

# THE LAST TWENTY-ONE YEARS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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At the coming of age, in year if not day, of the *Times Literary Supplement*, I have been asked to say something about the progress of English literature during the period. The attainment of majority for such a periodical is by itself something; for when I myself joined the Press, more than double the time ago, it was one of the axioms of the old stagers in it that no merely literary paper *could* last more than a few years. But this is not the side of the matter which has to be dwelt on here. It is the other side—the side in the other sense of ‘the matter’—with which this Supplement has been concerned.

It started almost level with ‘Number Twenty’ itself, and while discussions and vaticinations about the child’s future, and the exact inheritance which had been left to it, were still rife. It is, of course, clear that there is no logical reason for anticipating special revolutions or developments at the end of one century and the beginning of another, while there is no historical confirmation whatever of any such expectancy. 1400 certainly saw a sunset with a pretty dark night following, starred but sparsely and hardly ever brilliantly. Anyone who saw sunrise at 1500 must have had very long sight. 1600 saw neither set nor rise, but the noon of

the brightest and longest day ever known in our letters; 1700 a sort of not quite midday of sober, fair weather. At 1800, without undue pessimism, people except the few who could appreciate *Lyrical Ballads* might shrug their shoulders over a dawn which was in a very short time to usher another heyday. Out of such things no average was possible, even if it had been reasonable to attempt one.

There is, however, no doubt that as 1900 approached people’s minds were, reasonably or unreasonably, disturbed about the matter. I remember, at one of the complimentary dinners with which the hospitable North welcomed me when I was appointed to the Chair of English Literature at Edinburgh in 1895, very gloomy comments and vaticinations in some of the speeches. I ventured, in replying, to point out that in 1795 the actual and recent production of masterpieces or approaches to a masterpiece was hardly cheering, yet that Keats and Carlyle were born in the very year, and the *Lyrical Ballads* were only three years off. There never was a wind that bloweth so much as it listeth as the wind of the spirit.

Undoubtedly, with one or two brilliant exceptions,—I am taking the liberty to name no living persons

in this little notice, — the recent relays for the great torch-race had not been and were not for some time to be very encouraging. Hitherto each quarter, taken loosely, of the century had increased the treasure — as the man in the *Republic* says — in the most unmistakable manner. The first had given the poets from Wordsworth to Keats and the prose men from Scott to Macauley; the second ‘those about’ Tennyson and Browning, Thackeray and Dickens; the third a ‘crowd’ — modern slang for once giving us a very convenient appellation — of undoubted producers of literature of the highest class, two or three of whom even yet survive. But with the other exceptions already referred to, the closing years, and even decades, of the century had been by no means so fecund in

Poets like Shakespeare,  
Beautiful souls,

and the other constituents of that sarcastic stanza of Mr. Arnold’s — save perhaps in the opinions of the beautiful souls themselves.

We have all heard of the ‘naughty nineties’: there has perhaps been quite enough reproof and vindication of the decade and its preface of the later eighties from that point of view. But it was, I think, pretty clear to fairly critical eyes, and it ought to have become clearer still as those eyes profited more and more by what Dryden calls, in one of those bronze phrases of his,

The firm perspective of the past,

that any ‘naughtiness’ there may have been gave not at all the substance of the doubt that might fairly be entertained about that period, but was only one of its accidents. When the historian of English literature in the twentieth century writes his due chapter of antecedents, the fault which he will most probably find with this part

of our time is — and certainly it is a *maxima culpa* — the fault of Pose.

Now pose has always been a sort of measles of literature, affecting youth chiefly though by no means only; and like all diseases it sometimes becomes epidemic and malignant at particular periods. But I cannot remember in experience or in history any time at which it was more prevalent or multi-form than in the last ten or fifteen years of the nineteenth century. During the earlier time of that century it had, except in the curious subgroup of which Beddoes, Darley, Wade and a few more were poetical members for the first division, and the ‘Spasmodics’ for the second, chiefly confined itself to the mildest of all its forms — imitation of great ones: Byron, Tennyson, Dickens, Carlyle, and latterly Swinburne were all thus wrongly worshiped.

