THE SPRINGS OF HELICON

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SELECT EPIGRAMS FROM THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY. Edited, with Revised Text, Translation, Introduction, and Notes. 8vo, 14s. net.

Greek Text (*Pocket Edition*), fcp. 8vo, gilt top, 2s. net; leather, 3s. net.

Translation (*Pocket Edition*), fcp. 8vo, gilt top, 2s. net; leather, 3s. net.

THE ECLOGUES AND GEORGICS OF VIRGIL. Translated from the Latin into English Prose. Square 16mo, 5s.

BIBLIA INNOCENTIUM. Part I.: being the Story of God's Chosen People before the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ upon Earth, written anew for Children. Crown 8vo, gilt top, 6s.

BIBLIA INNOCENTIUM. Part II.: being the Story of God's Chosen People after the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ upon Earth, written anew for Children. Crown 8vo, 5s.

THE SAYINGS OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AS RECORDED BY HIS FOUR EVANGELISTS. Collected and Arranged by J. W. MACKAIL. Crown 8vo, 2s. 6d.

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM MORRIS. With 2 Photogravure Portraits and 8 other Illustrations. 2 vols. Large crown 8vo, 10s. net.

LONGMANS, GREEN & CO.

LONDON, NEW YORK, BOMBAY, AND CALCUTTA

THE SPRINGS OF HELICON

A STUDY IN THE PROGRESS OF ENGLISH POETRY FROM CHAUCER TO MILTON

BY

J. W. MACKAIL

M.A., LL.D., SOMETIME FELLOW OF BALLIOL COLLEGE
PROFESSOR OF POETRY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON
NEW YORK, BOMBAY, AND CALCUTTA
1909

FROM HELICON'S HARMONIOUS SPRINGS
A THOUSAND RILLS THEIR MAZY PROGRESS TAKE

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE substance of this volume consists of lectures given from the Chair of Poetry at Oxford in the autumn terms of the years 1906 to 1908. They have been revised and slightly expanded for the purposes of publication.

The volume is, as its title states, a study in the progress of English poetry. It forms one chapter in the subject with which the author proposed to deal during his tenure of the Chair; that subject being the Progress of Poetry, or in other words, the consideration of poetry as a progressive function and continuous interpretation of life. Poetry may be thus regarded, and it is thus that Gray regards it in his great Ode, whether in relation to the life of the individual from youth to age, to the life of a single nation or language, or to the larger movement and progress of the life of mankind as it successively embodies itself in different ages and countries, and is there re-embodied and reinterpreted by art. The progress of our own poetry between Chaucer and Milton is a single cycle,

but to the English-speaking nations one of cardinal importance, in the vast endless movement which is co-extensive with history.

There are three principal ways of studying that cycle, according to the object which is primarily in view. For the historian of poetry, it is necessary to deal with the subject in detail, to consider both the greater and the lesser poets, and to give a systematic account of the whole poetic production of the period with which he deals. For the philosophical investigator, to whom the value of poetry lies mainly in the ideas which it embodies, in the criticism of life (to use Arnold's famous phrase) which it offers, the historical aspect of its progress is of secondary importance, and the main body of its product attracts only a cursory regard. But to that more inclusive view which the progress of criticism is always striving to attain, both the accumulation of material and the refinement of analysis are but means, not ends. The life in poetry, the appreciation of poetry in its vital quality, is the object of study. The record or classification of actual works of art, the determination of the ideas or impulses which art expresses, are alike subordinate to the appreciation of art itself as a vital energy. The office of criticism, thus regarded, is to interpret art in something of the same way as art interprets life.

From this point of view, as for other reasons also,

it is desirable to concentrate attention upon the great poets, those in whom the vital progress of poetry has realised itself most fully. They give the master-words to the whole language of creative imagination. In our own literature, Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton have been the subject of so much long and minute study, that for criticism to return to them now might seem like labouring in a thrice-ploughed field. But in truth not only is that field inexhaustible, but each generation must work it anew to gain its own food. "Likewise Earth, the Most High of Gods, the unwasting, the unweariable, he grinds down as the ploughs go backward and forward, year upon year:" this is the central note in the miraculousness of human life as it receives expression from Sophocles in the *Antigone*. The most high poets, unwasting also and unweariable, not only repay, but require, perpetual reinterpretation. To each age, to each reader, they come in a new light and bear a fresh significance: the progress of critical appreciation follows the progress of poetry; and the whole interpretation of the past becomes, in its turn, a part of the thing to be interpreted.

Gray's Ode is not only a lyric poem of the first order: it is also a distilled and concentrated body of criticism by the most accomplished scholar and finest critic of his time. Every word in it is weighed and measured, and it only yields its full meaning to exact and minute study. When he speaks of the

springs of Helicon as the source of poetry, he is not merely using a traditional metaphor; he also lays stress on the organic connection of the whole of Western poetry with Hellenic origins. The movement of poetry, as he says elsewhere, was from Greece to Italy, and from Italy to England. In the three representative poets of whose work this volume is a study, we see English poetry filled at successive levels from those foreign yet kindred springs. The achievement of Chaucer was the absorption of the earlier Renaissance, as it is represented in poetry by Dante and by his two chief successors, Petrarch and Boccaccio. That of Spenser was the absorption of the fully-developed Renaissance, the art of rediscovered Greece and reconquered Rome as it took shape in the European poetry of the sixteenth century. Milton retraced the stream to the heights where it was born; with a fuller training and a more disciplined scholarship he passed beyond those intermediate sources to the fountain-heads; he won his way to the springs of Helicon, and gave to England a poetry which was for the first time fully classical, which stands as art on the same level with the Greek classics. In the progress made through the work of the three poets we see English poetry entering into its full inheritance.

It may be desirable to add a word with regard to the form in which quotations appear in this volume, as regards modernisation or standardisation of spell-

ing. Our older poetry loses something by departure from the exact form in which it originally appeared; but it gains more by such modification as lets it be read without needless difficulty. English spelling has materially altered since the end of the sixteenth century, but in the great English classics, the works which are always being read, the modification which has gone on in the living language has been naturally and rightly followed in the works of those who have continued to be living authors. This is notably so with Shakespeare; exact reprints of the original quartos and folios are made for professional students or for curious amateurs, but the world reads Shakespeare in the spelling of its own time. The Authorised Version of the Bible has followed the same process, and indeed a reprint of the original volume of 1611 has only once been made in modern times, and is practically inaccessible. In this respect Milton may claim a footing alongside of those others as being, like them, a living classic who has never suffered eclipse or submergence. A good case might no doubt be made for retaining a few spellings which are peculiar to Milton, or at least characteristic of him: it may be urged that where he deliberately used words like *higth* and *sovran*, it is a corruption of the text to replace these by *height* and *sovereign*. But this principle would in logic carry us further than the common sense of readers might be inclined to go; it would oblige us to do as we are directed

in the curious list of errata added to the later issue of the first edition of *Paradise Lost*, and print *hunderd* instead of *hundred*. For those—and they are not after all very many—who wish to read Milton in the exact form of the original editions, Canon Beeching's text is available; the rest of the world will be content to read Milton as they read Shakespeare and the English Bible.

With Spenser the problem is different. Not only was Elizabethan spelling in any case erratic, but Spenser's own spelling was deliberately eccentric; it was one which he adopted, or rather invented, in order to give an archaistic colour to his poetry. This eccentricity, while it is interesting from the light it throws upon his relation to earlier English poets, and in particular upon his attitude towards Chaucer, has nothing to do with the poetical quality, or in the main with the rhythmical and metrical quality of his own work. Where it affects rhyme or cadence materially it has to be retained; elsewhere it seems better ignored. Had the *Faerie Queene* entered into the life of the English people in the same way as the *Paradise Lost*, the spelling of the former poem would also have been gradually and instinctively modernised; and this process would undoubtedly have meant not merely that the *Faerie Queene* was more read than it has been, but also that it was more readable than it actually is.

How far a similar process of modernisation is

legitimate or practicable with Chaucer is a more difficult question. The fountain-head of the streams of our modern Helicon, he is at the same time the last and greatest of the Middle-English poets. His language is not modern English, much as the language of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is not classic Greek. We do not know how far the spelling of the Homeric poems was modernised in the process traditionally known under the name of the Pisistratean recension, which launched them afresh upon the main current of Greek life. But whatever that may have been, the text of Chaucer has never gone through any analogous modernisation; and the result is that to the ordinary reader at the present day his text, if printed in accordance with the best MS. authority, presents a difficulty which is really great even though it may be superficial, while, if modernised, it has to be modernised variously by individual judgment. But Chaucer himself has said pretty well all that can be said on the matter:—

> And for there is so great diversity
> In English and in writing of our tongue,
> So pray I God that none miswrite thee
> Ne thee mismetre for defaut of tongue;
> And read whereso thou be, or elles sung,
> That thou be understonde I God beseech!
> But yet to purpose of my rather speech.

The principle followed in this volume, with what success must be left to be judged by the reader, is to

keep strictly by the authentic text so far as that it is a matter of language rather than of spelling, but to modernise or standardise the spelling to the utmost extent consistent with that general verbal fidelity, wherever the meaning can be thus made more easily and immediately intelligible. For the want of logical system and the necessary inconsistencies which the adoption of this method involves, no further apology will be necessary for those who have faced the problem themselves and know its difficulties.

CHAUCER

I

ONLY a poet who possessed something of Chaucer's own genius could speak adequately of Chaucer as a poet; and when William Morris, now thirty years ago, declined the invitation to let himself be nominated for the Oxford Chair of Poetry, that chance was lost. Chaucer's work has since then been fully and ably handled by professed students of our earlier literature. Of Professor Skeat's great edition, of the knowledge and insight with which Professor Ker has written on Chaucer, with regard both to his individual genius and to his place in the field of mediæval letters, it would be superfluous to speak. But the appreciation of Chaucer in relation to the vital progress of poetry may be, and indeed must be, kept apart from the special provinces of historical and linguistic study. Into the controversy, begun in the sixteenth century and carried on intermittently since, whether Chaucer is to be regarded as the fountain-head or the great corrupter of English, it is not necessary to enter. Nor is it necessary, though it would not be irrelevant, to trace the fluctuations of his influence or popularity. These belong to a period in

which the progress of poetry had lost touch of him, to an age when his work had not yet won its place. After the century of his immediate influence and unquestioned primacy, a long time follows in which we may discern, even among his chief admirers, an accent of doubt or apology. "Mr. Cowley himself," says Dryden—how odd the words sound now!—"declared he had no taste of him." Dryden goes on to say, "No man ever had, or can have, a greater veneration for Chaucer than myself;" and Wordsworth, a century and a half later, said, "I reverence and admire him above measure." Yet Wordsworth thought it not unbecoming to rewrite the Prioress' Tale, and spoil it in the process, as Dryden had rewritten and spoiled the Knight's Tale before him. We do not rewrite the great classics; and Chaucer is now a classic. As we recede further from him, he rises above the intervening obstacles, and stands clearly revealed, not merely as one who (in his own words) made English sweet upon his tongue; not merely as a determining force in the evolution of our poetry, as the inventor of the heroic couplet, or the writer who decided the contest between two schools of versification; not merely as a mirror of his own age, an observer and recorder of human life, a master of description, pathos, humour, a story-teller of unsurpassed skill; but, beyond all this, as a great poet and creator, an artist of the first rank.

As in dealing with the progress of poetry it is

well to concentrate upon the great poets, so in dealing with a poet so copious and various as Chaucer it is well to concentrate upon his great poetry. Beyond his strictly prose work, there is much of his verse which scarcely professes to be poetry at all, or at all events poetry of a high order. One of his special qualities, indeed, is the amazing ease, the unconscious grace, with which he passes from light facile verse to poetry of noble sweetness, lovely melody, high imagination. He does not, as some poets do, give the impression of being subject to waves of inspiration which now raise his poetry to a high tension, and now fall away and leave it mechanical or uninspired. It rather seems as if he used, varyingly and capriciously, a poetical gift that always came when he chose to call for it, and of which he never lost control. One reason why he is always interesting is that the moment anything ceases to interest him he drops it. He leaves the Squire's Tale half told, and breaks off the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Good Women* in the middle of a sentence. He begins a letter from Dido to Aeneas, and after a dozen lines gets tired of it, and calmly proceeds—

> But who will all this letter have in mind
> Read Ovid, and in him he shall it find.

Yet this easy nonchalance goes together with an instinctive felicity which might make poets of greater

effort and more laborious art say despairingly as they regard his work—

> We blundren ever and poren in the fire,
> And for all that we fail of our desire.

He has much of the spirit of the child, easily pleased and easily fatigued, prone to follow the suggestions of an alert but vagrant fancy.

> Love is too young to know what conscience is;
> Yet who knows not conscience is born of love?

And so we may see Chaucer writing sometimes with a grace and charm that are quite idle and irresponsible, and then kindling to some piteous or tragic motive, some beauty of situation or splendour of passion, until the bird-note thrills us by turning into the song of an angel.

Hence, in a world which always tends to be obtuse towards poetry, to feel safe with dulness and to take kindly to the second-best, it is not surprising that Chaucer's fame as a poet has been much confused with false issues. It rests, or has rested, in great part on work which is not his best, or which is not his at all. To the normal modern reader he is known mainly through extracts; and it is singular how often these extracts seem chosen to miss his highest poetry, his specific greatness as a poet. We may be pretty sure to find among them the description of the Squire or the Miller, the Clerk of Oxford or the Parson—admirable sketches of character,

terse, lifelike, humorous, executed in quite fluent and workmanlike verse, but not exactly poetry, or if so, only poetry with a difference. We may very probably find the Prioress' Tale, a legend gracefully told, with a sort of thin elegance, suited admirably and with perfect dramatic instinct to the person of its narrator, but not poetry of the first excellence. We may find a few vignettes of landscape, or highly wrought descriptive passages like that of the temple of Mars in the Knight's Tale. But we shall seldom find anything that really shows to what a height Chaucer's poetry can rise. We shall not find the Complaint of Queen Anelida, nor the exquisite narratives in the *Legend of Good Women*, nor anything to give a notion of the sustained magnificence and mastery of the *Book of Troilus and Creseide*. Even for those who know their Chaucer more fully, emphasis has to be laid on the first-rate work to disengage it from the work that is short of first-rate, from the work that is the poetry of his time and surroundings rather than of his own essential genius.

With Chaucer, too, as with some few others among the great poets, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the poet and the story-teller. His narrative gift is probably unsurpassed ; it has not been equalled except by one or two in England, by a very small number anywhere. It is a gift of immense value to a poet, but it is not the gift of poetry. It rises to meet us in its full perfection in the author of the

Odyssey at the very beginning of our extant documents in European poetry. Among the Greek poets subsequent to Homer, or such of them as have survived, it hardly reappears, or at least reappears nowhere in any eminent degree. In Latin poetry it culminates in Ovid. He became the story-teller as well as the civiliser of Western Europe. It is his narrative gift which, even more than his gaiety and wit, his mastery of verbal and metrical technique, or his air and tone of the accomplished man of the world, explains the immense influence he had on European letters. It was this, above all else, which made him both to the Middle Ages and to the Renaissance—even to the grave regard of Dante and the austere judgment of Milton—rank as a poet alongside of Homer and Virgil. In England, Chaucer was not only the first great poet—for that title can hardly be given by any sane criticism, in its full sense, to any of his predecessors—but the first consummate story-teller, as he still remains the best. Few of his successors inherited that rare gift. It is conspicuously absent from the poetry of the Chaucerians. Spenser, with a strong narrative taste (which is a different thing from a high narrative gift), took great pains in manipulating a very complicated framework of narrative in the *Faerie Queene;* but he had no idea of telling a story so as to make it either clearly intelligible or continuously interesting. Milton's epic does not depend for its quality

upon the story. The story, if one can call it so, is indeed set forth with great lucidity and ordered skill; but its planetary wheelings (for that phrase aptly describes the constructional evolution as well as the metrical movement of the *Paradise Lost*) belong to a wholly different order of art. Pope's great narrative poem was never written, and Shelley's is almost unreadable. Byron possessed the power—as what power did he not possess?—but squandered it. Keats was on the road towards mastering it when he wrote *Lamia*. Among the poets of that age it is most marked in two who belong at best to the second rank, Scott and Crabbe. Among the great Victorian poets one only, Morris, who was a Chaucerian born, possessed it. A faculty which is more apparent in the *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad*, which is higher in Ovid than in Virgil, which is totally or all but totally absent in some of the greatest poets, cannot be taken as a criterion of poetic quality, or as part of the essence of poetry.

Mr. Swinburne divides the work of Shakespeare into three periods, the lyric and fantastic, the comic and historic, and the tragic and romantic. Such divisions are highly artificial, and must be used with caution. But in Chaucer's poetry we may likewise distinguish three periods, each marked by the preponderance of a special quality, and each associated with a characteristic metrical form. There is an early period, in which the external influence on him

was almost purely French; a central period, when he came under the classic or Italian influence; and a third, in which his movement of evolution returns upon itself, and comedy has in a sense absorbed tragedy by bringing the whole of life into open daylight. The terms lyric and fantastic apply with much fitness to his earlier poetry. Of his lyrics proper—those "balades, rondels, virelaies" of which he speaks in the *Legend of Good Women*, but a few survive. They include, together with two or three fine balades, two pieces which touch the high-water mark of the lyric: the triple roundel of *Merciless Beauty*, and the *Complaint of Anelida*, a lyric of elaborate structure, exquisite alike in workmanship and feeling. But in these, as in the longer poems of the same period, the fantastic quality is as marked as the lyric beauty. This period of his work would set him high, probably highest, among the English poets of his age; it would not place him among the classics or make him a capital figure in our literature. He was assiduously and delightedly practising his art so far as it had then been revealed to him. The development it took when he had finished his apprenticeship and when his genius passed from flowering into fruitage was determined from Italy.

The specific greatness of Chaucer as a poet lies in a poetic quality neither inherited nor acquired, but personal and incommunicable. His specific importance in the history of literature, which is a different

matter, lies in his having, alone in his age, absorbed this Italian influence, and thus created for English poetry a wholly new type and aim. He brought it —whether with or without some loss of its own native qualities—into relation with the main stream of the world's art. This achievement of his was what was in Gray's mind, when in that allusive elliptical manner, which sometimes makes his criticism as difficult to follow as Aristotle's, he said that "Chaucer first introduced the manner of the Provençaux, improved by the Italians, into our country." Until he did this, the foreign element in the fertilisation of our literature had been French. English poetry had two main currents, sometimes intermingling, sometimes in sharp opposition. One was the development of its native instrument, the northern unrhymed verse. The other was the adaptation to English use of the metrical structure, and, together with that metrical structure, the poetical forms and methods, of the earlier or contemporary art of France. The decisive predominance which Chaucer gave to the latter may have been in any case inevitable. But French influence was not sufficient—it never has been—to create for England a great type of poetry. Two countries alone have done this, Hellas and Italy.

In the fourteenth century, the mediæval world, while it still appeared full of life, was really coming to an end. The epic age of Western

Europe—the age of the *Chansons de Gestes*, of the *Nibelungenlied* and the verse *Edda*, of the architecture of the *plein cintre*—had long passed away. It was succeeded by the epoch of the perfected Gothic, the age of magnificent expansion and brilliant construction. The thirteenth century produced the *Summa Theologiae*, the churches of Chartres and Westminster, constitutional government, and that body of romance the splendour and copiousness of which is still the admiration of the world. Then came a thing new and unexampled, at once the consummation and the epitaph of the Middle Ages, Dante and the *Divine Comedy*. That majestic genius stands apart and alone. His two chief successors, Petrarch and Boccaccio, are the founders of modern poetry.

They were a generation older than Chaucer; and they represent in letters the change that passes over the world in the fourteenth century. The one founded modern literature; the other determined the revival of learning. With them we are launched on the full current of the Renaissance; we can foresee Ariosto and Tasso, we can foresee our own Elizabethans. The critical influence on Chaucer himself was that of Boccaccio. It is worth remarking, in a matter where substance is vitally connected with form, that while Chaucer's seven-line stanza is materially changed, both in length and cadence, from the classic Italian *ottava rima*, and while his rhymed

decasyllabic couplet is to all intents and purposes an invention of his own, both these principal metres of his have, as he uses them, a closer affinity to Italian than to French. But he never, so far as appears, tried to write in the forms of the Petrarcan Sonnet or Ode, and a scrap of thirty lines is all that we know of any attempt made by him to write in the Dantesque *terza rima*. He of course knew, admired, and copied from both Dante and Petrarch; but with one remarkable exception to be noticed later, there is little to show that they influenced him deeply. When he cites Dante, it is for some proverbial sentence or for some celebrated incident. "Envy parteth neither night nor day out of the house of Cæsar; thus saith Dant:" so runs a passage in the *Legend of Good Women*. In the Monk's Tale he recounts the story of "Erl Ugelin of Pise," following the text of the *Inferno* pretty closely, and winding up with the words—

> Whoso will hear it in a longer wise
> Readeth the greate poet of Itaile
> That highte Dante:

and in the preface to the *Legend of Saint Cecilia* he translates the famous hymn to the Virgin in the last canto of the *Paradiso*. But these are mere detached passages. A more striking instance is where he seems to have assimilated and reproduced a char-

acteristically Dantesque simile. In the second book of *Troilus and Creseide* come these lines—

> But right as floures, through the cold of night
> Yclosed stoopen on their stalkes low,
> Redressen them again the sunne bright,
> And spreaden on their kinde course by row.

This is a translation of a passage in the second canto of the *Inferno*—

> Quale i fioretti dal notturno gelo
> Chinati e chiusi, poi che il sol gl'imbianca,
> Si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo ;

or as it is rendered in Cary's fine translation—

> As florets, by the frosty air of night
> Bent down and closed, when day has blanched their leaves,
> Rise all unfolded on their spiry stems.

The lines in *Troilus* have an unusual accent in them at the first approach, even before one has realised where they come from. But Chaucer did not take them from Dante at all: he took them from Boccaccio. Boccaccio had calmly stolen the three lines as they stood to open a stanza of the *Filostrato*. And in Boccaccio no less than in Chaucer they give the shock of strangeness, the accent of a more classic and statelier verse.

Another passage in *Troilus and Creseide* which has

the same effect of strangeness is the song of Troilus in the first book—

If no love is, O God, what feel I so?
And if love is, what thing and which is he?
If love be good, from whennes cometh my wo?
If it be wicke, a wonder thinketh me,
When every torment and adversity,
That cometh of him, may to me savory think;
For ay thirst I the more that I it drink.

And if that at mine owen lust I brenne,
From whennes cometh my wailing and my pleynt?
If harm agree me, whereto pleyne I then?
I noot ne why unweary that I feynt.
O quicke death! O sweete harm so queynt!
How may of thee in me swich quantity,
But if that I consente that it be?

And if that I consent, I wrongfully
Compleyne iwis: thus possed to and fro,
All steereless within a boat am I
Amid the sea, betwixen windes two,
That in contrary standen evermo.
Alas, what is this wonder malady?
For heat of cold, for cold of heat I die.

So strange is the accent, that one's first instinct is to think that Chaucer is at his favourite game of parody, as he parodies the contemporary lyric in Absolon's song in the Miller's Tale. But the note of the stanzas is Elizabethan; and whatever Chaucer's genius as a poet, he could hardly parody the style which English poetry was to adopt a hundred and fifty years later. The matter is explained when we realise that these verses are translated from a sonnet by

Petrarch. Chaucer himself felt the difference in tone and the necessity of accounting for it; he met it with most characteristic and impudent humour, by inventing on the spot an ancient author of the name of Lollius and saying that the verses are taken from him.

It is then to Boccaccio, but to Boccaccio as himself profoundly influenced or even in a sense created by the two elder poets, that we have to assign the decisive impulse which made Chaucer the founder of classical English poetry. The contest between French and native English forms was decided by being lifted on to a higher plane. Hitherto any attempt at reconciliation had not been based on any larger synthesis. Queer attempts had been made, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or with greater success in the *Tale of Gamelyn*, to tack one on to the other. Popular taste was large enough or vague enough to accept both. The peasantry of Southern England, on the unimpeachable evidence of Langland, used both indifferently. The ploughmen, the hedgers and ditchers, of the fourteenth century not only "holpen erie his half acre" with the purely English songs lumped under the generic title of *How trolli lolli*, but "dryven forth the longe day" with the French ditty of *Dieu vous save, dame Emme*. The immense volume of metrical romances had developed, in rhyming systems of French origin, forms of stanza specifically English, and had transferred to them much of the

alliteration and cadence of native poetry. Langland's own poem (we may call it Langland's for brevity, without being committed to any view as to the authorship of its successive forms), the only work of Chaucer's contemporaries that shows sustained power combined with high imagination, appears to be intentionally archaistic, to represent the last effort of purely English poetry to assert itself against a culture which was no longer self-contained and insular. But whatever might have happened without Chaucer, what Chaucer did was decisive.

It was even too decisive. He brought the Renaissance into England before the time. We have to wait a hundred and fifty years for the English Petrarch. The welter into which English poetry fell for more than a century after Chaucer's death is not to be accounted for by civil wars and religious controversies. The soil was not ready for the Italian influence to strike root. The earlier Elizabethans had to learn all the lesson over again, and to learn it in an age when the Renaissance had outlived its morning glory, had become overburdened and sophisticated. Even the language had in their time, though it had gained immensely in power and range, lost something of its early freshness, its flexibility and fluency. Its province—I speak of the language of poetry—was already encroached upon; it held a divided empire with prose. The science of poetry, if we may use that term to express

the side of poetry that can be studied, taught, and transmitted, had to be refounded. Marlowe had to rediscover and remould that heroic couplet which had already reached perfection before it left its first creator's hands. Something of the same sort had to be done again in the latter part of the seventeenth century by Waller and Dryden. The history of the forms of poetry, as of its substance, is one of progress; there is no finality.

For the earlier Renaissance, the period, neither mediæval nor modern, which elapsed between the rediscovery of ancient Rome and the rediscovery of ancient Greece, the three great Italians of the fourteenth century are the classics; they represent the central movement, the authentic line of progress and achievement. A genius like that of Chaucer—facile, emotional, somewhat easy-going—required the full impact of a classic to raise him beyond the sphere of his contemporaries. Of the three, it was natural that Boccaccio, whose temperament bore the greatest affinity to his own, should give him that impact most fully. The classical tone as Boccaccio represented it was capable of solution and incorporation with inherited mediæval methods; it was less tense than in the two others, less learned, less difficult. Chaucer was not, like his Italian masters, a trained scholar according to the scholarship of the time. What he thought of academic learning we may judge (to adapt Swift's famous saying) by regarding

those upon whom he has thought fit to bestow it. He lavishes it most freely on that highly cultured woman, Alison of Bath, who makes citations from Seneca and Juvenal, from Valerius Maximus and Boethius, and whose reading ranged from Ovid's *Art of Love* to Ptolemy's *Almagest*.

The scholarship of Dante or of Petrarch was something quite beyond Chaucer's scope. Even in the easier form in which it reached him, the classical influence only took effect upon a comparatively brief central period of his work. As with many artists who have lived long enough to complete their orbit, his latest work shows a reversion to the ideals and methods of his earliest, only in an enlarged and matured manner. Their culminating point has been reached at the cost of great effort at high tension. As that tension relaxes, the earlier influences resume something of their old potency. In the romances which represent Shakespeare's latest work we find, mellowed to a new loveliness of tone, that lyric and fantastic quality which is the note of his first period. The sustained tension of his great central group of tragedies, the almost equally high tension of his central comedies (for peace hath her victories no less renowned than war, and no less laboriously won) has given way to a freer, looser, more fanciful handling, to which is added the careless ease, the effortless power, of a dramatist who has long ago mastered his art, and can play with it lightly. So it

is with Chaucer; and with him also, as with Shakespeare, there comes in towards the end the note of simple seriousness, the spirit of piety, which others besides Burke have remarked as deeply ingrained in the English nature.

