost nothing of its freshness and vitality with the passage of time. On the contrary, his admirers are now tending more and more to lay stress upon the brilliance of his portraits, the combined vigour and intimacy of his painting, his amazing knowledge, and his unerring fidelity to truth. M. Lemaître, in fact, goes so far as to describe Racine as a supreme realist, while other writers have found in him the essence of the modern spirit. These are vague phrases, no doubt, but they imply a very definite point of view; and it is curious to compare with it our English conception of Racine as a stiff and pompous kind of dancing-master, utterly out of date and infinitely cold. And there is a similar disagreement over his style. Mr. Bailey is never tired of asserting that Racine's style is rhetorical, artificial, and monotonous; while

M. Lemaître speaks of it as 'nu et familier,' and Sainte-Beuve says 'il rase la prose, mais avec des ailes,' The explanation of these contradictions is to be found in the fact that the two critics are considering different parts of the poet's work. When Racine is most himself, when he is seizing upon a state of mind and depicting it with all its twistings and vibrations, he writes with a directness which is indeed naked, and his sentences, refined to the utmost point of significance, flash out like swords, stroke upon stroke, swift, certain, irresistible. This is how Agrippine, in the fury of her tottering ambition, bursts out to Burrhus, the tutor of her son:

> Prétendez-vous longtemps me cacher l'empereur?
> Ne le verrai-je plus qu'à titre d'importune?
> Ai-je donc élevé si haut votre fortune
> Pour mettre une barrière entre mon fils et moi?
> Ne l'osez-vous laisser un moment sur sa foi?
> Entre Sénèque et vous disputez-vous la gloire
> A qui m'effacera plus tôt de sa mémoire?
> Vous l'ai-je confié pour en faire un ingrat,
> Pour être, sous son nom, les maîtres de l'état?
> Certes, plus je médite, et moins je me figure
> Que vous m'osiez compter pour votre créature;
> Vous, dont j'ai pu laisser vieillir l'ambition
> Dans les honneurs obscurs de quelque légion;
> Et moi, qui sur le trône ai suivi mes ancêtres,
> Moi, fille, femme, soeur, et mère de vos maîtres!

When we come upon a passage like this we know, so to speak, that the hunt is up and the whole field tearing after the quarry. But Racine, on other occasions, has another way of writing. He can be roundabout, artificial, and vague; he can involve a simple statement in a mist of high-sounding words and elaborate inversions.

> Jamais l'aimable soeur des cruels Pallantides
> Trempa-t-elle aux complots de ses frères perfides.

That is Racine's way of saying that Aricie did not join in her brothers' conspiracy. He will describe an incriminating letter as 'De sa trahison ce gage trop sincère.' It is obvious that this kind of expression has within it the germs of the 'noble' style of the eighteenth-century tragedians, one of whom, finding himself obliged to mention a dog, got out of the difficulty by referring to —'De la fidélité le respectable appui.' This is the side of Racine's writing that puzzles and disgusts Mr. Bailey. But there is a meaning in it, after all. Every art is based upon a selection, and the art of Racine selected the things of the spirit for the material of its work. The things of sense—physical objects and details, and all the necessary but insignificant facts that go to make up the machinery of existence—these must be kept out of the picture at all hazards. To have called a spade a spade would have ruined the whole effect; spades must never be mentioned, or, at the worst, they must be dimly referred to as agricultural implements, so that

the entire attention may be fixed upon the central and dominating features of the composition—the spiritual states of the characters—which, laid bare with uncompromising force and supreme precision, may thus indelibly imprint themselves upon the mind. To condemn Racine on the score of his ambiguities and his pomposities is to complain of the hastily dashed-in column and curtain in the background of a portrait, and not to mention the face. Sometimes indeed his art seems to rise superior to its own conditions, endowing even the dross and refuse of what it works in with a wonderful significance. Thus when the Sultana, Roxane, discovers her lover's treachery, her mind flies immediately to thoughts of revenge and death, and she exclaims—

> Ah! je respire enfin, et ma joie est extrême
> Que le traître une fois se soit trahi lui-même.
> Libre des soins cruels où j'allais m'engager,
> Ma tranquille fureur n'a plus qu'à se venger.
> Qu'il meure. Vengeons-nous. Courez. Qu'on le saisisse!
> Que la main des muets s'arme pour son supplice;
> Qu'ils viennent préparer ces noeuds infortunés
> Par qui de ses pareils les jours sont terminés.

To have called a bowstring a bowstring was out of the question; and Racine, with triumphant art, has managed to introduce the periphrasis in such a way that it exactly expresses the state of mind of the Sultana. She begins with revenge and rage, until she reaches the extremity of virulent resolution;

and then her mind begins to waver, and she finally orders the execution of the man she loves, in a contorted agony of speech.

But, as a rule, Racine's characters speak out most clearly when they are most moved, so that their words, at the height of passion, have an intensity of directness unknown in actual life. In such moments, the phrases that leap to their lips quiver and glow with the compressed significance of character and situation; the 'Qui te l'a dit?' of Hermione, the 'Sortez' of Roxane, the 'Je vais à Rome' of Mithridate, the 'Dieu des Juifs, tu l'emportes!' of Athalie—who can forget these things, these wondrous microcosms of tragedy? Very different is the Shakespearean method. There, as passion rises, expression becomes more and more poetical and vague. Image flows into image, thought into thought, until at last the state of mind is revealed, inform and molten, driving darkly through a vast storm of words. Such revelations, no doubt, come closer to reality than the poignant epigrams of Racine. In life, men's minds are not sharpened, they are diffused, by emotion; and the utterance which best represents them is fluctuating and agglomerated rather than compact and defined. But Racine's aim was less to reflect the actual current of the human spirit than to seize upon its inmost being and to give expression to that. One might be tempted to say that his art represents the sublimed essence of reality, save that, after all, reality has no degrees. Who can affirm that the wild ambiguities of our hearts and the gross impediments of our physical existence are less real than the most pointed of

our feelings and 'thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls'?

It would be nearer the truth to rank Racine among the idealists. The world of his creation is not a copy of our own; it is a heightened and rarefied extension of it; moving, in triumph and in beauty, through 'an ampler ether, a diviner air.' It is a world where the hesitations and the pettinesses and the squalors of this earth have been fired out; a world where ugliness is a forgotten name, and lust itself has grown ethereal; where anguish has become a grace and death a glory, and love the beginning and the end of all. It is, too, the world of a poet, so that we reach it, not through melody nor through vision, but through the poet's sweet articulation—through verse. Upon English ears the rhymed couplets of Racine sound strangely; and how many besides Mr. Bailey have dubbed his alexandrines 'monotonous'! But to his lovers, to those who have found their way into the secret places of his art, his lines are impregnated with a peculiar beauty, and the last perfection of style. Over them, the most insignificant of his verses can throw a deep enchantment, like the faintest wavings of a magician's wand. 'A-t-on vu de ma part le roi de Comagène?'—How is it that words of such slight import should hold such thrilling music? Oh! they are Racine's words. And, as to his rhymes, they seem perhaps, to the true worshipper, the final crown of his art. Mr. Bailey tells us that the couplet is only fit for satire. Has he forgotten *Lamia*? And he asks, 'How is it that we read Pope's *Satires* and Dryden's, and Johnson's with enthusiasm still, while we never touch *Irene*,

and rarely the *Conquest of Granada*?' Perhaps the answer is that if we cannot get rid of our *a priori* theories, even the fiery art of Dryden's drama may remain dead to us, and that, if we touched *Irene* even once, we should find it was in blank verse. But Dryden himself has spoken memorably upon rhyme. Discussing the imputed unnaturalness of the rhymed 'repartee' he says: 'Suppose we acknowledge it: how comes this confederacy to be more displeasing to you than in a dance which is well contrived? You see there the united design of many persons to make up one figure; … the confederacy is plain amongst them, for chance could never produce anything so beautiful; and yet there is nothing in it that shocks your sight … 'Tis an art which appears; but it appears only like the shadowings of painture, which, being to cause the rounding of it, cannot be absent; but while that is considered, they are lost: so while we attend to the other beauties of the matter, the care and labour of the rhyme is carried from us, or at least drowned in its own sweetness, as bees are sometimes buried in their honey.' In this exquisite passage Dryden seems to have come near, though not quite to have hit, the central argument for rhyme—its power of creating a beautiful atmosphere, in which what is expressed may be caught away from the associations of common life and harmoniously enshrined. For Racine, with his prepossessions of sublimity and perfection, some such barrier between his universe and reality was involved in the very nature of his art. His rhyme is like the still clear water of a lake, through which we can see, mysteriously separated from

us and changed and beautified, the forms of his imagination, 'quivering within the wave's intenser day.' And truly not seldom are they 'so sweet, the sense faints picturing them'!