But Swinburnian *pastiche*, as a busy reviewer of those days can testify, did not really go very far. Parodies, of course, were innumerable, but there is no pose in them. The most delightful serious example — dear for nearly half a century —

Where the cocoa and cactus are neighbors,  
Where the fig and the fir tree are one —

is American, not English.

Moreover, as must be obvious, pose of imitation, though exceedingly boring, is not exactly mischievous. Pose of revolt, unless it is actuated and directed by positive genius, can be mischievous also — and indeed can combine the two characteristics in a very deadly manner. The poses which grew up under the *fin de siècle* impetus — who was it, by the way, who first thought of that calamitous expression? — made a ‘party in a parlor’ which, though the very opposite of ‘silent,’ too frequently seemed to put in candidature for being ‘damned.’ There was the pose of naughtiness already

referred to; the pose of violence; the pose of paradox; the pose of neo-Bohemianism; the pose of platitude inverted; the pose of distorted form; the pose of attempted mixture of science and literature; the pose of cosmopolitanism; divers minor and more or less individual poses of imitation of things and persons that had not been considered worthy of imitation, and poses of denigration of persons and of things that had been so considered.

But though the particular attitudes of the particular pose might vary, the general characteristic, apart from the fortunate exceptions already excepted, undoubtedly *was* pose. Perhaps, indeed, after an unusually intense and long-continued activity of literature, one of two things is pretty certain. There will either be an acquiescence in comparative mediocrity, such as that which followed the period from Spenser to Milton, or some kind of struggle for *tours de force* to hide the diminished supply of force itself.

It was the obvious duty of the twentieth century — to apply a slightly mixed and also slightly vulgar but vigorous and relevant metaphor — to 'get its pose off its stomach.' Nor were the conditions, albeit not very cheerful at the moment, wholly discouraging. There is something characteristic, not entirely, though it may be partly, ridiculous, in the remark of the younger of those two Latin tragedians whose work unfortunately we have in barest fragments: 'I thought it best to have something in my genius for time and age to mitigate,' said Accius to Pacuvius. And these persons certainly provided that 'something' bountifully.

It is perhaps scarcely taking too much upon oneself or one's own craft for a critic to say that at such a time criticism has her work specially cut

out for her. Not criticism of the foolish old *Judex-damnatur-cum-nocens-absoluitur* kind: for it is at least doubtful whether such criticism ever did any good at all, and in the particular state of things just described it was almost certain to do harm. The people who did not pose and did not admire posing did not want such criticism; and the posers and their admirers would merely take it as proof that they had 'shocked the bourgeois,' which was just what they wanted to do. The ironical or *persifleur* critical mode was more suitable — in fact, had admirable opportunities and was sometimes absolutely necessary; but this kind has its dangers.

It is not the easiest thing in the world to do well; it is peculiarly apt to go off through the touchhole when it is done badly; and it is quite certain that a very large number of people do not really enjoy it — are more or less puzzled by it, and sometimes find the puzzlement passing into positive dislike. Yet nothing — except the mere passage of time, which in its own peculiar way heals all things if only by destroying some — could do so much in the way of 'mitigation' (the Romans were not a humorous folk, or young Accius might have used the word as Swift or Thackeray would) as criticism. It would have, of course, to be criticism varied in kind, even the *Judex v. Nocentem* sort being, on very rare occasions, perhaps allowable; while the kind of *persiflage* is much more often so.

But criticism in general — the faithful and fairly lively representation of what the work really does look like to a tolerably healthy, intelligent, and well-trained mind other than the author's — could hardly have better scope than at such a time; there being, of course, besides the exceptional torchbearers always to be kept in

mind, plenty of sound honest stuff produced besides the pose-work to supply the mill with better grist. To this, in such a retrospect as the present, it will be better to turn attention.

The general plea that one sees advanced for literature, as for other things, in the first quarter of the twentieth century is, I believe, that it has accomplished nearly, if not quite, as great a liberation from convention as the corresponding period of the nineteenth did; the subsequent periods of the nineteenth itself having reëstablished the tyranny of this odious thing in a degree equal to if not worse than that which it previously enjoyed. Those who have attained unto the Higher Scepticism may, indeed, ask if there is anything at all special in this: if it is not merely the operation of the eternal flux and reflux in a particular department of life or the functions of life. And unamiable individuals may go on to ask whether a convention of revolt is less conventional than one of imitative obedience — whether, indeed, convention and unconvention are not really the same thing.