Those years of tense concentration under the influence of the central movement of European poetry left Chaucer master of his art. Good workmanship was not rare in the English poetry of the fourteenth century; it could hardly be that where the other arts had reached such high perfection, this one, as assiduously studied as any, should fail to reach a high level. But the step from good workmanship to consummate art was taken by Chaucer alone. Gower shows how far poetry can go without that step. He was a good scholar according to the criterion of his time, and a poet of high technical skill; but when all has been said in his praise that can be said, it remains true that he is a dead author. Another instance is the unknown author of the *Flower and the Leaf*, the attribution of which to Chaucer was long accepted without question. It stands to him in much the same relation as the *Ciris* does to the authentic work of Virgil. The authorship of that piece was until lately a point on which scholars suspended their judgment between two theories, both of which presented serious difficulties, that it was by Virgil, and that it was by a later poet imitating Virgil. It has now been established, with a degree of proba-

bility that approaches certainty, that it is neither, but is by a slightly older poet belonging to the Virgilian circle, and one whose influence over Virgil's development was very great. Coincidences of phrase between the work of a great and that of a lesser poet do not necessarily mean that the inferior artist copied from the master; it is quite as likely to be the other way, and this is so more especially where the great poet has a passion for style and is sensitive to effects of language down to his finger-tips. It was thus that Virgil stole from Varro Atacinus and Cornelius Gallus as freely as he did from Naevius or Ennius. It may very well have been thus with the *Flower and the Leaf;* and the passage in the *Legend of Good Women*, which is generally regarded as having suggested that poem, may be in fact suggested by it.

For what he borrowed without acknowledgment, Chaucer had to pay a heavy penalty in the inclusion among his own work of many pieces by his imitators. Except for the *Cuckow and the Nightingale*, that sweet innocent poem to which, alone out of the work of all his pupils, Chaucer might gladly have set his name, the record of the Chaucerians is one of decadence and incompetence. After Gower, the descent is swift. Only the Scottish school preserve what life was left in that tradition, and even in them it is but feeble. The *King's Quhair*, with all its sincerity and simplicity, is after all no more than the imitative work of an amateur. Henryson has but a derivative and

reflected poetic gift; the *Testament of Creseid*, with its cheap sentiment, its awkward movement and staggering metre, falls as far below the *Book of Troilus and Creseide* in technical workmanship as it does in imaginative insight. Dunbar and his contemporaries, a hundred years after Chaucer, belong to a new epoch. In them there is a new quality of high interest and value; but the mediæval tradition has ceased to exist as completely as it had ceased to exist in the debased English work of the same period. In the *Court of Love*, which till recently was still allowed to stand among and to contaminate the poems of Chaucer, the Chaucerian manner in poetry undergoes its last degradation before being finally swept away.

In the case of Shakespeare, also, the attribution is uncertain of much work that does, and of some that does not, currently pass under his name. In any period of really living art, the individual artist is as it were the nucleus of a productive activity that extends beyond him, and of which he is himself partly the origin and partly the focus. It is perhaps only an apparent paradox to say that the greatest poetry may bear the least mark of a personality behind it. But the whole of Chaucer's work, if we exclude mere translations, carries on it the signature not only of a certain technical quality, but of his own personality. This is so, likewise, with a few poets of the highest rank; it is so with Dante; it is

so with Milton. But in them the absence of a certain breadth and universality has its compensation in an imaginative ardour and moral passion so intense that the personal quality of the poetry becomes almost like a great natural force. Chaucer had not this ardour and intensity. In the largeness of his range, in his breadth of sympathetic portraiture, he is next among our poets to Shakespeare. Like Shakespeare he portrayed the whole surface and aspect of life; *omnem vitae imaginem expressit*, we may say of him in the phrase of Quintilian. But Shakespeare also saw and felt deep down into its inner springs. Chaucer's insight is more external and superficial. Like a child in his clear-eyed receptiveness, his quick responsiveness to outward influences, he is like a child also in bearing no grudge against things. "I am so weary for to speak of sorwe," he says, and passes on, where another—where Shakespeare even—would have grown embittered and angry. He never frets. What he has instead of high moral passion is another quality as rare and as precious, that of mercy. This is what separates him sharply from the type of artistic intelligence—clear, masterly, a little pitiless—represented by Boccaccio and fully developed by the Italian Renaissance.

The heartlessness of the *Decameron* is a commonplace of criticism. But criticism, as so often happens, has gone right by a sort of sound instinct where its reasoned grounds were wrong, or at least inadequate.

It has fastened on a mere accident, though a significant one, the way in which the great plague at Florence is made the background for the tales. Yet to a serious view of life the incidents of the plague are not more piteous or more tragic than what passes before our eyes every day: if this does not stir us, we shall not be stirred vitally by anything. The quality of heartlessness affects the whole book, and the whole of Boccaccio's work. He shares it with or inherits it from Ovid. It is consistent with the highest gifts of the story-teller, but not with the highest gifts of the poet. Chaucer, working with a less highly educated intellect in more difficult material, brought into his work that quality of heart which not only vitalised its spirit, but reacted on its artistic structure.

"Chaucer," says Mr. Ker, to whose critical appreciation of the two writers I cannot express my obligation too fully, "learned from Boccaccio the intuition of the right lines of a story." So far as intuition can be learned, this was so. But it was from his own instinct that he learned to modify or transgress these lines, *ad maiorem poesis gloriam*. The instinct which led him to compress the *Teseide* from an epic into an epic idyl, and to expand the *Filostrato* from a "libro" into an "opera," was an instinct of sympathy as well as intelligence, as rare an instinct as the other, and a subtler one. It is one not only of right lines but of right values. In the result, the

Knight's Tale and the *Book of Troilus and Creseide* are, each in its own kind, perfect. But if we look for the reason, we shall see that the artistic difference is based on one which is profoundly moral. It is a matter of heart as well as of head.

The *Teseide* was the first Italian epic; and if we set aside the one fault in its design, that the subject does not bear large epic treatment, Boccaccio's handling of it compels our respect and our admiration. Only, that fault refuses to be set aside. In this instance Chaucer's instinct is surer than Boccaccio's; surer even than Shakespeare's always was, if the scenes in the *Two Noble Kinsmen* which come from Shakespeare's hand were meant for the substance not of a masque but of a drama. For the play as it stands Shakespeare of course cannot be held responsible; and what he might have done with it we cannot dream. What Boccaccio in fact did, shows that failure of perception which comes of the brain working without the heart. His ambition, no unworthy one, was to elevate narrative poetry from the scope of the *conte* and *fabliau*. But the story which he would have told enchantingly as a fabulist had to be expanded beyond what it would bear to pass as an epic; it has not the epic life-blood. The *Teseide* is loaded with machinery, partly because the dignity of the epic was supposed to require that, partly for a simpler reason, to fill it out to the proper epic size. Not only has it the orthodox

twelve books prescribed by the example of Virgil and Statius, but it contains—I do not know whether this has been noticed before or not—exactly the same number of lines as the *Aeneid*, 9896 lines in each case. This may be merely a very remarkable coincidence; it is perhaps more likely that it is one of those elaborate arithmetical artifices which were dear to the mediæval mind, and particularly, as all students of Dante know, to the great Florentine who was Boccaccio's master in the art of poetry. In any case, given the subject, this one fact is the condemnation of the poem. Chaucer, when he cut it down to a fourth of the length and reduced it to its proper scope of a tale, left it still dangerously long, and only kept together by great brilliance of execution and richness of workmanship. *Palamon and Arcite* is written in a more full and heightened style than any other of his narrative poems. The ornament is so rich that it requires all the speed and elasticity of his verse to keep it from the effect of overloading. It was a dangerous experiment, which he just succeeded in bringing to a triumphant conclusion. But he saw, with the instinct of a great poet, that the epic treatment required a larger scope, a more dramatic movement, a profounder human interest.

These things he found in the subject of Boccaccio's other poem; and into it he put his full powers. The *Filostrato* is lucidly told, gracefully

constructed, charmingly written; but the poem that Chaucer made out of it is a consummate masterpiece. The *Book of Troilus and Creseide* is one of the few large perfect things in our literature. This does not mean that it is a greater poem, or even a greater work of art, than others which have not this quality. It is a character it shares with *Romeo and Juliet* or *Much Ado*, and not with *Cymbeline* or *Lear*.

Not only so, but with the epic largeness Chaucer has reached in it the epic truth to life. *Palamon and Arcite* is like a rich tapestry; the figures in it are part of the decoration. They seem to move and speak faintly, as if through a veil where

> —in a cool green room all day
> I gazed upon the arras giddily
> Where the wind set the silken kings asway.

In *Troilus* they breathe and live. This is true not only of the two principal characters, but of all; of Pandarus, Deiphobus, Diomede, Helen, even the slight figure of Antigone. Nothing in modern creative work is more subtly delicate in its psychology.

> For out of olde fieldes, as men saith,
> Cometh all this new corn fro year to year.

Of Cressida, alone among the women of English poetry before Shakespeare, it may be said in the full sense without reservation that she is like one of Shakespeare's women. And even among Shakespeare's women it would be hard to name one

whom, like Chaucer's Cressida, we understand and love through her very weakness and inconstancy; so that the heart-broken and heart-breaking words of Troilus, when the end has come, do not sound enfeebled or anything but inevitable—

> Clean out of your mind
> Ye han me cast, and I ne can nor may
> For all this world within mine herte find
> To unloven you a quarter of a day.

The type was one which Shakespeare, whether by choice or chance, never treated. There are hints of it in Ophelia, who might have developed into something like Cressida had she lived longer. It is curious to note that it is not from Chaucer's Cressida, but from Chaucer's Cleopatra that Shakespeare took that single phrase "O rose of May!" which is the real epitaph on Ophelia. Of Shakespeare's own Cressida one can only say that, like the whole drama to which she gives her name, she is profoundly disagreeable, and that she is presented with frightful insight, but (except for one single phrase put in the soiled lips of Pandarus) without a touch of sympathy or mercy. Perhaps the nearest likeness to Chaucer's Cressida is to be found in some of Mr. Hardy's frail, passive, wild-rose-blossom women, who, like her, without passion or strength or constancy, have but one power, to hold and break the hearts of men.

To compare, point by point, Boccaccio's original

with Chaucer's copy—so far as it is a copy—would be a lesson in the art of poetry. The changes are not uniformly for the better; but they are seldom without good poetical reason. There are some touches in the *Filostrato* that we might think specifically Chaucerian which Chaucer has passed by. The gathering of the Trojan princesses to comfort Troilus, given by Boccaccio in two stanzas of extreme beauty (vii. 84 and 85) makes a picture just such as Chaucer loves, executed in what is just his manner.

In poca d'ora la camera piena
Di donne fu, e di suoni e di canti;
Dall'una parte gli era Polissena
Ch'un'angela pareva ne'sembianti;
Dall'altra gli sedea la bella Elena,
Cassandra ancora gli stava davanti;
Ecuba v'era, e Andromaca, e molte
Di lui cognate e parenti raccolte.

Ciascuna a suo potere il confortava,
E tale il domandava che sentia.
Esso non rispondea, ma riguardava
Or l'una or l'altra, e nella mente pia
Di Griseida sua si ricordava,
Ne più che con sospir ciò discopria;
E pur sentiva alquanto di dolcezza
E per li suoni e per la lor bellezza.

Yet Chaucer leaves out the episode altogether; and he is right; the tragedy has by this time gone beyond the sphere of romantic sensibility, and Chaucer's Muse, rising to the amplitude of the sub-

ject, has passed beyond the "camera piena di donne e di suoni e di canti" in which it loved to dwell. On the other hand Chaucer puts in, of his own invention, the whole of that splendidly handled scene of Helen and Cressida dining in the house of Deiphobus, and their visit to Troilus. It is here that we have one of the most wonderful of Chaucer's creations—his Helen. She is the Helen of the *Odyssey* reincarnate, "once and only once and for one only": one out of whom came a fire to devour many, yet on whom the fire could not take hold even to scorch her raiment. She moves through the poem with placid sweetness, in a strange radiance. She lifts the story into a new beauty when she appears; as she sits at the table of Deiphobus holding Cressida's hand in hers, or as she goes to visit Troilus on his sick-bed and to comfort him, "in all her goodly softe wise," laying her arm over his shoulder like a kind sister. When she kisses him and leaves him quietly to go to sleep, she has her Odyssean charm of affectionate tact and exquisite manners. Yet, like the Helen of the *Iliad*, she is doomed to bring unhappiness where she goes. It is a subtle imaginative touch that the ill-starred love of Troilus is helped on by her kindly, well-meant intervention.

> Good thrift have ye, quod Eleyne the queen.

The words, and the feeling behind them, are those, as Troilus says, of a "sister lief and dear," but a fate for which she is not responsible reverses them.

Of Chaucer's own invention too is the scene, which is perhaps the climax of the whole achievement, the riding of the knights up the street of Troy before Cressida's window. This has been praised once, and so that it need not be praised a second time.

O Master, pardon me if yet in vain
Thou art my Master, and I fail to bring
Before men's eyes the image of the thing
My heart is filled with : thou whose dreamy eyes
Beheld the flush to Cressid's cheeks arise
When Troilus rode up the praising street,
As clearly as they saw thy townsmen meet
Those who in vineyards of Poictou withstood
The glittering horror of the steel-topped wood.

The scene is indeed suggested by a few casual lines which the curious may find in the seventy-second and seventy-third stanzas of the second part of the *Filostrato;* but seldom has so magnificent a flower sprung out of so slight a bud. Seldom, one may add, has one of the supreme scenes of poetry been so strangely and so cruelly trailed through the mire as this was by Shakespeare when he wrote the second scene of the first act of *Troilus and Cressida.*

In smaller points there are similar discrepancies often illuminating, sometimes perplexing. Why, in the first description of Cressida, did Chaucer ignore the beautiful phrase of the Italian—

La qual, quanto la rosa la viola
Di beltà vince, cotanto era questa
Più ch'altra donna bella—

to substitute a piece of what looks at first sight either childish quaintness or malicious humour—

> Right as our firste letter is now an A
> In beauty first so stood she makeless—

lines which would not surprise one in his own juvenile work, but which rather suggest the scholarship and taste of the Wife of Bath? The explanation seems to be that here, as again and more legitimately in his description of the jewel worn by the Prioress of the *Canterbury Tales*, he went out of his way to pay a compliment to Queen Anne. The adroit courtliness of the touch may excuse its irrelevance. Why, again, in the speech where Cressida, with a faint effort at constancy, puts by the first overtures of Diomede, did he omit the most subtly dramatic touch in his original—

> a te Elena bella
> Si converria ?

Why, except in order to annoy, or to throw a tinge of comedy over the whole situation which he felt and imagined with such tragic intensity, does he say of Cressida—

> But whether that she children had or none
> I read it nought—

when he did read it, in so many words, that she had none?

A hundred instances might be given of the way in which Chaucer remodels the story, most often by

thinking intensely over it and re-embodying it in his own imagination. But it is at the end that the essential difference between the two poets and the two poems comes out. Boccaccio treats the tragedy as lightly and as carelessly as Ovid might have done. With Chaucer all other feelings are swallowed up in a passion of pity. Of that miraculous ending one can hardly trust oneself to speak. The thrill of tears is in the verses. Yet through his passion of pity the poet keeps a certain and mastering hand. I need hardly quote the splendid apostrophe of Troilus to the empty house of Cressida as he rides by it once more and for the last time, the famous verses beginning "O palace desolate, O house of houses." But even beyond its stately beauty is the piteous simplicity of his words as he broods over his wrecked life—

> Men might a book make of it like a story ;

and, as the seawind comes up to Troy in the moonlit night from the Greek camp on the shore,

> Feel I no wind that souneth so like pain :
> It saith, Alas, why twined be we twain ?

and when

> Another time imaginèn he wold
> That every wight that wente by the way
> Had of him ruth, and that they sayen shold,
> *I am right sorry Troilus will die.*

The grief is so poignant that it ceases to care for expression; it becomes hushed and almost inarticulate. *O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus!*

At the end of the poem the poetry has reached such a height and tension that the whole action is transfigured. Even Diomede and Pandarus speak with a new accent: the one, to give, in four lines, the feeling of a vast background, that of the tragedy of Troy itself, against which the tragedy of the lovers stands out in fire—

> The folk of Troy, as who saith all and some,
> In prison been, as ye yourselven see;
> For thennes shall not one on live come
> For all the gold betwixen sun and sea:

the other, awed for once into seriousness, to "think in his heart" and "say to himself full soberly," "Yea, farewell all the snow of ferne year." The words on the lips of a later poet became the burden of the world-famous *Ballad of Dead Ladies;* but they were Chaucer's first.

But the last note of all is not that of sorrow; still less, as in Shakespeare's play, of gloom, a horror of darkness, a cry of disillusion and disbelief. It is an uplifting of the heart in a strange exaltation.

> And when that he was slain in this manere
> His lighte ghost full blissfully is went
> Up to the hollowness of the seventh sphere . . .

And down from thennes fast he gan avise
This little spot of earth, that with the sea
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wretched world, and held all vanity
To respect of the plein felicity
That is in heaven above ; and at the last,
There he was slain, his looking down he cast :

And in himself he lough, right at the woe
Of them that wepten for his death so fast.

That inward laughter had no bitterness. And it is with no bitterness that Chaucer parts from Cressida.

Such fine hath, lo ! this Troilus for love,
Such fine hath all his greate worthiness ;
Such fine hath his estate royal above ;
Such fine his lust, such fine hath his nobless ;
Such fine hath false worldes brittleness :
And thus began his loving of Creseide
As I have told, and in this wise he died.

The lovely stanza follows Boccaccio's Italian closely ; but its grave sweetness is all Chaucer's own : and at the end there is a significant variation from the original.

Cotal fine ebbe il mal concetto amore
Di Troilo in Griseida, e cotale
Fin'ebbe il miserabile dolore
Di lui, al qual non fu mai altro eguale ;
Cotal fin'ebbe il lucido splendore
Che lui servava al solio reale :
Cotal fin'ebbe la speranza vana
Di Troilo in Griseida villana.

Villana is an ugly word ; one cannot call it undeserved, and it is not cruel and shocking like the

terms that Shakespeare allows himself to utter through the mouth of Thersites. But it was a word that Chaucer could not bring himself to say or even to think. To him Cressida was not a "ria donna," a bad woman. His epithet is different.

Ne me ne list this silly woman chide
Further than the story will devise.
Her name, alas, is published so wide
That for her guilt it ought enow suffise.
And if I might excuse her any wise,
For she so sorry was for her untruth,
Ywis, I wold excuse her yet for ruth.

The difference is as great in the lines that follow. In the *Filostrato* they are an exhortation, such as a man of the world would give, to young men not to trust women.

O giovanetti, ne'quai coll'etate
Surgendo vien l'amoroso disio,
Per Dio vi prego che voi raffreniate
I pronti passi all' appetito rio
E nell' amor di Troilo vi specchiate
Il qual dimostra suso il verso mio,
Perchè se ben col cuor gli leggerete,
Non di leggieri a tutte crederete.

Giovane donna è mobile, e vogliosa
È negli amanti molti, e sua bellezza
Estima più ch' allo specchio, e pomposa
Ha vanagloria di sua giovinezza,
La qual, quanto piacevole e vezzosa
È più, cotanto più seco l' apprezza ;
Virtù non sente nè conoscimento,
Volubil sempre come foglia al vento.

La donna è mobile: it is the well-worn refrain of a thousand verse-writers. Chaucer's sweet grave pity lifts him into a wholly different sphere.

> O younge freshe folkes, he or she,
> In which that love upgroweth with your age—

the criticism of life given by this alteration is as much higher than Boccaccio's as the liquid beauty of the verse excels the smooth glitter of the Italian. While he still lingers over Cressida, his heart turns to Alcestis; and not to her only, but to women who were as unhappy as Cressida, and more sinned against.

> Ne I say not this all only for these men,
> But most for women that betrayed be.

To parallel this passion of pity one has to turn to the Francesca episode in Dante. That is even greater, more concentrated, more astounding. But the pity that wrung iron tears from Dante, and made Hell grant what love did seek, wells out of Chaucer spontaneously: it is the climax of that tenderness and sweetness that make him, not indeed greatest in the kingdom of our poetry, but best loved, because most loving.

II

We have seen how at the end of the *Book of Troilus*—the poem which sets him definitely among the classics—Chaucer's genius so kindles and concentrates as to bring him into touch with Dante. It is a singular confirmation of this, that we find him almost immediately afterwards, for the first and last time, studying Dante with great care and obviously coming under the influence of his poetical style and manner. In one of the concluding stanzas of *Troilus*, he prays that he may have might given him of God his Maker, before he dies, "to make some comedy." The sense in which he uses the term is not certain; but it is clear from his words that he meant something of ampler scope as well as happier import. He must have known perfectly well, for all his deprecatory phrases about his "little book," that in *Troilus* he had written a poem that went far beyond Boccaccio's range; and one can fancy him thinking almost in Browning's exact words—

> Still, what if I approach the august sphere
> Named now with only one name, disentwine
> That under-current soft and argentine
> From its fierce mate in the majestic mass

Leavened as the sea whose fire was mixed with glass
In John's transcendent vision,—launch once more
That lustre? Dante, pacer of the shore
Where glutted hell disgorgeth filthiest gloom,
Unbitten by its whirring sulphur-spume—
Or whence the grieved and obscure waters slope
Into a darkness quieted by hope;
Plucker of amaranths grown beneath God's eye
In gracious twilights where his chosen lie—
I would do this! If I should falter now!

Dante's poem was a Divine Comedy. It was the human comedy to which Chaucer turned later, and in which he produced his final masterpiece. But the first result of his new impulse took shape in the *House of Fame*.

It is generally recognised that the *House of Fame* represents a reaction from high tension, that we see in it the artist amusing himself after his day's work. What has not been so much emphasised is that we have in it the reaction not only from *Troilus and Creseide*, but from an attempt, or at least an impulse and intention, to continue and heighten his work on the great classic lines. When he felt this beyond him, or at all events not in the direction of his proper genius, he poured the accumulated result of his study and effort into a poem filled with his brightest humour and his most sensitive feeling for style. In the *House of Fame* he is making fun of himself and his poetic aspirations with a brilliance that shows what progress he had made towards realising them. His conversa-

tion with the eagle is on one side pure farce, so exquisitely done that it becomes high art; but it has its serious side, and anticipates all that can be said of his own serious poetry in the way of adverse criticism. It is not possible to confuse it with his earlier work, the poetry he wrote before he had come under the classic influence. The difference is even emphasised by his reversion in the *House of Fame* to the French octosyllabic couplet. The metre is the same, but the rhythm and tone are new. The most striking single instance is in the lines which conclude the first book—

> It was of gold, and shone so bright
> That never saw men such a sight
> But if the heaven had ywon
> All new of gold another sun;
> So shone the eagle's feathers bright:
> And somewhat downward gan it light.

They have outgrown the old sweet fluidity; they have a new accent, a weight and sharpness like that of forged metal. In this, and in a certain quality of rhythm, as well as in the more obvious similarity of the incident, we may see clear traces of Chaucer's having read, not long before that midwinter night, as only one poet reads another, the ninth canto of the *Purgatorio*.

The commentators have noted that there is more of direct reference to or imitation of Dante in the *House of Fame* than in all the rest of Chaucer's

work put together. But in enumerating the coincidences of language (some of them either trifling or unconvincing) they have perhaps neglected those subtler affinities of rhythm and style which are of the inner essence of poetry. There is a notable one in this very passage. The detached last line, like a single stroke upon a bell, "and somewhat downward gan it light," following on a completed period and beginning with the word *and*, is a peculiar feature of Dante's style. No less than twelve cantos of the *Inferno* end thus. Final lines like

E caddi come corpo morto cade,

or

E vengo in parte ove non è che luca,

might readily be cited in large numbers; but it is needless to multiply instances.

The *House of Fame* is unique among Chaucer's poems in being a winter's tale—χειμερινὸς ὄνειρος ὅτε μήκισται αἱ νύκτες—while elsewhere he sets his fantasies in the surroundings of full spring or summer, in sweet-showered April or on a "freshe morwe of May." This touch is calculated. In that poem, more perhaps than in any other work of Chaucer's, one feels that (like Shakespeare when he wrote that endless and miraculously charming fourth scene of the fourth act of his *Winter's Tale*) he is writing entirely to please himself, without any regard for consequence or for constructional fitness. But in

it more than in any other work one feels also the grasp and power of the trained artist; and just because he was a trained artist, he broke off the *House of Fame* before the workmanship overweighted the material.

In the *Legend of Good Women* the specific Italian influence is passing away. It is only felt in the persistence of a larger, freer movement, combined with a firmer control over the structure of the narratives. They contain some of his finest work; the scale is justly chosen and carefully adhered to, and he keeps clear of his besetting weakness of digression. We may also notice that he is ceasing to make those elaborate lists and minute descriptions which are a regular feature of his early manner. The handling is broader, the touch more rapid. He has fully mastered the narrative art of which he was yet to make such splendid use. But he never completed this series of tales as it was planned. He may have felt that, with whatever dexterity of treatment, it would result in some effect of monotony. But apart from any such reasons, the larger sphere of the human comedy was opening itself out before him.

At what period the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales* began to take shape in Chaucer's mind we have no means of deciding. The *Decameron* must have been known to him at least as early as the *Teseide* and the *Filostrato;* what some editors mean

by saying that he had never read the *Decameron* it is difficult to guess, unless they are drawing a flagrantly illogical inference from the fact that he follows, in certain stories told by both, a different version from that of Boccaccio. But it did not require any such particular example to suggest the notion of a collection of tales in verse, of very various subject and treatment, dealing with the whole tragedy and comedy (in Plato's phrase) of human life. Chaucer had already proved his own narrative gift and his mastery over the manipulation of verse for the purpose of narration. He had invented in the decasyllabic couplet a metre of complete fitness for this purpose. It had doubled the effectiveness of the means at his disposal. It gave to verse composition a flexibility and range comparable to that gained for architecture by the introduction of the pointed arch. The French octosyllabic couplet, his own earlier favourite, was much inferior to it in both respects. The seven-line stanza so exquisitely used in *Troilus* was best suited for work involving no great or sudden variation of key—work that was large, sustained, and deliberate. It was not well suited for familiar narrative nor for quick transitions. But the new verse was capable of answering any demand made on it; once its capacities had been ascertained, the poets who had worked without it were like that people in the *Odyssey* who did not know the use

of oars—οὐδ' εὑήρε' ἐρετμά, τά τε πτερὰ νηυσὶ πέλονται—
"that are to ships as wings are to a bird."

In his earlier period Chaucer had used many other metres than the eight-syllabled couplet; he used several stanza-forms for continuous poetry, besides a profusion of lyric measures. To his central period, associated mainly with the rhyme-royal, belongs the invention and conquest of the heroic couplet. *Palamon and Arcite* may indeed have been remodelled later from an earlier version in stanzas, though to say that it was so remodelled is a mere assumption, but the *Legend of Good Women* shows the new metre in its perfection. In the *Canterbury Tales*, while the new verse is immensely preponderant, six stories are in other metres. It will be worth while going into this point a little more closely, both on its own account, and because it leads up to the larger question—how far the whole body of writing included in the *Canterbury Tales* is poetry, and what place that poetry holds in Chaucer's total poetic achievement.