> Oui, prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée …
> Il avait votre port, vos yeux, votre langage,
> Cette noble pudeur colorait son visage,
> Lorsque de notre Crète il traversa les flots,
> Digne sujet des voeux des filles de Minos.
> Que faisiez-vous alors? Pourquoi, sans Hippolyte,
> Des héros de la Grèce assembla-t-il l'élite?
> Pourquoi, trop jeune encor, ne pûtes-vous alors
> Entrer dans le vaisseau qui le mit sur nos bords?
> Par vous aurait péri le monstre de la Crète,
> Malgré tous les détours de sa vaste retraite:
> Pour en développer l'embarras incertain
> Ma soeur du fil fatal eût armé votre main.
> Mais non: dans ce dessein je l'aurais devancée;
> L'amour m'en eût d'abord inspiré la pensée;
> C'est moi, prince, c'est moi dont l'utile secours
> Vous eût du labyrinthe enseigné les détours.
> Que de soins m'eût coûtés cette tête charmante!

It is difficult to 'place' Racine among the poets. He has affinities with many; but likenesses to few. To balance him rigorously against any other—to ask whether he is better or worse than Shelley or than Virgil—is to attempt impossibilities; but there is one fact which is too often forgotten in comparing

his work with that of other poets—with Virgil's for instance—Racine wrote for the stage. Virgil's poetry is intended to be read, Racine's to be declaimed; and it is only in the theatre that one can experience to the full the potency of his art. In a sense we can know him in our library, just as we can hear the music of Mozart with silent eyes. But, when the strings begin, when the whole volume of that divine harmony engulfs us, how differently then we understand and feel! And so, at the theatre, before one of those high tragedies, whose interpretation has taxed to the utmost ten generations of the greatest actresses of France, we realise, with the shock of a new emotion, what we had but half-felt before. To hear the words of Phèdre spoken by the mouth of Bernhardt, to watch, in the culminating horror of crime and of remorse, of jealousy, of rage, of desire, and of despair, all the dark forces of destiny crowd down upon that great spirit, when the heavens and the earth reject her, and Hell opens, and the terriffic urn of Minos thunders and crashes to the ground—that indeed is to come close to immortality, to plunge shuddering through infinite abysses, and to look, if only for a moment, upon eternal light.

1908.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

The life of Sir Thomas Browne does not afford much scope for the biographer. Everyone knows that Browne was a physician who lived at Norwich in the seventeenth century; and, so far as regards what one must call, for want of a better term, his 'life,' that is a sufficient summary of all there is to know. It is obvious that, with such scanty and unexciting materials, no biographer can say very much about what Sir Thomas Browne did; it is quite easy, however, to expatiate about what he wrote. He dug deeply into so many subjects, he touched lightly upon so many more, that his works offer innumerable openings for those half-conversational digressions and excursions of which perhaps the pleasantest kind of criticism is composed.

Mr. Gosse, in his volume on Sir Thomas Browne in the 'English Men of Letters' Series, has evidently taken this view of his subject. He has not attempted to treat it with any great profundity or elaboration; he has simply gone 'about it and about.' The result is a book so full of entertainment, of discrimination, of quiet humour, and of literary tact, that no reader could have the heart to bring up against it the obvious—though surely irrelevant—truth, that the general impression which it leaves upon the mind is in the nature of a composite presentment, in which the features of Sir Thomas have become somehow indissolubly blended with those of his biographer. It would be rash indeed

to attempt to improve upon Mr. Gosse's example; after his luminous and suggestive chapters on Browne's life at Norwich, on the *Vulgar Errors*, and on the self-revelations in the *Religio Medici*, there seems to be no room for further comment. One can only admire in silence, and hand on the volume to one's neighbour.

There is, however, one side of Browne's work upon which it may be worth while to dwell at somewhat greater length. Mr. Gosse, who has so much to say on such a variety of topics, has unfortunately limited to a very small number of pages his considerations upon what is, after all, the most important thing about the author of *Urn Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus*—his style. Mr. Gosse himself confesses that it is chiefly as a master of literary form that Browne deserves to be remembered. Why then does he tell us so little about his literary form, and so much about his family, and his religion, and his scientific opinions, and his porridge, and who fished up the *murex*?

Nor is it only owing to its inadequacy that Mr. Gosse's treatment of Browne as an artist in language is the least satisfactory part of his book: for it is difficult not to think that upon this crucial point Mr. Gosse has for once been deserted by his sympathy and his acumen. In spite of what appears to be a genuine delight in Browne's most splendid and characteristic passages, Mr. Gosse cannot help protesting somewhat acrimoniously against that very method of writing whose effects he is so ready to admire. In practice, he approves;

in theory, he condemns. He ranks the *Hydriotaphia* among the gems of English literature; and the prose style of which it is the consummate expression he denounces as fundamentally wrong. The contradiction is obvious; but there can be little doubt that, though Browne has, as it were, extorted a personal homage, Mr. Gosse's real sympathies lie on the other side. His remarks upon Browne's effect upon eighteenth-century prose show clearly enough the true bent of his opinions; and they show, too, how completely misleading a preconceived theory may be.

The study of Sir Thomas Browne, Mr. Gosse says, 'encouraged Johnson, and with him a whole school of rhetorical writers in the eighteenth century, to avoid circumlocution by the invention of superfluous words, learned but pedantic, in which darkness was concentrated without being dispelled.' Such is Mr. Gosse's account of the influence of Browne and Johnson upon the later eighteenth-century writers of prose. But to dismiss Johnson's influence as something altogether deplorable, is surely to misunderstand the whole drift of the great revolution which he brought about in English letters. The characteristics of the pre-Johnsonian prose style—the style which Dryden first established and Swift brought to perfection—are obvious enough. Its advantages are those of clarity and force; but its faults, which, of course, are unimportant in the work of a great master, become glaring in that of the second-rate practitioner. The prose of Locke, for instance, or of Bishop Butler, suffers, in spite of its clarity and vigour, from grave defects. It is very flat

and very loose; it has no formal beauty, no elegance, no balance, no trace of the deliberation of art. Johnson, there can be no doubt, determined to remedy these evils by giving a new mould to the texture of English prose; and he went back for a model to Sir Thomas Browne. Now, as Mr. Gosse himself observes, Browne stands out in a remarkable way from among the great mass of his contemporaries and predecessors, by virtue of his highly developed artistic consciousness. He was, says Mr. Gosse, 'never carried away. His effects are closely studied, they are the result of forethought and anxious contrivance'; and no one can doubt the truth or the significance of this dictum who compares, let us say, the last paragraphs of *The Garden of Cyrus* with any page in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. The peculiarities of Browne's style—the studied pomp of its latinisms, its wealth of allusion, its tendency towards sonorous antithesis—culminated in his last, though not his best, work, the *Christian Morals*, which almost reads like an elaborate and magnificent parody of the Book of Proverbs. With the *Christian Morals* to guide him, Dr. Johnson set about the transformation of the prose of his time. He decorated, he pruned, he balanced; he hung garlands, he draped robes; and he ended by converting the Doric order of Swift into the Corinthian order of Gibbon. Is it quite just to describe this process as one by which 'a whole school of rhetorical writers' was encouraged 'to avoid circumlocution' by the invention 'of superfluous words,' when it was this very process that gave us the peculiar savour of polished ease which characterises nearly

all the important prose of the last half of the eighteenth century —that of Johnson himself, of Hume, of Reynolds, of Horace Walpole—which can be traced even in Burke, and which fills the pages of Gibbon? It is, indeed, a curious reflection, but one which is amply justified by the facts, that the *Decline and Fall* could not have been precisely what it is, had Sir Thomas Browne never written the *Christian Morals*.