But these questions, though not irrelevant, are somewhat extraneous to the present one. That question, by itself and stripped of all previous and dependent questions, 'What has been the general character of these twenty years and more of English literature?' is quite enough for anyone to answer at one time, and may even seem more than enough to anyone who is acquainted with literary history at large. That firm perspective of the past whereof we spoke before is hardly available yet. But at least one can say that the rather yeasty state of literature which was so prominent thirty and even twenty years ago has to a great extent, though by no means entirely, worked or fermented itself out.

What the quality of the matured vintage of this 'twenty' will be as a century one can hardly say yet. The literatures of centuries, as they take longer to come into existence, so they take much longer to be appreciated than the gifts of Bacchus. But some of us may take a good omen from the fact that, while the wines, or some of them, of 1820 were among the very best of their century, those of 1920 already seem not unfit to challenge a similar position.

In poetry, oldest and greatest of all forms of letters, I do not understand that the most sanguine eulogist and herald of youth claims — unless 'the sun is in his eyes' — any absolute and proved mastership as yet attained by anyone who did not publish before 1900. I use, of course, mastership not in the sense in which one speaks of proficients of more or less excellence, but in that in which one speaks of Shakespeare or Shelley. On the other hand, there is claimed, perhaps with justice, a very much greater amount of proof of the above-mentioned proficiency itself. We certainly have poetry now from poets compared to whose work the earliest work of Wordsworth and Coleridge, of Shelley and Tennyson is rubbish, though it does not follow that any of them will produce something better than 'Tintern Abbey' or the 'Ancient Mariner,' than 'Alastor' or the 'Lotus-Eaters.'

But undoubtedly the main feature of the period has been the abundant adventure in what is called 'free verse.' I do not much admire the term, for I cannot acknowledge any 'slavery' in metre or in rhyme. But one may admit — if it were of any importance I myself have very elaborately admitted — that irregular rhythm, destitute of the atmosphere which rhyme supplies and the *contour* given by metre, may be beautiful, admitting this for the simple

reason that it has been so in the past. Yet it may be doubted whether the conditions of this form or forms have as yet been sufficiently elaborated. It is quite clear that this kind of freedom is certain to indulge itself in mere anarchy at first.

As to what some people seem still to think and do more than seem to say — that metre and rhyme will be superseded — one may be rash enough to pronounce this impossible, because both answer to persistent physical demands for the outline and the atmosphere above referred to. But there undoubtedly is room for ametric and unrhymed but symphonically rhythmed verse, and for hybrid kinds between this and other forms in which these two decades have experimented already and which they may perfect further.

Poetry, however, is a matter the history of which is always a history of miracles; and miracles are things better dealt with in the past than in the present or in the future. Prose fiction is less 'kittle' to deal with, and the present writer happens to be in a rather exceptionally competent position to deal with it. For he happened to begin reviewing novels — with a pretty fair knowledge of what they had been before — in large numbers just when their palmy time, from the late forties to the early seventies of the last century, was ceasing, and ceasing rather hurriedly. 'The old three-decker' was a delightful institution; it deserved its delightful funeral hymn. It had a glorious history. But like other glorious three-deckers it was subject to dry-rot, and the dry-rot had set in pretty unmistakably. To come still closer to facts and change the metaphor, in the language of the same poet, you might say of the average novel bridge-builder of that day,

Each bridge that he makes either buckles or  
breaks

at the second volume. Immoral reviewers, I believe, never read their second volumes at all; moral ones, I know, sighed and groaned — not to say lost their tempers — over them. Some even wished that it might be the custom to print them in blank or 'dummy'; for in that case there would have been no trouble of reading, and the volumes would have made most useful notebooks.

On the other hand, those more-than-three-deckers or Santissimas Trinitades, the novels in parts, though they could be as great in quality as they were in bulk, were rather intolerable when they were only great in the latter and encouraged certain vices of their own — forgetfulness or even complete absence of plot, inconsistency of character, and the like. And when the individual strength of the novel-producers began to die off, as it did about the time mentioned, things became rather doleful, and the Mr. Toobads of the time used to tell us that the novel had had its day and would soon cease to be.