It is clear that the framework of the *Canterbury Tales* was planned out on a scale which allowed the inclusion of an enormous mass of material, and that its contents would be gradually filled up, in part by including or adapting tales already written, in part by writing fresh ones. In the *Decameron* there are a hundred *novelle;* and according to a passage in Chaucer's prologue, if the words are taken in their

obvious meaning, the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales* would have included when complete no less than a hundred and sixteen. The original scheme was perhaps for tales not exceeding in length those in the *Legend of Good Women*, an average of rather under two hundred and fifty lines apiece. That, in fact, is just the length of the Prioress' and the Manciple's Tales, while five others of the *Canterbury Tales* do not exceed the length of the *Legend of Dido*. To write a hundred or more stories on this scale would be no impossible task; it would have meant from twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand lines. The actual number of lines in the *Canterbury Tales*, excluding the prose, is over seventeen thousand. But at a very early stage the scheme began to grow and alter its whole features; and there is perhaps as much difference between the original design and the actual work produced as was the case later with *Pickwick*. The little world of people whom Chaucer created took the matter into their own hands. Dryden's famous words, "Here is God's plenty," though they are generally (in the careless way that the world has with famous phrases) applied to the whole body of work in the *Canterbury Tales*, were applied by him not to this, but to the group of pilgrims themselves. They develop and interact in a way which makes their talk and doings on the road into a story by itself—a story much longer than any one, or even any two, of the stories they tell, and as various, as

dramatic, as interesting. Meanwhile these stories themselves, or some of them, were undergoing a similar expansion. The Knight's Tale alone exceeds in length the whole nine stories in the *Legend of Good Women*. The scheme had to be completely remodelled. The introduction of the Canon and his yeoman marks a point at which it had, on its original lines, been quite given up.

> I have, God wot, a large field to ere,
> And weake been the oxen in my plough.

These words of the Knight's Tale apply with even greater force to the whole design of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's own working-day was past noon. Splendid as was the instrument he had forged in the rhymed couplet, great as were his mastery and facility in its use, the sun, in the Homeric phrase, was descending towards the hour of unyoking before the field was half covered.

> Even as a man to supper longs to go
> Whose wine-red oxen all day long have drawn
> Across the tilth the plough-frame to and fro;
>
> And welcome to him is the dusking grey
> At sundown, when to supper go he may,
> And his knees ache in going.

The number of stories told is in fact only twenty-four, and these include two which are stopped before

they have well begun, and another which is interrupted at an early stage and never resumed. Two of them are in prose. Of the remaining twenty-two, sixteen, containing about ten thousand lines, are in the couplet-verse, as are the three thousand five hundred lines of the prologue and interstitial narrative (with one curious exception, the brief prologue to the *Rime of Sir Thopas*, which is in stanzas). It is not impossible that the six tales in other metres are pieces not originally within the scheme of the work at all. If so, they may have been introduced into it, partly perhaps from a feeling that the couplet-verse if not varied might at last become monotonous, but partly also because they were already written, and the idea of letting them be wasted, or of rewriting them in another metre, seemed one to be deprecated. That neither idea was out of the question is shown by a modern case where we know the facts. The scheme of the *Earthly Paradise* was planned by William Morris with great care. But it outgrew the original plan; and while he, approaching it as he did in the full vigour of early manhood, and free from those financial and domestic embarrassments which seem to have pursued Chaucer in his later years, brought the altered design to accomplishment, a number of tales which he had planned and actually written never found their place in it. The *Story of the Golden Fleece* grew into a separate epic: other tales remain still unpublished; while the *Story of the Wanderers*, which

forms a prologue to the rest, was, as Professor Skeat believes to have been the case with *Palamon and Arcite*, completely rewritten in a different form, the change here also being, curiously enough, from a stanza into rhymed couplets. It is another interesting analogy, that in the *Earthly Paradise* the story of the *Lovers of Gudrun* occupies a place as unique as that of *Palamon and Arcite* in the *Canterbury Tales*. Like the Knight's Tale, it is more than twice the length of any of the others, and it is also in a different, and in some respects a larger and statelier manner, midway between the straightforward fluency of the *fabliau* and the full proud sail of the epic. It is likewise noteworthy that, whatever Chaucer may have done, Morris deliberately varied the versification of his tales by including all of the three great Chaucerian metres. To these three he confined himself, except that he followed Chaucer in the use of inserted lyrics.

Chaucer's scheme was more elastic, more comprehensive, in treatment as well as in substance. While there is no reason to assume that he would have written many more tales had he lived longer, it would have been easy to add others when and as he chose. But of course the primary difference is one of substance. The subject-matter of the *Canterbury Tales* is the whole of human life; it is a human comedy that includes tragedy, but that passes lightly from pathos to humour, and is fuller of the laughter

than of the tears of things. To the whole work in its mass his own words apply—

> This is the way to all good aventure;
> Be glad then, reader, and thy sorrow off cast:
> All open am I: pass in and speed thee fast.

The narrators are a mixed company of men and women, mostly belonging to the bourgeoisie, and not conversant with high thoughts or profound emotions. Throughout we must always remember who it is that is telling the story. While the accent of Chaucer himself is clear through all the tales, while they are all informed by his sweetness of temper, his humour, his keen observation and quick sympathy, each of them bears also the personality of the narrator in whose mouth it is placed. No greater triumph of dramatic art has been achieved, so far as dramatic art consists in creating people and making them live and act from within.

Without at present raising the whole formidable question of what poetry is, we may say that in any case it must fulfil two conditions; that it was worth writing in verse, and that it could not have been written but in verse. The first condition would exclude a great deal of the metrical output of Chaucer's contemporaries, and perhaps some of his own. The second excludes almost nothing that ranks as literature during times earlier than the period at which a language has developed the art of prose composition. This in Chaucer's England was

just beginning to be the case, but only just beginning. Wiclif was founding English prose; but it is a long step from Wiclif to Coverdale, or from the so-called Mandevile to Malory. Such prose as had been created for Italy by Boccaccio, supple, succinct, lucid, was not yet available in English.

It would be very odd, if we were not so much accustomed to it, that a volume or volumes entitled *The Poetical Works of Chaucer* should include *Melibeus* and the Parson's Tale. In the latter, Chaucer has carried his dramatic sympathy to the point where poetry is rejected as a sort of invention of the devil. In the former ("a little thing in prose," as he calls it in one of those delicious touches of his that often lie too deep for laughter—it is enormously long besides being portentously dull, and would take about two hours and a half in the telling) he is making fun of the contention of the romantic school that their poetry is the only genuine thing, and that if we will not have *Sir Thopas*, we shall have *Melibeus*—certainly an awful alternative either way. We may be thankful to Chaucer for this among his many mercies, that his humour took this particular line, and that he did not waste his time, and probably mislead many generations of critics, by going through the more elaborate jest of giving us the whole of *Melibeus* in verse, even had the verse been as smooth and as workmanlike as that of the *Confessio Amantis*.

If we set aside the little thing in prose, the wild burlesque of *Sir Thopas*, and the Parson's sermon, twenty-one tales in verse are left. In estimating the effective poetical value of the whole work, we have to consider partly what I have already hinted at, the entire construction in which the tales are set, and the dramatic fitness of each story to the occasion of the telling and the person of the teller; and partly, the poetic quality and excellence of the stories themselves. The former criterion is strictly relevant to our judgment of Chaucer as a creative artist. But this kind of creative art may exist in its highest perfection—as it does in Scott for instance, or in Dickens—without entering the sphere of poetry at all. In *David Copperfield* or the *Antiquary* we have a little world of people as living, as interesting, as distinct and various as the God's plenty of the Canterbury Pilgrims. In the main framework of the *Canterbury Tales*—the prologues and interstitial verse—there is little that could not be done in prose, at all events in the prose of a more mature accomplishment. For poetry, in the sense of high poetry, we must look mainly to the tales themselves.

The twenty-one which we have to consider fall naturally into three divisions. Seven are serious in subject and treatment; those of Palamon and Arcite, of Custance, of Griselda, of Cambuscan, of Dorigen, of Appius and Virginia, and of the little

Christian boy in Asia. Seven are what Chaucer himself very aptly calls harlotry ; those told by the Miller and Reeve, the Friar and Sompnour, the Merchant and Shipman, and the fragment which is all we are allowed to hear—though it has perhaps already gone quite far enough—of the life of Perkin Reveller, the Idle Apprentice. Seven are in an intermediate or mixed manner. Of these last, two are hardly poems at all, so much as versified material for sermons, tales told for edification, not for delight. The Legend of Saint Cecilia puts into verse, with considerable dexterity but with little beauty or imagination, the prose of the Golden Legend with all its prosaic details even down to the absurd etymologies. The Monk's Tale, while it contains passages of fine rhetoric, has no unity of construction, no organic quality. A string of instances chosen out of a stock such as, ever since Lactantius wrote the *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, formed a regular part of every churchman's library, is sufficient material for a sermon, but hardly for a poem. Both of these pieces seem clearly to be early work, retouched and inserted here. The other five differ from these two in constructive quality ; but they also differ from the first group of seven in not treating the story with high poetic seriousness. They do not stand out against the general narrative framework of the tales as against a background of lower tone ; in some cases they rise out of it, or fade into it, almost insensibly.

As stories indeed, while the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and the Manciple's Tale are trivial, and the Wife of Bath's Tale a slight thing pleasantly told, it would be difficult to beat the Pardoner's Tale of the three thieves for grim strength, or the Nun's Priest's Tale of the cock and fox for humour and light grace. But one does not look in them for really great poetry.

Even in the seven serious tales, the poetry seldom rises to a high tension. To the Knight's Tale I will return in a moment. In the rest we may notice the relaxation of a genius which had ascended in its central period to poetry, not of greater or sunnier charm, but of more ardent imagination, of a loftier purpose and movement. The Clerk's Tale of Griselda is interesting as showing a wavering between romantic and humanistic treatment. It is because the difference is never adjusted that, with all its many beauties, it is on the whole a failure as a poem. When he wrote it, Chaucer was clearly not at the stage, or in the mood, where he could treat it in the spirit of the *fabliau*. He had passed out of the romantic atmosphere into the open air. But in cool daylight the whole story of Griselda is either preposterous or shocking; in either case not fit material for high art. That it made a great impression on Petrarch, from whom Chaucer took it, is matter of known fact. But Petrarch in his whole life seems never once to have come into contact with real things.

This relaxation has its degree of seriousness. In the stories of Custance and of Dorigen Chaucer finds ample scope for beauty, imagination, pity, as well as for the special graces of romance. The former rises more than once to a splendid eloquence.

Paraventure in thilke large book
Which that men clepe the heaven, ywritten was
With sterres, when that he his birthe took,
That he for love should han his death, alas!
For in the sterres, clearer than in glass,
Is written, God wot, whoso could it read,
The death of every man, withouten dread.

This is noble poetry at high tension; and as noble, and more piercingly vivid, is another famous stanza:

Have ye nat seen sometime a pale face
Among a press, of him that hath be lad
Toward his death, whereas him gat no grace,
And such a colour in his face hath had,
Men mighte know his face that was bestad,
Amonges all the faces in that rout?
So stant Custance, and looketh her about.

But the essential difference between the tale of Custance and the *Book of Troilus and Creseide* is that the one is but a tale, told gracefully and movingly to pass the time away, and the other a creative masterpiece going to the heart of life.

Even the Knight's Tale, with its stately movement and lavish richness of ornament, does not bring us into the heart of things. It is no derogation from a poem which is one of the chief splen-

dours of our literature to say this. The same might be said of another poem which on its smaller scale much resembles it, Keats' *Lamia*. It is arguable that *Lamia* is Keats' finest poem; and the Knight's Tale is, I suppose, the single poem which represents Chaucer most fully. In it the pictorial or decorative value of his poetry is at its maximum. It is all beautiful, all dexterous and masterly, all Chaucer at a high level that only comes short of his highest. It has more range than any other single poem of his; it supplies more memorable phrases and lovely lines. It ranges from the sweet garrulous manner of the romance-writer, to a loftiness and incisiveness that are almost Homeric, almost Virgilian.

> Alas, why pleynen folk so in commune
> Of purveyance of God, or of fortune,
> That giveth them full oft in many a guise
> Well better than they can themself devise?

These lines recall the great words of Zeus at the opening of the *Odyssey*—

> Alas, how idly do these mortals blame
> The Gods, as though by our devising came
> The evil that in spite of ordinance
> By their own folly for themselves they frame!

The words of Arcite—

> So stood the heaven when that we were born:
> We must endure: this is the short and plain—

seem to echo some stately cadence of the *Aeneid* like the *Stat sua cuique dies* or the *superanda omnis fortuna*

ferendo est. Now we come on a fully elaborated epic simile—

> Right as the hunter in the regne of Thrace
> That standeth at the gappe with a spear,
> Whan hunted is the lion or the bear,
> And heareth him come rushing in the greaves
> And breaketh both the boughes and the leaves,
> And thinketh, *Here cometh my mortal enemy,*
> *Withoute fail he mote be dead, or I:*
> *For either I mote slay him at the gap,*
> *Or he mote slain me, if that me mishap:*
> So fareden they:

and again, on a line of Greek simplicity like that of Palamon's—

> For since the day is come that I shall die—

the sort of line in which the art is so consummate that it looks like accident. We have passages of light speed, those lovely lines for instance beginning—

> The busy lark, the messenger of day,

that read like a piece of early Shakespeare; and concentrated couplets, now smooth and weighty like the comment of Theseus,

> Then is it wisdom, as it thinketh me,
> To make a virtue of necessity;

now filled with lyric air and fire, as in the lamentation of the Athenian women over Arcite's body (like the weeping in Troy over Hector, Chaucer is bold enough to say)—

> Why woldestow be dead, these women cry,
> And haddest gold enough, and Emily?

In the Knight's Tale Chaucer (again like Keats in *Lamia*) was trying to write as well as he could. If a fault in it is to be hinted at, it is that now and then (but here again we must remember that the tale is told not in his own person, but in the Knight's) he seems to pay a little too much attention to the writing, and does not give quite free play to his humour or to his power of dramatic imagination. With Chaucer, indeed, as with that college friend of Johnson's who has made himself immortal by a single thoughtless phrase, "I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in." When he says of the portraits in the temple of Mars—

> All be that thilke time they were unborn,
> Yet was their death depeinted therebeforne :

when, in the highly wrought and noble description of Arcite's death, he says—

> His spirit changed house, and wente there,
> As I came never, I cannot tellen where :

it is with the flicker of a smile, checked as soon as it appears. The two passages are in singular likeness and contrast to two others of the same purport in Shakespeare, where the lightning of a grimmer laughter flashes across a situation of tragic horror. "This prophecy Merlin shall make ; for I live before his time," says the Fool in *Lear*, in a passage which is vainly rejected as an interpolation by some editors. "In heaven ; send thither to see : if your messenger

find him not there, seek him i' the other place yourself," is the sinister sarcasm of Hamlet. But here, as even in the dying words of Arcite with all their unsurpassable grace and tenderness, the strange sob of their cadences—

> What is this world? what asketh men to have?
> Now with his love, now in his colde grave
> Alone, withouten any company—

we are in the faint world of romance, among dreams that linger a moment, retreating in the dawn.

But in their main structure and substance, even where they deal with romantic stories and episodes, the *Canterbury Tales* represent the reaction from romance. Chaucer brought poetry into the open air, just when the romantic atmosphere was beginning to be oppressive. It was not before this, it was more likely a little later, that the English metrical romance reached its last and perhaps its greatest success in *Sir Degrevaunt*. But over Degrevaunt and all his kin rests henceforth the mocking note of *Sir Thopas*. Their feet move in an elderly morning dew; their sentiment begins to look tawdry under the daylight. Yet on the other hand in contrast with the author of *Piers Ploughman* Chaucer is the head of the romantic school, as Homer is romantic in contrast with Hesiod. He carries romance even into his comedy, as he carries his comedy even into romance. This is what gives his work so com-

plex and intricate a fascination. I have already spoken of the Nun's Priest's Tale as a masterpiece in his lighter style of poetry; airy, delicate, exquisitely humorous, with a light silvery grace about it, although it is only silver and not gold. It is in this poem that he makes his most direct attack on the romances—

> This story is all so true, I undertake,
> As is the book of Lancelot de Lake.

In a way too, it is all so poetical, all so romantic. He is a poet making fun of poetry, just as, being an accomplished and sensitive stylist, he is so fond of parodying style, even his own. Unless we realise how continually he is doing this, we miss half his meaning. Sometimes it is done quite broadly, oftener with so demure an air as almost to escape notice.

> For the orizont had reft the sunne's light
> (This is as much to sayn as it was night):

it may be suspected that here he is making fun of Dante.

> And in his ire he hath his wife yslayn:
> This is th' effect, there is no more to sayn:

this is a parody of his own epic manner. May's visit to the sick-bed of Damian in the Merchant's Tale is a conscious parody of Cressida's visit to the sick-bed of Troilus. It is audaciously introduced by

the very phrase, "pity runneth soon in gentle heart," used with such serious beauty in *Palamon and Arcite* and used again with a slighter and subtler touch of comedy in the proem of the falcon's speech to Canace; that speech itself being a parody from beginning to end of Chaucer's own seriously romantic manner as we see it in the *Legend of Good Women*. Indeed, except where Chaucer is at his very highest elevation, or where, as in the Prioress' Tale, he suppresses it for dramatic purposes, the suspicion of parody, the lurking instinct of making fun, is never far round the corner. It glances and sparkles through the Knight's Tale; it gives added breadth and charm to the earlier books of *Troilus and Creseide*. It keeps his tenderness from becoming sentimental, as his sentiment keeps it in turn from becoming heartless.

This comes out most vividly in his treatment of the feathered things, the "smale foules," of which he was so loving and so keen an observer. With his romantic passion for birds, he is full of their comic aspect. He is alike responsive to the magic of the nightingale and to the absurdity of the dove sitting upon a barn-roof. The *Parliament of Fowls* is a sort of epitome of his own poetical genius on all its sides: the romantic sensibility of the turtle—

> For though she died, I would none other make;
> I will be hers till that the death me take:

the reaction from romance in the duck—

> Who can a reason find or wit in that?
> Yea, quek! yit quod the duck: full well and fair!
> There be mo sterres, God wot, than a pair:

the high seriousness with which that Canterbury pilgrim is checked by the tercelet—

> Thy kind is of so low a wretchedness
> That what love is thou canst not see ne guess.

And so also with his loving and humorous view of other animals, like cats and dogs, as in the lines—

> And if the cattes skin be sleek and gay,
> She wol nat dwell in house half a day;
> But forth she wol, ere any day be dawed,
> To show her skin, and gone a-caterwawed:

or in a passage about dogs' manners in the Parson's Tale which can hardly be quoted with decorum, but which is even more intensely funny and true to life than Launce's lecture to Crab in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Seldom for very long together does Chaucer keep perfectly serious. But the world itself is not constantly serious; and when it is, it is often with the seriousness, not of a great art that sweeps by with sceptred pall, but of a Puritanism that renounces art altogether. Of Chaucer's Muse, both in her more

impassioned and in her lighter vein, it may well be said—

> By her attire so bright and shene,
> Men might perceive well and seen
> She was not of religioun.

Yet in this bright secular world we may see, towards the end, the spirit of Puritanism rising and casting a shadow over his work; not merely in the recantation at the conclusion of the *Canterbury Tales*, but in the grave impressive moralisations with which the Doctor's and the Manciple's Tales end—though here, once more, we must not forget the dramatic element. Even the light-hearted Paganism of Boccaccio had ended thus; as did, a century later, the splendid humanistic art of Botticelli; as did the whole Renaissance movement by the end of the sixteenth century. In Chaucer's own age and country, which were also the age and country of Wiclif and of John Ball, Langland gives us a criticism of life deeper than Chaucer's, though narrower. As responsive to the wretchedness of this world as Chaucer was to its variety and beauty, he dreams, not of a House of Fame, not of ladies dead and lovely knights, but of heaven opened, of Mercy and Truth meeting, of Righteousness and Peace kissing one another. When the vision comes on him—

> Into the land of longing · alone she me brought,
> And in a mirror that hight middle-earth · she made to behold.
> *Son*, she said to me—*here might thou see wonders.*

But they are not the wonders of Chaucer; and in that mirror the world is seen, full indeed of sharp colour and life, but without romance, without joy, without pity.

This seriousness is quite a different thing from the high seriousness of art. In its eyes, *Troilus and Creseide* falls under the same condemnation with the Miller's Tale; both are mere worldly vanity. But as poetry, the distinction between the two is evidently profound. We can hardly ignore, or leave unanswered, the question whether the Miller's Tale, and that whole body of brilliant work to which it belongs, be poetry at all, and if so, in what sense. To reduce the matter to a concrete instance, let me take two passages which are closely alike in substance and handling. In the Sompnour's Tale the friar responds to the invitation to order his own dinner as follows:—

> Now dame, quod he, je vous dy sanz doute,
> Have I not of a capon but the liver,
> And of your softe bread not but a shiver,
> And after that a roasted pigges head
> (But that I wold no beast for me were dead)
> Than had I with you homely suffisance.
> I am a man of little sustenance.
> My spirit hath his fostering in the Bible;
> The body is aye so ready and penible
> To wake, that my stomach is destroyed.

The other passage is from an author who is like Chaucer in many qualities, in a combination of

humour and sentiment, in creative fertility, and in the breadth of his outlook on human life.

> "I think, young woman," said Mrs. Gamp, in a tone expressive of weakness, "that I could pick a little bit of pickled salmon, with a nice little sprig of fennel and a sprinkling of white pepper. I takes new bread, my dear, with jest a little pat of fresh butter, and a mossel of cheese. In case there should be such a thing as a cowcumber in the 'ouse, will you be so kind as bring it, for I'm rather partial to 'em, and they does a world of good in a sickroom. If they draws the Brighton Tipper here, I takes that ale at night, my love : it bein' considered wakeful by the doctors. And whatever you do, young woman, don't bring more than a shilling's worth of gin and water when I rings the bell a second time ; for that is always my allowance, and I never takes a drop beyond."

This last passage is of course not poetry; what is it, if anything, beyond the mere absence of metrical form, in which it differs from the other? There are two things to say about this: first, that the matter of metrical form is not accidental but essential; secondly, that a poet working in a medium which is the medium of poetry is producing potential poetry, and that this potential poetry is to some extent, which may be greater or less, converted into actual poetry in the process of production. He may let it run at low pressure; he may reduce the elements of beauty, of construction and imagination; but the interaction of the mind of a poet and the forms of poetry is so close that he cannot, nor would

he if he could, wholly shut these elements off. Even where the verse seems to run automatically off the machine, to be at low pressure or at none, the artist's hand is on the lever, and able at any moment to fill and flood the verse with the quality of essential poetry. The Pardoner's Tale is a *fabliau* which is entirely suited to prose treatment, and has in fact made its impression on Europe through prose versions, from the *Gesta Romanorum* to the *Jungle Book*. But it rises without effort in Chaucer's hands to such grave rhythmic rhetoric as this:

> And on the ground, which is my mother's gate,
> I knocke with my staff both early and late
> And saye: *Leve mother, let me in!*
> *Lo how I vanish, flesh and blood and skin!*
> *Alas, when shall my bones been at rest?*

And in the opening lines of the Wife of Bath's Tale—

> In the olde dayes of the King Arthour
> Of which that Britons speaken great honour,
> All was this land fulfilled of fayerie:
> The Elf-Queen, with her jolly company,
> Danced full oft in many a greene mead—

we have the note that, at a higher imaginative pressure, but hardly with more melodious grace, comes back in the splendid prologue to *Lamia:*

> Upon a time, before the faery broods
> Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods,
> Before King Oberon's bright diadem,
> Sceptre, and mantle clasp'd with dewy gem,
> Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns
> From rushes green, and brakes, and cowslipp'd lawns.

The difficulty disappears if we take larger views. For poetry, like all real art, is a function of life, and its province is as wide as that of life itself. The harlotries of the *Canterbury Tales* have qualities other than those of poetry; but even of them it may be said that the thing could not be done in prose, or at least that in prose it would lose a specific charm, a definite artistic quality. It comes of his width of outlook, his large sane håndling of life, that Chaucer, while at his slackest he never loses touch of beauty, at his highest never loses his sunlit charm and brilliant speed. He says of the Duchess Blanch:

> Her list so well to live
> That dulness was of her adrad.

Chaucer is never dull; except where he means to be dull, and is so dramatically. It is far otherwise with his successors. "Chaucer fain would have me taught, but I was dull," says Occleve; and all his readers—they are not many—answer fervently, "Indeed you were." The Chaucerians are always being dull. Even their best work lacks the ripple and sparkle that never deserts that of their master. It is for this that even the high Muse is indulgent to him when, in the not unkindly phrase of Dryden, he mingles trivial things with those of deeper moment, and forgets that an author is not to write all he can, but only all he ought.

But Chaucer's supreme work is neither his earliest

nor his latest; it is the work of that central period where his field first broadens, and the enchanted atmosphere of romance begins to melt into the open day. Such is the law of progress in poetry. We may long to fix that brief perfection; but we might as well attempt to stay the sun. It is there that we find his largest and firmest handling of beauty. In his earlier and wholly romantic work we

> may on these branches hear
> The smale birdes singen clear
> Their blissful sweete song pitous,

in a world of garden-closes where the grass is powdered with daisies, where the railed alleys are "shadowed well with blosmy boughes green, and benched new and sanded all the ways"; the beauty is small and intricate, like that of pictures in a painted book. From that lovely babble of birds—

> Layes of love full well souning
> They sungen in their jargoning—

he rises to a freer handling, at once more natural and more impassioned:

> A nightingale upon a cedar green
> Under the chamber wall thereas she lay,
> Full loude sang again the moone sheen,
> Paraunture in his birdes wise a lay
> Of love.

Just so likewise from his romantic descriptions of

summer dawns he rises to this picture in the large epic manner:

> On heaven yet the sterres weren seen
> Although full pale ywaxen was the moon,
> And whiten gan the orizonte sheen
> All eastward.

In both of these passages we hear the great note of classical romance which is poetry consummate.

It is by virtue of his high poetry that Chaucer takes his rank as a poet.

> Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
> I heard the skylark sing;
> Sometimes all little birds that are,
> How they seemed to fill the sea and air
> With their sweet jargoning!

(with what a beautiful instinct Coleridge uses the Chaucerian word!)

> And now 'twas like all instruments;
> Now like a lonely flute;
> And now it is an angel's song
> That makes the heavens be mute.

To this angel's song he rises. It ceased; and it is elsewhere, in a later day, that Chapman heard, and we hear now

> the music of the spheres
> And all the angels singing out of heaven.

As the daylight broadens, the enchantment slowly fades away. Once the sun has climbed high, we must needs look back wistfully, not only to that

magnificence of the *splendori antelucani*, but even beyond it to the magic of dusk, to the world of enclosed gardens, of cool green rooms, of lit chapels and shadowy halls. For poetry must perpetually return to the romance that again and again she seems to have outgrown. "He seeth well," says the author of the *High History of the Holy Grail*, "that albeit the night were dark, within was so great brightness of light without candles that it was marvel; and it seemed him the sun shone there. With that he issueth forth and betaketh him to the way he had abandoned, and prayeth God grant he may find Lancelot of the Lake."