That Johnson and his disciples had no inkling of the inner spirit of the writer to whose outward form they owed so much, has been pointed out by Mr. Gosse, who adds that Browne's 'genuine merits were rediscovered and asserted by Coleridge and Lamb.' But we have already observed that Mr. Gosse's own assertion of these merits lies a little open to question. His view seems to be, in fact, the precise antithesis of Dr. Johnson's; he swallows the spirit of Browne's writing, and strains at the form. Browne, he says, was 'seduced by a certain obscure romance in the terminology of late Latin writers,' he used 'adjectives of classical extraction, which are neither necessary nor natural,' he forgot that it is better for a writer 'to consult women and people who have not studied, than those who are too learnedly oppressed by a knowledge of Latin and Greek.' He should not have said 'oneiro-criticism,' when he meant the interpretation of dreams, nor 'omneity' instead of 'oneness'; and he had 'no excuse for writing about the "pensile" gardens of Babylon, when all that is required is expressed by "hanging."' Attacks of this kind—attacks upon the elaboration and classicism of Browne's style—

are difficult to reply to, because they must seem, to anyone who holds a contrary opinion, to betray such a total lack of sympathy with the subject as to make argument all but impossible. To the true Browne enthusiast, indeed, there is something almost shocking about the state of mind which would exchange 'pensile' for 'hanging,' and 'asperous' for 'rough,' and would do away with 'digladiation' and 'quodlibetically' altogether. The truth is, that there is a great gulf fixed between those who naturally dislike the ornate, and those who naturally love it. There is no remedy; and to attempt to ignore this fact only emphasises it the more. Anyone who is jarred by the expression 'prodigal blazes' had better immediately shut up Sir Thomas Browne. The critic who admits the jar, but continues to appreciate, must present, to the true enthusiast, a spectacle of curious self-contradiction.

If once the ornate style be allowed as a legitimate form of art, no attack such as Mr. Gosse makes on Browne's latinisms can possibly be valid. For it is surely an error to judge and to condemn the latinisms without reference to the whole style of which they form a necessary part. Mr. Gosse, it is true, inclines to treat them as if they were a mere excrescence which could be cut off without difficulty, and might never have existed if Browne's views upon the English language had been a little different. Browne, he says, 'had come to the conclusion that classic words were the only legitimate ones, the only ones which interpreted with elegance the thoughts of a sensitive and cultivated man, and that the rest were barbarous.' We are to suppose, then, that if he

had happened to hold the opinion that Saxon words were the only legitimate ones, the *Hydriotaphia* would have been as free from words of classical derivation as the sermons of Latimer. A very little reflection and inquiry will suffice to show how completely mistaken this view really is. In the first place, the theory that Browne considered all unclassical words 'barbarous' and unfit to interpret his thoughts, is clearly untenable, owing to the obvious fact that his writings are full of instances of the deliberate use of such words. So much is this the case, that Pater declares that a dissertation upon style might be written to illustrate Browne's use of the words 'thin' and 'dark.' A striking phrase from the *Christian Morals* will suffice to show the deliberation with which Browne sometimes employed the latter word:—'the areopagy and dark tribunal of our hearts.' If Browne had thought the Saxon epithet 'barbarous,' why should he have gone out of his way to use it, when 'mysterious' or 'secret' would have expressed his meaning? The truth is clear enough. Browne saw that 'dark' was the one word which would give, better than any other, the precise impression of mystery and secrecy which he intended to produce; and so he used it. He did not choose his words according to rule, but according to the effect which he wished them to have. Thus, when he wished to suggest an extreme contrast between simplicity and pomp, we find him using Saxon words in direct antithesis to classical ones. In the last sentence of *Urn Burial*, we are told that the true believer, when he is to be buried, is 'as content with six foot as the Moles of Adrianus.' How could

Browne have produced the remarkable sense of contrast which this short phrase conveys, if his vocabulary had been limited, in accordance with a linguistic theory, to words of a single stock?

There is, of course, no doubt that Browne's vocabulary is extraordinarily classical. Why is this? The reason is not far to seek. In his most characteristic moments he was almost entirely occupied with thoughts and emotions which can, owing to their very nature, only be expressed in Latinistic language. The state of mind which he wished to produce in his readers was nearly always a complicated one: they were to be impressed and elevated by a multiplicity of suggestions and a sense of mystery and awe. 'Let thy thoughts,' he says himself, 'be of things which have not entered into the hearts of beasts: think of things long past, and long to come: acquaint thyself with the choragium of the stars, and consider the vast expanse beyond them. Let intellectual tubes give thee a glance of things which visive organs reach not. Have a glimpse of incomprehensibles; and thoughts of things, which thoughts but tenderly touch.' Browne had, in fact, as Dr. Johnson puts it, 'uncommon sentiments'; and how was he to express them unless by a language of pomp, of allusion, and of elaborate rhythm? Not only is the Saxon form of speech devoid of splendour and suggestiveness; its simplicity is still further emphasised by a spondaic rhythm which seems to produce (by some mysterious rhythmic law) an atmosphere of ordinary life, where, though the pathetic may be present, there is no place for the complex or the remote. To understand how unsuitable

such conditions would be for the highly subtle and rarefied art of Sir Thomas Browne, it is only necessary to compare one of his periods with a typical passage of Saxon prose.

> Then they brought a faggot, kindled with fire, and laid the same down at Doctor Ridley's feet. To whom Master Latimer spake in this manner: 'Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.'

Nothing could be better adapted to the meaning and sentiment of this passage than the limpid, even flow of its rhythm. But who could conceive of such a rhythm being ever applicable to the meaning and sentiment of these sentences from the *Hydriotaphia*?

> To extend our memories by monuments, whose death we daily pray for, and whose duration we cannot hope without injury to our expectations in the advent of the last day, were a contradiction to our beliefs. We, whose generations are ordained in this setting part of time, are providentially taken off from such imaginations; and, being necessitated to eye the remaining particle of futurity, are naturally constituted unto thoughts of the next world, and cannot excusably decline the consideration of that duration, which maketh pyramids pillars of snow, and all that's past a moment.

Here the long, rolling, almost turgid clauses, with their enormous Latin substantives, seem to carry the reader forward

through an immense succession of ages, until at last, with a sudden change of the rhythm, the whole of recorded time crumbles and vanishes before his eyes. The entire effect depends upon the employment of a rhythmical complexity and subtlety which is utterly alien to Saxon prose. It would be foolish to claim a superiority for either of the two styles; it would be still more foolish to suppose that the effects of one might be produced by means of the other.

Wealth of rhythmical elaboration was not the only benefit which a highly Latinised vocabulary conferred on Browne. Without it, he would never have been able to achieve those splendid strokes of stylistic *bravura*, which were evidently so dear to his nature, and occur so constantly in his finest passages. The precise quality cannot be easily described, but is impossible to mistake; and the pleasure which it produces seems to be curiously analogous to that given by a piece of magnificent brushwork in a Rubens or a Velasquez. Browne's 'brushwork' is certainly unequalled in English literature, except by the very greatest masters of sophisticated art, such as Pope and Shakespeare; it is the inspiration of sheer technique. Such expressions as: 'to subsist in bones and be but pyramidally extant'—'sad and sepulchral pitchers which have no joyful voices'—'predicament of chimaeras'—'the irregularities of vain glory, and wild enormities of ancient magnanimity'—are examples of this consummate mastery of language, examples which, with a multitude of others, singly deserve whole hours

of delicious gustation, whole days of absorbed and exquisite worship. It is pleasant to start out for a long walk with such a splendid phrase upon one's lips as: 'According to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematicks of the City of Heaven,' to go for miles and miles with the marvellous syllables still rich upon the inward ear, and to return home with them in triumph. It is then that one begins to understand how mistaken it was of Sir Thomas Browne not to have written in simple, short, straightforward Saxon English.