But few things, if any, that have been cease to be; they only undergo changes. That the change of the three volumes into one more or less coincided with the appearance of a new blossoming of romance in the hands of Stevenson, who is dead, and some others who are happily alive, is worth noting, of course, though the connection was certainly not causal. The at-last-achieved popularity, after long neglect, of George Meredith probably had a little more to do with the contemporary growth of the 'problem' or 'analytical' novel. At any rate, both kinds took to the six shilling — war-made seven-and-six — standard very kindly.

Whether here again, with the few exceptions already several times glanced at, the *sommités* have been as lofty and as numerous as between 1845 and



1870, we need not inquire. And it is, of course, easier in more respects than those of time and trouble to write one volume than it is to write three, even if the print is something smaller and the pages more crowded in the single one.

Perhaps the average novel — even the better-than-average — is less readable than it was sixty or seventy years ago; but the average, and even the less-than-average, is, probably not merely because of its shortness, more readable once. It is a drawback, no doubt, that it is as a rule so anxiously and almost tremblingly modern; and this modernity threatens it with something like the fate of the novel of the Regency, which even the present writer finds it difficult to read now, though he can read those of most other times, from Xenophon's to Marcel Proust's. And it may be urged by the Devil's advocate that something of this readableness is due to mere craftsmanship — that thing so different from artistry, though very well in its way.

But this very confinement to things actual or supposed to be actual, with the increased attention to some kind of technique, has its negative advantages. One may get rather tired of the bachelor-girl in the flat and the amateur detective who, with an assistant something like the old 'zany' of the traveling quack, 'makes a hare' of Scotland Yard; but they are better than the Cambridge undergraduate who in a novel, I think of the seventies, 'had a few holidays because of the death of the Greek Professor.'

In respect of some at least of the more ambitious and successful representatives of the twentieth century (first quarter) novel, it will be exceedingly interesting to critics of the future to see how they *stand*. For most of them, I believe, have been written much more in accordance with a definite scheme, in intention always, and

no doubt in result not seldom. This 'scheme' is not — again as I understand it — identical with the old 'plot,' though that old plot sometimes, as in the case of *Tom Jones*, comes near it, whether from above or below does not here matter in the least for our present purpose.

It is pretty certain that the best stories of the past have not as a rule been constructed in such a fashion. But then the best stories of the past have as a rule been so constructed that you care very little, or not at all, what plan, scheme, purpose, or anything of that kind the author had before him. 'Never mind your significance, old man!' our reckless forefathers and some of their unblushing descendants have said and still say. 'Give us story! Give us character! Give us, if you can, conversation vividly true to nature, not of our time only, and, in moderation, description ditto. Go on as long as you can hold us; or stop as soon as you know you are likely to let us slip.'

This requirement may be deplorably apolaustic, may even, as things apolaustic will so often, sink to the verge of immorality. But it is a requirement that the human race has apparently been making from the time of the *Odyssey*, which is probably the first 'best story' of the Western World at least, whatever the reader may think choicest of the times before 'significance.' One may doubt *in petto* whether the human race at large does not make it still. But only the Future can safely judge the Past, and even the Future had better be careful.

As regards branches of literature which have always approached nearer to the scientific than fiction in verse or prose — history, philosophy, and miscellaneous kinds — the past quarter of a century will no doubt hold its own, subject to the doom which, except in the rarest cases and by virtue of purely

literary excellence, awaits these mixed kinds. To those who really appreciate this excellence, time does not matter in the least. Ancient and modern are all the same. For the *vis formæ* is not only *superba* but *eterna*. When the force is only in the matter it may not exactly lose all its power, but certainly finds that power what the financial people call 'a wasting asset.'