SPENSER

I

THE Middle Ages died hard; and nowhere harder than in this island of the West, which was already marked among other nations by two specific qualities—a tenacious conservatism, and an instinct for adapting rather than replacing old institutions, for making changes and even revolutions under accustomed names and inherited forms. The coming of the Renaissance into England was strange, troubled, irregular. In some ways one might say it never came at all, or came in so imperfect a shape, with such transformed features, that it seems to demand another name. This was so over the whole field of civilisation, in religion and politics as well as in art. But in poetry the process of change was especially intricate: the threads of influence, the lines of growth, are complex and not easy to disentangle.

The fifteenth century was emphatically, not only in this country but throughout Europe, not an age of great poetry. In England the Chaucerians continued, with ever-dwindling inspiration, with growing loss of imaginative hold on life and power of interpreting it, the tradition created and fixed by Chaucer himself. Beyond the Chaucerians we have the

mystery plays, the ballads, a small supply of scattered lyrics: a heap of confused scraps, among which the vital process most visible is rather the decay which precedes germination than germination itself. The earlier Italian Renaissance had in poetry been succeeded by a long period of stagnation. Petrarch and Boccaccio died in 1374 and 1375; for a full century afterwards there is no Italian poet of the first or second rank, no outstanding mark in the progress of poetry. The *quattrocentisti* are the painters. In literature it was the age not of the poets but of the scholars. Just at the end of the fifteenth century comes Boiardo's *Orlando*. Boiardo died in 1494, the year of the French invasion of Italy. In France there had been the same lull and pause; François Villon is there the chief poet of a century which was in the main occupied with other things than poetry.

Early in the sixteenth century there was a great revival of poetry in Italy, and, a little later, in France, under an impulse partly native, partly communicated from Italy. The impact of this movement reached England just at a time when, even apart from it, there were signs of a poetic revival. The joy of life had come back to letters; and the joy of letters once more flooded over life. When the head of the English Petrarch fell on the scaffold in 1547, the new movement had been fully launched on its course.

In the age which followed—Spenser's age, though it was too various and too splendid in its poetical progress and achievement to be described adequately as the age of Spenser—we may then trace and mark at least four intertwined motive forces or impulses; the native, the classical, the French, and the Italian. The interaction of these impulses was in the highest degree complex and subtle. We need not be too curious in attempting to assign to each a separate and proper force; still less can we assign to any one such exclusive preponderance as would allow us to regard the others as relatively unimportant. But we shall never properly appreciate Spenser and Spenser's age unless we realise vividly in him, and in it, the presence of all four in mutual interaction.

First then—and it is proper to place it first, because the poetry of every country must be considered as what it is, a function of the national life—we see in the English poetry of this age an authentic revival of the native lyrical impulse. In this, English poetry holds of none and borrows of none. It is apart from scholarship, apart from any effect of foreign models, apart from the Renaissance itself, regarded as a European movement which overflowed into England. The English lyric poetry of the sixteenth century is as self-originating, as independent of external influences, as the Greek lyric poetry of the seventh and sixth centuries before Christ. Secondly, we have the classical impulse;

the effect on poetry of the revival of learning in the previous generation, that golden age of the scholars, of Greece rediscovered and Rome revitalised; and, together with this, the revived and enlarged appreciation of the earlier Italian classics, of Petrarch and to a less extent of Dante. Thirdly, we have the continuous impulse of the immense and splendid body of contemporary Italian poetry, right through the sixteenth century, from Sannazaro and Ariosto at its beginning to Guarini and Tasso towards its end. This impulse came in part directly; in part as transmitted through the French Renaissance, and thus inextricably interwoven with the fourth and last influence, that of France. The French Pléiade, just in the middle of the century, had an immediate and long-continued effect on the development of poetry in England which can scarcely be over-estimated. Spenser's own earlier poetry is modelled more immediately and obviously on that of Clément Marot than on the Italian poets from whom Marot drew; and the French influence continued to grow more and more important in English poetry for upwards of a century, through the successive stages of its history—in Du Bellay and Ronsard, in Du Bartas, in Corneille and the classicists. But, as had been the case already in the age of Chaucer, while the influence of French form and structure was more immediate, more extensive, and more patent, we must look beyond

these for the deeper inspiration. The progress of poetry (that I may quote Gray's brief and pregnant words) was from Greece to Italy, and from Italy to England.

All these influences, native, classical, French Renaissance, and Italian, mingle and accumulate in Spenser. It is thus—as well as from his own genius and from the imposing mass and brilliance of his production—that he is the central figure in the English poetry of the sixteenth century.

With Spenser we are at the full centre of the English Renaissance. For all his Chaucerianism, he is, as Chaucer in his time had been, a modern of the moderns. The change in the sky from evening to morning had passed a generation earlier. Surrey and Wyatt, slender as is the volume of their work, had quietly made ancient literature of the whole of earlier English poetry. They changed an epoch, or at least unmistakeably marked its change. Gawain Douglas's translation of Virgil and Surrey's are only thirty years apart in time: but they belong to two different worlds. The change was just consummated when Spenser was born. Six years later, the Elizabethan age began. Six years more bring us to the birth of Shakespeare.

Thus in Spenser we see the full tide of the Renaissance surging up through many channels round the stranded ship of English poetry, floating her, and bearing her off by confused currents upon

a new and adventurous voyage. That age, like our own, went almost mad over education; and Spenser represents not only the enlarged outlook and heightened ambitions of the new world, but also its rich scholarship. He went to Cambridge at seventeen, and studied there for seven years; it was an education almost as full and elaborate as Milton's or Virgil's. There he lived among a circle of ardent scholars, and received that bent towards classicism, as classicism was then understood, which is one of the main threads of influence that run through the whole of his poetry.

That classicism of the sixteenth century was a very mixed and intricate thing. On one side, following the great Italian humanists, it plunged deeply into Plato and the Platonic school. On another, Ovid was its master, and it sought to reinstate the brilliance, the dexterity, the accomplishment, which the Græco-Roman civilisation had reached before it fell into decay. On yet another, it read largely and deeply in ancient history, to gain knowledge of the past which might be applied to actual life, and to recover what it described in a compendious phrase as the wisdom of the ancients. On literature it had an influence for both good and evil. The fatal tendency of classicism is to see life through books, and to take it at second hand. Its natural instinct is to copy, and in doing so, to copy the inferior classics, who are more copiable, and then to go on

copying itself. Its scholarship tends towards pedantry; its poets tend to become rhetoricians. The influence of Ovid colours the whole mass of Elizabethan poetry; that of Seneca greatly hampered the growth of the English drama. Bembo and Politian were ranked as masters alongside of Virgil. "The tragedies of Buchanan do justly bring forth a divine admiration," says Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry*. Bembo himself was urgent on Ariosto to write Latin poetry only, as bringing greater fame and more assured permanence. There was a similar delusion among the circle of scholars with whom Spenser lived and studied at Cambridge. They held one or both of two positions. Latin was the common international language of educated Europe, and therefore all poetry that should make a universal appeal must be written in Latin; or at least, the Latin poets were the classics, and therefore any English poetry which meant to take rank as classical must be written as nearly as possible in the Latin manner. If only the former of these doctrines had been held, no great harm would have been done. The native instinct for poetry might have been trusted to take care of itself. But it was different with the latter. A serious and what might have been a disastrous attempt was made to guide the stream of poetry into artificial channels; to copy the conventions of Latin poetry; even to transplant its metrical forms, as those of

Greece had been transplanted into Latin poetry itself.

But this is a sort of thing that cannot be done in the same language twice; and in English poetry it had already been done once. The conquest and almost complete submergence of the native English metrical forms, under the influence of the first Renaissance and the decisive effect of Chaucer's genius, had fixed the lines of English poetry once for all. In his furnace the two metals had run into an alloy which was finer, harder, and more ductile than either of its two constituents. Something of loss there had been, but a greater gain. The Chaucerian metal became the basis of a standard currency, capable indeed of modification, enrichment, refinement, but in its main substance national and permanent. It was fine enough to be run into the most delicate moulds, flexible enough to meet, age after age, the ever-shifting and moving requirements of poetry. If Spenser had at any time been in danger of being carried away by the new ideas, he was saved from this by two things; his own admiration and almost worship of Chaucer on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the education which had made him familiar not only with the Latin and with some of the Greek classics, but with the consummate achievements already made by French and Italian poets in their own languages in the age just preceding his own, and those still being made by their successors.

The goal of his poetical ambition lay clear before him; it was to be the English Ariosto, the English Ronsard; perhaps to be even more, but this was denied to him, the English Virgil.

When Spenser left Cambridge in 1576, he was the chief figure among a closely associated circle of poets and scholars which may remind us in many ways of the circle of Virgil during the years previous to the appearance of the Eclogues. They were full of the enthusiasm of youth. In other European countries the poetry of the late Renaissance was at its greatest visible splendour; it had reached the full maturity which is recognised afterwards—not at the time—as presaging the decline. The *Lusiads* had appeared in 1572; the *Aminta* in 1573; the *Sepmaine* followed in 1579; and the *Gierusalemme Liberata* in 1581. English poetry was still on its full curve of ascent. It felt itself at the beginning of a new age.

Just then Spenser, returning to London after two years of further study and practice in the north of England, made that acquaintance with Philip Sidney which disengaged the movement of English poetry in its complete force. The new Virgil had found his Gallus. Sidney was two years younger than Spenser, but he was one of those in whom natural precocity has been stimulated yet further by circumstance and education. The eldest son of the Lord President of Wales, he had been marked out from birth for

great things, and his education had been, even for that age, elaborate almost beyond example. He came to Oxford at thirteen. Four years there were followed by three more spent in travelling all over the Continent, making the Grand Tour on a scale and with advantages which sent him back with a European reputation and conversant with the whole civilised life of Europe. He returned to England a finished soldier, courtier, patriot, and poet. When he met Spenser he was only four-and-twenty; but he had already been English ambassador to the Emperor, and was already hailed in the ecstatic language of that age as the Messiah of poetry. His death at thirty-two was said to have plunged all England into mourning: both during his life and afterwards he was idolised by almost every one who had known him. Not himself by the amount or quality of his poetry rising into the rank of the great poets, "having slipt into the title of a poet," as he says of himself, he yet still impresses us, as he impressed them, with a sense of poetical distinction and even genius. Not only so, but he had a native critical faculty which was developed by study, by wide and varied reading, and by acquaintance with the whole movement of contemporary culture, into an instrument of exquisite fineness, to which his serious Puritan temper lent a yet keener edge. Of the function of poetry he says, in a few simple words that are startling in their clear

insight and exactness, that it is "to make the too much loved earth more lovely."

On Spenser at all events (as through Spenser on the whole subsequent course of English poetry) the influence of Sidney was momentous. Its first result was the publication, in the year after they became acquainted, of the *Shepherds Calendar*. This was the manifesto of the new poetry. It was dedicated to Sidney as Virgil's Eclogues were to Gallus; and like them, it not only placed its author at the head of contemporary poets, but was the symbol and keynote of a new world in poetry.

Its importance in this respect was at once recognised by the world, as it had been by Spenser himself and by the whole circle to which he belonged. Perhaps no work in poetry has ever been launched on its course more elaborately, with such an armament of defence, explanation, and apology. The twelve poems of which it consists were embedded in a mass of prefaces, introductions, and commentaries. How far these were the work of E. K. (if E. K. be a real person, Edward Kirke or another), how far of Spenser himself, or of others, is not clear: what is certain is that they represent the views and enthusiasm of the whole school, and that in speaking of Spenser as they do, under the title of "our new poet," they meant to enforce, with all the emphasis in their power, their confidence that this was the new poetry. The curious verses, and these are

Spenser's own, attached as an *envoi* to the end of the volume, while for form's sake they disclaim rivalry with the great poets of an earlier age, Chaucer and Langland, yet make the claim formally and expressly for the new poetry that it shall outwear time and continue till the world's dissolution. The claim was really made not for these twelve poems, but for the new poetry, for the English poetry of the Elizabethan age. It was a great claim; and it was fully justified.

Of the twelve eclogues themselves there is no particular occasion to speak here in detail. They are a strange, almost chaotic, mixture of styles and manners, ranging in metre from the elaborate artificiality of the sestine in the eighth to the jigging couplets of the second and fifth, and in subject from the exquisite pastoral lyric of the fourth to the ecclesiastical polemics of the ninth. All, and more than all, of the adverse criticism that may be made against Virgil's Eclogues may be made against these. Of them, as of their Virgilian prototypes, it may be said, "They have all the vices and weaknesses of imitative poetry. Nor are these failings redeemed by any brilliant finish of workmanship. The execution is uncertain, hesitating, sometimes extraordinarily feeble. Even the versification is curiously unequal and imperfect." Yet of these Spenserian eclogues also one may go on to say, as of Virgil's, that granted all this, it does not touch the specific

charm of which these poems first disclosed the secret. The *Shepherds Calendar* has no distinct style, but it has the germination of many. It is full of metrical device and experiment. It contains, in the tenth eclogue, preludings of large-scale work in chivalrous romance. Finally, here and there, and especially in the first and twelfth, which are really a single poem cut into two in order to open and close the collection, may be distinctly heard the new note that is personal to Spenser, his unmatched fluency of melody.

From the moment of the appearance of this volume Spenser became not only the leading representative of the new poetry, but the recognised head of living English poets. This position he retained until his death. In the twenty years between, the mass of his production was enormous. The three volumes of 1590, 1591, and 1596 contain between forty and fifty thousand lines. Much more, according both to probability and to direct evidence, was written by him, and either suppressed or lost. The *Faerie Queene* alone, as we possess it, extends to close on thirty-five thousand lines; and we have little more than half of it as it was planned. An allegorical romance of seventy thousand lines in length is a thing that imagination almost boggles at —or would do so at least in any age less adventurous, less confident, and less profuse than that of the matured Renaissance.

Throughout the whole sphere of life, in its crimes and virtues, in its attempts and achievements, that age was possessed by a spirit of excess, an intoxication of greatness. It set itself deliberately to outdo all that had hitherto been done. It built and voyaged and discovered and conquered colossally. In our own National Gallery, where it is one of the splendours of the great Venetian Room, is a portrait, by the Brescian painter Moretto, of Count Martinengo-Cesaresco, killed young in the French wars of religion. He is richly dressed in silk and furs, a gilded sword-hilt showing from under the heavy cloak. On a table by him are an antique lamp and some coins. His elbow rests on a pile of silken cushions, and his head leans, with a sort of intensity of languor, on his open palm. The face is that of one in the full prime of life and of great physical strength; very handsome, heavy and yet tremulously sensitive, the large eyes gazing at something unseen, and seeming to dream of vastness. On his bonnet is a golden plaque, with three words of Greek inscribed on it, *ἰοὺ λίαν ποθῶ*, "Oh, I desire too much." Who the Giulia was whom he desired is among the things that have gone to oblivion; but the longing which the portrait has immortalised is not for one woman, were she like Beatrice or Helen, but for the whole world. These ambiguous words are a cloudy symbol; and that picture is a portrait of the spirit of the Renaissance.

As regards poetry in particular, that age ran to length, to extravagance, to redundance. This is true of almost all the Elizabethan poetry except in what is perhaps its finest flower, its lyrics; and even in these, taken collectively and not singly, the same quality is found in their superabundant profusion. The tradition of endlessness in poems was indeed not new; it was an inheritance from the Middle Ages. The romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries handed on the quality of exorbitant length to the romantic epics of the sixteenth. But the new age bettered the example, and in this one point unhappily learned no lesson from its classical models. With regard to no time are the lines addressed by Tennyson to the ancient poets more appropriate:

> You should be jubilant that you flourished here
> Before the love of letters, overdone,
> Had swampt the sacred poets with themselves.

The *Roman de la Rose* is often quoted as an instance of the mediæval extravagance. But its twenty-two thousand lines are a modest figure compared with the thirty-five thousand of the *Orlando Innamorato* and the forty thousand of the *Orlando Furioso*. The earlier Italian Renaissance, with its slenderer resources and its purer taste, had kept within the bounds of the ancient precedent. The *Divina Commedia* is shorter than the *Iliad;* the *Teseide* is

the same length as the *Aeneid*. Spenser in the *Faerie Queene* proposed to himself to outdo Ariosto, as much as Ariosto had outdone all his predecessors. For this intention of his we have express evidence. Harvey, who from his narrow classical prejudices, as well as from his severer taste, disliked the whole scheme of the poem, and would have recalled poetry from the extravagances of chivalrous romance to a more antique or more modern concentration, wrote to Spenser in 1580 in these words: "The *Orlando Furioso* you will needs seem to emulate and hope to overgo, as you flatly professed yourself in one of your last letters." But apart from any particular ambition to produce a larger poem than had hitherto been known, Spenser possessed the terrible Elizabethan fluency to a degree beyond all his contemporaries. Under the stimulus of his example, reinforcing the instinct for profusion which is the note of the whole period, this torrent of poetic fluency poured on until the language sank exhausted under it. Then, and not till then, the inevitable and wholesome reaction came towards precision and succinctness. That reaction was powerfully aided by the strenuous scholarship of the seventeenth century, and by the impression made throughout the whole republic of letters by the French classical school. Moderation, sobriety, clarity became the aim of poets; and limits were set to the length as well as to the scope of poems which the general

sense of later times has accepted as proper. The *Paradise Lost* reverts to the scale of the *Aeneid*. Even in the nineteenth century the most fluent and melodious of modern English poets kept, by instinct or judgment, within the same limits. The *Life and Death of Jason* and the *Story of Sigurd the Volsung* are, for all their copiousness and even diffuseness, each a little shorter than Milton's epic.

Yet Spenser's instinct, like that of all great artists as regards their own art, was in the main sound; for it is the mass and volume of his poetry, not less than its lavish and intricate beauty, that gives him his place and importance among the poets. He has been a vast quarry and playground for generation after generation of poets: like the Precious Strand in his own poem, a land

> Bestrowed all with rich array
> Of pearls and precious stones of great assay,
> And all the gravel mixed with golden ore.

He is the most inexhaustible and, in a way, the most various of the English poets. All his successors have loved, admired, plundered, imitated him; Milton and Pope, Wordsworth and Keats, a hundred others; not one but has dug in that gravel and brought away golden ore from it for his own use. In him they found that "enormous bliss" which

Milton, in a phrase of daring felicity, ascribes to his Earthly Paradise:

> A wilderness with thicket overgrown
> Grotesque and wild: and overhead upgrew
> Insuperable height of loftiest shade,
> Cedar and pine and fir and branching palm,
> A silvan scene, and as the ranks ascend
> Shade above shade, a woody theatre
> Of stateliest view. Yet higher than their tops
> The verdurous wall of Paradise upsprung,
> And higher than that wall a circling row
> Of goodliest trees loaden with fairest fruit,
> Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue,
> Appeared, with gay enamell'd colours mixt
> On which the sun more glad impressed his beams
> Than in fair evening cloud, or humid bow
> When God hath showered the earth: so lovely seemed
> That landscape.

Over and over again, as one plunges through the depths of that wilderness—

> A wilderness of sweets, for nature here
> Wantoned as in her prime and played at will
> Her virgin fancies—

one comes, scarcely with surprise, on phrases and passages that might be those of our greatest poets in their most superb and characteristic manner. It is impossible here, though it would be fascinating, to pursue this into detail; but two or three instances will show what I mean.

> Scarcely had Phœbus in the glooming East
> Yet harnessed his fiery-footed team:

that is Shakespeare, the Shakespeare of *Romeo and Juliet.*

> And taking usury of time forepast
> Fit for such ladies and such lovely knights :

that is Shakespeare again, the Shakespeare of the Sonnets.

> Many an Angel's voice
> Singing before the eternal Majesty
> In their trinal triplicities on high :

that is the younger voice of Milton.

> And ever and anon the rosy red
> Flasht thro' her face :

one might fancy that the unmistakeable note and accent of Tennyson.

This immense poetic flexibility, this amazing profusion and variety in style as well as in language—for in his vocabulary, too, Spenser is copious beyond the common copiousness of the Elizabethans—is a poetical quality of rare value; it is not of the essence, and does not imply the quality, of a supreme poet. As poetry produces its greatest effects through few and simple words, so some of the greatest poets have been scrupulously frugal in their language, and their style has been simple to austerity. Higher than the verdurous wall of Paradise, higher than the encircling fruit-laden trees, is the secret hill-top where the Muse sits among her chosen, and gives

them, as Milton says, large prospect into the nether empire.

> As some rich tropic mountain, that infolds
> All change, from flats of scattered palms
> Sloping thro' five great zones of climate, holds
> His head in snows and calms.

The image of perfection which art condenses out of the flying vapours of the world may be only blurred and dispersed by copiousness of invention and splendour of ornament: so hard is it for a rich man to enter into the kingdom.

To compare one great artist with another is often futile, and not seldom misleading; but such comparison may be more suggestive, and is less dangerous, when there can be no question of setting the two against one another. So far as there can be any analogy between arts so wholly different as those of poetry and history, Spenser might be called the English Livy. In both you have the same fluency and melodiousness, the same power of handling language on an immense scale with unexhausted elasticity. Both deliberately set themselves to outdo, in scale and volume, what had hitherto been done in a special field of literature, and succeeded in achieving their purpose. Both chose a subject-matter of great intricacy, involving many tedious passages and much repetition; neither ever tires of repeating himself, or seems to lose interest in what he is doing. Doubt has been expressed whether, if

the *Faerie Queene* had been completed, any reader would ever have got to the end of it; the same apprehension may be, and indeed has been, hinted at as regards the one hundred and seven lost books of the *Historiae ab Urbe Condita*. Both authors were possessed by the greatness of a floating and imperfectly grasped ideal; Rome to Livy, chivalry to Spenser, mean all that is noble and glorious, but their power of hard thought is not great, and they are often found draping in their stately and musical rhetoric not only commonplaces, but absurdities. Innovators and conquerors in the field of letters, they were at the same time impassioned though not profound or accurate lovers and students of the earlier and purer national literature. They gave a new copiousness, a new range and flexibility to their language; but to the eyes of scholars and critics they often made wild work of it. The Patavinity which was reproached in Livy has its analogy in Spenser, whose use of the Chaucerian language and idiom is extraordinarily erratic, and whose archaism, while, according to the testimony of Fuller, it impaired his popularity and even diminished his sales, is so inaccurate as to fill scientific students of language with a feeling little short of horror. Both he and Livy were borne on through their immense task not merely by fluency and enthusiasm, but by a love of commonplace moralising which was inexhaustible, and by an almost

complete absence of humour. Livy never felt that his story was flat; Spenser never felt that his romanticism was absurd. No one who had the gift of laughter, who felt the comedy of life, could have gone gravely on through the third book of the *Faerie Queene*. Over and over again it moves a smile in the reader, but never once in the writer. In this book, it is true, there occur the only two passages in the whole poem which it is possible to regard as intentionally humorous. There is something like a flicker of amusement in the description of Britomartis and her nurse at church in the second canto; but such humour as there is in the stanza is more probably unconscious:—

> Early the morrow next, before that day
> His joyous face did to the world reveal,
> They both uprose and took their ready way
> Unto the Church, their prayers to appeal
> With great devotion, and with little zeal:
> For the fair Damsel from the holy herse
> Her love-sick heart to other thoughts did steal;
> And that old Dame said many an idle verse
> Out of her daughter's heart fond fancies to reverse.

One can fancy with what an exquisite blending of fun and tenderness Chaucer would have treated the scene. The other passage is where the Squire of Dames, in the seventh canto, tells the story of the three women who had repelled his advances. In it Spenser *apprend d'être fif* with rather calamitous results. The story itself is a traditional *fabliau*, a

piece of ponderous mediæval wit. It is incorporated rather than assimilated by Spenser: its proper place is in the *Moyen de Parvenir*, not in the *Faerie Queene*, where it is strikingly out of tone with its surroundings. "Thereat full heartily laughed Satyrane," we are told: he may have done so, but probably no reader of the poem has ever felt inclined to follow his example.

So too, with his feeling about the past and his attitude towards his own age. Following the common fashion of his period, which was indeed more or less the common fashion of human nature, he is perpetually, even to weariness, insisting on the degeneracy of modern times, on the vices of civilisation, the decay of chivalry, the treachery and ingratitude of courts. "O goodly usage of these antique times, in which the sword was servant unto right:" this is a theme on which he is perpetually embroidering, much as Orlando (not Ariosto's Orlando, Shakespeare's) eulogises "the constant service of the antique world, when service sweat for duty, not for meed." He is fond of thinking of his romantic imaginary world, "this delightful land of faerie," as he truly calls it, as though it were some golden age that had actually existed in the past, when

> Antique age, yet in the infancy
> Of time, did live then like an innocent.

He was not only a romantic dreamer and student,

but a man of large and disappointed ambitions. In a famous passage in his *Mother Hubberd's Tale* he draws, with mordant truth, and in swift brilliant couplets worthy of Pope himself, the wretchedness of a courtier's life :

So pitiful a thing is suitor's state !
Most miserable man, whom wicked fate
Hath brought to court, to sue for had-ywist,
That few have found, and many one hath missed !
Full little knowest thou that hast not tried
What hell it is in suing long to bide :
To lose good days that might be better spent,
To waste long nights in pensive discontent,
To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow,
To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow,
To have thy prince's grace, yet want her peers',
To have thy asking, yet wait many years,
To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares,
To eat thy heart through comfortless despairs,
To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,
To spend, to give, to want, to be undone.

His *View of the Present State of Ireland* shows him on this side of his nature, the keen, hard, not over-scrupulous Puritan politician. In the prologue to the fifth book of the *Faerie Queene* he sets forth a sort of philosophy of history, in which the gorgeous language and versification give an imposing semblance of coherence to what is in effect a combination of the romantic cry, that glory and loveliness have passed away, with an ecstatic eulogy of Tudor absolutism. The Platonic doctrine of the Great Year is there used with extraordinary effect to

enforce the progressive degeneracy of the world; but he does not, like Virgil in the fourth Eclogue, regard the vast cycle as nearing its close, and a new golden age in prospect; the movement is still on its downward arc: and poetry itself is the anodyne rather than the vital function of life. It is just this want of touch between art and life that prevents Spenser, with all his poetical gift and accomplishment, from taking a place in the first rank of poets. "This," he says himself in another of these prologues into which he put his deepest thought, or what he took for thought,

> Of some the abundance of an idle brain
> Will judged be, and painted forgery:

and such indeed is the matured judgment of posterity. But abundance has never been more inexhaustible, or forgery more magnificently painted. Like his own magic crystal devised by Merlin,

> It round and hollow-shaped was
> Like to the world itself, and seemed a world of glass.

Into that crystal we may still plunge our eyes with ever renewed fascination.

The Platonism which is expressly set forth in many passages like that which I have cited, and in whole poems like the Hymns to Heavenly Love and Heavenly Beauty, was the side of Greek literature which appealed most strongly to the Renaissance. It satisfied, and fed to a greater intensity, their sense

of vastness, their intoxication with language, their longing to transcend all limits. It is the only side of Greece which had a visible influence on Spenser himself. He was, according to contemporary testimony which may be taken for what it is worth, "perfect in the Greek tongue"; an accomplished scholar, that is to say, according to the standard of what was in England not an age of high or severe scholarship. But the distinctively Greek quality is wholly absent from his poetry; he is, in that sense of the terms, a romantic and not a classic. This is patent as regards the whole tone and colour of his poetry; and even for traces of any influence on him from Homer, from the Greek lyrists, or from the Attic tragedians we may search through him in vain. The only specific translations or adaptations from the Greek that are to be noted throughout the *Faerie Queene* are from Græco-Roman epigrams in the Anthology, and these he very likely knew only in Latin versions. Among the Greek poets proper, he seems scarcely to have gone back beyond Theocritus. The Greek clarity, the Greek purity, were alien from his luxurious romantic temperament. This is not said in disparagement; for he too had heard the Muses singing, though not on the mountain or in seven-gated Thebes; and we can hardly wish him to have been other than he was.