One other function performed by Browne's latinisms must be mentioned, because it is closely connected with the most essential and peculiar of the qualities which distinguish his method of writing. Certain classical words, partly owing to their allusiveness, partly owing to their sound, possess a remarkable flavour which is totally absent from those of Saxon derivation. Such a word, for instance, as 'pyramidally,' gives one at once an immediate sense of something mysterious, something extraordinary, and, at the same time, something almost grotesque. And this subtle blending of mystery and queerness characterises not only Browne's choice of words, but his choice of feelings and of thoughts. The grotesque side of his art, indeed, was apparently all that was visible to the critics of a few generations back, who admired him simply and solely for what they called his 'quaintness'; while Mr. Gosse has flown to the opposite extreme, and will not allow Browne any sense of humour at all. The confusion no doubt arises

merely from a difference in the point of view. Mr. Gosse, regarding Browne's most important and general effects, rightly fails to detect anything funny in them. The Early Victorians, however, missed the broad outlines, and were altogether taken up with the obvious grotesqueness of the details. When they found Browne asserting that 'Cato seemed to dote upon Cabbage,' or embroidering an entire paragraph upon the subject of 'Pyrrhus his Toe,' they could not help smiling; and surely they were quite right. Browne, like an impressionist painter, produced his pictures by means of a multitude of details which, if one looks at them in themselves, are discordant, and extraordinary, and even absurd.

There can be little doubt that this strongly marked taste for curious details was one of the symptoms of the scientific bent of his mind. For Browne was scientific just up to the point where the examination of detail ends, and its coordination begins. He knew little or nothing of general laws; but his interest in isolated phenomena was intense. And the more singular the phenomena, the more he was attracted. He was always ready to begin some strange inquiry. He cannot help wondering: 'Whether great-ear'd persons have short necks, long feet, and loose bellies?' 'Marcus Antoninus Philosophus,' he notes in his commonplace book, 'wanted not the advice of the best physicians; yet how warrantable his practice was, to take his repast in the night, and scarce anything but treacle in the day, may admit of great doubt.' To inquire thus is, perhaps, to inquire too curiously; yet

such inquiries are the stuff of which great scientific theories are made. Browne, however, used his love of details for another purpose: he co-ordinated them, not into a scientific theory, but into a work of art. His method was one which, to be successful, demanded a self-confidence, an imagination, and a technical power, possessed by only the very greatest artists. Everyone knows Pascal's overwhelming sentence:—'Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie.' It is overwhelming, obviously and immediately; it, so to speak, knocks one down. Browne's ultimate object was to create some such tremendous effect as that, by no knock-down blow, but by a multitude of delicate, subtle, and suggestive touches, by an elaborate evocation of memories and half-hidden things, by a mysterious combination of pompous images and odd unexpected trifles drawn together from the ends of the earth and the four quarters of heaven. His success gives him a place beside Webster and Blake, on one of the very highest peaks of Parnassus. And, if not the highest of all, Browne's peak is—or so at least it seems from the plains below—more difficult of access than some which are no less exalted. The road skirts the precipice the whole way. If one fails in the style of Pascal, one is merely flat; if one fails in the style of Browne, one is ridiculous. He who plays with the void, who dallies with eternity, who leaps from star to star, is in danger at every moment of being swept into utter limbo, and tossed forever in the Paradise of Fools.

Browne produced his greatest work late in life; for there is nothing in the *Religio Medici* which reaches the same level of

excellence as the last paragraphs of *The Garden of Cyrus* and the last chapter of *Urn Burial*. A long and calm experience of life seems, indeed, to be the background from which his most amazing sentences start out into being. His strangest phantasies are rich with the spoils of the real world. His art matured with himself; and who but the most expert of artists could have produced this perfect sentence in *The Garden of Cyrus*, so well known, and yet so impossible not to quote?

> Nor will the sweetest delight of gardens afford much comfort in sleep; wherein the dullness of that sense shakes hands with delectable odours; and though in the bed of Cleopatra, can hardly with any delight raise up the ghost of a rose.

This is Browne in his most exquisite mood. For his most characteristic, one must go to the concluding pages of *Urn Burial*, where, from the astonishing sentence beginning—'Meanwhile Epicurus lies deep in Dante's hell'—to the end of the book, the very quintessence of his work is to be found. The subject—mortality in its most generalised aspect—has brought out Browne's highest powers; and all the resources of his art—elaboration of rhythm, brilliance of phrase, wealth and variety of suggestion, pomp and splendour of imagination—are accumulated in every paragraph. To crown all, he has scattered through these few pages a multitude of proper names, most of them gorgeous in sound, and each of them carrying its own strange freight of reminiscences and allusions from the unknown

depths of the past. As one reads, an extraordinary procession of persons seems to pass before one's eyes—Moses, Archimedes, Achilles, Job, Hector and Charles the Fifth, Cardan and Alaric, Gordianus, and Pilate, and Homer, and Cambyses, and the Canaanitish woman. Among them, one visionary figure flits with a mysterious pre-eminence, flickering over every page, like a familiar and ghostly flame. It is Methuselah; and, in Browne's scheme, the remote, almost infinite, and almost ridiculous patriarch is—who can doubt?—the only possible centre and symbol of all the rest. But it would be vain to dwell further upon this wonderful and famous chapter, except to note the extraordinary sublimity and serenity of its general tone. Browne never states in so many words what his own feelings towards the universe actually are. He speaks of everything but that; and yet, with triumphant art, he manages to convey into our minds an indelible impression of the vast and comprehensive grandeur of his soul.

It is interesting—or at least amusing—to consider what are the most appropriate places in which different authors should be read. Pope is doubtless at his best in the midst of a formal garden, Herrick in an orchard, and Shelley in a boat at sea. Sir Thomas Browne demands, perhaps, a more exotic atmosphere. One could read him floating down the Euphrates, or past the shores of Arabia; and it would be pleasant to open the *Vulgar Errors* in Constantinople, or to get by heart a chapter of the *Christian Morals* between the paws of a Sphinx. In England, the

most fitting background for his strange ornament must surely be some habitation consecrated to learning, some University which still smells of antiquity and has learnt the habit of repose. The present writer, at any rate, can bear witness to the splendid echo of Browne's syllables amid learned and ancient walls; for he has known, he believes, few happier moments than those in which he has rolled the periods of the *Hydriotaphia* out to the darkness and the nightingales through the studious cloisters of Trinity.

But, after all, who can doubt that it is at Oxford that Browne himself would choose to linger? May we not guess that he breathed in there, in his boyhood, some part of that mysterious and charming spirit which pervades his words? For one traces something of him, often enough, in the old gardens, and down the hidden streets; one has heard his footstep beside the quiet waters of Magdalen; and his smile still hovers amid that strange company of faces which guard, with such a large passivity, the circumference of the Sheldonian.

1906.

SHAKESPEARE'S FINAL PERIOD

The whole of the modern criticism of Shakespeare has been fundamentally affected by one important fact. The chronological order of the plays, for so long the object of the vaguest speculation, of random guesses, or at best of isolated 'points,' has been now discovered and reduced to a coherent law. It is no longer possible to suppose that *The Tempest* was written before *Romeo and 'Juliet*; that *Henry VI.* was produced in succession to *Henry V.*; or that *Antony and Cleopatra* followed close upon the heels of *Julius Caesar*. Such theories were sent to limbo for ever, when a study of those plays of whose date we have external evidence revealed the fact that, as Shakespeare's life advanced, a corresponding development took place in the metrical structure of his verse. The establishment of metrical tests, by which the approximate position and date of any play can be readily ascertained, at once followed; chaos gave way to order; and, for the first time, critics became able to judge, not only of the individual works, but of the whole succession of the works of Shakespeare.