At a library committee once a good-natured representative of science gibed a colleague who had taken under his wing a new edition of a thirteenth-century text, 'What's the good of that?' 'Well,' said the other, 'it may be much good or little; but such as it is it will keep its goodness for another half-dozen centuries, while you'll be discarding as out of date the parcel you have got before you possibly next session, and certainly before half a dozen years are over.' And the man of science, being a good-natured man, acknowledged the hit.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, in spite of some efforts to separate history from literature, and in spite also of a mighty superfluity of biography, you might fill not bad bookshelves or even cases in this sort from the period. And although the war — that terribly magnified and intensified as well as veracious thunderstorm of Caleb Balderstone — interfered with many things, the two decades have seen fair continuance of the apparently humble but really invaluable task of recovering and making accessible the treasures of the past — a task which was so long neglected in England, and which the nineteenth century was almost the first to take seriously.

Lastly, let us come — perhaps I should say come back — to that most abused but hardy branch of letters, criticism. Parasite in both senses, plague, disgrace, discipline again in more senses than one, tonic or whatever

else it may be called or thought, it is not, perhaps, too sanguine or too flattering to see in it symptoms at the present time, with allowance for things to be allowed for, healthy rather than otherwise — healthier pretty certainly than they were five-and-twenty or twenty years ago. Foolish denigration of things past, foolish exaltation of things present, foolish expectation of things future are with us still; and the last named — least distasteful, though perhaps most pity-worthy, of the three — has again been encouraged by that omnipresent reagent 'The War' and the consequent hope of a new world.

There is not a new world, there will not be a new world, there never has been a new world — at least in the sense of sudden and immediate novelty. At the bottom perhaps things never change at all. People are always thinking that things are very nice and finding that they have to pay for them; blaming other people for their own acts; quarreling with their brothers; finding the daughters of men fair; feeling quite sure that the deluge will not come; and so on and so on and so on. But even the apparent and, so far as they go, real changes never take a very short time, in literature as elsewhere. And the great increase in careful study of past literature, as well as the active experiment in new production, which has for some time characterized our days, can hardly fail to tell for good.

It is true that great mistakes have been and are being made — mistakes which directly affect this good and hamper it or turn it to bad. But these mistakes are mostly due to political interference and not to purely literary agencies. And some hold that there are signs already of the disastrous ebb of really humanistic culture — the worst thing of all — turning, however slowly, to something like flood.

But, as has been more than once

hinted, and perhaps even more than hinted, in this brief survey, there never was such a John Barleycorn — name of good omen and good record! — as literature. You may do the most dreadful things to it; it may look as if it had ceased to exist, and it will surprise and delight you by getting up and waving in the wind as merrily as ever. Only

being, in one way if not in all, more spiritual, it will give the surprise and delight at much less regular intervals, and in even greater variation of quantity and quality of crop. Diagnostics as well as prognostics respecting it had need to be mainly Pantagrueline in order to be safe; and the only abiding motto is *Sursum corda*.

## THE SAINT, THE COW, AND THE WIZARD

BY M. DIGBY

From the *Manchester Guardian*, February 6  
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SOME time ago near a remote part of the coast of Wales there lived a wizard who had been formerly of great power and had enjoyed the horrified respect of all his neighbors both far and near. But at the time with which this story deals he had reached a stage of malicious senility, and was wont to use his gifts at random and for the gratification of his own childish and unpleasant whims.

In the course of a few months he collected round him a great variety of beasts, birds, and insects. Some of them, such as asses, fighting cocks, boars, and cats, were native to the country which he afflicted with his presence, while others, such as peacocks, lions, and porcupines, he imported from remote regions by the most strenuous exercise of his supernatural powers. All these creatures he turned loose in a wide grassy field that swelled up behind his house in the direction of the higher mountains.

This in itself might not have roused the neighborhood to more than a very

mild protest; for the possession of a wizard by any district is in itself a gratifying circumstance, and one learns to bear its compensating discomforts with fortitude. But the wizard, not content with what he had accomplished already, was forever tinkering at his new acquisitions with one or other of his magic devices. More especially he devoted himself to an alteration in their stature and bulk, so that the lions became of the size of poodles but exceedingly venomous, and the chickens — which were in the yellow-down stage, when the wings first begin to sprout — became two or three feet in height, and chased dogs and ate cabbages whole whenever occasion offered. But perhaps the worst example of the wizard's misdirected energies was the flea, which he had caused to be considerably larger than a sheep, and which would cover many yards at a single bound and would attack the lions and the chickens with equal impunity.

Even this the locality might have borne in silence had the unclean crea-