A great deal of well-meant nonsense has been talked about Spenser's purity, in the other sense of

that ambiguous word. He was a poet of high if rather vague and sentimental idealisms. The scope of the *Faerie Queene* is expressly stated by him to be the fashioning twelve moral virtues. But its end, he says, in words which are more significant, is to fashion a gentleman. There is a profound difference between a gentleman and a saint; and the gentleman of that age, in Tennyson's phrase, hovered between war and wantonness; he inherited the corruption of the age of chivalry as well as the rich sensuousness of the Renaissance. It has been a fashion to extol Spenser at the expense of Ariosto. But the light-heartedness, the gay inconsequence, of the Italian poet is combined with a natural goodness quite as great as that underlying Spenser's rather heavy and forced morality. Ariosto had no consciousness of a mission, beyond that of producing an endless stream of melodious and brilliant poetry. He belongs to a time before the Renaissance had sickened of its own Palace of Art; he accepted life in a large way, he saw all the humour and beauty and brightness of it. The beauty of goodness always appeals to him. His Bradamante is as pure as Britomartis, and ten times more loveable. He has no sentimental illusions about his world of knights and ladies; but he frankly thinks it a very good and beautiful world. The *gran bontà de' cavalieri antichi* is a thing about which he is quite in earnest. It is not without significance that his greatest enthusiasm is for Vittoria

Colonna; a very different kind of patroness and heroine from Queen Elizabeth. He certainly makes no parade of morals. But with one or two exceptions, there is hardly anything in the *Orlando Furioso* that is not suitable to be read aloud, even according to the taste of the present day; the same cannot be said of the *Faerie Queene*. And when Spenser lapses into sensuousness, it is with a certain clumsiness from which Ariosto was saved, not by a higher ideal, but by a more refined and educated taste. In Spenser, as in so much English art—as in so much English work beyond the sphere of art—there is a trace left of the insular grossness, a strain of something a little forced and exaggerated. He is hardly of the centre.

But the centre had for the time been lost. An iron age had displaced the golden time of Raphael and Ariosto and Erasmus. The brave attempt of Humanism to breathe fresh life into the Middle Ages, and carry the old world alive and unbroken into the new age, had been made and had failed. The religious wars broke out before the middle of the sixteenth century. Thenceforth the whole of life became one vast field of battle between the revolutionary Reformation and the Catholic reaction. These bitter enemies had one, and but one, disastrous feature in common, a fanatical hatred of great and humane art. In Italy the sunset of the Renaissance lingered; but the shadow of the

Catholic reaction is already visible in Tasso's romantic epic. In England the revolution which, in the historian's striking words, laid its foundations in the murder of the English Erasmus, and set up its gates in the blood of the English Petrarch, left a long heritage of sombre restlessness, of doubt and gloom. It has often been remarked as strange, even as unaccountable, that throughout the earlier years of the Elizabethan age there is an all but universal cry that poetry is dead or dying, that barbarism and ignorance have flooded in. The *Tears of the Muses*, published by Spenser in 1591, and written not long before, is one prolonged complaint of this.

> Heaps of huge words uphoarded hideously
> With horrid sound though having little sense,

are all, he says, that is left of the palace of poetry. The truth was that, in her secular movement, poetry was breaking up and transforming herself. A new generation was already at the doors, one which was in turn to sweep up and put away the Renaissance, as the Renaissance had swept up and put away the Middle Ages.

It was not only at the doors, but within them. Night's candles were burnt out, and jocund day stood tiptoe on the misty mountain tops. The world was moving at a prodigious speed, and poetry had to quit her ancient seats, to whirl and follow the sun. The year 1591 is remarkable in letters,

not only for the *Tears of the Muses* volume, but for another work in which there is a satirical allusion to the *Tears of the Muses*. That work was the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Of the life of Nicholas Bottom (who has been called, not without some colour of reason, the hero of that play) we unhappily know as little as we do of the lives of Autolycus' aunts. But if he did not marry till middle life, his son might very well have handled a pike at Naseby.

Thus Spenser, like so many other great poets, represents the late splendour of a descending and fast disappearing tradition. The realm in which he was so great an innovator, so wide an explorer and conqueror, was even before his death passing into other hands. Much of his work has faded away and become obsolete; but his great argosy came into harbour. He lives effectively in a few sonnets, in one superb ode, and in the *Faerie Queene*.

The Epithalamion, in Johnson's stately phrase of compliment, "it were vain to blame, and useless to praise." For sustained beauty of execution, for melodiousness in which the most melodious of English poets excels even his own standard, for richness of ornament that stops just short of excess, and does not either blur the outline or clog the movement, it easily takes the first place, not only among Spenser's own lyrics, but among all English odes. The mechanism of the verse is

a marvel of delicate intricacy. The twenty-three long undulating stanzas into which it is divided by the recurrent but perpetually varying refrain are all based on the same general rhythmical scheme of subdivision, but with variations of internal structure devised with extreme skill to prevent monotony, to give the play and freedom of a live organism. It is possible to read the poem, even to be familiar with it, and not to recognise until after more minute inspection that the normal nineteen-line stanza is varied with three other forms of stanza, two of eighteen and one of seventeen lines, and that the arrangement of the rhymes has further delicate variations. The Ode was Spenser's latest lyric, written after his hand had for years been occupied on the large decorative canvas of the allegorical epic. It was written for a personal occasion :

> Take these lines, look lovingly and nearly,
> Lines I write the first time and the last time.
> He who works in fresco steals a hair-brush,
> Makes a strange art of an art familiar,
> Fills his lady's missal-marge with flowerets.

From it he returned to his main work, to the *Faerie Queene;* and to his main work we may now turn. Edward Phillips, nearly a century afterwards, speaks of it as " being for great invention and poetic height judged little inferior, if not equal, to the

chief of the ancient Greeks and Latins, or the modern Italians." What Phillips said or thought would itself be of little importance; but there is reason to believe that the judgment he speaks of is that of Milton.

II

In reading the *Faerie Queene*, as in reading all poetry, we cannot appreciate it duly without the study and the effort requisite to let us place ourselves more or less at the poet's point of view, to let us understand, or not wholly misunderstand, what he meant by poetry and what poetry meant to him. But we cannot appreciate it, in its essential quality as poetry, at all, unless we approach it with an unclouded mind, and disengage ourselves from commentaries and theories. The child's vision must, if it were possible, be combined with the scholar's understanding. This is a hard saying, but the thing itself is hard. The course lies straight and narrow between the rock and the whirlpool. Appreciation only comes of study; study too often dims and sophisticates appreciation. The attempt to be made here must be not to lose ourselves either in a mist of theories, or in a quicksand of facts; but to disengage, as far as may be, the poetical quality of the poem in form and substance; to estimate, as far as may be, the degree to which it actually condenses, from the flying vapour of language and life, an

image of perfection. For while the value of a poem is manifold, its value as poetry is just this.

Spenser has left us in no doubt as to what he meant by poetry and what he meant to do in his great poem. It is a subject on which he is never tired of discoursing. He recurs to it over and over again, both in his elaborate prefaces and introductions, and more incidentally in many passages of the *Faerie Queene* itself. The loose construction and leisurely movement of the poem give him full opportunity for personal digressions and passages of homiletic or imaginative exposition. In these expositions of his doctrine and practice there is the same melodious fluency which is the primary quality of his poetry itself; the same fecundity of illustration and ornament, the same lofty if somewhat vague and inconsequent idealism. The image of perfection which he set himself to embody was, in his own words, that of a noble person fashioned in virtuous and gentle discipline. It was life at its utmost height and richness. Before it lay the whole pageant of the world, the kingdom and the power and the glory of it. "In that Faery Queen," he says, in words which for him are unusually precise, "I mean glory." This word of glory is the keynote of the whole Renaissance; the glory of discovery, of conquest, of possession, of mastery. The achievement of this glory was "virtue"; the virtue of the statesman, the ruler, and the soldier, enlarged by liberal

studies and bathed in the splendours of romance. The twelve moral virtues, to the glorification of which the twelve books of the *Faerie Queene* were to be devoted, were all summed up in the crowning virtue of magnificence; and this "magnificence" is almost the same thing as "courtesy," courtiership, the conduct of life by the masters of the world, lords over the five senses and the visible earth. Such glory was transitory, like this world itself; but it was the nearest approach which this world gave to immortality.

The vehicle chosen by Spenser to set forth his vision of the world's glory was that of the chivalrous romance. The *Faerie Queene* is not an epic; both in its author's genius and in its own purpose it is alien from the epic tension and concentration. He speaks of following Homer and Virgil; but this is because the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* were read by him, and affected him, as romances. The romantic epic, as it had been lately attempted by Tasso, was a hybrid product, destined to be sterile. Spenser does not seem himself to notice any distinction of kind between Tasso and Ariosto. But his own poem is a still more complex hybridisation; it is the spirit of Tasso working on the method of Ariosto. The *Faerie Queene* has not, and was not meant to have, the epic unity, the epic structural and organic composition. It has no story, or if it has, the story has neither beginning nor end, and does not really

matter. It has no dramatic life, no tragical interplay of human will and passion. It has no hero, for its hero is an abstraction, or rather a shifting series of abstractions. It is a romance wrapped in the imperial robes of the epic, but lacking her sceptre and crown. It is a pageant and allegory of life, while the epic is the imaginative embodiment of life itself.

All poetry is an allegory, in the sense that it embodies, in concrete symbols, a meaning larger and nobler than that which its literal words convey. In this sense, the amount of allegory in a poem depends not so much on the poet as on the reader. Homer and Virgil were allegorised, both in ancient and in modern times, to such an extent that their true outlines were lost, their true quality as poetry obscured, though it was still instinctively felt. But in Spenser the allegory is throughout conscious and purposed; it is of the structure and essence of the poem. In his prefatory letter prefixed to the *Faerie Queene*, he describes it in set terms as a continued allegory; and this is the case. But his specific use of allegory, and with it the specific quality of the poem, was determined by the fact that, with immense imagination and endless fertility of invention and language, he had neither the narrative nor the dramatic gift. He has little power—one might say he has little wish—of telling a story or realising a situation. The *Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory

more expressly and closely than the *Faerie Queene*. But Bunyan's narrative gift is so certain, his dramatic instinct is so fine, that the allegorical abstractions with which he purports to be dealing take flesh and blood on them almost without his will, and become real human beings. There are no real human beings in the *Faerie Queene*.

The amount of allegory in it of course varies very much, as does its quality and complexity. In its large lines the poem is an allegorising of abstractions, of virtues or vices, of physical or mental functions, of philosophical or theological ideas, even of political situations. Each book allegorises one of the virtues. Many of the episodes are elaborate and detailed allegories on their own account: such as the long and tedious description of the human body as the Castle of Alma in the ninth canto of the second book, or the siege of that same castle at the wards of the five senses in the eleventh canto. Others follow the mediæval manner more closely. An impersonation like Lady Praise-Desire in the House of Temperance, with the poplar-branch in her hand, or the description of the entrance to the temple of Venus, with its porters Doubt and Delay, and its gate of Good Desert guarded by the giant Danger, might come straight from the *Romaunt of the Rose*, and belongs to a tradition which never had been very happy, and from which Chaucer himself had long ago decisively broken away. This is hardly allegory

at all; still less so are those parts of the poem which deal with contemporary history after the fashion of the *roman à clef*. It is in these that the poetry is at its lowest temperature; they are not so much poetry as versified politics. Much of the fifth book is of this kind. The trial of Duessa before Mercilla is mere pamphleteering. All that is needed to convert it into a political tract is to replace the names; to speak plainly of Mary and Elizabeth instead of calling them Duessa and Mercilla, and to substitute for the names of Care and Zeal those of Cecil and Walsingham. In the three cantos which follow, even this slight veil is dropped, because it was not really worth while keeping it up. Belgium, Spain, Henry of Bourbon, are introduced openly under their own names. The poetic imagination ebbs away, leaving only a sort of bleached rhetorical framework. Even the language becomes little removed from that of prose. Except for a few inversions of order brought about by the necessities of rhyme, there is stanza after stanza that has nothing, either in imagination or in style, to distinguish it from the florid heavy prose of that period. It is Spenser become mechanical, the Spenserian manner become a trick. How nobly he recovered himself later, those will not need to be reminded who have followed the poem to the end—or not to the end, for there is none, but to the point where it was broken off by the poet's death.

There is a natural tendency in the human mind to confuse imagination with imagery. The difference between them is that between creation on the one hand and invention on the other, and it is vital. Spenser thought (so far as he did think) in images. His inventiveness, his faculty for pouring forth an endless stream of imagery, is unsurpassed, just as is his faculty for conveying this imagery in unfailingly fluent and melodious language. He is a complete master of decorative art, so far as this very fertility and fluency do not, as we may think, lead him to make his decoration too intricate, to overload his ornament. But while all art is decoration, it is not in its merely decorative quality that art can be great art, can fully realise its function. To do this, it must rise from invention to creation. Its imagery must be transmuted by imagination; it must not only adorn, but interpret and, in a sense, make life.

If Spenser is not, in the full sense of the term, one of the first order of poets, it is because, while he does possess this higher gift of creative and interpretative imagination, he possesses it intermittently, capriciously, and imperfectly. The *Faerie Queene* does not move. It lives, but hardly with full life. It is not that his poetry does not represent the actual world. No poetry does. It is that it does not create a world more real than the actual world. It drifts, at the suggestion of complex influences, through a sea of dreams. It fluctuates between

moral allegory and unmoralised romance, now swerving into passages of crude realism, and again soaring to ideal heights of imagination. But the poet's genius is so great, his resources are so vast, and his handling of them so easy and adroit, that he absorbs the reader into his own dream. His fabric rises into the air like an exhalation; as the gleaming pageant floats and passes before us, we are hardly conscious, any more than we are conscious in actual dreaming, of its inconsequence and unsubstantiality. Scenes melt into one another; nothing is surprising. It is all iridescent, magnified, wrapped and floating in a luminous mist.

In the last canto of the last completed book of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser himself makes a claim for the poem which is of a different nature. The image of the epic, with its high imaginative tension and concentrated creative energy, hung before him as a poetic ideal; but it became in his hands, like his ideal figures and scenes, something filmy, elusive, and unsubstantial. In this passage he lays claim to unity and purpose in his long train of romantic imagery; and does so, very characteristically, by means of a new piece of romantic imagery of just the same texture as the rest.

Like as a ship, that through the ocean wide
Directs her course unto one certain coast,
Is met of many a counter wind and tide
With which her winged speed is let and crost,
And she herself in stormy surges tost,

Yet, making many a board and many a bay,
Still winneth way, ne hath her compass lost;
Right so it fares with me in this long way
Whose course is often stayed, yet never is astray.

Right so it does nothing of the sort. Even had he lived to catch up all the interlaced or floating threads of the poem, and to bring them out to a conclusion, it would not have made any material difference. We are not in the least interested in the progress of the action in the *Faerie Queene;* or rather, there is no progress of the action for us to be interested in. It is difficult to remember, as we read it, whom we are reading about, or how they came there. They drop out and reappear capriciously; we are pleased to meet them, we half think we have seen them before, and it does not matter when they are gone. They move among one another, weaving intricate and lovely patterns, and as the pattern still flows out of the loom, "his web, reeled off, curls and goes out like steam." Into these chambers of imagery the breath of fresh outer air hardly enters; it would blow the whole fabric away.

This enchanted atmosphere, this luminous mist of romantic feeling and glittering imagery, pervades the whole poem. But it varies from point to point, like some actual vapour that collects or clears, lifts or drops, under light variable airs.

Far off they saw the silver-misty morn,
Rolling her smoke about the royal mount,

That rose between the forest and the field.
At times the summit of the high city flashed:
At times the spires and turrets half-way down
Pricked thro' the mist; at times the great gate shone
Only, that opened on the field below;
Anon, the whole fair city had disappeared.

Sometimes it condenses into a cloud through which we move heavily, and the figures loom indistinct and spectral. Sometimes a rift of sky blows open, and a corner of the landscape is seen in clear daylight. In these little clear islets we may find what is perhaps Spenser at his best, though not at his most characteristic: in those rare and pleasant simpler touches where the poetry becomes lucid and close to life, or in those passages, not rare, where it rises to some great nobleness of expression, some great elevation of sentiment. Spenser's Chaucerianism was no mere muddle of antiquarian pedantry; it was a real love and admiration, a poetical sympathy that makes him write now and then, for a few lines together, with the freshness and charm of Chaucer. If I may venture to put it so, he sometimes drops into poetry. When he has almost wearied us with Britomartis, he suddenly writes of her thus:

One day, whenas she long had sought for ease
In every place, and every place thought best,
Yet found no place that could her liking please,
She to a window came that opened west,
Towards which coast her love his way addrest:
There, looking forth, she in her heart did find
Many vain fancies working her unrest,

And sent her winged thoughts more swift than wind
To bear unto her love the message of her mind.

It is like cool water. The same clear simplicity comes with the same lovely effect in many single lines. Calepine, when he is recovered of his wounds, goes out, as Palamon or Arcite might go, "to take the air and hear the thrushes' song." "What May-game hath misfortune made of you?" the Amazon asks Artegall when she finds him in prison, touched by surprise to forget all her rhetoric. In the beautiful pastoral incident which fills several cantos of the sixth book, Spenser reverts not only to the free romantic manner of the *Arcadia*, but to a simpler, fresher style and language than that to which he had wrought himself when he planned to make his poem not only a romance but an epic and an allegory of life.

One day, as they all three together went
To the green wood to gather strawberries—

how unlike this is to the highly-charged, slowly-wheeling, rich verse that we think of as Spenserian!

It is old and plain:
The spinsters and the knitters in the sun
Do use to chant it: it is silly sooth
And dallies with the innocence of love
Like the old age.

Of course he cannot keep it up; the traditions of high romance must be observed; and the first thing that happens in the wood is that a tiger comes out

of it, "with fell claws full of fierce gormandise, and greedy mouth wide-gaping like hell-gate." The hero, who has "no weapon but his shepherd's hook to serve the vengeance of his wrathful will," at once fells the tiger to the earth with it, and before the formidable beast can recover, hews off its head—whether with the shepherd's hook or not, the chivalrous spirit of romance does not pause to inquire.

And just as Spenser's genuine love and admiration of Chaucer combine with the instinctive resurgence in him, as in all the poetry of his age, of the native lyrical impulse, to make him write now and then with Chaucerian freshness and simplicity, so his genuine love and admiration of the classics make the *Faerie Queene* in many passages rise to an almost classic height. In the flowing loosely-woven texture of the poem there are many lines and stanzas, and even whole passages, which stand out from the rest in virtue of a concentration, a precision, a dignity which are the qualities of the classics. It would be tedious to develop this point by large illustration; and in any case the search and the selection must be made by each reader for himself; and the search is delightful, even apart from the added delight of recognition or discovery. It would be easy to collect and dwell upon many single lines that have this quality of exalted beauty, lines like the famous

Glistering in arms and battailous array;
or
Wasting the strength of her immortal age;
or
Spreading pavilions for the birds to bower.

It is curious to notice how all these lines, though they were not chosen in order to bring out the point, but simply for their own sake, are participial; they convey an image incidentally in the course of the main movement of the passages in which they are set. This is true of the poem generally. It is like the English architecture of the same period, still Gothic in main substance and structure, but enriched by classic detail. Its classicism is decorative, not constructional. This is the case likewise with the longer passages or whole stanzas which reach, or suggest, the classic manner.

Both roof and floor and walls were all of gold,
But overgrown with dust and old decay,
And hid in darkness, that none could behold
The hue thereof; for view of cheerful day
Did never in that house itself display,
But a faint shadow of uncertain light:
Such as a lamp whose life does fade away,
Or as the moon, clothed with cloudy night,
Does shew to him that walks in fear and sad affright.

That is the classical manner; not that of the great classics, it is true, not like the ἀλλ' ἐπὶ νὺξ ὁλοὴ of Homer or the *ibant obscuri* of Virgil; it is a diluted secondary classicism more like that of Apollonius or Statius. But the stanza is only one out of three

in which the House of Riches is described; the other two, which precede and follow it, are in the loaded intricate manner which is normal to Spenser, and which is in direct antithesis to the classical. Nor would it be possible, even if the poet had wished to do so, to adapt the classical manner to the imaginative substance of the poem (if substance it might be called that substance had none), which is that of a vast pageant moving through a dream.

This pageant-like or dream-like quality makes the *Faerie Queene* approximate to a masque or interlaced series of masques rather than to an epic. There is no difference of plane between the figures and the ornament; for the figures are the ornament. "You shamefast are, but shamefastness itself is she," says Alma to Guyon; she might equally well have put it the other way. The episodes nearly always break off in the middle, or rather, do not so much break off as melt away. It is singular how many of the cantos end on this note of vanishing:

Eftsoons he fled away and might nowhere be seen—

or

The while false Archimage and Atin fled apace—

or

And from Prince Arthur fled with wings of idle fear—

or most strikingly, and with most studied and splendid effect, in the wonderful line which closes the Mutability cantos,

And Nature's self did vanish, whither no man wist.

It is a piece of deliberate art with Spenser that he hardly ever finishes a story. He does finish the story of Cambell and Canace in the fourth book, and makes a sad bungle of it. The variations in the texture of the poem are given, the stages in its movement are marked, chiefly by points at which the continuous pageantry, like a stream spreading into pools, expands, rather than concentrates, into set pageants of unusual elaboration and magnificence. The Masque of Cupid, at the end of the third book, is the best known of these, as it is perhaps the greatest. Almost as well known is the pageant of the Months in the seventh book. Of the same type, though with a difference of subject and treatment, is the chronicle of the kings of Britain, a sort of masque of British history, towards the end of the second book, and the marriage procession of the rivers towards the end of the fourth. To the ninth, tenth, and eleventh cantos of the sixth book, which stand quite by themselves, some further reference will be made.

So much it is indispensable to keep in view with regard to the quality and substance of the *Faerie Queene* as poetry. We may now go on to consider with a fuller appreciation the metrical vehicle which Spenser chose for it, the famous Spenserian stanza. It is one of the four great English metrical forms for poetry written on a large scale; and it is rightly and indissolubly connected with the name of Spenser; for he

both introduced it and perfected it. No one of the other three metres is called after the name of a single poet. Chaucer invented (or to all intents and purposes invented) two of them, the rhyme-royal and the heroic couplet. The former of the two he also carried to perfection. But for various reasons, it has not been so continuously and habitually used by later poets as the other three; and to call it the Chaucerian verse would do injustice to Chaucer's other and greater invention: for though Chaucer's crowning masterpiece is in the former metre, the larger part of his mature work, and that by which he is most universally known, is in the latter. The heroic couplet itself was used by Chaucer with consummate skill, and established by him as a standard form of English verse. But it afterwards underwent great changes and developments. It cannot be associated exclusively with any poet's name, but it is perhaps associated most closely in common usage with a later age and with the shape it took in the hands of Dryden and Pope. The last of the four dominant forms of English verse, the unrhymed decasyllable, has also passed through many phases and received new qualities from more than one great poet. But the Spenserian verse was not only created and established by Spenser, but left by him in its final form. It has never gone out of use. It was written freely through both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. In the great

renascence of English poetry a hundred years ago it occupied a leading position. Shelley, Byron, Scott, Keats, all used it largely. None of them gave it any new quality: and it still remains exactly what Spenser left it.

Technically the Spenserian stanza consists of the interlaced double quatrain (what metrical treatises call the eight-line ballad-stave) which was introduced into England by Chaucer, with the addition of a twelve-syllabled ninth line rhyming with the eighth. But this addition completely changes its character; it gives it a new rhythm and a new balance, and one totally unlike that of any form of verse previously used. Spenser's stanza is, in the full sense of the words, a fresh creation. Careful scrutiny may indeed pick out, here and there in the earlier part of the *Faerie Queene*, a stanza in which the ninth line comes as a sort of afterthought, and the other eight preserve something of the ballad-stave cadence; but these are few, and only recognisable when one looks for them. Normally and habitually the ninth line is felt coming through the whole stanza, which implies it and converges upon it.

Spenser was no doubt led to the invention of his stanza by the desire to find an English form of verse which should be the equivalent, and a little more than the equivalent, of the Italian rhymed octave. From Boccaccio to Tasso, the *ottava rima* had reigned undisputed in Italy as the vehicle for the

heroic romance and for the regular epic. It was one admirably suited to the genius and structure of the Italian language. But it did not accommodate itself well to English, nor to French, in which the English metricists sought their models. Chaucer instinctively passed by the metre of Boccaccio; Spenser, as instinctively, passed by the metre of Ariosto and Tasso. Chaucer syncopated the octave stanza into the rhyme-royal, Spenser expanded it into the Spenserian. In both cases the effect was to produce a vehicle that was more romantic and complex; that fell short possibly of the serenity and balance of the Italian octave, but gained in richness and harmony. The long swaying rhythms of the new stanza were exactly suited to a style like Spenser's, loaded with ornament and almost stationary in movement. It allowed him full amplitude; it held, it even invited and reinforced, the quality of boundlessness in his genius, the immense superflux of language and fancy. It is worth noting that the rhyme-royal where Spenser uses it, in the four *Hymns*, gives something of the effect of a curtailed Spenserian; it has not the authentic cadence. But these poems were written after he had invented and begun to use his proper medium.

Like most metrical forms, the Spenserian stanza has its excellences and its defects. For poetry which consists of a stream of pageants it is exactly suited. It is no less apt as a vehicle of imaginative

reflection, for thought translating itself in images. It lends itself to rich effects produced by accumulated touches. When, as it often does, it swells up to the very end; or when, to produce a different effect, it slowly ebbs off; or when, as is equally characteristic with Spenser, it slides forward with equable rhythms till near the end, and then, in the eighth and ninth lines, rises into a great crescendo and storm of sound, it is little short of miraculous. To embark on quotations is a formidable matter, but just one instance of each kind of effect may be given. An instance of the first, almost too well known, but still endlessly delightful to repeat, is from the description of the Garden of Acrasia (II. xii. 71):

> The joyous birds, shrouded in cheerful shade,
> Their notes unto the voice attempered sweet:
> The angelical soft trembling voices made
> To the instruments divine respondence meet:
> The silver-sounding instruments did meet
> With the base murmur of the water's fall:
> The water's fall, with difference discreet,
> Now soft, now loud, unto the wind did call:
> The gentle warbling wind low answered to all.

As an instance of the second may be taken a stanza of equal beauty and celebrity, the famous invocation to Chaucer (IV. ii. 34), with its singular likeness, in phrasing and rhythm as well as in substance, to those exquisite verses of William Morris which come as the *envoi* to the *Earthly Paradise:*

Then pardon, O most sacred happy spirit,
That I thy labours lost may thus revive
And steal from thee the meed of thy due merit
That none durst ever whilst thou wast alive :
And being dead, in vain yet many strive :
Ne dare I like ; but thro' infusion sweet
Of thine own spirit which doth in me survive
I follow here the footing of thy feet
That with thy meaning so I may the rather meet.

For an instance, finally, of the third kind, we may go to one of the innumerable combats between a knight and two Paynims—mostly in common form and a little tedious, but in this case lifted to a new splendour by the blaze and crash of the final line (II. viii. 37):

Horribly then he gan to rage and rail
Cursing his gods and himself damning deep.
But when his brother saw the red blood rail
Adown so fast, and all his armour steep,
For very fellness loud he gan to weep,
And said : Caitiff, curse on thy cruel hand
That twice hath sped ; yet shall it not thee keep
From the third brunt of this my fatal brand :
Lo ! where the dreadful Death behind thy back doth stand.