Upon this firm foundation modern writers have been only too eager to build. It was apparent that the Plays, arranged in chronological order, showed something more than a mere development in the technique of verse—a development, that is to say, in the general treatment of characters and subjects,

and in the sort of feelings which those characters and subjects were intended to arouse; and from this it was easy to draw conclusions as to the development of the mind of Shakespeare itself. Such conclusions have, in fact, been constantly drawn. But it must be noted that they all rest upon the tacit assumption, that the character of any given drama is, in fact, a true index to the state of mind of the dramatist composing it. The validity of this assumption has never been proved; it has never been shown, for instance, why we should suppose a writer of farces to be habitually merry; or whether we are really justified in concluding, from the fact that Shakespeare wrote nothing but tragedies for six years, that, during that period, more than at any other, he was deeply absorbed in the awful problems of human existence. It is not, however, the purpose of this essay to consider the question of what are the relations between the artist and his art; for it will assume the truth of the generally accepted view, that the character of the one can be inferred from that of the other. What it will attempt to discuss is whether, upon this hypothesis, the most important part of the ordinary doctrine of Shakespeare's mental development is justifiable.

What, then, is the ordinary doctrine? Dr. Furnivall states it as follows:

> Shakespeare's course is thus shown to have run from the amorousness and fun of youth, through the strong patriotism of early manhood, to the wrestlings with the dark problems that beset the man of middle age, to the gloom which

> weighed on Shakespeare (as on so many men) in later life, when, though outwardly successful, the world seemed all against him, and his mind dwelt with sympathy on scenes of faithlessness of friends, treachery of relations and subjects, ingratitude of children, scorn of his kind; till at last, in his Stratford home again, peace came to him, Miranda and Perdita in their lovely freshness and charm greeted him, and he was laid by his quiet Avon side.

And the same writer goes on to quote with approval Professor Dowden's

> likening of Shakespeare to a ship, beaten and storm-tossed, but yet entering harbour with sails full-set, to anchor in peace.

Such, in fact, is the general opinion of modern writers upon Shakespeare; after a happy youth and a gloomy middle age he reached at last—it is the universal opinion—a state of quiet serenity in which he died. Professor Dowden's book on 'Shakespeare's Mind and Art' gives the most popular expression to this view, a view which is also held by Mr. Ten Brink, by Sir I. Gollancz, and, to a great extent, by Dr. Brandes. Professor Dowden, indeed, has gone so far as to label this final period with the appellation of 'On the Heights,' in opposition to the preceding one, which, he says, was passed 'In the Depths.' Sir Sidney Lee, too, seems to find, in the Plays at least, if not in Shakespeare's mind, the orthodox succession of gaiety, of tragedy, and of the serenity of meditative romance.

Now it is clear that the most important part of this version of Shakespeare's mental history is the end of it. That he did eventually attain to a state of calm content, that he did, in fact, die happy—it is this that gives colour and interest to the whole theory. For some reason or another, the end of a man's life seems naturally to afford the light by which the rest of it should be read; last thoughts do appear in some strange way to be really best and truest; and this is particularly the case when they fit in nicely with the rest of the story, and are, perhaps, just what one likes to think oneself. If it be true that Shakespeare, to quote Professor Dowden, 'did at last attain to the serene self-possession which he had sought with such persistent effort'; that, in the words of Dr. Furnivall, 'forgiven and forgiving, full of the highest wisdom and peace, at one with family and friends and foes, in harmony with Avon's flow and Stratford's level meads, Shakespeare closed his life on earth'—we have obtained a piece of knowledge which is both interesting and pleasant. But if it be not true, if, on the contrary, it can be shown that something very different was actually the case, then will it not follow that we must not only reverse our judgment as to this particular point, but also readjust our view of the whole drift and bearing of Shakespeare's 'inner life'?

The group of works which has given rise to this theory of ultimate serenity was probably entirely composed after Shakespeare's final retirement from London, and his establishment at New Place. It consists of three plays

—*Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*—and three fragments—the Shakespearean parts of *Pericles, Henry VIII.*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. All these plays and portions of plays form a distinct group; they resemble each other in a multitude of ways, and they differ in a multitude of ways from nearly all Shakespeare's previous work.

One other complete play, however, and one other fragment, do resemble in some degree these works of the final period; for, immediately preceding them in date, they show clear traces of the beginnings of the new method, and they are themselves curiously different from the plays they immediately succeed—that great series of tragedies which began with *Hamlet* in 1601 and ended in 1608 with *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the latter year, indeed, Shakespeare's entire method underwent an astonishing change. For six years he had been persistently occupied with a kind of writing which he had himself not only invented but brought to the highest point of excellence—the tragedy of character. Every one of his masterpieces has for its theme the action of tragic situation upon character; and, without those stupendous creations in character, his greatest tragedies would obviously have lost the precise thing that has made them what they are. Yet, after *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare deliberately turned his back upon the dramatic methods of all his past career. There seems no reason why he should not have continued, year after year, to produce *Othellos, Hamlets*, and *Macbeths*; instead, he turned over a new leaf, and wrote *Coriolanus*.

Coriolanus is certainly a remarkable, and perhaps an intolerable play: remarkable, because it shows the sudden first appearance of the Shakespeare of the final period; intolerable, because it is impossible to forget how much better it might have been. The subject is thick with situations; the conflicts of patriotism and pride, the effects of sudden disgrace following upon the very height of fortune, the struggles between family affection on the one hand and every interest of revenge and egotism on the other—these would have made a tragic and tremendous setting for some character worthy to rank with Shakespeare's best. But it pleased him to ignore completely all these opportunities; and, in the play he has given us, the situations, mutilated and degraded, serve merely as miserable props for the gorgeous clothing of his rhetoric. For rhetoric, enormously magnificent and extraordinarily elaborate, is the beginning and the middle and the end of *Coriolanus*. The hero is not a human being at all; he is the statue of a demi-god cast in bronze, which roars its perfect periods, to use a phrase of Sir Walter Raleigh's, through a melodious megaphone. The vigour of the presentment is, it is true, amazing; but it is a presentment of decoration, not of life. So far and so quickly had Shakespeare already wandered from the subtleties of *Cleopatra*. The transformation is indeed astonishing; one wonders, as one beholds it, what will happen next.

At about the same time, some of the scenes in *Timon of Athens* were in all probability composed: scenes which resemble

Coriolanus in their lack of characterisation and abundance of rhetoric, but differ from it in the peculiar grossness of their tone. For sheer virulence of foul-mouthed abuse, some of the speeches in Timon are probably unsurpassed in any literature; an outraged drayman would speak so, if draymen were in the habit of talking poetry. From this whirlwind of furious ejaculation, this splendid storm of nastiness, Shakespeare, we are confidently told, passed in a moment to tranquillity and joy, to blue skies, to young ladies, and to general forgiveness.

> From 1604 to 1610 [says Professor Dowden] a show of tragic figures, like the kings who passed before Macbeth, filled the vision of Shakespeare; until at last the desperate image of Timon rose before him; when, as though unable to endure or to conceive a more lamentable ruin of man, he turned for relief to the pastoral loves of Prince Florizel and Perdita; and as soon as the tone of his mind was restored, gave expression to its ultimate mood of grave serenity in *The Tempest*, and so ended.

This is a pretty picture, but is it true? It may, indeed, be admitted at once that Prince Florizel and Perdita are charming creatures, that Prospero is 'grave,' and that Hermione is more or less 'serene'; but why is it that, in our consideration of the later plays, the whole of our attention must always be fixed upon these particular characters? Modern critics, in their eagerness to appraise everything that is beautiful and good at its proper value, seem to have entirely forgotten that there is another side to the

medal; and they have omitted to point out that these plays contain a series of portraits of peculiar infamy, whose wickedness finds expression in language of extraordinary force. Coming fresh from their pages to the pages of *Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, one is astonished and perplexed. How is it possible to fit into their scheme of roses and maidens that 'Italian fiend' the 'yellow Iachimo,' or Cloten, that 'thing too bad for bad report,' or the 'crafty devil,' his mother, or Leontes, or Caliban, or Trinculo? To omit these figures of discord and evil from our consideration, to banish them comfortably to the background of the stage, while Autolycus and Miranda dance before the footlights, is surely a fallacy in proportion; for the presentment of the one group of persons is every whit as distinct and vigorous as that of the other. Nowhere, indeed, is Shakespeare's violence of expression more constantly displayed than in the 'gentle utterances' of his last period; it is here that one finds Paulina, in a torrent of indignation as far from 'grave serenity' as it is from 'pastoral love,' exclaiming to Leontes:

> What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
> What wheels? racks? fires? what flaying? boiling
> In leads or oils? what old or newer torture
> Must I receive, whose every word deserves
> To taste of thy most worst? Thy tyranny,
> Together working with thy jealousies,
> Fancies too weak for boys, too green and idle
> For girls of nine, O! think what they have done,

And then run mad indeed, stark mad; for all
Thy by-gone fooleries were but spices of it.
That thou betray'dst Polixenes, 'twas nothing;
That did but show thee, of a fool, inconstant
And damnable ingrateful; nor was't much
Thou would'st have poison'd good Camillo's honour,
To have him kill a king; poor trespasses,
More monstrous standing by; whereof I reckon
The casting forth to crows thy baby daughter
To be or none or little; though a devil
Would have shed water out of fire ere done't.
Nor is't directly laid to thee, the death
Of the young prince, whose honourable thoughts,
Thoughts high for one so tender, cleft the heart
That could conceive a gross and foolish sire
Blemished his gracious dam.