Such are some, and only some, of the effects of which the stanza is capable. On the other hand, it often drags and becomes languid. The last line sometimes seems pure surplusage ; sometimes one may say the same of more than the last line. The thought, and even the imagery, become exhausted before the end of the stanza is reached. Spenser's

fluency is unfailing; but there are many places where the fluency becomes mere verbosity, many where the stanza seems stuffed out with anything that comes first to hand. It is this that lies at the root of Spenser's strange lapses into bald prose. He recovers from them swiftly, but there they are: in single lines like

> Though otherwise it did him little harm;

or

> Then very doubtful was the war's event;

or

> But the rude porter, that no manners had;

and even more markedly in some longer passages that are mere untransmuted lumps from the debased prose romances of the period, such as,

> But turn we now back to that lady free
> Whom late we left riding upon an ass;

or the amazing account of her adventures given by Priscilla to Calidore in the second canto of Book VI. It fills eight stanzas, and is all as bad as can be; I will only give one gem out of the heap:

> Then, as it were to avenge his wrath on me,
> When forward we should fare he flat refused
> To take me up (as this young man did see)
> But forced to trot on foot, and foul misused,
> Punching me with the butt-end of his spear.

Doll Tearsheet might talk so: did talk so in fact, the very next year, in the squalid but powerful scene where she makes her last appearance on Shakespeare's stage.

Finally, as a vehicle for narrative poetry, the Spenserian verse is inherently faulty, because it lacks speed. Its movement is not progressive; it is like that of spreading and interlacing circles. Spenser was no doubt naturally without that rare quality, the narrative gift; but he deliberately (and very likely rightly) chose a metrical form for the *Faerie Queene* which emphasised this deficiency. The same thing is true of the stanza as used by other poets. Compare Keats's two masterpieces; how heavy, how struggling, is the narrative movement in the *Eve of St. Agnes* when set beside the swift, clear brightness of *Lamia!* or compare the endless circumvolutions of Shelley in the *Revolt of Islam* with the sense of life and movement in the *Witch of Atlas*. Even Byron, the swiftest of English poets, becomes slow and almost languid in *Childe Harold*. In his *Don Juan*, where rapidity was essential, he abandoned the Spenserian verse, and boldly launched into the Italian rhymed octave, though he did not succeed in naturalising it, and *Don Juan* remains a long metrical *tour de force*. And if we take Byron where he is swiftest and most himself —the Byron of the *Giaour*—the difference is almost incredible.

The foremost Tartar's in the gap
Conspicuous by his yellow cap—

it is safe to say that Spenser, or any one writing in the Spenserian manner, would have spent a whole stanza in getting over the ground that this fierce swift couplet covers in a single stride. Byron himself could hardly have done otherwise; for so essentially is the Spenserian stanza Spenser's creation, that it cannot be written at all except in a manner nearly akin to his.

This perilous fluency, this unbounded melodiousness, is at once Spenser's strength and his weakness as an artist. It displeased the classicists of his own time. His friend Harvey honestly disliked the *Faerie Queene*, and said so roundly to Spenser himself. "Hobgoblin running away with the garland from Apollo" he calls it, in a phrase which one can hardly fancy Spenser would either forgive or forget. He sets the whole thing down, rather petulantly, to some foolish ambition in Spenser to outdo Ariosto on his own lines. Harvey's opinions on poetry were not those of a poet, and are perhaps not of special value. But in this instance he expresses the feeling not merely of classicist pedantry, but of classical judgment. Every one knows that we have only half of the *Faerie Queene* as planned; that it was to have extended to twelve books, and something like sixty thousand or seventy thousand lines. What is not so widely known, or

at least so clearly remembered, is that these twelve books were only the first part of a still more gigantic scheme. If that scheme had been carried out, we should have had a poem, or a mass of poetry, of something more like one hundred and fifty thousand lines. This would substantially exceed even the sixty thousand couplets into which the *Shah Nameh*, through successive accretions, became swollen in the hands of Firdausi and his pupils or continuators. It would have been a poem which, in Lord Cockburn's celebrated phrase, would have exhausted Time and encroached on Eternity.

But towards the end of the sixth book of the *Faerie Queene* we become conscious of a great and significant change of tone. It occurs subtly and silently, like dawn overspreading the sky. But it means that the spirit of the poet, and of his art, has changed. The Renaissance is tiring of itself; poetry is returning to life: and with the same movement life is returning to poetry.

The note of change comes with the reversion to pastoral at the opening of the ninth canto.

> Now turn again my team, thou jolly swain,
> Back to the furrow which I lately left.

The note here is very different from that of the elaborate high-flown introductions to which we have been accustomed hitherto. The immediate reference is merely to his customary process of taking up the

dropped thread of his romance. But it suggests more: it suggests a return to the furrow in another sense, a return to the pleasant villages and farms, to the opener air, from the enchanted atmosphere, heavy and luminous, of courtly romance.

> A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes
> A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.

The *Faerie Queene* becomes a *Winter's Tale* in the beautiful episode which follows. The

> shepherd grooms
> Playing on pipes and carolling apace,
> The whiles their beasts there in the budded brooms
> Beside them fed, and nipt the tender blooms,

are those of the *Shepherds Calendar* back again, but softened, etherealised, lit by romance. Pastorella, the one figure in the whole of the *Faerie Queene* who is all but human, reminds one of Shakespeare's Perdita. Like Perdita she needs must turn in the story into a king's daughter lost and hidden among shepherds; such was the tradition of romance, that might not lightly be broken. But, king's daughter or not, she brings with her the breath and beauty of common life. The vanity of ambition is a theme on which throughout the poem Spenser has been perpetually discoursing; but here, for the first time, it brings with it the vanity of courtliness, the evanescence of the Renaissance ideal. Melibœus the shepherd, Pastorella's reputed father, has been a

courtier himself in his youth, has sold himself for hire and spent his youth in vain; now, in one of Spenser's most exquisite stanzas, he tells how he has gone back to sweet peace, and "this lovely quiet life which I inherit here." His sermon on content and simplicity is Spenser speaking in his own voice, sincerely, without either self-consciousness or strain. Pastorella-Perdita "had ever learned to love the lowly things." With the reversion towards simplicity is mingled a strain of grave religion. It is not only that "happy peace" and "the perfect pleasures" grow in common life, and all the rest is but a "painted shadow of false bliss": it is that the whole gorgeous fabric of romantic chivalry is a lure, "set to entrap unwary fools in their eternal bales." And so, when the shepherds are "met to make their sports and merry glee, as they are wont in fair sunshiny weather," we are reminded not only of the *Winter's Tale* but of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. "If a man was to come here in the summer time, and if he also delighted himself in the sight of his eyes, he might see that that would be delightful to him. Some have wished that the next way to their Father's house were here, that they might be troubled no more with either hills or mountains to go over; but the way is the way, and there's an end."

This new land is as yet but dimly seen: it is coloured and half concealed by the iridescent vapour.

While still among the shepherds, Calidore strays back into fairyland, to the Acidalian hill where he sees the Graces dancing, not to the lyre of Apollo, but to the pipe of Colin Clout. But when he moves towards them, they all vanish out of his sight, "and are clean gone, which way he never knew," and Colin Clout is left piping on the hillside alone. The candles of the mediæval world are burned out; but the eyes of those who issue from the brilliantly lit palace are still dazzled and cannot see things clearly. In the uncertain light, that pleasant simple countryside seems one in which tigers attack strawberry-gatherers, and are decapitated with sheephooks. "Exit pursued by a bear," is the famous stage-direction at the end of the first part of the *Winter's Tale:* sixteen years pass, and then "enter Autolycus, singing."

So Spenser pulls himself back, at the opening doorway into daylight and the new world. Calidore's life among the shepherds was making him unmindful of his vow and of the queen's commands. He leaves Pastorella-Perdita and goes on the quest of the Blatant Beast. We are back in the full current of allegorical romance. But the spell, once snapped, cannot be quite rewoven; the poem flutters for a little on a broken wing, and stops.

It stops, or the poet's death stopped it. The story of the last three months of his life is one of confused horror. Fire and sword of an Irish rising; his home sacked and burned, and his newborn child

perishing in the flames; a wretched winter-flight to England; a stony welcome there, a month or two of misery and illness, and death "for lack of bread" they said, if it be not incredible: such was the tragic end. Twelve years later was published the magnificent fragment, "two Cantos of Mutability, which, both for form and matter, appear to be the parcel of some following book of the Faerie Queene, under the legend of Constancy." They may be conjectured to have been written in the last year of his life, and perhaps with some premonition of its approaching end. They renew the earlier splendours of the poem, but with a deeper and graver music. In single lines and phrases there is an organ-tone that can scarcely be matched elsewhere in Spenser; and the Titaness, proud and fair,

> Being of stature tall as any there
> Of all the Gods, and beautiful of face
> As any of the Goddesses in place,

stands out among the swaying tapestry-figures of Spenser's pageantries like some colossal sculpture of Michelangelo's. He lapses into his old decorative manner in the episode of Arlo-hill; in the simile of the cat in the dairy (the forty-seventh stanza of the first of the two cantos) it almost looks as if he were parodying himself. But from that he rises again to the great speech of Mutability; to the summoning and appearing before the throne of Nature of the

procession of the Seasons and the Months, Day and Night, the Hours, Life and Death; and to the final doom pronounced by Nature, which sums up, in a few majestic words, the whole system and government of the Universe. Then Nature herself vanishes: the lights go out; silence falls; and through the silence comes one last echo and cadence of sound, a prayer to be granted the Eternal Peace.

Thus Spenser, in the old Northern phrase, "changed his life," and was laid beside Chaucer in the Abbey Church at Westminster. His life, his vision of poetry as a pageant of life, his conception of poetry as a function of life, were splendid and transitory. They ceased; while life, and with it poetry, moved on.

MILTON

I

THE death of Spenser, in the penultimate year of the sixteenth century, really marks the end of the Elizabethan age, the age of the Tudor monarchy and the full impact on English poetry of the Italian Renaissance. That Renaissance had itself originated in the rediscovery of ancient Greece and Rome; its communication to England was partly direct, partly and more largely through the intervening medium of France. The progress of English poetry had now passed through two of the capital stages in its course. To the age of Chaucer, the final flowering of mediæval England under the foreign impulse of the first Renaissance, had succeeded the age of Spenser and of the second Renaissance. English poetry had enlarged its scope and modernised its methods: but it was still national and insular; it still awaited a further transformation through full contact with the classics, full interfusion with the central current of European poetry.

Much had to be done before this happened; and the poetical movement in England after Spenser is intricate and confused. To the age of Spenser immediately succeeds the age of Shakespeare. The

volume and energy of that single genius gave a new meaning, one might almost say, to poetry; and if Milton was, by direct and immediate inheritance, the successor of Spenser, if, as was the case, he was himself but little affected by Shakespeare's influence, it is nevertheless true that all English poetry after Shakespeare moves in a deepened and enlarged world.

The greater part of the seventeenth century is occupied by the epoch of the transition. Between Shakespeare's death and the completion of the *Paradise Lost* there are just fifty years. It was a half-century of profuse and multiform poetical production. It was the period of the great Jacobean dramatists, Fletcher and Massinger, Ford and Webster; of Donne and Vaughan and Herbert and Crashaw; of the Caroline lyrists, Wither, Herrick, Lovelace; of Fanshawe, the last of the Elizabethans, and Waller, the first of the moderns. Its most popular and most widely read poet was Cowley: its later years saw the growing fame and influence of Dryden. Before its conclusion, Addison was born. In such a list of names there is no easily traceable thread of connexion, no regular line of development and advance. The confusion of English politics in the seventeenth century seems reflected in the confusion of English poetry. We cannot bring its progress under any single formula. It is difficult to discriminate between the poetry which represents the

continuance of an earlier impulse and that which is a new beginning, a separate movement. We seem to wander in a dimly lighted undergrowth, in a close dungeon of innumerous boughs. When we emerge into daylight, it is to find ourselves in another world. Darkness had slowly fallen on the Elizabethan afterglow; from out of a sky spangled with a confused multitude of stars which succeeded it, there comes breaking and flooding in, slowly and inevitably, the *Aufklärung*, the blanched clearness of a new and modern day.

From the movement of the age in which he is the central and supreme figure in English poetry, Milton stands from first to last apart, in a magnificent isolation. Before we attempt to consider his poetry and appreciate his achievement, it will not be irrelevant to consider, and to indicate in a brief summary or suggestion, what it was that his contemporaries meant to do, or did by instinct without meaning it; for only thus shall we be in a position to estimate his relation to them, and to judge how his work in poetry was akin to or alien from theirs.

The movement of the seventeenth century in English poetry was both an expansion and a contraction. It is on the latter side that it chiefly strikes the modern imagination and the modern critical sense. By comparison with the opulence of Elizabethan poetry, the poetry of Dryden and the Augustans seems narrow and thin. But it had

acquired a quality which the other had not, and for the sake of which prodigious sacrifices had been made; it had ceased to be insular and become European. It had gone to school and civilised itself. It had submitted itself to laws of taste and a standard of manners. To the new generation, the poetry of the Elizabethan and Jacobean age, with its exuberance, its superabundance, its unrestraint, had become an unweeded garden. Men were tired of it; their minds were set in a different direction. Elizabethan poetry had abolished the mediæval tradition, and reared upon its ruins a fabric of wonderful beauty and magnificence; now its own turn had come to be replaced, to succumb to new ideas, to give way before a new manner. Its beauties had for the time being ceased to attract; its defects, the defects of slovenliness and quaintness, were what criticism fastened upon, and what not only criticism but living poetical instinct set itself to overcome. To get rid of these the spirit of the new age was ready to sacrifice anything. That new movement was the legacy of the dead Renaissance. It had the defects of its virtues. A classical ideal had been established: but in the effort to attain it, poetry side-slipped into classicism.

In the labyrinth of seventeenth-century poetry, the criticism of the eighteenth fastened, instinctively and rightly, on Waller, as the clue guiding past divergent paths and blind alleys to the actual passage out of

which poetry finally emerged. Waller was, but for this, a poet of but small account either for the quantity or the quality of his writing. It would be difficult, but for this, to understand how he got his great and long-lasting reputation. He was smooth, Pope tells us, and we are apt to ask what there is so very remarkable in being smooth. But this smoothness, this clean polish, was just then the quality towards the attainment of which the effort of literature in England was converging and concentrating. In the critical essay at the end of the Life, Johnson weighs Waller piece by piece and finds him light currency. "But it cannot be denied," he ends, "that he added something to our elegance of diction, and something to our propriety of thought." The conclusion is fine and just. Elegance and propriety are secondary, not essential, qualities in poetry. But they are included, together with other qualities far nobler and larger, in the content of poetry which is classic, as they are qualities which assume an exaggerated importance in the poetry which founds itself upon the classics, but is itself only classicist. To the inaugurators of a new reaction a century later it seemed that nearly all had been lost which was worth saving. But in looking at what was lost they disregarded, or too lightly took for granted, what had been won; for all such losses are but transformations of energy. What had been won was this; that English literature had been brought

into the main stream of European art and thought, had equipped itself with modern arms to meet the conditions of the actual world, and was prepared to take its place in the great intellectual movement of the eighteenth century. Poetry had shifted its axis. The movement was hardly one either of advance or of regression; it was rather what is called in the mechanical sciences a movement of translation.

Such was the large and strenuous task partly set before itself of set purpose, partly followed by a half-unconscious instinct, by the poetry of the latter half of the seventeenth century. It is worth noting that in what I have called a movement of translation, translation in the other sense of that word took a very important part. It was the age of translations, in a somewhat different sense and with a somewhat different purpose from the ages which preceded and followed it, though both of these were equally abundant in the number of translations they produced. At an earlier period, the classic poets, whether those of ancient Greece or Rome or those of a more modern foreign civilisation in Italy or France, had been translated primarily for the sake of their contents, in order to give access to an otherwise unknown world that held in it the secrets of knowledge. At a later period they came to be translated for the sake of translating, in the exercise of the

secondary but not despicable art of the copyist. In the seventeenth century, from Fairfax's Tasso just at its beginning to Dryden's Virgil just at its end, we can see the one object fading out and the other growing; and between them, connecting the one with the other, a third object predominant. That object was to make the English language into a completed vehicle of poetical expression; to make England into an organic member of the Republic of Letters, and to fuse the life and progress of English poetry with those of the poetry of the civilised world. A similar object, or at least a similar instinct, was at the basis of another noticeable feature in the latter half of the century. This was the fashion of laborious, and as it seems now little more than pedantic, translations of English poetical masterpieces into Latin: that of Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida* by Kynaston, that of Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess* by Fanshawe, that made of the *Paradise Lost* itself, but a few years after its publication, by Henry Bold. This was not only pedantry; still less was it only undertaken on such grounds as those on which the practice of Latin verse-making is continued and defended to-day. It was another movement of the same general impulse; it meant the testing of these English poems by a certain classical standard, and the vindication for them of a certain classical or universal quality. It was a recognition, in a queer

distorted fashion doubtless, of the unity and solidarity of poetry. The European nations still held by a Latin standard. We find Milton in his youth still weighing, as Dante had done more than three centuries, as Ariosto had done more than a century earlier, the question of writing his great poem in Latin. After Milton the question had no longer to be considered. Gray's fragment *De Principiis Cogitandi*, Landor's first Latin draft of *Gebir*, are isolated anachronisms. The beginnings of the modern world coincide with the disuse of Latin as a universal language. In politics and diplomacy it slowly gave way to French. In science, Newton's *Principia*, published thirteen years after Milton's death, was the last work of first-rate importance written in Latin to appear in England. Locke, about the same time, elected for English in the work which laid the foundations of analytic philosophy. The English language had entered into its full inheritance.

But from the general poetic movement of the age, Milton from first to last stands apart. In the period between his earlier and his later poems, English poetry had not only altered its accent; it had changed its language. At neither point (if we exclude a few slight juvenile pieces of his boyhood and those metrical versions of the Psalms in which he elected not to be a poet) are his accent and speech those of his age. He moved in a world of his own: on a different plane, in a different atmosphere. In

the *Comus* there are passages in the later Elizabethan or Jacobean manner. In the *Samson* there are passages approximating to the manner of the Restoration. In both cases, such passages stand out from the rest of his work with an air of strangeness. He remains himself even in these; there is not a square inch of his poetry from first to last of which one could not confidently say, This is Milton and no one else. But he is least Milton where he writes, rarely and for a few lines together, in a manner approximating to the characteristic manner of the age in which he wrote.

These lines, for instance, from the *Comus* come very near the Elizabethan manner; it may be doubted whether one's admiration for them would be mingled with any shade of surprise if one came on them in reading a play of Massinger's:

> Why should you be so cruel to yourself
> And to those dainty limbs, which Nature lent
> For gentle usage and soft delicacy?
> But you invert the covenants of her trust
> And harshly deal, like an ill borrower,
> With that which you receiv'd on other terms.

They are the Elizabethan style at its finest and purest; but it is only perhaps in the reflected light of the lines which precede and follow them, and which are unmistakeable Milton, that these six lines are anything beyond Elizabethanism grown translucent. Certainly one would not single them out as characteristically Miltonic.

Similarly in his latest work may be found, but very rarely, two or three lines together that, if detached from their context, come very close to the post-Restoration manner in poetry, the manner handed down to the eighteenth century by Dryden and Otway.

> Spare that proposal, father, spare the trouble
> Of that solicitation ; let me here,
> As I deserve, pay on my punishment
> And expiate, if possible, my crime.

By stopping here in the middle of a sentence, we get four lines which in rhythm and diction might belong to some contemporary play, such as the *Maiden Queen* or *Venice Preserved*. But even to get anything as like as this we have to juggle a little with the text.

Between the poetical manner of the *Comus* and the poetical manner of the *Samson Agonistes* there is a vast interval ; but the interval is intra-Miltonic ; the orbit lies from first to last in a plane of its own ; and from the general poetical movement of his age Milton, as I said, stands wholly apart. He founded no school ; he exercised no effect upon contemporary poets. It may be doubted whether if he had never been born the development of English poetry up to the end of the seventeenth century would have been sensibly different from what it was. Yet he is of the centre, as none of his contemporaries are. He did for English poetry a work higher

than theirs, overmastering and including theirs, a work that has to be done once and once only, and beyond which there is nothing more to do. They made our poetry civilised : he made it classic. With one magnificent movement of ascension and concentration he lifted it onto the heights that signal to one another across the world. He struck for one object, hitherto unsought and undreamed of by English poetry ; he sacrificed everything for it, and achieved it. That object was perfection.

Where perfection is the object seen and aimed at, it will allow of no rival, and exacts prodigious payment. All other objects must be discarded, or go for fuel into the furnace. Thus it is only momentarily attainable ; it feeds its life's flame with self-substantial fuel, which at the best just lasts out until the moment of projection. It cannot be continued or transmitted. It can be attained perhaps only once in the progress of any single art within the bounds of any single civilisation ; behind follows exhaustion and relapse, in so far as the art does not break away and begin afresh upon other lines and with other motives. It is as though Nature herself had in this particular direction done her utmost, and fell away from her achievement exhausted.

From his boyhood onwards, Milton felt in himself this absorbing and controlling impulse. He took no pains to conceal it ; rather he emphasised it from the first with deliberate gravity. He was to do in

English poetry what no one hitherto had done, what no one hitherto had even tried to do; for its attainment, no training was too severe, no education too prolonged, no delay worth considering twice. Whatever happened, he was not going to be hurried. He deliberately took the risk of total failure rather than be content to fall back on any imperfect success. He laid out his task as though he had eternity before him. Like the merchantman of the parable, he sold all he had to buy that one pearl. Even in the sphere of poetry itself, he gravely put away from him the other things which are its life and which make it precious; he put away tears and laughter, the common sweetness of earth, the power to move the hearts and bring loveliness into the lives of men.

In the *Vacation Exercise*, written in his nineteenth year at Cambridge, this note is struck with complete certainty. Still little more in mind than a boy, as the other extant pieces belonging to that period of his life show, he had already cut himself adrift from his age; already he saw clear and high before him the path that led up to the summit where the Muses sit crowned. The celebrated Nuneham portrait, though it was not painted till a year or two later, shows him as he was then. With the severe beautiful face of which we possess this record, Milton at the age of nineteen had scanned the whole poetical movement going on among his contemporaries and

dismissed it as slight, fantastic, not worthy of him and of what he conceived as the actual dignity and potential capabilities of his art. The earlier part of the Exercise had been in Latin. Then he turns and invokes his native language.

Here I salute thee, and thy pardon ask
That now I use thee in my latter task.
I pray thee then, deny me not thine aid
For this same small neglect that I have made,
But haste thee straight and do me once a pleasure
And from thy wardrobe bring thy chiefest treasure;
Not those newfangled toys, and trimming slight
Which takes our late fantastics with delight;
But cull those richest robes and gay'st attire
Which deepest spirits and choicest wits desire.
Yet I had rather, if I were to chuse,
Thy service in some graver subject use
Such as may make thee search thy coffers round
Before thou clothe my fancy in fit sound:
Such, where the deep transported mind may soar
Above the wheeling poles, and at heaven's door
Look in, and see each blissful deity
How he before the thunderous throne doth lie,
Listening to what unshorn Apollo sings
To the touch of golden wires, while Hebe brings
Immortal nectar to her kingly sire.

"If I were to choose," he says: but he had already chosen. He realised fully what the choice meant. At the point where others ended their education, he began his. He studied silently and intensely for the next ten years, writing little and publishing less until an age at which many poets have done their finest work. At the age of twenty-three, just before

leaving Cambridge, he gravely records that, in an age of precocious maturities, his own late spring showed no bud or blossom. The full meaning of this can only be realised when we remember that he had already written the Nativity Ode, and either had written or was just about to write the *Allegro* and *Penseroso*. These pieces, in which he refused to recognise even the blossom of what he meant to do in poetry, sound a note hitherto unknown in this island. Between two and three years later he was induced by Henry Lawes to write the Ludlow Masque. It was still with the same strange deliberate sense of immaturity. He would not publicly acknowledge its authorship; for long he would not allow it to be printed. When Lawes at last succeeded in his insistence that there was a limit to the number of manuscript copies which he could make to satisfy the enthusiasm of those who had seen it or heard of it, and that it must be produced to public view, Milton would not let his name appear on it. Instead of an author's name on the title-page there was a motto which is a sharp cry of annoyance and pain.

Eheu, quid volui misero mihi! floribus austrum
Perditus—

The blossom of that hesitating spring must be guarded jealously till it matured into fruitage: *ut flos in septis secretum nascitur hortis, ignotus pecori,*

nullo contusus aratro. A few months later he allowed another flower to stray out of that secret garden. *Lycidas*, with his initials only to give any public clue to its authorship, appeared at the end of a little collection entitled *Obsequies to the Memorie of Mr. Edward King*, printed at the Cambridge University Press, and not, we may reasonably suppose, circulated or read outside of Cambridge to any appreciable extent.

In effect, then, it may be said that Milton published no poetry until the volume of 1645. He was then thirty-seven; he had recently turned to another field of labour, and as he regarded it, of duty; he had come down from the hill of the Muses to become a publicist and controversial writer; he was known, not as a poet, but as the author of pamphlets on episcopacy, divorce, and liberty of unlicensed printing. He saw another long delay before him, another laborious stage in the long process of self-education and self-development, which could take no short cuts, and would be ruined by any neglect of duty, however laborious or distasteful duty might be. His determination to publish then was no doubt made on mixed motives. In the curious preface prefixed by the publisher we can certainly hear an echo of Milton's own voice and judgment.

"It's the worth of these Poems," he writes, "not the flourish of any prefixed *encomions* that can invite

thee to buy them, though these are not without the highest Commendations and Applause of the learned'st *Academicks*. . . . I know not . . . how harmonious thy soul is; perhaps more trivial Airs may please thee better. But . . . let the event guide it self which way it will, I shall deserve of the age, by bringing into the Light as true a Birth, as the Muses have brought forth since our famous *Spencer* wrote; whose Poems in these . . . are as rarely imitated, as sweetly excell'd. Reader, if thou art Eagle-eied to censure their worth, I am not fearful to expose them to thy exactest perusal."

In this last sentence especially it is Milton's very self who speaks. Self-depreciation was never a weakness of his; he will have no indulgence; he will not be tried by any standard but the highest. How far he still fell short of that perfection on which he had set his eyes was a matter between himself and his Maker, in which he would not have allowed that any one else had any concern. In this, no less than in his politics and his theology, he was Puritanism incarnate. In the sphere of art, as in the sphere of civic and religious life, he represents individualism carried to its highest point. To that spirit the pride of life, the glory of this world, was as nothing: it was fused and vaporised in the higher spiritual pride, a pride so intense that it took upon itself the likeness of a strange and sublime humility. In the noble sonnet of Wordsworth's, written by a

poet who in this respect as in others had much in common with Milton, there is one flaw. "Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart," he says, and says truly: but then he goes on to say "and yet thy heart the lowliest duties on itself did lay." No, it was not his heart; it was his soul still, the same austere lonely soul that would call no man master, that claimed, or assumed without claiming, freedom from all restraint but that of the inward law. The essence of Puritanism, what was at once its tremendous strength and its fatal weakness, was just this, that it was the merciless requirement of perfection. This is the spirit which shows itself in the famous passage of *Lycidas*, where the desire of fame is spoken of as being, however noble in its kind and however ennobling in its effect, a last infirmity which has to be overcome. It is the spirit of the concluding phrase of the *Comus*, the words which Milton himself, five years after they were written, set down again as the motto of his life, *If virtue feeble were, Heaven itself would stoop to her*. It is the spirit of Milton, and, among the poets, of Milton only: for Puritanism only flowers once.

It is only by close attention to this attitude of mind that we can understand and appreciate the unique character of the contents of this volume of 1645. Into it he put, seemingly without selection, practically all that he had written. Alongside of masterpieces unequalled in English there are scraps

of mere occasional verse, there are things begun and then left off because he recognised that they were in a false manner and not worth going on with, there are even school exercises composed when he was a boy at St. Paul's. Nearly thirty years later, when revising the volume, he added to it, in the same strange, dispassionate, almost impersonal way of regarding his own work, another juvenile set of verses, the stanzas *On the Death of a Fair Infant*, which he seems to have forgotten, or been unable to lay his hands upon, when he was collecting material for the earlier volume. "From a boy of seventeen," says Warton of this piece generously and quite justly, "this Ode is an extraordinary effort of fancy, expression, and versification"; but this is the utmost that can be said of it. It is imitative, laboured, full of boyish conceits. He cannot have attached any value to it except from the haughty feeling, traceable all throughout his life, that it was enough to give any verses value that they bore the signature of John Milton. But this was only the other side of a feeling as deep and showing an even more superb pride, that up to the age of forty, all that he had written stood finally on the same level, because none of it was good enough to stand above that signature.

The fact then that Milton did not suppress, but on the contrary deliberately perpetuated, his earliest, slightest, and most immature essays in poetry, is not to be taken as indicating any failure in his judgment,

any flaw in his fastidiousness, any wavering in his merciless and unwavering requirement of perfection. From the first, or almost from the first, he is as rigorous with his own poetry as with the conduct of his own life. The most striking single instance of this is to be found in the autograph manuscript of the *Comus*. A passage of sixteen lines is crossed out in the prologue, which no one but Milton could ever have written, and no one but Milton ever have struck out. Though this passage is of course familiar to all students of Milton's poetry, it is and always has been unknown to many of his most constant readers and most ardent lovers. This fact, together with another to which I will come presently, is sufficient excuse for quoting the whole of the opening paragraph of the prologue as it originally stood.

Before the starry threshold of Jove's court
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes
Of bright aerial spirits live inspher'd
In regions mild of calm and serene air
Amidst the Hesperian gardens, on whose banks
Bedew'd with nectar and celestial songs
Eternal roses grow and hyacinth
And fruits of golden rind, on whose fair tree
The scaly-harness'd dragon ever keeps
His unenchanted eye; around the verge
And sacred limits of this blissful isle
The jealous ocean, that old river, winds
His far extended arms, till with steep fall
Half his waste flood the wild Atlantic fills
And half the slow unfathom'd Stygian pool.
I doubt me, gentle mortals, these may seem

Strange distances to hear, and unknown climes.
But soft, I was not sent to court your wonder
With distant worlds and strange removed climes.
Yet thence I come, and oft from thence behold
The smoke and stir of this dim narrow spot
Which men call earth ; and with low-thoughted care
Confin'd and pester'd in this pinfold here
Strive to keep up a frail and feverish being
Beyond the written date of mortal change,
Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives
After this mortal change to her true servants
Amongst the enthron'd Gods on sainted seats.
Yet some there be that by due steps aspire
To lay their just hands on that golden key
That opes the palace of Eternity.
To such my errand is, and but for such
I would not soil these pure ambrosial weeds
With the rank vapours of this sin-worn mould.

In this magnificent passage we have the potential Milton of the *Paradise Lost:* we have at their full power the consummate finish of diction and phrasing, the smooth irresistible movement, the planetary wheeling of the long period. But in its place, and for its object, Milton felt it to be overloaded ; and with a single stroke of the pen, half of it, and that in itself the most splendid half, disappeared. But for the chance preservation of the autograph manuscript, we should know nothing of a passage which perhaps as much as any single one in Milton's whole work combines the perfection of the classical with the perfection of the romantic manner.

In his fully mature poetry his manner becomes, of

course, more exclusively classic. Passages conceived and executed in the distinctively romantic manner, though incorporated with exquisite skill, show a different texture and tone from their surroundings, and are to that extent at least theoretically detachable. Bentley, in his celebrated edition of the *Paradise Lost*, actually proposed to detach them, and while he did this in a rash and rather absurd way, he was on the track of a real and even a profound critical principle. But in this suppressed passage of the *Comus* the classical and romantic elements are in perfect fusion, and for a moment—no more is possible—in exact counterpoise. It is likewise an education in criticism to compare this passage with the others in which Milton handles the same motive. Two of them are in this same poem; one in the Younger Brother's speech:

> But Beauty, like the fair Hesperian tree
> Laden with blooming gold, had need the guard
> Of dragon watch with unenchanted eye
> To save her blossoms and defend her fruit
> From the rash hand of bold Incontinence.

The central line here (one of those miraculously melodious lines of which Milton and Keats alone had the secret) gives the concentrated essence of the suppressed passage; it is once more an instance of the perfect fusion of the classical and romantic tones: the rest is hardening into classicism. The

other is the lyrical epilogue to the Masque; the single magical phrase of

> Hesperus and his daughters three
> That sing about the golden tree.

That is neither classical nor romantic; for both those terms involve a choice of manner, a deliberate style. To use a phrase which I borrow from another context, "it is neither classical nor romantic; it is simply right."

Here once more it is not merely a lesson in criticism, but a glimpse into the process of creation, to turn to the Milton manuscript and see how Milton tried the phrase over and over and made three successive alterations in it before it took its final shape of simple and seemingly unconscious or inspired perfection. There are but few instances in which one is let so intimately into the inner laboratory of the artist. Mr. de Selincourt in his admirable edition of Keats (and Keats, I may say in passing, is the English poet who in method and workmanship offers the nearest analogy to Milton) has shown how through a similar process, involving four successive alterations, the lines in *Hyperion*,

> Not so much life as on a summer's day
> Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,

took their perfect phrasing and melody. It is not so generally known that a similar alteration—one only, but one that makes all the difference—was

made by Keats in the first line of *Endymion*, but made before the line was committed to paper.

There are three passages introducing the same motive in the *Paradise Lost*, and one, in some ways the most interesting of all, in the *Paradise Regained*. Those in the *Paradise Lost* are in the fully developed classical manner; we can see in them how in the hands of any poet of inferior genius to Milton's that manner becomes classicist; even with him it is on the point of stiffening. They occur in the third, fourth, and eighth books. On Satan's first entrance into the newly created system, he passes

> Amongst innumerable stars, that shone
> Stars distant, but nigh hand seemed other worlds,
> Like those Hesperian gardens fam'd of old,
> Fortunate fields and groves and flowery vales.

When he makes his way into the Earthly Paradise, he sees in it

> Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm,
> Others, whose fruit burnisht with golden rind
> Hung amiable, Hesperian fables true,
> If true, here only.

And Raphael when leaving the garden says to Adam,

> The parting sun
> Beyond the earth's green cape and verdant isles
> Hesperian sets, my signal to depart.

It is curious to see how, in these three recurrences, the imaginative or musical motive passes through

successive contractions, shrinking in the last to a mere verbal or musical suggestion, an intangible colour on the language. It recurs once more, as though in an echo, in the *Paradise Regained.* This is in the very remarkable passage describing the visionary banquet set before Our Saviour by the Tempter. There Milton, with his last backward look on the realms of romance, sets the "Ladies of the Hesperides" beside the later enchantment

> Of fairy damsels met in forest wide
> By knights of Logres or of Lyones.

I said that there was another reason for laying special stress on the suppressed passage in the prologue of the *Comus.* It is this; that it presents a most curious and fertile analogy with one of Tennyson's most splendid early poems, which he also suppressed after it had appeared in the volume of 1832, and which was never allowed to reappear until after his death. Even now the *Hesperides* is perhaps not very widely known. But to those who do know it, it will seem nearly certain that besides the two lines from the *Comus* which Tennyson prefixed to it, he had read the Milton manuscript at Trinity, and been profoundly influenced by the suppressed passage.

> Wandering waters unto wandering waters call;
> Let them clash together, foam and fall.
> Out of watchings, out of wiles
> Comes the bliss of secret smiles.

All things are not told to all.
Half round the mantling night is drawn,
Purple-fringed with even and dawn . . .
Till mid-noon the cool east light
Is shut out by the round of the tall hill-brow ;
But when the full-faced sunset yellowly
Stays on the flowering arch of the bough,
The luscious fruitage clustereth mellowly,
Golden-kernelled, golden-cored,
Sunset-ripened above on the tree :
The world is wasted with fire and sword,
But the apple of gold hangs over the sea.

It has not the weight and poise of the other; it is looser-textured and more diaphanous; but the two have the same essential quality of romance and magic. This also Milton knew; this also he discarded in his ascent to the summit.

These solemn heights but to the stars are known,
But to the stars and the cold lunar beams :
Alone the sun arises, and alone
Spring the great streams.

It is a curious question, and one which hardly arises in any other case, what position Milton would have held among English poets if he had died at fifty. He would have been represented then by the volume of 1645 and by about a dozen sonnets. We inevitably read all that earlier poetry by the reflected light of the *Paradise Lost*. We have here been engaged, in effect, in an attempt to regard it apart from that reflected light and by itself. It is easy to see now to what it all tended, how it represents

successive layers of poetry, as one might say, shed, stripped off, outgrown, in the process of Milton's colossal self-imposed task of concentration. It is easy to see now that in these earlier poems he never fully expressed himself, never put out his full strength. They were exercises in his art: exercises of varying intricacy, adjusted to the particular point in each case that his long, patient self-education had reached. The volume in which he collected them was a record of progress up till then. In such a record all the entries were in a sense of equal value; for if the record was to be complete, it must show the whole process point by point. It must have been for some such reason, more or less consciously influencng his mind, that he gravely set down the laboured and frigid fragment on the Passion, or the quite worthless set of commendatory verses that he had contributed anonymously to the second folio Shakespeare, side by side with the Nativity Hymn, with the *Ode at a Solemn Music*, with *Comus* and *Lycidas*.

However this may be, the great difference in our view of Milton if he had not lived to write the *Paradise Lost* would be that we should regard him principally, perhaps almost wholly, as a lyric poet. Even those pieces which are not, in any proper or exact use of the term, lyrical, have a more or less close affinity to the lyric. The sonnet is only separated from the lyric by narrow and rather elusive boundaries; and there is an equally close though a

different sort of affinity between the lyric and the pastoral. The masque likewise, as a specific form of art differing from the drama proper, is the drama pushed as far towards lyrical treatment as it will bear consistently with the retention of dramatic form. With regard to the Ludlow Masque, this point is acutely seized and finely brought out in Sir Henry Wotton's celebrated criticism: "I should much commend the Tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Dorique delicacy in your Songs and Odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our Language: *Ipsa mollities.*" As a drama, as a representation of action, the *Comus* is slight and unconvincing. But this is not the scope or object of the masque; action in it is merely used as a slight framework for giving coherent form to a pictorial, reflective, and emotional content which is in its essence lyrical.

The *mollities*, the delicacy, which the Provost of Eton singled out as the distinctive quality of Milton's work, had also been named by Horace as the distinctive quality of Virgil's early poetry. It conveys, in both cases, the sense of an exquisite and fastidious refinement; and in neither case is its justice impaired by the fact that the poetry in question bears on it the stamp of immaturity. In that very immaturity lay the promise of the future. Both poets had set before themselves an ideal in poetry towards which the labour of a whole lifetime was essential; neither

of them would be hurried; they would not forestall the slow process through which art, no less than nature, grows into perfection.

> Lo, sweeten'd by the summer light
> The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
> Drops in the silent autumn night.

Between the *Eclogues* and the *Aeneid*, between the *Comus* and the *Paradise Lost*, the interval is long. Much was dropped on the difficult ascent. But the ascent was made at last; and we have now among the immortals, not the author of the *Eclogues* and the author of *Comus* and *Lycidas*, but Virgil and Milton.

Between *Lycidas* and the publication of the *Paradise Lost* there are just thirty years. They were, as regards poetry, years of silence; the silence, after the burst of spring flowerage, of the long brooding heats of summer, during which the year comes slowly to its maturity. But for a few casual scraps of translation, Milton's only poetical product throughout them was a very few sonnets; solemn and rare indeed, in the words of the great English sonnet-writer,

> Since, seldom coming, in the long year set,
> Like stones of worth they thinly placed are,
> Or captain jewels in the carcanet—

but only giving the faintest hint of the immense power in reserve behind them, like the flickers that run across the darkness of massed clouds behind

which is gathered the whole armoury of heaven, *nubila sol imbres nix venti fulmina grando.*

Earth turned in her sleep with pain,
Sultrily suspired for proof:
In at heaven and out again
Lightning!—where it broke the roof,
Bloodlike, some few drops of rain.

No parallel to this long silence between the prelude and the performance, dead silence but for those few low trumpet-notes, is to be found, I think, in the history of poetry. It was the final test to which Milton put his powers.

Sometimes as we pass along the streets of a modern city, we come at nightfall on a dark mass of building, with hardly a sign of life about it except a light feather of steam that curls from a huge ventilating shaft. As we come nearer we can catch through a crevice in furnace doors a glimpse of some great incandescence, we can hear the steady purring of vast dynamos, and see a silent-footed engineer moving within among valves and pressure-gauges. When the hour is come, it is but the pulling across of a lever, and a whole region glitters with light and thrills with power. Some such feeling we have about Milton in that long central period. But his controlling motive after all was not perfection in his art —in which there are many kinds of perfection—nor was it perfection in the science of his art, in which among English poets he still stands, as he stood then,

alone. It was perfection in the eye of his great Taskmaster. For this we shall find no adequate symbolism in the arts or the applied sciences; we must turn from these to the first and greatest messengers of Puritanism. That long silence was unaffected by what went on in the outworks of his life; by all the angry controversies and wasted energies and household unhappinesses which make up the apparent substance of those years. All the while, drop by drop, continually, the reservoir of poetry was filling up in him till it stood abrim. We seem to be in a vision such as rose before the prophet when he saw by night. "And I answered again, What be those two olive branches which through the two golden pipes empty the golden oil out of themselves? And he answered me and said, Knowest thou not what these be? and I said, No, my lord. Then said he, These are the two Anointed Ones that stand by the Lord of the whole earth."

II

In 1642, Milton, then in his thirty-fourth year, writes of himself as "not having yet completed to my mind the full circle of my private studies." That circle he was already doomed never to complete. His eyesight, overtaxed from early youth, was failing. When he accepted the post of Latin Secretary to the Commonwealth in the spring of 1649, it was with the distinct knowledge that the work it involved meant early blindness. A year afterwards the sight of the left eye was gone; in two years more he was totally blind.

To any ordinary man this would have meant the end. He had built great bases for eternity, and was struck down while the masses of material and of acquirement that he had spent his life in collecting were still only a potential structure. He had staked all on the one throw and seemed to have lost it. Like the builders on the plain of Sennaar, he had "cast to build a city and tower whose top may reach to heaven." *Dis aliter visum:* and all that was left of that vast project seemed to be the grim epitaph,

> Thus was the building left
> Ridiculous, and the work Confusion named.

Even Milton's own haughty courage nearly gave way under that crushing blow. Tears, like laughter, were among the things that he had put away from him. But there breaks from him one low piercing cry of pain.

> My light is spent
> Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
> And that one talent which is death to hide
> Lodg'd with me useless.

For a while he sought refuge in a cold and profound thought, like that of the Stoic Emperor: "God doth not need either man's work, or his own gifts"; or, with a transcendental and inverted humility, strove to accept the service of those who only stand and wait. He plunged deeper than ever into angry political controversy, striking fiercely right and left in a mood careless alike of his own self-respect or of effective results. He sought narcotics in mechanical tasks of compilation. His first unhappy marriage had come to an end with the death of Mary Powell, just about the time when his blindness became total. He married again. Some gleam of happiness that came into his life then was quenched fifteen months later when the "espousèd saint" whom, in the most touching of all his poems, he calls "love, sweetness, goodness," died in childbed. But in that brief interval he had summoned back his full courage, and set steadily to work on the composition of the *Paradise Lost*.

The scheme of the great epic had, as is well

known, been taking shape in his mind for many years. It was practically settled in its main outline when he returned from abroad in 1639. The definite adoption of the epic and not the dramatic form, after long balancing between the two, was only made some years later. According to the well-attested story about the lines which open Satan's monologue at the beginning of the fourth book, that passage, and some others, had been actually written as early as 1642. The substance and even the very wording of the poem had been slowly distilling in his mind long before he set himself to continuous composition. Some five years or more passed in this task. According to Aubrey, the poem was substantially complete by the summer of 1663. It was two years later that Ellwood read it in manuscript. It was no doubt subjected to much further detailed revision before it passed the licenser and went to press in the spring of 1667. All that revision had to be conducted under the same overwhelming difficulties as had to be conquered before it could take written shape at all. For those who have themselves practised the refinements of written composition, who know how the judgment is dependent on the eye, and what perpetual reference back and forward a finished revision involves, the achievement of the double task will be recognised as implying a grasp and power that are almost superhuman. In the fine and just words of De Quincey, the *Paradise Lost* is not a book among

books, not a poem among poems, but a central force among forces. That amazing power had to work through a machinery as cumbrous as it was imperfect. It had to hold in place, and record through casual hands as opportunity was given, the vast scheme of the poem and the minutest adjustments of diction, rhythm, and period. It had to carry the whole substance of the epic in solution, and deposit it, cell by cell, exactly at the right place, and exactly in the right order. Composed in darkness, brooded over in memory, dictated in fragments, it all fell into place. We can hardly imagine any material alteration if, like Virgil, he had been able to keep the manuscript beside him and give to it at will, day by day, the final touches of a patient and fastidious hand. Blind Mæonides is but a shadowy tradition, even if we do not, with some modern critics, first deny the existence of Homer and then, logically enough, and inevitably, deny the existence of the *Iliad*. Among the great artists of the modern world Beethoven alone presents even a remote parallel to Milton's achievement. Viewed thus, the *Paradise Lost* may well seem to us the most astonishing of all the products of high genius guided by unconquerable will.

For what is most remarkable about the *Paradise Lost* is not so much the greatness of its conception, though that is wonderful; it is not so much the height and amplitude of imagination through which the conception is embodied, though these are splen-

did : it is the sustained and all but faultless perfection of the execution. Here and there we may see, or think we see, a slip or a flaw. In different parts of the poem there are distinct differences of workmanship; there are even differences, less distinct but still traceable, of what is another thing, quality of workmanship. The fine close-woven texture shows, on minute inspection, not only the variation which all the products of really great art show by virtue of their being organic and not machine-made products, but places where the mind has wandered, or the hand flagged, or the tool slipped. When we have taken full account of these, it remains true that here we have a poem of over ten thousand lines in which the workmanship throughout is such as had been in English poetry previously undreamed of, such as has never been since equalled, such as we cannot imagine ever being surpassed by any human skill. In the science of his art Milton is our one absolute master. Of him in poetry as of Bach in music it may be said that they fix a limit. Other kinds of perfection there may be ; but beyond their perfection no one may go. Either of them might have adopted as his the superb claim made for his own achievement in art by the Greek painter Parrhasius :

Εἰ καὶ ἄπιστα κλύουσι λέγω τάδε· φημὶ γὰρ ἤδη
εὕρησθαι τέχνης τέρματα τῆσδε σαφῆ
χειρὸς ὑφ' ἡμετέρης· ἀνυπέρβλητος δὲ πέπηγεν
οὖρος· ἀμώμητον δ' οὐδὲν ἔγεντο βροτοῖς.

"This I say, even though they that hear believe not: I declare that the clear limits of this art have been found under my hand, and the goal is set that may not be overpassed, though there is no human work with which fault may not be found."

In the main we are justified in believing that the *Paradise Lost*, as it at last appeared, satisfied Milton's own impeccable ear and merciless judgment. So much may be gathered, though doubtfully, from the fact that he published it with no word of deprecation, and that his prefatory note explaining his choice of unrhymed verse has the tone of a workman who is well content with his own work. But there is further confirmation in the fact that he left it materially unaltered when he republished it seven years later. That second edition is described as "revised and augmented by the author." But the revision, though evidently careful and even minute, resulted in few changes and next to no augmentations. Apart from alterations of single words—and there are not many even of these—there are only seven instances in which a passage is reworded or an addition made. Two of these are the exquisite passages, of four lines in one case and five in the other, inserted at what became the beginnings of the eighth and twelfth books when he redivided the original ten books into twelve. Three new lines were inserted in the description of the lazar-house in the eleventh book; in no one of the other four instances does the

alteration made affect a passage of more than four lines.

If we read the *Paradise Lost* through with a careful eye on the diction and versification, we can distinguish in it, as we can distinguish in the *Aeneid*, strata of earlier and later work. The differences are very subtle; they do not affect the general unity of style and texture. To appreciate them is perhaps the last reward given to the trained student in language and the expert in prosody. Thus the seventh book shows a marked predilection for lines with a pause at the end of the first or fourth foot, and the eleventh for lines made up of monosyllabic words. Three speeches in Books IX. and X. are respectively in what, within the bounds of his fully developed and as yet unimpaired mastery of style, may be called Milton's early, middle, and late manner. The speech of Satan to Eve in Book IX., beginning "Empress of this fair world," is in a manner not far removed from the poetical manner of the *Comus*, simpler and more fluid, less fully charged and less closely woven than the characteristic manner of Milton's maturity.

Till on a day roving the field, I chanced
A goodly tree far distant to behold,
Loaden with fruit of fairest colours mixt,
Ruddy and gold: I nearer drew to gaze:
When from the boughs a savoury odour blown,
Grateful to appetite, more pleased my sense
Than smell of sweetest fennel, or the teats

> Of ewe or goat dropping with milk at even,
> Unsucked of lamb or kid that tend their play.

These lines might be put into the part of the Attendant Spirit in the *Comus* without seeming strange or out of place. Satan's monologue, earlier in the same book, beginning, "O earth how like to heaven!" is in Milton's culminating manner, the manner which is kept up without a single swerve through the first four books, and which is the reason why those four books are generally, and not unjustly, held to be the crown of Milton's whole work in poetry. This speech is equal to anything in the first half of the poem, and to a certain extent, though not to such an extent as causes any jar, stands out in virtue of that quality from its surroundings. A little further on, Adam's soliloquy in the tenth book, beginning, "O miserable of happy! is this the end?" anticipates the manner of the *Paradise Regained*. The structure is less periodic, the rhythm more broken; the evolution of thought often proceeds, one might almost say, by jerks, not under a single controlling movement. The whole speech bears distinct traces of rhetoric; it is the single speech in the whole poem of which one would be inclined to say that it was too long; parts of it are even curiously unpoetical.

Yet it does not follow necessarily, nor even probably, that these three passages were written at long successive intervals, and are early, middle, and late

in their origin as they are in the colour of their style. For if we regard them in their whole context, we shall see that their variation is almost scientifically adjusted, and is evidence not only of Milton's certainty of hand, but of a quality for which he seldom or never gets the full credit due to him, a dramatic sense of extreme delicacy. With him, as with Sophocles, this quality is so fine that it may easily elude observation. Like the best Greek sculpture, it works of set purpose within narrow limits, and to the ordinary eye the surface seems flat which is really alive with subtle modelling, and, in Milton's own apt words, is

> inimitable on earth
> By model or by shading pencil drawn.

The construction is at every point organic; in the phrase of architects, *elle ne dort jamais*. The manner, diction, and metrical quality of these three passages which I have cited are in each case adapted with precise fitness to the circumstances. Those of Satan's speech to Eve, with their relaxed fluency and calculated simplicity, are in the character which he has assumed, for the purpose of skilful deception, of the brute who has just found human sense and language, and still uses both with an accent of strangeness, of imperfect concentration, of incomplete mastery. They are completely different from those of the ruined archangel uttering his own

thought and speaking in his own person. Those of Adam's long soliloquy are adapted with equal nicety to the person of one whose mind and senses are reeling under the first shock of his fall. The foundations of his life are crumbling beneath him. He has lost, with his innocence, not only his self-confidence, but his lucidity of intelligence, his power of sustained reasoning, his control of language, and even his sense of truth. His life has ceased to be a poem, and his words reflect the change. He can conclude nothing; he can fix his mind nowhere. His turmoil of thought issues in confused and broken language. He can follow out no train of reasoning; he circles round in a maze, trying ineffectually to find refuge in rhetorical sophistries. His very language, participating in the intellectual and moral abasement, becomes harsh and all but prosaic. The way in which Milton manages this without letting go his hold over the sustained workmanship of the whole poem is no sign of late composition or lessening power; it is one of the highest proofs which the poem shows of combined skill and daring, of the complete control which its author had over the science and mechanism of his art.

It is true that in this and the two following books (the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth) there are other traces, if not of diminishing power, yet of a certain lessening of concentration and tension. The texture of the poetry in places becomes sensibly looser; there

are passages where the material has not been perfectly fused. We can note instances, here and there, of a reversion to Elizabethanism. We can note others in a harder and drier manner, such as was coming over Milton when he wrote the *Paradise Regained*. There are one or two instances in which classical ornament, as though he felt this harder manner growing on him and wished to give it some artificial counterpoise, is attached rather than organically incorporated.

> Nor important less
> Seemed their petition, than when the ancient pair,
> In fables old, less ancient yet than these,
> Deucalion and chaste Pyrrha, to restore
> The race of mankind drown'd, before the shrine
> Of Themis stood devout.

The rhythm and phrasing have all the old skill; but the way in which the comparison is introduced and expanded seems now something like artifice. Or again, later in the same book, in the description of the descent of the cherubim:

> Four faces each
> Had, like a double Janus; all their shape
> Spangled with eyes more numerous than those
> Of Argus, and more wakeful than to drowse,
> Charmed with Arcadian pipe, the pastoral reed
> Of Hermes, or his opiate rod. Meanwhile,
> To resalute the world with sacred light
> Leucothea waked.

It is exquisitely beautiful; but it is on the point of becoming ornament for ornament's sake: it trembles on the verge of classicism.

In the eleventh book, again, alongside of passages where a harsh inversion or an elliptic syntax is in Milton's latest manner:

> But longer in that paradise to dwell
> The law I gave to nature him forbids,

or

> But who was that just man, whom had not heaven
> Rescued, had in his righteousness been lost?

we find phrases which are almost purely Shakespearian; and others where an unaccustomed gentleness of thought seems to reflect itself in a new and exquisite delicacy of rhythm; as in

> One short sigh of human breath, upborne
> Even to the seat of God,

and once more a little further on,

> For see! the morn,
> All unconcern'd with our unrest, begins
> Her rosy progress, smiling.

It is worth noting that these last two phrases, with their tender and luminous beauty, both occur in the scene of reconciliation between Adam and Eve: they are another instance of that subtle dramatic instinct in Milton which discloses itself to more refined analysis—or rather, for this is the real truth, to sufficiently careful reading.

Only in the twelfth book, where Michael summarises the history of the world from the Flood to the Second Coming, can we say definitely that the

style here and there does flag, the theological handling is not wholly fused into poetry. The speech of Michael (ll. 386–465) is a sermon forged into verse, with immense skill, but not with complete success; for complete success was here in the nature of things impossible. It is a majestic homily, but Milton has deliberately chosen that it shall be this, and not poetry. It was the last sacrifice he made in the ascent towards perfection; for the perfection now before him was a spiritual perfection where, as at the conclusion of Dante's *Paradiso*, desire and will still ascend, but imagination succumbs: *all' alta fantasia qui mancò possa.* In the furnace-heat of that perfection art itself sublimates and disappears.