Nowhere are the poet's metaphors more nakedly material; nowhere does he verge more often upon a sort of brutality of phrase, a cruel coarseness. Iachimo tells us how:

The cloyed will,
That satiate yet unsatisfied desire, that tub
Both filled and running, ravening first the lamb,
Longs after for the garbage.

and talks of:

an eye

Base and unlustrous as the smoky light
That's fed with stinking tallow.

'The south fog rot him!' Cloten bursts out to Imogen, cursing her husband in an access of hideous rage.

What traces do such passages as these show of 'serene self-possession,' of 'the highest wisdom and peace,' or of 'meditative romance'? English critics, overcome by the idea of Shakespeare's ultimate tranquillity, have generally denied to him the authorship of the brothel scenes in *Pericles* but these scenes are entirely of a piece with the grossnesses of *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*.

Is there no way for men to be, but women
Must be half-workers?

says Posthumus when he hears of Imogen's guilt.

We are all bastards;
And that most venerable man, which I
Did call my father, was I know not where
When I was stamped. Some coiner with his tools
Made me a counterfeit; yet my mother seemed
The Dian of that time; so doth my wife
The nonpareil of this—O vengeance, vengeance!
Me of my lawful pleasure she restrained
And prayed me, oft, forbearance; did it with
A pudency so rosy, the sweet view on't
Might well have warmed old Saturn, that I thought her

As chaste as unsunned snow—O, all the devils!—
This yellow Iachimo, in an hour,—was't not?
Or less,—at first: perchance he spoke not; but,
Like a full-acorned boar, a German one,
Cried, oh! and mounted: found no opposition
But what he looked for should oppose, and she
Should from encounter guard.

And Leontes, in a similar situation, expresses himself in images no less to the point.

There have been,
Or I am much deceived, cuckolds ere now,
And many a man there is, even at this present,
Now, while I speak this, holds his wife by the arm,
That little thinks she has been sluiced in's absence
And his pond fished by his next neighbour, by
Sir Smile, his neighbour: nay, there's comfort in't,
Whiles other men have gates, and those gates opened,
As mine, against their will. Should all despair
That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind
Would hang themselves. Physic for't there's none;
It is a bawdy planet, that will strike
Where 'tis predominant; and 'tis powerful, think it,
From east, west, north and south: be it concluded,
No barricade for a belly, know't;
It will let in and out the enemy
With bag and baggage: many thousand on's
Have the disease, and feel't not.

It is really a little difficult, in the face of such passages, to agree with Professor Dowden's dictum: 'In these latest plays the beautiful pathetic light is always present.'

But how has it happened that the judgment of so many critics has been so completely led astray? Charm and gravity, and even serenity, are to be found in many other plays of Shakespeare. Ophelia is charming, Brutus is grave, Cordelia is serene; are we then to suppose that *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*, and *King Lear* give expression to the same mood of high tranquillity which is betrayed by *Cymbeline, The Tempest*, and *The Winter's Tale*? 'Certainly not,' reply the orthodox writers, 'for you must distinguish. The plays of the last period are not tragedies; they all end happily'—'in scenes,' says Sir I. Gollancz, 'of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.' Virtue, in fact, is not only virtuous, it is triumphant; what would you more?

But to this it may be retorted, that, in the case of one of Shakespeare's plays, even the final vision of virtue and beauty triumphant over ugliness and vice fails to dispel a total effect of horror and of gloom. For, in *Measure for Measure* Isabella is no whit less pure and lovely than any Perdita or Miranda, and her success is as complete; yet who would venture to deny that the atmosphere of *Measure for Measure* was more nearly one of despair than of serenity? What is it, then, that makes the difference? Why should a happy ending seem in one case futile, and in another satisfactory? Why does it sometimes matter to us

a great deal, and sometimes not at all, whether virtue is rewarded or not?

The reason, in this case, is not far to seek. *Measure for Measure* is, like nearly every play of Shakespeare's before *Coriolanus*, essentially realistic. The characters are real men and women; and what happens to them upon the stage has all the effect of what happens to real men and women in actual life. Their goodness appears to be real goodness, their wickedness real wickedness; and, if their sufferings are terrible enough, we regret the fact, even though in the end they triumph, just as we regret the real sufferings of our friends. But, in the plays of the final period, all this has changed; we are no longer in the real world, but in a world of enchantment, of mystery, of wonder, a world of shifting visions, a world of hopeless anachronisms, a world in which anything may happen next. The pretences of reality are indeed usually preserved, but only the pretences. Cymbeline is supposed to be the king of a real Britain, and the real Augustus is supposed to demand tribute of him; but these are the reasons which his queen, in solemn audience with the Roman ambassador, urges to induce her husband to declare for war:

> Remember, sir, my liege,
> The Kings your ancestors, together with
> The natural bravery of your isle, which stands
> As Neptune's park, ribbed and paled in
> With rocks unscaleable and roaring waters,
> With sands that will not bear your enemies' boats,

But suck them up to the topmast. A kind of conquest
Caesar made here; but made not here his brag
Of 'Came, and saw, and overcame'; with shame—
The first that ever touched him—he was carried
From off our coast, twice beaten; and his shipping—
Poor ignorant baubles!—on our terrible seas,
Like egg-shells moved upon the surges, crack'd
As easily 'gainst our rocks; for joy whereof
The famed Cassibelan, who was once at point—
O giglot fortune!—to master Caesar's sword,
Made Lud's town with rejoicing fires bright
And Britons strut with courage.

It comes with something of a shock to remember that this medley of poetry, bombast, and myth will eventually reach the ears of no other person than the Octavius of *Antony and Cleopatra*; and the contrast is the more remarkable when one recalls the brilliant scene of negotiation and diplomacy in the latter play, which passes between Octavius, Maecenas, and Agrippa on the one side, and Antony and Enobarbus on the other, and results in the reconciliation of the rivals and the marriage of Antony and Octavia.

Thus strangely remote is the world of Shakespeare's latest period; and it is peopled, this universe of his invention, with beings equally unreal, with creatures either more or less than human, with fortunate princes and wicked step-mothers, with goblins and spirits, with lost princesses and insufferable kings.

And of course, in this sort of fairy land, it is an essential condition that everything shall end well; the prince and princess are bound to marry and live happily ever afterwards, or the whole story is unnecessary and absurd; and the villains and the goblins must naturally repent and be forgiven. But it is clear that such happy endings, such conventional closes to fantastic tales, cannot be taken as evidences of serene tranquillity on the part of their maker; they merely show that he knew, as well as anyone else, how such stories ought to end.

Yet there can be no doubt that it is this combination of charming heroines and happy endings which has blinded the eyes of modern critics to everything else. Iachimo, and Leontes, and even Caliban, are to be left out of account, as if, because in the end they repent or are forgiven, words need not be wasted on such reconciled and harmonious fiends. It is true they are grotesque; it is true that such personages never could have lived; but who, one would like to know, has ever met Miranda, or become acquainted with Prince Florizel of Bohemia? In this land of faery, is it right to neglect the goblins? In this world of dreams, are we justified in ignoring the nightmares? Is it fair to say that Shakespeare was in 'a gentle, lofty spirit, a peaceful, tranquil mood,' when he was creating the Queen in *Cymbeline*, or writing the first two acts of *The Winter's Tale*?

Attention has never been sufficiently drawn to one other characteristic of these plays, though it is touched upon both by Professor Dowden and Dr. Brandes—the singular carelessness

with which great parts of them were obviously written. Could anything drag more wretchedly than the *dénouement* of *Cymbeline*? And with what perversity is the great pastoral scene in *The Winter's Tale* interspersed with long-winded intrigues, and disguises, and homilies! For these blemishes are unlike the blemishes which enrich rather than lessen the beauty of the earlier plays; they are not, like them, interesting or delightful in themselves; they are usually merely necessary to explain the action, and they are sometimes purely irrelevant. One is, it cannot be denied, often bored, and occasionally irritated, by Polixenes and Camillo and Sebastian and Gonzalo and Belarius; these personages have not even the life of ghosts; they are hardly more than speaking names, that give patient utterance to involution upon involution. What a contrast to the minor characters of Shakespeare's earlier works!

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that he was getting bored himself. Bored with people, bored with real life, bored with drama, bored, in fact, with everything except poetry and poetical dreams. He is no longer interested, one often feels, in what happens, or who says what, so long as he can find place for a faultless lyric, or a new, unimagined rhythmical effect, or a grand and mystic speech. In this mood he must have written his share in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, leaving the plot and characters to Fletcher to deal with as he pleased, and reserving to himself only the opportunities for pompous verse. In this mood he must have broken off half-way through the tedious history of *Henry VIII*.;

and in this mood he must have completed, with all the resources of his rhetoric, the miserable archaic fragment of *Pericles*.

Is it not thus, then, that we should imagine him in the last years of his life? Half enchanted by visions of beauty and loveliness, and half bored to death; on the one side inspired by a soaring fancy to the singing of ethereal songs, and on the other urged by a general disgust to burst occasionally through his torpor into bitter and violent speech? If we are to learn anything of his mind from his last works, it is surely this.

And such is the conclusion which is particularly forced upon us by a consideration of the play which is in many ways most typical of Shakespeare's later work, and the one which critics most consistently point to as containing the very essence of his final benignity—*The Tempest*. There can be no doubt that the peculiar characteristics which distinguish *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* from the dramas of Shakespeare's prime, are present here in a still greater degree. In *The Tempest*, unreality has reached its apotheosis. Two of the principal characters are frankly not human beings at all; and the whole action passes, through a series of impossible occurrences, in a place which can only by courtesy be said to exist. The Enchanted Island, indeed, peopled, for a timeless moment, by this strange fantastic medley of persons and of things, has been cut adrift for ever from common sense, and floats, buoyed up by a sea, not of waters, but of poetry. Never did Shakespeare's magnificence of diction reach more marvellous heights than in some of the speeches of

Prospero, or his lyric art a purer beauty than in the songs of Ariel; nor is it only in these ethereal regions that the triumph of his language asserts itself. It finds as splendid a vent in the curses of Caliban:

> All the infection that the sun sucks up
> From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall, and make him
> By inch-meal a disease!

and in the similes of Trinculo:

> Yond' same black cloud, yond' huge one, looks like a foul
> bombard that would shed his liquor.

The *dénouement* itself, brought about by a preposterous piece of machinery, and lost in a whirl of rhetoric, is hardly more than a peg for fine writing.

> O, it is monstrous, monstrous!
> Methought the billows spoke and told me of it;
> The winds did sing it to me; and the thunder,
> That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounced
> The name of Prosper; it did bass my trespass.
> Therefore my son i' th' ooze is bedded, and
> I'll seek him deeper than e'er plummet sounded,
> And with him there lie mudded.

And this gorgeous phantasm of a repentance from the mouth

of the pale phantom Alonzo is a fitting climax to the whole fantastic play.

A comparison naturally suggests itself, between what was perhaps the last of Shakespeare's completed works, and that early drama which first gave undoubted proof that his imagination had taken wings. The points of resemblance between *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, their common atmosphere of romance and magic, the beautiful absurdities of their intrigues, their studied contrasts of the grotesque with the delicate, the ethereal with the earthly, the charm of their lyrics, the *verve* of their vulgar comedy—these, of course, are obvious enough; but it is the points of difference which really make the comparison striking. One thing, at any rate, is certain about the wood near Athens—it is full of life. The persons that haunt it—though most of them are hardly more than children, and some of them are fairies, and all of them are too agreeable to be true—are nevertheless substantial creatures, whose loves and jokes and quarrels receive our thorough sympathy; and the air they breathe —the lords and the ladies, no less than the mechanics and the elves—is instinct with an exquisite good-humour, which makes us as happy as the night is long. To turn from Theseus and Titania and Bottom to the Enchanted Island, is to step out of a country lane into a conservatory. The roses and the dandelions have vanished before preposterous cactuses, and fascinating orchids too delicate for the open air; and, in the artificial atmosphere, the gaiety of youth has been replaced by the disillusionment of

middle age. Prospero is the central figure of *The Tempest*; and it has often been wildly asserted that he is a portrait of the author —an embodiment of that spirit of wise benevolence which is supposed to have thrown a halo over Shakespeare's later life. But, on closer inspection, the portrait seems to be as imaginary as the original. To an irreverent eye, the ex-Duke of Milan would perhaps appear as an unpleasantly crusty personage, in whom a twelve years' monopoly of the conversation had developed an inordinate propensity for talking. These may have been the sentiments of Ariel, safe at the Bermoothes; but to state them is to risk at least ten years in the knotty entrails of an oak, and it is sufficient to point out, that if Prospero is wise, he is also self-opinionated and sour, that his gravity is often another name for pedantic severity, and that there is no character in the play to whom, during some part of it, he is not studiously disagreeable. But his Milanese countrymen are not even disagreeable; they are simply dull. 'This is the silliest stuff that e'er I heard,' remarked Hippolyta of Bottom's amateur theatricals; and one is tempted to wonder what she would have said to the dreary puns and interminable conspiracies of Alonzo, and Gonzalo, and Sebastian, and Antonio, and Adrian, and Francisco, and other shipwrecked noblemen. At all events, there can be little doubt that they would not have had the entrée at Athens.

The depth of the gulf between the two plays is, however, best measured by a comparison of Caliban and his masters with Bottom and his companions. The guileless group of English

mechanics, whose sports are interrupted by the mischief of Puck, offers a strange contrast to the hideous trio of the 'jester,' the 'drunken butler,' and the 'savage and deformed slave,' whose designs are thwarted by the magic of Ariel. Bottom was the first of Shakespeare's masterpieces in characterisation, Caliban was the last: and what a world of bitterness and horror lies between them! The charming coxcomb it is easy to know and love; but the 'freckled whelp hag-born' moves us mysteriously to pity and to terror, eluding us for ever in fearful allegories, and strange coils of disgusted laughter and phantasmagorical tears. The physical vigour of the presentment is often so remorseless as to shock us. 'I left them,' says Ariel, speaking of Caliban and his crew:

> I' the filthy-mantled pool beyond your cell,
> There dancing up to the chins, that the foul lake
> O'erstunk their feet.

But at other times the great half-human shape seems to swell like the 'Pan' of Victor Hugo, into something unimaginably vast.

> You taught me language, and my profit on't
> Is, I know how to curse.

Is this Caliban addressing Prospero, or Job addressing God? It may be either; but it is not serene, nor benign, nor pastoral, nor 'On the Heights.'

1906.