It is this sustained, all but flawless excellence of workmanship throughout the whole poem which, beyond all else, gives the *Paradise Lost* its enduring value. It is independent of any view which later generations have taken, or may take, of the quality of its subject or of the theological system on which the poem is founded. No doubt Milton was determined in his own choice by the belief which he shared with the whole of Christendom, that the Bible narrative of the Fall was historically true, and of the most momentous truth. But what matters is not the subject chosen, or the reasons for choosing it: what matters is the use made of it. If the human mind came to the conclusion, not merely that the narrative was untrue in fact, but that it was false in essence,

the poem would as a work of art be left intact. To Milton himself on his own system of belief the ancient mythology and the systems based on it had this very quality of essential falsehood; but they meant none the less to him. He did not assert for his own work any other renown, any other immortality, than the renown and the immortality of Homer. It is true, no doubt, that he claims, in the majestic prologue to the seventh book of the *Paradise Lost*, that the Urania whom he invokes is not one of the nine Muses, but sister of the Eternal Wisdom; that she is heavenly, the others an empty dream. So he says; but in the very act of saying it he has himself returned into that world of dreams, and confessed that he too is an artist, and that his own work is art.

The workmanship, the science and skill of that art, not only gives the *Paradise Lost* enduring value; it also gives it endless interest. Milton's technical skill is only now receiving full recognition. This is not an occasion to enter on a study of his use of language and metre. Such a study, to be useful, must needs be both minute and detailed. Mr. Robert Bridges, in his Essay on Milton's Prosody, has dealt with one aspect of it in this way, bringing to the task the qualifications of a trained student of language and a skilled musician. There are few, he says at the end of his analysis of the verse of the *Paradise Lost*, who will pursue this path any further. I do not here attempt to pursue it so far. But I

may just indicate a direction for its pursuit from the point where Mr. Bridges' more severely technical method stops. Analysis of the Miltonic metre takes us but part of the way unless it is continued into analysis of the rhythmic or prosodic structure into which that metre is built up—or rather we should say, into which that metre grows through processes which are vital, organic, and creative. A study of Milton's line is but the prelude to a study of Milton's period.

On its formal side, what makes Milton's versification as unique as it is admirable, is the instinctive and yet prescient skill with which the pause is continuously varied so as to keep the whole metrical structure in movement. There are no dead lines. There are no jerks or stoppages. His movement may best be described by quoting a passage which, like many others, is at once a description and an instance. It is a

> Mystical dance, which yonder starry sphere
> Of planets and of fixt in all her wheels
> Resembles nearest, mazes intricate,
> Eccentric, intervolv'd, yet regular
> Then most, when most irregular they seem,
> And in their motions harmony divine.

I ask the reader most particularly to notice that these six lines, like almost any short quotation that can be made from the poem, are broken from their context. They begin in the middle of a sentence, and end in

the middle of a clause. The continuous periodic movement cannot be really shown by examples, just because it is continuous and periodic. If we except the speeches, each of which by the necessity of the case is more or less a definite and detachable unit, the periods flow into one another. Like the orbit of a planet, the movement of the verse never closes its ellipse and begins again. Each of the twelve books is a single organic rhythmical structure. But one cannot very well quote a whole book.

Within that structure, the variation of pause and stress is similarly in continuous movement. As a general fact this is instinctively felt in reading the poem ; how rigorously the law of freedom is observed comes out even more surprisingly when brought to the test of figures. For movement of stress one instance may serve as a typical example. In Michael's description of the plagues of Egypt in the twelfth book, beginning—

> But first the lawless tyrant, who denies
> To know their God, or message to regard,
> Must be compelled by signs and judgments dire—

the detailed roll of the plagues is all threaded on the word *must*. It recurs nine times, with studied and intricate variation of its place in the line: this is, taken by order, in the first, eighth, fifth, fourth, fifth, fifth, first, third, and fourth syllable. Again, as regards variation of pause, in the whole ten thousand

lines of the *Paradise Lost* there are less than five-and-twenty instances of the pause coming at the same point in the line for more than two lines consecutively. Facts like these are the formal index of what is the great organic principle of Milton's verse. That is, that like all organic structures, it is incalculable; it cannot be reduced to a formula. It has in it that *clinamen principiorum* which the Epicurean philosophy put forward as the explanation of freewill, and which, or something in effect equivalent to which, the most recent science suggests as the explanation, or at least the formula, of life itself. His rhythm is perpetually integrating as it advances; and not only so, but at no point can its next movement be predicted, although tracing it backwards we can see how each phrase rises out of and carries on the rhythm of what was before it, how each comes in not only rightly, but as it seems inevitably. This secret he inherited from no English predecessor and transmitted to no follower. The two poets who showed him the way were Virgil and Sophocles. For while in his poetical manner, in the evolution of his thought and what may be called the rhetorical structure of the poetry, he is more akin to Ovid and Euripides, it is the elder and greater poets whom he recalls in the essential quality of his art. Of the two, his art is more akin to that of Sophocles in virtue of the apparent ease with which he wields it, of its complete scientific mastery, and of

a severe self-restraint that may easily be mistaken for frigidity; the exact opposite of the nether continent described in the *Paradise Lost* as beyond the stream of Lethe, where

> the parching air
> Burns frore, and cold performs the effect of fire.

But with Virgil's art also Milton's has some points of striking analogy, particularly in the structure of his periods. Both habitually practise an artifice almost peculiar to them, that of carrying on the period for another line after it seems to have ended. This hardly comes out clearly in any single instance, and therefore I do not offer one; it is a quality that must be appreciated in its cumulative effect. The effect is neither that of a final clenching stroke, as it is very remarkably in Dante, nor that of a dying cadence or echo, in the way in which it is often very beautifully employed by Spenser; it is rather that of an enrichment, a superflux, as of water that arches itself in a full glass above the level of the brim. It is analogous, in its structural and harmonic value, to an overbrimming quality which Milton and Virgil both share with Sophocles in their use of words. Language as they use it is many-faceted, full of harmonic undertones, of allusion and suggestion. It unfolds and changes colour as we look on it. The effect is more easily felt than described or analysed; it lies so much at the heart

of the poetry that it is only through the medium of poetry that it can be at all adequately expressed. We may be reminded of Tennyson's lines about the soul passing through her palace of art—

> And all things that she saw she multiplied,
> A many-faced glass;
>
> And being both the sower and the seed,
> Remaining in herself, became
> All that she saw, Madonna, Ganymede,
> Or the Asiatic dame;
>
> Still changing, as a lighthouse in the night
> Changeth athwart the gleaming main
> From red to yellow, yellow to pale white,
> Then back to red again.

This overbrimming quality of language is at once the cause and the effect of the concentration of phrase in Milton's mature work. We have already seen how in the act of writing the *Comus* he struck out a whole passage, and at a later point in the poem gave its whole imaginative essence in a single line. Similar instances may be found in the *Paradise Lost.* Sometimes the concentration is so great that it defeats its own purpose; the overbrimmed glass is shaken and spilt. One instance may be propounded for consideration. Here is a famous passage in the *Comus*, written under the impulse of Milton's early romanticism and with Elizabethan richness.

> Till an unusual stop of sudden silence—

(even so early as this the periodic structure of Milton's verse is so fully developed that one is obliged to begin the quotation in the middle of a sentence)—

> Till an unusual stop of sudden silence
> Gave respite to the drowsy frighted steeds
> That draw the litter of close-curtain'd Sleep ;
> At last a soft and solemn-breathing sound
> Rose like a steam of rich distill'd perfumes,
> And stole upon the air, that even Silence
> Was took ere she was ware, and wish'd she might
> Deny her nature, and be never more,
> Still to be so displac'd.

Now turn to the fourth book of the *Paradise Lost : Silence was pleas'd.* How much of the imaginative value, how much of the poetical quality of the earlier passage has Milton carried into these three bare words, into this needle-point of concentration ? how much has he abandoned, deliberately and counting the cost ? The merchantman who sold all he had to buy the one pearl must have been gravely embarrassed if he found himself penniless and his pearl unmarketable. But Milton at least did not falter in his choice.

In his later work this concentration in the use of language goes so far that he begins to write, one might say, in a sort of shorthand. There are whole passages in the *Paradise Regained* which give the effect of a piece of empty honeycomb ; the delicate, scientifically adjusted, faultless structure has been

set in its place, but is waiting still for the liquid gold to be poured into it and fill it to the brim.

> So spake the Eternal Father, and all heaven
> Admiring stood a space, then into hymns
> Burst forth, and in celestial measures moved,
> Circling the throne and singing, while the hand
> Sung with the voice, and this the argument.

This should be the prelude to some great choral symphony such as those of the *Paradise Lost.* But instead of that, what follows is what it would not be unfair to call an abstract or précis of the unwritten ode. It is executed with Milton's unfailing metrical skill, but, except for that, little removed in its quality from prose.

> Victory and triumph to the Son of God,
> Now entering his great duel, not of arms,
> But to vanquish by wisdom hellish wiles!
> The Father knows the Son; therefore secure
> Ventures his filial virtue, though untried,
> Against whate'er may tempt, whate'er seduce,
> Allure, or terrify, or undermine.
> Be frustrate, all ye stratagems of hell,
> And, devilish machinations, come to nought!

This is not the organ-music that we knew. What's become of all the gold? Has the golden oil ceased to flow into the lamp now that night is so deep?

This condensation rather than concentration—what I have ventured to call a kind of poetical shorthand—is strongly marked in many passages of the *Paradise Regained.* Sometimes it takes the

form of a string of clauses in apposition, sometimes of a highly elliptical construction, which in either case amounts to a deliberate neglect of constructive quality.

> Expert in amorous arts, enchanting tongues
> Persuasive, virgin majesty with mild
> And sweet allay'd, yet terrible to approach,
> Skill'd to retire, and in retiring draw
> Hearts after them tangled in amorous nets.

In these lines the periodic structure, the smooth, strong, upward-circling movement of the Miltonic verse is broken up. Or again,

> They praise and they admire they know not what,
> And know not whom, but as one leads the other.
> And what delight to be by such extoll'd,
> To live upon their tongues and be their talk?
> Of whom to be disprais'd were no small praise:
> His lot who dares be singularly good.

It is Milton still; but Milton walking where once he had flown.

This contraction and condensation is equally marked in the transitions of the *Paradise Regained*. The speeches are introduced in formulary lines of an almost archaistic stiffness, a hieratic austerity.

> To whom our Saviour sternly thus replied—
> To whom our Saviour with unalter'd brow—
> To whom quick answer Satan thus return'd—
> To whom thus answer'd Satan malcontent—

There are more than twenty such lines in the poem, the whole length of which is only that of about two books of the *Paradise Lost*. The effect of this and similar reiterations is to give the modelling of the whole work a fine but almost metallic hardness; it is poetry still exquisite in quality, but stripped to the last thread, trained down to the last ounce.

There are one or two passages in the *Paradise Lost* itself which have anticipatory traces of this curious hard stenographic expression. One is worth citing. It occurs in the episode in the tenth book of the transformation of Satan and his crew into serpents —an episode which has been very generally condemned, and in which it may be fairly said that Milton gives way to the strong attraction he had always felt for the peculiar poetical genius of Ovid, and forgets himself so far as to be clever. This is the passage in question.

> However, some tradition they dispers'd
> Among the heathen of their purchase got,
> And fabled how the Serpent, whom they call'd
> Ophion, with Eurynome, the wide-
> Encroaching Eve perhaps, had first the rule
> Of high Olympus, thence by Saturn driven
> And Ops, ere yet Dictæan Jove was born.

The whole seven lines were summarily rejected by Bentley, with his usual desperate hardihood and with something more than his usual reason. "Let any man believe, if he can," says he, "that Milton gave such wretched nonsense." That Milton gave it,

nonsense or not, is what no one but Bentley ever doubted. But, in the first place, it is to be remarked that the seven lines are in fact detachable, both in rhythm and substance: though they compose perfectly with the rest, though they even add a fresh beauty of enrichment, they could be removed without leaving any gap. In this respect the passage is almost unique in the poem. In the second place—and this is still more interesting—we can in these lines listen to Milton's mind working, to his thought forming itself. "The serpent, whom they called Ophion—with Eurynome—'the wide-encroaching'—Eve, perhaps?" It is Milton thinking aloud, and his thought, as it moves from point to point, noting itself down in words which almost automatically, as it would seem, run into the familiar mould of his august rhythm. But there is this singular result, that a word is actually run over from one line into the next: for "wide-encroaching" is in effect one word; it is hyphened in the very carefully printed first edition. It is as though Milton had lifted off his hand for a minute and let the loom go on working of itself, with the result that the shuttle swerved and made this curious little variation of pattern. It is a unique variation. The nearest approach made to it elsewhere is in the four or five instances in which the division of lines comes between an adjective and its noun—as, for instance,

A sapphire throne inlaid with pure
Amber, and colours of the showery arch,

or

Which nightly as a circling zone thou seest
Powder'd with stars. And now on earth the seventh
Evening arose in Eden.

But these are not really parallel.

The limits of this study do not allow me to proceed to any further consideration of the *Paradise Regained*, or of the *Samson Agonistes*. Each requires, as each more than repays, minute and close treatment. But before returning to Milton's central achievement, one thing must not be omitted, and that is to traverse, briefly but explicitly, the strange and obstinate misapprehension, which nothing seems to eradicate, that Milton himself thought the *Paradise Regained* the greater of the two epics. That it possesses certain unique poetical qualities of its own is undeniable. Wordsworth declared it "the most perfect in execution of anything written by Milton," and Coleridge, with a more careful qualification, called it "in its kind the most perfect poem extant." But what Milton said was something quite different. The words of Edward Phillips upon which the misconception rests are these: "It is generally censured to be much inferior to the other, though he could not hear with patience any such thing when related to him." Of course he could not. He could only have heard it with patience if he had known it to be untrue.

The aloofness of Milton, as he moved in his high and solitary orbit, is equally marked with regard to the influence exercised on him by his immediate predecessors, and with regard to the influence which he in turn exercised on his contemporaries and on the course of English literature. He takes up the torch where Spenser had laid it down, almost as if there had been no intervening period. On Spenser also the spirit of Puritanism had grown in his last years. The latest extant fragment of the *Faerie Queene* is much in the Miltonic spirit and manner; it even anticipates some qualities of Milton's rhythm and diction. In passing from the one poet to the other, we have the feeling that the whole Shakespearian age has been but an interlude. There are a few lines in the *Paradise Lost* in which we can trace Shakespeare's influence, in which we can catch an echo of Shakespeare's phrasing.

> For solitude sometimes is best society,
> And short retirement urges sweet return—

that is in Shakespeare's earlier, fluent and melodious manner.

> Thy message which might else in telling wound,
> And in performing end us—

that is in the later Shakespearian manner, the manner of the tragedies. In the lines,

> To be no more; sad cure; for who would lose,
> Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
> Those thoughts that wander through eternity?

the accent is that of *Measure for Measure*. The line,

> When I behold this goodly frame, this world,

sounds as though it came straight from *Hamlet*. And in a very remarkable passage—

> If I could hope to change the will
> Of him who all things can, I would not cease
> To weary him with my assiduous cries—,

a phrase taken directly from Dante is followed strangely by one which is almost verbally transferred from the Sonnets. But these, with one or two other instances, are so exceptional that they only emphasise the general rule. No more inference is to be drawn from them than from the fact that one of the loveliest lines in *Lycidas* is borrowed from Middleton, and not only so, but was deliberately altered by Milton himself from his first draft into a more exact reproduction of Middleton's wording.

This line is worth pausing over, because it shows in a very interesting way with what fastidious judgment Milton stole a phrase, how he weighed and tested it, and how he gave it, by a new setting, a colour and value that were of his own choosing. The *Game of Chess*, a play of Middleton's, was produced in 1624, the year before Milton went to Cambridge. Apart from its poetical merit, which is great, it had a success of scandal from its political bearing, and led to strong representations from the

Spanish Ambassador. Milton in all probability saw it represented before it was withdrawn; and there was much in it which accorded with his own temper. In that play the passage occurs—

> Upon those lips
> The holy dew of prayer lies, like pearl
> Dropt from the opening eyelids of the morn
> Upon a bashful rose.

"Here for once," says Mr. Swinburne, "even that celestial thief John Milton has impaired rather than improved the effect of the beautiful phrase borrowed from an earlier and inferior poet." On such a question one can only differ from Mr. Swinburne's judgment with diffidence. But it is open to argument whether the metaphor of tears dropping from eyelids is not too much in the Elizabethan fashion to satisfy a purer taste. Certainly the phrase clung to Milton's memory: and when he was revising *Lycidas*, he altered the line as he had first written it—

> Together both, ere the high lawns appeared,
> Under the glimmering eyelids of the morn
> We drove afield—

to the form in which it is universally known. What is however most interesting, and what throws a light on the whole question of Milton's borrowings, and of poetical borrowings generally in the hands of great poets, is that the phrase, lying in his mind for years, had there taken a new value and meaning. It had taken that "Doric delicacy" which is peculiar

to Milton. Instead of the conventional image, it had re-embodied itself in a new visual image of wonderful truth and unexpected beauty. It is one which, like so many of Milton's phrases, shows his extraordinary sensitiveness to effects of light. The opening eyelids of the morn have become, not the fanciful source of dewdrops, but the widening and brightening streaks of light through bands of cloud on the morning horizon. It is a new image, comparable in delicate accuracy to the dawn-pictures of Shakespeare himself, to Friar Laurence's

> Chequering the eastern clouds with streaks of light,

or to Don Pedro's

> Dapples the drowsy east with spots of grey.

When we realise its full beauty, we may not be inclined to think with Mr. Swinburne that his use of Middleton's image "is not quite so apt—so perfectly picturesque and harmonious—as the use to which it was put by its inventor."

In the whole range of Jacobean poetry, the work to which Milton has most recourse is a second-rate translation of a second-rate original, Sylvester's version of the *Sepmaine* of Du Bartas. He borrowed much from it in substance. He borrowed, or at least did not disdain to use, a few of Sylvester's happier phrases: a word like "smooth-sliding," a phrase like "the winding rivers border'd all their

banks," a collocation of names like "Cincinnatus, Fabricius, Serranus, Curius." But no contrast could be more striking than that between Milton's undeviating magnificence and what a French critic well describes in his appreciation of Du Bartas as "efforts constants, quoique souvent malheureux, vers la grandeur"; and the dismal versified school-divinity of the Gascon poet sets in higher relief the height of Milton's achievement in fusing those lumps of shapeless lustreless dross and refining them into sombre gold. When a style was current—nay more, where a style was almost universally admired—in which the Creator rates Adam like a fishwife and addresses him as "apostate Pagan!" we may excuse the one or two slips of the same sort which Milton made and left unblotted—the "O hell!" of Satan in Paradise, the "O Eve, in evil hour" of Adam, for which it is hardly sufficient excuse that it is the language of Adam speaking after the Fall. These are lapses as rare as they are superficial and trivial.

That sustained perfection of workmanship, that continuous planetary movement "on the highest arc," to use Milton's own noble expression, "that contemplation circling upwards can make from the glassy sea whereon she stands," is one of the reasons why the *Paradise Lost* supplies but few of those single jewel-phrases which enter into the language, and become part of the common thought of the world. It is but an extension of the statement that the poem

loses in detached quotation. The whole poem is a quotation; it has sunk into the national thought and permanently raised the national power of expression, but it operates thus over its whole extent rather than at detached points. The *Allegro* and *Penseroso* alone have given as many phrases of universal currency to the English language as the whole of the *Paradise Lost*. There are some half-dozen such in the *Paradise Lost*—some half-dozen of those phrases which have become so universally familiar that they are hardly recognised as literature: "confusion worse confounded," the "human face divine," "hell broke loose," "on hospitable thoughts intent," "to save appearances." The Serbonian bog, like the Cynosure of neighbouring eyes, has long become a phrase of journalism and lost all its meaning. There are single lines also, lines like

> If shape it might be call'd that shape had none,

or

> Not to know me argues yourselves unknown,

which have similarly passed into the common stock. But it remains true in the main that Milton's language, whether it be severe or enriched, is not the language of mankind. It is a dialect spoken only by him and a few of his peers; they speak to one another from the heights, *nec vox hominem sonat;* except for that lofty and distant fellowship, he moves alone.

The solitariness of his genius is reflected in the striking absence throughout the *Paradise Lost* (except in those fine passages where he speaks of himself) of any personal or contemporary allusions. Of these he had always been sparing, except in occasional pieces like *Lycidas* and the Sonnets. Even in the *Comus* the exquisite reference to Diodati, his closest friend, is brought in so impersonally as almost to escape notice :

> A certain shepherd lad,
> Of small regard to see to, yet well skill'd
> In every virtuous plant and healing herb
> That spreads her verdant leaf to the morning ray.
> He lov'd me well, and oft would bid me sing,
> Which when I did, he on the tender grass
> Would sit and hearken even to ecstasy.

But in his later years he had few friends, and none with whom he fully shared his soul. In the *Paradise Lost* the rarity of particular allusions makes them the more impressive, as in the celebrated descriptions of the riotous streets of London after the Restoration, and that of the summer morning's excursion from London to the pleasant countryside and the suburban villages that lay all about what was even then an overgrown city. Even these allusions are generalised, although the reference is obvious. One and one only of his contemporaries is mentioned by name : and the choice of that one name, thus singled out for immortality, is highly significant. It is not that of a countryman of his own ; it is not that of a soldier or

statesman, nor of a man of letters, a poet or scholar or theologian. It is that of the most eminent man of science of that age, Galileo, the great Italian physicist and astronomer. And the title by which Milton speaks of him is no less remarkable. The Tuscan artist, he calls him; as if to indicate that science and art are in vital conjunction, as they were in his own person and in his own poetry. Scientific theology, as it was then understood, is of course of the main substance of the *Paradise Lost*. Scientific astronomy is almost equally so. Of the science of music, which during Milton's lifetime was taking one of its greatest advances, the many passages in his poetry which deal with music would alone prove that he was an accomplished master. More generally we may say that Milton was in full touch and full intellectual sympathy with the New Learning, with the expanding movement of the human intelligence which was absorbing and annulling the Renaissance. It was the age not only of culminating Puritanism and of rising classicism, but of a prodigious movement of advance in physical science. It was the age of the foundation of the Royal Society: it was the age of Harvey and Boyle, of Torricelli and Pascal. Before Milton's death, Newton had founded the science of optics, had invented the refracting telescope, had discovered though not yet published the law of gravitation. Throughout the *Paradise Lost* we feel the pressure and impulse of the great movement which

was on foot to comprehend the physical universe, and which since then has by its progress and conquests created the modern world.

But in the poetry itself likewise the science is as wonderful as the art. The art is science applied to thought and language, and transfigured by that creative imagination on which the discoveries of science, like the fabric of art, are ultimately based. In the science of his art Milton stands alone among the English poets, without equal or second. It is this beyond all else which makes him, in the full sense of the word, a classic.

As a study of the scientific quality of Milton's art, no exercise is more useful than to go carefully through Bentley's famous edition of 1732. It is seldom mentioned except in derision. But Bentley was no fool; and he was the first scholar of his age. What he did in that work was to go through the *Paradise Lost* with absolute fearlessness, testing it, line by line and word by word, by the standards of scientific scholarship. Twice he inserts a line of his own—once between lines 810 and 811 of Book IV., and again between lines 114 and 115 of Book VII. In both cases the line is explanatory, is meant to complete the full logic of what Milton had put elliptically, or had left to be understood. If a sufficient induction may be drawn from two instances, we may judge from these that Bentley's mind worked very much as Milton's might have

done had Milton not been a poet. In the appreciation of other and more highly esteemed critics we are apt to find the converse defect, and of the two it is probably the more dangerous: that their mind works very much as a poet's might have done if that poet had been other than Milton. Some of Bentley's critical strictures are just, and even where they are unjust, they are always on the point. Some of his emendations have been silently accepted and passed into the received text: two instances may be found by the curious in lines 321 and 451 of the seventh book. Some others ought very likely to be adopted. In VI. 55,

> Into their place of punishment, the gulf
> Of Tartarus, which ready opens wide
> His fiery Chaos to receive their fall,

he makes an unconvincing alteration, but he points out rightly that the word *Chaos* in this context is far from satisfactory. In X. 329,

> Satan in likeness of an angel bright
> Betwixt the Centaur and the Scorpion steering
> His zenith, while the sun in Aries rose,

Bentley is almost unquestionably right in altering *rose* into *rode*. He gives us no reasons, and only cites a parallel phrase: but no doubt he saw and grasped the point, that *rose* is astronomically inaccurate, and that Milton's astronomy is always scrupulously correct. In another astronomical or quasi-astronomical

passage he proposes an emendation equally ingenious but more uncertain. When Satan has been expelled from the Earthly Paradise for the first time (IX. 62),

> Thence full of anguish driven
> The space of seven continued nights he rode
> With darkness; thrice the equinoctial line
> He circled, four times crossed the car of night
> From pole to pole traversing each colure.

"Cone of night, not car of night," says Bentley: "car must have been a mistake of the printer's." The matter is not so easy to decide, especially if we consider that Milton may have had somewhere in his mind an echo of the last line of the second Idyl of Theocritus.

But as a rule Bentley's criticisms fall short or go aside because, with all his great powers, he was here beyond his depth. The science of Milton's art, alike in structural quality and in the handling of language and metre, was more delicate and profound than that which Bentley brought to bear on its criticism. Even in the few lines which we may feel inclined to agree with him in obelising, even in the few words which we may feel inclined to agree with him in emending, we shall do well to hesitate before thinking that we have mastered Milton's science, or followed out the subtlety of his art. The same caution applies to the study of classics other than Milton, and to the criticism of scholars inferior to Bentley.

Milton founded no school. He gave no impulse to letters, except that impulse received by all true artists when they see and recognise consummate art. He stands now, as he stood in his own time, alone. The only later English poet who has approached him in aim and method, though not in poetical power or in effective achievement, has drawn what might be a picture of him in lines that have something of Milton's own haughty majesty:

No airy and light passion stirs abroad
To ruffle or to soothe him; all are quell'd
Beneath a mightier, sterner stress of mind.
Wakeful he sits, and lonely, and unmov'd,
As oftentimes an eagle, ere the sun
Throws o'er the varying earth his early ray,
Stands solitary, stands immoveable
Upon some highest cliff, and rolls his eye,
Clear, constant, unobservant, unabased,
In the cold light above the dews of morn.

Below and behind lay the warm earth: the green woodland full of singing voices, the pleasant villages and farms, the cleared spaces where his predecessors had found full scope for English poetry, among "the fields and the turreted cities," the continuous life of nature and the splendid and transitory pageant of the lives of men, their tears and laughter, their loves and passions, struggles and achievements and failures. He passed above and beyond these

et extra
Processit longe flammantia moenia mundi
Atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque.

From those supernal heights poetry descended again to earth, to become a function of life on its daily level, an interpretation of life to the analytic intelligence, a pattern of life as a rational and bounded process. It left the starry threshold, the golden pavement of heaven's immeasurable floor, to pass into and mingle with the social movement, to bear its part in the progress of civilisation. From that lower plane, from that more contracted sphere, it rose slowly again after a long interval. It successively reattached itself to nature, to romance, to history. By the end of the eighteenth century, when Milton had in his turn become one of the ancient classics, English poetry had rekindled itself, had renewed its progress, and was launched once more on a new way.

THE END

Printed by Ballantyne, Hanson & Co.
Edinburgh & London