THE LIVES OF THE POETS [1]

No one needs an excuse for re-opening the *Lives of the Poets*; the book is too delightful. It is not, of course, as delightful as Boswell; but who re-opens Boswell? Boswell is in another category; because, as every one knows, when he has once been opened he can never be shut. But, on its different level, the *Lives* will always hold a firm and comfortable place in our affections. After Boswell, it is the book which brings us nearer than any other to the mind of Dr. Johnson. That is its primary import. We do not go to it for information or for instruction, or that our tastes may be improved, or that our sympathies may be widened; we go to it to see what Dr. Johnson thought. Doubtless, during the process, we are informed and instructed and improved in various ways; but these benefits are incidental, like the invigoration which comes from a mountain walk. It is not for the sake of the exercise that we set out; but for the sake of the view. The view from the mountain which is Samuel Johnson is so familiar, and has been so constantly analysed and admired, that further description would be superfluous. It is sufficient for us to recognise that he is a mountain, and to pay all the reverence that is due. In one of Emerson's poems a mountain and a squirrel begin to discuss each other's merits; and the squirrel

[1] *Lives of the English Poets*. By Samuel Johnson, LL.D. Edited by George Birkbeck Hill, D.C.L. Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1905.

comes to the triumphant conclusion that he is very much the better of the two, since he can crack a nut, while the mountain can do no such thing. The parallel is close enough between this impudence and the attitude—implied, if not expressed—of too much modern criticism towards the sort of qualities—the easy, indolent power, the searching sense of actuality, the combined command of sanity and paradox, the immovable independence of thought—which went to the making of the *Lives of the Poets*. There is only, perhaps, one flaw in the analogy: that, in this particular instance, the mountain was able to crack nuts a great deal better than any squirrel that ever lived.

That the *Lives* continue to be read, admired, and edited, is in itself a high proof of the eminence of Johnson's intellect; because, as serious criticism, they can hardly appear to the modern reader to be very far removed from the futile. Johnson's aesthetic judgments are almost invariably subtle, or solid, or bold; they have always some good quality to recommend them —except one: they are never right. That is an unfortunate deficiency; but no one can doubt that Johnson has made up for it, and that his wit has saved all. He has managed to be wrong so cleverly, that nobody minds. When Gray, for instance, points the moral to his poem on Walpole's cat with a reminder to the fair that all that glisters is not gold, Johnson remarks that this is 'of no relation to the purpose; if *what glistered* had been *gold*, the cat would not have gone into the water; and, if she had, would not less have been drowned.' Could anything be more ingenious, or more

neatly put, or more obviously true? But then, to use Johnson's own phrase, could anything be of less 'relation to the purpose'? It is his wit—and we are speaking, of course, of wit in its widest sense—that has sanctified Johnson's peversities and errors, that has embalmed them for ever, and that has put his book, with all its mass of antiquated doctrine, beyond the reach of time.

For it is not only in particular details that Johnson's criticism fails to convince us; his entire point of view is patently out of date. Our judgments differ from his, not only because our tastes are different, but because our whole method of judging has changed. Thus, to the historian of letters, the *Lives* have a special interest, for they afford a standing example of a great dead tradition—a tradition whose characteristics throw more than one curious light upon the literary feelings and ways which have become habitual to ourselves. Perhaps the most striking difference between the critical methods of the eighteenth century and those of the present day, is the difference in sympathy. The most cursory glance at Johnson's book is enough to show that he judged authors as if they were criminals in the dock, answerable for every infraction of the rules and regulations laid down by the laws of art, which it was his business to administer without fear or favour. Johnson never inquired what poets were trying to do; he merely aimed at discovering whether what they had done complied with the canons of poetry. Such a system of criticism was clearly unexceptionable, upon one condition —that the critic was quite certain what the canons of poetry

were; but the moment that it became obvious that the only way of arriving at a conclusion upon the subject was by consulting the poets themselves, the whole situation completely changed. The judge had to bow to the prisoner's ruling. In other words, the critic discovered that his first duty was, not to criticise, but to understand the object of his criticism. That is the essential distinction between the school of Johnson and the school of Sainte-Beuve. No one can doubt the greater width and profundity of the modern method; but it is not without its drawbacks. An excessive sympathy with one's author brings its own set of errors: the critic is so happy to explain everything, to show how this was the product of the age, how that was the product of environment, and how the other was the inevitable result of inborn qualities and tastes—that he sometimes forgets to mention whether the work in question has any value. It is then that one cannot help regretting the Johnsonian black cap.

But other defects, besides lack of sympathy, mar the *Lives of the Poets*. One cannot help feeling that no matter how anxious Johnson might have been to enter into the spirit of some of the greatest of the masters with whom he was concerned, he never could have succeeded. Whatever critical method he might have adopted, he still would have been unable to appreciate certain literary qualities, which, to our minds at any rate, appear to be the most important of all. His opinion of *Lycidas* is well known: he found that poem 'easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting.' Of the songs in *Comus* he remarks: 'they are harsh in their diction,

and not very musical in their numbers.' He could see nothing in the splendour and elevation of Gray, but 'glittering accumulations of ungraceful ornaments.' The passionate intensity of Donne escaped him altogether; he could only wonder how so ingenious a writer could be so absurd. Such preposterous judgments can only be accounted for by inherent deficiencies of taste; Johnson had no ear, and he had no imagination. These are, indeed, grievous disabilities in a critic. What could have induced such a man, the impatient reader is sometimes tempted to ask, to set himself up as a judge of poetry?

The answer to the question is to be found in the remarkable change which has come over our entire conception of poetry, since the time when Johnson wrote. It has often been stated that the essential characteristic of that great Romantic Movement which began at the end of the eighteenth century, was the re-introduction of Nature into the domain of poetry. Incidentally, it is curious to observe that nearly every literary revolution has been hailed by its supporters as a return to Nature. No less than the school of Coleridge and Wordsworth, the school of Denham, of Dryden, and of Pope, proclaimed itself as the champion of Nature; and there can be little doubt that Donne himself—the father of all the conceits and elaborations of the seventeenth century—wrote under the impulse of a Naturalistic reaction against the conventional classicism of the Renaissance. Precisely the same contradictions took place in France. Nature was the watchword of Malherbe and of Boileau;

and it was equally the watchword of Victor Hugo. To judge by the successive proclamations of poets, the development of literature offers a singular paradox. The further it goes back, the more sophisticated it becomes; and it grows more and more natural as it grows distant from the State of Nature. However this may be, it is at least certain that the Romantic revival peculiarly deserves to be called Naturalistic, because it succeeded in bringing into vogue the operations of the external world—'the Vegetable Universe,' as Blake called it—as subject-matter for poetry. But it would have done very little, if it had done nothing more than this. Thomson, in the full meridian of the eighteenth century, wrote poems upon the subject of Nature; but it would be foolish to suppose that Wordsworth and Coleridge merely carried on a fashion which Thomson had begun. Nature, with them, was something more than a peg for descriptive and didactic verse; it was the manifestation of the vast and mysterious forces of the world. The publication of *The Ancient Mariner* is a landmark in the history of letters, not because of its descriptions of natural objects, but because it swept into the poet's vision a whole new universe of infinite and eternal things; it was the discovery of the Unknown. We are still under the spell of *The Ancient Mariner*; and poetry to us means, primarily, something which suggests, by means of words, mysteries and infinitudes. Thus, music and imagination seem to us the most essential qualities of poetry, because they are the most potent means by which such suggestions may be invoked. But the eighteenth century knew

none of these things. To Lord Chesterfield and to Pope, to Prior and to Horace Walpole, there was nothing at all strange about the world; it was charming, it was disgusting, it was ridiculous, and it was just what one might have expected. In such a world, why should poetry, more than anything else, be mysterious? No! Let it be sensible; that was enough.

The new edition of the *Lives*, which Dr. Birkbeck Hill prepared for publication before his death, and which has been issued by the Clarendon Press, with a brief Memoir of the editor, would probably have astonished Dr. Johnson. But, though the elaborate erudition of the notes and appendices might have surprised him, it would not have put him to shame. One can imagine his growling scorn of the scientific conscientiousness of the present day. And indeed, the three tomes of Dr. Hill's edition, with all their solid wealth of information, their voluminous scholarship, their accumulation of vast research, are a little ponderous and a little ugly; the hand is soon wearied with the weight, and the eye is soon distracted by the varying types, and the compressed columns of the notes, and the paragraphic numerals in the margins. This is the price that must be paid for increased efficiency. The wise reader will divide his attention between the new business-like edition and one of the charming old ones, in four comfortable volumes, where the text is supreme upon the page, and the paragraphs follow one another at leisurely intervals. The type may be a little faded, and the paper a little yellow; but what of that? It is all quiet and easy; and, as one reads,

the brilliant sentences seem to come to one, out of the Past, with the friendliness of a conversation.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.